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Runaway Classicists: Anne Carson and Alice Munro's "Juliet" Stories

Ian Rae

- 1 Alice Munro's most prolific critic, Robert Thacker, argues that the key to understanding her short stories is the fact of her "having grown up, and of having lived in, and of having left, and of having remembered, and of having returned to, and above all of having made texts out of Huron County, Ontario" ("Introduction" 2). Taking Munro's 1974 story "Home" as paradigmatic, Thacker argues that Munro's fiction is "patently autobiographical and metafictional; it reflects the circumstances of Munro's return to Ontario after living in British Columbia for twenty years" (4). He thus "knowingly" conflates "the narrator/Munro" (4) and seeks to understand Munro's narrative technique through author statements, archival drafts of stories, and maps of Huron County. Perhaps to counteract such biographical readings, Munro took the extraordinary step of distinguishing her fictional stories from her memoirs in the 2006 foreword to *The View from Castle Rock*. Thacker, in turn, has subsequently noted that Munro's recent story collections "see individual lives through a wider angle of vision, introducing overarching patterns intimated through allusions to Greek myths, Shakespeare, and other literary texts, which seem to overlap present circumstances, shifting the frame of reference into further dimensions of imaginative apprehension, though with no ultimate revelation" ("Quartet" 375). Munro thereby stresses the fictional quality of even her first person narratives.
- 2 This essay will complicate biographical readings of Munro's work by demonstrating that the character of Juliet, featured in three linked stories in Munro's 2004 collection *Runaway*, reflects Munro's interest in the poet and classicist Anne Carson as much as it does Munro's biographical experience. However, since such biographical readings are highly speculative, the second half of this essay will employ formal analysis to demonstrate that scholars can profitably read the classical content of the Juliet stories through Carson's literary criticism. In particular, the similarities between Juliet's unfinished dissertation on the ancient Greek novel and the published version of Carson's dissertation on desire in ancient Greek literature, *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986),

offer insights into the triangulated patterns of erotic and maternal longing in the Juliet stories.

- 3 The danger of encouraging the autobiographical fallacy in Munro criticism is readily apparent in Jonathan Franzen's review of *Runaway* for *The New York Times*, which resurfaces as an introduction to international editions of *Runaway*. While Franzen's review performs the useful service of identifying a basic plot undergirding many Munro narratives, it also encourages the perception that Munro's plot is a thinly veiled version of her life story. Franzen's review thus resembles Thacker's work in its biographical approach to Munro's fiction:

Here's the story that Munro keeps telling: A bright, sexually avid girl grows up in rural Ontario without much money, her mother is sickly or dead, her father is a schoolteacher whose second wife is problematic, and the girl, as soon as she can, escapes from the hinterland by way of a scholarship or some decisive self-interested act. She marries young, moves to British Columbia, raises kids, and is far from blameless in the breakup of her marriage. She may have success as an actress or a writer or a TV personality; she has romantic adventures. When, inevitably, she returns to Ontario, she finds the landscape of her youth unsettlingly altered. Although she was the one who abandoned the place, it's a great blow to her narcissism that she isn't warmly welcomed back – that the world of her youth, with its older-fashioned manners and mores, now sits in judgment on the modern choices she has made. Simply by trying to survive as a whole and independent person, she has incurred painful losses and dislocations; she has caused harm.

And that's pretty much it. That's the little stream that's been feeding Munro's work for better than 50 years. The same elements recur and recur like Clare Quilty. What makes Munro's growth as an artist so crisply and breathtakingly visible – throughout the *Selected Stories* and even more so in her three latest books – is precisely the familiarity of her materials. Look what she can do with nothing but her own small story; the more she returns to it, the more she finds. (Franzen)

