"Disturbing to Others": The Too Great Happiness
of Alice Munro and Sophia Kovalevsky

Marijke Boucherie

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Abstract: The title story «Too Much Happiness» of Alice Munro's recent collection (London, Chatto & Windus, 2009) is a short biography of the Russian Mathematician and novelist Sophia Kovalevsky (1850-1891), the first woman to be appointed for a chair at a European University, in Stockholm. In her version of Sophia Kovalevsky's biography, the Canadian author Alice Munro evokes the extremely severe cultural and historical constrictions that hindered Kovalevsky's career, at the same time that she dramatizes the workings of her formidable mind. A powerful picture thus emerges where the historical and universal dimensions of Sophia Kovalevsky's life come together in a picture of the artist and the scientist engaged in the search for truth regardless of historical settings and limitations.

Keywords: Literature, mathematics, biography, feminism, universalism, creativity, truth.

"Perturbadora para Otros": La felicidad demasiado grande de Alice Munro y Sophia Kovalevsky

Resumen: La novela corta «Too Much Happiness», que da título a la reciente recopilación de historias de Alice Munro (Londres, Chatto & Windus, 2009; *Demasiada Felicidad*, trad. Flora Casas, Barcelona, Lumen, 2010) es una breve biografía de la novelista y matemática rusa Sophia Kovalevsky (1850-1891), primera mujer nombrada para una cátedra en una universidad europea (Estocolmo). En su versión de la biografía de Sophia Kovalevsky, la autora canadiense Alice Munro evoca las dificultades culturales e históricas que complicaron la carrera de Kovalevsky, al mismo tiempo que dramatiza el funcionamiento de su mente formidable. El resultado es un retrato sugerente en el que se unen la dimensión histórica y universal de la vida de Sophia Kovalevsky, una artista y científica comprometida con la búsqueda de la verdad independientemente de su contexto histórico y limitaciones.

Palabras clave: Literatura, matemática, biografía, feminismo, universalismo, creatividad, verdad.

Marijke Boucherie
Is a researcher at Ulices, the University of Lisbon Centre of English Studies. Her field of research is English Poetry, especially the Victorian Poetry of Nonsense and the way it explores the confines of language and conceptualization. During the last years she has taught and researched Canadian Literature and has published articles on the Canadian authors Alice Munro, Mavis Gallant, and Jane Urquhart. She has also published on Charles Dickens, Iris Murdoch, and Stevie Smith. Recently she has published «Nonsense and Other Senses», in Elisabetta Tarantino (ed.), *Nonsense and Other Senses. Regulated Absurdity in Literature*, Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars Press, 2009, pp. 259-274.
Correo electrónico: marijke.boucherie@gmail.com

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In what manner should we act in the future to make our
common life happier? Mathematically we could have
stated this question in this manner: given a definite function (in
this case our happiness), which depends upon many variables (namely
our monetary resources, the possibility of living in a pleasant place and
society and so forth) – in what manner can the variables be defined
so that the given happiness function will reach a maximum?
Needless to say we are unable to solve the problem mathematically.[1]

Sophia Kovalevsky

Too Much Happiness, the title story of Alice Munro's latest collection (2009), evokes the life of a historical figure: the nineteenth century Russian mathematician Sophia Kovalevsky (1850-1891), the first woman to become a professor at a European University.[2] In 1888, Sophia was awarded the prestigious Bordin Prize by the Academy of Sciences in Paris for her anonymously submitted contribution «Sur le problème de la rotation d'un corps solide autour d'un point fixe». However and because she was a woman, she could not become a member of the said Academy nor teach at a French University. Neither was she eligible for a position in a Russian university although in 1889 she became accepted as a corresponding –not a regular– member of the Academy of Science of Saint Petersburg. Through the influence of her mentor, the German mathematician Karl Weierstrass, and her Swedish colleague Gösta Mittag-Leffler, Sophia Kovalevsky became a lecturer at the then recently erected University of Stockholm in 1883, but only obtained tenure (*nomination à vie*) in 1889, one year before her death. In Stockholm, Sophia Kovalevsky began to write fiction: *Recollections of Childhood* (1889),[3] a memoir of herself and her beloved sister Aniuta and their life on the family estate of Palabino, and *Nihilist Girl* (published as *Vera Verontsova* in Sweden), inspired by both her and Aniuta's liberal ideals.[4] She also wrote her recollections of George Eliot whom she met twice, in 1869 and in 1880.[5] Finally, and in collaboration with her Swedish friend Anne-Charlotte Leffler, she published a play written in Swedish, *Kämpen för Lyckam* (1887) or *Struggle for Happiness*.[6]

