

Short Story as hagiography: Alice Munro's triptych of a secular saint in *Runaway* (2005)

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....

niet als een einde van het leven,
maar als de lente van de dood.

Maria Vasalis, "Oktober"

Zeit brauchen heisst: nichts vorwegnehmen können, alles abwarten müssen, mit dem Eigenen vom andern abhängig sein. Das alles ist dem denkenden Denker völlig undenkbar, während es dem Sprachdenker einzig entspricht. Sprachdenken ... liegt.. im Bedürfnis des anderen und, was dasselbe ist, im Ernstnehmen der Zeit.

Frans Rosenzweig. "Neue Denken"¹

Alice Munro's Collection of Short Stories *Runaway* (2005)² contains three stories that feature a common female protagonist, called Juliet. Entitled respectively "Chance" "Soon" and "Silence", the stories first appeared in the *New Yorker* in June 2004 as a three panelled narrative, showing Juliet as a young girl ("Chance", 48-86) young mother ("Soon", 87-125) and middle aged woman ("Silence", 126-157).³

The Juliet narratives take up a familiar theme in Alice Munro's fiction: the relationship between mothers and daughters; in the present case, the failure of Juliet in meeting the needs of her mother Sara ("Soon") and later those of her daughter Penelope ("Silence"). At the same time, the stories enthrone a version of the female artist — here the artist as reader and researcher — and portray Juliet divided between her loyalty to the demands of others and to her own diffuse, yet passionate

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¹ *Zweitstromland*, 17, p. 256.7.

² The Portuguese translation, *Fugas*, translated by Margarida Vale de Gato, was published in 2007 by Relógio D'Água.

³ Page numbers will refer to Alice Munro. *Runaway. Stories*. London: Chatto & Windus, 2005 and each story will be referred to through the abbreviations CH for "Chance" (48-86), SO for "Soon" (87-125) and SI for "Silence" (126-157).

longings for which she finds food in books and love of words.⁴ At the end of an eventful life, the middle aged Juliet returns to what she most cherished as a young girl: her "bright treasure" (CH 83), her love of words.

1. Religious vocabulary and a secular world

An obvious feature of the three stories is the way the third person narrator uses explicit references to a very wide range of mythical, religious and secular frameworks: Ancient Greek mystery cults in "Chance"; Druids, Christianity, Buddhism, the Baha'i faith in "Soon"; Neo-pagan sects, Hindu asceticism and desert wisdom in "Silence". There are also references to secular thinking, such as evolution theory, Freudian causality and the therapeutic value of talking in respectively "Soon" (119), "Silence" (158) and "Chance" (69).

Although explicit, the references to religious beliefs serve the plot in an apparently inconspicuous way and instead of suggesting an otherworldly dimension, they emphasize the secular setting and the precise coordinates of space and time that cross the stories. They are so prominent, however, that they tease the reader into finding hidden connections between an obvious religious vocabulary and the theme of guilt discussed in "Chance" and "Soon" and the withdrawal from the world of the main character depicted in "Silence". Moreover, as a three partite narrative structured around a single main character, the stories present themselves in the mould of a triptych⁵ — originally an altarpiece — and further invite a religious reading in the light of hagiography that presents Juliet's life as an edifying secular "biography of saints"⁶. This perspective is once again strengthened by recurrent formal and thematic elements that force upon the reader the inevitable confrontation with the issue of spiritual hunger which leads both Juliet and her daughter Penelope (albeit in different ways) into otherworldly retreats. Especially in the third story,

⁴ In a review of *Runaway*, A. Alvarez writes: "For people like Rose and Juliet, the key to happiness – the key to everything – is language and the astonishing things you can do with it." (2005: 24). The Juliet stories are especially reminiscent of Munro's books *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) and *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988). The theme of the female artist and the demands it makes on others is a recurrent in Munro. See Ailsa Cox (2005), especially the chapter "The Biographical background" for the divide between the woman artist's loyalty to her children and her art.

⁵ Triptych: "...[Gk *triptychos* threefold, ...] ...2 a: a picture or carving in three compartments side by side; *esp.* a picture serving as an altarpiece and consisting of a central panel and two flanking panels of half its size that fold over it ..." *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, *op. cit.*, p. 2448.

⁶ "Biography of Saints" is the definition of hagiography provided by *Webster's Third International Dictionary* (1019). My sources for hagiography are Aigrin: 1953, Delehaye:1973, Attwater: 1983. Aigrin and Delehaye give many examples of syncretism between Hellenistic literature and hagiography, specifically of the importance of Heliodorus and Achilles Tatius, the authors that Juliet investigates.

“Silence”, the life of Juliet is presented as the culmination of a process that compels the reader to re-read the first two stories in the light of a circular “Pilgrim’s Progress” and to view Juliet as a female penitent in a world without God.⁷

The confrontation between “progress” and “circularity”, between historical and mythical time is one of the structural and thematic elements of the three stories. Indeed, what impresses the reader at first is their almost documentary nature: the narratives are set in a definite historical time, “Chance” in 1965 and 1964, “Soon” in 1968 and 1969 and “Silence” starts in 1989⁸ to end somewhere at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Concrete geographical settings (Vancouver, Whale Bay, Ontario) and everyday details heighten the realism and allow for the narrative as a whole to be considered as a “progress in life” of Juliet, a female character born around 1943 in a rural town of East Canada.

