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## Private Scandals/Public Selves: The Education of a Gossip in *Who Do You Think You Are?*<sup>1</sup>

In the prohibited transgression of the boundary into the sphere that the subject of gossip would claim as "private" ... lies a constitutive element and at the same time essential stimulus to gossip.<sup>2</sup>

If all truths became public, we would approach utopia.<sup>3</sup>

THE LONGSTANDING CONFLICT between gossip and privacy has recently entered a new and surprising phase. After centuries of moral censure, gossip's reputation is on the upswing, while privacy has come increasingly to be regarded with suspicion and even hostility. The impetus behind this strange reversal of fortunes dates to the 1960s when anthropologists like Max Gluckman first proposed that "gossip, and even scandal, have important positive virtues."<sup>4</sup> In contrast to traditional condemnations which focused on gossip's violation of privacy and dissemination of secret

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<sup>2</sup> Jörg R. Bergmann, *Discreet Indiscretions: The Social Organization of Gossip*, trans. John Bednarz, Jr. (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1993) 54.

<sup>3</sup> Ronald de Sousa, "In Praise of Gossip: Indiscretion as a Saintly Virtue," *Good Gossip*, ed. Robert F. Goodman and Aaron Ben-Ze'ev (Kansas: UP of Kansas, 1994) 31.

<sup>4</sup> Max Gluckman, "Gossip and Scandal," *Current Anthropology* 4 (1963): 308.

information, Gluckman and his school<sup>5</sup> focused on its social function, arguing that gossip is a mechanism that maintains community norms and values by identifying transgressions, and that mediates communal discord by providing an outlet for the harmless discharge of conflict and hostility. Echoes of Gluckman's influential formulation are still audible in contemporary vindications of idle talk,<sup>6</sup> but what makes Gluckman's defence of gossip such a significant turning-point in the contest between gossip and privacy is the degree to which it succeeds in disengaging the analysis of gossip from questions relating to the privacy of those it violates. Even Robert Paine, Gluckman's principal sparring partner in the 1960s, was silent on the issue of privacy—despite its bearing on his theory that gossip is not a communal mechanism but “a cultural device used by the individual to forward his own interests” through the acquisition and management of information.<sup>7</sup>

The tendency of social scientists to celebrate gossip's power to reinforce communal values or to enhance individual status, while demurring on the question of its effects on individual privacy, received a radical twist by feminist critics<sup>8</sup> who began to deconstruct the stereotype of the female gossip in the 1980s. By exposing the patriarchal assumptions which support traditional attacks on “scandalmongering” and “idle talk,” feminist reappraisals of gossip typically sought to revalue women's discourse and to reclaim gossip as a positive term, without acquiescing to the sexist claim that gossip is an exclusively female activity. As Patricia Meyer Spacks

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Elizabeth Colson, *The Makah Indians* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1953); M. Herskovits, *Life in a Haitian Valley* (New York: Knopf, 1937) and *Trinidad Village* (New York: Knopf, 1947); James West, *Plainsville, USA* (New York: Columbia UP, 1945).

<sup>6</sup> See Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, “The Vindication of Gossip,” *Good Gossip* 11–24; Ferdinand Schoeman, “Gossip and Privacy,” *Good Gossip* 72–82.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Paine, “What is Gossip About? An Alternative Hypothesis,” *Man* 2 (1967): 282.

<sup>8</sup> See Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986); Deborah Jones, “Gossip: Notes on Women's Oral Culture,” *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader*, ed. Deborah Cameron (New York: Routledge, 1991) 242–50; Donna C. Stanton, “Recuperating Women and the Man Behind the Screen,” *Sexuality and Gender in Early Modern Europe: Institutions, Texts, Images*, ed. James Grantham Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993) 247–65; Lorraine Code, “Gossip, or in Praise of Chaos,” *Good Gossip* 100–105; Louise Collins, “Gossip: A Feminist Defence,” *Good Gossip* 106–14.

argues, "The ferocity of several centuries' attack on derogatory conversation about others probably reflects the justifiable anxiety of the dominant about the aggressive impulses of the submissive."<sup>9</sup> In light of such a critique, traditional appeals to the sanctity of privacy lose their moral heft and begin to sound suspiciously hollow. Conversely, gossip seems to promise not only a valuable means of consolidating a feminist community but, in its characteristic mode of undercutting authority by making public what those in power would prefer to conceal, may even provide a politically liberating practice.<sup>10</sup>

The growing mistrust of certain forms of privacy apparent in feminist discourses of gossip has recently been generalized in a provocative way by Ronald de Sousa. De Sousa agrees with Gluckman that gossip can promote community values by symbolically punishing those who violate them; but like the feminist critics, he "prize[s] the subversive element in gossip" and rejects the notion that community values are themselves intrinsically valuable. "Community," he warns, "is a Janus face: though one side wears the smile of social harmony, on the other lurks the scowl of fascism."<sup>11</sup> Arguing that "a world in which all information were universally available would be preferable to a world where immense power resides in the control of secrets," de Sousa celebrates gossip's "assault on the notion of a private sphere of life" as the triumph of the Kantian categorical imperative.<sup>12</sup>