- 4 In the process of outlining "her story," Franzen confuses the performance of Munro's storytelling with a confessional revelation of the storyteller's secret self ("she has caused harm"). Although Franzen gestures toward second and third wave feminism and their changing perceptions of women's role in the home and workplace; although his abstraction of the plot suggests the mythic patterns of archetypal criticism; and although his emphasis on narcissism and the repetition compulsion points toward psychoanalysis, he abandons the rigour of these critical models for a confessional mode that conflates the author/protagonist in fiction and the author/speaker in poetry.
- 5 Nonetheless, Franzen's piece has value as a general introduction to Munro's writing. For example, his synopsis of Munro's plot accurately summarizes the mood, the locations, the sequence of events, and some of the characters in the trilogy of Juliet stories that comprise the bulk of *Runaway*. However, Munro's collection as a whole wards off such biographical readings by constantly emphasizing the literary basis of the plots, devices, and allusions in Munro's short stories. Briefly stated, *Runaway* begins by updating the biblical myth of the scapegoat in the titular story about a runaway goat that symbolically bears the sins of a failed marriage. In "Chance," "Soon," and "Silence," Munro explores Greek and Roman antiquity through the character of Juliet, a professional classicist. Munro's allusions make a chronological leap forward to the nineteenth century in "Passion," where Munro cites Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* as a key to understanding a tale of amorous betrayal. Yet nineteenth century realism is also subject to critique in "Passion" and Munro's subsequent story, "Trespasses," where realist and confessional modes of narrative prove to be unreliable. The fact that nearly

every character in *Runaway* is scheming, dreaming, (self-)deceiving, channeling supernatural powers, or in some way inhabiting an imagined world, compounds the reader's suspicion of the apparently concrete quality of the depicted worlds. Munro shows her stylizing hand most explicitly in the next story, "Tricks," which is set in Stratford, Ontario, and makes elaborate use of Shakespearean devices (twin brothers, a play within play, a tragicomic outcome). The collection's final story, "Powers," bears the subtitle "Give Dante a Rest," which propels the reader back to the medieval period, even as the subtitle's colloquial expression insists on a more contemporary attitude. To make these intertextual matters even more complicated, nearly every story in *Runaway* includes an allusion to the principal intertext of another story in the collection. The intricacy of Munro's web of allusions underscores how she has tailored the form of interlinked short stories to produce overarching continuities without sacrificing her preferred focus on the decisive event, anecdote, or moment.

- 6 This acute focus is often closer to that of lyric poetry than to that of discursive prose. It is within this context that one can begin to appreciate Munro's admiration for Carson, a postmodern poet who is neither realist nor regionalist in outlook, and who grew up in Ontario but writes about North America through the lens of Greek myth. Munro's enthusiasm for Carson is writ plainly on the back cover of Carson's 1998 novel-in-verse: "*Autobiography of Red* is amazing – I haven't discovered any writing in years that's so marvelously disturbing" (Knopf 1999). Carson's novel consists of a series of linked poems framed by an essay, an interview, translations of ancient Greek fragments, and other academic complements to the titular romance. In the 1990s, this unusual narrative won enthusiastic support from literary heavyweights such as Harold Bloom, Susan Sontag, Guy Davenport, and Michael Ondaatje, which helped to propel Carson into the upper echelons of the English-language literary world. After writing in relative obscurity for two decades, and issuing one slender volume of poetry with Brick Books (London, ON) in 1992, Carson burst onto the international literary scene in 1995 with two large collections published by New Directions and Knopf in New York. She has since garnered Lannan and MacArthur Foundation prizes in the United States; the Griffin Poetry Prize in Canada; the T.S. Eliot Prize for Poetry in England; as well as a host of other prizes, fellowships, and prestigious nominations, such as an unsuccessful bid for the Professor of Poetry chair at Oxford. As a fellow recipient of the Lannan prize, Munro no doubt took a professional interest in Carson's explosive career.
- 7 Yet Munro's endorsement of Carson's writing begs further analysis because critics typically slot Munro's stories at the realist end of the narrative spectrum and then position the lyrical, postmodern hybrids composed by the likes of Davenport, Ondaatje, and Carson at the opposite end. Consider Franzen's polarization of their respective styles: "Munro's work is all about storytelling pleasure. The problem here being that many buyers of serious fiction seem rather ardently to prefer lyrical tremblingly earnest, faux-literary stuff" (Franzen). Having championed lyrical fiction in *From Cohen to Carson: The Poet's Novel in Canada*, I will simply state here that Franzen's dismissal serves Munro criticism poorly because it underestimates her interest in poetry and suggests that the pleasure of reading her short stories is somehow divorced from her manipulations of generic form. Indeed, Franzen comes dangerously close to resembling one of the pernicious small town characters in *Runaway* who frown on the high cultural pretensions of poets such as Leon Jamieson in Munro's titular story. When Jamieson wins a lucrative prize for poetry late in life, the townsfolk refuse to believe in the prize money; instead, they speculate that Jamieson's money comes from marijuana sales: "It

seemed that people could believe in dope money buried in glass jars, but not in money won for writing poetry" (12). Rather than oppose Munro's prose to lyric poetry, therefore, I wish to examine the affinities between Carson's literary interests and those of the character Juliet in *Runaway*.