In a linear succession, the reader is told about Juliet’s start as a young scholar in Classical Studies in Vancouver and her chance encounter with the prawn fisher Eric who will become the father of her “love child” Penelope (“Chance”); the journey of Juliet and her baby daughter Penelope to her home town in Ontario and the painful confrontation with her ageing parents, Sam and Sara (“Soon”); and finally Juliet’s desperate waiting for news of Penelope who, at the age of twenty, has joined a religious sect never to return. This last part is told in “Silence”, a story that covers approximately thirteen years (from 1989 to approximately 2002) and which shows Juliet’s gradual withdrawal from worldly activity and gratification, even after she learns, by a sudden twist of the plot and thirteen years after the disappearance of her daughter, that Penelope is married to a wealthy husband and a mother of five children. Thus, and although each story can be read as a separate unit, together they unfold along a diachronic line and evoke the form and function of the “Entwicklungsroman”⁹.

At the same time, the hyperrealism of the stories reverberates with mystery because the basic cinematographic structure opens up blanks that provide the opportunity for temporal and spatial reversals in the process of reading. Mythical circularity resonates in the linear progress of the story and allows for a mental space

⁷ The allusion is both to John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678, 1684) and to Alice Munro’s book, *The Progress of Love* (1986).

⁸ The dates 1965 (CH 48) and 1969 (SO 89) occur in the text. Other indications of time make it possible for the reader to calculate the precise historical time of all major events in the narratives: according to my calculations, Juliet was born in 1943, she met her lover during the last days of 1964 and he died in 1981. Penelope was born in 1968, and the last story ends somewhere around 2002.

⁹ *Entwicklungsroman*: I use this translation of *Erziehungsroman* instead of *Bildungsroman*, because it is the word used in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*’s (619) discussion of Longus’ novel *Daphnis and Chloe* said to be the forerunner of the novel of “development” and one of the books Juliet is reading in “Silence”.

in which the (fictional) facts lose their irreversibility and ask constantly to be rearranged.¹⁰ The reader's attention is thus actively engaged in re-interpreting the data of the text in the light of new meanings that arise out of new points of view. In this sense, the stories create demands on the reader analogous to those made on Juliet who, in her readings, is attentive to details and thus remains open to inconclusive endings: "She lived amongst books, reading through most of her waking hours and being compelled to deepen, to alter, whatever premise she had started with" (SI 151). One might say that Juliet's journey as a reader consists in a gradual learning process of "negative capability"¹¹ in which she comes to abandon her self-centred fantasies and grows in the direction of an ever-receding "reality" that remains open to further investigations. As such, the three stories may be said to create "the portrait of the reader" as an apprentice in the "vale of Soul-making", an image of the world created by Keats that the poet himself explains in terms of reading.¹²

2. The Ancient Greek inheritance

The authors that the mature aged Juliet takes a special interest in are the four Greek novelists, Aristeides, Longus, Heliodorus and Achilles Tatius:

She had given up on her thesis and become interested in some writers referred to as the Greek novelists, whose work came rather late in the history of Greek literature (starting in the first century B.C.E., as she had now learned to call it, and continuing into the early Middle Ages). Aristeides, Longus, Heliodorus, Achilles Tatius. (SI 151).¹³

¹⁰ Confronting the writing of fiction and non-fiction, the Flemish writer Anne Provoost writes: "Non-fiction reconciles itself with the irreversible; fiction places question marks around the irreversible, reveals all its angles. In that sense, reading fiction is a more active process than reading non-fiction. A true story stimulates our sense of empathy; a fictitious story stimulates our imagination." Anne Provoost, 2006 at http://www.pbs.org/moyers/print/andersenletter_print.html.

¹¹ John Keats, Letter to George and John Keats, 21, 27(?) December 1817: "Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without reaching after fact & reason..." (Keats, 1990: 43)

¹² "Letter to the George Keatses", 14 February – 3 May 1819. 249-250: "I will call the *world* a School instituted for the purpose of teaching for little children to read – I will call the *human heart* the *horn Book* used in that School – and I will call the *Child able to read*, the *Soul* made from that *school* and its *hornbook*. Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul?" (emphasis in the text) (249-50). In another letter, Keats compares the imagination to a monastic retreat: "My imagination is a Monastery and I am its Monk-you must explain my metaphysics [for metaphysics] to yourself.", "Letter to Percy Bysshe Shelley, August 16, 1820" (Keats, 1990: 390).

¹³ Writing on Shakespearian romance, Michael O'Connell shows that here is a relationship between the tradition of "romance", hagiography and the Greek novelists Heliodorus, Longus and Achilles Tatius (2002: 217-219).