In a letter to Anne-Charlotte, quoted by Kennedy, Sophia alludes to this book, saying: «you were *happiness*, and I am, and most likely shall always be *struggle*».[7] And it is true that the biography of Sophia Kovalevsky reads as a series of almost unconquerable struggles. As a nineteenth century Russian woman Sophia could not attend a univer-

sity nor could she study abroad without the consent of her parents or without being a married woman. She used the stratagem of a white marriage to a fellow liberal, Vladimir Kovalevsky, in order to be able to study in Germany and obtained a PhD degree at the University of Göttingen in 1874. She had been privately tutored in Berlin by Weierstrass and followed courses at the University of Heidelberg as an attendant because she could not enroll as a regular student. She suffered terrible losses, the loss of her sister Aniuta and later that of her husband, Vladimir, who committed suicide and left her destitute so that she had to immigrate to Sweden in order to earn a living for herself and her small daughter. In Sweden, she experienced a sense of loneliness and isolation that never left her. She spoke Russian, German, English, French and Swedish but she wrote: «you cannot think what torment it is to be forced to speak in a foreign tongue to dear friends. You might as well walk with a mask on your face».[8] Sophia Kovalevsky was also a person of great intensity: «Intensity is my essence», she writes in her childhood memory,[9] and surely a phenomenal energy fuelled both her mathematical investigations and her personal relations. A record of Sophia Kovalevsky's extraordinary mental concentration was left by her friend and fellow student, Julia Lermontova:

> Her (Sophia's) ability over many hours to devote herself to concentrated mental labor without leaving her desk was really astonishing. And when […] she finally arose from her chair, she was always so submerged in her thoughts that she would walk back and forth with quick steps across the room, and finally break into a run, talking loudly to herself and sometimes breaking into laughter. At such times she seemed completely separated from reality, carried by fantasy beyond the borders of the present […]. She was never at peace.[10]

Sophia Kovalevsky died from pneumonia in February 1891, a month after her forty-first birthday. Her last words, the day before she died, were said to be «too much happiness», the words that the Canadian writer Alice Munro takes up as the title of her own story of Sophia and of the whole of her collection of stories of 2009.

The data of Sophia Kovalevsky's life here summarized can be found in the biography, *Little Sparrow: A Portrait of Sophia Kovalevsky* (1983) by Don H. Kennedy,[11] the book that Alice Munro explicitly acknowledges as the main source of inspiration for her story.[12] It is impressive how the simple, almost minimalistic quality of Munro's style manages to give, in only fifty seven pages, the feel of the person of Kovalevsky and all the facts and details of her life provided by Kennedy and other sources.[13] But then, Munro's story is not a chronological narrative of Kovalevsky' life, nor are its elements organized in a linear movement towards a happy ending according to the tradition of romance that the word «happiness» in the title may induce to believe. Rather it is a complex and peculiar structure which allows the reader to inhabit Sophia's life and to feel what it means to be Sophia Kovalevsky. In my reading, the story is about the enigma of mental space and its representations. As such, it is a story about a woman mathematician and novelist but simultaneously a reflection about how both mathematics and literature are works of the imagination and dis-cover the unexplored possibilities of the creative mind.

