

HE MILTON HOMER'D HIMSELF: PARODY, MIMICRY,
AND POSTCOLONIAL INSURGENCY IN ALICE MUNRO'S
«WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?»

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RESUMEN

El relato de Alice Munro «Who Do You Think You Are?» (1978) ha sido interpretado como un ejemplo paradigmático de interrogantes poscoloniales y genérico sexuales que corren paralelos a su naturaleza como un *bildungs/künstlerroman*. Significativamente, la pregunta que da título a la narrativa se confirma también como una estructura más que amplia para el despliegue de modos paródicos y mímicos que desafían a la subjetividad colonialista desde un territorio de asentamiento. Este artículo traza la senda descrita por la intersección subversiva de la parodia y la mímica como estrategias orientadas a la insurgencia poscolonial. No obstante, la fractura generada por este reto doble a la estructura política revela sus límites desde el comienzo. De acuerdo a ello, de la misma manera que cualquier autoridad contiene su misma amenaza, estas herramientas de intervención poscolonial, si bien exponen un desequilibrio de poder, se revelan fútiles para lograr una eventual transferencia del mismo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: parodia, mímica, ficción poscolonial, Alice Munro, literatura canadiense.

ABSTRACT

Alice Munro's short story «Who Do You Think You Are?» (1978) has been widely interpreted as a paradigmatic instance of postcolonial and gender queries that parallel its nature as a *bildungs/künstlerroman*. Significantly, the question that entitles the story is also the ample frame for the deployment of parodic and mimic modes that challenge any colonialist subjectivity from the ambivalence of a settler territory. This paper traces the path delineated by the subversive intersection of parody and mimicry as directly oriented to postcolonial insurgency. The fracture that this double defiance generates in the body politics, however, unveils its limits from the onset. Accordingly, in the same form that power inherently contains its threat, these postcolonial strategies of intervention, while they do expose power imbalances, are futile when intent on an eventual transference of power.

KEY WORDS: parody, mimicry, postcolonial fiction, Alice Munro, Canadian writing.

In the 1996 Penguin edition of Alice Munro's short-story collection *Who Do You Think You Are?*, the epigraph presents the pronouns *Who* and *You* in italics in opposition to the rest of the question typed in normal capitals. Graphically, the



two pronouns acquire in this form a prominent character that displaces onto a secondary position the guessing task propelled by the *Do You Think?* When going through the ten stories in the book, the reader may notice that the enquiry triggered by the *who* and the answer coming from the *you* organise the collection in terms of a question and a wide range of plausible answers extracted from the different episodes that constitute this narrative, somewhere between the *bildung* and the *künstlerroman*. As Robert McGill claims, here, like in Munro's *Something I've Meaning to Tell You* (1974), «the 'you' is polyvalent, and it signals Munro's preoccupation with the rhetorical communicative function of fiction and with the problems of establishing identity» (2002: 112). Far from being static, this establishment of identity is based on a dialectical construction, on a processual identification that, through parody and mimicry, constructs contingent subjectivities.

«Who Do You Think You Are?», the piece-title in Munro's well-known collection, is emblematic of national, gender and postcolonial identitary queries in Canada¹. The compulsory rumination that the answer to such a question brings about makes room for a number of concerns that in many and different ways stem from the conflict of being Canadian, woman and a postcolonial subject at the time in which the book was launched and nowadays². The seemingly naïve context in which the enquiry is made of the protagonist Rose by her school teacher, Miss Hattie Milton, conceals a number of aspects that, in being this the last of the stories, contaminate the precedent fictions with similar worries. When Rose is reluctant to copy the long poem that she is expected to learn by heart arguing that she already knows the chalked composition on the blackboard, the discontented teacher forces her to write down each line three times and reinforces her authority by asking the infantile Rose «[w]ho do you think you are?»³. In the scene of parody, mimicry and

¹ Canada's postcolonial condition has been a matter of debate in the 1990s. Linda HUTCHEON (1991) opines that only the Native Canadians are properly referred to as postcolonial subjects, since it is their cultures that have been displaced and their history delegitimated. In contrast, neither Diana BRYDON (1991; 1995) nor Donna BENNETT (1993-94) hesitate in considering Canada as a postcolonial territory immersed in that ambivalent stage of difference from and complicity with the metropolitan cultural modes. In consonance with the Canadian especificity somewhere between coloniser and colonised, Alan Lawson (1995) proposes a view of Canada as part of a second world. The existence of these multifarious viewpoints underlines that «[p]ost-imperial realities are far more contradictory, agitated, and diverse than any one critical approach could hope to describe» (BOEHMER, 1995: 247).