Juliet's choice of novelists is inspired by obvious autobiographic reasons, especially her preference for Heliodorus, whose novel, *Aethiopica*, tells of a mother in search for her lost daughter. A summary of the *Aethiopica* is given in the story "Silence" where Juliet is shown to adapt the Greek novel to her own needs:

But she was secretly drawn to devising a different ending, one that would involve renunciation, and a backward search, in which a girl would be sure to meet fakes and charlatans, impostors, shabby imitations of what she was really looking for. Which was reconciliation, at last, with the erring, repentant essentially great-hearted queen of Ethiopia. (SI 152).

The relationship between Juliet's search for her daughter and her readings can be confirmed by some (very elementary) research on the Greek novelists outside Munro's text (OCD, 1970 and KKL, 1989). There, we learn that the four Greek authors wrote about the power of "Eros", the meeting of waylaid lovers and the reconciliation between lost children and their parents. Some of them, especially Achilles Tatius and Heliodorus, were important for their (pagan) religious sentiment and inspired hagiography and famous Christian writers (Aigrin, 1953 and Delahaye, 1973).¹⁴ More important, however, all belong to the history of the short story and formal elements of Munro's stories can be related to these authors (Reid, 1977: 16).¹⁵ For instance, in Achilles Tatius' *The Adventures of Leucippe and Cleitophon*, the first person narrator is induced by a picture to talk of his adventures, a stratagem Munro uses in "Soon", which also begins with an ecphrasis of a painting by Chagall.¹⁶ Longus' novel is the famous tale of the "progress of love" between Daphnis and Chloe who gradually discover the reality of "Eros" and as such is considered to be the "prototype of the *Entwicklungsroman*,¹⁷ a form that, as already mentioned, underlies the Juliet stories. Moreover, Longus is praised for the structural organization

¹⁴ The syncretism between Christian hagiography and the Greek novelists is largely commented upon in René Aigrin, *op. cit.* and Hippolyte Delehaeye, *op. cit.* and the relationship between female penitent saints and the Greek Goddess Aphrodite exists both in "Silence" and in the works quoted. See Delehaeye, pp. 186-194 about Saint Pelagia the Penitent, easily comparable to Juliet, who in "Silence" evolves from a successful career woman to a penitent. Heliodorus was a worshipper of the sun: "Heliodorus' syncretistic faith is deep: Helios (identified with Apollo) holds the personages (often through his priests) in leading-strings." (OCD, 1970: 493).

¹⁵ The relationship with the short story and the other Greek novelists Juliet is reading, lies in the episodic structure of the narratives, which can stand as short narratives on their own.

¹⁶ In a previous paper "Chagall is for Shopgirls': art and memory in Alice Munro's story "Soon" presented at the International Conference, *A Tangled Web: Ideas, Images, Symbols*, in Lisbon 17-18 November, 2005 and exclusively focused on the story "Soon", I did not see the connection between Munro's use of ecphrasis and that of Achilles Tatius.

¹⁷ *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 1970: 619. (The connections between Munro's stories, hagiography and the Greek novelists is so obvious that my first impulse to write this paper was to show the richness of the relations. But what is important in the Juliet stories is the "syncretism" of literary and religious traditions and the way they live on in new forms.)

of his work where each scene occupies a function in the whole, a precept that is typical of Alice Munro's art.¹⁸

A list of the analogies between the authors that Juliet studies and the story that tells of Juliet reading them could go on almost indefinitely. But what is important here is that in providing seemingly casual pieces of information, the narrator brings into the story the syncretism of literary and religious texts and shows them to lie at the heart of the history of story telling in general and of the stories in question themselves.¹⁹

One of the ways the ancient narratives are present in "Chance", "Soon" and "Silence" lies in the choice of the names of the characters. For instance, the name of Juliet's daughter, Penelope — motivated by Juliet's love for Greek literature — suggests a revised version of the Homeric epic²⁰ with Juliet cast in the role of the mythical Penelope while waiting herself for a daughter called Penelope. The merging of the roles of Ulysses and Penelope in both Juliet and her daughter foregrounds the parallelism between the two, the search for spiritual nourishment of Penelope mirrored in Juliet's gradual retreat into silence and meditation. Like Demeter in search of Persephone, Juliet settles into an apparently barren life, which deepens at the same time that the waiting for her daughter proves fruitless. In the story, metaphors of desertification merge the Demeter myth with Biblical vocabulary and announce Juliet's gradual transformation into a recluse, a sort of female desert monk or 'Amma'²¹. In the beginning of "Silence", for instance, Juliet joyfully anticipates what she hopes to be the long expected meeting with her daughter:

¹⁸ E. Sch. "Poimenika Kata Daphnin Kai Chloên", *KLL*, 1989: 7617: "jede Szene übt eine bestimmte kompositorische Funktion aus...". In "Silence" Longus' pastoral setting of erotic love must also be seen against Aristeides' obscene tales: the holy violence of Juliet's sexual hunger and its spiritual sublimation are one of the motives of Munro's three stories.