Carson and Juliet

- 8 The first, and least significant, connection between Carson and Juliet is their physical resemblance. Munro's description of the young Juliet could easily be a youthful rendering of the two or three author photographs that Carson's publishers allow to circulate (<http://www.randomhouse.com/knopf/authors/carson/index.html>): "She was a tall girl, fair-skinned and fine-boned, with light brown hair that even when sprayed did not retain a bouffant style. She had the look of an alert schoolgirl. Head held high, a neat rounded chin, wide thin-lipped smile, snub nose, bright eyes, and a forehead that was often flushed with effort or appreciation" (52-3). A more compelling affinity between Carson and Juliet is their career choice: "Juliet was twenty-one years old and already the possessor of a B.A. and an M.A. in Classics. She was working on her Ph.D. thesis, but had taken time out to teach Latin at a girl's private school in Vancouver" (52). Carson earned an M.A. in Classics at the University of Toronto in 1975. She then took a job at the University of Calgary before completing her Ph.D. at the University of Toronto in 1981. Appropriately, much of the first Juliet story, "Chance," takes place on the Prairies, where Juliet falls in love with Eric Porteous on the train trip to Vancouver. However, Juliet attends university a decade before Carson, so more evidence is needed to connect their biographies.
- 9 Juliet's research interests mirror those of Carson. Although Juliet is known in her hometown as "the girl who talks Latin" (113), and although she has agreed to teach Latin in Vancouver, nearly everything readers learn about her research concerns Carson's area of specialization: ancient Greece. On the train west, Juliet is preparing to teach a course on Greek Thought when she meets Eric and tries to impress him with a lesson on Greek astronomy. Juliet eventually abandons her Ph.D. to pursue Eric and raise a child, whom they give the Homeric name Penelope. After Eric's death, Juliet returns to Classics to research ancient Greek novelists, a subject to which Carson devotes several chapters of *Eros the Bittersweet* (77-97), and to which I will return in the second half of this essay.
- 10 There are further illuminating parallels between the reception of Carson's scholarship and poetry, and the reception of Juliet in academia and the various towns she inhabits. Reviewers of Carson's work praise her erudite publications, but interviewers rarely fail to comment on what they perceive as a disturbing blend of high seriousness and girlish playfulness in Carson (mismatched earrings, sparkle nail polish), as well as the quirkiness of an attractive, unmarried woman who is passionate about material as recondite as ancient Greek lyric (Gannon, Hampson, Rehak; for a more balanced perspective see Aitken). Although an eccentric antiquarianism is part of the mystique of, say, Ezra Pound, interviewers (male and female) generally find Carson's expertise intimidating. Likewise, Juliet struggles with double standards in Classics, a field dominated by male authors and academics (Doherty):

Her professors were delighted with her – they were grateful these days for anybody who took up ancient languages, and particularly for someone so gifted – but they

were worried, as well. The problem was that she was a girl. If she got married – which might happen, as she was not bad-looking for a scholarship girl, she was not bad-looking at all – she would waste all her hard work and theirs, and if she did not get married she would probably become bleak and isolated, losing out on promotions to men (who needed them more, as they had to support families). And she would not be able to defend the oddity of her choice of Classics, to accept what people would see as its irrelevance, or dreariness, to slough that off the way a man could. Odd choices were simply easier for men[.] (53)

