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La question animale dans les nouvelles d'Alice Munro

The Animal Question in Alice Munro's Stories

Numéro coordonné par Héliane Ventura

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2-OF FOXES, STUFFED SIMULACRA, AND FICTION

Of Fox and Fathers: "Boys and Girls" and "Working for a Living"

Biancamaria RIZZARDI *

RÉSUMÉ

Cet essai se concentre sur deux nouvelles publiées à près de quarante ans de distance, "Boys and Girls" (1968) et "Working for a living" (2006), pour mettre en lumière l'importance accordée par Alice Munro au personnage du renard. Par l'intermédiaire du commerce de la fourrure, il est l'élément essentiel du processus de colonisation mais il est aussi au cœur de l'histoire personnelle car c'est autour de lui que la vie familiale de l'auteur s'est construite. A travers les échos et les variations qui se donnent à voir d'une nouvelle à l'autre Munro bâtit "un roman de renard" qui entrelace les fils de l'histoire littéraire, de l'histoire du pays et de l'histoire d'une famille.

Keywords: Father, Fox, Ted Hughes, multiplicity of being.

To approach Alice Munro's stories through the angle of "the animal question" or "becoming animal, becoming human"¹ is unusual. I would like to pause and consider why this might be so. The first thing that occurs to me is that in order to tackle such an issue, the reader—and in particular the Euro-centric reader—is required to make a slight effort. While with modern and post-modern writers, from Kafka on I would say, the relationship with animals and the identification with animals, has become a way of escaping from a monolithic sense of self in order to discover new nuances within one's writing and the representation of the self, with Canadian writers and with Alice Munro in

· Università di Pisa.

¹ "Becoming animal, becoming human: Alice Munro and the animal question" was the original title of the conference which took place at the university of Toulouse on January 8th, 2016.

particular, this is not always so. In the sense that these motivations may be necessarily inserted into a historical, geographical, and natural context that renders the relationship with the animal, whether tame or wild, free or in captivity, very common and familiar. Alice Munro's "Canadianness" further substantiates this relationship, on the one hand imbuing the narrative with what I would call a tone of "normality," while on the other providing a perspective from which to "re-read" the whole affair.

As sample texts, I shall take a couple of stories and one animal. The stories are "Working for a Living" taken from the collection *The View from Castle Rock* (2006) and "Boys and Girls," from the collection *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968). The animal is the fox. In both stories, the scenario is typical of Alice Munro's writing, which often finds a pictorial equivalent in the paintings by the Groups of Seven:

our nine-acre farm had an unusual location. To the east was the town, the church towers and the tower of the Town Hall visible when all the leaves were off the trees, and on the mile or so of road between us and the main street there was a gradual thickening of houses, a turning of dirt paths into sidewalks, an appearance of a lone streetlight, so that you might say we were at the town's farthest edges, though beyond its legal municipal boundaries. But to the west there was only one farmhouse to be seen, and that one far away, at the top of a hill almost at the midpoint in the western horizon. (WL, 147)²

The description given here provides a textual equivalent of the paintings by Arthur Lismer which, if not located in Southwestern Ontario but in Quebec, nevertheless offer a recognizable outlook on rural life in Eastern Canada, for instance "Saint-Hilarion" (1925) which represents an entire village and "Habitant Farm" (1926) which focuses on an individual farm. Munro seems to be engaging in a clandestine ekphrasis, suggesting pictures behind words and allowing the reader to supplement the visible text with the invisible images that she calls forth.

As with all masterpieces, in the case of the stories that I shall be examining, it is not at the level of the plot that the originality of the text may be found. "Working for a Living," is a long short story that tells of the youth of the writer's father, and of how, as a country boy from Huron County, he first went to the village of Blyth in order to continue his studies, only then to abandon them so as to follow his heart's desire: to become a fox hunter. As a teenager, he

² Alice Munro, "Working for a Living," *The View From Castle Rock* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2006). Subsequently referred to as WL.

shunned the farming life of his parents and spent time in the bush hunting and trapping. In his adult life, this led to fox farming, raising fur animals, especially silver foxes. During the Depression, when Alice was a young girl, the business started to go downhill, but was saved by the mother who managed to sell their furs to American tourists. Eventually they had to give up the enterprise and the father found a job in a foundry.