² In the United States and Great Britain the collection was entitled *The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose*. In Canada, it gained for Munro her second Governor's General Award in 1978. *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968) had already been awarded the prize and, later, it was *The Progress of Love* (1986) that received a new Governor's General Award. *Friend of My Youth* (1990) was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1991. *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), *Something I've Meaning to Tell You* (1974), *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982), *Open Secrets* (1994), *The Love of a Good Woman* (1999), and more recently *Hate, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (2001) complete Munro's fictional effort, which turns her into the Canadian short-story writer par excellence.

³ In the first of the stories in the collection, «Royal Beatings» and in the midst of a discussion with her stepmother Flo, the insubordinate Rose is also asked «who do you think you are» (MUNRO, 1996: 16). As a consequence of her challenging attitude, Rose is eventually punished by her father, who restores with his belt what Rose's words had undermined, namely, Flo's assumed role as a surrogate mother.

postcolonial insurgency that the story deploys, Miss Hattie's words resonate with reverberations that largely transcend the memories of the now adult Rose when back in her homeland of Hanratty, in western Ontario: «[t]his was not the first time in her life Rose had been asked who she thought she was; in fact, the question had often struck her like a monotonous gong and she paid no attention to it» (Munro, 1996 [1978]: 243)⁴.

This paper focuses on Munro's fiction to analyse its complicity with postcolonial issues of mimicry and parody as oriented to interrogate colonialist modes of tradition, fiction and subjectivity. Double talks, ironies and postcolonial inversions of hegemony come all to be materialised in this short story whose mockery abounds in the ambivalent uses through which the European tradition is filtered and parodied in order to intend the abrogation of colonialist authority (see Ashcroft *et al.*, 1989). As we will see below, that abrogation is never implemented, being the space of repetition opened up by parody and mimicry one in which an eventual disavowal is endlessly deferred. All in all, the obligatory cultural performativity of the colonial situation forces the subaltern subjects to buy into the hegemony of master representation. Such a practice of expected mimesis is also the space suitable for a deformation that the story employs as its main trope⁵.

The exertion of colonialist cultural power inherently impels a subversion that can never be quite complete when opting for the parody of the dominant models. Far from being eradicated, those models prolong their presence as de/reformed entities that continue to exist. Yet the intersection of parodic and mimic displacements reverses much of the weight of tradition in the story and flirts with a discredit of authority embodied in the name of Hanratty's most peculiar inhabitant, the retarded Milton Homer whose ubiquity Rose remembers from the present of her narration. As she sentences, «[a]ny mention of Milton Homer was a joke» (Munro, 1996: 240), but, the mention itself, despite its comic aftermath, reproduces and reinscribes the models it mocks. Therefore, parody and mimicry are part of

⁴ The collection has been sequenced chronologically as follows: «Royal Beatings», «Privilege», «Half a Grapefruit» and «Wild Swans» deal with Rose's childhood in West Hanratty; «The Beggar Maid», «Mischief», «Providence» and «Simon's Luck» are centred on the protagonist's period away from home, her marriage and divorce, and, finally, «Spelling» and «Who Do You Think You Are?» narrate her conciliatory return to Hanratty and the now elderly stepmother (MARTIN, 1989: 98-127). Nevertheless, stories like «Who Do You Think You Are?» split their course between present and past, and adult Rose and her infantile alter ego.

⁵ My notion of cultural performance is indebted to that of gender put forward by BUTLER (1990). For her, the performance of gender that constitutes the subject leaves some space to vary the inescapable (hetero)norm, and in this way, the subversion of the biological binary male/female and its cultural signification as masculine/feminine can be undertaken (see BUTLER, 1993). In this context, the resignification of the norm is enabled by its inefficiency, and, as a corollary, subversion relies on the power appropriated by the rearticulation of the established cultural meanings (BUTLER, 2002: 73). According to this, any discursive construction contains its questioning, which DOLLIMORE (1991) has labelled the *perverse dynamics*. Thus, the dominant norm, whatever its nature, encloses its deconstruction, as it happens, for example, in the semiotic traces threateningly present in the symbolic order (MORTON, 2002: 116).

an insurgency that acknowledges its limits from the onset. Furthermore, the imitation of Milton Homer carried out by another villager, Ralph Gillespie, situates us within a paradigm of iterative parodic imitations at the edge of an abyss in which notions of originality and authenticity dissipate. Thus, Ralph, a seemingly ordinary war veteran, mimicks Milton in such an extent that «he Milton Homer'd himself» (Munro, 1996: 243), while it is Rose's imitation of Ralph doing Milton that triggers the stream of memories that structures the story. Ralph's identity is literally replaced by that of the man he imitates, and thus the necessary distance between the target model and the copy in the prototypical imitation disappears to favour a confusion that, while countering the hegemonic acts of representation and indoctrination, puts any identity at the limit. In this sense Munro's fiction reveals that «the new world's resistance to containment and ideological incorporation is not limited to the initial expressions of new world experience but has continued to inform the discourse of fiction of English-speaking Canada». As Margaret E. Turner posits, «[Canadian] texts interrogate the new world's way of knowing as they show that way of knowing in the process of constructing the new world» (1995: 17-18).