¹⁹ One thinks here of T. S. Eliot's essay, "Tradition and Individual Talent". The relationship between Alice Munro's art and T. S. Eliot has been commented upon by W. R. Martin (1987: 190) where the author emphasizes Munro's capacity to open up the concentrated form of the short story with the incommensurability of time and space, and to amalgamate different levels of reality, a characteristic T. S. Eliot attributed to the Metaphysical Poets, in an essay with that name. The imagery of draught and water in "Silence" also establishes intertextual links with "The Waste Land".

²⁰ Munro's female Ulysses points to both Homer and James Joyce. Be it also said that Juliet's mother is called "Sara", a Jewish name of an arch-mother; the suggestion that Juliet's parents are Jewish is hinted at in many ways, i.e. her father is called Sam and the family name is Henderson. "Juliet", of course, is linked to erotic love through the allusion to Shakespeare's heroine in *Romeo and Juliet*.

²¹ There were women among the Egyptian desert ascetics of the 4th and 5th C. E: "Ammas" (Nomura, 2001). But the most famous female penitent and contemplative is Mary Magdalen (the iconography of whom often includes a book) who is often related to Mary of Egypt, the Aegyptiaca (d. 421) "a historical figure who led a sinful life in Alexandria, repented, and did penance during 47 years in the desert of Syria..." (Haag: 1993, 280). (My translation).

“all this time I’ve been in a sort of desert, and when her [Penelope’s] message came I was like an old patch of cracked earth getting a full drink of rain.” (SI 128, italics in the text). The religious imagery of spiritual draught and the revivifying power of water establishes a clear parallel between Juliet’s search for Penelope and Demeter’s search for Persephone, but the words, “cracked earth getting a full drink of rain”, are also to be encountered in the books of Exodus and of Isaiah²², and in all poets that prayed heaven to send their “roots rain”.²³

3. “Silence”

In “Silence” the Greek and Judaeo-Christian images of draught are merged into Juliet’s reading of the Heliodorus’ novel *Aethiopica*, specifically the characters of the gymnosophists, Hindu philosophers and desert wanderers to whom the Queen of Ethiopia has entrusted her child. They are said to be “attracting and repelling those they lived amongst with their ironclad devotion to purity of life and thought, their contempt for possessions, even for clothing and food” (SI 152).

The notion of “purity of life and thought” ascribed to the Hindu ascetics is also the obsessive image in which Juliet repeatedly thinks of her daughter, as if Penelope were the personification of her mother’s ardent, almost metaphysical projections in which spiritual, ethical and aesthetic perfection meets:

She [Penelope] has grace and compassion and she is as wise as if she’d been on this earth for eighty years. Her nature is reflective, not all over the map like mine. ... Angelically pretty, she’s like my mother... Strong and noble. Molded, I should say like a caryatid (SI 128: italics in the text, emphasis mine).

These words are part of an interior monologue, when Juliet thinks that soon, she is going to be reunited with her daughter. This does not happen but Juliet remains faithful to her vision of her daughter, even after she is forced to adjust it to the news that Penelope is a “prosperous, practical matron” and a mother of five. (SI 156). Juliet is not able to relinquish Penelope as the embodiment of perfection and it is the image of the purity of her daughter, rather than her reality as a person/character that she chooses to preserve, even at the cost of her own solitude and isolation:

But I think the reason [why Penelope has remained silent] may be something not so easily dug out. Something like a purity in her nature. Yes. Some fineness and strictness and purity, some rock-hard honesty in her. My father used to

²² Exodus 17, 6 where God orders Moses to strike the rock at Horeb in order to give his people to drink; and Is. 35, 6-7: “For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, / and streams in the desert; / the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water.” *The King James’ Bible* (Cambridge: At the University Press)

²³ Cf. Gerald M. Hopkins’ sonnet: “*Thou Art Indeed Just, Lord*” (1889) and its ultimate line: “Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain”, *The Norton Anthology of English literature*, 7th ed. (New York. London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000) pp. 1658-9.

say of someone he disliked, that he had no use for that person. Couldn't those words mean simply what they say? Penelope does not have a use for me. Maybe she can't stand me. It's possible." (SI 158: emphasis mine)

The harsh judgement that Juliet inflicts upon herself in order to protect her daughter engages her into an investigation²⁴ of purity: the purity of the gymnosophists in the *Aethiopica*, the purity of Daphne and Chloe in their search for an answer to the longing that consumes them. Little by little, Juliet will take upon herself the traits of the gymnosophists and the story "Silence" tells the various phases of Juliet's slow metamorphoses into a monastic persona, dedicated to manual work and reading. As if following the monastic precepts of poverty, chastity and obedience, Juliet gives up sex and pleasurable food. She has little money and does menial work to survive. "She [lets] her hair grow out" (SI 150). She moves into a bachelor's flat in a basement but has a "brick-paved patio opening out at ground level" where she cultivates a small garden (SI 150), as if she were tending "*le jardin clos de l'âme*", the closed garden of the soul of mystical nuns.²⁵ This pilgrimage of inwardness and detachment culminates in the spiritual dimension called forward in the overtly religious vocabulary of the last sentence of the story which is also the inconclusive end of Juliet's life:

She keeps on hoping for a word of Penelope, but not in any strenuous way. She hopes as people who know better hope for undeserved blessings, spontaneous remissions, things of that sort (SI 158).

