RESISTING ACQUIESCENCE: INSTITUTIONALIZATION AND LATE-LIFE FRIENDSHIP IN ALICE MUNRO'S "MRS. CROSS AND MRS. KIDD"

Simone Francescato*

Abstract

This essay analyzes Alice Munro's "Mrs. Cross and Mrs. Kidd" from the collection *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982), focusing on the ways in which the story dramatizes the clash between the pervasive vitality which characterizes the two protagonists and their friendship, and the normalizing acquiescence prescribed by the institutional care facility where they reside.

Opporsi alla remissività: istituzionalizzazione e amicizia nella tarda età in "Mrs. Cross e Mrs. Kidd" di Alice Munro

Questo saggio analizza il racconto "Mrs. Cross and Mrs. Kidd" di Alice Munro, tratto dalla raccolta *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982), focalizzandosi sulle modalità con cui esso rappresenta lo scontro tra l'estrema vitalità che caratterizza l'amicizia tra le due protagoniste e la remissività loro imposta dall'istituto in cui risiedono.

Along with Margaret Laurence's novel *The Stone Angel* (1964) and short stories like "Spelling" (1978), or the quite recent "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" (2001) by Munro herself, "Mrs. Cross and Mrs. Kidd" (taken from the collection *The Moons of Jupiter*, 1982) has gradually come to be recognized as one of the most significant representations of institutionalized late life written by a Canadian author. This work has received contrasting scholarly interpretations: some of these have emphasized a certain continuity in the identity of the two protagonists throughout the text; Hooper, for instance, has argued that this story be read as «a simple tale, with no deep psychology or complications of plot […]. The lesson is that life is always like high school, with alliances and crushes, no matter how old one gets» (72); others have read the story as a fascinating representation of how identities may evolve over time, and of how late-life friendships may help «soften sorrows as we age» (130), as Sandra Buechler has recently argued. The present essay goes in a similar and yet

* Università Ca' Foscari Venezia.

Oltreoceano. L'identità canadese tra migrazioni, memorie e generazioni, a cura di Silvana Serafin, Alessandra Ferraro e Daniela Ciani Forza, 11 (2016).

different direction, focusing on the ways in which institutionalization infiltrates the protagonists' self-representation and possible friendship, leaving very little space for them to exert any sort of agency in their social arena. But, as they realize their helpless condition at the end of the story, Mrs. Cross and Mrs. Kidd are led to a «renewed conjunction»[1] that, while revealing their fragility as human beings, also exposes the subtle oppression to which they are condemned in the nursing home where they reside.

Closing the gaps of difference

The story begins by offering a portrait of Mrs. Cross and Mrs. Kidd in their youth, and by drawing attention to the fact that, after the two women's relocation to an institutional care facility, Hilltop Home, their individual differences have somehow been forgotten or erased. To an external and younger observer, the narrator recounts, the two old women (whose first and maiden names, Dolly Grainger and Marian Botherton, are only mentioned once and parenthetically in the whole story[2]) have always seemed to be inseparable and very close throughout life. However, the truth is that Mrs. Kidd comes from a very well-off family, and is more educated and mannered than Mrs. Cross, who, by contrast, comes from the working class, is more unrefined, straightforward, but also more physically active. The recent re-balancing of their situation, accomplished by their children, who have closed their «gap [and] equaled things out» (Munro writes: «Mrs. Cross's children, on the average, make as much money as Mrs. Kidd's children, though they do not have as much education. Mrs. Cross's grandchildren make more money», 162) can be read in an ironic way as a reference to the fact that the two women, regardless of their differences, have now been forced by their offspring into some kind of «artificial intimacy», as Rasporich has defined it (116), through their being locked up in the same facility. The social and cultural distance that separated, and still separates, them is no longer a fact, but a memory that the two old women alone remember («They themselves are the only ones who can recall what separated them, and to a certain extent does yet», 161).

[1] Haziron writes: «The narrative structure of 'Mrs. Cross and Mrs. Kidd' appears to be circular. It begins with a state of conjunction between the two elderly ladies in the institution, and unfolds with a transformation of the conjunction into disjunction and finishes with a renewed conjunction between these two characters» (75).

[2] With the notable exception of Mrs. Cross's mentioning her friend's first name in a significant passage of the text, later on commented upon in this essay.

