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**Stylistic Perspectives on
Alice Munro's
*Dance of the Happy Shades***

Textes rassemblés et édités par
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Ce numéro spécial d'*Études de Stylistique Anglaise* est le premier à porter directement sur un auteur du programme de l'agrégation externe d'anglais. L'œuvre au programme, *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), est le premier recueil de nouvelles d'Alice Munro, lauréate du prix Nobel de littérature 2013 avec le titre de « master of the contemporary short story ». Ce n'est toutefois pas cette distinction qui justifie que la *Société de Stylistique Anglaise* lui consacre un numéro spécial. Depuis de très nombreuses années, des stylisticiens français et étrangers étudient son œuvre tant son écriture est propice à une analyse textuelle serrée. Michael Toolan en explique les raisons dans les pages qui suivent.

Je tiens, à cet égard, à remercier Michael Toolan (University of Birmingham – U.K.) d'avoir immédiatement accepté de codiriger ce numéro spécial. Je ne pouvais en effet pas trouver meilleur allié. Non seulement Michael Toolan est un stylisticien de renom mais il est, avant tout, un incondtionnel d'Alice Munro.

Bien que ce volume soit prioritairement rédigé à l'intention des agrégatifs, les auteurs n'ont pas eu pour consigne de se plier au format du concours (leçon ou explication de texte). Les études qui suivent représentent des choix de recherche individuels. La rhétorique propre au concours est tenue pour acquise et les candidats peuvent se concentrer sur le fond et, bien sûr, la forme. La seule contrainte pour les auteurs, outre les délais serrés, était de proposer des études fondées sur une analyse rigoureuse du matériau textuel. Comme l'écrivait le regretté Geoffrey Leech (2008, 8) dans *language and Literature – Style and*

Foregrounding : « The notion of textual warranty [...] is a prerequisite to literary interpretation ». Tous les auteurs, qu'ils soient stylisticiens, spécialistes de littérature canadienne ou d'Alice Munro, se sont pliés de bonne grâce à cette exigence. Cela explique que la plupart des articles de ce recueil se concentrent sur des nouvelles particulières. Les spécificités ainsi mises en lumière sont bien sûr pertinentes pour l'étude des autres nouvelles du recueil et de l'œuvre d'Alice Munro dans son ensemble. En tout, dix nouvelles sont traitées individuellement. Les deux articles transversaux qui ouvrent ce numéro s'appuient sur une observation précise du texte afin, précisément, de montrer la continuité stylistique d'une nouvelle à l'autre.

On le sait, la stylistique est à la croisée de l'analyse littéraire et de l'analyse linguistique. Le présent volume penche du côté de la « stylistique littéraire » même si la théorie, linguistique ou stylistique, n'est jamais loin. Plusieurs facettes de la stylistique sont présentées (pragmatique, narratologique, stylistique de corpus ou cognitive etc.) et ce volume rend compte de la diversité des approches au sein la *Société de Stylistique Anglaise* et de sa société sœur, la *Poetics and Linguistics Association*. Ce qui compte, en définitive, n'est pas le cadre théorique choisi mais ce que son utilisation permet de mettre en lumière sur le style de l'auteur ou sur son univers fictionnel.

Si la tendance actuelle est de dissocier la recherche des concours, il y a en fait complémentarité et non concurrence entre les deux. L'agrégation est un concours de haut niveau qui ne peut pas se passer de l'apport de la recherche, quel que soit le domaine. De même, la préparation de ce concours est profitable au futur chercheur qui acquiert ainsi une méthode et un rythme de travail bien utiles pour la rédaction d'une thèse. L'agrégation est aujourd'hui un pont entre l'enseignement secondaire et l'enseignement supérieur et il est important que les enseignants-chercheurs continuent à contribuer à la préparation de ce concours difficile.

Je souhaite donc que ce recueil d'articles aide à éclairer l'œuvre d'Alice Munro et, qui sait, que les approches stylistiques proposées fassent naître des vocations de stylisticiens.

Bon courage aux agrégatifs et bonne lecture à tous.

Why write stylistic analyses of Munro's stories?

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What is a stylistic approach to a literary text? It is a textual analysis and a commentary articulated in linguistic terms. It assumes that the descriptive and explanatory systems of one linguistic model or another should be a good way of enhancing our understanding of how the text works. And not just 'should' but 'must'; and not just for a literary text, but any text.

As Michael Burke reminds us in his Introduction to the recently-published *Routledge Handbook of Stylistics* (2014), the origins of stylistics lie in the poetics and rhetorical studies of the ancient Greeks, but it has reinvented itself many times over to suit changing times. Within the English literary tradition, for example, the Renaissance period saw the emergence of handbooks of elegant and 'cultured' style. Then in the Augustan and Classical period, writers like Pope, Dryden and Johnson continually commented on the writing of the time in ways that were covertly stylistic: they expressed censure or approval of writers' grammar and usage very much on the assumption that alternative choices of grammar and phrasing would be demonstrably better (or worse). Thus they did not aim merely to promote their subjective tastes and opinions on matters of effective writing; rather they sought arguments and evidence to support their judgements, as stylisticians do.

We can fast-forward to the Russian formalists (and, later, Bakhtin), to structuralist scholars of poetics like Shklovsky, Mukařovsky, and Jakobson, and then to the steady growth of interest in a loose coalition of literary-linguistic traditions over the last fifty years. Today there are many hyphenated sub-types of stylistics, most notably cognitive stylistics or poetics, but also corpus stylistics, pragmatic stylistics, (critical) discourse

stylistics, ecolinguistic stylistics, and several more. Mostly, more unites these than separates them. Mostly they study, from different angles, the language of literature, so linguistic categories and methods take pride of place, albeit a substantially contextualised linguistics. By a contextualised linguistics I mean one that recognises that form, meaning, value and interpretation are open to change with change of reader, despite the degree of convergence or similarity, among diverse readers' reading of a single text, which makes the idea of a shared language and textual analysis possible.

As has been often noted, stylistic analysis of a text aims to be explicit and accessible: it tries to talk about texts in terms which are clear and comprehensible to all. Most stylisticians would regard it as a kind of failure if the discourse of their article about a 'difficult' poem was comprehensible to a smaller group of readers than the poem itself was. That is the failing which, some stylisticians have argued, the more esoteric and subjective types of literary criticism are prone to, denouncing such criticism as elitist or presumptuous. If a poem is (roughly) understandable by a hundred people in a given population, while the critical commentary on that poem is understandable by only fifty of the original hundred, then there is a sense in which the commentary serves no useful purpose at all (those fifty already understood). By contrast if a stylistic commentary enables two hundred people to derive more understanding and appreciation of a poem independently roughly understood by half that number, then the readership has grown, and an effort of outreach and awareness-raising has been worthwhile.

How patronising, didactic, and question-begging to put the case in those terms, displaying a presumption just as deplorable as the literary critic's, the reader may think (both critic and stylistician would seem to be in the same business, of asserting 'the expert knows best'). But there are significant differences in the roles: the intuition-dependent, impressionistic critic is more like a judge who makes declarations without reasons, the stylistician more like an advocate, who offers reasons and proposes conclusions, for general readers (members of the jury) to accept or reject. Stylistics does not hide its teacherly tendency, seeking only to justify it by underpinning it with good arguments, clear evidence, scope for postulated claims to be tested and amended if necessary. And what does this idea that a stylistic commentary is 'retrievable' or 'falsifiable' really mean? It means that the stylistician aims to show the reader how to repeat the analysis and invites them to do so—or to apply the same method on a comparable text.

In this way a ‘transfer of skills’ lies at the scientific core of stylistics: most of its practitioners do not aim to dazzle their readers, awed into intellectual silence by the brilliance and incontrovertibility of the literary-linguistic analysis. Rather, they seek to involve and engage the reader, by showing their working as they develop evidence for interpretive points (some of these may be quite pedestrian), and inviting the reader to question the steps in the argument, the strength of the reasoning, and the possibility of alternative readings.

I should add that as I compose these pious claims, with all their vulnerability to the complaint that they show no capacity for self-criticism, I am acutely aware of the danger of being hoisted by my own petard. Is my own article in this collection clear and comprehensible along the lines I have protested? Will it add to the ideas about the story that those who have read it already have? Will it help anyone to appreciate the story fuller? I am in the reader’s hands.

Why, though, is a stylistic approach appropriate in the case of Alice Munro’s fiction? I believe a stylistic approach is justified because everything about Munro’s work reveals that her writing involves the most painstaking craft, alongside exceptional psychological insight into people’s drives and emotions, their fears and desires, and their sheer bafflement at the complexities of living. Munro is not a general practitioner or a psychiatrist or a priest, she is not our wife, our husband, our daughter or grandmother, our lawyer or our accountant. She is not our embalmer. But it is as if she sees and hears all that these intimates and experts might see of us, and selectively discloses these insights in ‘scenes from the life’ that are as composed and weighted as a sonnet or a sonata. Her best stories are perfect structures, *‘où tout se tient’*. That certainly does not mean they are texts where all is explained; certainly not, for the simple reason that not all is explicable. There will be gaps, secrets, mysteries, and lacunae; there will be causes and reasons that never quite come clear. These unnarratable things, Munro often reminds us, are the things most worth trying to tell.

So in these complex tellings (even in these early stories, Munro’s gifts of anachronic narration and unexpected shifts of point of view are apparent) all will *not* become clear by the ends of these stories, with initial lack filled or problem solved. Sometimes it is only towards the end of a story that reader and protagonist begin to discern that there *is* a problem, let alone its precise nature or extent. Or if story-closure of a kind is achieved, it is of a literally temporary kind: imposed by the unstoppable passage of time, the fact that at some point in texts as in exams and as in

life, 'time is up'. So Munro's stories, by design, have little in common with the ruthless symmetry of the new subdivision of "shining houses" and yards in the story of that name, violently forced upon the old wilderness city. Munro's story structures might be better compared to the unpicturesque jumble of objects surrounding old Mrs Fullerton's house, of which the narrator remarks:

Here was no open or straightforward plan, no order that an outsider could understand; yet what was haphazard time had made final. ("The Shining Houses", 22)

Time, not design, as the arbitrary imposer of finality. In the story there can be no peaceful co-existence, let alone reconciliation, between the new order and the old disorder. There is a noticeably masculine emphasis to the new settlers' enterprise, involving 'competitive violence and energy' on the path to 'soundness and excellence' and 'a community'. This last *desideratum* is proposed, the narrator comments, "as if they [the new suburbanites] found a modern and well-proportioned magic in it, and no possibility anywhere of a mistake" (*mistake*, by the way, is a favourite Munro word – perhaps because they are one thing we all make). There is an almost Beckettian ending to this story, where the thoughts of Mary, the story's focaliser, are relayed in free direct form. Mary is the only newcomer sympathetic to Mrs Fullerton, but she is outvoted by her peers, who are intent on bulldozing what is old, unmodern, dirty and smelly out of the neighbourhood. Her downbeat conclusion is "There is nothing you can do at present" (29).

But surely the kind of 'micro' analysis that these stylistic papers present, poking and prodding little oddities of wording, or repetition, or choice of phrase, will tend to cause us to neglect the larger picture? Aren't stylisticians admiring individual trees, and thereby failing to see the forest as a whole? And could Munro have really *intended* all the extensive ideas and associations that these essays assert are carried by the various parts of the texts discussed? The questioner could have a point here, certainly. But these kinds of scepticism might cause us to disregard the meticulous—obsessive, even—care with which every little detail of the wording and the phrasing has been worried over, worked upon, and—yes—improved upon by Munro as she has put these stories through (who knows?), dozens of drafts. Consider how a top class chef will be a perfectionist with regard to every aspect of the preparation and the presentation of a dish—a dish that

will be gone within the hour! How much more anxious and perfectionist is the architect, or the painter, or the literary writer.

You might think that once Munro had ‘got the hang of’ writing stories—say after 20 or 30 years!—she would do less polishing and revising, would know ‘at once’ when she had put things the best way she could. Or, in effect, that the tiniest details of word-choice and phrasing were of no significance, so that to keep things as they were would be as good as to change them—which is really to say that such moments are not perceptible as details at all. Some ‘details’ encountered in a reading of a Munro story may certainly be of that kind: is the story printed in Times New Roman, or Bookman Old Style? Is the initial letter of each story section in a larger font than the rest of the text, or is the initial word in small caps? Are *ise/isation* words spelled with *s* or *z*? Is *cloakroom* (in “Red Dress”, 158-9) spelled as two words, or as one word, or hyphenated? Even these variations, a multimodal stylistician would consider. My point is that all textual phenomena ‘above’ this level are significant details for Munro and therefore for the reader: each of them may trigger story-relevant inferences or implicatures that enrich, by making more complex, a reader’s apprehension of the story.

Consider Munro’s story called “Passion”, was first published in *The New Yorker* magazine in March 2004, and was then included in her collection *Runaway* (Knopf), which appeared later the same year. Before publication in the *New Yorker*, the story will have gone through multiple drafts, with comments and critique from her agent, and then from her editor at the magazine, so that the version published there was a fine one, a finished work. Except Munro wasn’t finished with it. In the book-published story, I have found over 200 changes made by Munro to the version published a few months earlier in the *New Yorker*: more than 200! My favourite is the last change in the story: a mention of *a cheque for a thousand dollars* is changed to *a cheque for one thousand dollars*. What’s the difference, one may ask? A thousand is one thousand, and one dozen is a dozen... But Munro is subtly exploiting a linguistic difference where grammar overlaps with pragmatics, that is, with meaning in context. Saying ‘a thousand’ of anything simply reports a quantity, but does not particularly focus on the completeness or emphasise the precise amount of the quantity. Viewed in written form or spoken aloud, *a cheque for one thousand dollars* cannot be read or said without paying some extra attention to the *one*, beyond what you would pay to the indefinite article, *a*. The use of *one thousand* implies that the cheque is for a whole

thousand dollars, or as much as a thousand dollars. The altered choice better captures the point of view of the impecunious young woman (whom the story focaliser, now forty years older, remembers herself once to have been), for whom this sum is a life-changing amount of money, a passport to a new life.

Incidentally, on the topic of Munroian revision there is a revealing moment at the end of the Nobel Prize interview that Alice Munro gave in her own home (in November 2013), in lieu of travelling to Stockholm to receive the award and deliver an acceptance speech. The interviewer asks Do you ever go back these days and read any of your old books? and Munro replies:

No! No! I am afraid to! No, but then I would probably get a terrific urge to change just a little bit here, a little bit there, and I have even done that in certain copies of my books that I would take out of the cupboard, but then I realize that it doesn't matter if I change them, because it's not changed out there.

Here is another confirmation of Munro's stylistic perfectionism which, in light of the power and depth of the work she is burnishing, is the best reason for giving her stories the stylistic attention that the following essays attempt.