At the centre of "Boys and Girls" lies the standout character of Ben Jordan's daughter, a young girl born on a farm in Southwestern Ontario, who is also a *persona* for the author. In "Boys and Girls" her father raises silver foxes and she describes the killing and skinning and selling of their pelts to the Hudson's Bay Company or the Montreal Fur Traders. She makes her brother participate in a voyeuristic scene, peeping through a hole at a horse being killed to provide fodder for the foxes, and she tries unsuccessfully to rescue another. The ending, with the episode centering on the pair of horses, Mack and Flora, stands out like a renaissance painting.³

In "Working for a Living" it is the fox that writes the father's story, and that of the family, just as, forty years earlier in "Boys and Girls," the story, both personal and national, took form in the *persona* of the fox. These two versions represent two sides of the same story: the father's childhood and that of the writer, as well as that of Canada, written and re-written from two different perspectives, but a story which does not alter at the core, because it is entirely taken up by the animal. The fact that time has elapsed between the two versions is not what matters most. What prevails is how, within time itself, that early and foreshadowing moment, the father's transition from childhood to maturity firstly, and then the writer's, has managed to sediment, bringing with it all the layers of colour, scent, fear and worry, the wonder and achievement connected with the Canadian countryside and the history of the country. Here the fox brings with it a story, geometrical and essential, broken up and folded in on itself, recounting itself, as in the painting by Franz Marc, "Foxes" (1913) (fig. 1) which diffracts the body of the fox as if it were captured in a kaleidoscope or Proust's magic lantern.

³ One cannot help thinking of the horses of Leonardo da Vinci but also of those by Benozzo Gozzoli, Domenico Ghirlandaio, Pisanello, Paolo Ucello, Carlo Crivelli to name only a few.



Fig. 1. Franz Marc, "Foxes" 1913 © Museum Kunstpalast – ARTOTHEK.

Both texts provide ample room for reflection, and have been the subjects of much critical appraisal⁴ but I shall concentrate on one aspect only, the animal that lies within them in its secret core because this joint presence of human beings and animals seems to have been overlooked and it is precisely the close relationship between the father and the fox in one story, and the daughter and the fox in the other, that brings about the transition from childhood to maturity in both characters. In a specular manner, the two relationships lead to several

⁴ "Boys and Girls" is probably one of the most studied stories in Munro's oeuvre. The latest contribution to the explanation of the story is a lacanian one. See Jennifer, Murray, *Reading Alice Munro with Jacques Lacan* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016).

others, above all those between father and daughter, read and re-read after more than forty years in the same way the deconstructed almost prismatic "Fox Reflections" of Franz Marc's painting open up innumerable overlapping vistas.

In "Working for a Living" the narrative plays itself out through dichotomies that provide the scenario of the story: culture/cultivation; city/countryside; city-dwellers/farmers; the time before Depression/ the time after Depression; man/woman (husband/wife; grandfather/grandmother); inside/outside.

The main character's life is mapped out by the different phases of his relationship with the fox: for instance, he discovers that he is no longer interested in studying because he is attracted to a Fennimore Cooper-type lifestyle which he has read but never experienced: "He had read books by Fennimore Cooper and he had absorbed the myth or half-myths about wilderness..." (WL, 131). At this point he drops out of school to become a fox-hunter and he meets the woman who will become his wife: she is a distant cousin, a teacher who gives him good advice and provides financial help to set up a fox-breeding farm. During a period of financial difficulty, the family manages to break even thanks to the sale, organised by the wife, of fox furs and when the business goes under he has to find a job. Life is mapped out by foxes.