Against this proliferation of defences of gossip, I wish to place Alice Munro's novelistic collection of interlinked short stories, *Who Do You Think You Are?*—a text that provides a nuanced and critical reflection on the ethics of gossip and the ambiguous virtues of privacy. As I will argue, *Who Do You Think You Are?* is neither a *Bildungsroman* as some critics maintain, nor even a *Künstlerroman* as others have argued, but a *Klatchmaulroman*: a novel of the education of a gossip. Peter Bergmann's analysis of gossip as "discreet indiscretion" suggests that such an education

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<sup>9</sup> Spacks, *Gossip* 30.

<sup>10</sup> See the discussion of feminist revisions of Gluckman and Paine's theories of gossip in Brian Johnson, "Language, Power, and Responsibility in *The Handmaid's Tale*: Toward a Discourse of Literary Gossip," *Canadian Literature* 148 (1996): 39–55.

<sup>11</sup> De Sousa, "In Praise of Gossip" 33.

<sup>12</sup> De Sousa, "In Praise of Gossip" 32.

would be conducted as a tug-of-war between contradictory values, since the feelings of power gossip generates in the gossiper are at odds with the feelings of helplessness it can generate in the victim. In the first place, the gossip's education includes an initiation into a practice of gossiping that is performed unconsciously, "without having 'to call it by its proper name'"—what Schütz and Luckmann call "habitual knowledge."<sup>13</sup> Gossip's disrepute, however, means that learning to gossip is not only a matter of "knowing how" but also of "knowing that"—in other words, recognizing gossip as a morally problematic activity. Bergmann's sense that "gossip's significance has not begun to be clarified" thus rests on "the discrepancy that exists between talking about gossip and its practice—the discrepancy between the collective public denunciation and the collective private practicing of gossip."<sup>14</sup> This division clearly begs larger questions about the responsibility of the gossip to the privacy of his or her victims, but also about the nature and value of privacy itself.

Munro's stories offer their own evaluation of gossip's significance in light of the pervasive discrepancy between public pronouncements and private practices by showing how gossip is central to the invention and management of their protagonist's identity, as well as to her ethical growth. Initially, Rose learns to gossip by emulating her stepmother Flo, approaching gossip as a discursive practice that allows her to assume the identity of "chronicler" with imaginative power over other people. Over the course of the stories, however, Rose becomes increasingly uncomfortable with a form of self-construction that depends on a structure which is itself reversible and, as such, can be turned against its user. By the end of the collection, Rose has radically revised her view of her own freedom as a gossip, finding her power not in its use but in its renunciation. Throughout this process of education, gossip becomes a trope for the interpenetration of private and public identities. The stories thus productively complicate both traditional dismissals and contemporary defences by dramatizing how identities are forged in the heat of gossiping about other people's private scandals.

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<sup>13</sup> Bergmann, *Discreet Indiscretions* 20–21.

<sup>14</sup> Bergmann, *Discreet Indiscretions* 21.

## 2

Munro's exploration of gossip as a technique of self-fashioning in *Who Do You Think You Are?* foregrounds the gendered representation of gossip by revisiting an old stereotype of the crone in the character of Flo, Rose's wicked stepmother and spinner of "old wives tales." As Bergmann argues, the history of associating gossip with women has a "symbolic birth place" at the washing place,

because while doing their wash, which contained the bodily dirt of its user, "revealing" stains and worn out places and holes, the women constantly came across traces of the private and intimate affairs of others. Washerwomen thereby structurally assumed the position of gossip producers who acquired morally contaminated information about the private affairs of others or at least could figure it out from traces (visible evidence). If the resounding slaps of the mallets and the voices and laughter of the women could be heard in the village then in time these sounds assumed for the villagers—especially for the men—a significantly threatening character, and "gossip" thereby became accepted as the designation for the socially condemned, feared, and specifically female form of conversation about the private affairs of others.<sup>15</sup>

When viewed from this perspective, Flo's impulse "to see people brought down to earth" that leads her to "make public what she finds in the laundry bag"<sup>16</sup> is emblematic of the gossip's function:

Late at night she or Rose, or both of them, would be out at the washing machine in the woodshed. Sometimes, Rose saw, her father's underwear was stained. She would not want to look, but Flo held it up, waved it almost under Rose's nose, cried out, "Lookit that again!" and made clucking noises that were a burlesque of disapproval. (48)

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<sup>15</sup> Bergmann, *Discreet Indiscretions* 63.

<sup>16</sup> Alice Munro, *Who Do You Think You Are?* (Agincourt: Signet, 1978) 48. Subsequent references are to this edition.