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Discontinuity, disjointedness: parenthetical structures and dashes in Alice Munro's stories from *Dance of the Happy Shades*

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Alice Munro has always paid close attention to elements that affect the surface of the text: not only typography (italics), but also dashes and ostentatious parenthetical structures. Looking at these elements on the surface of the text often proves rewarding, as Isla Duncan's analysis of "Child's Play" shows (Duncan 2011: 153-6). Duncan demonstrates there is nothing random in Munro's use of parenthetical structures and the correlative punctuation marks, brackets and dashes in this first-person narrative¹. A cursory glance at the stories in *Dance of the Happy Shades* shows that the number of parenthetical structures and dashes varies greatly from one story to the next. I would like to pay close attention to Munro's use of dashes and parenthetical structures in the first collection as elements that disrupt the surface of the text. A parenthetical expression is a phrase or clause that is inserted within a larger structure (a phrase or a sentence) which is complete without the smaller structure. In other words, parenthetical structures are supposed to be superfluous. Yet works that have paid attention to these adjuncts have demonstrated they are nothing

¹ Duncan argues that the unusually high number of parenthetical structures in "Child's Play" corresponds to the narrator's desire to be in control. I have subscribed to this reading, adding however that in one key sentence the function of the dash-interpolation is to contradict the narrator's version (93-94). The sentence that claims that after the murder she and her friend simply resumed their old lives contains a parenthetical structure that disrupts fluency and, in doing so, gives the lie to this claim.

but gratuitous (Dürrenmatt; Authier-Revuz & Lala). Visually speaking, parenthetical brackets and dashes draw attention to themselves and Sabine Boucheron-Petillon calls these structures “ajouts montrés”, ostentatious adjuncts (Boucheron-Petillon, 2002). Referring to parenthetical dashes and brackets as “l’espace du décroché”, she suggests disjunction as well as the possibility of opening a dislocated and marginalized space. Francine Cicurel argues that within this space the narrator or even the author engages in a more intimate communication with the readers (60).

The visual dimension needs to be taken into account too as dashes and brackets visually disrupt the surface of the text: parenthetical structures cut into the larger phrase, and therefore introduce discontinuities. This is particularly true of the dash. In his guide to punctuation Eric Partridge argues that the dash “derives from ‘to dash’, to shatter, strike violently, to throw suddenly or violently” (68). Taking into account the graphic dimension, Francine Cicurel and Jacques Dürrenmatt suggest that a dash opens multiple paths (Cicurel 50; Dürrenmatt 88) while Claude Demanuelli notes that dashes suggest, if not epitomize, cracks (*fêlures*), resistance to closure (*l’inachevé, l’irrésolu*) and discontinuity (Demanuelli 108). Since a dash may break open the surface of the text Dürrenmatt posits that texts that are punctuated by dashes belong to a type of interrogative writing—one that is characterized by silences, gaps, and a resistance to closure and disclosure (88). These hypotheses are relevant for a writer whose stories often resist closure, whose narrative style has been defined as “interrogative” (Adrian Hunter 219), and who has been said to conjure up “alternate worlds” that are “positioned alongside in the same geographical and fictional space” (Coral Ann Howells 5). Cicurel argues that since ostentatious punctuation marks attract attention, they necessarily epitomize a specific kind relationship between text and reader, therefore focusing on them should prove rewarding when it comes to identifying narrative strategies and the ways in which a writer tries to engage with the reader (57). I propose to look at a few stories from *Dance of the Happy Shades*²— “The Peace of Utrecht”, “Images” and “An Ounce of Cure”—in order to examine how Munro uses parenthetical structures and single dashes as stylistic devices, to illustrate and illumine the major themes in each story. I will conclude with the

² Alice Munro, *Dance of the Happy Shades*, London : Vintage, 2000.

narrative games in “The Time of Death,” where parenthetical structures allow for ambiguity and resistance to closure.

“Images”: the disquieting dash and the “erie land”

Munro has often said that she constructs a story from an image or picture that, like a magnet, attracts other images (interview with Geoff Hancock 216) and she has cited the image of Joe and his axe as the central image in this story. Interestingly, a single dash directs the readers’ eyes towards the key element in the passage. Joe gradually appears through the bushes (his head, his camouflaging clothes, his legs), the narrator uses words that denote vision (four occurrences of “see”), and eventually refers to light (“gleaming”), as the sunlight strikes and illumines the object that the single dash draws attention to: “I could see [...] gleaming where the sun caught it—a little axe, or hatchet” (37). The punctuation mark inexorably leads to the weapon.

What the passage also suggests however is that “Images” is about vision and perception, as heralded by the opening pages. “Images” opens with the narrator’s remembering or rather pretending not to remember the time her cousin Mary McQuade came to her grandparents’ house to help nurse her grandfather (30). The narrator then evokes that summer and the room she slept in:

There was no fan there and the dazzle of outdoors—all the flat fields round the house turned in the sun, to the brilliance of water—made lightening cracks in the drawn-down blinds. (31)

In a passage that refers to surfaces, it is tempting to suggest that the pair of dashes visually reproduces these surfaces, but more interestingly, the dash-interpolation³ describes a visual trick, due to the blinding sun: a metamorphosis as the fields “turn” into water. Munro’s usage of the dash in “Images” illustrates Dürrenmatt’s argument that a dash signals changes and metamorphosis (50). This is no coincidence in a story called “Images” which conveys a little girl’s perception of the world around her. In other

³ Geoffrey Nunberg uses the word ‘parenthetical’ to refer to the parenthetical bracket and calls the parenthetical dash a ‘dash-interpolation’. I will use these words when comparing the structures.

words, the dash-interpolation summarizes the major theme of the story. The dashes also evoke the horizontal cracks in the blinds, through which the dazzling light comes in. It is no coincidence either that the dashes disrupt the surface of the text at the very moment the “lightning cracks” are mentioned. The dashes can echo the disturbance and represent the cracks through which the elements that frighten the girl will penetrate her world. All the more so as the suggestion of thunder is also introduced since “lightening” usually refers to flashes of light during a storm, suggesting that the cracks are cracks of thunder. The dash signals the intrusion of the gothic world, as these elements are enumerated after the next dash: “—under the sweating heat the fact of death contained, that little lump of magic ice.” (31) For Catherine Lanone, the room thus turns into “a surrogate Gothic jail where death lurks in the sweltering heat” (Bigot and Lanone 72), with “the disquieting dash representing its dangerous powers of connection and intrusion” (72).

On the contrary it seems that the several parentheticals in the first pages contain ordinary scenes of everyday life, which the narrator calls “ordinary repetitions” (31), such as the mother cleaning the white cloth and the light fixture (31) or the aunt playing the piano (31). It seems that in the opening pages, there is a distinction to be made between the parentheticals which contain ordinary scenes and the dash-interpolation signalling the intrusion of the other world. In “Images” several worlds coexist in the narrator’s representation of her memories. The other world is both a gothic world, which the shadows epitomize (35), and another world outside which I am tempted to call “the eerie land”, from an anecdote Munro told Catherine Ross. Munro told Ross that when in childhood she read Dickens’s *A Child’s History of England*, she began to “read about the troubles in Eerie land”—her own interpretation of “Ireland” (Interview CCC 14). One passage seems to epitomize the moment when the girl steps into the eerie land: she shatters the crust of frosted snow “like frosted glass” and steps over a fence (35). From this moment she describes the escapade with her father along the river, during which the father turns into a pedlar from pictures, the bushes turn into the bush and a neighbor turns into a fairy-tale monster.

The opening pages heralds this passage into the eerie land as the sentence conjuring up the dazzle of the sunlight and the lightning cracks foreshadows the later section with Joe. Describing the effect the vision of Joe and his hatchet has on her, the narrator describes herself as “transfixed, as if struck by lightning” and waiting “like a child [...]

electrified against the dark noon sky” (38), which echoes the initial image, all the more so as “cracks” and “axe” share the same sound (/æks/). Both passages suggest that the story is all about vision, the capacity to conjure up images—whether we interpret the word “image” as a reference to the optical *counterpart* of an object produced by an optical device or as an apparition or illusion—as well as metamorphosis.

The escapade into the eerie land that culminates in the visit to the cellar-house ends on the top of the hill, which father and child reach after they have “come around in a half-circle” (42). They look down upon the landscape, and the narrator describes “what lay in front of [them]”:

the whole basin of country drained by the Wawanash River lay in front of us—greenish brown smudge of bush with the leaves not out yet and evergreens, dark, shabby after winter, showing through, straw-brown fields and the others, darker from last year’s plowing [...] and houses set apart, looking squat and small. (42)

The landscape unfolds after the dash as the enumeration runs uninterrupted for seven lines, as the narrator tries to encompass all that the girl could see. The enumeration ends on solid-looking houses. The dash completes the vision, as order and the normal world are brought back. In “Images” Munro uses dashes to suggest possible entryways and exits into a gothic world and into an eerie land, which mirrors the themes of the story, yet the single dash at the end of the story allows for a return to the familiar world.

“The Peace of Utrecht”: the resurfacing of the past

“The Peace of Utrecht”, a story that depicts the narrator’s visit home, ten years after having left and one or two years after her mother’s death, is punctuated by many dashes and brackets. From the beginning, the narrator uses parenthetical structures to provide details or explanations. She might qualify what she has just written, adding “very likely we are both afraid” (190); or offering “this *situation* as I call it” to explain the word “this” (193). In other words the narrator seems to use these structures to suggest that she is controlling her narrative and providing her readers with a complete version of events and feelings, as the narrator of “Child’s Play” seems to do, in Duncan’s analysis (154). However in the story, dashes signal discontinuity in the narrator’s

representation of the past, since as she puts it herself, the picture is not complete (200) and through the sisters' reticence to share their feelings about the past, the story is punctuated by many gaps and silences.

Details such as the pavement broken up by winter "like signs of a minor bombardment" (194) and the "long grimacing cracks" (197) on the facade of the sisters' house signal rupture, and the main function of dashes in the story is also to signal rupture and to allow for the resurfacing of the past. First, as the narrator notes the grimacing cracks on the façade (197), a dash-interpolation suggests the hesitation between past and present: "there was—there is—a little blind window" (197). The parenthetical structure does not simply qualify the narrator's first assertion, as the previous adjuncts did; as the parallel phrases "there is/ there are" are placed next to each other, present and past coalesce. Once in the hall, Helen looks at herself in the mirror and another image surfaces after a single dash:

Then I paused, one foot on the bottom step, and turned to greet, matter of factly, the reflection of a thin, tanned, habitually watchful woman, recognizably a Young Mother [...] a look of tension from the little sharp knobs of the collarbone—this in the hall mirror that had shown me, last time I looked, a commonplace pretty girl [...] (198)

The narrator's position, one foot up on the step, the other foot on the ground, emblemizes her hesitation, if not stasis. The single dash functions as a pause, and sets off the final elements. It draws attention to the surface of the mirror that serves to conjure up and capture the two faces. Helen has entered an empty house (Maddy is away) only to find that it is haunted by ghosts. In the next paragraph the narrator describes herself waiting for her mother to call her (198) and uses gerunds ("drinking cups of tea") and the past tense ("she lay") so that the time when the mother was alive is described with the same tense as the events of the visit home, generating ambiguity. The whole passage relies on a hesitation between past and present which results in the resurfacing of the past. The paragraph ends on an italicized phrase representing the mother's voice, calling—a voice from the past that resonates in the present. Dürrenmatt argues that the dash necessarily signals changes and displacements, including spatial and temporal displacements (50), and it is tempting to suggest that the dashes (both the single dash and the dash-interpolation) evoke the cracks through which the past resurfaces for the narrator.

In the next paragraph, although past and present are envisioned together, the dash-interpolation serves a completely different function: “As I talked to my children I was thinking—but carefully, not in a rush—of my mother’s state of mind when I called out” (198). The parenthetical structure contains a perfectly balanced structure with a perfectly balanced rhythm (four syllables with two stresses) on each side of the comma, so that ultimately the pair of dashes also helps to slow down the rhythm as the narrator allows herself time to remember her mother. Interestingly, the next dash-interpolations, two of them inside the same sentence, introduce a different rhythm, and seem to serve yet another function:

“I was allowing myself to hear—as if I had not dared before—the cry for help—undisguised, oh, shamefully undisguised and raw and supplicating—that sounded in her voice” (198).

Disrupting the larger structure by two dash-interpolations creates an interesting visual effect as the phrase “the cry for help” is not so much between the dash-interpolations as inside a visually-suggested third space, which isolates and sets off the cry. In this sentence the dashes create a halting rhythm, as the narrator accumulates adjectives. As the narrator describes feelings she would not admit to, these parenthetical dashes and the very particular halting rhythm they create help the narrator inscribe subjectivity and affect, one of the functions of the dash that Eric Bordas identifies: “il renforce l’inscription d’une subjectivité énonciative et presque d’une émotion, dont la diction matérialise le souffle conducteur” (np).

The parenthetical structures also create an intimate space, which I am tempted to call a space for confession, in which the narrator allows herself to admit to the cruelty that was hers at the time when her mother was still alive. Cicurel argues that a parenthetical structure creates an intimate space, in which the narrator speaks to the reader in a different tone of voice, a whisper, therefore engaging in a more intimate relationship (59). This clearly holds true of this parenthetical where the narrator confesses the brutal and ugly truth: “she must have wept and struggled in that house of stone (as I can, but will not, imagine) until the very end.” (199) The parenthetical is nothing but superfluous; on the contrary, the adjunct is crucial to the whole passage as the narrator who has confessed to having been deaf to her mother’s cries for help and fears, now confesses she will not imagine her mother’s last days. She will express the same reluctance when her aunt describes her mother’s final struggle on her

coffin-like bed: “*The snow, the dressing gown and slippers, the board across the bed.* It was a picture I was much inclined to resist.” (208) Yet the play on sounds (the almost perfect rhythm) and the italics suggest otherwise, turning the haunting image into sounds, an echo that will resonate in the character’s mind and body—there is no escaping the image (see Bigot and Lanone 202-203). At the end of Helen’s visit to her aunts, a single dash reinforces the haunting quality of the visit: “Is this the function of old women, beyond making rag rugs and giving us five-dollar bills—making sure the haunts we have contracted for are with us, not one gone without?” (209). Visually speaking, a dash can also attach the final element to which the reader’s eyes are drawn to the rest of the clause. The passage illustrates what Partridge refers to as a “cunning” use of the single dash “to emphasize very strongly a final member” (73). Dürrenmatt argues that a single dash usually introduces a brief pause and disruption in the sentence that sets off the final element (41). In the story, the function of this dash seems to epitomize the narrator’s fate—being haunted by her mother and her guilt.

Recalling the single dash that enables the narrator to conjure up the image of Helen as a little girl in the mirror (198), it is possible to see these single dashes as entryways into the “alternative” worlds that, Coral Ann Howells suggests, are “positioned alongside in the same geographical and fictional space” (5). Thus, Howells argues, “realistic street maps of small towns are overlaid or undermined by maps of characters’ inner lives” (5). For “The Peace of Utrecht” is a story of entrapment, with the family home turning into a gothic space and inner jail: “Munro takes us into the haunted house of a domestic horror story where two grown-up sisters are tormented by memories of their dead mother.” (Howells 19) Whether we see the dashes that punctuate the story as a sign that the narrator’s attempts at controlling her narrative fail, cracks through which the past resurfaces or cracks signalling the intrusion of the gothic world, it seems safe to suggest that in “The Peace of Utrecht”, the high number of dashes and parenthetical structures are part of narrative strategies to convey the haunting dimension of the story and to resist closure. The story shows that, as Demanuelli suggests, dashes epitomize cracks and resistance to closure (108).