Much has been said and written about the nature of parody and related concepts like pastiche. In the mid-1980s Linda Hutcheon claimed that the increasing interest in parodic forms presented by contemporary art had to do with a general «interrogation of the nature of self-reference and legitimacy» (1985: 2). In her analysis of the origin of the term, Hutcheon decomposed the Greek *parodia* and said that the prefix *para-* means *against* as well as *beside*. Thus, she dismissed the negative content usually associated with parody, and so did she with the idea of ridicule that it normally conveys (1985: 32). In «Who Do You Think You Are?», however, parody recovers that mock element that Hutcheon appreciated in the Greek term to which the modern concept is indebted. Milton Homer's exhibitionist gestures and his grandiloquent speeches confirm the emphasis on doubling and ridiculing the traditions that his compound name, Greek and English, links. Significantly, in terms of the deformed identity definition that the town's symbol provides Hanratty with, all his awkward behaviours are overlooked, being this one of the ways in which the town shows its complicated sense of identity: the town's most distinctive character, a parody of the European literary traditions, has definitely assumed a role of *original*. This problematic assumption resumes in the imitation done by Ralph who, for the sake of his excellent parody, is in everyone's opinion *gone* Milton Homer. This transference of personality and subjectivity denotes the close relationship between performativity and identity, the latter non-existent except in the guise of the former. As generations pass by, Milton's and Ralph's behaviours are naturalised, since they seem to lose their identifiable referents. No one sees Milton Homer as a replica of the European poets that survive in his embodiment, and, as Rose points out, no one will grasp that Ralph is performing Milton instead of performing *himself* (Munro, 1996: 250). This loss of *original* referents and their replacement for performative ones pinpoints the theatricality inherent in any identity; the consequent appropriation of those referents as self-produced, being their *foreign* traits adopted as local and *native*. This process is conspicuously present in postcolonial negotiations of cultural and social identity the world over. Canada's situation as a settler culture, as we will see below,



further complicates this negotiation in which the linear return of the colonial gaze does not reflect the double process of appropriation and naturalisation whereby the postcolonial subject constructs his/her identity. Instead, sameness and difference uphold the identification processes in which mimicry and parody work to interrogate any stance of hegemonic power yielding. Far from implying a rejection or an assertive opposition, parody and mimicry are constitutive characteristics of that dominance whose subversion is attempted, and as Ashcroft *et al.* opine, they come to challenge and confirm the presence and vigour of the targeted models (1995a: 9).

Linda Hutcheon defines the parodic as «trans-contextualisation and inversion, [...] repetition with difference» (1985: 32). Stories like «Who Do You Think You Are?» transcontextualise and graft the European tradition into a ground decidedly marked as postcolonial, and, as a result, there is a transference of the authority that tradition is endowed with into the hands of its disseminated inheritors elsewhere. After being amazed by the infantile Ralph's imitation of Milton, Rose realises that she also wants to feel that same satisfaction of impersonating someone else: «[s]he wanted to do the same. Not Milton Homer; she did not want to do Milton Homer. She wanted to fill up in that magical, releasing way, transform herself; she wanted the courage and the power» (Munro, 1996: 247)⁶. These telling words that advance Rose's future career as an actress are also embedded in the context of parody that the story generates, and, furthermore, shed some light onto the appropriation of power, voice and authority implied by parody and mimicry⁷. Additionally, they reveal part of that power given to Rose by her act of story telling.

If in the parodic intervention tradition is the intertext deformed in the hybrid cultures and fictions of the *new world*, as the operation of grafting suggests (see Derrida, 1993), that same operation indicates that the dominant position of the European master text is dismantled in dislocating its (re)production in time and space. An abiding relativity overshadows any cultural domination when the structures that support it are transposed into a different landscape. Englishness translated into a context divergent from that of its former production is no longer an essence, but, for the sake of its adoption and transplantation into a new territory, a partial presence (Moore-Gilbert *et al.*, 1997: 35). Hanratty, the microcosmos in «Who Do You Think You Are?», like Jubilee and many other similar towns all the

⁶ In the story «Mischief», Rose declares to be fond of disguises, a comment she makes in a party in which her future lover, Clifford, says to have adopted a role that highly differs from his usual behaviour (MUNRO, 1996: 131). As can be seen, most of the stories favour a context in which the characters' identity is in jeopardy of perishing when they assume models that diverge from and subsume their defining traits.

