Abstract

Theoretical ideas about ‘narrative coherence’ (Schafer, 1980) and ‘autobiographical competence’ (Holmes, 1993) are prevalent within contemporary therapeutic culture, frequently deployed in the service of the patient producing a narrative ‘I’ that can tell its own story. In this paper, I question linear, sequential clinical narratives that appear to be typical of the novel, instead proposing the short story as a more appropriate literary model for the telling of a self within psychoanalysis. Following a reading of Alice Munro’s The Moons of Jupiter, I draw on the roots of the short story in fable together with Freud’s Totem and Taboo to illuminate how Munro offers us an exemplary tale that parallels the origin of the self in its identification with the other. I conclude that the short story’s way of telling mimes how the self’s integrity is founded not on any externally-derived authoritative knowledge but is rather to be found within itself.

Introduction.

‘Even as I most feverishly, desperately practise it’ Munro (1972) writes, ‘I am a little afraid that the work with words may turn out to be a questionable trick, an evasion (and never more so than when it is most dazzling, apt and striking) an unavoidable lie’ (p. 182). Munro’s moral concern with artifice, with the way ‘work with words’ risks turning out to be a ‘questionable trick’ is one to which we might all wish to pay heed. For these days, of course, everyone has a story. In popular culture there has been an exponential rise in the use of digital and social media along with self-help groups and other platforms enabling us to assemble, construct, narrate and defend our particular story: to fashion an identity through which we want to be known. As psychotherapists, though, we might prefer, like Munro, to remain sceptical of how the patient’s ‘work with words’ – the account of his or her life that is brought to therapy – the account of his or her life that is brought to therapy - can all too readily be moulded into a sequential narrative akin to a novel, whose coherence is incommensurate with the fragmentary, irreconcilable or enigmatic aspects of experience. Well-rehearsed scripts and chronological plotlines establishing a seamless, self-directed, totalising account of the self’s past, present and future not only alert us to the likely false connections woven into this smoothly narrated version of the self; they also signal the potential for an untrustworthy gap to open up between language at its ‘most dazzling, apt and striking’ and the complexity and intensity of the world it aims to describe.

The idea that the telling of a life in therapy might be akin to the unfolding of a novel begs a question about the features of the genre that might make it a suitable model for the telling of a self. There is a vast literature, of course, on the theory of the novel (eg. Bakhtin, 1981; Lukacs, 1916; Mazzoni, 2017; McKeon, 2000) and considerable disagreement amongst literary theorists about how best to define it. Indeed, the novel’s long historical evolution and protean form makes any attempt at specifying its distinguishing features almost impossible. However, Brooks (1984) reminds us how it has been ‘the great nineteenth century narrative tradition’ that ‘conceived certain kinds of knowledge and truth to be inherently narrative, understandable (and expoundable) only by way of sequence, in a temporal unfolding’ (p. xii). This interest in time and sequence, tied to the novel’s (and particularly the Bildungsroman’s) ‘central conventions of realism’ (May, 2012, p. 176), is one that has most clearly
come to influence the fields of counselling and psychotherapy. It lies embedded within contemporary notions of ‘narrative coherence’ (Schafer, 1980) and ‘autobiographical competence’ (Holmes, 1993) and the attempt to produce a narrative ‘I’ that can tell its own story; an active quest for reality and identity that is sometimes deemed to be the principal aim and function of therapy (eg Roberts, 2000). Yet if the purpose of psychoanalysis is, as Steedman (1992) suggests, ‘to give back to the patient the story of his or her life, welded into a chronological sequence and narrative coherence, so that at the end of it all, the coming to psychic health might be seen as the re-appropriation of one’s own life story’ (p. 172), then we might want to ask, as does Walsh (2017), whether and to what extent the psychoanalytic subject is able to give any account of him or herself that does not recruit the linear, sequential mode of narrative typical of the novel.

By way of interrogating these novelistic forms of discourse in some of the currently popular models of therapy, I want to propose a possible alternative literary form that Freud himself suggests in his early case histories. Freud (1895) of course was notoriously dismayed by the way his early case histories appeared to read more like short stories than scientific treatises. ‘I must console myself’, he writes in his case study of Elisabeth von R, ‘with the reflection that the nature of the subject is evidently responsible for this, rather than any preference of my own’ (p.164-S). Freud’s own ‘work with words’ here is already mobilizing the ‘questionable trick’ of which Munro speaks; for the idea that there might be something ‘in the nature of the subject’ leaves us wondering whether Freud is referring to the subject in terms of the field, the discipline of psychoanalysis, or whether he is hinting at the psychoanalytic subject in terms of the self and its constitution. In this paper, I will take seriously the latter idea: that there is something in the nature of the self and how it is brought into being that might require something closer to the form of a short story for its articulation than the narrative modes of telling so often favoured within contemporary therapeutic culture.