“A Trip to the Coast” and “An Ounce of Cure”; losing and regaining control

“A Trip to the Coast” opens with a description of the hamlet which echoes both Carson McCuller’s world (the opening page of “The Ballad of the Sad Café”) and paintings by Edward Hopper, such as *Capron House* (1933) or *Gas* (1940). In other words, the opening suggests the possibility of the almost empty hamlet turning into a gothic space. This is soon confirmed when the narrator describes the trees, gradually introducing changes, until a single dash draws attention to their metamorphosis into ghosts:

Harmonious woodlots of elm and maple give way to a denser, less hospitable scrub-forest of birch and poplar, spruce and pine—where in the heat of the afternoon the pointed trees at the end of the road turn blue, transparent, retreating into the distance like a company of ghosts (172).

With the trees that are compared to ghosts, the family home turns into a gothic space, a world not of fairy tales but of monsters, ruled by a dominating, verbally abusive grandmother. As the day progresses, the little girl’s “premonition of freedom and danger” (175) that hits her in the dark courtyard turns into a strange “power” after the fight with her grandmother:

she had felt as if [...] something had cracked; yes, it was that new light she saw in the world. And she felt something about herself—like power, like the unsuspected still unexplored power of her own hostility... (185).

It is no coincidence that the word “cracked” should occur in the passage that describes the surfacing of her repressed emotion. The dash-interpolation illustrates Demanuelli’s argument that a dash emblemizes cracks (108) and I suggest that the dash that sets off the final elements in the sentence visually represents the cracks in the surface that allow these powerful emotions to arise and disturb the character. The passage also epitomizes what Ildikó de Papp Carrington identifies as “sudden splits in the surface” when an unexpected event or experience threatens a character’s control (38). However, the story ends not on the grandmother’s death but on a vision of May sitting on the step of the store, revealing stasis and intimating inability to act and move, even after the death of her grandmother. In this story, the cracks in the surface are

not exploited since May's new power or empowerment is cut short by her grandmother's death.

By contrast, in "An Ounce of Cure", powerlessness is mitigated by the narrator's attempts to regain control. A first-person narrative, "An Ounce of Cure" is the story with the highest number of parenthetical structures and ostentatious punctuation marks in the collection. It is quite clear that throughout the story, Munro shows what Carrington has identified as the split between observer and participant (3-32; 13-108). The narrator describes the humiliating experience of being in love with the boy who jilted her, getting drunk and finding herself half-naked in front of her employers. Dashes, commas, semi-colons and even exclamation marks punctuate the passage where the narrator describes her plight at the Berrymans', for instance the results of her having drunk too much and too quickly:

My head sank back; I closed my eyes. And at once opened them, opened them wide, threw myself out of the chair and down the hall and reached—thank God, thank God!—the Berrymans' bathroom, where I was sick everywhere, everywhere, and dropped like a stone. (81)

These punctuation marks and the repetitions create the rhythm that mimics the girl's panicked feelings, the surge of sickness, and the rush to the bathroom. They create a vivid and, more importantly, comic scene. The dash-interpolation in the passage differs from previous instances as it belongs to the scene.

By contrast when the narrator describes the arrival of the Berrymans she uses two dash-interpolations that convey her comments as narrator:

And there—oh, delicious moment in a well-organized farce!—there stood the Berrymans, Mr. and Mrs., with expressions on their faces [...] I don't think I ever knew what brought them home so early—a headache, an argument—and I was not really in a position to ask. (84)

The first pair of dashes introduces a pause as she stops to let the reader see the picture she paints. The punctuation marks, the comma and the exclamation mark, insist on the drama and the narrator seems to be calling on her readers, asking them to imagine the absurd farce. Thus the narrator offers the readers "a glimpse of the shameless, marvellous, shattering absurdity" (Munro 87), as when she describes the Berrymans' unexpected arrival, resulting in her powerlessness. "An Ounce of Cure" illustrates what Carrington calls "the most central and creative paradox of Munro's

fiction”, that is to say “repeated but consciously ambivalent attempts to control what is uncontrollable, to split in half to control a suddenly split world” (5). The narrator splits her own self into two, the protagonist who fell victim to her infatuation and who was humiliated when the adults came home, and the observer who can depict her plight with humor, and also comment on her folly.

The narrator will tend to use dashes to convey the contrast between her two selves, but will sometimes use both parentheticals and dash-interpolations in close proximity, which reinforces the effect of her speaking with two voices and about two selves:

I remember Joyce [...] saying that I had become terribly sick from eating—I think she said *sauerkraut*—for supper, and that I had called them for help. (When I asked her later what they made of this she said, “It wasn’t any use. You *reeked*.”) (85)

Other dash-interpolations or parentheticals introduce direct contact with the reader, as the narrator adds details that she deems ridiculous, pointing to and admitting to the absurdity of her conduct then:

I day dreamed endlessly; in fact if you want to put it mathematically, I spent perhaps ten times as many hours thinking about Martin Collingwood—yes, pining and weeping for him—as I ever spent with him; (77)

[...] in order to keep the impact of those kisses intact. (I showed the most painful banality in the conduct of the whole affair, as you will see.) Two months and a few amatory stages later, he dropped me. (76)

The narrator is therefore also attempting to assert control over her narrative, as she points to the differences between her former self and her adult self, in particular when she uses the past and present tenses to emphasize distance. As the direct addresses to the reader show, the parenthetical does represent a privileged space of intimate communication with the reader, which Cicurel identifies as one of the main functions of a parenthetical structure.

Furthermore, “An Ounce of Cure” is not simply about a girl who underwent a humiliating experience, it is also about a girl who is turning into a storyteller, and ultimately, about the writing process itself. The narrative is characterized by many commas and colons as well as dashes and brackets that all draw attention to the act of composition. At times the narrator seems to be honing her style, looking for the right word as she

qualifies her assertions: “I was extremely backwards—or perhaps eccentric—in my emotional development” (86). She tends to introduce several verbs or adjectives to add texture to the story, as when she qualifies “thinking”, replacing it with “pining and weeping for him” or adds an adjective in a less visible parenthetical structure, using commas: “Now here is where my ignorance, my disastrous ignorance, comes in.” (79). Towards the end of the story a single dash sets off her explanation:

But the development of events on that Saturday night—that fascinated me; I felt that I had had a glimpse of the shameless, marvellous, shattering absurdity with which the plots of life, though not of fiction, are improvised. (87-88)

The verb “fascinated” after the dash mitigates previous words such as “terrible”, “disaster” or “exposure”. Through its ternary rhythm (three adjectives all beginning with a stressed syllable) the passage manages to convey a sense of empowerment, as the girl becomes aware that she might and will use such plots in life to become a writer. Although she depicts a humiliating experience, she is also reminding us that she is learning to transform a painful experience into material. Eventually, the final sentence of the story which is split into two parts, with a semi-colon, epitomizes her humorous attempt at revenge through style and a pun: “I am a grown-up woman now; let him unbury his own catastrophes.” (88) The effect is that of balance, with on the one side of the semi-colon, the narrator as subject, and on the other side, the man as object. Perfect balance for an ironic ending in which, as Catherine Lanone puts it, “the self-possessed narrator is capable of escaping the scenario written by the male gaze” (129), ultimately, the self-composed narrator is in control.

“Walker Brothers Cowboy” offers a somewhat similar vision of a character who can change positions and turn from victim into storyteller, with an additional dimension as the storytelling scene is narrated by someone else:

After a while he turns to a familiar incident. He tells about the chamberpot that was emptied out the window. “Picture me there,” he says, “hollering my heartiest. *Oh lady, it’s your Walker Brother’s man, anybody home?*” He does himself hollering, grinning absurdly, waiting, looking up in pleased expectation and then—oh, ducking, covering his head with his arms, looking as if he begged for mercy (when he never did anything like that, I was watching), and Nora laughs [...] (192)

The single dash draws attention to the father's histrionics, which are expressed through a series of gerunds, and introduced by the exclamation "oh"; while the bracket is an aside, a comment the narrator adds, for the reader's benefit. She is therefore drawing the readers' attention to the discrepancy between her father's version and the scene she related in a previous passage. The father's position as a storyteller who can change reality in order to turn an unpleasant episode into a funny story is thus highlighted. As in "The Shining Houses", where the narrator comments on changes that occur when one tells a story many times over (19)—changes or discrepancies give a story "a pure reality". The narrator indicates that discrepancies are a necessary component in storytelling.

Yet the story that emblemizes Munro's poetics as a poetics that relies on discrepancies and gaps and disjunctionedness is one of her earliest stories, "The Time of Death".

"The Time of Death": breaking open the surface of the text

From the opening pages, the layers of narratives are quite complex as a combination of parenthetical structures and single dashes introduces gaps and discrepancies in the embedded stories and the accounts of the day on which a child died. "The Time of Death" opens *in medias res*, or rather after the event, as the first word of the story is the adverb "afterwards": "Afterwards the mother, Leona Parry, lay on the couch" (89). The child's death is not mentioned in the opening paragraph, furthermore, the mother's story (the narrator introduces the mother's words without inverted commas, but with two verbs and a colon that indicate that the words are hers) is soon interrupted:

Leona [...] talked, beginning like this, in a voice that was ragged and insistent but not hysterical: I wasn't hardly out of the house, I wasn't out of the house twenty minutes—

The function of the dash is to represent an interruption which, however, does not occur in the dialogue on the level of the *diegesis*, rather, it is a trick on the narrator's part. The narrator interrupts his narrative and introduces a dissenting voice:

(Three quarters of an hour at the least, Allie McGee thought, but she did not say so, not at the time. [...] Leona was there in her kitchen going on

about Patricia. Leona was sewing this cowgirl outfit for Patricia on Allie's machine [...]
Never was as scared once, Leona said, plunging forward with a jerky pressure on the pedal [...] and my aunt that died—)

Within the brackets, a silent voice surfaces and comments on the mother's words, silently setting her right. We may assume that the parenthetical simply indicates that this is a silent comment. However, the bracketed adjunct also serves as a space in which another story is presented: the aside contains a flashback which describes the scene that took place earlier that day. It also contains Leona's words as remembered by her neighbour.

Allie McGee's silent comment contradicts the mother's version, and more precisely the estimated time given by the mother, "twenty minutes", the last two words before the dash at the end of the first paragraph. Interestingly, the mother's grammar, the double negative of "wasn't hardly", also challenges her version of events. The difference between the two versions is critical if one considers the title of the story. The function of the first dash, then, may be more complex than to signal an interruption. A gap between the two versions is opened when the narrator chooses to interrupt the mother's tale and to let the other version, the other time estimate, surface.

After the closing bracket (90), the mother's narrative is resumed and telling her side of the story she turns herself into a tragic heroine, depicting herself stopping dead in her tracks, looking very white, struck by a premonition (90-91). Not surprisingly, the narrative is punctuated by several single dashes representing her interruptions (89, 90, 91), they express the halting rhythm of her story, and convey her emotion. Furthermore, the story is interrupted by yet another dash followed by another silent comment by Mrs. McGee. A single dash reproduces Allie McGee's interruption when she starts telling George and Irene about their brother's death (96), yet I propose that the function of all these dashes is not simply to reproduce the interruptions, rather, they signal disjunction as they create further gaps in the narrative.

Secondly, the parenthetical and the vignette it contains are crucial to the understanding of the whole story as the picture of the mother in the passage proves to be very different from the picture offered by Leona herself. The flashback whose focalizer is Allie McGee portrays Leona as a careless woman who "raced the sewing machine and [...] pulled the thread straight out to break it" (89). In the context of the child's death, the actual thread evokes a metaphorical thread, the thread of life. In other words, in

the space of the parenthetical, a suggestion that the careless mother is responsible for the death of her child suddenly arises.⁴

However a later passage suggests another hypothesis when the story moves backward, to the time *before* the accident, when the children were playing: “George and Irene had been playing their cut-out game, cutting things out of the catalogue” (92). The determiner “the” conveys the ordinariness of the scene since any Canadian reader would understand the reference to be to Eaton’s catalogue. But the ordinary scene and the innocent game are given a sinister dimension through repetition—there are eight occurrences of the word “cut” (“their cut-out game”, “cutting things out of the catalogue”; “this family they had cut out of the catalogue”; “they cut out clothes for them”; “the way you kids cut out!”; “you didn’t even cut any fold-over things”) in a passage that culminates in Patricia’s decision to pick up the scissors: “she took the scissors and cut very neatly” (92). If the mother is depicted as likely to break the needle and breaking the thread, the second passage shows Patricia taking charge of the scissors and the absence of grammatical object in the phrase “cut very neatly” is striking. Secondly, “neatly” is one among several adverbs such as “competently” (93) and “expertly” (93) that generally describe Patricia’s gestures and which suggest that Patricia is usually competent and efficient when she acts, which now casts doubt as to the version of a purely accidental death. In other words, the passages show conflicting versions and possibilities, alternately suggesting that the mother and the girl are to be held responsible.

The ambiguity in the story is made possible by the fact that the accident has been edited out, which is materialized on the page by the blank space that separates the moment when Patricia decides to boil water in order to scrub the floor and the decision to send the children to Mrs McGee’s (94). In other words, the cut out game is mirrored by the narrator’s own narrative game, his having cut out the accident in his narrative. The opening pages which combine two single dashes and a pair of brackets have introduced a disruption in the narrative flow, opening gaps through which different versions of the story surface, and introducing

⁴ At a recent conference devoted to Munro’s *Dance of the Happy Shades*, Héliane Ventura showed that the parenthetical paragraph contains the words ‘liable’ in connection with ‘break’: “it’s liable to break the needle” (89), which suggests the mother’s responsibility in her child’s death, due to the polysemy of the word “liable”. Conference *The Inside of a Shell*, Alice Munro’s *Dance of the Happy Shades*, 6-7 November 2014, ENS Lyon.

the ambiguity which is compounded by the silence surrounding the accident itself. The narrative is full of holes, most notably the gaping hole of the time of death itself, a hole through which the story of a death by murder, doubling the story of a death by accident, may emerge.

Francine Cicurel argues that dashes can be seen as visible traces (stitching marks) of what the French critic Michel Charles calls “ghost texts” (Cicurel 61; Charles 170; 178). Michel Charles proposes that for some readers ghost texts (*textes fantômes*) are hidden behind the text written by the author. Ghost texts only exist in the reader’s imagination although they are undoubtedly triggered by elements in the text itself (Charles 208). The high number of dashes in “The Time of Death”, as cuts in the surface of the text, and the editing out of the child’s death make it possible for the reader to imagine that Patricia killed her brother. Furthermore when one considers Munro’s entire oeuvre, it is also tempting to see the dashes as opening gaps through which later stories by Munro may surface in the memory of the reader who is familiar with these stories. “Monsieur les Deux Chapeaux” (*The Progress of Love*) tells the story of an accident endangering a child who is surely learning-disabled (the child’s brother shoots a gun during a children’s game, either by accident or by intent). “Monsieur les Deux Chapeaux” exposes the boy’s desire to be rid of his impaired brother, but there is no certainty as to what happened. By contrast, the narrator of “Child’s Play” admits to having conspired with her best friend in the death of a “special girl” when she was a child. Verna, one of the “special” children at summer camp, drowned after a wave caused the three girls to lose their footing in the water, when the two friends placed their hands on Verna’s head, effectively preventing her from rising to the surface. Although the narrator states “[t]his could have been an accident” (221), she describes Verna’s struggle and points to how difficult it was for the girls not to lose their grip on Verna’s head. Verna was not the narrator’s sister but was believed to be, which horrified the narrator: “the other girl said a horrifying thing to me. She said, “I used to think that was your sister.” (199) The narrator’s horror at being mistaken for Verna’s sister speaks volume in the context of Munro’s stories such as “Monsieur les Deux Chapeaux” and “The Time of Death”.

