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The Ordinary as Subterfuge: Alice Munro's "Pictures of the Ice"

Héliane Ventura

- 1 In his essay entitled *Le récit est un piège* (The tale is a trap) Louis Marin relies on the supposed evidence of a XVI century Venetian treatise on the composition and use of traps to distinguish between three types of entrapment. Through fantasy, through appetite, and through strength which he envisages respectively as the traps of the imagination, of need, and of movement, in French fables and histories of the XVII century, I use the theoretical framework proposed by Louis Marin, after Gian Battista de Contugi, to examine a story by Alice Munro from her 1990 collection *Friend of my Youth*. This story is remarkable for its use of devices linked with deception and as such is emblematic of the work of this most Machiavellian of writers.
- 2 As often in a Munro story, one is confronted with two story lines which are partly an extension and partly a reflection of each other. The main story line apparently concerns Austin Cobbett, a retired minister who engineers a fake scenario to indulge his passion for self-sacrifice in secret. Austin tells his grown-up children and the community he has lived in for many years that he is about to get married again to a rich widow in Hawaii and live the well-earned leisurely existence of a contented pensioner, walking the sandy beach of an earthly, and mundane, paradise. Because this choice is out of character, the former minister takes great pains to establish the veracity of his tale, buying summer clothes, joking with the bank clerks, and showing likely photographs as material evidence. In reality, he is covering up for the fact that he is about to be hired as a minister for a godforsaken community in Northern Ontario, where he will live in a trailer, in sub-zero temperatures, dedicate himself to thankless people, and (as it turns out) get drowned in a treacherous lake.
- 3 The subsidiary story line, or what appears to be such, concerns his housekeeper, Karin Duprey, whose life is shadowed by a traumatic event the nature of which we only discover in the last pages: her baby died of meningitis during a winter storm when the road to the hospital was blocked. She is the only one to discover Austin's subterfuge and she equally indulges in deceptions of her own. Like the minister, she is about to

embark on a new life, far from her original community, although her plans are only hinted at and not disclosed in the narrative.

- 4 Related to both story lines we find the character of Brent Duprey, Karin's former husband and Austin's former protégé. Brent is rescued from drunkenness by Austin. He becomes a hard-line teetotaler, makes final demands on Karin before separating from her, and eventually dispossesses Austin of the temperance house he had created in order to take full control of the renamed establishment.
- 5 The story could be regarded as an ordinary tale of human betrayal and deception except that it embeds treacherousness in such a way as to transform subterfuge into selflessness and ordinariness into transcendence. Such is the art of entrapment, says Louis Marin, that it relies on ordinariness:

This is what is strange. It is not because this type of writing is ordinary that it is not strange. This is what the art of entrapment relies on: the ordinary. This is what, as a consequence, the art of deconstructing artifice must rely on: locating the strange in the ordinary. (Marin 75; my translation)

- 6 Louis Marin establishes a protocol for reading the story: no matter how ordinary the writing pretends to be, it is ciphered and requires to be treated like a cryptogram. Consider the opening paragraph of the story:

Three weeks before he died - drowned in a boating accident in a lake whose name nobody had heard him mention - Austin Cobbett stood deep in the clasp of a three way mirror in Crawford's Men's Wear in Logan, looking at himself in a burgundy sports shirt and a pair of cream, brown, and burgundy plaid pants. Both permanent press. (Munro 137)