Alice Munro admits to this reading because, in the acknowledgements, she writes that it was «the combination of novelist and mathematician» that caught her interest when she incidentally came across the name of Sophia Kovalevsky in the *Britannica*.[14] The fascination for the connection between mathematics and literature is further emphasized by the words of Sophia that Alice Munro chooses as epigraph for her story:

> Many persons who have not studied mathematics confuse it with arithmetic and consider it a dry and arid science. Actually, however, this science requires great fantasy.[15]

The idea that mathematics and «fantasy» are connected is taken up again in the story when it quotes the historical recorded saying of Sophia's tutor, Weierstrass, who equates mathematics and poetry:

> there must be something like intuition in a first-rate mathematician's mind, some lightning flare to uncover what has been there all along. Rigorous, meticulous, one must be, but so must the great poet.[16]

Weierstrass's words might be describing Alice Munro's own art: «rigorous, meticulous and great poetry». It is as a poet that Munro approaches the mathematician Sophia Kovalevsky, thus doing justice to Henrik Ibsen who once said that Sophia's life «could only be successfully depicted in a highly poetic manner».[17]

The poetry of Munro's story lies in the spacious architecture of the story, a structure which seems totally transparent and yet is capable of housing Sophia's complex character and the difficult predicament of being both a scientist and a woman in the nineteenth century, someone who, in the social roles of sister, wife, mother and teacher appears to herself as being «a freak».[18]

Munro's story presents the equation between the woman, artist and scientist in terms of Sophia's nineteenth century context, yet the manner in which she does so suggests very strongly that the conditioning of every artist –be it man or woman– is also a contemporary because universal problem. Sophia Kovalevsky's particular story is shown to be connected to a greater and more universal conflict, which is the tension between the solitary nature of the work of the imagination and the demands of others that interfere with solitude and encumber the time necessary for the connection with inner space. Mental and social space, solitariness and togetherness, the (in)tense joy of creation and the easy happiness of becalming in the sphere of family and friends, are constant in the life of the

woman artist, torn as she is between her historical conditionings and her singularity as a person.

Alice Munro's emphasis on the universal dimension of Sophia Kovalevsky's life, despite her very great cultural conditionings, is considered by some critics with a certain reservation. In a review of «Too Much Happiness», for instance, Anne Enright touches upon the problem of how history and the universal are equated in the story, implying that Munro «still» has a problem with the use of history:

> Munro's work often concerns the past, but *something still niggles* about her relationship with history. Perhaps the problem lies in the difference between a past that is anchored in living memory and a past that floats free of it. Memory is a great and moral tool for this writer, the way it allows our past to be freshly revealed to us by events in the present. Because of memory, our lives shift and make sense at the same time. This might be a definition of what it is to grow; it may also be why Munro's stories are living things that refuse to be still on the page.[19]

Enright herself brings a correction to her implied criticism of Munro and rightly so, for what distinguishes Alice Munro –in the story under discussion and in her work in general– is her universalism and transcendence, her «poetry».

Technically, Alice Munro achieves an almost godlike view in the biography of a historical person through the evocation of diverse and multiple experiences of time in an intimation that connects the separate accidents of Sophia Kovalevsky's life in, as it were, a frame of timelessness. *Sub species aeternitatis.*[20]

The architecture of the story (organised in five numbered parts) breaks up linear time by a series of juxtaposed fragments, which, like building blocks, show separate or mixed scenes of Sophia's life in either present, past or fu-

ture, causing time to flow in all directions from and to the present moment in which the character finds herself. A kind of mosaic is thus created where the total picture is more than the sum of its parts. It causes Sophia's life to emerge as a multi-faceted and constant movement, a profound mystery made up of very concrete and precise details yet constantly going beyond them.

It is very interesting that the non-linear and non-static picture of Sophia's life created by Munro is analogous to the new conception that Sophia helped to introduce in mathematics. Sophia Kovalevsky's «Theory of *Partial* Differential Equations»[21] brings movement and dynamics into mathematics and breaks with the paradigm of static and exact analytical solutions. Instead of using linear time as the only independent variable of an equation (as in *Non* Partial Differential Equations), Sophia's theory envisages other independent variables and thus paves the way to non-linear mathematics, dynamic phenomena and theories of chaos. The new mathematics that arises with Weierstrass, Kovalevsky, Poincaré (a friend and colleague of Sophia who also appears as a character in Munro's story) and others introduce theories of complexity that, in a way, also reflect the historical context in which those mathematicians lived. The nineteenth century with its many political, social, cultural and industrial revolutions witnesses to the emergence of a more complex and dynamic world to which both mathematics and the arts try to do justice.[22]