However, the crone's subversive play with the father's unmentionables is not enough to make *Who Do You Think You Are?* into a feminist "crone-ography," in Mary Daly's sense of the term, since Flo's telling has little to do with "unmasking deceptive patriarchal history, rendering it obsolete."<sup>17</sup> Instead, Flo's performances tend to confirm social mores, turning patriarchal norms to her own advantage. Flo is thus "like Isis remaking the penis of Osiris" in that she "reinstates and reaffirms the patriarchy even as she appears to challenge it."<sup>18</sup> As Robert Paine argues, such choric reaffirmations are the cornerstone of gossip as a technique in which "morality and self-interest are brought extremely close to each other" in a competition for "moral status."<sup>19</sup> Gossipers thus raise their own status, or "generate an immediately satisfying sense of power," through "appropriate interpretations" of other people's behaviour.<sup>20</sup>

Flo's ribald accounts of scandalous goings-on in Hanratty exemplify this self-consolidating version of gossip which Rose herself later learns to employ. The story of the Tyde-family history, for instance, furnishes Flo with ample opportunity to secure her own moral status: the tyrant butcher-father; the deformed daughter Becky whom he supposedly beats ("they did not understand about polio," Flo tells us knowingly); rumours of an incestuous birth; the mock-trial and murder of the father that follow; the trial, sentencing, and eventual pardon of the young men involved ("A farce, said Flo"); and finally, Becky's ensuing "career of public sociability and display" (9). In Flo's catalogue of rural horrors, prohibition and transgression are two sides of the same coin. She admonishes herself to Rose, "I shouldn't even be telling you this stuff"; but the ironic narrator assures us, "More was to follow" (7). The conclusion of her story is marked by a similarly calculated ambivalence:

That was all. Flo put the lid down on the story as if she was sick of it. It reflected no good on anybody.

"Imagine," Flo said. (9)

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<sup>17</sup> Mary Daly, *Gyn/ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon, 1978) 16.

<sup>18</sup> Magdalene Redekop, *Mothers and Other Clowns: The Stories of Alice Munro* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 117.

<sup>19</sup> Paine, "What is Gossip About?" 281.

<sup>20</sup> Bergmann, *Discreet Indiscretions* 147.

Flo's assessment that the story "reflected no good on anybody" may be reasonable within the narrative parameters she sets, but on a dramatic level it reflects very well on Flo herself. Occupying the dominant position of observer and judge, Flo distances herself from the transgressions she describes and identifies herself with the power of social institutions. For the judgmental chronicler, the need to tell the tale is clearly as important as the need to censure it or, at least, to "be sorry for people like that" (45). The resulting ambivalence is succinctly rendered by Flo's concluding injunction, "Imagine," which, on the one hand typifies the function of the gossip to relish the contemplation of each scandal in scrupulous detail; and on the other, conveys the contempt and disbelief that accompany the exasperation of a scandalized arbiter of social norms.

Despite the imaginative power wielded by the gossip in the creation of a persona, the narrative does not romanticize that power by depicting her as an invulnerable figure. Flo's identity is always menaced by a counter-force that threatens to subvert her careful self-construction. According to Bergmann, the power to scandalize is ultimately rooted in "the specific *relational structure* of gossip"—"the gossip triad" consisting of the subject, producer, and recipient of gossip.<sup>21</sup> Because gossip's power depends largely on the absence of its subject, anyone can occupy any position within the gossip triad at any given moment. The gossipier always risks becoming the gossipee. The instability of this situation has a profound impact on the gossipier who would construct herself by telling stories about other people, since the implicit story of the self embedded in criticism of others must compete with a potential body of other stories about the gossipier that stretches beyond the horizon of authorial control. Consequently, the gossip is an anxious figure, typified by an alternation of curiosity and paranoia. The cost of self-aggrandizement is the stricter policing of private behaviours to ensure that one's reputation is beyond reproach, or at least beyond the public gaze.

For Flo, this contradictory position is manifested in an obsession with privacy and a constant fear of being overheard. Her admonition to Rose, for example, "You mind your own business" (1), rehearses the attitude that informs Flo's own frantic self-protection prior to Rose's "royal beating" at the hands of her father:

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<sup>21</sup> Bergmann, *Discreet Indiscretions* 45–49.

“Well we don’t need the public in on this, that’s for sure,” Flo says, and she goes to lock the door of the store, putting in the store window the sign that says “Back Soon,” a sign Rose had made for her with a great deal of fancy curving and shading of letters in black and red crayon. When she comes back she shuts the door to the store, then the door to the stairs, then the door to the woodshed. (15)

Considering that she has just gossiped about another royal beating—the one received by Becky Tyde’s father—Flo’s attempts to “shut up” the beating she precipitates seem especially hypocritical. Tellingly, as Rose’s beating nears a climax, Flo’s anxiety intensifies: “She [Rose] has given up on words but is letting out a noise, the sort of noise that makes Flo cry, *Oh, what if people can hear?*” (17). Such hypocrisy casts doubt on the sociological cliché, first devised by E.A. Ross, that gossip functions as a social control for gossipers themselves since, the theory goes, the fear of being gossiped about pre-emptively ensures conformative behaviour.<sup>22</sup> Instead, Flo’s antics emphasize the superficiality of an identity forged in the heat of gossip, exposing it as the mere veneer of respectability.