Interestingly, the word “afterwards” also features in the opening sentence of the latter story⁵. These later stories shed a disquieting light on

⁵ “I suppose there was talk in our house, afterwards.”

Patricia's actions. Many of Munro's later stories about murder rely on the technique of multiple versions that prevents disclosure and closure⁶ and "The Time of Death" proves to be an interesting early instance of Munro's refusal to disclose the truth. She clearly uses parenthetical structures and dashes as a means to introduce ambiguity and resist closure.

Conclusion

I have attempted to show that Munro uses ostentations adjuncts and punctuation marks in very specific ways in each story, as devices which enable her to emphasize the effects conveyed by other stylistic devices. A story such as "An Ounce of Cure" shows that first-person narratives tend to use dashes to convey the split between narrator and character. Dashes proliferate in stories where emotions and loss of control arise, as well as in stories where the presence of another world is suggested. In "Images", dashes are clearly used to intimate changes and metamorphoses while "The Peace of Utrecht" suggests that parenthetical structures may very well be used to express confessions that challenge the surface and composure of the character but can indicate entryways and exits, allowing the past to resurface. "The Time of Death" gives intimations of what Adrian Hunter calls Munro's interrogative narrative style, with punctuation marks and parenthetical structures that emphasize the gaps in the story. Dürrenmatt argues that texts that are punctuated by dashes belong to a type of interrogative writing—one that is characterized by silences, gaps, discontinuities, and a resistance to closure and disclosure (88), and this holds true of Munro's early stories.

⁶ "The Love of a Good Woman" (*The Love of a Good Woman*) and "A Wilderness Station" (*Open Secrets*) would be cases in point, while a story such as "Fits" (*The Progress of Love*) reveals gaps in the protagonist's version of events.

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Alice Munro's Conversational Style

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One of the features of Alice Munro's style that has been remarked upon by the critics is the conversational tone of her short stories. Toolan, in his study of the short story "Circle of Prayer" remarks upon its "'conversational' tenor" (2010, 316), Duncan, in her study of a different short story, "Passion", draws attention to Munro's colloquial style (2011, 109) and Howells (1998, 15) goes as far as to label Munro's "mode of storytelling as gossip". These remarks refer, of course, to later stories by Munro, yet I would argue that in the collection of fifteen stories that were published under the title *Dance of the Happy Shades*, we can already perceive those features that were to become the hallmark of her style. One of her editors, Daniel Menaker is quoted as saying that he never edited her style because "her style was her voice, her natural way of speaking at its very best" (Thacker 2005, 447). How exactly Munro achieves this conversational style is one of the questions I wish to examine in this article.

Obviously, a written text, such as the short story, cannot reproduce conversation *per se*. However much we may think that we are hearing a speaking voice, it is of course an illusion. At the most obvious level, speech contains a whole host of extralinguistic and paralinguistic devices, such as gesture, intonation and rhythm that will be absent from a written text, and although the narrator may create the illusion of directly speaking to an addressee, there will be no spoken response from the addressee or reader, no turn-taking will occur. But to insist on the irreconcilable differences between the two modes is to miss the point. What is important here is that Munro's short stories contain a sufficient number of the characteristics of

prototypical speech for literary critics and readers alike to identify her style as being conversational.

So how exactly do we identify a conversational tone or style, and what light might this shed on Munro's writing in general? In order to answer these questions, I shall be adopting a stylistic approach. In other words, I will seek to demonstrate that textual meaning is created through the use of language and specific language patterns and that a close study of these patterns can help explain how a literary effect is created.

A Conversational Style

When we think of the differences between spoken and written language, one difference that immediately springs to mind is the use of contracted forms in speech:

My parents didn't drink. They weren't rabid about it. (75)¹

Yet this distinction, however well-founded, will not reveal all the complexities of Munro's conversational style. A more profitable approach would be to examine the extensive research that has been carried out, over the last thirty years or so, on the relationship between spoken and written language. The different strategies involved have been studied by linguists such as Beaman (1981), Biber (1988), Chafe (1982) Tannen (1982) and Carter and McCarthy (2006), though this list is far from exhaustive. Biber (1988, 1995) has attempted to identify the characteristics of spoken and written English through the analysis of several corpora, based on the hypothesis that the co-occurrence of certain linguistic features corresponds to a specific discourse function. In the *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (Biber et al., 1999) a whole chapter is devoted to the grammar of conversation. While stereotypically narrative texts are composed of "past tense verbs, 3rd person pronouns, and communication verbs controlling that-clauses" (Biber 2004, 22), interactive discourse contains present tense verbs, contractions, private verbs such as *assume* and *believe*, and *that* deletions. Although conversation may contain

¹ All page references are to the following edition: Alice Munro *Dance of the Happy Shades*. London, Vintage, 2000

patterns of variation, when compared to written registers it is “distinctive in being extremely interactive, involved, focused on the immediate context and personal stance, and constrained by real-time production circumstances” (Biber 2004, 30). For Chafe (1981), the fundamental characteristics of spoken language can be categorized under the dimensions of involvement and fragmentation, whereas the dimensions of integration and detachment cover the various features of the written mode. Chafe was aware that this distinction really refers to two extreme points on a continuum and that the distinction between written and spoken modes may not always be so clear-cut, and linguists such as Ochs have been quick to point out that a “novelist trying to recreate a casual situational context will use many of the features [...] of unplanned discourse, so that the basic dichotomy may not always hold” (1979, 77). Moreover for Tannen, “the difference between features of language which distinguish discourse types reflects not only – and not mainly – spoken vs written mode, but rather genre and related register growing out of communicative goals and context” (1982, 18). She also argues that literary language in the written short story generally makes use of the features of spoken discourse “to create the kind of knowing (...) basic to oral performance: subjective knowing, established through a sense of identification between audience and performer or audience and characters in the text” (1982, 1).

Nevertheless, Chafe's dimensions of involvement and fragmentation offer us a useful basis for analysing conversational style and I shall begin my analysis of Alice Munro's short stories in the light of these two dimensions, with the hypothesis that certain choices of linguistic structures are functionally motivated.

Involvement

Involvement can be understood at three different levels. There is “self-involvement by the speaker; interpersonal involvement between speaker and hearer; and involvement of the speaker with what is being talked about” (Tannen 1989, 27). Eleven of the fifteen short stories in the collection entitled *Dance of the Happy Shades* are written in the first person, so it is hardly surprising to discover that they illustrate these levels of involvement to varying degrees.

The speaker's involvement with the addressee is illustrated most clearly through the use of the second person pronoun in such a way that it

could denote the actual reader: "I showed the most painful banality in the conduct of this whole affair, as you will see" (76); "I would get a feeling of love, if that is what you want to call it" (134); but also through the use of direct questions: "If someone asked her where she got it, and she told them, what would I say?" (106); "For instance, if I hadn't been in a stupor over Ted Forgie, would I have taken a different view of Clare? Not likely" (135). There is even the occasional imperative: "Never mind the Malleys," the narrator tells the reader, in "The Office" (63).

The speaker's personal involvement, in the sense of disclosure of self, is marked through naming herself as the subject of discourse, through the use of the first person pronoun as subject "I", object "me", and in the possessive forms "my" and "mine" (as well as the first person plural "we", "us" and "our/s"). It is also marked through the choice of lexical verbs such as "think", "feel", "know" in the main clause, where these denote mental operations that the speaker alone is at liberty to comment on. While in written discourse these verbs of cognition tend to be followed by "that", it is striking that in the first person narratives "that" tends to be omitted: "I knew it would be" (106); "I decided I had better work hard" (123); "I know it serves me right" (129), which corroborates Biber's findings regarding subordinator *that* deletion (2004).

Personal stance is also illustrated through a number of discourse markers such as "well" : "If there was anything he couldn't explain, well, he would just forget about it" (145); "but I might think well, awful as it is its (*sic*) something happening and its been a long winter" (141). Discourse markers serve to "bracket units of talk" (Schiffrin 1988, 35), thus signalling to the addressee how what follows or precedes should be interpreted. "No" also functions as a discourse marker, correcting a preceding statement:

I (...) walked into the kitchen and decided to get drunk.
No, it was not like that. I walked into the kitchen to look for a coke or something. (79)

and through degree adverbs that serve to emphasize, such as "really": "It was really the sound of the word "office" that I liked" (60).

The first person narrator in Munro's short stories is both the young girl in the story and the older more reflective adult. Although there are moments when the older narrator's voice seems to break through, most of the time the narrator refuses to bring to the fore her superior knowledge of events, preferring to hide behind the epistemic stance of uncertainty such

as “perhaps”, “I do not know” (107), or ‘hedging’ perception copular verbs such as “appear” and “seem”. Such comments on the utterance itself, or on the context of utterance, correspond to the third level of involvement.

Ochs (1979) identifies the preference for deictic modifiers, as opposed to the use of the indefinite or definite articles, as also being a characteristic of informal spoken discourse. Several examples of the use of deictic *this* instead of the definite article are to be found in the short stories: “I thought, not for the first time, well reading this letter any fool can see there is not going to be another” (135). The use of “this” can also be related to greater speaker involvement with the context of utterance, as the deictic “this” serves to situate the referent within the sphere of the speaker in terms of space and time (Fraser and Joly, 1979). Its use is not just in opposition to the use of the indefinite or definite article, as it can also be used instead of the zero article, as in the following example, or even on occasions the pronoun “it”, serving to focus on the referent, to foreground information: “This Mason Williams was one of the heroes of the school” (153); “This did not prove to be a concrete hardship at all” (87). In the first instance, the rest of the paragraph describes the boy in question; in the second, the reason why not going out before her sixteenth birthday was not considered a hardship by the narrator is expanded upon in the passage that follows. In both cases, “this” serves to introduce the topic which the narrator has decided to focus upon.

Although Chafe distinguishes three levels of involvement, Tannen underlines that these levels often intertwine (1989, 138). The use of “fuzzy terms” or indefiniteness, also equated with the mode of speech, is one example where several levels of involvement are present. These expressions of vagueness occur in varying forms in the short stories. There are nouns such as *something* and hedges such as *sort of*, *kind of*:

I walked into the kitchen to look for a coke or something. (79)
Then my father and I walk gradually down a long, shabby sort of street. (2)
a kind of wretchedness and shame spread through me. (33)

While from one point of view these expressions can illustrate the speaker's involvement with the context, it can also be argued that they have other discourse functions (Overstreet 1999), including creating a rapport with the listener, inviting them to fill in the blanks as it were. When such expressions occur at the end of the sentence, as in the first example above, they extend the sentence beyond its grammatical

completeness, thus suggesting a link between the linguistic strategy at the microtextual level and Munro's lack of closure and indeterminate endings in her short stories at the macrotextual level.

In spite of these similarities between the use of imprecisions in Munro's short stories and in conversation, there are important differences, which we should not lose sight of. In conversation there is a shared context, which allows the speaker to be far more imprecise, as the addressee is presumed capable of reconstructing what is missing. Thus, there is likely to be far more referential vagueness in ordinary conversation than in a short story. In the latter, an excessive use of imprecision would render the story difficult to read, as the reader would end up with no clear picture of what was happening. Imprecision can also play a different role in written narrative. It may be the mark of an unreliable narrator or it may be used to reflect the specific mind-style of a character. Semantic imprecision, for example, may be a sign that the narrator or character is unable to identify what s/he is describing, as in the case of a young child (Pillière 2001), while epistemic modality, the use of *could* and *might* may reveal the narrator's stance towards the information given.

The use of imprecision can also be linked to the circumstances of conversation itself: conversation takes place in real time, thus preventing the speaker from being able to plan their utterances in advance. This brings us to the second dimension outlined by Chafe: fragmentation.

Fragmentation

Biber underlines that in conversations, the "words and grammatical organization [are] composed on the spot, as the conversation itself unfolds. There is little time to plan ahead, or to edit afterwards" (1995, 3). In fact there are three principles of online production for spoken English grammar: "keep talking", "limited planning ahead" and "qualification of what has been said" (Biber et al. 1999, 1066-7). These factors have inevitable repercussions on the syntax. When we converse, we can only hold so much information in our memory at one specific moment, and the speaker can only plan so far ahead in what s/he wishes to say. As a result the subject of a spoken sentence tends to be simple, while the predicate may be more elaborated. Lack of advance planning can also result in the message being modified or elaborated retrospectively.

The typical linguistic features that result from these pressures of online production are hesitations, repetitions, and incomplete sentences. However, once again, how these features are represented in a literary text may vary. In everyday speech, hesitation is often marked through conversation fillers such as “er” and “um”, expressions that rarely figure in the reproduction of speech in literature. It is, however, possible to leave utterances incomplete, to change thought mid-sentence or to include parenthetical structures, to create the impression of the speaker elaborating their thoughts as they speak:

But it really doesn't make me feel very gay – worse still, it doesn't really surprise me – to remember all the stupid, sad, half-ashamed things I did.
(77)

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Munro’s style in this respect is the constant way the message is elaborated upon retrospectively. This is achieved in a number of ways. Firstly, adjectives are frequently postposed instead of being fully integrated into the noun phrase. Chafe (1994) identifies the use of attributive adjectives as being one of the features of written texts, illustrative of the dimension of integration. In Munro, the various adjectives, far from being integrated, are frequently juxtaposed after the noun phrase, appearing to be an afterthought, as if the narrator is exploring the description, the meaning of what she is saying, or revising what she has just said:

a good dress, navy blue with little flowers, sheer, worn over a navy-blue slip. (5)
The grain boats, ancient, rusty, wallowing. (2)

Chafe remarks that when people are talking they “proceed to express one idea after another until they reach a point where they suddenly decide they have come to some kind of closure” (2008, 10). Once again, there is a link between the linguistic strategy and Munro’s narratives where “the message has no end, always woven into another message” (Blodgett, 84).

In such re-elaboration, the adjectives are not coordinated by a coordinator such as “and”, but simply separated by commas, thus presenting the details in a fragmentary fashion (Pillière 2005); they do not form a synthetic, unified whole. The list of modifiers could be extended *ad infinitum*. In the second quotation, note how the final adjective “wallowing” introduces a comment on the scene and belongs to a different lexical field than the first two, which simply characterise the boats’ state of

repair. "Wallowing" has two possible meanings: floundering in water, but also self-indulgence (especially in despair). In the second instance, we would have a case of hypallage, the adjective being semantically accurate of the mother's behaviour, and such a comment could only belong to the older narrator. This may be a little far-fetched but it would confirm Blin's analysis of asyndeton in Munro's fiction as signalling a shift of narrative voice (Hetherington-Blin 2006). Hooper commenting on the following sentence from the opening of "Walker Brothers Cowboy": "sweaty, itching from the hot wool, ungrateful" (1), remarks that "the word *ungrateful* suggests an adult view of events; that the narrator is recalling this incident as an adult (2008, 2). Again the reader is left with the impression that the narrator's reflections are being constructed as the text unfolds, rather than existing prior to it. This gives the text a spoken feel.