Why might this be so? Of course, the relationship between psychoanalysis and literature has traditionally been seen by some (eg Derrida, 1975, Felman, 1977, Kirova, 1997) as a troubled one, as I have elsewhere (Rizq, 2018) discussed. Moving on from these arguments, however, I want to start by thinking of narrative as a way of presenting reality to the mind: of stories as a kind of epistemological category (Jameson 1989). Of interest here are the literary methods of the short story: the ontological and epistemological means by which the reader is oriented to a particular kind of experience and knowledge of the world and the self. For if, as the Merriam-Webster dictionary suggests, a novel is ‘an invented prose narrative that is usually long and complex and deals especially with human experience through a usually connected sequence of events’, then the short story, as Patea (2012) reminds us, is a form that is ‘compressed, unified and plotted’ (p.3), rendering perception ‘in a mode close to the way in which we experience and know the world: occasionally, in fragments’ (p. 19). The novel, rooted in what May (2012) calls a ‘realist ontology’, creates the illusion of life through revealing everyday details of the social, psychological and material world that confer a sense of authenticity and verisimilitude. By contrast, the short story rests on a metaphysical ontology generated by a focus not on the temporality of everyday life but rather on ‘a world of inexplicable strange loops, a mystical world of paradox and ambiguity, of shadows and shifting perspectives governed not by rational order but by intuition and dream logic’ (Rohrberger, 2004, p.6). While the totalising epistemology of the novel proceeds by specifying the contextual details that render the social world recognizable and familiar, the revelatory epistemology of the short story is more oblique, resting on suggestion, implication and hints: strategies of defamiliarization that render the world of appearances strange, different and new. Novels tend to be discursive, aiming to
expand or embroider on a particular theme, whilst a short story condenses or distils experience, tending to focus on a single event, emotion or situation. It aims to capture the essence of an experience, conveying, as Poe (1846) suggests, a ‘unity of impression’ or a single, self-contained effect. Finally, from an historical perspective, the novel is rooted in the classical storytelling tradition of the saga and the epic, lengthy, complex forms whose traditions are rooted in travel and history. The short story, on the other hand, is a briefer narrative form deriving from the ancient traditions of myth, biblical verse, parable, fable, and romance. It is bound up with the experience of the sacred and in this way constitutes ‘not a form of knowledge, but a challenge to knowledge’ (Leitch, 1989, p. 133).

Whilst there is a growing academic literature on the short story (eg. Lounsberry et al, 1998; May, 1996, 2013; O’Connor, 1963; and Rohrberger, 1998 amongst other distinguished theorists), I do not intend, and nor is it within my area of expertise, to elaborate on the theory of the genre. Rather, as a psychotherapist, I will borrow from literary criticism to focus more narrowly on what it is about the short story’s particular ‘way of telling’ that might be thought of as capable of shedding light on the ‘way of telling’ or the account of a life that occurs within a psychoanalysis. In this paper I will use the example of Munro’s (1983) *The Moons of Jupiter*, a collection of short stories in which she offers a sequence of eleven tales plotting the lives and experiences of women at different stages of their lives. The content of each story varies enormously, but all revolve round her protagonists’ shared experiences of work, relationships and family life as well as their confrontation with ageing and death. The final title story of the collection is justly celebrated not only by Munro’s reading public but also by a number of literary critics including Howells (1997), who suggests that *The Moons of Jupiter* ‘is arguably the most significant turning point in Munro’s fiction-writing career’ (p. 67) and Mayberry (2009), who calls it ‘one of Munro’s most intensely focused examinations of the capabilities and limitations of narrative’ (p. 30). Whilst these and a number of other critics, notably Carrington (1989), Heble (1994), McIntyre (2009) and Redekop (1992) provide close and stimulating readings of the story, none of them sets out specifically to examine from a psychoanalytic perspective the kind of subjectivity that Munro describes and dramatizes in her particular way of telling in the story. In this paper, I want to start with a reading of the story and then draw on the roots of the short story in fable as a basis for discussing Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*. I am interested here in how the form of the short story can be seen as an exemplary tale paralleling the origin of the self in its identification with the other. I will conclude that the short story’s way of telling mimes how the self’s integrity is founded not in any externally-derived authoritative knowledge but is rather to be found within itself.

*The Moons of Jupiter.*

In the opening pages of *The Moons of Jupiter*, we find middle-aged divorced Janet settling her elderly father into the heart wing of a Toronto hospital. He is wired up to an ECG: ‘On the screen’, writes Munro, ‘a bright jagged line was continually being written. The writing was accompanied by nervous electronic beeping. The behaviour of his heart was on display. I tried to ignore it. It seemed to me that paying such close attention – in fact, dramatizing what ought to be a most secret activity - was asking for trouble’.

The alert reader will be aware, even at this early point in Munro’s tale, that the ‘jagged line’ that is ‘continually being written’ here is not simply an erratic heartbeat. It points a metafictional finger, so
to speak, at the act of writing itself: the art of representing the heart’s ‘most secret activity’, something that is usually taken to be invisible. But what is it about ‘paying such close attention’ to writing that leads to trouble? Munro’s carefully-choreographed and extraordinarily stylized story of only a few pages illuminates how the artifice of language inevitably distances us from reality; and how narrative design and order as well as the act of naming in the story rely on the mimetic power of language to evoke mystery, pathos and an elegiac sense of loss in the reader while at the same time performing its ineluctable failure to adequately represent the world, the self and the other.

Janet is coming to terms with the impending death of her father as well the refusal of her eldest adult daughter to communicate with her. The story, told over seven short sections that loop back and forth over the space of a few days is not only of how she makes the complex inner psychological adjustments necessary to confront the task of mourning and letting go within her family relationships; it is a tale that dramatizes how Janet achieves moments of a new self-awareness. It seems unlikely then that Munro’s decision to arrange her material in seven, non-sequential sections is arbitrary; like the biblical time-span of seven days that God takes to create the world, Janet herself has limited time before her father’s operation to create a new emotional world by restoring a lost sense of connection and understanding with him as well as her ‘incommunicado’ daughter. The story’s lack of narrative linearity - Janet’s four hospital visits, an overnight stay at her youngest daughter’s flat, the visit to the planetarium and a tranquil moment of rest in a Chinese garden - vividly conveys the way Janet’s consciousness and memory orbit around her family and loved ones. A muddled chronology, defying easy summary, not only mirrors the muddle and disorder of life; it mimes the way in which Janet’s memory works retroactively to rework and revise her understanding of her relationships as well as of herself.