Seeking out the father's story means seeking out the history of Canada as well; and in fact, the whole narrative is constantly—even obsessively—set within a framework of historical and geographical details that emphasize the idea of "Canadianness." At the heart of the father's story lie the foxes and the attitude, both real and symbolic, of extreme solicitude towards the foxes, for whom the father, a latter-day Robinson Crusoe (as described by the daughter in "Boys and Girls"⁵) builds a small town on his farm:

The colony of fox pens took up a good deal of the territory on our farm. It stretched from behind the barn to the high bank overlooking the river flats. The first pens my father had made had roofs and walls of fine wire on a framework of cedar poles. They had earth floors. The pens built later on had raised wire floors. All the pens were set side by side on intersecting "streets" so that they made a town, and around the town was a kennel - a large wooden box with ventilation holes and a sloping roof or lid that could be lifted up. And there was a wooden ramp along one side of the pen, for foxes' exercise..." (WL, 143)

⁵ Alice Munro, "Boys and Girls," *Dance of the Happy Shades* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1968), subsequently referred to as BG. "Everything was tidy and ingenuous; my father was tirelessly inventive and his favourite book in the world was Robinson Crusoe" (BG, 114).

He takes photos of their pups together with his mother: "He took a snapshot of his mother holding the three little pups" (WL, 138). He won't kill them with a gun so as not to damage their pelts:

How do you kill a trapped fox? You don't want to shoot him, because of the wound left in the pelt and the smell spoiling the trap. (WL, 137)

The father's life unfolds through his encounters with animals, a type of encounters with a form of the Other to which human needs are attributed.

At the beginning of the 1983 edition of the book, *Volpone, or the Fox* by Ben Jonson, the editor Brian Parker placed an image with a caption that reads: "Birds peck 'dead' fox in twelfth-century Bestiary" (Cambridge University Library, M.S. I.I. 4,26). Horizontally the image can be divided into three strata: the upper one with four crows feeding on a dead or dying fox; the middle one created by the animal's long body; and the lower one, where it can be seen that the stretched-out body is keeping her pups hidden.

This strikingly resembles the tripartite layout of the levels making up the "frightening" interior of the house where the young Del used to live, described almost at the beginning of BG, where we read:

We were afraid at night in the winter. We were not afraid of *outside* though this was the time of year when snowdrifts curled around our house like sleeping whales and the wind harassed us all night, coming up from the buried fields, the frozen swamp, with its old bugbear chorus of threats and misery. We were afraid of *inside*, the room where we slept. At this time the upstairs of our house was not finished. A brick chimney went up on the wall. In the middle of the floor was a square hole, with a wooden railing around it; that was where the stairs came up. On the other side of the stairwell were the things that nobody had any use for anymore – a soldiery roll of linoleum, standing on end, a wicker bay carriage, a fern basket, china jugs and basins with cracks in them, a picture of the Battle of Balaclava, very sad to look at. I had told Laird, as soon as he was old enough to understand such things, that bats and skeletons lived over there; whenever a man escaped from the county jail, twenty miles away, I imagined that he had somehow let himself in the window and was hiding behind the linoleum (BG, 112)

In the same edition of *Volpone, or the Fox*, alongside this image there is another: "Fox. With ape helper, preaches to geese from a pulpit, on Misericord (N.4.1520) in Beverly Minster, Yorkshire" (fig. 2).