At times, the sequence of noun phrases creates a crescendo effect:

with dignity, with bitterness, with no reconciliation. (4)

with the final prepositional phrase containing both a negation and a higher number of syllables. Yet, once again, the nouns form a strange collocation, introducing varying levels of interpretation of the mother's reaction to being "flung onto a street of poor people" (4). The final noun phrase "no reconciliation" introduces a temporal dimension, describing both the present state of affairs and the state of things to come. In so far as it expresses a judgement through hindsight, we can discern the voice of the older narrator, contributing to the multi-layered perspective of Munro's style. But these multilayers are not woven into an integrated whole. On the contrary they are added, a step at a time, as the narration progresses, thus once more creating a conversational tone to the passage.

Another characteristic form of elaboration to be found in these short stories is the elaboration of a noun phrase, which frequently involves repetition of the initial noun preceded by a modifying adjective or followed by postmodifiers:

I noticed the smell in the house, the smell of stale small rooms, bedclothes, frying, washing, and medicated ointments. (50)

flat land, a wide flat plain. (3)

Bush lots at the back of the farm hold shade, black-pine shade. (7)

a sufficiency of good feeling, old-pal feeling. (46)

Frequently, there is a movement from a noun phrase whose head contains a general reference or superordinate to a series of noun phrases that narrow down the range of reference, suggesting the narrator is seeking to be more precise:

We had our own business, a fox farm. (4)
I have a little car Clare gave me a year ago Christmas, a little Morris. (142)

or seeking to specify an object's use:

There is one bench with a slat missing on the back, a place to sit and look at the water. (2)

In each case we have a clarifying function. Rather than integrating all the information, the narrator prefers a more incremental approach, layering the details, so that each piece of information is added to the clause in a loose fashion. The narrator seems to be adding information as an afterthought as if she realizes the addressee does not possess all the necessary information in order to have a clear grasp of the situation, or a clear picture of what is being described, or is in danger of misunderstanding what has previously been said:

In fact, she disliked the whole pelting operation – that was what the killing, skinning, and preparation of the furs was called – and wished it did not have to take place in the house. (111)
People are sitting out, men in shirtsleeves and vests and women in aprons – not people we know. (1)
We enter a vacant lot, a kind of park really. (2)

If Munro makes frequent use of asyndeton and juxtaposition, she also uses the coordinating conjunction “and”, another feature of spoken language according to Chafe and Ochs. In Pillière 2005, I draw attention to two possible coordination structures that have different stylistic effects. The first is the structure *A and B and C*, where the speaker chooses to isolate the different elements that constitute the whole. This structure will be preferred when the speaker is constructing a whole or unity – it is less the unity that retains the speaker's interest than the parts or, to put it a different way, the parts are considered to be greater than the whole and are usually distinguishable one from another. This structure enables the speaker to separate, to dissociate the elements belonging to the whole.

The structure *A, B and C*, on the other hand, associates the different elements and does not bring into play their differences. What

counts here is the unity of the group, and it is a structure often used in fixed phrases or in clichés such as “tall, dark and handsome”. These two structures are different ways then of apprehending a unit or group. One is analytical, focusing on the elements that compose the unit. The other is synthetic, underlining the points of resemblance, the shared properties. When a speaker uses *A and B and C*, she opts for a dissociative point of view and invites her addressee to consider the different elements that make up the whole individually. When she uses *A, B and C*, the speaker invites the addressee to see the association between the different elements, or considers that the addressee is capable of seeing the shared properties. Given what we have observed of Munro's syntax so far, it is perhaps only to be expected that she prefers either *A and B and C* or *A, B, C* in these short stories, a fact which is confirmed by Blin's study of “Friend of My Youth” (2012). In *Dance of the Happy Shades*, the following examples illustrate Munro's predilection for these dissociative structures:

These days our back porch was piled with baskets of peaches and grapes and pears, bought in town, and onions and tomatoes and cucumbers grown at home. (116)

These days our back porch was piled with baskets of *peaches, grapes and pears*, bought in town, and *onions, tomatoes and cucumbers* grown at home

All the houses in darkness, the streets black, the yards pale with the last snow. (142)

All the houses in darkness, the streets black, *and* the yards pale with the last snow.

a slightly overcast sky, no sunsets, the horizon dim. (2)

a slightly overcast sky, no sunsets, *and* the horizon dim.

Interestingly enough, the final example is flagged by the Microsoft grammar checker with a wiggly line because *and* is missing, underlining the fact that it is not common in written English.

Conversation – a digressive mode

Although these short stories are skilfully put together, the style actually seeks to create an impression of improvisation, thus imitating a casual conversational tone. If canonical word order is SVO in English, there are a number of hanging constituents in Munro's prose that do not form part of the main clause, creating the effect of being produced with

little preplanning. A classic example is the participial clause, even though for Chafe (1985) such clauses are usually associated with writing rather than speech, and used when there is a considerable degree of integration. In Munro, participle clauses are often postposed, introducing additional information about a noun phrase, and correspond to what Quirk et al. call ‘supplementive clauses’ (1985, 1123):

Children, of their own will, draw apart, separate into islands of two or one under the heavy trees, occupying themselves in such solitary ways as I do all day, planting pebbles in the dirt or writing in it with a stick. (2)

The connection between these *-ing* clauses and the main clause is often loose, and the fact they are often preceded or followed by a comma means that they may contain foregrounded information. The postposition of a participle clause can sometimes be interpreted as a reduced version of a non-restrictive relative clause:

we wake my brother and eat it at once in the dining room, always darkened by the wall of the house next door. (5)
 we wake my brother and eat it at once in the dining room, *which is* always darkened by the wall of the house next door.

These days our back porch was piled with baskets of peaches and grapes and pears, bought in town, and onions and tomatoes and cucumbers grown at home, all waiting to be made into jelly and jam and preserves, pickles and chili sauce. (116)

These days our back porch was piled with baskets of peaches and grapes and pears, *which had been* bought in town, and onions and tomatoes and cucumbers *which had been* grown at home, *all of which were waiting* to be made into jelly and jam and preserves, pickles and chili sauce

This lack of structural integration, or the explicit signalling of structural relations, is to be found also in detached constituents that are coreferentially related to a pro-form to be found either to the left or the right:

That was what the Saylas did, kept a little fruit store. (103)
 They took the groceries out when he died, old Mr. King. (128)

In these two examples we have examples of right dislocation. In the second, the subject noun phrase “old Mr. King” has been moved to the right of the clause with its place being taken by the co-referential pronoun *he*. While such constructions may at first appear also to give the

impression of an afterthought, there is some evidence that they can also serve a pragmatic function seeking to “ secure the continued attention of an addressee, i.e. to maintain a given relation between a referent and a proposition” (Lambrecht 2001, 1076). Carter and McCarthy (2006) use the general term *tail* to refer to the slot at the end of a clause which may be filled by various grammatical patterns, and they point out that tails are common in spoken discourse, but rare in written texts. Other variant word order that suggests informal speech includes the displacement of the direct object:

My mother will sometimes carry home, for a treat, a brick of icecream –
pale Neapolitan. (5)
I remember a year or two ago, us going past their place. (131)

or ellipsis :

I never drank anything stronger, left that to Clare. (133)

Imitating the speaking voice:

One of the ways in which Munro recreates the impression of a speaking voice is to recreate its rhythms and prosody through typography, punctuation and syntax. Munro often has recourse to italics to indicate emphasis or indignation:

I had an exact recollection of *everything*. (77)
She said, 'Are you sure everything is going all right at school?' *School!* (78)

However, it is Munro's use of punctuation which is most interesting. She frequently chooses to break the sentences into short units imitating how the text might be read aloud, but these breaks are not necessarily where you would expect to break the sentence grammatically. While the use of the comma is flexible (Quirk et al. 1985, 1615), it is far more unusual to break a sentence with a period between the main clause and the dependent clause. Take the following two passages:

All the houses in darkness, the streets black, the yards pale with the last snow. It seemed to me that in every one of the houses lived people who knew something I didn't. Who understood what had happened and perhaps had known it was going to happen and I was the only one who didn't know.
(142)

We enter a vacant lot, a kind of park really, for it is kept clear of junk and there is one bench with a slat missing on the back, a place to sit and look at the water. Which is generally grey in the evening, under a slightly overcast sky, no sunsets, the horizon dim. A very quiet, washing noise on the stones of the beach. Further along, towards the main part of the town, there is a stretch of sand, a water slide, floats bobbing around the safe swimming area, a life guard's rickety throne. Also a long dark green building, like a roofed verandah, called the Pavilion, full of farmers and their wives, in stiff good clothes, on Sundays. (2)

In these two extracts, we find a period before the relative clause, so that the pronoun is separated from its antecedent: “Who understood what had happened”, “Which is generally grey”. The reader is therefore forced to break the sentence flow as s/he would if reading the text aloud, so that within each section of the sentence, the information it contains is easily processed, thus imitating a frequently observed feature of spoken discourse. Punctuation marks in Munro’s narratives therefore seem to imitate more closely prosodic boundaries than is usual, in a written text, since more often than not, punctuation is also influenced by grammatical constraints. Again we have the impression that information is continually being added to the main clause, and this is underlined by the use of “also” or “and” to start a fresh sentence. Punctuation in Munro plays an important role in pacing the narrative, and in creating the illusion of a “speaking” voice.

A narrative of endless possibilities ...

The idea that Munro's style is conversational is often accompanied by another adjective: “discursive” (Clark, 1996), which emphasizes that the ordering of events is loosely connected. In order to examine this aspect of her conversational style, I would like to study the opening lines of the first short story in the collection: “Walker Brothers Cowboy”. As with many of Alice Munro’s short stories, the opening sentence immediately situates the reader *in medias res*: there is no careful scene-setting, no detailed introduction of character:

After supper my father says, “Want to go down and see if the Lake's still there?” We leave my mother sewing under the dining-room light, making clothes for me against the opening of school. She has ripped up for this purpose an old suit and an old plaid wool dress of hers, and she has to cut

and match very cleverly and also make me stand and turn for endless fittings, sweaty, itching from the hot wool, ungrateful. We leave my brother in bed in the little screened porch at the end of the front veranda, and sometimes he kneels on his bed and presses his face against the screen and calls mournfully, "Bring me an ice cream cone!" but I call back "You will be asleep," and do not even turn my head. (1)

At the opening of the story, the reader is situated at a specific moment in time, in relation to a preceding moment: *after supper*. This, then, is apparently no momentous event. At first reading, the simple present tense in *after supper my father says*, refers to a specific event. Note the difference in interpretation, had we had: "after supper my father *usually* says". Note too, the clearer reference to a specific moment in the past if we add *that evening*, "*that evening* after supper my father says". The present perfect that follows "she has ripped up for this purpose" refers to an action that has taken place before the moment of narration but which has current relevance for the narrator. From this point of retrospection, the narrative slips into describing actions that have taken place prior to the moment of narration: "she has to make me stand and turn for endless fittings, sweaty, itching from the hot wool". The use of an adjective "endless" which clearly places the event in the iterative, followed by a noun that is in the plural, "fittings", makes the narrative slip once more from a linear sequence of chronologically-related events into a series of described happenings that are recurrent. The following sentence, with the repetition of the verb "leave", echoes the second, and once again appears to introduce an event that can be seen as belonging to a sequence of events, yet the presence of the adverb "sometimes" brings us back to the iterative mode, and the use of the modal auxiliary "will" in the narrator's words to her younger brother: "You will be asleep", can be seen both as a prediction and as a comment on habitual action, a prediction that is based on what the narrator knows of her brother's behaviour, on what she has already observed on previous occasions. A similar use of "will" is to be found a few lines further on in the story where, once again, it first appears that a specific moment is being focused on with the use of "be V-ing": "People are sitting out, men in shirt-sleeves and undershirts and women in aprons – not people we know". But this initial impression is undermined by what follows: "if anybody looks ready to nod and say, 'Warm night,' my father will nod too and say something the same".

This oscillation between the unique event and the iterative continues over the next few pages. The narrator's activities with her mother, for example, the walk to the shop and the purchase of the ice-cream, are recounted in the iterative mode through the use of the plural

“in the afternoons” and adverbs of frequency “sometimes”, “often”, terminating with the plural “my mother has headaches”, so that when the text finally slips into the story proper and the significant episode “this afternoon”, the ride in the country and the visit to the father's old flame, Nora, the reader is taken unawares:

My mother has headaches. She often has to lie down. (...)
“What you need,” my father tells her, “is some fresh air and a drive in the country.” He means for her to go with him on his Walker Brothers route.
That is not my mother's idea of a drive in the country.
“Can I come?”
“Your mother might want you for trying on clothes.”
“I'm beyond sewing this afternoon,” my mother says.

Then, at the end of the story, the singular event blends back into the iterative, the evening is like all the other evenings: *the sky becomes gently overcast, as always, nearly always on summer evenings by the Lake*. The constant movement backwards and forwards from the iterative to the specific creates the impression that the story is casually constructed (Blodgett 1988, 16). The narrative structure does not present us with a clear linear sequence of events, but then neither does the syntax, as we have just seen.

Conclusion

Alice Munro's prose is perhaps best defined by a remark made by Virginia Woolf, writing in *A Room of One's Own*. She describes a text “not made of sentences laid end to end, but of sentences built, if an image helps, into arcades and domes” (1929, 79). It is worth noting that Woolf has recourse to architectural images to explain what she means, just as Munro herself does, when she comments on her own reading habits in her essay “What is Real”. Munro explains that she does not read a story necessarily from beginning to end, but likes to be able to pick up the story at any point:

I go into it and move back and forth and settle here and there, and stay in it for a while. It's more like a house. Everybody knows what a house does, how it encloses space and makes connections between one enclosed space and another and presents what is outside in a new way. This is the nearest I can come to explaining what a story does for me, and what I want stories to do for other people. (1982, 224)

Both Woolf and Munro, different though they may be in many ways, underline that meaning, "what a story does", is constructed not through a linear sequence or the fixed order of the sentence. For Munro, it is her conversational style, with its constant digressions and elaborations that calls into question any linear sequence of events and which helps support Blodgett's claim that Munro's narration assumes the shape of exploration:

we cannot help but sense the presence of writing that is discovering itself in the art of writing, prepared, therefore for dead ends, for spaces in its text that require adjustments to a new moment of awareness. (Blodgett 1988, 156)

Commenting on the penultimate sentence of the last chapter before the Epilogue to *Lives of Girls and Women*, Blodgett writes "as it unfolds, the sentence dismantles itself" (1988, 37). This is equally true of many of Munro's sentences. The result is a proliferation of meaning, as detail is added upon detail.

The question that begs to be answered is why Munro so frequently chose the first-person narrative and the conversational mode. Part of the answer must lie with the fact that it offers her the opportunity to introduce a multi-layered perspective that resists closure within the compact space imposed by the genre of the short story; multi-layered both in the number of voices that are present in the text and in the lack of a single linear perspective. Moreover, such a mode requires greater reader participation. The attention to details, while at the same time creating a "speaking voice", gives the short stories a note of authenticity, enabling the reader to identify more easily with the first person narrator, so that the significant event in the story, when it does finally occur, becomes significant for the reader also, not because it is a world-changing event - on the contrary it is often ordinary to the point of appearing banal - but because of the reader's involvement with the narrator.