Alice Munro finds a way of introducing the manifold independent variables of Sophia's life through a stratagem that apparently starts with an intimation of linear time: the story focuses on the last weeks of Sophia's life and follows the itinerary that takes her on a train journey from Genoa to Stockholm where she will die some days after her arrival. With stops in Paris and Berlin, the journey takes about eight days and provides the narrative with an underlying linear dynamics that moves towards an ending: the geo-

graphical destination of Stockholm and Sophia's imaginary anticipation of marriage. The ending shall be death, however, a sharp reminder that all experiences of time are inextricably connected to the irresolvable paradox of absence of time. Timelessness thus infuses the fissures and turns of the narrated fragments and envelops the concrete data of the story in an otherworldly dimension.

Sitting in the train with occasional stops to visit people of her past (Poincaré, her sister's husband and son in Paris, Weierstrass and his sisters in Berlin) Sophia's mind travels through past and future, a time travelling that is constantly interrupted by the pressing needs of her present predicament: the lack of heating in the train, a soar throat, the too heavy luggage, the presence of fellow travellers. The play between «factual details, memories and observations»[23] told by a distant narrative voice (that through the use of free indirect speech also seems to be the unaffected voice of Sophia) projects a huge space, where all kinds of alternative experiences of time enter and float free: dream states, imaginary conversations, letters and documents (all based on existing documents), hallucinations, delirium induced by drugs, and, at the end, a brain affected by lack of oxygen. One of dimensions of the story is connected to myth and romance and invites the reader to live and be happy «on the wings of simple words».[24] The first sentence of the story, for instance, introduces concrete historical data in the framework of a conventional love story and thus preserves the allusion to the suspended time of the fairy tale and to the word «happiness» in the title: «*On the first day of January, in the year 1891, a small woman and a large man are walking in the Old Cemetery, in Genoa.*»[25] The scene is set for a man and a woman to be happy in sexual fulfillment, as is the mythical connection between love and death.

Alice Munro seems to encourage this reading because the first part of the story[26] is occupied with Sophia's obsession with her lover Maxsim Kovalevsky, a namesake of her

first husband. The name «Maxsim Kovalevsky» and the evocation of his impressive physical bulk, academic qualifications, and comfortable social status appear in the first lines of the story[27] while Sophia's name only comes two pages later as plain «Sophia»,[28] without her surname. Until then Sophia has been invoked as «a small woman», «a woman», «*also* a Kovalevsky» (my emphasis), «a widow», «she». Thus and from the start two important themes of the story are introduced: the intertwining of life and death (*eros / thanatos*) and the different social and cultural conditionings of work and love for men and women.

It is no coincidence that Sophia Kovalevsky makes her entrance (in line 88) in the story merely as a woman called «Sophia», a name that appears after the mentioning of the prize that confirms her genius as a mathematician: «The Bordin Prize was what spoiled them. So Sophia believed.»[29] The irony cuts deep when the reader learns that Maxsim Kovalevsky, an academic himself, does not bear to stand in the shadow of a woman who is internationally acclaimed for her scientific achievements. He dismisses Sophia in a letter, which bears the cruel (and historically true) sentence: «If I loved you I would have written differently.»[30]

The reader thus comes to know Sophia not as the world famous mathematician but as a woman whose mind is wholly obsessed by her lover: «He takes up too much room, on the divan and in one's mind.»[31] Sophia's passion engulfs the value of her scientific achievements and she is the first to equate happiness with the prospect of marrying Maxsim. When the two finally become engaged –Sophia having forced the situation– she has a vision of her life as tipping the balance towards happiness: «it is to be happiness after all. Happiness after all. Happiness.»[32]

To Sophia the thrice repeated «happiness» means an imagined fulfilment of total love, a homecoming to safety, to Maxsim's «smell of comfort and money»,[33] to the «true speech»[34] of the Russian language, «the shelter of your

nursery language».[35] The images used by the narrator convey Sophia's dreams of being taken care of by strong men not so much as infantilizing, but as a protection to be longed for: «a little daughter snuggled up in their arms».[36] It shows how the prospective of marriage is seen as a freedom from hardship and exposure, but also as a desire of fusion, as release of a constant and intolerable tension. For Sophia, marriage to Maxsim means the end of her exile in Sweden and of the tyranny of her teaching duties: «I will not teach anymore, I will be free.»[37]