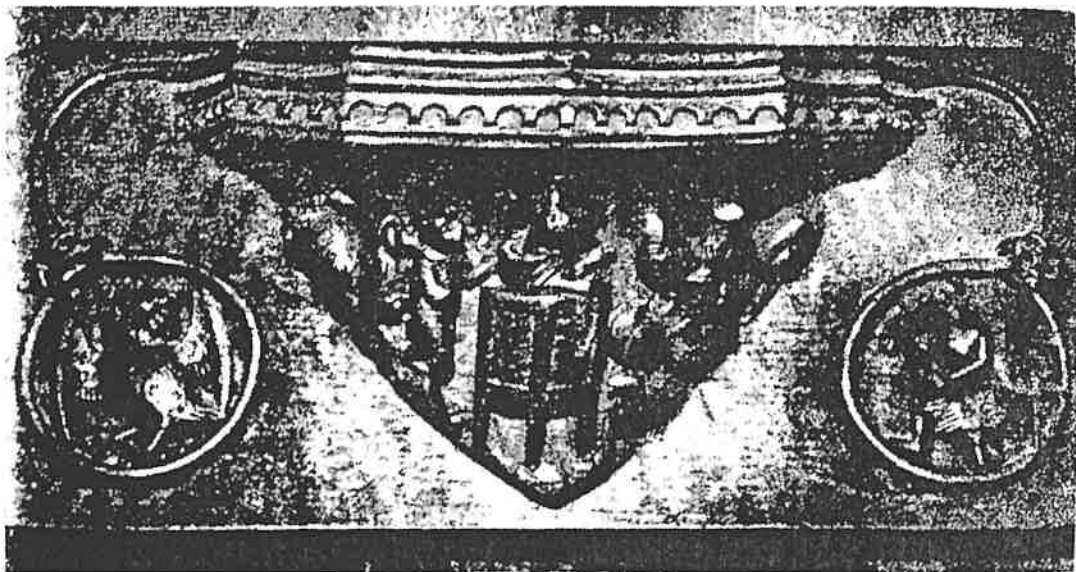


Fig. 2. "Fox. With ape helper, preaches to geese from a pulpit, on Misericord (N.4.1520) in Beverly Minster, Yorkshire." Reproduced by kind permission of the Vicar and Churchwardens of Beverly Minster.

Both images provide us with a possible interpretation for the story being examined. It is undoubtedly true that in Medieval bestiaries, in those made of stone in the ancient cathedrals, in the paintings of the great deformed from the past—such as Grunewald, Bosch, Bruegel—there already was an awareness of the Other, and the vision deriving from this was always balanced by the dazzling light coming from a profoundly rooted, and apparently unshakeable truth, which facilitated sudden and fleeting descents into Hell.

In the modern age, with the tendency to seek inspiration from the depths, the writing itinerary is fashioned after the Baudelairian descent into the *gouffre* of conscience—"au fond de l'inconnu pour trouver du nouveau"—and one is obsessively faced up with the attending ghost of the *Doppelgänger*, as may be found in Poe, Hoffman, Melville, Dostoevsky, up to Faulkner, Kafka and the greatest writers of the 20th century. It is from this interiority that the originality of Alice Munro's writing emerges, which enables her to make something of the story of her father's life, transcending the limits of time—or rather, returning to it. The father's relationship with the fox as a *person* is laid out in a narrative collocation that is the most fitting one, through its subsequent metamorphoses, to present the multi-faceted nature of the character. A lifetime is therefore broken up and expanded beyond the mere representation that comes across as deformed by a post-modern gesture: the protagonist's epic-lyric path will not accept truncation; his eyes transcend boundaries. The story unfolds by itself, unpredictably, innocently unawares.

I would like to suggest that in all likelihood Alice Munro had at the forefront of her mind Ted Hughes' Poem, one of his most anthologised, "The Thought Fox":

I imagine this midnight moment's forest:
 Something else is alive
 Beside the clock's loneliness
 And this blank page where my fingers move.