- 7 The painstaking attention to the different items of clothing worn by the main character, whose death is announced before the relation of his life has begun, immediately strikes a discordant note which hardly conceals the shafts of wit which surround the description or lie in the blanks, one of which being the suppressed name of the obscure lake: Shaft Lake, which also refers to Austin's «shafting» the community. The allusion to permanence with regard to the shirt and pants appears as an instance of ironic displacement which, «under cover» of ordinariness, metonymically points in the direction of the minister's lifelong commitment. It is also a profoundly ironic detail, particularly ill-fitted for a man who dedicated his life to the reformation of sinners and maintained his hope in the possibility of change by creating a house called «Turnaround House», not to mention the choice of colour for the shirt and the pants, extremely ironic for a man who encouraged abstinence from alcohol. The minister's reflection «in the clasp of the mirror» is equally proleptic and programmatic in its apparent ordinariness: one simultaneously perceives the clasp of ice which will seal his fate and the multi-faceted dimension of the character who indulges in deception.
- 8 The doubleness which results from the simultaneous presence of the character and of his reflections immediately points in the direction of duplicity, a duplicity openly acknowledged by Austin himself. His first words are: «Did you ever hear that expression 'mutton dressed as lamb'?» This reference to duplicitous metamorphosis is particularly ironic because Austin was a minister, in the service of the lamb of God. By choosing casual clothes for his Hawaiian retirement he seems to draw away from the lamb of God while pretending to be a lamb. This is the most significant clue given to the reader at the start: even though Austin pretends to have turned around and relinquished his religious commitments, he is not to be trusted. Once a minister, always a minister: his commitment is as permanent as the crease in his new pants. The

minister's new vestments act as a lure or a decoy to convince the community that he is now different when he is essentially the same. According to Marin's terminology, supposedly borrowed from Gian Battista de Contugi, the type of entrapment represented here is the trap of fantasy:

The trap of fantasy is the one through which the adversary finds himself confronted by his own image, one which is particularly pleasing. By making him stop, entranced, in front of his own image, one can easily and safely hit him. The principle of this type of trap is the appeal to sameness and the pleasure engendered by imitation. However, experience indicates that the efficacy of the trap does not lie in fantasy itself or in the images it creates. They are only the means that make the trap function. Efficacy lies in the appeal to sameness and the pleasure in likeness. Thus, the decoy carried by the hunter on his fist to call back his hawk, or the decoys that he sets up in marshes when the wild ducks pass by; the female flies towards the image of the male and the male towards the image of the female, and both find themselves within reach of the swift arrow shot by the man who lies in wait. (Marin13; my translation)

- 9 The image in the mirror that Austin offers the community in Logan is the image of their expectations in terms of retirement. The socially acceptable form of withdrawal from the sphere of work is linked with enjoyment of life. The ascetic minister offers a version of himself as a consumer and hedonist. He covers up his difference with counterfeit similarity to square with the doxa, and the community is taken in precisely because of the attraction to similarity and the pleasure in imitation. Austin pleases them by imitating their ways or doing what they would do if they were in his place.
- 10 Austin's self- transformation into a decoy meant to deceive people in Logan can also be deciphered through the extended metaphor and the rhetorical internal rhyme used by an authoritative narrator: «he was a stringy old rooster - stringy but tough, and game enough to gear up for a second marriage». It is also to be found in the explicit double-entendre: «Austin needed all the cover-up he could get»(Munro 137). Not only do we find the setting up of a trap in narrative utterance but we also encounter it in the process of enunciation. In fact the suggestion of entrapment through polysemy and metaphors precedes the discovery of the subterfuge. The reader is confronted with a double-barreled process of entrapment. She is shown the mechanism of the trap before the revelation of the fake scenario is conveyed to her. In other words she is alerted to the process of entrapment; she knows, being a Munro devotee, that she is being led astray which triggers a desire to discover other lures.
- 11 These lures can be perceived in photographs, which supplement, in narrative economy, the initial mirror image. Like the mirror image, the photographs and postcard pictures belong in the category of traps of fantasy. They rely on complacent stereotypes to delineate Austin's future existence in a Hawaiian town, the name of which is written «in flowing letters like silk ribbon» on the postcards that he shows Karin. Of this name the narrator says: «the name floating in the sky looked as possible as anything else about it.» (Munro 140) It is precisely this assertion of likelihood which strikes up the chord of suspicion and leads us to investigate a striking stylistic feature linked with the description of the pictures and the characters they display. «Fluffy white hair, trim figure. Chic». «The town where he will live in Hawaii. Also a photograph of her house». (Munro 140) The ekphrastic narration is based on nominal sentences which, so structural grammar tells us, give the text an appearance of irrefutability by identifying the embedded predicate with the subject. (Dupriez 306) As Louis Marin further develops:

What is strange is precisely this:

1-that «a minimal assertion should coincide with an item of syntax which, from the morphological point of view, belongs to the category of nouns», that «a form morphologically characterized as nominal should play the syntactic role of a verb» (Benveniste, *Problems of General Linguistics*)

2-that this assertion should in the present situation be a narration describing a way of being and a situation ... Its use reveals something of great import: that the event, the way of being, are in effect described in the present moment but as a complete essence, an absolute truth, a permanent value, timeless and placeless, without any relationship with the one who speaks, describes, or narrates; a final assertion, an authoritative argument. (Marin 75; my translation)

- 12 The process of nominalization reinforces the power that photographs have «to ratify what is represented.»(Barthes 133) What matters in the photographs, as in the nominal sentences which describe them, is the «certificate of presence», «the power of assertion» which make this scenario exist as an indubitable reality. (Barthes 135) The narrator joins hands with the character to try to authenticate the phony tale of the second marriage in Hawaii by seemingly eliminating subjectivity. By conspicuously taking away from the sentence part of the ordinary syntax, the narrator indulges in a process of effacement which has far-reaching significance. It provides one with a morphological clue to the presence of «holes» in the text, which gape open like so many pitfalls to alert one to the fact that something is missing, that some things are concealed in the textual blanks that have been purposefully constructed.
- 13 Together with the strategy of depletion which curtails sentences, one finds devices aimed at replenishment or redundancy which are similarly suspicious and similarly draw attention to the rhetorical nature of the process of entrapment. Alliterations and consonance, for example, are particularly conspicuous in the description of the photographs: «a postcard picture», «a bit of balcony», «the jewel-bright waves breaking». The imitative value of alliteration makes one hear the sound of waves pounding on the shore, as if to reinforce the referential illusion by buttressing images with sounds in the discourse of fantasy and simulacrum.
- 14 The traps of fantasy are set up on two levels: in discursive utterance they are set up by one character to entice the other characters in the narrated world and, at the level of enunciation, they are set up by the narrator to lure the reader. The traps of appetite in Munro's story differ from the previous ones in the sense that they are apparently destined for one set of characters and do not directly aim at taking in the reader. These traps consist in baits and have to do with temptation:

The trap of appetite is the one through which the animal or human being that one wants to capture is shown a thing he needs. The violent desire he has to acquire it, whether spurred by hunger, thirst, or sex, or some other appetite, makes him powerless precisely because of his power and renders him defenseless in front of a lesser power. Thus, the lures of all kinds that the hunter or clever fisherman sets in his hoop nets... (Marin 13; my translation)
- 15 These traps, engineered by Austin, are apparently meant for Karin. Austin has made up his mind to donate his worldly possessions to Turnaround House, now controlled by Brent Duprey and renamed Lazarus House. Out of respect for other people's taste he has chosen to sell his goods by auction and present Lazarus House with the resulting amount in cash. He has entrusted Karin with clearing everything out but she feels the need to keep some of those things for herself. The things she hankers after are presented in the text through, once more, the use of a truncated syntax: «A willow-

pattern plate. The blue-and-gray flowered curtains. A little, fat jug of ruby-colored glass with a silver lid.»(Munro 149) The nominal sentences endow the things that Karin has selected with the timelessness of art, they become things of beauty dispensing joy forever. «She can see her place transformed with these things in it. More than that she can feel the quiet and content they would extend to her». (Munro 149) Karin's appetite is definitely whetted by the thought of stealing, and the materialistic objects displayed in the house do function as baits, yet their status becomes somehow transmuted as Karin imagines that they will trigger off a change in her house and above all in herself. «Sitting in a room so furnished, she wouldn't need to go out. She would never need to think of Brent and ways to torment him». (Munro 149) These baits are depicted as playing a healing and compensatory part, as Karin's way to redemption. If she steals the minister's wife's valuables, she will lead a better life and be a better person. One should be aware of the fact that this construction of meaning is due to Karin's focalization. She is the one who is responsible for this casuistry, but far from appearing like an untenable proposition, it becomes more and more validated by the narrating agency, as forcefully exemplified in: «she feels approved of - a most unexpected thing». (Munro 155)