Juliet's journey ends upon a bleak note of hope ("hoping", "hopes"), a hope that is a hope for blessings, for freely bestowed grace ("undeserved", "spontaneous") and for forgiveness ("remissions"). The final dismissive words "things of that sort" take the edge of the religious overtones and remain faithful to the emotional aloofness that set the tone throughout. But they also show that a vocabulary of explicit religious origin continues to live in everyday language and somehow projects a form of the religious life that does not flee from disenchantment.²⁶

²⁴ The term "investigation" is the word that Juliet uses to describe what she is doing: "She keeps on with her studies. The word *studies* does not seem to describe very well what she does – investigations would be better." (SI 158). Emphasis in the text.

²⁵ The text relates Juliet's gardening to her father, just as her greying hair approaches her to her mother. But the fact that her bachelor's flat (cell?) is a basement flat strongly suggests an interior withdrawal and the tending of her small garden on a ground level patio inevitably leads to the religious imagery of female nuns and mystics at the end of the Middle Ages tending their souls. (Cf. Paul Vandenbroeck, 1994)

²⁶ Read in a broader perspective, "Silence" invites for a reflection on the values that remain when the Judaeo-Christian and Greek roots of Western Civilization, flooded by the upheavals of the nineteen sixties, became diffused into a myriad range of spiritual discourses and religious fanaticisms.

But from what god does Juliet hope for grace and remittance? Whom or what must she obey? And what is her sin? Indeed, in the central panel “Soon”, the reader is told that Juliet is a “passionate atheist”.²⁷ In this story, Juliet’s militant free thinking feeds her stubborn, almost infantile resentment and impedes her to respond to her mother’s plea for love. Later, Juliet will re-interpret the scene as a betrayal: “Because it’s what happens at home that you try to protect, as best as you can, for as long as you can” (SO 125). Thus, Juliet’s passionate protection of her daughter’s purity in “Silence” may be seen as a redemptive correction of her failure towards her mother narrated in “Soon”.

4. “Soon”

“Soon” begins with an ecphrasis, the description of a painting by Chagall, *I and the village*. In the picture — actually a print in the shop of Vancouver Art Gallery — the pregnant Juliet sees, in the fullness of a moment, her own exalted idea of her parents which inspires her to tell about them to her friend Christa.²⁸ But when, after the birth of Penelope, she actually visits her parents, the totality inherent in her vision has to yield to time, the linear unfolding of the story accompanying Juliet’s gradual confrontation with parents ravaged by age and illness.

It is significant that the plenitude of vision is linked to a moment in Juliet’s life when she is pregnant, before her daughter is born. As a young mother visiting her elderly parents, she must face what it means to bring a new life into the world: the impossibility of going back in time, the inevitability of death, and the reality of people whose otherness cannot be theorized away. Thus and at the same time that she gives birth to her daughter, she herself is further driven out from the womb as her image of her parents makes way for the persons they have now become: elderly, fragile, irritable. Juliet’s pride in her “love child” (SO 103), her eagerness in playing down her former scholarly reputation, her defiant exhibition of sexual liberation meet with stubborn resistance or awkward silences. Juliet is forced to abandon her initial vision and has to readjust, as will later be the case with her readings, “the premise she has started with” (SI 151).

It is in this context that Juliet is unwillingly drawn into a discussion with a Christian minister about the existence of God. She passionately avows her atheism to which the clergyman responds with a threat that will prove to be prophetic. He accuses Juliet of denying her daughter future “nourishment”: “You and your — whatever you call him — you’ve decided to reject God’s Grace. Well. You are

²⁷ The expression “passionate atheist” belongs to Freeman Dyson (2006:4): “There are two kinds of atheists, ordinary atheists who do not believe in God and passionate atheists who consider God to be their personal enemy.”

²⁸ See footnote 17 for the use of ecphrasis in Achilles Tatius’ *Leucippe and Cleitophon*. (The choice of the name “Christa” for Juliet’s friend may not be an accident).

adults. But to reject it for your child — it's like denying her nourishment" (SO 120).

This unforgiving and narrow view is corrected by Juliet's mother, Sara, who offers another version of belief, thus providing a possible answer to what grace may be in a world without God. The answer is expressed in the word "Soon", the word Sara hesitatingly looks for and stuttering stumbles upon:

'My faith isn't so simple,' said Sara, her voice all shaky (and seeming to Juliet, at this moment, strategically pathetic). 'I can't describe it. But it's — all I can say — it's *something*. It's a — wonderful — *something*. When it gets really bad for me — when it gets so bad I — you know what I think then? I think, all right. I think — Soon. *Soon I'll see Juliet.*' (SO 124; emphasis in the text).