One of the principal ways in which the narrator undercuts Flo’s pretensions is by identifying gossip with “dirty talk”—a strategy that recalls the scatological discourse of the washerwoman and implicitly reinscribes the moral critique of idle talk. The filth and impropriety that Flo attributes to others in order to create her own respectability reassert themselves as metaphors for her own discourse. This link between gossip and Rose’s own favourite “toilet locale” (24) is established very early on in the text, when we are told that Flo had an indoor bathroom put into the kitchen:

They were all familiar with each other’s nether voices, not only in their most explosive moments but in their intimate sighs and growls and pleas and statements. And they were all most prudish people. So no one ever seemed to hear, or be listening, and no reference was made. The person creating the noises in the bathroom was not connected to the person who walked out. (4)

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<sup>22</sup> Bergmann, *Discreet Indiscretions* 144.



The location of the toilet is significant since the kitchen, like the washing place, is a symbolic female space that is frequently seen as a locus for gossip.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, the metaphoric loquaciousness of these “nether voices” which produce “pleas” and “statements” involves a type of “body language” that, like gossip, is jettisoned from more acceptable ways of speaking. Most importantly, the division of domestic space into public and private realms emulates the structural conditions of gossip, whose “*central theme ... lies precisely in [a] tense relationship between a revealed ‘first’ and a concealed ‘second’ world.*”<sup>24</sup>

The irreconcilable tension between “the person creating the noises in the bathroom” and “the person who walked out” perfectly describes the dynamic of Flo’s scandalmongering:

Present time and past, the shady melodramatic past of Flo’s stories, were quite separate, at least for Rose. Present people could not be fitted into the past. Becky herself, town oddity and public pet, harmless and malicious, could never match the butcher’s prisoner, the cripple daughter, a white streak at the window: mute, beaten, impregnated. As with the house, only a formal connection could be made. (8)

Like the “bathroom noises,” Flo’s gossip depends on a rupture between past and present, public and private. Consequently, her histories resemble what Rose finds “in the heaped snow under a glaze of ice, where the snow had melted and frozen again”: “turds copious and lonesome, preserved as if under glass, bright and mustard or grimy as charcoal, with every shading in between” (24). Flo, who Rose fears “would show up at the school with a pail and shovel” to clean out the filthy outhouses, “lambasting everybody in the bargain” (24–25), is finally not so different from the “honey-dumper” whose job she nearly usurps. Her symbolic embodiment of his function offers a wry critique of the bullshit artist, even as the honey-dumper’s permanent retirement, when “the School Board saw fit to put flush toilets in the cleaned-up basement” (38), anticipates the stories’ final verdict on her “dirty talk.”

<sup>23</sup> See Jones, “Gossip: Notes on Women’s Oral Culture.”

<sup>24</sup> Bergmann, *Discreet Indiscretions* 53.

If the glaring contradictions in Flo's discourse and practice typify the self-deceptive position of the gossip, critics have been anxious to confine the significance and influence of her strategies to the early stories in the collection. W. R. Martin leaves Rose curiously free of the charge of gossiping since his reading associates gossip exclusively with Flo. Viewing Flo as "a contrast to the sensitive, imaginative Rose," he suggests that the crone's weakness for sensationalism is only a foil for the real heroine, who "typically examines and ponders events more deeply."<sup>25</sup> Rose might tell stories, Martin concedes, but she certainly does not gossip. A closer analysis of Rose's discursive practices, however, seriously questions such a conclusion. For when we find that "Flo and Rose had switched roles," that "now Rose was the one bringing stories home, Flo was the one who knew the names of the characters and was waiting to hear" (41), the discursive register in which "stories" are told has not changed. Thus, "the sort of story Rose brought home" (42) about Muriel Mason's elusive Kotex and Ruby Carruthers's sexual misadventures precisely mirrors "the sort of story Flo told Rose" about Becky Tyde (43).

The narrative of Rose's story about Ruby Carruthers, one of her earliest attempts at gossip, emphasizes the fluidity of Rose and Flo's roles as gossip producer and recipient. As Flo—still the more sophisticated gossip—interjects with interpretations of Rose's gossip about "a slutty sort of girl" who keeps house for a local family, she foregrounds ways in which others' folly can furnish raw material for flattering self-comparisons:

One time when [Ruby] was there alone three boys went over to see her. Del Fairbridge, Horse Nicholson, Runt Chesterton.