Through the window I see no star:
 Something more near
 Though deeper within darkness
 Is entering the loneliness:

Cold, delicately as the dark snow,
 A fox's nose touches twig, leaf;
 Two eyes serve a movement, that now
 And again now, and now, and now

Sets neat prints into the snow
 Between trees, and warily a lame
 Shadow lags by stump and in hollow
 Of a body that is bold to come

Across clearings, an eye,
 A widening deepening greenness,
 Brilliantly, concentratedly,
 Coming about its own business

Till, with a sudden sharp hot stink of fox
 It enters the dark hole of the head.
 The window is starless still; the clock ticks,
 The page is printed.⁶

In "The Thought Fox," Ted Hughes likens the process of writing a poem to the approach of a fox, which slips into his head as a real fox would slip into a hole. At the beginning of the poem, the poet sits before a starless window poised over an empty page. The fox emerges from a place "deeper within darkness" than the evening sky. It comes from somewhere near and enters the poet's loneliness. The

⁶ Ted Hughes, "The Thought Fox": onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-8705.1984.../pdf

thought has risen from the dark subconscious of the poet and has taken shape. The fox comes closer, sniffing his way, following a scent toward the waiting poet. It seems the thought is coming to the poet, perhaps in response to a summons from him. The fox becomes clearer in the poet's vision as it gets closer, but it is now apparent to the poet that the fox is coming on "its own business." Foxes give off an odour when anxious, most notably when they are being hunted. The poet is certainly hunting the fox, but its disappearance into his head is an assimilation of the thought rather than the thought's escape. The stink hangs on in the air, a residue of the process and suggestive of the fox having been run to ground. The page is printed, yet the sky remains starless and the clock still ticks, as if nothing so vigorous as a hunt had taken place. "There was the smell," Alice Munro recalls, reflecting on her father's work with the foxes in her childhood:

After the pelt had been stretched inside-out on a long board my father scraped away delicately, removing the little clotted webs of blood vessels, the bubbles of fat; the smell of blood and animal fat, which the strong primitive odor of the fox itself, penetrated all parts of the house. I found it reassuringly seasonal, like the smell of oranges and pine needles. (BG, 111-112)

Almost forty years separate the publication of "Boys and Girls" and "Working for a Living," when the writer thematically reviews the figure of her father, the fox breeder, and reflects upon her own relationship with her father from the point of view of an adult. In both stories the central vision focuses on the transition from a mostly agricultural world to a fox-breeding one, in the way of a transition from childhood to maturity. To do this, Alice Munro once again uses the lucid detached description of her childhood on the farm, and her parents' breeding farm in Huron Country. The location is only one aspect of the description. In point of fact there is indeed a stratification and poly-referentiality between Canada and Scotland, city and countryside, wilderness and civilisation, settlement and unspoilt nature. Regionalism prevails, along with the precise description of her spatial territory. The concept of territory brings with it that of the appropriation of the territory, as well as the relationship between man and the natural world. The perspective of the story is childhood, but contemporaneously also adulthood, insofar as the writer is an adult when she looks back over her life, her relationship with her parents, her relationship with her father, her mother, with Huron Country, with childhood, with the farmhouse in which she lived and, above all, with the fox.

It is the fox that in both stories looks over the farm, and it is precisely through the relationship with the fox that both characters, father and daughter,

mature, as does their relationship itself. It takes forty years before the writer finally decides to look back over and complete that essential part of her relationship with her father, her past, with Canadian history, which had remained closed off behind a fence. It is no coincidence that the noun 'pen' (which recurs so frequently in both stories), means both 'a small enclosure for animals' and 'an implement for writing', with all the implications that this gives rise to.

Much more could be said on this topic, and many other Alice Munro's short stories could be quoted on the topic related to the interrelatedness of writer and animal. What I have tried to draw attention to in this paper is Munro's attempt to elaborate a form of art which investigates and celebrates the world of animals, the fox in this case, and tries to speak about it from a point of view which is profoundly oriented towards the overcoming of oppositional or destructive attitudes.

This element of Alice Munro's poetics urges human beings to move towards a thorough awareness of the importance of preserving the intrinsic and systemic (to say it *à la* Gregory Bateson) multiplicity of being, and is firmly opposed to the danger of *single-mindedness* and a homophonic vision of the world.

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