Sara's belief is a belief in time, i.e. in life, in the promise of the love for her daughter, — a belief that the older Juliet will be afraid to act upon with her own daughter Penelope. What is so interesting about Sara's words is that her confession of faith stumbles upon the word "something", twice repeated in the text and emphasized through italics. Thus a pronoun that in need of a noun is left hanging in the air, indeterminate yet affirmative, a something and not a nothing, a hope for a "presence", for something that "is". In "Silence" and in "Soon", two mothers who are also mother and daughter practice the "metaphysics of waiting"²⁹, Sara for a presence (her daughter Julia who may "soon" come) and Juliet for an absence (her daughter Penelope who does not come, whose coming is indefinitely postponed).³⁰

Sara's stuttering also stands in contrast with the minister's way of speaking which is, as the text says, "always indicating ironclad conviction" (SO 121). The adjective "ironclad" also reappears in "Silence" where the narrator speaks of the gymnosophists' "ironclad devotion to purity of life and thought" (SI 152). Twice, a word denoting strong inflexibility is used in a context of religious or spiritual conviction. In "Soon", however, Juliet's opinion that Christianity is a lie appears as intransigent as the "ironclad" belief of the minister and their argument ends in irreconcilable hostility with each part entrenched in an intolerance towards the other's point of view. Their opposition has more to do with their own needs than with the belief or not in God: to be in the right and to win the argument seems to be the issue; power and not the existence of God is what matters.³¹

²⁹ The expression belongs to Iris Murdoch in *Nuns and Soldiers* (1980: 305): "She wanted to be for him, all servant. She must wait, she must learn the metaphysics of waiting." The connotations are clearly those of negative theology. See also Pierre Hadot, *Plotin ou la simplicité du regard* (1997) who writes about the soul waiting in connection to female mystics and saints: "L'âme... 'cherche'.... Mais aussi, elle 'attend', comme les grandes mystiques, Mechtilde, Thérèse d'Avila, Rose de Lima" (p.88).

³⁰ It would be interesting to reflect upon the theological implications of Munro's stories, namely that the presence of "God" in a secularized world can only exist as an "absence" and that as such, the religious life is the life that does not flee from the implications thereof. This is, accidentally, one of the obsessive themes of Iris Murdoch's novels.

³¹ Munro's three stories, written after 2001, clearly deal with the question of religious fanatics.

5. “Chance”

Juliet’s need to be acknowledged and its connection to reading and sexuality is the theme of the first story “Chance”.³² In accordance with the structure of the triptych, the panel “Chance” is the counterpart of the last one, “Silence”, the penitent Juliet meeting with her young self when “unholy” energies will jolt her out of herself and plunge her into life. Thus the story of Juliet’s encounter with sacred violence in “Chance” and the story of her withdrawal in “Silence” cover the central piece — “Soon” — the panel where the main characters — Sara, Juliet and Penelope — come together in the fullness of life. Encapsulated in a word world, young Juliet’s forceful encounter with Eros will bring her to the brink of a reality where words fail. There she learns the art of silence, doing humble physical work, reading books, paying attention to details, investigating.³³ The title “Silence”, then, rather than referring to Penelope’s silence — not letting her mother know that she is alive and blooming — may be said to be the point of arrival of Juliet’s progress: the painstaking learning of disenchantment through a process of gradual unselfing, learning how to read both people and books.³⁴

In “Chance” Juliet is enchanted by words. Unlike her mother, she is articulate and neither hesitates nor stutters. But interestingly, her passion for words is presented in an image that recalls her mother’s love expressed in the word “soon”: “*Soon. Soon I’ll see Juliet*” (SO 124). For Juliet, however, “soon” means an inward movement, a turning back to something precious that must be attended to and cultivated: her love of Greek words. Thus, in “Chance” Juliet is seen to finally remember a Homeric epithet she has vainly been looking for: “*Kallipareos. Of the lovely cheeks*” (Ch 83). It is here that the word “*soon*” appears for the first time, a word that will become the title of the main panel in the triptych:

Kallipareos. Of the lovely cheeks. Now she has it. The Homeric word is sparkling on her hook. And beyond that she is suddenly aware of all her Greek vocabulary, of everything which seems to have been put in a closet for nearly six months now. Because she was not teaching Greek, she put it away.

This is what happens. You put it away for a little while, and now and again you look in the closet for something else and you remember, and you think,

³² There are echoes in “Chance” of both *Jane Eyre* and *The Virgin and the Gipsy*, namely in the opposition between cloistered and wild spaces in “Chance” and in the vague longings of Juliet, the fulfilment of which she believes to have found in Eric.

³³ The allusion to the Benedictine rule, *Ora, Labora et Lectio* (Kardong, 1995), is strong in the last scenes of Juliet’s life, “Silence”, p. 158. It is interesting that “Lectio”, meaning biblical studies, is derived from “legere”, to read. (In West Flemish, “lezen” is still the word for both reading and praying).

³⁴ The Juliet Stories are reminiscent of Stevie Smith’s poem, “The Frog Prince”, especially its last two lines: “Only disenchanting people/ Can be heavenly” (*Collected Poems*, 1985), pp. 406-7. p.407.

soon. Then it becomes something that is just there, in the closet, and other things get crowded in front of it and on top of it and finally you don't think about it at all.