Janet herself is a writer and the reader is given to understand that she will struggle with the versions of other people she has created in her mind. We see how this makes it difficult for Janet to face and cope with her father’s manifest vulnerability and to think about him as a person with an independent life and history of his own. She knows that, as a young boy, he ran away from home in search of a better life, but ‘I didn’t care to think of his younger selves’ she admits. ‘Even his bare torso, thick and white…was a danger to me; it looked so strong and young. The wrinkled neck, the age-freckled hands and arms, the narrow, courteous head, with its thin gray hair and mustache, were more what I was used to’. It is clear then that Janet’s relationship with her father is predicated on a story she has fabricated around him: ‘his independence, his self-sufficiency, his forbearance’. When she tells people about him, she insists: ‘He worked in a factory, he worked in his garden, he read history books…he never made a fuss’.

But following the news that her eldest daughter, Nichola, wants to be ‘incommunicado for a while’, Janet begins to examine herself afresh. Wryly recalling her younger self with her own friends she thinks: ‘How thoroughly we dealt with our fathers and mothers, deplored their marriages, their mistaken ambitions or fear of ambition, how competently we filed them away, defined them beyond any possibility of change. What presumption’. Indeed, Janet now starts to realise that what she believes about Nichola – that she is ‘sly and solitary, cold, seductive’ - is likely to be contradicted by others who know differently. On returning to the hospital, she begins to question her understanding of her father, recognising that the version she has always held of him is partial, coloured by her own perspective and distorted by self-interest. It was not true that ‘he never spoke regretfully about his life’ she realises. ‘It was just that I didn’t listen’.
But in the face of his imminent heart operation, her father too is reworking his own version of himself as part of his preparations for death. A further fiction is invoked as he quotes the line ‘Shoreless seas’, from ‘Columbus’, a poem by Joaquim Miller that he is trying to recall. Like the jagged lifeline of the ECG that illuminates the heart’s vital, yet hidden biological rhythms, poetry here illuminates the heart’s essential yet concealed psychological activity as it prepares for its final journey towards death and the New World of the unknown. Yet scepticism about the capacity of poetry or any fiction to console in the face of mortality remains foregrounded: ‘If there’s anything you can’t explain right away, there’s a great temptation to – well, to make a mystery out of it’ he remarks; and Janet, ‘feeling an appalling rush of love and recognition’, believes her father is referring to the soul. But both maintain a certain wariness about the false comforts of religion that mean ‘playing tricks on yourself’. Inasmuch as Janet’s father wants to believe in the stories he has been reading in magazines that tell of people’s comforting near death experiences, he maintains a level of suspicion, if not outright cynicism, when faced with any attempt to make death meaningful, comprehensible and bearable: ‘It’s all in whether you want to believe that kind of thing or not’.

Janet’s visit to the planetarium, ostensibly to distract herself from her anxiety about her father’s impending operation, unmistakably signals the central event of the story. As she sits down with an audience of noisy schoolchildren, a theatrical presentation announced by ‘some splendid, commanding music’ turns the bowl of the planetarium’s ceiling into dark blue night sky, ‘an orchestrated image’ according to Howells (1998) ‘of infinite space inside a closed dome’ (p.83). It is at once a mythic vision of the cosmos, dramatizing the shifting patterns of a universe whose distant meaning lies beyond any human understanding as well as an image of the patterning of meaning that constitutes the narrative text. The immensity and significance of the transcendent vision is set alongside the apparent banality and meaninglessness of everyday life: the indifferent children ‘crackling their potato-chip bags’. At first it is the illusion of reality that is foregrounded – ‘the stars came out not all at once but one after the other the way stars really do come out at night, though more quickly’ – and the ‘stunning facts’ are confidently listed to convey the ‘innumerable variations, innumerable repetitions’ of the galaxies within the universe. Subsequently, though, we are told ‘realism was abandoned for more familiar artifice’; a model or map of the solar system is invoked to convey in more ‘elegant style’ the movement of the planets within the vast cosmos. Indeed we, like the audience watching the show, are being offered different ways of representing and dramatizing the unfathomable, unknowable and mysterious workings of the universe and our place within it. A sense of the radical insufficiency of any knowledge obtained by these forms of representation is, however, always present; Janet learns that Mercury now rotates three times as it circles around the sun, instead of just once as was previously understood. These updated facts about planetary activity mirror on a cosmic scale the way in which Janet is in the process of updating the meaning and significance of events and relationships in her life. Knowledge can only ever be provisional: ‘Why did they give out such confident information, only to announce later that it was quite wrong’? Janet’s scepticism here is not only about the validity of scientific knowledge; it registers Munro’s profound doubts about the capacity of language to model reality and to frame life’s excess and complexity in all its ‘innumerable variations, innumerable repetitions’. Perhaps it is not surprising then that at the end of the show, Janet remains unimpressed by the artifice behind the presentation: ‘the music, the church-like solemnity, simulating the awe that they supposed they ought to feel’. The cosmic drama she has watched fails to do justice to the ‘horrible immensities’ of the universe; and like the children who do not comment on what they have seen but are more interested in ‘eatables and further
entertainment’, she refuses the comforting vision of transcendence on offer in much the same way as her father has earlier refused the false comfort offered by the magazine stories of near-death experiences. Awe, she feels, is something only to be felt in the face of the real: ‘once you know what it was, you wouldn’t be courting it’.