*"To see what they could get," Flo put in.* She looked at the ceiling and told Rose to keep her voice down. Her father would not tolerate this sort of story.

Del Fairbridge was a good-looking boy, conceited, and not very clever. He said he would go into the house and persuade Ruby with no trou-

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<sup>25</sup> W.R. Martin, *Alice Munro: Paradox and Parallel* (Edmonton: U of Alberta P, 1987) 106.

ble at all, and if he could get her to do it with all three of them, he would. What he did not know was that Horse Nicholson had already arranged with Ruby to meet him under the veranda.

*"Spiders in there, likely," said Flo. "I guess they don't care."* (42; my emphasis)

Rose still seems to be the apprentice telling this story, since Flo clearly anticipates its real significance: "If you ever got up to any of that with a boy it would be the end of you," she said. "I mean it" (43). Flo's vigilance about the differences that emerge in her dialogue with the story between "us" and "them" is less for her benefit than for her pupil's, for it is Rose who unexpectedly receives the moral of her own story. But she has already anticipated the lesson, for

Rose would not have told her anything in which she did not play a superior, an onlooker's part. Pitfalls were for others, Flo and Rose agreed. The change in Rose, once she left the scene, crossed the bridge, changed herself into a chronicler, was remarkable. No nerves any more. A loud skeptical voice, some hip-swinging in a red and yellow plaid skirt, more than a hint of swaggering. (41)

Whereas Flo's self-dramatizations remained implicit in her gossip, Rose's storytelling suggests a deeper and more self-conscious commitment to gossip as a strategy and as an identity, even though her desire to legitimate her discourse with the title of "chronicler" betrays an anxiety about her chosen method of self-invention. For even at this early stage in her education, Rose is keenly aware of which details are worth emphasizing and which are better left unreported, as she demonstrates in her omission of the story's actual conclusion, which threatens to humanize Ruby and restore her lost dignity:

Rose did not bother with the rest of the story, which was that Ruby got into a bad mood, sat on the veranda steps with the dirt from underneath all over her clothes and in her hair, refused to smoke a cigarette or share a package of cupcakes (now

probably rather squashed) that Runt had swiped from the grocery store where he worked after school. They teased her to tell them what was the matter and at last she said, "I think I got a right to know who I'm doing it with." (43)

The inclusion of each new pathetic detail, from the dirt in Ruby's hair to the (probably) squashed cupcakes, increases the listener's sense of sympathy for Ruby. But when the subject is finally allowed to speak for herself, her affirmation of her human right "to know who I'm doing it with" moves the hearer from distant sympathy for Ruby to visceral empathy with her. For she has been violated by more than a callous group of boys; the gossiper has also violated her right to know what is being said about her.

Rose's omission of another story in which she herself is ridiculed for the pretentious claim that she eats half a grapefruit for breakfast—which Flo would have thought "as bad as drinking champagne" (40)—undercuts for us, but not for Flo, the impressiveness of her new-found swagger. Rose's hypocrisy is most glaring, however, in her account of the schoolgirl whose missing Kotex was "smuggled somehow into the trophy case in the main hall. There it came to public notice. Folding and carrying had spoiled its fresh look, rubbed its surface, so that it was possible to imagine it had been warmed against the body. A great scandal" (41). The incident is initially presented as part of the narration; only after it has been told is it dramatized as part of Rose's after-school gossip. This circuitous presentation foregrounds the differences between the event and its discursive repetition, which is meagrely described ("Flo enjoyed the episode of the Kotex") and thus highlights Rose's undisclosed reaction of sympathetic identification: "Rose could have been the girl who lost the Kotex. That was probably a country girl, carrying the Kotex in her pocket or in the back of her notebook, for use later in the day. Anybody who lived at a distance might have done that. Rose herself had done it" (40–41). In the ensuing scandal, however, "Rose was afraid that she might be the leading candidate for ownership, so was relieved when responsibility was fixed on a big sullen country girl named Muriel Mason, who wore slub rayon housedresses to school, and had B.O." (41). In light of Flo and Rose's maxim, "pitfalls are for others," the "episode of the Kotex" is particularly revealing of how intimately gossip links identity to the protection of one's own privacy at the expense of another's.

er's. For Rose's gossip about Muriel Mason does not only elide her identification with the victim in order to secure her superior position retrospectively; it also reproduces the likely method by which "responsibility was fixed" on Muriel rather than on Rose herself by their classmates. By implying that Rose has a vested interest in the gossip about Muriel because of the threat of ridicule represented by the Kotex to her own reputation at school, the narrator exposes the degree to which the gossip's identity is based on a competition for privacy, as it provides a stinging comment on Rose's self-protecting strategies.