⁷ In the course of the collection, it is not only Rose, but also Flo who resorts to parody as a subversion of authority in a number of occasions. In «Half a Grapefruit», Flo acknowledges to have parodied the behaviour of her own stepmother (MUNRO, 1996: 52), and in «Privilege», she decides to parody Cora, one of the girls whose behaviour Rose has, in turn, adopted as a model to follow (MUNRO, 1996: 43). In both cases, she employs parody to appropriate some power, and, as a consequence, the authority she yields is used to enrage either her mother or Rose. Their grudging reactions underline that the destabilisation of power intended is achieved.

way along Munro's fictions, embodies a new setting for the European modes extrapolated into western Ontario⁸. The town's exaggerated reflection of the canonical mores of Europe underlines the forked tongue with which the village and its inhabitants speak, while the exacerbated interest in perfectly reproducing the colonialist model highlights the parallel concern with its subversion⁹. British indoctrination of children in historical and geographical contents that have nothing to do with the reality they inhabit, a literary tradition that excludes Canadian writers to favour the British canon, Orange parades and, finally, a pervasive sense of not *knowing who one is* underline the postcolonial character of Munro's story and the cultural border Hanratty occupies. The sense of cultural disorientation that the town exhibits as attached to the identity worries typical of a *bildungsroman* and *küntlesroman* provoke that the enquiry that titles the collection be endowed with a particular postcolonial interrogating strength.

The shifting positions described by the poles of colonised and coloniser in a settler territory provokes a subtler parody of the dominant tradition. Excepted the case of Native Canadian writing, where the role of counter-narrative against the European colonisation hardly admits any discussion, and the writing of minority groups more recently landed in Canada, for whom the social dominant sectors are an object of indictment for marginalising minority cultural productions, Canadian writing is always partaking in an endless negotiation of identity with the former metropolitan modes¹⁰. On the contrary, in a slave or occupied colony, where the structures of hegemony as well as the frames of cultural indoctrination are more perceptible, the distance between the local attribution of power and that projected in the metropolitan control is more visible. The white Canadian's position as an inhabitant of a *second world*, in Lawson's terms, is the «site of an slippage» where the structures of power that are taken for granted in a slave colony are open for reconsideration. Drawing on Joanne Tompkins, Lawson writes that settler cultures are «sites of rehearsal and (re)negotiation. They are liminal sites at the point of negotiation between the contending authorities of Empire and Native» (1995: 22; Wyle, 2002: 35)¹¹. Hence the necessary otherness that needs to be predicated on

⁸ Hanratty, Jubilee, Logan or Dalguish are the fictional enclaves that in the stories by Munro seem to incarnate the writer's village of Wingham, some 125 miles from Toronto (ROSS, 1992: 21).

⁹ Rose herself says to have the impression that Hanratty constructs its identity as a parody of what a village is expected to be. Thus, in the story «Providence», she states: «When you come back to living in a town after having lived in cities you have the idea that everything is comprehensible and easy there, almost as if some people have got together and said, 'Let's play town'» (MUNRO: 1996: 168).

¹⁰ Here the term *minority* does not derive its meaning from a quantitative context, but from a set of cultural practices whose validity is not widely accepted as part of the canonic set of representations (DELEUZE & GUATTARI, 1987: 105).

¹¹ Instead of *settler colonies*, BRYDON (1995) proposes the term *settler-invader*, which is more attentive to the double angle of the cultural, colonial encounter in including the view of the settler as invader of the First Nations' space. Although the adequacy of the term *postcolonial* to describe the complexity of this type of territory has been largely doubted (see HUTCHISON, 1991), Brydon herself argues that its adequacy is supported by the wide field of analysis that it creates.



these authorities and their ascribed subjects for the settler to more clearly identify is also a matter of negotiation and dispute. Therefore, this context is apt for the proliferation of parody and mimicry as the tools for an insurgency that leads to the temporary appropriation of power to define, and concurrently defer, similarly provisional stances of difference and identity.

For Hutcheon, proximity and critical distance are parody's indispensable conditions (1985: 6), two constituents that help interrogate the notion of original text and authority. That critical distance is determined by irony and governs the relation between tradition and its postcolonial double, and that same distance allows us to see the text produced, the traces of the presumed *original* and, finally, the transformation that it has undergone (see Hutcheon, 1995). The bitextual synthesis of the old and the new forms that defines parody forces the reader to make meaning extracting references from two sources to «supplement the foreground with acknowledgement and knowledge of a background context» (Hutcheon, 1985: 33-34). Munro's story finds a propelling motor in the interference of one text on the other. Hanratty is located between two cultural enclaves, colonial and postcolonial, and, consequently, is appropriate to contrive a double game of reinstating and questioning European culture. In no moment is there an overt displacement of one of the formations to favour the other. Instead, there is an ongoing exchange of sites of dominance and subordination that impinges on the creation of an overriding relativity in terms of subjectivity, power and hegemony.