Perhaps the very objects duly given to them by their children, and with which their rooms have been furnished, are to remind them of their different lives: botany and zoology books, cases of brittle butterflies and songbirds in the case of Mrs. Kidd, and «ornaments, pictures, cushions» (164), which are mostly tasteless knick-knacks, in the case of Mrs. Cross. These objects, however, do not reflect the present identity of their owners, but only a certain 'sweetened' and anachronistic image of them which is cherished by their family. Mrs. Kidd, in reality, cannot read the books because they «are large and heavy and she can't find a way to look at them comfortably»: moreover, «she [doesn't want to] admit it to her children, but her interest has waned, it has waned considerably» (163). As for Mrs. Cross, she values her knick-knacks mainly because they seem to reflect her children's power of acquisition («Mrs. Cross finds out from her children what these things cost and tells people. She says she is shocked», 164). Mrs. Kidd, in particular, seems to be reduced to a sort of fond reminiscence, contrived by her children to avoid the harsh facts of the passing of time and of their own aging («Her children, who all live at a distance […]. They say in their letters that they remember […] their letters are full of remembering. They want her fixed where she was forty or fifty years ago, these children who are aging themselves», 163). Mrs. Kidd, very submissively accepts her diminished role as a sort of gifted child («They celebrate what would in a child be called precocity: her brightness, her fund of knowledge, her atheism… all the ways in which she differs from the average, or expected, old lady», 163[3]), believing that, for her, it is «a duty to hide from them the many indications that she is not so different as they think» (163).

The first part of the story sees the two women hanging around on their wheelchairs and making sarcastic and sneering remarks about the place and its most impaired patients. While Mrs. Kidd keeps herself at a distance, somehow unable to bear the misery she sees, Mrs. Cross faces the less fortunate patients unafraid, especially those residing on the Second Floor of the institution, like her own cousin Lily Barbour. The daily routine at Hilltop Home is initially described in terms of a certain continuity with life outside, but in a kind of miniaturized, dependent form which recalls an experiential horizon reserved

[3] The infantilization of elderly persons has often been explored in the fiction about aging and nursing homes. In May Sarton's 1973 classic novel *As We are Now*, written in the guise of a memoir by an old woman secluded by her relatives in what she defines «a concentration camp for the old» (9), we read passages like the following: «They shatter me. I am not worthy, a leper – an old woman without control over herself. When I cried so much in the dark it was a small punished child crying, but that is what I have to battle against – the longing to be forgiven, to be accepted again» (42).

for children («It was like school here. People paired off, they had best friends. The same people always sat together in the dining-room. Some people had nobody», 166).

Something changes, however, as Mrs. Cross notices Jack, a fifty-nine year-old man hospitalized after having a stroke, who not only kindles her affection, awakening in her a sort of motherly instinct[4], but also appeals to her as a case of medical injustice. This acquaintance with Jack, who is apparently unable to communicate, somehow triggers a latent subversive power in the old woman, which only her friend Mrs. Kidd is able to recognize («Mrs. Cross felt something stretching in her. It was her old managing, watching power, her capacity for strategy, which if properly exercised could never be detected by those it was used on./ Mrs. Kidd could detect it however», 168). Mrs. Cross's heartfelt and furtive commitment to Jack's case exposes the fact that the ultimate mission of sites like Hilltop Home is that of 'preserving' people's physical well-being by tying them to a set of routine activities, rather than helping them broaden and expand their full experiential horizon. Mrs. Cross's disappointment reaches its highest point in her conversation with a doctor, who dismisses her questions and concerns about Jack by replying: «I'd say you'd done your share of worrying» (171), a remark that, when applied to her own case, could be somehow read as: «We don't really worry about you either». For Mrs. Cross, not being permitted to do good towards Jack, whom she deems as an extremely «intelligent man» (169), stands out as a revelation of the absurdity and the helplessness to which she herself seems to be condemned. The woman thus decides to act on her own and to start a program of rehabilitation for her new friend. It is, indeed, at this point that she notices that at Hilltop Home there is nothing really useful for stimulating the patients and their interaction. Patients, in fact, can only benefit from a collection of comforting readings meant to distract them from the limited life they are leading. Sure enough, while looking for an atlas to help Jack communicate about the place he comes from, she finds «to her disgust» that at Hilltop Home «there [is] nothing but [books about] love stories and religion» (168).

Mrs. Cross's commitment to Jack in the story is not entirely disinterested as it also represents an attempt to bypass the doctors and their cold detachment through a delusional identification with a younger patient, whose possible recovery would give her a sense of a renewed agency in the world. In her recent

[4] Adams, Blieszner and De Vries write: «Because of their stage of life, [older people] participate in a different set of daily routines and activities than those who are employed or have children living at home. This in turn affects their opportunities to make and keep friends» (119).

analysis of this story, Milda Danyté has defined this psychological process as a natural tendency to create «possible selves» intended to undermine «relatively stable and stabilizing patterns» of identity, as those prescribed by the institution where old people are often forced to live[5]. A danger inherent to this tendency, however, is losing contact with reality. Indeed, one should not fail to observe that, after her enthusiastic decision to help Jack, Mrs. Cross not only spends less time with Mrs. Kidd, her equal in age («Mrs. Cross and Mrs. Kidd had not had any falling-out or any real coolness. They still had some talks and card games. But it was difficult. They no longer sat at the same table in the dining-room […]», 174), but also completely neglects to visit her unfortunate cousin in the upper story of the institution («she hadn't been up to the Second Floor, hadn't visited Lily Barbour, since she took up with Jack», 171), as if her cousin would represent a possible future version of herself which she cannot bear to take into account.