The freedom that Sophia yearns for is the freedom from her oddity and her uncomfortable position in society where she sees herself reflected in the eyes of her colleagues' wives as «a learned chimpanzee», «a multicultural parrot»,[38] an *idiot savant* exhibited yet not accepted by the wives of the male professors:

> «Wives were the watchers on the barricade, the invisible implacable army. Husbands shrugged sadly… Men whose brains were blowing old notions apart were still in thrall to women whose heads were full of nothing but the necessity of tight corsets».[39]

Yet, at the same time, Sophia understands that men are as much prisoners of cultural conditionings as women. Very interestingly, she comes to understand that her first husband, Vladimir, whom she did not love, considered her more like an equal because

> he did not have the manly certainties. That was the reason he could grant her some equality those others couldn't and why he could never grant her that enveloping warmth and safety.[40]

It is in connection with her first husband, Vladimir Kovalevsky, that Sophia's former and first other happiness surfaces in the story. This is the happiness provided by the

language of mathematics, a happiness that possesses her to the point of forgetting her surroundings and even her own physical self. When solving mathematical problems she is «happy» because mathematics is her natural element, the air she breathes and must breathe in order to live.

It is as a child that Sophia realizes that she is able to understand the symbols of trigonometry, a discovery that the story presents as a moment of immense happiness, counterpoint happiness to the happiness of marriage contemplated before:

> She had never heard of sines or cosines, but by substituting the chord of an arc for the sine, and by the lucky chance that in small angles these almost coincide, she was able to break *into this new and delightful language.*
>
> She was not surprised then, *though intensely happy.*
>
> Such discoveries would happen. Mathematics was a natural gift, like the northern lights. It was not mixed up with anything else in the world, not with papers, prizes, colleagues, and diplomas.[41]

Breaking into the «new and delightful language» of mathematics, Sophia has no choice but to go and live there. Mathematics is her daemon, the god that possesses her. What distinguishes Sophia Kovalevsky as a mathematician is her intuition, the new ways she discovers for old problems, her «method» which, as her tutor Weierstrass realizes «diverged most brilliantly from his own».[42]

Sophia's gift is part of her genius, but her originality is also part of her being a woman. Sophia is a girl and has not received a formal training in mathematics. Therefore, she starts solving mathematical problems on her own, outside the conventional paths taught at schools, and finds new ways to uncover «what as been there all along».[43] To Weierstrass Sophia is the student he has always hoped for:

A student who would challenge him completely, who was not only capable of following the strivings of his own mind but perhaps of flying beyond them. He had to be careful about saying what he really believed – that there must be something like intuition in a first-rate mathematician's mind, some lightning flare to uncover what has been there all along. Rigorous, meticulous one must be, but so must be the great poet.[44]

In the eyes of Weierstrass, Sophia is genderless. He is in love with her androgynous mind. He sees her not as a woman but –significantly– as a blessing to himself: «a gift to me and to me alone».[45] The words are beautiful but they are a denial of the Sophia's reality as a woman, which is part of her genius; it is also a denial of the difficulties Sophia has to cope with in her profession as mathematician. If, as quoted, *Mathematics is a natural gift… not mixed up with anything else in the world, not with papers, prizes, colleagues, and diplomas,*[46] to study mathematics and to make a living out of it means real hardship for a woman. In order to accomplish this, Sophia has to make a nominal marriage with a man who, out of liberal ideals, is willing to give her his name: Vladimir Kovalevsky. When, years after their union, the couple has a child, Sophia simply stops with her career. She writes popular science pieces, «using a talent more marketable and not so disturbing to other people or so exhausting to herself, as mathematics».[47]

To Sophia motherhood does not come «naturally» like mathematics, but is experienced as laden with guilt and impatience. In the end, all social and professional relations are felt as a burden, even old friendships. The violence with which she severs herself from reality in order to wholly inhabit her mind –be it the world of mental creation, be it the possession by her lover Maxsim– is suggested by the names of two historical women to whom Sophia is referred to in the story: Charlotte Corday[48] and Mary Stuart, who both achieved mythical status as impas-

sioned murderers of men and who were both executed. Thus while the narrative voice mingles with that of Sophia in considering the many sides of the relationships between powerful men and women, an extreme undertow of rage and transgression is felt to underlie the story and heard to reverberate through the distant tone that tells of Sophia sitting in the train, thinking her thoughts.