Like parodic modes, mimicry is part of the ambivalence that defines the relation between coloniser and colonised. The coloniser's encouragement to follow the dominant ethos never results in a simple reproduction but in «a 'blurred copy' [...] that can be quite threatening» (Ashcroft *et al.*, 1995b: 139)¹². This results from the same mimic constituent informing parody, since «mimicry locates a crack in the certainty of colonial dominance», in other words, «an uncertainty in its control of the behaviour of the colonised» (1995b: 139). In addition, Homi K. Bhabha's notion of mimicry is endowed with the traits of resemblance and menace (1994: 86; Griffiths, 1995: 240), a «double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority» (Bhabha, 1994: 88). The ambiguous position of the colonised and his/her cultural production constitute a disruption of the colonialist order, a replica, and suggest, as Ashcroft and his fellow authors propose, the insurgency of the colonial culture (1995b: 141). In contrast, in the opinion of Moore-Gilbert *et*

¹² In the late 1960s, the Indo Trinidadian writer V. S. Naipaul was the first in pointing out mimicry as a feature of the postcolonial negotiation in his novel *The Mimic Men* (1967). Theorised by ASHCROFT *et al.* (1989; 1995), BHABHA (1994) and LOOMBA (1998), mimicry has been employed in the subversion of the power displayed in the cultural encounter. But its control partially escapes the hands of both coloniser and colonised, thus dismissing any manichean, dual consideration of the postcolonial struggle and siding with a Foucaultian view of power as ubiquitous. The double dynamics of fulfilling the imposition of colonialist discourse and refusing the power of that narrative has unfolded in the production of the hybrid cultural entities of the new world, where inherently, the power asymmetries of the colonial encounter are defined anew (PARRY, 1995: 41; see SHARPE, 1995).



al., mimicry «is a colonial strategy which works to consolidate power by inducing its subjects to imitate the forms and values of the dominant culture» (1997: 34-35). Drawing on Bhabha, the authors also reveal the double-edged nature of the strategy under discussion, since it involves either a defying return of the colonialist gaze or, on the contrary, a refusal to return that gaze, and, consequently, a challenge to the power imbalance implied in the colonial encounter. Moore-Gilbert *et al.* also point out that the intended subversion is futile a priori, since the subaltern needs to remain different from the dominant subject in order to «preserve the structures of discrimination on which colonial power is based» (1997: 35). Without losing sight of that futility, I would also argue that it is the ambivalence located between remaining faithful to and overtly contesting against colonialist authority that engenders a fracture in the establishment of hegemonic relations. The mimic performance that Ralph, Rose and Milton carry out and the studied form in which these gestures are taken up shows in parallel the double-sided nature of mimicry and part of that already mentioned futility, and accordingly, each of them underlines and undervalues the relevance of the figure and the body politics that they imitate. Simultaneously, their actions side with the constructedness of every identity and the following decentring of subjectivity as a performative act whose meaning depends on a established cultural frame. The added effects of parody and mimicry contribute in the story to the production of discursive insurgency, since, as Bhabha sentences, the comic character that parody and mimicry imply deviates the grandeur of the colonial imagination, and this is «[...] one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge» (1994: 85).

The story displays from its beginning that insurgent approach to tradition unfolded in a double move of respect and mockery. Hanratty's Milton Homer ridicules the two great European writers that converge on his name by means of the sexually charged gestures that the man performs around town. The public discourse of tradition and the private sphere of body sexualised language conflate, and Milton's actions are labelled as obscene. The overlapping of widely separated spheres produces the collapse of the dividing boundary. In the aftermath, ridicule resumes in the definition of the parody that the story articulates, evincing its indebtedness to the Greek concept of parody.

Mirroring the doubleness inherent in the man's name, the locals of Hanratty are afraid of Milton's wild side, but, at the same time, appreciate him as an emblem of the town's distinctiveness. His exhibitionist attitude with women and children is neutralised by the aura of good luck that he presumably brings about when he visits the houses of newly born babies. At the beginning of the story, Rose recalls when she and her brother Brian were enclosed in their house while suffering measles and Milton is seen in their garden, his presence being then the reason for the kids' mayhem, an elating reaction disclosed in the fear that the man can break up the kid's swing and in the excitement for having the local icon around¹³. Rose teases then her brother by

¹³ For MCGILL (2002), all the way along Munro's fiction the house is a space of doubleness since it works as an sphere of protection, but also as an open space whose content can be observed

revealing that Milton picked him up when he was a baby, and this produces in Brian a mixture of pride and repulsion. This two-fold feeling echoes the colonial anxiety for being part of the colonialist tradition, and, at the same time, for setting distance from that body of knowledge. This doubleness is rapidly ingrained in the mimic mode of the story because, according to what Bhabha holds, mimicry «[...] is a form of colonial discourse that is uttered *inter dicta*: a discourse at the cross roads of what is known and permissible and that which though known must be kept concealed; a discourse uttered between the lines and as such both against the rules and within them» (1994: 89). Mimicry and parody in «Who Do You Think You Are?» unfold this will for the story to oscillate *within* and *without* the lines that double metropolitan culture and society. Thus, Milton's fondness for rubbing his pudenda publicly is set in contrast to the formality of his speeches for the newly born, creating in this way another doubleness that agrees in excess with a social code and, concurrently, subverts its public side. «[Colonial imitations] share a discursive process by which the excess or slippage produced by the ambivalence of mimicry [...] does not merely 'rupture' the discourse», Bhabha concludes, «but becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a 'partial' presence» (1994: 86).