- 11 Amy Richlin adds some statistical support to these observations. Richlin notes that, “[a]ccording to the lists of Ph.D. dissertations in the United States and Canada published in the *Newsletter* of the American Philological Association, in 1989-90, 53% of dissertations were written by women, 12.8% were directed by women, and only one dissertation had the word ‘woman’ or ‘feminine’ in the title or indicated any investigation of gender. It always seems peculiar to me to read about disciplines where everyone is wondering what to do now that they’re finished with feminism; this will not be a problem in Classics for some time” (161). While Carson eventually met with success as an academic, she struggled first with a failed tenure bid at Princeton in the 1980s and then with the closure of the Classics Department at McGill in the late 1990s.
- 12 Juliet’s gender position is even more marginal outside the hallowed halls of the university: “In the town where she grew up her sort of intelligence was often put in the same category as a limp or an extra thumb, and people had been quick to point out the expected accompanying drawbacks – her inability to run a sewing machine or tie up a neat parcel, or notice that a slip was showing. What would become of her, was the question” (53). Juliet’s sense of alienation in a male-dominated milieu is a standard Munro theme, as Beverly Rasporich observes: “The feminist quest in Munro’s fiction is primarily undertaken by the dominant persona of an intelligent and mature narrator who questions society’s expectations of her as female both in past memory and present circumstance. Both outer and inner directed, this voice speaks for a collective female experience and, at the same time, dramatizes the compelling, private lives of individuals” (Rasporich 32). Yet in *Runaway* Munro complicates this notion of unified female experience by depicting a divisive mother-daughter relationship in which Penelope rejects Juliet’s lifestyle and refuses to fulfill her mythological role as keeper of the home fires in the absence of the patriarch. Penelope’s rejection of her mother’s life choices echoes Juliet’s own rejection of Sarah (100-1), and thus the Juliet stories do not simply polarize gender positions. Instead, Munro’s characters operate in a minefield of emotions in which situations overlap and intersect in surprising ways. The disjointed symmetries of their relationships are akin to Juliet’s dream of a cracked sheet of ice, where everything is at once symmetrical and out of context (65-6).
- 13 Ultimately, Juliet’s combination of intelligence and good looks lands her a job in public television “interviewing people who are leading singular or notable lives, and deftly directing panel discussions, on a program called *Issues of the Day*” (126). Carson, too, worked in public television. She acted as the humanities commentator on a 1995 PBS series about Nobel laureates called *The Nobel Legacy*, an experience that seems to have stimulated an interest in the technical aspects of the television (“TV Men” and “On Ordinary Time” in *Men in the Off Hours*), as well as generating a zeal for the interview as a literary device (*Autobiography of Red*, “Mimnermos: The Brainsex Paintings”). Beyond these similarities, however, Juliet and Carson have little in common. There is no Carson precedent for Juliet’s experiences of childrearing, nor for Juliet’s life in British

Columbia. Therefore, rather than using biography as a key to unlock the mysteries of fiction, I propose that critics acknowledge Munro's general interest in Carson and use Carson's criticism on Greek literature to illuminate formal and intertextual dimensions of the Juliet stories.

Classics and Criticism

- 14 Juliet's choice of a new dissertation topic in "Silence" illuminates the trials and tribulations of her romantic and family histories:

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 Middle Ages). Aristeides, Longus, Heliodorus, Achilles Tatius. Much of their work is lost or fragmentary and is also reported to be indecent. But there is a romance written by Heliodorus, and called *The Aethiopica* (originally in a private library, retrieved at the siege of Buda), that has been known in Europe since it was printed at Basle in 1534.

In this story the queen of Ethiopia gives birth to a white baby, and is afraid she will be accused of adultery. So she gives the child – a daughter – into the care of gymnosophists – that is, naked philosophers, who are hermits and mystics. The girl, who is called Charicleia, is finally taken to Delphi, where she becomes one of the priestesses of Artemis. (151)