The relationship Mrs. Cross establishes with Jack is also profoundly unbalanced, as Jack's condition leaves space for her to make up a fantasized version of his actual life (which she refers to using the word «secret», 172), largely drawing from her own nostalgic regret for the past. At one point she says to him:

> Well. I have a secret too. I had a boy I liked, he was killed in the First World War. He walked me home from a skating-party, it was our school skating-party […] when I heard he was killed, that was after I was married, I was married at seventeen, well, when I heard he was killed, I thought, now I've got something to look forward to, I could look forward to meeting him in Heaven. That's true. That's how childish I was./ Marian was at that skating-party too. You know who I mean by Marian. Mrs. Kidd. She was there and she had the most beautiful outfit. […] Also she had a muff. She had a white fur muff. I never saw anything I would've liked to have for myself as much as that muff (173).

In this soliloquy with Jack, Mrs. Cross even gets to confess, unrequested, things she would have never revealed to anyone (she married a man while still being in love with another), and that also introduces an element of ambivalence and envy towards her universally-recognized dearest friend at the institution, Mrs. Kidd.

[5] Citing socio-psychologist George C. Rosenwald, Danyté identifies in Munro's characters «the human tendency to create new narratives for themselves as a way of rebelling against the 'relatively stable and stabilizing patterns' that are laid out for themselves» (63) in the institution for the elderly. With reference to the newly-established relationship between Mrs. Cross and Jack, Danyté also argues «This new role in Mrs. Cross's life can be understood through what socio-psychologists refer to as 'possible selves': 'Individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming» (68).

Very much like her companion, at a certain point Mrs. Kidd makes a «new friend of her own» (173). This friend is Charlotte, a woman in her mid-forties suffering from multiple sclerosis, whom «years of institutional life had made […] childish, affectionate, good-humored» (173). This young woman's childish subservience reminds one of the image attached to Mrs. Kidd by her offspring, one which is mentioned in the first part of the story («They have a notion of her that is as fond and necessary as any notion a parent ever had of a child», 163), but such similarity goes entirely unnoticed by the older woman. Although she is «more self-analytical than Mrs. Cross», as Danyté has it (69)[6], Mrs. Kidd thinks of her own relationship with Charlotte in rather abstract terms, failing to recognize that the latter is largely a projection of her own remissive self, whose only relief is escape into an imaginary world. In a key point in the text she wonders:

> Was she turning into one of those old ladies that love to be waited on? Those old ladies also needed somebody to boss. They were the sort who went around the world on cruise ships, she had read about them in novels. […] Charlotte was itching to be somebody's slave. So why did Mrs. Kidd hope to restrain herself? She did not wish to be such a recognizable sort of old lady. Also, slaves cost more than they were worth. […] She wanted to float herself clear […]. She imagines a house on the edge of some dark wood or bog, bright fields in front of it running down to the sea. She imagined she lived there alone, like an old woman in a story (175).

Although in different ways, both Mrs. Cross and Mrs. Kidd develop close relationships with patients through which they build up 'possible selves'. On the one hand, these relationships compensate for the lack of inter-generational exchange in the facility. On the other hand, they also express the different modalities with which the two women respond to their institutionalization: Mrs. Cross with Jack's unexpressed anger and rage, and Mrs. Kidd with Charlotte's submissive acceptance.

Two useless old crocks

Munro's story culminates in a climax sequence where Mrs. Cross attempts to make a further step in Jack's rehabilitation in speaking and writing, by getting him to play scrabble with Mrs. Kidd and Charlotte. Unfortunately, however, her hopes are let down. Munro writes: «[Mrs. Cross] saw Jack's hand descend

[6] While Mrs. Cross is a people-person, Mrs. Kidd is more literary, and less capable of adapting to circumstances (see also Buechler 132).

clumsily on the Scrabble board. The letters went flying. He turned and showed her his ugly look, worse than she had ever seen it. She was amazed and even frightened, but she did not mean to let him see» (177). Katherine Mayberry has read this scene not only as personal failure on Mrs. Cross's side, but also as an extradiegetic device which, by enhancing uncertainty, works «against the composition of narrative truth» (30). Diegetically speaking, however, Jack's sudden retreat into the unfathomable incommunicability of his illness violently throws Mrs. Cross back to matter-of-factness, forcing her to accept that *she* herself is actually helpless and out-of-control, no matter how hard she tries to reject this idea («she was not able to say a word, such a feeling of grief, and shock, and helplessness rose in her heart», 177).