In a similar context of repetition, Milton performs exaggerated gestures while marching in the conspicuous parades of Hanratty, where the town seems to look for signs that link it to an European common past while reinforcing issues of commonality and highlighting difference with things external. The Orange parade on July 12th, for example, renders visible two different circumstances: on the one hand, Milton's relevance in the community, and, on the other, the town's reliance on European religious modes. Significantly, their prominence is exposed in the compulsory attendance to church that the Milton sisters force on the man, and their intended disavowal appears in the grotesque circumstances that, as we will see below, derive from that requirement. Parades are an extremely typical pastime in Hanratty, but as part of that impulse to the establishment of a behaviour and its immediate reversal in the story, there also exists among the locals the popular assumption that those participating repeatedly are idle people deprived of more pressing occupations. These collective manifestations endow the communal spirit of a certain simultaneity and fraternity that is echoed as well in other manifestations that extol collective unity, such as the language of anthems (Anderson, 2000: 146; see Walcott, 1996). Like the reinforcement of communal identity that they represent, parades circumvent a void of identity and help the villagers face the lack of communal difference. In this sense, this collective enjoyment agrees with what Kieran Keohane (1997) calls *symptoms of identity*. Like in any medical or psychoanalytical diagnosis, a number of symptoms

from the outside. This is what happens in the scene in which Rose and Brian see Milton using their garden swing and are afraid that the man can notice them as well and come into the house. Furthermore, the house is essentially a self-conscious metaphor for the creation of fiction, which in its double-sided nature, closed and open, mirrors the unveiling and concealing of data (McGILL, 2002: 104-105).





are the apparent manifestation of a still hidden disease or trauma. In the initial stage of any illness, however, the symptoms are the only materialisation of an invisible malady and the tenuous line separating it from nothingness. For Keohane, Canadian identity, like Hanratty's, is very consonant with this symptomatic materialisation where the symptoms reflect its actual invisibility. Those minor factors, Keohane says, distance the individual from the frightening lack, and they «are the background of everyday practices that embody interpretations that sustain meaning and protect us from the lack, and which simultaneously expose us to the lack enough to animate us» (1997: 15). Ralph's or Rose's symptomatic identity productions, like the communal identity of Hanratty, cannot conceal that, in the operation of production, as it happens in the Derridean form of intertextuality by grafting, any tradition is deformed by its implantation in a new territory. Each of these parades imitates forms that appear marked by their old world provenance while that *origin*, in itself hybrid, like the conflation of *Milton* and *Homer* in the appeal of the retarded man, seems to go undetected for the locals. Their marked knowledge in terms of spatiality rarely problematises the number of assumptions that they have incorporated into their daily existence. «Milton had been named after his mother's family. That was a common practice, and there was probably no thought of linking together the names of two great poets. [...] that coincidence was never mentioned and was perhaps not noticed» (Munro, 1996: 240), Rose narrates. Thus, in the present of the story, when Rose, Brian and his girlfriend Phoebe visit Hanratty, Rose and her brother are unable to explain Phoebe who Milton Homer was. For the newcomer, he is plainly «the village idiot» (Munro, 1996: 239), but neither Rose nor her brother agree on these offensive terms. For them Hanratty is not a village and Milton's description can only be accomplished by resorting to the cliché «he was not all there» (Munro, 1996: 239). While the euphemistic expression hides Milton's retarded nature, it also veils the naturalised bearing of that tradition to which his name looks back. Additionally, the «he was not all there», where *he* stands for Milton (and) Homer, inevitably exposes the almost imperceptible weight of tradition on Hanratty. That naturalisation is the covert presence of a *localised* body of knowledge.

In the context of impossible originality determined by parody and mimicry, Milton's aunts, Miss Hattie and Miss Mattie are identical twins that largely indoctrinate their students and town folk in the same colonialist mores in which they were grown up. From the physical resemblance that they share, they do not only mirror each other, but mirror and reproduce different parts of the tradition that the story parodies¹⁴. In addition, being Miss Hattie the dominant sister, Miss

¹⁴ This paradigm of mirroring and doubling is also present in the story «The Beggar Maid», where Patrick, Rose's husband-to-be, intends to mould Rose as a self-image. Her accent, her manners and her straightforward way of referring to things sexual, for instance, are intervened by Patrick. «All the time moving and speaking, she was destroying herself for him [...] and loved some obedient image that she herself could not see» (MUNRO, 1996: 101-102). However, Rose's mimicry is also a tool to delegitimize the power that Patrick holds on her, as it is evinced in the story «Mischief», where she falls in love with someone else.