The legend of Mary Stuart appears in the story through a narrative stratagem that both emphasizes the destructiveness of unconscious forces and provides the concrete circumstances that will lead to Sophia's death. A passenger on the train, a doctor who lives on the island of Bornholm –the island where Mary Stuart's husband, Bothwell, is said to have died insane– recognizes the famous mathematician and advises her to avoid Copenhagen because of an epidemics of smallpox. Aware that she should first check this information, Sophia nevertheless acts in an impulse upon this advice and travels over the Danish Isles in a nightmarish voyage that reads like a descent into the underworld and re-casts the character of the doctor as a figure of death. The tablet that the doctor has given her will later induce in Sophia an altered state of consciousness which will lead her to ignore the symptoms of her illness and also fuel the «fireworks in her own brain».[49] A new exhilaration possesses her, induced partly by the drug and partly perhaps by the lack of oxygen in the brain, which reconnects her with the first happiness of her life, mathematics, and gives her a vision of her life «*taking on a new shape, seen through sheets of clear intelligence, a transforming glass*».[50] The vision acts like an enchantment and gives her an idea for a new novel that would be as natural the Northern Lights of mathematics and would catch the pulse of life:

> There was *a movement back and forth*, she said, there was a pulse in life. Her hope was that in this piece of writing she would discover what went on. Something underlying. Invented, but not.

> What could she mean by this? She laughed.
> She was overflowing with ideas, she said, of a whole new breadth and importance and yet so natural and self-evident that she couldn't help laughing.[51]

This is the fundamental intuition of Sophia Kovalevsky, moments before her collapse and death. It is a vision of simplicity and transparency, a vision of Plato like «elemental truths» –Μαθήματα– that seems to underlie the pain and strife of life.[52] The pursuit of such a vision is Sophia's daemon, a driving force that possesses her as absolutely as did her passion for Maxsim. Ultimately, Sophia may be seen as a madwoman, a mystic, a poet –a mathematician– in search of a fundamental simplicity capable of showing the interconnectedness of all variables in a «transforming glass»[53]: whether the end result be a mathematical formula, a poem or a story, it will be an act of creation propelled by the pulse of life in all its intricate and complex ramifications.

The creative process is shown to be dangerous in the absolute demands that it makes on the artist or scientist: what is at stake is the search for a form that will allow for the truth to reveal itself. Nothing less than life itself is at stake, as Sophia Kovalevsky's untimely death proves. In the story, death is brought about in large part by Sophia's obsessions and alienation from common reality. And yet, everything that leads to Sophia Kovalevsky's untimely end is also an intrinsic part of the search for truth as a never-ending task that imposes itself on the artist and scientist. Therefore, if Sophia Kovalevsky's last words, «too much happiness», may be read as the ultimate affirmation of her alienation, they can also be seen as Sophia's final discovery that the meaning of life lies in the confluence of all its variables in a truth that acknowledges and celebrates life's mystery. Happiness means to live. Too much happiness means to die from the happiness of life.

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The expression «moving back and forth» that evokes the kind of new story Sophia Kovalevsky means to write in order to discover the «pulse of life»[54] are the exact words that, thirty-nine years earlier, Alice Munro used to define her own art. In an essay of 1982, entitled «What is Real», Munro explains what a story means to her in a way that uncannily foreshadows the reality of life evoked in «Too Much Happiness» of 2009. Trying to explain what reading a story does for her, Alice Munro says:

> I don't take up the story and follow it as if it were a road, taking me somewhere… I go into it, and *move back and forth* and settle here and there, and stay in it for a while. It is more like a house. […] So, when I write a story I want to make a certain kind of structure, and I know the feeling I want to get from being inside that structure. […] There is no blueprint for the structure. It is not a question of, "I'll make this kind of house because if I do it right it will have this effect." I've got to make, I've got to build up, a house, a story, to fit around the indescribable 'feeling' that is like *the soul of the story*, and which I must insist upon in a dogged, embarrassed way, as being no more definable than that.[55]

Alice Munro's story «Too Much Happiness» is the story that the dying Sophia Kovalevsky plans to write. It is the story of a happiness that is not related to a specific circumstance, but a picture of happiness that emerges out of the convergence of all the elements of life seen as interconnected and considered in simultaneity. It is the happiness of creating something that is «invented, but not», of approaching something that, as in mathematics, is always already there and waits to be uncovered: the soul of the house, the soul of the story, the soul of the character: the soul.