- 16 The trap of appetite set up by Austin for Karin has been converted into a bait for the reader, meant to make her accept a most unorthodox protocol. The way has been paved for this moral turnaround by the various instances of duplicitous conversion which precede Karin's smug decision to keep some of the valuables for herself, for example, Brent Duprey's conversion from an irresponsible alcoholic to a ferocious teetotaler, a process which hints at a total conversion, and his taking over Turnaround House to convert it into Lazarus House, a change of name which signifies conversion from the realm of the dead to the realm of the living. But, above all, semantic and stylistic parallelisms alert the reader to the notion of turning around. For instance, Austin is first seen in Crawford's Men's Wear as he looked at himself in the mirror, or «turned around» to respond to a joke, while Karin is first encountered in a doughnut place where «she swung around» on the stool to address her acquaintances. And just as Austin's doubleness was revealed in the mirror, so Karin's is indicated by the double colour of her hair, the roots all black and the remaining part all blond.
- 17 The major instance of duplicitous transformation however, is in the title of the story and what it refers to: «Pictures of the Ice». The «unlikely formations» created by the snow and the ice covering the landscape represent a familiar topos in Munro's work. For instance, they are to be found in the story entitled «Fits» from *The Progress of Love* (1986), where they echo the cover-up for a double murder. Here their symbolic dimension is also unmistakable but here they are used to conjure up intimations of paradise through reference to pearly gates and honeycomb:

Sheets of ice drop from the burdened branches of the willow trees to the ground,
 and the sun shines through them from the west; they're like walls of pearls. Ice is
 woven through the wire of the high fence to make it like a honeycomb. (Munro 151)
- 18 Austin captures these radiant moments with his camera the day before he leaves for his supposed retirement in Hawaii. He asks Karin to collect the pictures when they are developed and wait for his instructions. The instructions will never reach her since Austin dies in a boating accident on Shaft Lake. The pictures of the ice become Karin's implicit inheritance and are in sharp opposition to the objects she acquired by stealth, ethereal radiance set against the substantiality of materialism and the taint of theft.

But the radiance acquires a supernatural dimension which qualifies the intimations of paradise and lends the pictures a sinister aspect:

Karin looks at these pictures of the pale lumpy ice monstrosities, these pictures Austin took, so often that she gets the feeling that he is in them, after all. He's a blank in them, but bright. (Munro 155)

- 19 The bright blank does not seem to be constructed as the irradiating brightness of the godhead shining through the ice formation. What Karin sees is more akin to the sheen of glass covering up the monstrous shapes of traitors locked in ice, in Dante's ninth circle of hell:

...e vidimi davante
e sotto I piedi un lago che per gelo
avea di vetro e non d'acqua sembiante. Canto XXXII 22-24¹

- 20 Like the pictures of the ice, the frozen lake of Dante's inferno «has the appearance of glass and not of water», it is an abyss which constitutes the lowest point in the journey to hell. It seems to be present in Munro's short story under several guises, as a mirror in the initial paragraph, as Austin's final burial place in Northern Ontario and as a bright blank in the pictures of the ice.