Mattie cannot escape the paradigm of otherness that her sister designs for her. In opposition to the silent Mattie, Miss Hattie creates her own definition. Whereas Miss Hattie is the local school teacher, Miss Mattie was once a missionary in China where she worked in the evangelisation of Chinese children. In Hanratty, from the past that Rose recalls from the present of the story, Hattie and Mattie reported for their peers in night domestic shows the experiences of the latter in Asia and illustrate it with lantern slides. Through the report of her sister, who lets her be the mouthpiece, Hattie's representation of China as other covers the fact that her town and her people are also other to the authority of the colonialist tradition they foster. Her orientalist view of the Chinese, not only as heathen, but as people radically different though likely to be converted, also evinces the will to fix a position of otherness for them in attention to which to establish a mirage of self identity. «In the process of mimicking», Bhabha posits, «the other becomes a subject of difference [...]. Slippage and excess allow for a representation of difference and disavowal» (1994: 86). From Hanratty, that fixation appears at least slippery due to the mimic modes in which the town is imbued and the predictable ridicule that Milton's threats of farting bring to the shows. Hattie's view of the Chinese as people likely to reflect the image of the Anglophone but unable to become fully English, but *Anglicised*, is consonant with Bhabha's idea of *almost the same but not quite*, with which he describes some of the working effects provoked by the enforcement of colonialist subjectivity on its counterpart (1994: 86). Mattie's actions as a missionary in China partake in a pattern of repeated colonisations that, like the identities that tend to replicate each other in the story, are lost in a milieu of reflections and refractions.

Significantly, the Milton sisters also participate in that double structure of tradition that the retarded man's name scatters through the town. If Miss Hattie indoctrinates the children in the European tradition opened by figures like Homer, her sister brandishes religion as the tool of colonialism exemplified here by a British figure, that of the poet John Milton, especially well known for his religious *Paradise Lost* (1667). In general terms, *the English book*, be it the Bible or a metonym of the canon epitomised in the figure of any of the great writers, conveys a token of authority largely parodied here. That parody, however, grants that «the process of replication is never complete or perfect, and what it produces is not simply a perfect image of the original but something changed because of the context in which it is being produced» (Loomba, 1998: 89). The subversion of the European metadiscourse rests, as Loomba asserts, on this process of underlining the imperfect character of the copy, which, in turn, suggests the ineluctable ambivalence of the postcolonial discourse, in and out of that text that it is intent on reversing. The Milton sisters make of the alliance religion-literature a powerful form to control the locals, and thus, it is they, fierce Methodists, that ask for the suppression of TV programmes broadcast on Sundays at church time. Their petition for popular support materialised in their asking for the villagers' signature ends up in a parody of that attitude that they impersonate, since Milton, in charge of handing in paper and pen for the people to sign up, decides rather to draw himself whiskers and blotch his shirt. As many other times in the story, the mock and ridicule characterising parody and mimicry counteract any assumption of authority that the locals may hold. Thus,



«mimicry is [...] the sign of the inappropriate, however a difference of recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance and poses an immanent threat to both 'normalised' knowledge and disciplinary powers» (Bhabha, 1994: 86).

This effect of attempted control and its simultaneous reversal appears when Miss Hattie creates a sense of spectacle in her slide show. The Chinese rites of eating *anything* or their presumed life betterment when they become Christian constitute pseudo-ethnographic remarks made by Hattie on a colonised space from another. Additionally, in the mouth of the missionary's sister, these comments undergo an immediate delegitimation of authority that precludes the solidification of the Chinese representation as other. Subjectivity and otherness are continually in process; they reject any easy stasis and opt, in turn, for remaining on the move. In Hanratty any identity and its opposite are subjected to dispersal and transformation, to disruptive imitations and contingency that reflect the power invested, its refraction and the recurrent provisional transference of authority. As the result of the refusal to fixation, it is not incidental that Miss Hattie's shows are accompanied by food and drink for the attendants, the image of the show and the act of eating while watching suggesting a consumption of the other, which, in this way, reaches that hankered fixation. From the reverse side of the slide, which the Milton sisters think unconceivable, it is the Chinese that, through the missionary's preaching, can establish cannibalistic connections between Christianity and consuming Christ's body. Hattie, in turn, argues that the evangelisation of the Chinese is a first step to improve their nourishment by approaching it to western eating habits. This, she says, influences on the future size of their bodies (Munro, 1996: 244), thus establishing a further connection between the religious tradition, westernisation and the physical appearance of the other. In the end, the words uttered by Hattie reveal the relevance of having a quasi-identical figure in the other, which, however, preserves a certain difference that avoids the final indistinction, as it usually happens in a parody. Hattie's ethnographic discourse is embedded in that avoidance of sameness and goes from the physical traits of the Chinese to China's geographical situation, where the echoes of war came from at the time of the shows and liberty was lacking, she points out. Assessing the knowledge disseminated in the shows, Rose remembers that «[...] Mao was in power in China and the Korean war was underway, but Miss Hattie made no concessions to history, any more than she made concessions to the fact that the members of her audience were eighteen and nineteen years old» (Munro, 1996: 244).