- 15 Here, Munro shifts into the mode of literary critic and compares the characters in the Juliet stories to those in *The Aethiopica* to enhance readers' understanding of the modern characters. Heliodorus's ancient novel holds a "continuing fascination" for Juliet because she sees an analogy between the gymnosophists and the religious cult that lures Penelope away from home (152). In turn, Juliet sees herself as "the Ethiopian queen" who "never cease[s] to long for her daughter" (151). Munro thus introduces *The Aethiopica* as a hermeneutic model for evaluating the contemporary story of a divided family.
- 16 Carson's analysis of the *Aethiopica* in *Eros the Bittersweet* helps to explain the plot twists that produce erotic and narrative suspense on the romantic side of the Juliet stories. Carson's book examines the works of Longus, Heliodorus, Achilles Tatius, and Chariton through the lens of her thesis on literacy and erotic triangulation. For Carson, the erotic lyrics of Sappho and her contemporaries condensed and refined a literary configuration of erotic desire wherein a "circuit" is set up between three essential points: "lover, beloved and that which comes between them" (*Eros* 16-17). Sparks fly between the points in this circuit, but the points are never fused. The essence of Eros, for Carson, is constant movement and deferral – a deferral exacerbated by the absent presence produced by the new technology of literacy, which fashions a triangular relation between sign, signified, and reader. According to Carson, novels such as the *Aethiopica* develop the lyric circuit "*in extenso*," and thus "[t]actics of triangulation are the main business of the novel" (79). Carson supports this assertion by quoting S. Gaselee's appraisal of the Greek novels, which Gaselee says typically depict "a succession of sentimental and sensational episodes; the two main characters either fall in love with one another soon after the opening of the story, or in some cases are actually married and immediately separated; they are sundered time and again by the most improbable misfortunes; they face death in every form; subsidiary couples are sometimes introduced, the course of whose true love runs very little smoother"

(Gaselee 411; Carson, *Eros* 79). These erotic conventions also shape Munro's plot, and thus Juliet's literary research becomes an enquiry into her selfhood.

- 17 Munro's lovers meet early in the story but are kept apart by a series of minor, major, and fatal accidents. Her principal characters are also embroiled in love triangles fraught with erotic deferral: Eric kisses Juliet but they do not make love because Juliet claims (falsely) that she is a virgin. Moreover, Eric is married to Ann. However, Ann's health has been ruined by a car accident and Juliet just happens to visit Eric's house on the day of Ann's wake. Juliet seduces Eric but then he sleeps with his old girlfriend Christa (also Juliet's best friend) while Juliet is showing the baby to her parents in Ontario. Back east, Juliet's parents (the subsidiary couple) are embroiled in their own love triangles – Sara, Sam, and Irene followed by Sara, Sam, and the minister – but their romance runs somewhat smoother because Sara's poor health tempers the characters' actions. In contrast, Eric's adultery jeopardizes Juliet's love affair when he confesses his infidelity years later. Their quarrel is never resolved because Eric dies suddenly in a storm at sea.
- 18 These erotic entanglements would be entirely conventional, were it not for three important alterations. First, Munro's lovers do not come together on the final pages of her narrative. Whereas, in *The Aethiopica*, "[m]ischance and adventures continue until all the main characters meet at Meroe, and Charicleia is rescued – again – just as she is about to be sacrificed by her own father" (Munro 151), Juliet's story lacks a crucial intervention in which chance unites the lovers, instead of separating them. Munro's characters die and their relationships fall apart, which points to Munro's second plot innovation: the manner in which Juliet longs for her daughter (suffering long absences and flying into fits of jealousy toward the religious rivals for the daughter's love) mirrors the romantic plot in its triangular configuration. Munro's third innovation is that she uses the breaks between her short stories to omit the long periods when Eric and Juliet were actually together. Juliet longs for Eric to join her in the future in the first two stories, but she also longs for the union that has disappeared into the past in the third story – a past that Munro only conveys to the reader anecdotally. This narrative ruse transforms erotic deferral into erotic elegy.
- 19 Elegy dominates the mood, tone, and form of Munro's fiction, according to Karen Smythe. Smythe follows Edward Engelberg in using the term "elegiac fiction" to describe Munro's work because many of Munro's stories resemble "those nineteenth- and twentieth-century texts that manifest a 'modern sense of personal loss and dispossession, and of a special kind of sadness that validates the belief that one's life has been a series of missed opportunities'" (5). Certainly, this perception dominates Juliet's ruminations in "Silence." Eric's death has made union impossible, so Juliet performs the elegiac task of devising forms of consolation. Smythe explains that "[d]eath is not a principle of closure in elegy (fictional or poetic) but provides the basis for writing itself, as well as for structural openness, for resistance to the universally thematic 'end' – to death itself. The principle that does structure the end of an elegiac text, then, is consolation: whether explicitly or implicitly present or explicitly denied, consolation is the driving force and the shaping concept of elegy" (Smythe 8). Juliet, being an intellectual, tries to find consolation by identifying the causes of her missed opportunities. She is earnest in this task, but also self-aware enough to recognize that she has probably embarked on an endless and fruitless quest (158). Indeed, she speculates on the ultimate causes of her loneliness until the end of the narrative, which

remains open on the level of plot because Juliet clings to the faint hope that Penelope might return. The trilogy of stories concludes: "She keeps on hoping for a word from Penelope, but not in any strenuous way. She hopes as people who know better hope for undeserved blessings, spontaneous remissions, things of that sort" (158). Juliet's hope is thus irrational and self-conscious of its irrationality.