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1 *Apud* Don H. Kennedy, *Little Sparrow: A Portrait of Sophia Kovalevsky*, Athens (Ohio, USA), 1983, p. 186.

2. Hans Wussing & Arnold Wolfgang, *Biographieen Bedeutender Mathematiker*, Berlin, 1975, p. 480.

3. «Some chapters Sophia wrote in Russian, some directly in Swedish» (Don H. Kennedy, *op. cit.*, p. 274). The Swedish and Danish version bear the title «*Our Russian Life: The Raevsky Sisters*» (idem, 274).

4. Pelageya Kochina, *Love and Mathematics: Sofya Kovalevskaya*, Moscow, 1985, p. 225.

5. Don H. Kennedy, *Little Sparrow*, pp. 119-123.

6. Kennedy, *Little Sparrow*, p. 267.

7. Kennedy, *Little Sparrow*, p. 294.

8. Kennedy, *Little Sparrow*, p. 243.

9. Pelageya Kochina, *Love and Mathematics*, p. 24.

10. Kennedy, *Little Sparrow*, p. 145.

11. As Don H. Kennedy explains (*op. cit.*, p. 2), Sophia was given the nickname «'Little Sparrow' (*Vorobyshek*) because she was small and lively».

12. Alice Munro, *Too Much Happiness*, London, 2009, p. 305.

13. Alice Munro, «Acknowledgements», *Too Much Happiness*, London, 2009.

14. Idem, *ibidem*.

15. Munro, *Too Much Happiness*, p. 246.

16. Cf. Don H. Kennedy, *op. cit.*, p. 219. Alice Munro, *Too Much Happiness*, p. 207. In the collection *Too Much Happiness* (2009), the story goes from pages 246 to 303.

17. Kennedy, *Little Sparrow*, p. 273.

18. Alice Munro, *Too Much Happiness*, p. 250.

19. Anne Enright, «Come to read Alice, not to praise her», *The Globe and Mail*, 28.08.2009. (The emphasis is mine.)

20. Spinoza's words but which come to my mind because of the poem «Freddy», by Stevie Smith: «Nobody knows what I feel about Freddy / I cannot make you understand / I love him sub specie aeternitatis / I love him out of hand. / I don't love him so much in the restaurants that's a fact […].» (*Collected Poems*, London, 1975, p. 65.)

21. Alice Munro, *Too Much Happiness*, p. 254. (The emphasis is in the text.)

22. The mathematical theories of Kovalevsky were explained to me by the mathematician Manuel Boucherie Mendes, but the responsibility for an erroneous understanding or interpretation is mine. Expressions like «a whole that is more than the sum of its parts» and terms like «emergence» which I use as metaphors are actually up to date terms used in mathematical theories.

The revolutions evoked appear in the story (and in Sophia's biography) are: the freedom of the Russian serves, liberalism, feminism, the French revolution of the «Commune» (Sophia's sister Aniuta was married to the *communard* Victor Jaclard; Aniuta was also courted by Dostoevsky, certainly a writer of indeterminacy, dynamics and chaos, a profound political, spiritual and artistic revolutionary artist, as shown by Rowan Williams (*Dostoevsky*, London, 2009).

23. «What is Real» [1982], in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Detroit, 1996, vol. 95, p. 290.

24. «On the wings of simple words» is an allusion to the expression «on the wings of difficult words» which appears in *David Copperfield* by Charles Dickens. It is no coincidence that Munro's story uses the ingredients of a fairy-tale *bildungsroman* like *David Copperfield*, in order to subvert them and create the mysterious course of «real» life and the hazardous, accidental and indirect meanderings of the «real» artist.