Returning to the hospital for her father’s last night before the operation, Janet says that she has been to an ‘exciting’ show at the planetarium, telling him ‘it’s like a slightly phony temple’. She immediately regrets her comment: ‘I had meant that to be truthful, but it sounded slick and superior’. The limitations of words to convey truth can be shaming, Munro hints, not only because they utterly fail to convey the reality of experience and mortality, but because, like the word ‘exciting’, they can also convey something false: something closer to a caricature than the truth. Ashamed of her ‘slick and superior’ language, Janet makes a final effort to forge an emotional connection with her father as she asks him to tell her the moons of Jupiter, and they engage in the mutual attempt to remember and name each one: Io, Europa, Ganymede, Callisto. Naming here, for Munro, is much more than simply providing a label; for here, the process of naming the moons testifies to the power of fiction to create and shape the universe into a satisfying story. The Greek characters after whom the moons are named are rooted in mythology, a classical narrative used to understand and manage the mysteries of the universe; and it is this mythical narrative that is recruited by Janet and her father to create an illusion of comfort before their inevitable parting.

The seventh and final section concludes the story with a flashback to Janet’s brief sojourn in a Chinese garden after she left the planetarium the previous day. As Janet sits peacefully on her own, the re-arranged chronology in the story allows Munro to hint at the biblical day of rest following God’s creation of the world. Like the story itself, the garden too is a fiction, an artificial reproduction of something that belongs to another time and place; but its ‘familiar artifice’, like the planetarium’s, seems to calm and soothe Janet before she returns to the hospital for the final meeting with her father. In the distance, she sees ‘a girl who reminded me of Nichola’ and realises that just as she will have to let her father go into his operation, so too she will have to let Nichola go into adult life, independent of her mother: ‘She was one of the grown up people in the world now’.

Forms of stories.

‘I don't really understand a novel’, says Munro (in Rothstein, 1986). ‘I don't understand where the excitement is supposed to come in a novel, and I do in a story. There’s a kind of tension that if I’m getting a story right I can feel right away, and I don’t feel that when I try to write a novel. I kind of want a moment that's explosive, and I want everything gathered into that’ (p. 17).

If, as May (1984) argues, ‘the short story is short precisely because of the kind of experience or reality embodied in it’ (p. 328), then perhaps it is by way of the ‘explosive’ moment that we can best grasp the short story’s most fundamental way of telling. For unlike the novel that is propelled by its relationship to what E. M. Forster (1927) calls ‘the naked worm of time’, a narrative of events or experiences generally arranged in linear sequence, the short story is driven by its relationship to the single epiphanic moment: a moment that, by virtue of being extracted from the flow of time, comes to be imbued with particular significance and power. Indeed, as a literary mode that remains close to fable and folklore, May (1984) reminds us that the short story is acutely sensitive to the manifestation of what Cassirer (1946) refers to as the ‘momentary deity’: a primitive mode of experience constituted by a ‘fleeting, emerging and vanishing mental content’ piercing everyday life
with an experience of the uncanny or sacred. ‘In stark uniqueness and singleness it confronts us’ writes Cassirer, ‘not as part of some force which may manifest itself here, there and everywhere, in various places and times, and for different persons, but as something that exists only here and now, in one indivisible moment of experience, and for only one subject whom it overwhelms and holds in thrall’ (p. 18).

Gordimer (1976) describes the short story’s attempt to depict this ephemeral, phenomenological quality of experience as akin to seeing by ‘the flash of fireflies, in and out, now here, now there, in darkness’ (p.264). It is a metaphor that vividly evokes the multiple, simultaneous, transient glimpses of the universe that Munro describes in the planetarium scene: ‘the way the stars came out not all at once but one after the other the way stars really do come out at night, though more quickly’. Munro captures this momentary, dissolving perception of that which lies beneath life’s surface appearances by embedding it not within a chronologically-arranged sequence of episodes over time, but within a more paratactic arrangement: a loose cohesion of incidents that prohibits any easy recourse to presumed connections, reasons or motives. The story’s seven separate sections index various events taking place over a few days in Janet’s life. Juxtaposed rather than explicitly connected, their relationship is never unambiguously thematised allowing Munro merely to point to events rather than attempting to explain their relationship to each other. Indeed, the idea that we might be able to establish a causal connection between contingent events, that there might be somewhere a comforting explanatory narrative for the meaning of a life is precisely the kind of self-deceiving fiction that Munro’s story seeks both to dramatize and unsettle.