Additionally, the fact that one of the twin sisters assumes a role of dominance in opposition to her other also unveils the appropriation of the experience of the subaltern, its translation and adoption for particular purposes. The slide shows conform an act of speaking *for* and *instead of* the other, doubly embodied by the Chinese and Miss Mattie, in which the appropriation of this figure ensures the dominant self the prevalence of its constitution and an unquestionable image of superiority. Miss Hattie presents the shows whereas her twin, actually the person who went through the experience of living in China, remains silent and silenced. Meanwhile, the Chinese are simply *shown*. This image of fraternal submission is reinforced by the fact that the missionary stays at home, in charge of the domestic,

whereas her sister works at the local school. Indeed the sisters deploy a number of binary oppositions that allow for the predicament of otherness: Hattie is active and Mattie passive, the former works out whereas the latter remains at home; Hattie is the learned and her sister the religious and contemplative one, they represent the public and the private, and in all the cases the first element of the opposition dominates the second one, as it happens in the pair subjectivity/otherness that mimicry and parody destabilise continually. In this sense, as Loomba sentences, in the process in which the English book is shown to the colonised, s/he is made automatically different, either heathen or unlearned (1998: 89-90). And that difference is employed in the construction of a position of hegemony for the religious and the learned Milton sisters. From the settler space of Canada that construction of a stance of hegemony needs to be doubly anchored: in relation to the white inhabitants of Hanratty and in opposition to the non-white Native Canadians. The Milton sisters' location as white Anglo Saxon Puritans shakes their assumed hegemony, since their connection to the metadiscourse of European religion and literacy is feeble for the sake of their settler Canadian affiliation, the particular characteristics of the territory named Canada, and, no less important, for the excessive zeal in disguising themselves *as* Europeans.

Only Rose, an actress, and consequently used to continuous identity transformations, seems aware of the problem that Hanratty mirrors in its dependence on and attempted seizure of the colonial linkage. Her awareness started when she was one of the students in Miss Mattie's class and sat near Ralph Gillespie. At that moment, and for the first time, Rose comes across the connection when Ralph erases the name *Chapman* from the title of a chapter in their book and replaces it for *Milton*. Instead of «On First Looking into Chapman's Homer», Rose can then read «On First Looking into Milton Homer» (Munro, 1996: 240). And, indeed looking *into* and *through* Milton Homer and its coterminous implications for the uprooting and subversion of tradition is what the story does in its double deployment of mimicry and parody as tools for postcolonial insubordination. Located on the other side of the mirror, Milton, Ralph and finally Rose mimick the tradition that defines them. «I hear you' re quite a mimic» (1996: 253), Rose says to Ralph once she is back in town, although she does not realise at that moment that so is Milton and herself, despite the fact that her narration to Brian at the beginning of the story is structured by her imitation of Ralph doing Milton. And hence, part of that ironic compromise that, for Bhabha, mimicry presents. Mimicry displaces itself between the colonialist conception of a synchronic panoptical vision of identity as stasis to a diachronic vision of identities in process (Bhabha, 1994: 86). In other words, between Milton, Homer and what these names symbolise are all their postcolonial replicas whose identities, like those of Rose, Ralph, Milton Homer or that of Hanratty town, mutate and accommodate to time and space.

«Who Do You Think You Are?» participates in that process whereby, through mimicry, the constitution of otherness resists its intended solidification. Bhabha's double definition of mimicry as resemblance and threat makes here the former constituent so acute that the threat in itself cannot help being more evident, since the impossibility to distinguish between the target and the copy blurs identity



borders, being this the subtext underlying Rose's comment when she states: «how do they (newcomers and young people) know who it's supposed to be Milton Homer like? They don't know» (Munro, 1996: 250). Accordingly, mimesis, intended as a *total* copy of colonialist modes, makes space for mimicry, where the copy is rather aware of its nature and the space that distances it from the full reproduction. Munro's story locates somewhere between both constituents of the colonial and cultural encounter and circumscribes itself within an insurgency that openly and self-consciously reflects on the conditions of its own production. Thus, «[w]hat emerges between mimesis and mimicry is a *writing*, a mode of representation that marginalises the monumentality of history, quite simply mocks its power to be a model, that power that supposedly makes it imitable» (Bhabha, 1994: 86). In the answers given to the question *who do you think you are?* there surfaces the idea that the questioner and the object of the question are not sure any longer of their former statuses. The redirection and rearticulation of power in the story cogently evince that Munro's text is constructed on the ambivalence that mimicry and parody employ to inscribe that insurgency habitually linked *grosso modo* to postcolonial cultural productions the world over.



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