- 21 The pictures of the ice are constructed in such a way as to allow room for the imagination to fill in the blank: «shapes of ice that might be people, animals, angels, monsters, left unfinished» (Munro 151). Their elliptical description makes room for the return of the missing, the effaced or the repressed: Austin is explicitly made to inhabit forever the bright blank. Other ghosts might implicitly be lurking: Karin's baby for instance who died during a snowstorm and seems to be superimposed upon the picture through the play of similes. When Brent, far advanced in drunkenness, finally realized that the baby was «like a hot coal», he wrapped him in wet towels with Karin's help and brought him to the hospital, but too late. The similes that are used to depict the baby's death coalesce polarities, the fire of coal and the wetness of towels. These polarities resonate against Austin's plot conjuring up the mock image of a Hawaiian paradise better to plunge into a frozen hell. They also resonate against the ambivalence of the pictures simultaneously evoking the pearly gates of Heaven and the abyssal lake of icy destruction. The metaphors of «the sheets of ice over pale lumpy monstrosities» provide an additional clue which suggests the unspeakable event repressed under these shrouds of memory, all the more so as what is «buried» in ice is precisely the children's playground: «And all the playground equipment, the children's swings and climbing bars, has been transformed by ice, hung with organ pipes or buried in what looks like half-carved statues» (Munro 151). The baby's death hovers about the bright blank which can be designated as Karin's private inferno. The pictures of the ice conjure up an empty and frozen universe which seems to encapsulate Austin's dereliction in the glacial solitude of Shaft Lake and the agonies of his self-sacrifice as well as Karin's mental torture and her sense of utter deprivation at the time of her baby's death.

- 22 The ambiguity of the pictures of the ice constitutes another trap or trick, less clearly designed but more powerfully constructed:

The trap of strength or movement.... is the one simultaneously set up and concealed on the path of the animal or man that one wants to capture, it is a mechanism that he encounters by chance, in which he will be caught, without being directed to it through a lure or a decoy... The essence of the trap is thus to create a place where and a moment when a small part of the adversary's strength or movement becomes

the cause of the annihilation of his total strength and movement. (Marin 14; my translation)

- 23 What was Austin's intention when he entrusted Karin with the photographs? Did he really want to deploy another system of thought than the materialistic one? What is Karin's intention when she sends these pictures, without a note or a signature, to Austin's children, Don and Megan, and to Brent Duprey? The last line of the story provides a cryptic answer: «She just wants to make them wonder». To be wonder-struck is to be silenced and arrested in one's movement by the unexpected, unfamiliar or inexplicable.(OED) All three characters, Don, Megan, and Brent, are high achievers who will doubtless be stopped for a while in their race towards power and control by the sight of the unexplained and inexplicable pictures of the ice. They can be regarded as traps of force or movement leading those who contemplate them to the stasis of self-examination all the more so as, in their arrested dimension, they constitute a «freeze» in which past events are simultaneously crystallized and covered up.
- 24 Just as the characters will be made to wonder about the meaning of the pictures of the ice sent to them anonymously, so the reader is made to wonder about the questions they will ask themselves, perhaps one of them prompted by Umberto Eco in *The Name of The Rose*:
- Finally, the basic question of philosophy (as of psychoanalysis) is the same as in the detective novel: Whose fault is it? (Lits 211; my translation)
- 25 The pictures of the ice can be regarded as «a metonymy for the spiritual quest», as suggested by Mark Lits with reference to Umberto Eco's monk, William of Baskerville investigating the traces left on the fresh snow around the monastery, or with reference to Gaboriau, making Lecoq say:
- This waste land covered with snow is like an immense white sheet of paper where the people we are looking for have inscribed not only their movements and their strategy but also their secret thoughts, the hopes and fears which agitated them. What are they telling you these transient traces, Daddy? Nothing. For me they are alive, as the ones who left them there, they are palpitating, they are speaking, they are accusing.(Lits 237, my translation)
- 26 Palpitating with unknown forces and intent, the pictures of the ice might be regarded as an accusatory document which is all the more mysterious as it is simultaneously anonymous and silent. Who is guilty? What is one guilty of? The pictures point in the direction of a secret transgression. They transform those who send them into accusers, those who receive them into the accused and readers into investigators but the principle of conversion or turnaround which dominates the story prompts the reader to reverse roles and investigate the accuser's wrongdoing as much as the offences of the accused, only to discover that the categories coalesce. Transformation and tricks are so inextricably linked that deception becomes converted into innocence.
- 27 Austin's traps of fantasy, his fake scenario built on lies and equivocation, are an empowering strategy, destined to buttress his apostolic mission among the underprivileged in Shaft Lake. The traps of appetite which lead Karin to pilfer are presented as compensating for her loss and repairing her wounds. Although she is a prey to Austin's bait, she is constructed as having an interchangeable role with the minister. Like him she uses an empowering strategy which enables her to set up traps of force for other people. Like him she uses dubious double-dealing to try to awaken speculative enquiry or self-examination in the minds of people around her. Brent is equally presented as being condoned for his treachery in taking over Lazarus House. As