The elimination of causal connections alongside the story’s tightly-knit unity of form ensures the reader has to work hard to establish the possible interrelationships between disparate elements in the tale as well as to grasp what is hinted at or obscured beneath the surface of the text itself. It is not until the planetarium scene that the reader is presented with what we might think of as the central mise en abyme: a scaled-down mirror version of the wider universe that is also a version of Munro’s fictive world. It confronts the reader with an explosively dense metafictional moment in which Munro finally lays bare the artifice that underlies our experience of the world and its ‘horrible immensities’. It points to the radical insufficiency of language in the face of the real even whilst it exploits it as a medium that comforts us with ‘stunning facts’ or traditional narratives seeking to reassure and explain. The patterns of the stars, the constellations that Janet sees in the bowl of the planetarium, the scientific models by which we understand the universe are only human constructions imposed on a vast, enigmatic, ineffable universe. ‘Constellations do not exist’, writes Milner (2016), ‘there only exist the stars that compose them’ (p. 31). Like Janet, we look up at the starry sky and persuade ourselves that we can see meaningful patterns emerging from the formless cosmic flux above. The Great Bear and Little Bear that Janet subsequently mentions to her father in the hospital are created entirely within the imagination; yet somehow they appear to us still, radiantly shining out from the night sky. We navigate the external universe by weaving the chaos of the stars into meaningful patterns, forms and names in the same way as we navigate the internal subjective world by constructing patterns of meaning out of the fragments of our experience, from the disparate events and contingencies of our lives. Indeed, when Janet and her father work together in their final meeting to name the moons of Jupiter, their joint effort brings, quite literally, the ‘momentary deity’ into existence. The names of Io, Europa, Ganymede, Callisto of course derive from classical mythology, itself a series of fictional narratives intended to render the vast intricacies of the universe explicable to the ancients Greeks. Munro seems here to be calling on the short
story’s earliest traditions to underline the way naming, giving words to things, itself constructs how we perceive, pattern and understand the world. Yet it is in her very attempt to narrate experience, to ‘dramatize what ought to be a most secret activity’ that Munro performs the ‘questionable trick’ of writing. By drawing attention to her story as a work of art as well as to the role of the writer in fashioning or fictioning the world, Munro aims to interrogate, disrupt and unsettle our ideas about the relationship between fiction and reality.

**The short story as fable**

Perhaps these notions of creating, fashioning and fictioning bring us closer to the roots of the short story in fable. The etymology of the word fable derives from the Latin ‘fari’, to speak, as well as the Greek ‘pharein’ to say. From ‘fari’ we derive fate, that which is spoken, and ‘fabula’, an account or story: something that is fabricated. To speak, it seems, is always to tell a tale; yet as Voltaire (1747) comments in the dedicatory letter to *Zadig*, a fable is an ‘ouvrage qui dit plus qu’il ne semble dire’ (p. 22) - a work which says more than it seems to say. Indeed, in the past, fables were often taken to be mythologies, animistic folk-tales requiring interpretation to uncover what Smith (1915) calls ‘some general truth pertinent solely to man’ (p. 524). Whilst not all short stories are fables, it is certainly true that fables themselves are generally brief, sometimes extremely so; and so we might say, in Gelley’s (1995) words, that the fable is a short tale that aims to articulate ‘narrative examples and moral meanings’ (p. 122). It provides a model of ethical conduct not via moral instruction or didactic teaching but rather via instances or comparisons. Something is brought to the reader’s awareness by way of a likeness, an Aristotelian illustration or paradeigma inductively pointing to further examples of a more general theme or category. Examples function, suggests Aristotle, ‘by moving from particular to particular, passing through the universal’ offering ‘a particular and practical conclusion that is an indication for concrete acting’ (in Natali, 1989, p. 147). If we stand back for a moment to position *The Moons of Jupiter* within the context of the ten previous stories making up Munro’s collection, we can see that the entire book revolves around a series of iterative examples comprising the ‘innumerable variations’ and ‘innumerable repetitions’ of women’s lives.

However, Ambuel (2007) reminds us that we need to account for a certain philosophical ambiguity in the notion of a *paradeigma*; for the term refers both to a particular instance or example as well as to the transcendental ideal on which all other instances or examples model themselves. ‘A paradeigma might be an architect’s or sculptor’s model, an image (eikôn) of what is to be made’ he writes, ‘but it can also be an exemplar, the standard against which other things are measured’ (p. 8). But what might this mean in Munro’s tale? For it is not as if Munro is asking us to accept *The Moons of Jupiter* as an example of how to behave; nor that Janet is being held up as a kind of moral ideal for us to emulate. Rather, hidden within her story lies the deeper question about whether and to what the extent fiction itself can stand as any kind of example: whether it can actually mime the reality it attempts to describe. Can it, in short, say anything truthful about the world, or does its use of ‘dazzling, apt and striking’ language merely mislead us? Munro’s scepticism comes to the fore in the central exemplum of the planetarium where, by juxtaposing Janet’s world of relationships alongside the sidereal world of the cosmos, she foregrounds the complex, uneasy partnership that exists between fiction and reality. As we try to unpick this perplexing relationship, we cannot help asking along with Munro how it is possible for ‘familiar artifice’ to convey reality, to illuminate or display the ‘horrible immensities’ of the universe. Is fiction merely a kind of decoration, an ornamental ‘cover’ used to stretch over the reality of the world, rather like the ceiling of the planetarium? Or is
there something about the world itself that demands this covering, this fiction, in order to display itself at all? If we push at these questions a little further, we can see it is not that fiction offers us a limited version of reality, a replica that convincingly simulates the world whilst unfortunately lacking authenticity in this or that respect; nor that it enables us to find ways of modelling things that already exist in the world. The metaphysical opposition between reality and fiction is not to be resolved by recourse to a fictional model purporting to represent the reality of the world. Instead, Munro seems to suggest that it is through the act of writing, of inventing a story, that we are able to fashion or fiction a world for ourselves; that we can bring the world itself into being. Yet even as Munro undertakes this creative act, she remains deeply mistrustful of its authority; she deploys ‘artifice’ as a means of fictioning a world whose claim to a relationship of verisimilitude remains continually open to doubt. Indeed, in ensuring ‘realism [gives] way to familiar artifice’, Munro fashions a world whose invented origins, as we shall see, embody and instate a truth about the fiction that inaugurates the self.