- 20 A hermeneutic context for interpreting this ambiguous conclusion might be found in a different set of classical allusions in the Juliet stories. In "Chance," Juliet is preparing for her course on Greek Thought by re-reading a text by "Dodd" (56-7) that she has covered with "an orgy of underlining" (65). Juliet's quotations and her special interest in the section on the Maenads reveal that she is reading E.R. Dodds's 1951 classic, *The Greeks and the Irrational*. This book aimed to challenge the widely held belief that the defining feature of Greek life was its dependence on rationality. Dodds demonstrated that irrational behaviour had a vibrant and crucial place in Greek life and myth (although his conclusion suggests that Western civilization must strive to suppress such impulses). Unwittingly, Juliet demonstrates the relevance of Dodds's thesis to modern Canadian life as she begins her train trek in complete composure aboard the CPR, the rational agent of government expansion in the Canadian West (often contrasted with American Wild West). However, an awkward conversation with a socially maladroit man on the train prompts a series of irrational behaviors in both the stranger and the classicist: Juliet flees his company and forgets to bring a sweater to keep her warm in the observation car; the alienated man throws himself under the train and Juliet blames herself for his death; Eric tries to stop Juliet from blaming herself but she cannot, even when she sees the logic of his reasoning. Eventually, Juliet falls asleep while reading the following passage from Dodds, which contrasts conflicting orders of logic: "*what to the partial vision of the living appears as the act of a fiend, is perceived by the wider insight of the dead to be an aspect of cosmic justice*" (Munro 65; Dodds 39). By italicizing and inseting this passage, Munro hints that the seemingly random moments of panic, queasiness, and shame in the Juliet stories are in fact symptoms of a larger pattern. Although Juliet is skeptical of any notion of cosmic justice if it involves a divine power, her religious skepticism ultimately drives Penelope away from her.
- 21 Given that the passage from Dodds follows his discussion of Greek fears of *miasma*, or pollution from interpersonal contact (Dodds 35-7), I would suggest that the seemingly random (and misspelled) citation from Dodds points to a larger formal pattern in the text. One can map the connections between "random" events without resorting to theology by noting how Munro pairs irrational sentiments with abject physical attributes. As Bronwen Wallace observes of Munro's early stories, "in Munro's development of character, we are never far from the persistent reality of their physical bodies" (Wallace qtd. in Rasporich 70). Munro develops this awareness in the Juliet stories through the invalid status of Ann and Sara; through Christa's multiple sclerosis; and through the errant sexual longings of the male characters. However, Munro's corporeal consciousness takes on a particularly abject quality in "Chance." Julia Kristeva defines the abject as something at once "radically separate, loathsome. Not me" (2). Yet this "Not me" cannot be separated from the self. Even when it is jettisoned, it never becomes a completely separate object. It is often a kind of sentiment or an emission from the body that the ego wishes to repulse but cannot relinquish. The abject

thus evokes a range of conflicting desires in the individual by entangling rejection and desire, far and near, fear and an uncanny sense of familiarity.

- 22 In "Chance," Juliet experiences a classic example of abjection when she frets over the menstrual blood she was forced to leave in a toilet bowl (after the train stopped on account of the suicide). Abjection has already connected the seemingly distinct characters of Juliet and the suicide because both Juliet and the suicide struggle to control their "leaky eyes" (55, 67), as well as their need seek solace in strangers. Yet Kristeva argues that the abject is fundamentally tied to associations with women and the maternal role, which Juliet's story corroborates because, having left her menstrual blood behind, Juliet meets a woman whose child she babysat briefly. The mother explains the cause of the train stoppage by spelling out "b-o-d-y" so as not to alarm the young boy (63). The passengers on the train confirm Juliet's connection to the suicide by mistaking the blood in the toilet bowl for blood from the suicide's body (62). Overwhelmed by these connections, Juliet turns to writing to cope with her internalized shame and disgust. However, like the young boy who struggles to keep his crayon within the borders of his colouring book – "Look at the mess you made, all over the lines" (62) – Juliet struggles to keep within the ruled lines of her stationery when she begins to write a letter to her parents (64). Thus the abject works in tandem with the irrational because, in a patriarchal society, it is "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (4).