Austin himself says «Who's to say whether Brent's way isn't closer to God than mine is, after all?» Disloyalty, theft, and fraudulent strategies become converted into Christian behaviour or selfless dedication to one's religious ideal. Thus the story sets up an apology for deception which is further validated by the implicit realization that the ways of God are impenetrable.

- 28 The transformation of heresy into orthodoxy is all the more slippery as it can also be read as an apology for revenge. Austin donating all his worldly possession to the «snake» who dispossessed him of the house he had created reads like an act of Christian forgiveness which is nonetheless destined to teach him a lesson. It is at the same time a selfless gesture of immense generosity and a retaliation of the most self-righteous kind, which defines Austin as an unrelenting forgiver, and a smug forger, tricking his community into believing in his saintly behaviour at the same time as in his mundane desires, giving away his possessions and re-marrying in Hawaii: «Slipping out from under, fooling them, enjoying it». The process of nominalization captures the permanence of deception in the construction of the character and the metaphor likens him to a snake, the very image that Karin had used to depict Brent Duprey. Just as Karin's and Austin's roles are interchangeable, so Austin's and Brent's become reversible. Just as Karin and Austin carry echoing first names, which reinforce the possibilities of reversion, so Austin, Karin, and Brent are inextricably linked by the play on words involving their names, Duprey and Cobbett, in which one cannot help hearing a dupe, a prey and a bait, if not a co-bait. The interlaced structure of their stories has created a mesh, a tangled web of deception which renders each of them equally guilty or by the same token, equally innocent, reinforcing their status as confirmed sinners or saviours.
- 29 Ironically enough, by stressing the possibilities of reversibility, onomastic determinism simultaneously highlights and invalidates the very principle of conversion upon which the story is built. The turning to God of sinners is an irreversible transformation, as exemplified for instance by the conversion of Saint Augustine. Austin, whose name is short for Augustine, falls short of his famous predecessor. Instead of walking the straight path of orthodoxy, he scuttles across the floors of frozen lakes in utter dereliction. As for Brent, whose name evokes migratory geese, he seems condemned to move back and forth according to genetic determinism. Karin's fate remains unspoken but there is a curse upon her quasi namesake. Karin did not kill her brother but will never forgive herself for her baby's death. The pictures of the ice are no ordinary snapshots. They are the unresolved enigma in which the characters' damnation or redemption are forever or momentarily suspended in the stasis of ice and art.

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NOTES

1. et je vis devant moi
et sous mes pieds un lac à qui le gel
donnait l'aspect du verre, et non de l'eau

ABSTRACTS

La nouvelle d'Alice Munro "Les images de la glace" utilise de façon remarquable des stratégies de feinte. Elle met en scène des personnages qui se servent du camouflage pour donner le change. La vie de tous les jours est représentée comme un subterfuge. La duplicité des personnages est illustrée par les photographies que l'on trouve dans le titre de la nouvelle. En recouvrant le paysage, la glace fournit une métonymie de la quête spirituelle et suggère la possibilité du déchiffrement herméneutique. Cet article envisage successivement les pièges de l'imagination, de l'appétit et de la force tels que décrits dans l'essai de Louis Marin, *Le récit est un piège*.

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Héliane Ventura, Professor at the University of Orléans, has published a book on Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and co-edited *Proceedings from conferences on Words and Images*. She has written articles on the Canadian novel, short story and poetry and more recently on A.S. Byatt's short stories.