The thing that was your bright treasure. You don't think about it at all. (CH 83, emphasis in the text, underlining mine)

Juliet's "bright treasure", her love of (Greek) words, suffers a sea-change in "Chance", where she is introduced as detached and separate. She is twenty two years old and preparing a PhD thesis in Classical Studies. Her intellectual achievements set her apart as an "oddity" (CH 53). This is 1965 and her parents require her to "be popular" (CH 53) and "to fit in" (CH 53). In the Classical Department where she herself feels to fit in, the obstacle lies in her being a woman: "The problem was that she was a girl" (CH 53), the text says, merging the voice of the narrator with the image of herself that Juliet has internalized.

The reader sees Juliet reading a book, sitting in a train on her way to the man that will eventually become Penelope's father. During the ride, Juliet remembers when she first met Eric, also on a train, on a transcontinental journey over Canada which is recalled in a long flashback. Two journeys are thus embedded one into the other and strongly evoke the suspension of time in which Juliet, as an oddity already exists: "Nevertheless, on the train, she was happy" (CH 56).³⁵ Her otherworldliness is further emphasized in the delight Juliet takes in the wild, formless landscape that she observes through the window: "What drew her in — enchanted her, actually, — was the very indifference, the repetition, the carelessness and contempt for harmony, to be found on the scrambled surface of the Precambrian shield" (CH 54).

Her eagerness for what is without limits, for what is infinite, is also reflected in the book she is rereading, Eric Dodd's famous study on *The Greek and the Irrational* (CH 56). It is no coincidence that the author of this study and her future lover bear the same name, Eric.³⁶ Thus and from the very start, in "Chance" the sacred is linked to books and to sexuality, both pointing to transcendence, to a longing for something indefinite and mysterious that goes beyond the boundaries of time and space. Later, in "Silence", the reader will hear of Eric's shipwreck and of the burial of his body on the beach, a ritual which is explicitly related to the burial of Shelley (SI 143) and thus further emphasizes Juliet's nature as a "word child"³⁷ and the way she interprets herself and others in terms of literary allusions. Yet, in "Chance" the

³⁵ Juliet sees and feels through the words of books. Thus she thinks of the word "Taiga" (CH 54) when looking at the wild snow landscape and imagines herself a heroine in a Russian novel "where the wolves would howl at night" (CH 54). But when a wolf really appears outside the train window, she does not see the animal.

³⁶ Through sound Eric is connected to Eros. Eric is also the name of the Norse hero who is said to have come to North America (Newfoundland) five centuries before Columbus. Thus, Eric-Eros also connects Canada to Ancient Greece. www.sagadb.org/eirikis_saga_rauda.en. (Accessed 20 June 2010).

³⁷ The allusion is to Iris Murdoch's novel *A Word Child* (1976).

link between life and literature will lose its idealistic contours and Juliet will be plunged into the sacred violence of love and death, the Dionysian possession necessary to unlearn the facile consolations of art.³⁸

An extreme incident will bring Juliet and Eric together. A fellow passenger, an awkward character from whom Juliet withdraws in fastidiousness³⁹, commits suicide by throwing himself under the train. Through a series of accidents, the place where his smashed body was lying on the tracks is defiled with Juliet's menstrual blood and urine flushed through the toilet. The taboos involved in the mixture of the suicide's mangled body and Juliet's menstrual blood create an almost unbearable image of defilement and murder and link sexuality, specifically female sexuality, to images of extreme violence and guilt, and thus to the most archaic representations of the sacred.⁴⁰

Juliet's contact with primordial violence drowns words and books. She discovers that she is "unable, in her customary language to go on" (CH 65). She is made savage by what has happened: "unholy laughter" (CH 68) sweeps her civilised notions and erudite words. Her speculations about maenadism (Ch 59), her dreams of *Taiga* (CH 54) and wolves in romantic landscapes tilt over into an extreme confrontation with the pitilessness in her own nature that is also that of the savage encounter with the reality of sexuality. Eric, also on the train, is the chance witness of Juliet's 'wolfish' transformation and becomes therefore indelibly linked to Juliet's encounter with the most archaic layers of her being: she cannot but choose to go to him. Her final encounter with Eric bears the traits of simultaneously violation and mystical ravishment: "He advances on her and she feels herself ransacked from top to bottom, flooded with relief, assaulted by happiness. How astonishing this is, how close to dismay." (CH 85: emphasis mine).

Eric is real. He is the reality that Juliet has been looking for and that still possesses her when she later dismisses her mother's awkward declaration of love. It is the reality that naturally flows over into her daughter, Penelope, a character who is always shown to exist in relation to Juliet and who only once, and for a very short moment, appears speaking in the first person, ironically to say: "I forgive you. I guess I am not a baby" (SI 149)⁴¹.

³⁸ In "Chance" obsessive imagery and references to the underworld (night, darkness, shrouds, caves) and to the light of the underworld (stars, fire) are opposed to imagery belonging to the sun as healing power.

³⁹ Significantly, Juliet recoils from the passenger's words "to chum around": "She could hear him now, chewing on the words *chum around*. Apology and insolence." (CH 57: emphasis in the text).