The short story as fable of the subject.

Fables of course, are principally allegories: brief stories used as models of ethical action. ‘The fable’, writes Keenan (1997), ‘is offered for example, but for the kind of example that asks to happen in an act of something like imitation or identification, in the rhetorical event of a comparison’ (p. 46). What does this mean, and how might the notion of the fable as exemplary tale help us understand the relationship between the short story and the psychoanalytic concept of the subject? In his philosophical theory of reading, Keenan draws on the Aesopian fables of the raven who pretends to be an eagle and the wolf in sheep’s clothing to illuminate the fable’s concern with duplicity and undecidability, where identification with the other forms the borrowed basis of the self. The reader of the fable, he suggests, is similarly asked to make a comparison with the story’s protagonist who has made the error of mistaking the self for another; an error that consigns subjectivity to a constitutive alterity of which it will always remain unconscious. The fable’s address to the other, its ‘call of a narration from an undetermined location’ (p. 57) thus forces the reader to mime the very rhetorical mechanism of substitution by which its protagonist comes into being as a subject.

Keenan’s interest lies in the way reading restores subjectivity, installing a certain responsibility in the face of the undecidable. But it is what he has to say about the fabular basis of the self that I think most helps us freshly approach the psychoanalytic concept of the subject. Let us return to Freud here, for in the final essay of Totem and Taboo, Freud (1913) was once again to write a short story: not a case study this time, but rather a story about the anthropological origins of the Oedipus complex and the foundation of society, religion and culture. In his tale, Freud proposes a decisive, historical event in primitive times: the existence of a tyrannical, primal Father and the tribal horde of sons who kill and devour him. This ‘memorable and criminal deed’, he suggests, founded the beginning of religious principles and moral restrictions through feelings of guilt and remorse in the band of brothers that eventually led to the creation of taboos.

Whilst Strachey (1955) tells us that Freud regarded Totem and Taboo as his best written work, it is clear that Freud himself had considerable doubts about its publication. Indeed, his anxiety can be inferred from a short footnote to the paper in which he writes: ‘The lack of precision in what I have written in the text above, its abbreviation of the time factor and its compression of the whole subject matter, may be attributed to the reserve necessitated by the nature of the topic’ (p. 141).
Perhaps it is worth pausing here; for Freud’s choice of words, his reservation about ‘the nature of the topic’, is strangely reminiscent of the words used in his case study of Elisabeth von R. some 18 years previously. We might recall that in this paper, Freud expresses concern about how there is something ‘in the nature of the subject’ that means his case histories are likely to be read as short stories rather than scientific reports. In Totem and Taboo, Freud’s worry resurfaces again in his references to the ‘abbreviation of time’ and ‘compression of the whole subject matter’, characteristics that, as we have seen, may be considered to be the sine qua non of the short story yet which Freud feels - with some dismay, perhaps - lend ‘a monstrous air’ (p. 141) to his hypothesis.

In his tale of identification, Freud suggests that the tribal brothers unite over their hatred of and ambivalence towards the authoritative Father of prehistory. ‘The violent, primal father’ he writes (1913), ‘had doubtless been the feared and envied model of each one of the company of brothers; and in the act of devouring him they accomplished their identification with him, and each one of them acquired a portion of his strength’ (p. 142). Killing the father, Freud seems to suggest here, takes place neither out of the sons’ wish for revenge nor out of jealousy of his sexual privilege, but rather in order to acquire his power and identity for themselves. In this way, the eating of the primal Father, the totem meal that incorporates the other within the self, implies the annihilation of the other who is now the constitutive foundation of the self. ‘I the ego am born by assimilating the other, by devouring him, incorporating him’ writes Borch-Jacobsen (1993) in his discussion of Freud’s paper. ‘Everything…begins with murderous, blind identification, all the blinder because there is still no ego to see anything or represent anything to itself at all’ (p.33). In this reading, we can see how Freud offers us an example of the identity of an ego that cannot pre-exist the event of imitation, of identification; it is as if the very essence or being of the self lies not within the self, but within the other who is desired as model. ‘[T]he imitant’, says Lacoue-Labarthe (1990), ‘has to be nothing in and of itself or must…have ‘nothing characteristic of itself’. I must not therefore already be a subject’ (p. 82). It seems then we can only come into being, we can only be created, through identification. It is a borrowing of that which will never be returned; a ruthless plagiarizing of the other through which we incorporate an identity whose alterity we subsequently repress or eliminate. Through this act of identification the desiring subject, the one who longs to be a subject as the other is a subject, is inaugurated.