25. Alice Munro, *Too Much Happiness*, p. 246.

26. The story is divided in five numbered parts (I-V), each one subdivided in several separated «modules» or units.

27. Alice Munro, *Too Much Happiness*, pp. 246-247.

28. *Too Much Happiness*, p. 249.

29. *Too Much Happiness*, p. 249.

30. *Too Much Happiness*, p. 250.

31. *Too Much Happiness*, p. 248. Sophia quotes a poem by Alfred de Musset to describe her lover, thus casting herself in the role of George Sand, an author whom Sophia loved. Don H. Kennedy (*op. cit.*, p. 70) speaks of the nineteenth century equation between women

novelists and whores, and quotes Sophia's father in a letter to his daughter Aniuta: «Now you're selling your stories; who knows if the time will come when you sell yourself.» Sophia loved George Sand's novel *Consuelo*, with «its chief character the Spanish-gypsy singer who was Turgeniev's [...] supposed mistress» (Pelageya Kochina, *Love and Mathematics*, p. 239). On her deathbed, Sophia says good-bye to her young daughter Fufu who has just dressed up for a party as a gypsy (*Too Much Happiness*, p. 302). Sophia herself laid claim on having gypsy blood, which reminds one of Maggie Tulliver in George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss*, and of course on Sophia's acquaintance with Eliot, a writer whose personal life Sophia's father would have considered as confirming his views on lady novelists. The point here is that Munro's story links Sophia's life with other nineteenth century women artists for whom exercising their art and defying social norms went together.

32. Alice Munro, *Too Much Happiness*, p. 253.

33. *Too Much Happiness*, p. 294.

34. *Too Much Happiness*, p. 248. And: «an immediate understanding, a rich gable of Russian, as if the languages of Western Europe had been flimsy formal cages in which they had been too long confined, or paltry substitutes for true human speech».

35. Alice Munro, *Too Much Happiness*, p. 265.

36. *Too Much Happiness*, p. 294.

37. *Too Much Happiness*, p. 279.

38. *Too Much Happiness*, pp. 266-267.

39. *Too Much Happiness*, p. 267.

40. *Too Much Happiness*, p. 295.

41. *Too Much Happiness*, p. 299. (The emphasis is mine.)

42. *Too Much Happiness*, p. 270.

43. *Too Much Happiness*, p. 210.

44. *Too Much Happiness*, p. 270.

45. Cf. Alice Munro, *Too Much Happiness*, p. 281. Evaluating Sophia's three contributions as constituting each sufficient ground for a Doctoral Degree, Weierstrass writes to the Doctoral Comittee in Göttingen, describing Sophia Kovalevsky's mathematical competence as follows: «Was aber den Stand der mathematischen Bildung der Frau v. Kowalsky überhaupt angeht, so kann ich versichern, dass ich nur wenig Schüler gehabt habe, die sich, was Auffassungsgabe, Urteil, Eifer und Begeisterung für die Wissenschaft angeht, mit ihr vergleichen liessen.» (Hans Wussing & Wolfgang Arnold, *Biographien Bedeutender Mathematiker*, Berlin, 1975, p. 485.) My translation: «What concerns the precise mathematical competence of Mrs Kovalevsky, I can assure you that I have had few students who can be compared to her in intellectual grasp, judgement, diligence and enthusiasm for science.» One notices how, in the story, Sophia appears as an element of Weierstrass's egotistical longings.

46. Alice Munro, *Too Much Happiness*, p. 299.

47. *Too Much Happiness*, p. 284.

48. *Too Much Happiness*, p. 268.

49. *Too Much Happiness*, p. 270.

50. *Too Much Happiness*, p. 299.

51. *Too Much Happiness*, p. 301.

52. «Μαθήματα – Παθήματα. – The elemental truths. – Pain.» This is the first sentence of Daudet's text, *La Doulu*, translated by Julian Barnes (*In the Land of Pain*, London, 2002, p. 3).

53. Munro, *Too Much Happiness*, p. 298.

54. *Too Much Happiness*, p. 301.

55. Alice Munro, «What is Real» [1982], in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, vol. 95, pp. 289-290. (The emphasis is mine.)

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