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Searching for Lake Huron: Songs, Journeys and Secrets in 'Walker Brothers Cowboy'

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The first short story of the collection *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968) opens with a question: "Want to go down and see if the Lake's still there?" (Munro, 'Cowboy'1). The lake in question is Lake Huron, which adjoins both Michigan (U.S.) and Ontario (Canada). The relevance of the Ontario province in Munro's oeuvre has been commented on by several critics. In his 1984 article, "Connection: Alice Munro and Ontario", Robert Thacker, for example, highlights that "in her stories [...] the presence of Ontario's past is not only recurrent, it is ubiquitous" ("Connection" 213). In Thacker's analysis, the 1930s and 1940s Ontario country landscape is contrasted by Munro's characters with the more metropolitan one of the 1960s and beyond. As it emerges, the geographical dimension interacts with the temporal one, and generates in the characters "moments of epiphany" (Thacker, "Connection" 213) which come to unveil their identities: "in order to understand who they are, her characters first must recognize where they have come from; almost always this is from rural Ontario, up by Lake Huron" (Thacker, "Connection" 213).

Such topophilia, a term with which the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan describes profound attachment to a specific place, has also been noticed by Reingard M. Nischick: in her works Munro "prefers to "map" a certain Canadian region: southwestern Ontario (sometimes abbreviated as "Sowesto"), more specifically the area around London, close to Lake Huron" ("Gender" 203). Nischick explains that such a predilection is for autobiographical reasons: "Munro's longtime preoccupation with that particular region and her interest in local history and topography in her

writing are linked to her own life" ("Gender" 203). Munro was born in Ontario and, apart from a long period in British Columbia between 1951 and 1972, she has spent most of her life there. Nischick begins her essay "(Un-) Doing Gender: Alice Munro, "Boys and Girls" (1964)" by answering the opening question of Coral Ann Howells's book *Alice Munro* (1998), about the necessity of reference to the map of Canada to understand Munro's production. Nischick's answer is that such a reference "is not really necessary to appreciate Munro's fictional worlds" ("Gender" 203). In my opinion, this assertion underestimates the importance of geographical connotations in the author's production, which is interconnected with the questions of self and national identity. with an understanding of the location of story places on a cartographical representation, the reader will be better able to estimate and comprehend certain dynamics which occur in the narrative plot, including those linked to the processes of identity-formation.

In literature, the role of the geographical or cartographical elements, has been seen as a source of multiple possibilities for representation: "literary texts both operate within and help to shape the geography of their worlds" (Tally, *Spatiality* 99) and enable "the reader to generate alternative meanings" (Tally, *Spatiality* 99). Sheila Hones, for example, highlights the fact that literary maps "have been used [...] to connect stories with places and to express in two-dimensional visual form some of the spatial aspects of narratives" (*Literary Geographies* 85). She goes further, and associates narrative to geography: "[...] fiction can be usefully understood as a geographical event, a dynamic unfolding collaboration, happening in space and time" (*Literary Geographies* 32). At this point, it will be useful to insert a brief parenthesis about the notions of space and place and their relation to time. Space and place are generally used in common language as interchangeable terms, with reference to terrestrial extensions. However, if examined through the lenses of geography and philosophy, the two terms are far from being synonymous and their relationship becomes rather problematic. Space is an unlimited, indefinite and immeasurable entity, which copes with vagueness and vastness. As Tuan remarks, "The ideas "space" and "place" require each other for definition" (*Space and Place* 6). Their differentiation occurs when a space is segmented, circumscribed, bounded theoretically or physically, generating a place. The separation between the two notions, then, becomes clear-cut:

What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value [...] From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space and vice versa. Furthermore, if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place. (Tuan, *Space and Place* 6)

In *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces* (2011), the philosopher Bertrand Westphal emphasizes the reassertion of the spatial dimension over the temporal one which had dominated the literary scenery until World War II. Prior to 1945, space was an ancillary dimension, “an empty container” (*Geocriticism* 7), “merely a backdrop of time” (*Geocriticism* 7); it functioned as a framework for the occurrence of the temporal events. According to him, the aftermath of the Second World War constitutes the turning point for the so-called “spatiotemporal revolution” (*Geocriticism* 13): “time and space become less ambitious, more tentative: the instants do not flow together at the same duration; in the absence of hierarchy, durations multiply; the line is split into lines; time is hereafter superficial. The perception of historical time was overtaken by the relative laws of space-time” (*Geocriticism* 13). Westphal sees, in the passage to the twenty-first century, a rebalance between the temporal and the spatial dimensions which become interconnected and “inextricably meshed” (*Geocriticism* 26). On the analytical level, he conceives that there is a strong connection between literature and geography: “If it is the nature of geography to probe the potential of human spaces, it is also in the nature of literature to touch on space, because all literature is in space, regardless of its thematic developments” (*Geocriticism* 33). He identifies maps and mapping strategies as devices to explore the net of relationships between the writer and the construction of fiction, and suggests the application of a geocritical approach to the examination of literary texts.

As noted earlier, the relationship between space/place and identity is one of the main preoccupations of Munro’s fiction. Each spatial dimension is endowed with an “identitarian essence” (Westphal, *Geocriticism* 188), through which the individual makes sense of him- or herself: “human identity [...] is inextricably bound up with the places in which we find ourselves and through which we move” (Prieto, “Geocriticism” 18). In the literary context, the creation of spaces and places implies a system of confrontation in the shape of Chinese boxes: the writer becomes a sort of cartographer and traces a map according to their personal vision: “writers map the real and imagined spaces of their world in various ways through literary means” (Tally, *Spatiality* 79). The reader confronts the

geographical component of the text, and, if possible, refers to cartographical representation in order to locate the given spatial coordinates: "the reader of a literary map also envisions a space, plots a trajectory, and becomes orientated to and within the world depicted there" (Tally, *Spatiality* 79). In the process of generation of their own map, the author transfers their personal motives and perceptions which endow the chart with subjective meanings. Such meanings will be part of the reader's reception of the place in question, and will provide them with the instruments to understand "the literary map in such a way as to present new, sometimes hitherto unforeseen mappings" (Tally, *Spatiality* 79). Thus, the modality and the object of representation will enact an endless generation of significance, which will provide the narrative with a "multifocal dynamic" (Westphal, *Geocriticism* 199).

In her works Munro "reveals a concern with the implications of space for identity formation and knowledge acquisition" (McGill, "Distance" 9). She portrays landscapes which possess a certain typicality, or which may be defined as typically Canadian, or typical of Ontario. In *The Influence of Painting on Five Canadian Writers: Alice Munro, Hugh Hood, Timothy Finley, Margaret Atwood, and Michael Ondaatje* (1996), John Cooke deals with the creation of national myth around Ontario between 1900 and 1965, which has made this area emblematic of Canadian identity: "the most powerful images of Canadian identity, most obviously those provided by Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven, have been provided by visual art" (*Painting* 2). As the art critic Joan Murray remarks, the members of the Group, J.E.H. Macdonald, Arthur Lismer, Frank Johnston, F. H. Varley, Frank Carmichael, A. J. Casson, Tom Thomson, Laurence Harris, "became the catalyst for a long revolution in Canadian art" (*Northern Lights* 11). They considered themselves to be rebels, and were considered as such by their public. In a manner similar to the writers and the poets of their days, they tried to distance themselves from the influence of English tradition. In the imaginative sense, the Group of Seven engaged with the landscape and assimilated it to their artistic forms. In fact, instead of merely transfiguring Nature, they selected its peculiar features and endowed it with mythic qualities. The challenge for these artists was to replace images of an assimilated land, Frye's "predigested picturesque", with images consistent with their personal experience. They translated the elements of physical landscape into imaginative forms, which corresponded with the painters' experience of them. If, on the one hand, it is true that art can be a mirror of the world,

on the other hand it is also true that art reflects, primarily, the inner places of the artist. As Murray notes, their “key ideas were grandeur and beauty, a sense of the sublime, vastness, majesty, dignity, austerity, and simplicity” (*Northern Lights* 12). They focused on the topographical shapes of the natural environment and tried to remove the vision of Canadian land as a hostile and unfamiliar environment.

Cooke detects in Munro a certain fondness for Alex Colville, Jack Chambers and other members of the Magic Realist school of painting, which, however, does not originate any “specific painterly style” (*Painting* 82) in her writing, which is much more oriented towards the world of photography. If we cannot speak of a pictorial manner emerging in her work, we can certainly discuss her practice of a “geographical meta-fiction” (McGill, “Distance” 10); according to Robert McGill “her stories meditate on their own strategies and implications in fictionalizing place, and they pay attention to the situated-ness of authors and readers, as well as to the ways in which one might come to learn about place through fiction” (McGill, “Distance” 10). The reference to specific areas and landscapes in her oeuvre has a double function: on the one hand, the presence of national traits in her settings orients the reader towards the Canadian collective identity. On the other hand, the sense of belonging to Ontario, which has an autobiographical origin, highlights the characters’ individual feelings and their struggle for self-perception.

In ‘Walker Brothers Cowboy’, narration starts *in medias res*: the reader observes the life of a family after dinnertime. The unnamed protagonist, who will appear as Del Jordan in Munro’s short story cycle *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), accepts her father’s provocative invitation for a walk to the lake, in order to verify its effective existence. Such an uncertainty towards the presence of the lacustrine element can be ascribed to the crisis of values provoked by the advent of the Great Depression. Chronologically, ‘Walker Brothers Cowboy’ is set in the 1930s: “The nineteen-thirties. How much this kind of farmhouse, this kind of afternoon, seem to me to belong to that one decade in time, just as my father’s hat does, his bright flared tie, our car with its wide running board” (Munro, ‘Cowboy’ 8). After the crash of the American Stock Market in 1929, the world was afflicted by a severe economic crisis, referred to as the “Great Depression”. Canada suffered from the crisis as well: very high levels of unemployment, a fall in the value of money, high taxes, and low prices and wages. A general sense of discontent and displacement affected the individual, due to the collapse of all established

principles, beliefs and ideals which had been a sort of collective heritage. Such insecurity is translated in this short story through the reference to a generic geographical location, the lake, which proves to be an evanescent entity. Tuan ascribes the naming process the power to transform a space into a place. At the beginning of narration, the action focuses on the movement towards an indefinite destination which configures as a space:

“Space is given by the ability to move. Movements are often directed toward, or repulsed by, objects and places. Hence space can be variously experienced as the relative location of objects or places, as the distances and expanses that separate or link places, and – more abstractly- as the area defined by a network of places” (Tuan, *Space and Place* 12).

Later on the protagonist becomes more precise in her spatial description, and provides each place with proper names: “This is in Tuppertown, an old town on Lake Huron, an old grain port” (Munro, ‘Cowboy’ 1); “we lived at Dungannon” (‘Cowboy’ 2); “Sunshine, Boylesbridge, Turnaround – that is all his territory” (‘Cowboy’ 3). Apart from Lake Huron and Dungannon (a small village in the Huron county), none of the above-mentioned locations exist. This marks a clear separation between a past based on security and wealth, and a present which sees both the Jordans and the country as a whole struggling with precarious life conditions. Before the crisis, the family lived in Dungannon and Ben, the narrator’s father, was a fox breeder who “sold their pelts to the people who make them into capes and coats and muffs” (‘Cowboy’ 4). With the advent of the Depression, the Ben’s fox fur business has collapsed. On the textual level, this present time of shattered dreams is reflected in the impoverished conditions of Tuppertown, now the Jordan family’s hometown: “The street is shaded, in some places, by maple trees whose roots have cracked and heaved the sidewalk” (‘Cowboy’ 1); “we pass a factory with boarded-up windows [...] Then the town falls away in a defeated jumble of sheds and small junkyards” (‘Cowboy’ 2). The town, like the whole of Canada, is going to ruin, and the displaced individual, essentially powerless, can only witness this disintegration. The “immanence of space’s past in the present” (McGill, “Distance” 12) is represented by the harbor: “[...] the docks where we would go and look at the grain boats, ancient, rusty, wallowing, making us wonder how they got past the breakwater” (Munro, ‘Cowboy’ 2). This image of the grain merchant ships in decaying conditions exemplifies the impact of the Great Depression on the agricultural sector, which had seen a period of prosperity before the crisis. Such a decline also interests part of the

population; as it emerges from the text, the harbor area is crowded with vagrants, who represent a destitute and drifting humankind: “Tramps hang around the docks and occasionally on these evenings wander up the dwindling beach and climb the shifting [...] and say something to my father which, being frightened of tramps, I am too alarmed to catch. My father says he is a bit hard up himself” (‘Cowboy’ 2).

The main core of ‘Walker Brothers Cowboy’ is represented by the complex relationship between the protagonist’s parents; the unresolved conflicts within and between Ben and his wife, generate a series of negative emotions (resentment, anger, indifference, frustration) which involve their children as well, and in particular their pre-teenage daughter. The mother blames her husband for the failure of the fox breeding business, which has caused the family to ‘come down’ the social ladder: “We poured all we had into it, my mother says, and we came out with nothing” (‘Cowboy’ 3). It seems that nothing can placate her dissatisfaction: “No bathroom with a claw-footed tub and a flush toilet is going to comfort her, nor water on tap and sidewalks past the house and milk in bottles, not even the two movie theatres and the Venus Restaurant and Woolworths” (‘Cowboy’ 4). She experiences the family poverty with great discomfort and opposes it through a total closure towards her husband, whom she generally ignores, and towards the rest of the society that shares their same destiny: “Many people could say the same thing, these days, but my mother has no time for the national calamity, only ours” (‘Cowboy’ 4). She uses a strategy of control on her children, and in particular on her daughter. Ildikò de Papp Carrington distinguishes Munro’s characters into the controllers and the controlled, who are involved in situations which expose their “physical and psychological vulnerability” (Carrington, 99). As a reaction, the latter try to free themselves by “splitting [...] into two personae: the detached watcher and the experiencing participant” (102). In her relationship with her mother, the protagonist of this story acts as an uninterested watcher, who endures with scant patience her mother’s attempts to mould her, since she is “her creation” (Munro, ‘Cowboy’ 5): “She has ripped up [...] an old suit and an old plaid wool dress of hers, and she has to cut and match very cleverly and also make me stand and turn for endless fittings, sweaty, itching from the hot wool, ungrateful” (‘Cowboy’ 1). According to Deborah Heller, one of the most recurring themes in Munro’s writing is that of “a young daughter’s failure, or inability, to meet the demands of a mother” (Heller, 7). Despite the girl’s attempts to mirror the image of doll-like perfection that her mother aims for, represented by “wretched

curls and flaunting hair bow, scrubbed knees and white socks" (Munro, 'Cowboy' 5), she feels she will never satisfy her mother.

By contrast, her relationship with her father allows her to express her real self. She has, compared to her younger and querulous brother, a privileged relation with her father. She considers him to be a leading figure able to educate her, much more than her mother, who rather forces her to observe annoying and boring actions and rituals. According to Robert T. Tally Jr, narrative is "a form of world-making" (Tally, *Spatiality* 49), and as "narrators or writers survey the territory they wish to describe, they weave together disparate elements in order to produce the narrative" (Tally, *Spatiality* 49). In this short story, Munro gives to Ben the role of map-maker, since in his account of the origin of the Great Lakes he combines historical, geographical and even geological elements, associated with mimic movements. The girl-narrator reports:

He tells me how the Great Lakes came to be. All where Lake Huron is now, he says, used to be flat land, a wide flat plain. Then came the ice, creeping down from the north, pushing deep into low places. Like *that* – and he shows me his hand with his spread fingers pressing the rock-hard ground where we were sting. His fingers make hardly any impression at all and he says, "Well, the old ice cap had a lot more power behind it than his hand has." And then the ice went back, shrank back towards the North Pole where it came from, and left its fingers of ice in the deep places it had gouged, and ice turned to lakes and there they were today. (Munro, 'Cowboy' 3)

Caitlin Charman, comments on the autobiographical element which emerges in this passage, by highlighting the fact that "in this piece, and in later stories, Munro is still connecting her personal experience of the landscape" (Charman 272) to social and environmental questions: "She moves from an anthropocentric understanding of the region and its timescales to a glacial sense of time and place" (273). The movement which had triggered the two characters crossing of space is now blocked by this narration, which turns cartography into "a subject for storytelling" (Tally, *Spatiality* 51). It represents the suspension, the rest, the "pause", as Tuan puts it, which allows the transformation of a space into a place. After her father's narration, the protagonist's perception of time becomes gloomy and she feels profoundly unsettled: "The tiny share we have of time appalls me, though my father seems to regard it with tranquility. [...] I do not like to think of it. I wish the Lake to be always just a lake" (Munro, 'Cowboy' 3).