But what can it be ‘in the nature of the topic’ that makes Freud protest further on in his footnote that ‘[i]t would be as foolish to aim at exactitude in such questions as it would be unfair to insist on certainty’ (p.141)? I suggest that whatever else it is, Freud’s wonderfully speculative story is an exemplary tale, one that mimes the inexactitude, the undecidability of its own fabulous origins. Indeed, Freud at first seems to argue that the putative accuracy of the events he describes is irrelevant: the reality might never have taken place at all. The sons’ remorse could have been provoked as much by the phantasy of killing the father as by actually killing him in reality: ‘the mere existence of a wishful phantasy of killing and devouring him’ he writes, ‘would have been enough to produce the moral reaction that created totemism and taboo…psychical reality would be strong enough to bear the weight of these consequences’ (p. 160). But Freud’s concern about the ‘lack of precision’ in his hypothesis seems to make him all the more determined to make a case for the decisive priority of the event’s occurrence in reality. In making a comparison with modern day neurotics, he argues: ‘[N]eurotics are above all inhibited in their actions: for them, the thought is the complete substitute for the deed. Primitive men, on the other hand’, he writes, ‘are uninhibited:
thought passes directly into action’. For primitive men, then, the deed is pre- eminent. It takes priority over something which in the neurotic will remain at the level of psychic phantasy. And so it is the originative act, the primal murder that appears to constitute the basis of Freud’s triumphant conclusion: ‘In the beginning was the Deed’.

But the story isn’t over yet. In another apparently minor footnote, almost an esprit de l’escalier at the end of the paper, Freud enigmatically refers this final phrase back to a scene in Goethe’s Faust. It is the moment in which Faust translates the first few lines of Genesis (‘In the beginning was the Word’) and, dissatisfied, finds himself substituting ‘deed’ for ‘Word’ in precisely the gesture that Freud himself has just plagiarised. In other words, Freud’s claim to verisimilitude appears to lean not on the authenticity of a potentially verifiable historical event, but rather on a borrowed fictional text, on another Word. Like Faust, Freud is attempting to substitute an act for what is, in fact, a fiction. But if the primal murder, the Deed, is seen as merely a substitute for what will later become, in neurotics, the phantasy of killing the Father, we might say that the authority of Freud’s tale rests on the undecidability of a prior fiction, on the generation of a (primordial) fantasy now deemed to be the precondition for an invented beginning. Following Keenan then, it seems that Totem and Taboo turns out to be a wolf in sheep’s clothing after all. It is an exemplary tale, a fable in which Freud stages the very act of identification, of substitution, that itself inaugurates his story of the founding Father; which is to say it is a fable about the origin of fable itself. By telling us a fictive story of origins folded within another founding tale, Freud (1913) lays bare ‘the origin of so many things – of social organisation, of moral restrictions, and of religion’ (p. 142), exposing them to the artifice of their beginnings.

We are beginning to approach more nearly here how the short story’s fabular lineage makes it a genre particularly suited to dramatizing the project of self-knowledge and its limits. Like most of Munro’s characters, Janet is a writer and storyteller whose memory appears to be the principal source and repository of a growing self-awareness. But Munro alerts the reader to the way in which Janet’s memory has formed the basis of a self whose origins lie in a necessary fiction: necessary not just because of some token admission of our limited capacity to know and understand the self, but because of Munro’s awareness of the ineluctable limits to self-possession. When Janet reviews the narrative of her life, she becomes aware, as Cavarero (2000) points out, that ‘[a]utobiographical memory always recounts a story that is incomplete from the beginning. It is necessary to go back to the narration told by others, in order for the story to begin from where it really began’ (p.39). The stories the adult Janet tells about herself and her father have their roots in her earliest experiences at home in the family, with those who knew her best. Yet even here as she comes to realize, the status of her self-knowledge is precarious. She remembers the words of her father: ‘You know those years you were growing up – well, that’s all just a kind of a blur to me’. In turn, she reflects on herself as a young parent who ‘couldn’t tell the years apart’, and thinks regretfully how her own exhaustion and forgetfulness at the time her daughters were born mean that ‘[t]hose bumbling years are the years our children will remember all their lives’. It seems as if the first chapter in the story of a life is inescapably registered as a loss, even by those whom we have most trusted to keep, sustain and treasure it. The quest for self-knowledge, for the self’s story of itself, can therefore only ever begin with a fiction, ‘a refabulation’, says Cavarero (2000), ‘of a story told by others’ (p. 39). Indeed, we might recall that the poem by Joaquim Miller that Janet’s father tries to remember is itself a refabulation. It is both a tale told by Columbus’s sea-mate about the discovery of America as well as the re-telling of a founding story of origins. Munro’s insertion of Miller’s poem stages this re-
telling by offering us the story of a tale wrapped within a fable that is itself contained within a fiction. In *The Moons of Jupiter*, just as in *Totem and Taboo*, ‘realism [gives] way to familiar artifice’, offering the reader an exemplary tale about the death of the Father that founds a New World; with both Munro and Freud thereby each creating a (metafictional) world whose exposition incarnates a constitutive truth about the origin of the subject.