Letters

- 23 The use of letters as a recurring narrative device in the Juliet stories suggests a further connection to the Greek novelists and to Carson's research. Carson devotes an entire chapter to epistolary devices in *Eros the Bittersweet* because letters are a defining feature of the early novel in both Greek and English:

'Letters' (grammata) can mean 'letters of the alphabet' and also 'epistles' in Greek as in English. Novels contain letters of both kinds, and offer two different perspectives on the blind point of desire. Letters in the broad sense, that is to say the floating ruse of the novel as a written text, provide erotic tension on the level of the reading experience. There is a triangular circuit running from the writer to the reader to the characteristics in the story; when its circuit-points connect, the difficult pleasure of paradox can be felt like an electrification. [...] In the numerous epistolary scenarios to be found in ancient novels, letters are never used to convey a direct declaration of love between lover and beloved. Letters stand oblique to the action and unfold a three-cornered relation: A writes to C about B, or B reads a letter from C in the presence of A, and so on. When letters are read in novels, the immediate consequence is to inject paradox into lover's emotions (pleasure and pain at once) and into their strategies (now obstructed by an absent presence). (Eros 91)

- 24 The Juliet stories begin and end with letters, and these letters stand at an oblique relation to the action. The first letter arrives from Eric several months after he kisses Juliet on the train. It has taken Eric months to remember the name of Juliet's school and he still cannot remember her last name. Thus the letter might never have arrived and the re-ignited romance hinges on a chance delivery. Juliet composes the second letter after the suicide on the train, but she abandons the letter when she tires of her habitual tone as "a rather superior, invulnerable observer" (65). The third letter is sent from Juliet to Eric while she visits her parents in Ontario. The letter reprises the events

of the preceding pages, but Munro downplays the letter's importance, perhaps because Juliet resumes her superior tone after a somewhat more vulnerable introduction, "*Dreaded (Dearest) Eric*" (124). In one of those telescoping moments when Munro's third person narration channels the first person perceptive of the female protagonist, the narrator of "Soon" claims that Juliet found the letter "years later. Eric must have saved it by accident – it had no particular importance in their lives" (124). This letter is presented as relating obliquely to the plot. However, an omniscient narrator should know that Eric strayed during Juliet's visit to Ontario; once armed with this knowledge, the reader can easily speculate that the epistolary reminder of Eric's family ties had a profound and shaming effect on the adulterous man, who probably saved the letter for this reason. Nonetheless, the reader does not learn the precise reason because Juliet's perspective constrains the epistemic field of the narration.