For a gossip like Flo, a gap in space is more essential than a gap in time to her successful relation of self-aggrandizing scandal. Because Flo constructs herself at the expense of her neighbours, her gossip depends on metaphors of spatial difference between self and other, inside and outside. As an adult, Rose expands upon the strategies she learned from Flo by adapting the structure of her discursive inheritance to a gap in time. This new strategy allows her, paradoxically, to make a younger version of herself the subject of her own gossip. As a girl, listening to Flo's tall tales, Rose found that "present people could not be fitted into the past" (8). As an adult, however, she finds that she herself is capable of the same kind of splitting that she had once noticed in the subjects of Flo's gossip. When she tries to repeat the scandals she once shared with Flo, Rose discovers that she cannot fit her present self into the stories of her own past: "She had to swear they were true, she was not exaggerating" (28).

According to Phillipe Lejeune, such self-division is typical of the autobiographer, for whom difference from oneself is initially a function of time:

The name is the guarantor of the unity of our multiplicity; it federates our complexity in the moment and our change in time .... [And yet] any speaking subject carries within himself that double split of addresser and addressee and of enunciation and utterance .... In general, these gaps, these divisions are both expressed and masked by the use of a single "I."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Phillipe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989) 34.

Lejeune's theory of a subject who is temporally split—for whom “the first person always conceals ... a secret third person”<sup>27</sup>—has important consequences for theories of gossip, a discourse which, as Roland Barthes warns, “reduces the other to *he/she* ... the third person pronoun ... the pronoun of the non-person.”<sup>28</sup> For as soon as an autobiographer speaks of herself as an absent third-person, this pronominal shift means that the gossipier also carries within herself a younger gossipee whose absence fulfils the structural conditions of the triad. Throughout her adulthood, Rose exploits this structural self-division to assemble a public persona from the private details of her own past. Rather than effecting a reconciliation of past and present selves, as autobiography often seeks to, Rose's divulgements are primarily concerned with recreating the self-aggrandizing dynamic of her gossip: “Rose knew a lot of people who wished they had been born poor, and hadn't been. So she would queen it over them, offering various bits of squalor from her childhood” (24).

Although she finds this strategy useful for “intimidat[ing] right-thinking people at dinner parties” (90), Rose's self-doubling is darkly reflected in the humiliation she feels at an earlier dinner party, when she brings her snobbish fiancé Patrick back to Hanratty to meet Flo:

Patrick got to hear about a man who cut his own throat, *bis own throat*, from ear to ear, a man who shot himself the first time and didn't do enough damage, so he loaded up and fired again and managed it, another man who hanged himself using a chain, the kind of chain you hook on a tractor with, so it was a wonder his head was not torn off.

*Tore off*, Flo said.

She went on to a woman who though not a suicide, had been dead in her house a week before she was found, and that was in the summer. She asked Patrick to imagine it. All this happened, said Flo, within five miles of where she herself

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<sup>27</sup> Phillippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography* 35.

<sup>28</sup> Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Noonday, 1977) 185.

was born. She was presenting credentials, not trying to horrify Patrick, at least not more than was acceptable, in a social way; she did not mean to disconcert him. (89-90)

Rose's real shame about her past in Hanratty, as she endures Flo's gossip from Patrick's priggish point of view, belies the apparent ease of her self-division later, when she cynically turns her childhood "squalor" into a kind of anti-cultural capital. But this chilling resumé of local suicides does not only prefigure Rose's habit of "presenting credentials" at dinner parties with a grim sense of irony; by linking public acts of self-construction to gossip about self-destruction it pinpoints the issues behind "the things she was ashamed of ... the failure she couldn't seize upon or explain" that haunts Rose throughout her quest for identity in her adult life (207). As Lejeune's model insinuates, the gossip who would change herself into an object is always caught in precisely the same dialectic between creation and immolation because she must first make herself absent before she can "make" herself present.

Like Flo's attempts to elevate her moral status in the eyes of her listeners, Rose's desire to "queen" herself above her peers is undercut by the threat of imminent reversal that is constitutive of gossip's structure. This theme is developed in "Simon's Luck," the story that is the "crucial link in the design of the volume: it provides the vital link between Rose's floundering and her confident magnanimity at the end."<sup>29</sup> As the story begins, Rose finds herself at a party, fearing that "she might be doomed to hang out on the fringes of things, making judgments" (158), only to become the subject of malicious gossip among a group of young faculty members:

They were talking in low, serious voices. One of them looked at her. She smiled. Her smile was not returned. A couple of others looked at her, and they went on talking. She was sure they were talking about her .... (162)

Complementing the emphasis on self-construction in her own discourse, the junior faculty's gossip directly threatens Rose's identity,

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<sup>29</sup> W. R. Martin, *Alice Munro: Paradox and Parallel* 101.

making her represent the “Fucked-up jealous establishment,” and leaving her helplessly wanting “to state her case” (162):

The years of work, the exhaustion, the travelling, the high school auditoriums, the nerves, the boredom, the never knowing where your next pay was coming from. She wanted to plead with them, so they would forgive her and love her *and take her on their side*. (163)

If there is some poetic justice in this reversal that allows Rose to experience first-hand the reductive effects of gossip, it does not precipitate an immediate rehabilitation. Instead, Rose’s response to becoming the subject of other people’s smug judgements recalls Flo’s urgency to withdraw from public scrutiny when scandal threatened during Rose’s “royal beating.”