The thwarted interaction between the two couples, Mrs. Cross/Jack and Mrs. Kidd/Charlotte, has a productive and sense-making effect in the story: on the one hand, it leads the two characters not only to becoming fully aware, together, of their position, but also, and this is for the very first time in the story, to giving a name to it, to representing it to themselves through the image of the «useless old crocks» (178) used at one point by Mrs. Cross. This same image simultaneously conveys a sense of the role and the identity that the institution forces them to assume, and which stems from the limited interactive and inter-generational experience that such an institution guarantees. Their failure in helping two needy younger patients represents a definitive confirmation of their own uselessness, and that is why they both know it is so important to hide from the personnel that they have transgressed the limit imposed on their agency (Mrs. Kidd says: «We don't need to say how it happened», 178).

The full confrontation with their misery leads them to a liberating «combined laughter», which precedes a swapping of roles that sees the two old women, again for the first time, as entirely stripped down to the very bone of their contingent experience, with no outside constriction to force their intimacy. It is now the rather meek and remissive Mrs. Kidd to take an initiative, helping bossy Mrs. Cross to leave by lending her own wheelchair to her and by pushing her back to her room. This pivotal scene sees the two women showing sides of their personality that are very different from those that have always characterized them (as we read at the beginning of the story, Mrs. Kidd is very good at talking but not in moving, and Mrs. Cross is the other way around[7]), and completes the circularity of the story's narrative structure traced by Daziron, as she observes: «This act of charity has not only drawn the two ladies together to an extent they had never experienced, it has also enabled them to reach a state of balance

[7] See the story 160-161.

which neither of them had known before» (80). The little secret of their failure will remain unknown to others just like the differences that have separated them for many years and went unnoticed. But while their initial intimacy was the fruit of their homologation at Hilltop House, their complicity in hiding failure is now something that binds them authentically as secret conspirators against an institution which they perceive as detached, or even hostile.

Dolly and Marian's rediscovered and reinvigorated friendship, to conclude, is now grounded in the 'here-and-now', and is very far from their rather formal and distant former relationship. Although a belated and sad little conquest, this reciprocity powerfully invites us readers to challenge our conceptions and to question the stereotypical image of serene old age in home care facilities[8].

Works cited

Adams, Rebecca G. Blieszner, Rosemary and De Vries, Brian. "Definitions of Friendship in the Third Age: Age, Gender, and Study Location Effects". *Journal of Aging Studies*, 14 (2000), 1: 117-133.

Buechler, Sandra. *Understanding and Treating Patients in Clinical Psychoanalysis: Lessons from Literature*. London & New York: Routledge. 2015.

Danyté, Milda. "Changes in Identity in Alice Munro's Stories: A Sociopsychological Analysis". *Literatūra* 56 (2014), 4: 57-77.

Daziron, Héliane. "'Of Beasts and Stones: 'Mrs Cross and Mrs Kidd'". *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 11 (1989), 2: 75-82.

Hooper, Brad. *The Fiction of Alice Munro: An Appreciation.* Westport, Conn: Praeger. 2008.

Lang, Frieder R, and Karen L. Fingerman. *Growing Together: Personal Relationships Across the Lifespan*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University. 2004.

Mayberry, Katherine J. "'Every Last Thing… Everlasting': Alice Munro and the Limits of Narrative". Harold Bloom. *Alice Munro.* New York. NY: Bloom's Literary Criticism. 2009: 29-40.

Munro, Alice. "Mrs. Cross and Mrs. Kidd" in *The Moons of Jupiter*. London: Vintage. 2004 (1th ed. 1982): 160-180.

Rasporich, Beverly J. *Dance of the Sexes: Art and Gender in the Fiction of Alice Munro*. Edmonton, Alta. Canada: University of Alberta. 1990.

Sarton, May. *As We Are Now: A Novel*. New York: W. W. Norton. 1992.

[8] «Like an epic story, 'Mrs. Cross and Mrs. Kidd' dramatizes the victorious struggle of its heroines. Like a modernist fable, it reduces the ideal and the transcendent to the near caricature. The result is not anti-heroic or mock-heroic. It is simultaneously ironic and heroic, belittled and aggrandized, for Alice Munro does not belong to the school of 'lean modernism' that strips individuals to their skeletons and boils motifs down to their bare essentials» (Daziron 81).