At this point, the narration concentrates on the family background and life. After the collapse of the fox breeding business, Ben reinvents himself as a door-to-door salesman, a “pedlar knocking at backwoods kitchens” (‘Cowboy’ 4), who sells diverse items for the Walker Brothers company: “cough medicine, iron tonic, corn plasters, laxatives, pills for female disorders, mouth wash, shampoo, liniment, salves, lemon and orange and raspberry concentrate for making refreshing drinks, vanilla, food colouring, black and green tea, ginger, cloves and other spices, rat poison” (‘Cowboy’ 3-4) The description of her father’s job and her observation of one of his working days, underline the protagonist’s admiration towards him; he shares with the figure of the cowboy, a sort of nickname he attributes to himself, a very strong relationship with the area he crosses during his daily paths: “Sunshine, Boylesbridge, Turnaround – that is all his territory” (‘Cowboy’ 3); “his Walker Brothers route” (‘Cowboy’ 6). Like the cowboy, he has his typical garment, which, in his daughter’s words, should make him recognizable: “He wears a white shirt, brilliant in the sunlight, a tie, light trousers [...] and a creamy straw hat. His salesman’s outfit, with pencils clipped in the shirt pocket” (‘Cowboy’ 6). He is a very creative person, who, during his solitary ways, entertains himself with songs he has invented: “My father sings most of the time while driving the car” (‘Cowboy’ 7) .

In this short story, music is strongly related to the crossing of spaces; as Tuan states “[s]ound itself can evoke spatial impressions” (Tuan, *Space and Place* 15). As a matter of fact, Ben admits that, while driving, the songs function as a palliative: “[...] it gives me something to do, making up rhymes” (Munro, ‘Cowboy’ 15). The act of singing works as a background to the description of the changing landscape during the work trip with their father, which the protagonist and her little brother undertake: “Even now, heading out of town, crossing the bridge and taking the sharp turn onto the highway, he is humming something, mumbling a bit of a song to himself, just turning up, really, getting ready to improvise [...]” (‘Cowboy’ 7).

During narration, there are three samples of Ben’s songs; the first one represents a sort of sung advertisement for his commercial activity: “And have all linaments and oils,/For everything from corns to boils” (‘Cowboy’ 4) . The second and the third show his comic abilities: “Old Ned Fields, he now is dead,/ So I am ridin’ the route instead.../Wisht I was back on the Rio Grande, plungin’ through the dusky sand” (‘Cowboy’ 7); “Where are the Baptists, where are the Baptists,/ where are all the

Baptists today?/ They're down in the water, in Lake Huron water, / with their sins all a-gittin' washed away" ('Cowboy' 7).

Music, however, appears in the final and most decisive part of 'Walker Brothers Cowboy'. After a long day of visits to potential costumers, Ben pauses at the house of Nora Cronin. Different from what happens the rest of the day, when the children are obliged to wait in the car, this time they enter the house of this particular 'customer'. Nora at first appears as a strange person in her tone ("[she] comes across to us and says in a flat voice, neither welcoming nor unfriendly, "Have you lost your way?"") ('Cowboy' 10)) and in her apparel ("She is wearing a farmer's straw hat, through which pricks of sunlight penetrate and float on her face, a loose, dirty print smock and running shoes" ('Cowboy' 11)). Her attitude is a bit too affable towards a salesman. During the narration Munro "emphasizes [the girl's] peripheral position, her innocent eye's incomprehension of the most powerful facts of life" (Carrington, 72) presenting her as a naïve young girl. She does not realize completely the kind of relationship between her father and Nora. But the reader assumes there has been a youth love between them or an affair. The protagonist sees this unconventional woman "as a sort of exotic Other" (McIntyre, 53) whose eccentricity causes some astonishment and perplexity in the narrator. Eventually noticing the picture of the Blessed Virgin on the kithchen wall, the girl realizes that the Cronins must be Catholics—for her, very much 'the Other'. She recalls a relative's euphemism for this religious 'impairment': "*She digs with the wrong foot*" (Munro, 'Cowboy' 14).

Her father's behavior when he is with Nora unveils to the young girl some unknown aspects of his personality: "She and my father drink and I know what it is. Whisky. One of the things my mother has told me in our talks together is that my father never drinks whisky. But I see he does. He drinks whisky and he talks of people whose names I have never heard before" ('Cowboy' 15). Such an observation intensifies "the child's sense of darkness and mystery in her father's life" (Carrington, 73). The fact that Nora suddenly changes her apparel and makes her appearance more pleasant, and her request to Ben to dance with her, do not seem to appall the protagonist, who, instead, "concentrates on her sudden sense of strangeness in a very familiar figure" (73). When Nora turns off the gramophone after Ben's refusal to dance, the narrative tension decreases and the story quickly comes to a conclusion. The pervading atmosphere of the returning journey is of disenchantment, characterized by an absolute

silence: “My father does not say anything to me about not mentioning things at home, but I know, just from the thoughtfulness [...] that there are things not to be mentioned” (Munro, ‘Cowboy’ 17-8). Silence, after all, is the absence of noise, which, in the musical context serves to make more evident the sounds which follow or precede it. It constitutes a sort of white space, without a precise outline, which alternates between one place and another. In this short story, the return journey represents a “soundless space” (Tuan, *Space and Place* 16) in which the protagonist acquires a maturity (and maybe also a mischievousness) represented by her self-imposed silence regarding certain events. She has already crossed the boundaries of childhood.

In ‘Walker Brothers Cowboy’ the spatial perspective coincides with the creation of the narrative universe. Physical space, at first an indefinite and undetermined entity, acquires the connotation of a place when, during narration, Munro avails herself of a specificity both in relation to the topographic and the toponymic element. The spatial axis intersects with the temporal one, in accordance with Westphal’s notion of ‘spatiotemporality’, in two cases: through the presence of the autobiographical element, exemplified by the representation of Ontario, which permeates the Munro oeuvre; and through the references to and the representation of the dramatic conditions of Canadian society after the Great Depression. The images of decay, despair and desolation belong also to the individual, who feels completely displaced in a hopeless present made of shattered dreams.

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“Here was no open straightforward plan”: Jumbled Space in “The Shining Houses”

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In this essay I shall look at Alice Munro’s use of place and space in “The Shining Houses”, the second story in *Dance of the Happy Shades*. Compared to the other stories in the collection and to Munro’s subsequent work, “The Shining Houses” is unusual for its brevity, with almost no events, but very dense in its treatment of place, space and landscape as it portrays a wilderness city transformed into a residential, sort of suburbia, subdivision. In *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan proposes a specific differentiation between space and place. He considers space as an area of freedom and mobility, while place is seen as an enclosed and humanized space: “Compared to space, place is a calm center of established values” (Tuan 1977, 54). Munro’s story devotes special attention to both space and place, in a manner similar to Tuan’s conceptualization of them, and also shows their interaction and metamorphosis.

This essay considers space and landscape in the story not as inert empty containers; it looks instead at their function as metonyms. As a consequence, space is not subsidiary to plot and character but interconnected with them. Traditional notions of space see it as a kind of stasis, characterized by neutrality and passivity, where nothing really happens. Since the 1970s, a new approach to geography has questioned these concepts and has initiated the so called “spatial turn” within the

human and social sciences.¹ This new branch of the discipline known as human geography or radical geography sees space as a social construct and therefore constituted through social relations and material social practices. To summarize the main points about space and place in human geography relevant to the analysis carried out in this article, it should be considered, first of all, that space is the product of interrelations, constituted through interactions. Secondly, space should be conceived as the “sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality; as the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist; as the sphere therefore of coexisting heterogeneity.” (Massey (2005), 2007, 9). Space must be predicated upon the existence of plurality. Thirdly, space must be regarded “always under construction [...] always in the process of being made [...] never finished; never closed.” (9). Tuan also links space to movement and place to pauses: “From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa” (Tuan 1977, 6).

A scenario of outsiders and /or strangers populates Munro’s macro text. Critics have discussed this at length². This essay examines corollary aspects related to the outsider condition. “The Shining Houses” revolves around the transformation of a rural area into middle class suburbia. An inhabitant of the old rural neighborhood, Mrs. Fullerton, refuses to sell her property, which in the minds of the new residents has some disconcerting qualities: it is dilapidated and smelly, possibly because of the chicken she keeps in her yard. Mrs. Fullerton thus turns into an outsider, and her house and the land surrounding it become the locus of

¹ See in particular Henri Lefèbvre, *La production de l’espace* (1974), Paris: Anthropos, 2000 (4th ed.), transl. by N. Donaldson-Smith, *The Production of Space*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991; Tuan, *Place and Space*; Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*, London & New York: Verso, 1989.

² Robert Thacker. *Alice Munro: Writing Her Life. A Biography*. Toronto: Emblem McClelland & Stewart, 2011. Rowland Smith. “Rewriting the Frontier: Wilderness and Social Code in the Fiction of Alice Munro” in *Alice Munro*. Harold Bloom ed., New York, Infobase Publishing, 2009, pp. 153-166. G. Balestra, L. Ferri, C. Ricciardi eds. *Reading Alice Munro in Italy*. Toronto: The Frank Iacobucci Centre for Italian Canadian Studies, 2008. Gerald Lynch. *The One and the Many: English Canadian Short Story Cycle*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001. Georgian Murphy. “The Art of Alice Munro: Memory, Identity, and the Aesthetics of Connections” in *Canadian Women Writing Fiction*. Mickey Pearlman ed., Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993, pp. 12-23. James Carscallen. *The Other Country: Patterns in the Writing of Alice Munro*. Toronto: ECW Press, 1993. David Williams. *Confessional Fictions: A Portrait of the Artist in the Canadian Novel*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991. Coral Ann Howells, *Alice Munro*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988.

eccentricity in the newly created residential area. The new owners try to find legal ways to force her to sell, and eventually succeed. The story shows how the creation of place by necessity involves the definition of what lies outside. As cultural geographer Tim Cresswell observes, “the ‘outside’ plays a crucial role in the definition of the ‘inside’”. The term place suggests “a tight connection between geographical place and the assumptions about normative behavior. People and practices [...] can be ‘in-place’ or ‘out-of-place’”(103).

In the story the subdivision called “Garden Place” is meant to provide comfortable dwellings at reasonable costs. Those homes “were for people like Mary and her husband and their child, with not much money but expectation of more” (23). The houses in “Garden Place” with their “vivid colours” and their “geometrical designs” (29) are intended for middle class young families. Here the symmetrical roads are named after flowers and the “ingenuously similar houses” look “calmly at each other, all the way down the street” (23).

The story thus encapsulates three figurations or themes that are dear to Munro. First, the representation of an outsider to the community; second, the attention to the representations of homes; the third element, the landscape, is constantly linked to the other two, the houses and the outsider. Furthermore, the landscape at the end of the story metamorphoses and assumes the role of character. This article will look at the spatial dimension of the story intended here not merely as setting. In order to do so, I rely on the work of human geographers such as Doreen Massey and Gillian Rose who see space as something in constant process. Traditional conceptualizations of time and space –Massey argues – see the two opposed to each other where time is the one which matters and out of which History (with capital H) is made. As she puts in plain words: “Time Marches on but space is a kind of stasis, where nothing really happens” (Massey 1994: 253). On the contrary, for radical geographers, “far from being the realm of stasis, space and the spatial are also implicated [...] in the production of history” (Massey 1994: 254). Radical geographers speak of space/time and consider the dimensions of space and time “inextricably interwoven” (Massey 1994: 261). Space – they argue – must not be conceptualized in terms of absence or lack. In their positive definition both space and time should be inter-related and as a result an “absolute” dimension of space does not exist: “space is not absolute, it is relational” (Massey 1994: 261). In this perspective space becomes “the perfectly

obvious, manifest fabric of social existence, not its mysterious underside” (West-Pavlov 2009: 23).

Many of Munro’s characters pursue an unrelenting search for comfort and security in a house / home and sooner or later discover its elusiveness and precariousness. As, for example, in “Oh, What Avails”:

Far back in the house, Joan’s mother is singing along with the radio. She doesn’t know of any danger. Between the front door, the scene outside and their mother singing in the kitchen, Joan feels the dimness, the chilliness, the frailty and impermanence of these high half-bare rooms – of their house. It is just a place to be judged like other places –it’s nothing special. It is no protection. (*Friend of My Youth* 193).

“The Peace of Utrecht” from *Dance of the Happy Shades* represents homecoming as an impossibility: “I have been at home now for three weeks and it has not been a success” (190). From this opening onwards, home and family fail to provide the comfort and the stability that is traditionally associated with them; what they offer instead is “the dim world of continuing disaster [...] home” (191). The sense of bounded reassurance will be shattered, albeit subtly. In actual fact, as the story closes, it is a glass bowl, a “heavy and elaborate old bowl” which will slip out of one of the protagonist’s hands and smash on the floor (210).

The power, often negative, that places or houses can have on the subject is beautifully established in “Who Do You Think You Are?” The protagonist makes this painful recognition after having spent some time in the mansion of her very rich prospective parents in law: “She had never known before how some places could choke you off, choke off your very life” (112). This episode shows how place and / or space becomes an agent in ways that could be tyrannical and hard to pin down (Gordon 2000); of how it can elicit desires, then disappoint or reappropriate these desires and camouflage the ache of disappointment. There is a kind of unrepresentability about that particular oppressing space, a pressure that has to do not only with social maps but also with what is repressed, hidden, encrypted or unspoken. Space “exerts its own variety of agency, modeling the human actors who have configured it” (West-Pavlov 2009: 19). As Robert McGill argues in his excellent article “Where do you think you are? Alice Munro’s Open Houses”, to “notice when landscape functions as metonym and not as metaphor is to be aware that space is not subordinate to character but interconnected with them” (2002 4 b). In this respect, Munro herself has remarked: “Fiction is all bound up with the? local. The internal reason for that is surely that feelings are bound up

in place [...] The truth is fiction depends for its life on place” (in Rasporich: 122). “In other words – McGill observes – physical space does not dissolve but is all the more important as space because of its relationship with human mental life” (4).

In “The Shining Houses” Mrs. Fullerton’s home is first described by Mary, one of the newcomers to “Garden Place” and the only person sympathetic towards the elderly woman. When the story opens she is at Mrs. Fullerton’s to buy fresh eggs. Mary engages in conversation and learns that the older woman has lived alone since her husband walked away without explanation twelve years before. However, the experience of visiting Mrs. Fullerton’s place is far from ordinary. When Mary steps into this property she feels as if she is crossing an invisible boundary to enter alien territory. In particular, the surroundings of the house are baffling to her, in their display of an accretion of old and discarded objects mingled with vegetables and flower beds – all in the most unusual and startling array. This is the dwelling place of an old lady who is definitively perceived by the new community as an eccentric, in a derogatory sense.