Rose’s intensified concern to defend her privacy emerges during her relationship with Simon, the man she meets at the same faculty party. When Rose buys groceries for their evening together, she discovers how easily her private desperation for love enters the sphere of public knowledge, even if it does not become the subject of malicious gossip *per se*:

“You must have brought home some company,” said the woman who kept the store. She spoke with no surprise or malice or censure, just a comradely sort of envy.

“When I wasn’t expecting it.” Rose dumped more groceries on the counter. “What a lot of bother they are. Not to mention expense. Look at that bacon. And cream.”

“I could stand a bit of it,” the woman said.

(166)

As the narrator implies, Rose’s misplaced anxiety about “malice or censure” reveals more about the impetus behind her own inclination to gossip than about the woman’s “comradely” inquiries. Her transparent attempts to protect her privacy, moreover, recall her earliest fears of being gossiped about back in Hanratty when, as a teenager, she anticipates going to Toronto to “buy hair-remover to put on her arms and legs, and if possible an arrangement of inflatable cushions, supposed to reduce your hips and thighs” (59):



She thought they probably had hair-remover in the drugstore in Hanratty, but the woman in there was a friend of Flo's and told everything. She told Flo who bought hair-dye and slimming medicine and French safes. As for the cushion business, you could send away for it but there was sure to be a comment at the Post Office, and Flo knew people there as well. (59)

Flo's contacts in the drugstore and the Post Office, like the woman who envies Rose at the grocery store, create for Rose the impression of being fully visible—always potentially an object of gossip. Consequently, she avoids the prying eyes of the envious woman by buying her groceries “at a supermarket several miles away” (168). When Simon does not arrive for dinner, “She put out the lights because she didn't want to be caught sitting up .... what could be more desperate than a woman of Rose's age sitting up all night in her dark kitchen waiting for her lover?” (170). And finally, at the climax of the story, she gives up chasing after Simon because she fears that her vulnerability will become public knowledge: “she thought of how many crazy letters she had written, how many overblown excuses she had found, having to leave a place, or being afraid to leave a place, on account of some man. Nobody knew the extent of her foolishness, friends who had known her for twenty years didn't know half of the flights she had been on, the money she had spent, and the risks she had taken” (172). Such a juxtaposition of Rose's public self-constructions with her private desires does more than simply ironize the protagonist's lack of self-knowledge. It also suggests that the danger of romanticizing privacy is commensurate with the danger of romanticizing gossip. For Rose's desire to preserve her privacy is directly proportional to her characteristic failure to consider the feelings and weaknesses of others, as the story's ending pointedly suggests.

In the final moments of “Simon's Luck,” Rose learns of Simon's death from a woman she had also met at the faculty party: “Poor Simon. You know he died .... Cancer of the pancreas .... Sad. He had it for a long time” (176–77). Ironically, through this bit of idle talk, Rose is roused from the feelings of powerlessness she associates with being publicly humiliated, to imagine someone else's vulnerability: “It was preposterous, it was unfair, that such a chunk of information should have been left out, and that Rose even at this

late date could have thought herself the only person who could seriously lack power" (177). By making her aware of other people's lack of power, the gossip about Simon's "luck" finally enables Rose to question her own discourse of gossip—not simply in terms of its reversibility, that is to say, its disadvantages for her—but ethically, in terms of its effect on others.

## 4

Rose has been seeking transformation through the strategic use of gossip since her youth in Hanratty. In "Wild Swans," for instance, Rose conflated Flo's gossip about the "White Slavers" she was to watch out for on the train to Toronto with her gossip about the undertaker who "drove the old hearse all over the country, looking for women" and sang about a girl whose "*throat is like a swan*" (58) to characterize her sexual encounter with a male passenger as a drama of seduction and transformation. Even in the final pages of the story, "She wanted to fill up in that magical, releasing way, transform herself; she wanted the courage and the power" (204). Throughout the collection of stories, however, gossip's transfiguring power has been ironized by a narrator who points out the superficiality and hypocrisy of a transformation in which the private and public identities of the gossip refuse to cohere. "Who Do You Think You Are?," the final story of the collection, confirms this critique of gossip as an agent of self-transformation by suggesting that maturity results from an ethical engagement with the complexity and ineffability of other people's experience that can only be achieved by sacrificing the self-protecting pleasure gossip affords.