The dizzyingly recursive fictions through which subjectivity is produced are one reason, Butler (2005) argues, that the self can never be reducible to narrative competence. When we try, like Janet, to give an account of ourselves, our narrative, she suggests, ‘begins in media res, when many things have already taken place to make me and my story possible in language. I am always recuperating, reconstructing, and I am left to fictionalize and fabulate what I have already taken place to make me and my story possible in language. I am always recuperating, reconstructing, and I am left to fictionalize and fabulate origins I cannot know (p. 37). Just as the *mise en abyme* of the planetarium scene in Munro’s tale offers an endless self-mirroring that blurs the distinction between fiction and reality, between model and what we can know of the real, so too we might say there is a ‘blur’ at the heart of the subject: no single, distinct version or ‘ur-text’ of the self but rather a variety of endlessly multiplying forms or narratives in all their ‘innumerable variations, innumerable repetitions’. It is this never-ending deferral of meaning that destabilises any foundational account of the self, opening up to us the ‘familiar artifice’ of a subject whose narrative reconstruction is constantly undergoing revision. Indeed, Munro goes further by insisting we doubt the authenticity of any story we may come to tell about ourselves. For if my origin lies only in that which I have fictionalized, how can I affirm its truth? And insofar as my story is ‘dazzling, apt and striking’, can it ever be anything more than ‘an evasion’? How, and by what means, is it possible to have any kind of authoritative knowledge about the self?

**Conclusion**

Authoritative knowledge, of course, tends to be knowledge whose reference point lies ‘out there’ in the external world. Rooted in the everyday world of ‘morals and manners’ (Martineau, 1838), we might, albeit with some over-simplification, regard the novel as anchored in an external reference point that acts to bind the form, providing a basis for its moral and aesthetic integrity. The referential basis for the short story, however, is somewhat different. Whilst the brevity and concision in Munro’s tale do not preclude reference to the external world, the story’s ‘selfconsciousness and stylized arrangement’ (McIntyre 2009, p.74), its highly choreographed use of flashback and above all its metafictional treatment of writing and representation signal a refusal of contextual details and explanatory logic that would otherwise embed it within the solidarity of the social world. In what then is the short story anchored? Where is the source of its integrity? For the *mise en abyme* at the heart of Munro’s tale is not merely a clever post-modern literary device to demonstrate the self’s endless refractions of itself; rather, it contains folded within itself an implicit question about what makes for integrity when the very foundation of the subject cannot be guaranteed. Indeed, how can the integrity of the self - that which represents most nearly ‘who I am’ - survive in the short story’s disjointed and fragmentary way of telling? In offering a particular view of the self and its constitution, I suggest *The Moons of Jupiter* mimes how the self’s integrity is founded not in any reference point in the outside world, not in any externally-derived ‘authoritative knowledge’, but rather in its own internal frame of reference. Its very recursiveness defines a form that is bound, not by the co-ordinates of plot, character or motive as in the novel, but rather by the tightly-knit nature of itself. In this way the self, like Munro’s short story, could be said to take itself
as an example or *paradeigma*: an example that is founded on, sustained and authorized only by the artifice of its own origins.

What might this mean for us as psychoanalytic practitioners? In taking the short story as model for the subject, psychotherapists are faced with the responsibility of hearing an account of a life for which no other life can be taken as a reference or model. We are exposed to the irreducible singularity of the other in which no previous case and no external frame of reference can be invoked by way of response. In our attempt to establish general laws, lessons or rules that confer on a particular ‘case’ what Freud (1895) liked to call ‘the serious stamp of science’ we are apt to be misled by our use of limiting terms and definitions: ‘questionable tricks’ as Munro might say, that offer false comfort and reassurance in the face of the unknown.

But despite its ‘dazzling’ or untrustworthy nature, and despite the way it constantly ‘turn[s] out to be a questionable trick’, it seems we cannot dispense with fiction; indeed, Munro’s tale describes and performs the way fiction both produces and nourishes the self. But if the self is not to be found in the narrative coherence of its own telling, nor in any external reference point, then we might imagine that the psychoanalyst’s task, his or her own ‘work with words’, is oriented towards the very place in which the patient’s self, its uniqueness and integrity, can best be found. But where exactly is this place? And what can the short story tell us about its location? Let us conclude by returning once more to *The Moons of Jupiter* in which the central planetarium scene illuminates the ‘dominant narrative image of transcendent patterning that exceeds all human comprehension’ (Howells, 1998, p. 83). By setting this universal *paradeigma* alongside the particularities of Janet’s life and relationships Munro implies that, just as a full view of all the moons of Jupiter is forever unavailable to us, so too our perspective on other people can only ever be limited, fragmented and partial. ‘I ask my mind a question’, says Janet’s father, ‘but I can’t see all the connections my mind’s making to get it’. In seeking, like Janet’s father, to ‘see all the connections’ within the inner world of the mind as well as in the external world of the eternal cosmos, we reach out towards yet inevitably fall short of establishing the whole truth. Perhaps it is for this reason that Munro remains distrusting of any claim to authoritative knowledge in the self’s way of telling. In the ‘phony temple’ of the fictioning self, there is no objective, universal truth to which we can have access. All we have is the ‘moment that’s explosive’: the vivid ‘flash of fireflies’ that constitutes a condensed, discrete moment of truth.

‘Any life’, says Borges (1968) ‘no matter how long or complex it may be, is made up essentially of a single moment’ (p.83). The short story’s way of telling is one that reveals to us that it is only the integrity of the moment itself - ‘the fleeting, emerging and vanishing mental content’ (Cassirer, 1946, p.18) - that can ultimately assume exemplary or representative status within a life. It is the moment to which we as psychoanalysts must pay heed. For in the patient’s own ‘work with words’ - the telling of a dream, the temporary forgetfulness, the careless slip of the tongue - we may find, along with Munro and Freud, where the foundational fiction of the self, the subject, most unavoidably lies.


For a historical treatment of the mise en abyme in literary theory, see Lucien Dallenbach, Le recit speculaire: essai sur la mise en abyme, Paris, Seuil, 1977