- 25 The crucial letters of the *Aethiopica* also help to explain the names of the principal characters in the Juliet stories. In the *Aethiopica*, the black Ethiopian queen has written a letter to explain the extraordinary circumstances that caused her to give birth to a white child. The queen's letter explains that, at the moment of penetration by the African king, she was looking at a painting of white Andromeda being rescued from captivity by Perseus. The names of these heroes are echoed in *Runaway* by Ann and Eric Porteous, thereby encouraging readers to superimpose the Queen-Andromeda-Perseus triangle onto the Juliet-Ann-Porteous one. Yet Carson notes that in the *Aethiopica* the crucial information contained in the letter is not read until the fourth book of the novel, and then only to save Charicleia's life (*Eros* 92-3). The definitive intervention of the reading, which saves Charicleia, contrasts with the absence of a definitive intervention in the Juliet stories. In contrast, the fourth and final letters in the Juliet stories are not really letters at all, but rather blocks of italicized, undelivered, first person address that mimic the earlier letters in their visual presentation on the page.
- 26 Juliet's fourth letter arises from a discussion about children with a woman on a BC ferry. Confronted with a near-stranger, Juliet struggles to abandon her invulnerable facade and to confess her emotional dependence on her daughter: "*She gives me delight, Juliet could have said*" (128). The paragraph then proceeds to detail the things Juliet could have said to articulate her love of Penelope to the stranger, but did not. Juliet's expression of this love has been further stifled by the administration's prohibition of letters or phone calls at Penelope's spiritual retreat. Yet the italicized paragraph continues to resemble a letter because Juliet's musings are juxtaposed across a double line break with Penelope's short missive: "*Hope to see you Sunday afternoon. It's time.*" (128). Munro thus contrasts the tender, hypothetical, but non-existent letter with the curt, ambiguous, actual one.
- 27 As Juliet becomes further estranged from Penelope, she increasingly develops what Carson would call a "contrafactual relation to the world" (*Economy* 58). In *Economy of the Unlost: Reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan*, Carson describes contrafactuals as syntactic constructions that describe a world which might have been if an event in the past had not negated its possibility. Contrafactuals resemble a conditional tense ("Juliet could have said") in which the condition cannot be fulfilled (the stranger and Penelope are gone). Carson maintains that contrafactuals are an extremely economic mode of poetic expression because they give the reader portraits of both an imagined, ideal present and a very different, actual present. Juliet's final "letter" discusses the failure of her relationship with Penelope and with her latest boyfriend, Gary, in this

contrafactual mode. Munro telescopes the third person narration into Juliet's first person perspective and the narrator dismisses Gary, Christa's brother, as "too rational" a man to function as Juliet's partner (153). Juliet finds it impossible to confess her failure as a mother to such a man:

If Gary saw that she was agitated he pretended not to notice. But it was probably on this evening that they both understood they would never be together. If it had been possible for them to be together she might have said to him, My daughter went away without telling me good-bye and in fact she probably did not know then that she was going. She did not know it was for good. Then, gradually, I believe, it dawned on her how much she wanted to stay away. It is just a way that she has found to manage her life.

It's maybe the explaining to me that she can't face. Or has not time for, really. You know, we always have the idea that there is this reason or that reason and we keep trying to find out reasons. And I could tell you plenty about what I've done wrong. But I think the reason may be something not so easily dug out. Something like purity in her nature. Yes. Some fineness and strictness and purity, some rock-hard honesty in her. My father used to 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. (157-8)

- 28 These three paragraphs exhibit the greatest degree of confusion of all the letters. The first paragraph introduces the direct expression of Juliet's interior thoughts, but then the second paragraph introduces a quotation mark (which is never closed) as if Juliet really were speaking to someone. The second paragraph flirts with second person address ("I could tell you plenty") even as it documents the flip-flops of Juliet's mental reasoning. The third paragraph introduces yet another interpretation of the failed relationship. The overall effect of the letter is one of genteel, lonely madness. The erotic paradoxes that fuel the Greek novel (Carson, *Eros* 83) resist resolution here and Juliet nearly drowns in the contradictory possibilities of her longings. Although the short story genre makes frequent use of epiphany (Cox 30-42), the clarity and transcendence of the epiphanic moment is denied here.
- 29 In conclusion, I have not examined the affinities between Juliet and Carson to suggest that the key to the Juliet stories can be found in the biography of the poet, but rather to suggest that Munro's interest in the poet and her publications points to textual clues that elucidate formal and stylistic dimensions of the Juliet stories. Many other critics have tried to steer Munro criticism away from its biographical and realist biases (Canitz 247), but Thacker dismisses these efforts with a sweeping gesture ("What" 197). I hope that the two halves of my essay will complement and challenge biographical readings, which on their own can do nothing to illustrate the value of Munro's fiction as literature. A more profound appreciation of Munro's skill and invention as a short story writer can be achieved by tracing the probable sources of her material and then investigating the formal dynamics of her imaginative craft.

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ABSTRACTS

Cet article examine les affinités entre le personnage de Juliet et la poétesse Anne Carson pour suggérer que l'intérêt que Munro porte à sa personne et à son œuvre est réinvesti dans la création d'un personnage de fiction. Il ne s'agit pas de lire la fiction de Munro sous l'angle de la biographie mais de réconcilier la lecture contextuelle et l'analyse littéraire.

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