Initially, Rose's acceptance of the crone's voyeuristic language is signalled by the story's narrative frame: a gossipy conversation between Rose, her brother, and his wife about the "village idiot," Milton Homer. It is not, however, this gossip about Milton Homer's "scandalous behaviour" (198) that has a profound effect on Rose's education, but her memory of a chance encounter with Ralph Gillespie, a boy from her English class "who specialized in Milton Homer imitations" (202):

when Rose remembered this unsatisfactory conversation she seemed to recall a wave of kindness, of sympathy and forgiveness, though certainly no words of that kind had been spoken. That pecu-

liar shame which she had carried around with her seemed to have been eased. The thing that she was ashamed of, in acting, was that she might have been paying attention to the wrong things, reporting antics, when there was always something further, a tone, a depth, a light that she couldn't get and wouldn't get. Everything she had done could sometimes be seen as a mistake. (209)

Rose's habit of "reporting antics" to construct a persona is thrown seriously into question as a result of this seemingly idle conversation. For her inability to penetrate beyond its very idleness to recapture something of the profound connection they shared as schoolmates gives Rose a transforming insight into the difficulty of achieving human intimacy that has profound implications for her own discourse:

There seemed to be feelings which could only be spoken of in translation; perhaps they could only be acted on in translation; not speaking of them and not acting on them is the right course to take because translation is dubious. Dangerous as well.

For these reasons Rose did not explain anything further about Ralph Gillespie to Brian and Phoebe .... (210)

By making the Other the subject of concern, by giving Ralph the right, not of last word, but of first refusal, Rose renders the stories' judgement on the use of gossip as a means of self-construction: the gossip's education culminates in a rejection of her own "dangerous" voice. Rose finally seems to escape becoming a crone by embracing an ethic of privacy and a practice of silence.

This would be a strange conclusion for a novel of education to reach, however, particularly one as fascinated by gossip's generative powers as it is suspicious of its methods. To be sure, Flo's example and Rose's education exemplify Paine's thesis that gossip is self-interested. But *Who Do You Think You Are?* must still be distinguished from patriarchal condemnations of female gossip, in part because its ironic treatment of Flo nevertheless remains largely sympathetic and humanizing. Although I have emphasized the self-interested elements of her discourse, Ajay Heble is also correct to

argue that Flo's "tales evolve out of a local community of gossip" that represents "the transforming, myth-making powers of memory."<sup>30</sup> Gossip's ambiguity lies precisely in its embodiment of such contradictory values. Rose's gossip too embodies these contradictions, but at a much deeper level than Flo's, because Rose's apparent rejection of gossip at the end of the story is not as straightforward as it seems. As Spacks suggests, "gossip provides a model for many operations of the novel [and] opens the way for a kind of interpretation that defines aspects of the text's relation to the reader and locates its roots in ordinary social discourse."<sup>31</sup> If Rose has been in command of her own story as a secret third-person narrator since the beginning, as Munro's most careful critics argue,<sup>32</sup> she has hardly embraced an ethic of silence as fully as the final story might suggest. Rose, in other words, might renounce one form of gossip only to take up another form which now implicates the reader. Transposing the gossip triad from thematic to formal concern, Rose's autobiographical narration turns the reader into the recipient of her literary gossip. Consequently, not Rose, but the reader, is revealed to have been the gossip's apprentice all along. If we are meant to be Rose's apprentices, however, we are clearly expected to learn that Rose's paean to privacy is only one element in a much larger story whose end is an ethical dialogue with others in the public domain. Such a dialogue may be achieved, Munro suggests, only if we are willing to sacrifice the protective shell of public identity and follow Rose's example of *self*-disclosure, turning gossip into open discourse, widely distributed and honestly attributed.

To the rising chorus of voices currently reassessing the conflict between gossip and privacy in favour of the former, Munro's stories lend a valuable sense of balance. Like the most radical critics of privacy, Munro is highly suspicious of its capacity "to promote self-deception and hypocrisy."<sup>33</sup> But she is equally suspicious of utopian appeals to "a universalized practice of radical and guilt-

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<sup>30</sup> Ajay Heble, *The Tumble of Reason: Alice Munro's Discourse of Absence* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1994) 101–102.

<sup>31</sup> Spacks, *Gossip* 12.

<sup>32</sup> See Williams, *Confessional Fictions: A Portrait of the Artist in the Canadian Novel* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1991) 204; Heble, *The Tumble of Reason* 104.

<sup>33</sup> De Sousa, "In Praise of Gossip" 32.

less indiscretion, a world of transparent gossip.”<sup>34</sup> At a time when we already seem to inhabit “a world of transparent gossip” in which privacy is in short supply, Munro’s exhortation that we become ethical gossips is particularly welcome. What we might be expected to learn from her fiction is that we cannot escape from gossip, even if we finally make ourselves its object by implicating ourselves in a laying bare of such practices.

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<sup>34</sup> De Sousa, “In Praise of Gossip” 33.