⁴⁰ Cf. René Grirard, *La violence et le sacré* (1972 : 57): "Le rapport étroit entre sexualité et violence, héritage commun de toutes les religions." For the relationship of menstrual blood and violence, see *ibidem*, 55-59.

⁴¹ Penelope is overwhelmingly present in her mother's thoughts and longings, but except for some scenes of Penelope as a baby, she never materializes as a character. She exists as an

The depth to which Juliet was "possessed" by Eric/Eros is shown in the manner her bereavement is represented: "So this is grief. She feels as if a sack of cement has been poured into her and quickly hardened". (147). What astonishes in this Niobe-like "figure of grief"⁴² is the way it reveals the hollowness of Juliet's body, her fundamental dispossession. The metaphor of cement is violent: unlike the life preserving connotations in "stone" or the hope for rain in "deserts", "cement" evokes a reification without redemption, a harsh and ugly solidification of life flow and thus of words. Later on, Juliet will consider this moment of her life as the summit of her failure towards her daughter: "She had been lacking in motherly inhibitions and propriety and self-control" (SI 56). And as the reader comes to understand the obscene depths of Juliet's dearth, he or she may come to agree with Penelope and interpret the latter's disappearance as a flight from her mother's too great need, a burden that is not hers to carry. Penelope's flight conveys that, unlike her mother, she is not willing to look for transcendence in the sexual fulfilment with a man. The revelation, at the end, that Penelope is "living the life of a prosperous, practical matron" (SI 157) comes as an almost unbearable anti-climax to Juliet's fantasies about her daughter as the embodiment of purity and perfection. It proves the fallacy of fiction of both the character and those who read about her, but it also asks questions about the good life. Can one avoid being possessed by the god of Eros? How does one reconcile the unholy violence in oneself with the attention to others? Has not the propagation of life itself (Penelope's five children) the capacity to make little of words and reflection and inwardness? Are not words dangerous when they enthrone fantasies and fanatic convictions?

In a sense, the Juliet stories are about the dangers inherent in longings for something absolute and the radical demands they can make on life. It allows the stories to be read as an interrogation about all kinds of fanatics. For all characters are shown to have fanatic traits, to value their own views and beliefs more than they do each other.

In the three stories about mothers and daughters, the reader is shown how the demands of love can be at odds with longings for the absolute and how both may reveal the impotence of words and their capacity for distortion. But this "necessary failure" is presented as inherent in the human condition as it is interwoven with many kindred stories that tell about the never resolved conflicts between love of the Mother (love of the same) and sexual love (love of difference): Demeter and Persephone, The Queen of Aethiopia and Charicleia, Daphnis and Chloe, Leucippe and Cleitophon. As such, the otherworldly space offered by books underlines the unresolved nature of love and stands as an alternative to all systems of faith and

absence. I am aware that I do not speak here of Juliet's relationship with her father portrayed in "Soon".

⁴² The expression belongs to the title of Karen E. Smythe's study: *Figuring Grief: Gallant, Munro, and the Poetics of Elegy* (1992).

learning that promise foreclosed solutions, secure answers and bracing responses. At the same time, it keeps alive an image of promise and the structure of “romance” although in an ambivalent way. The Juliet stories show that the moments of total vision must inevitably fall back into the finitude of time, and that the artistic form must be conquered, not from the romantic “carelessness” (CH 54) of nature, but from the messy complications of human relationships. At the same time, they also reveal that finitude and imperfection are constantly opened up by moments of grace, signs of redemption that keep alive hope and as such, the notion of time itself as the space where love exists and life happens. Grace and blessings lie in the prospect of time itself, as the title of the central panel so eloquently expresses. Ultimately, for the reader at least, grace lies in the art of story telling where such abundant complexity can come together in a truthful way without giving way to easy consolation.

What sets Juliet free at the end — what gives the hope that perhaps “soon” Penelope may come — is the revelation that the life her daughter has chosen for herself not only contradicts her scenarios but “transcends” them. The news of Penelope’s fertility defeats Juliet’s image of her daughter but also her own life as a penitent. Ironically, the daughter’s almost archetypical motherhood surpasses her real mother’s most saintly projections by giving her five real (fictional) grandchildren. The Zen-like blow that the narrator deals out — to Juliet and to the reader — in providing for Penelope the traditional happy ending of romance — of reconciliation, although not between Juliet and her daughter, but more important, between her daughter and life — also emphasizes how fiction may reveal the “Real” of the real, the metaphysical dimension inherent in life itself and the capacity it has to unsettle and to surprise. It brings Juliet back to her Greek authors, to books that mingle old and new vocabularies and multiple cultures and religions to speak of the ever returning theme of love lost and regained. From words out of books to words that have to be conquered from experience and hope, Juliet’s spiritual journey is one in which the soul, through work, discipline and silence learns to shed wings and to accept mortality: to be surprised by life.⁴³

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⁴³ The allusion is to Milton. *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* and to Plato’s image of the souls growing wings through the contemplation of love and beauty. *Phaedrus* 246 c-d.

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