When Mary came out of this place, she always felt as if she were passing through barricades. The house and its surroundings were so self-sufficient, with their complicated and seemingly unalterable layout of vegetables and flower beds, apple and cherry trees, wired chicken-run, berry patch and wooden walks, woodpile, a great many roughly built dark little sheds, for hens or rabbits or a goat. (22)

Many of Munro’s protagonists aspire to the solace of home and community which is constantly denied them. However, hard they cling to that idea of the home as place of safety and protection, the reality keeps escaping them. They show a strong need to be part of a collective identity – be it the rural village or a larger town, or even just a “subdivision” (22), as in “The Shining Houses”. The function of the community in providing the reassurance these characters very much need, can be found in what Hannah Arendt calls “The Common”: “The presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves” (50). The way some of these stories develop, however, shows at the same time also a radical undoing of this common world or community. The world around these characters at some point in these stories ceases to offer the “comforting illusion of dwelling in common” (Yeager 1996: 10). In “The Shining Houses”, for example, the “community” of the new subdivision establishes its cruel supremacy at the expense of older residents of the place, Mrs. Fullerton in particular. The

newcomers in the subdivision strongly need to fulfill their sense of community. As the narrator comments: “But these are the people who win, and they are good people; they want homes for their children [...] they plan a community – saying that word as if they found a modern and well-proportioned magic in it, and no possibility anywhere of a mistake” (*DHS*: 29).

In the story “The Office” the feeling of being “sheltered and encumbered [...] warmed and bound” (*DHS*: 61) in one’s home, is set against moments in which the protagonist steps “out of the darkness of sheltered existence” (Arendt: 51); as a result meaning-filled places change into “derangements of anonymous space” (Yeager: 10). This causes the protagonist to feel “exposed” and to experience both freedom and loneliness in such a “harsh” way that they are impossible to bear (*DHS*: 61). In the end she will renounce freedom and opt for the bounded and reassuring familiar space of home. A more fundamental and encompassing sense of uncertainty and loss of reference points can be found in the story “Images”. Here disorientation and insecurity are connected to one of the characters’ home: “Whose house is that?” my father said pointing./ It was ours, I knew it after a minute. We had come round in a half-circle and there was the side of the house that nobody saw in the winter, the front door that went unopened from November to April and was still stuffed with rags around its edges, to keep out the east wind ” (*DHS*: 42).

Lorna Hutchinson has effectively summed up Munro’s writing complexity: “Munro deals with the intricacies of human nature and a realism that develops through the extraordinary detail of place and person amidst a mire of ambiguity”. In her stories “the familiar world is inextricably linked to the unfamiliar; it exists only through its darker sphere, and vice versa” (189, 194). It is worth emphasizing that in Munro’s texts, as Robert McGill reminds us “the realist plea is for verisimilitude [...] Munro’s concept of what is ‘real’ is more complex than one might first suspect” (2002: 11 a). In “The Shining Houses” as well as in the first story in the collection, “Walker Brothers Cowboy” place and landscape undergo transformations like “a landscape that has an enchantment on it, making it kindly, ordinary and familiar while you are looking at it, but changing it, once your back is turned, into something you will never know, with all kinds of weathers, and distances you cannot imagine” (WBC 18).

In addition, the persistent representations and detailed descriptions of houses in Munro’s fiction emphasize the limit (*limen*) between inside

and outside, an edge that promotes dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, as well as acts of trespassing (see Martin and Mohanty 1986). In doing so the story establishes the role of place in the constitution of the normal and the 'pathological', the 'in-place' and the 'out-of-place'. To quote Crosswell again, "Place as home thus plays an active role in the constitution of the normal, the natural and the appropriate [...] deviation from the expected relationship between place and practice [leads] to labels of abnormality and inappropriateness" (122). As a consequence, when "something or someone has been judged to be 'out-of-place' they have committed a transgression. Transgression simply means 'crossing a line' [and is] an inherently spatial idea. The line that is crossed is often a geographical line and a socio-cultural one. It may or it may not be the case that the transgression was intended by the perpetrator. What matters is that the action is seen as transgression by someone who is disturbed by it" (103).

In the story "The Shining Houses" an imaginary border separates two adjacent areas: the old settlers' houses and the newly-built "Garden Place" subdivision. The new community's defense of their secure place is bought at the price of exclusion, denial and blindness. The invisible border between the new and the old area grows more powerful as the story progresses and towards the end transformations occur. Here landscape bounded and unbounded metamorphosize more than once, swapping roles: the supremacy of the new Garden Place is decidedly subdued at night time. Once more space and time are represented as inextricably linked. In the darkness the border between the new and the old areas becomes fluid and indefinite:

Mary went out and walked [...] up the street. She saw the curtains being drawn across living-room windows; cascades of flowers, of leaves, of geometrical designs, shut off these rooms from the night. Outside it was quite dark, the white houses were growing dim, the clouds breaking and breaking, and smoke blowing from Mrs. Fullerton's chimney. The pattern of Garden Place, so assertive in the daytime, seemed to shrink at night into the raw black mountainside (*DHS*: 29).

One of the oldest houses, Mrs. Fullerton's, is surrounded by heaps of debris and relics, in addition to the plants, likewise arranged in no apparent order. The array of the plants and of the old objects do not follow any planned pattern, in clear contrast with the symmetry of the front and back yards of the houses of the subdivision, with their straight edges and perfect flower beds.

“HERE WAS NO OPEN STRAIGHTFORWARD PLAN”: JUMBLED SPACE IN
“THE SHINING HOUSES”

Here was no open or straightforward plan, no order that an outsider could understand; yet what was haphazard time had made final. The place had become fixed, impregnable, all its accumulations necessary, until it seemed that even the washtubs, mops, couch springs and stacks of old police magazines on the back porch were there to stay (22).

For anthropologist Marc Augé, the act of looking at ruins does not involve a journey into history; it implies instead a different and peculiar experience of time, of what he calls “pure time” (36). According to Augé ruins exist through the gaze of the onlooker. Between the multiplicity of their past, however, and their lost functionality, what one is left with is a sort of “time outside history” (41), de-historicized, a-temporal. It is thanks to this pure time – this time without history – that the onlooker is able to achieve a greater awareness and understanding; it is thanks to this moment that the spectacle of ruins can offer “a brief rapture of intuition” (38). In “The Shining Houses” Mary, one of the newcomers, who is here the onlooker, perceives the long rows of white houses in construction (she notices they are “not entirely white”) as cause, as she puts it, of “the wound of the earth” (*DHS*: 23), thus suggesting a slanted critical stance. Mary alone among the newcomers has sympathy for Mrs. Fullerton and does not want to see her forced out.

Héliane Ventura has discussed Munro’s landscapes in terms of the ephemeral and of the fragment with special reference to the short story “Vandals” in the collection *Open Secrets* (1994). Ventura’s argument is pertinent also to the story discussed here:

The ‘other country’ which is conjured up in Alice Munro’s writing evidences a mythic and mystic landscape of origins strewn with aesthetic traces which belong in the temporal category of the ephemeral, the half-glimpsed, the transient, such as footprints dissolving on sand, or mist burning away in the sunshine. Munro creates a territory which relies on flux density, on energy and forces. Her ephemeral traces [...] move along lines of deterritorialization and reterritorialization that belong in the machinery of desire, on the surface of fluid planes. They repudiate heaviness to suggest the inchoate, transient stuff that dreams are made of [...] In her ironically chiasmatic aesthetics, Munro uses de-vastation as the foundational moment of her writing [and] makes a case for the poetics of the fragment, the scattered bits and pieces, the vanishing, the irretrievable, half-glimpsed, and ephemeral revelations of the minor genre [...] called the short story (309; 320).

The characteristic of this kind of ephemeral landscape in “The Shining Houses” is suggestive again of dark corners, slanted walls, wild uncut

bushes, and of a disordered accretion of discarded objects that characterizes Mrs. Fullerton's property:

And under the construction of this new subdivision, there was still something else to be seen; that was the old city, the old wilderness city that had lain on the side of the mountains [...] But houses like Mrs. Fullerton's had been separated from each other by uncut forests and a jungle of wild blackberry and salmonberry bushes; these surviving houses, with thick smoke coming out of their chimneys, walls unpainted and patched and showing different degrees of age and darkening, rough sheds and stacked wood and compost heaps and grey board fences around them – these appeared every so often among the large new houses of Mimosa and Marigold and Heather Drive -- dark, enclosed, expressing something like savagery in their disorder and the steep, unmatched angles of roofs and lean-tos; not possible on these streets but there. (*DHS*: 24).

The whole scenario evokes Conradian images of an inviolable, jungle-like, heart of darkness, albeit with a fluctuating border. Space and landscape are thus represented as both chaos and order, jumbled and linear: as places that are continually disaggregated and re-sutured. As Martin Heidegger writes: "A boundary is not that at which something stops, but that from which something begins its presencing" (153).

“HERE WAS NO OPEN STRAIGHTFORWARD PLAN”: JUMBLED SPACE IN
“THE SHINING HOUSES”

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“The text, the image and the implicit in Alice Munro’s ‘Images’ and ‘Postcard’”

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Il me semble qu’il y a des tableaux dans l’œuvre de Munro et des photographies qui essaient d’aller au delà des mots, vers un indicible de l’intériorité.

Héliane Ventura, *La Casa di Parole–Alice Munro*, April 2007

The two short stories chosen for this critical study of the text and the image are the two stories in the collection *Dance of the Happy Shades* whose titles explicitly refer to a visual genre or form–“Images” and “Postcard”–though other titles in the collection could be considered as images or visual, especially “Red Dress–1946” or “The Shining Houses.” Liliane Louvel has observed that many writers make such references to the visual arts:

Many writers have expressed a nostalgia for their “sister art,” communicating their desire to create a painting-infused work [...]. A mere observation of writers’ discourse on their work or even from within their work reveals a fascination for painting, photography or the image, or a repeated use of vocabulary related to art techniques, practices or history. (Louvel, *Le tiers pictural*, 84, my translation).

Mary Condé, in her inventory and analysis of photographs in Munro’s short stories, has noted how Munro, in a striking self-conscious *excipit* on the writing of the story itself, refers to the visual arts:

Munro herself explicitly compares storytelling and photography within her own fiction. The narrator of “The Ottawa Valley” assesses her achievement at the end of the story, the last in the volume: “Now I look at what I have done and it is like a series of snapshots” (98)

And Munro expresses a sensitivity to the visual in the 1994 *Paris Review* interview:

When I was writing that story I looked in a lot of old newspapers [...] I got very strong images of the town, which I call Walley. I got very strong images from newspaper clippings.

Liliane Louvel’s theoretical studies on the text and the image and more particularly on the possible particular relationship between the short story and the image posit that the “unity of effect” proposed by Poe in his definition of the short story is also characteristic of the visual arts, especially painting and photography:

Is the short story the perfect locus for “the infinite dialogue” between word and image? In terms of instant effect as defined by Poe, as a “detachable” piece entirely grasped as a whole as a painting or a photograph apparently are, it may be so. (2011a, 19)¹

The unity of effect in the short story genre is obtained in part by the respect of classical theatre’s three unities: of space, of time and of action, but also by the condensed style, pleasantly described by Hemingway as being the emerged eighth of an iceberg. This metaphor is particularly tempting to refer to in the case of Alice Munro as she has specialized not only in the condensed emerged eighth, but also in making the submerged seven-eighths a very important part of her oeuvre: secrets, hidden lives, “something I’ve been meaning to tell you” but didn’t. The “politics of silence and the poetics of silence,” as Corinne Bigot puts it,² are at work, and the reader is consistently faced with reading the implicit as well as the explicit in Munro’s stories. In her analysis of Munro’s early fiction, Dahlie Hallvard refers to Munro’s use of the short story form in terms reminiscent of Hemingway’s metaphor:

¹ This is also the basis of a discussion in Louvel’s article “Les voix du voir: illusions d’optique et reflets sonores” in *JSSE* 41, Autumn 2003 in which she refers to Valerie Shaw’s essay *The Short Story, a Critical Introduction* and writings of Henry James on short fiction.

² See her very recent essay entitled *Alice Munro: Les silences de la nouvelle*. See also the *JSSE Special Issue The Implicit in the Short Story in English*, 2003 and *L’implicite dans la nouvelle de langue anglaise*, ed. Laurent Lepaludier, 2005.

Though [Alice Munro] has said that she is “very, very excited by what you might call the surface of life,” the substance of her fiction to date suggests that this excitement must also derive in part from her intuitive feeling that there is something else of significance just below that literal surface. This may be one reason why to date she has been more attracted to the short story than to the novel, though as she has stated in an interview, “I don’t feel that a novel is any step up from a short story.” Nevertheless, that more concentrated fictional form probably allows her to explore in a more imaginative and intense way the intangible aspects of her world: those shadowy and shifting areas between the rational and the irrational, between the familiar, comfortable world and sudden dimensions of terror, and between various facets of uncertainty and illusion. (57)

The hypothesis of this essay is that the dynamics of text, image and the implicit is a part of this “imaginative and intense way” in which “Images” and “Postcard” “explore the intangible aspects of [Munro’s] world” (Hallvard 57). More specifically, this study aims at answering these questions: what are the visual elements or images in the two stories, how do they function, and how do they resonate in relation to the text’s implicit and contribute perhaps to a “poetics of silence?”

Because the titles of these stories are the first site of visual reference, they will be the first object of closer analysis, beginning with their construction. Neither of the titles “Images” or “Postcard” is determined grammatically, a factor of indeterminacy compounded for the first story by the fact that the word “images” does not appear in the diegesis. This extradiegetic title can then be considered as a tool to be used by the reader to interpret the story and as such, sets the reader at a critical distance from it, clearly what Michelle Gadpaille conceives when she says that the title “Images” “suggests a story with an *episodic quality* that will unfold in a *set of stop-action photographs*” (qtd. Condé, 98, my emphasis).

The title of “Postcard” also lacks grammatical determination. The title is not “A Postcard” as in “A Trip to the Coast” or “The Postcard” as in “The Office” or “The Shining Houses,” designating the particular, but at the same time it remains in the singular, as opposed to “Images,” therefore not designating the general either, as would the title “Postcards.” And indeed “a postcard” appears in the diegesis on the very first page of the story. Nevertheless, the abbreviated form of the title, without grammatical determination, significantly evokes, like “Red Dress–1946,” the style of painting titles, making of the title “Postcard” a “pictorial marker” (Louvel, 2008, 190) both in its content and its form: the story is about a pictorial form, just as the story itself is assimilated to a painting. So though the two titles are not constructed in precisely the same

grammatical mode, they both are somewhat atypical in their relation to the diegesis and in programming the reading to follow.

“Images” is the third short story in the collection *Dance of the Happy Shades*. In it, the first person unnamed narrator confides the story of the early spring her mother was bed-ridden and looked after by Mary McQuade, a “big and gloomy” cousin of her father’s who had taken care of her dying grandfather the previous summer. It was during that “cold March” that the young narrator and her father ventured out to “look at the traps” set by her father and encountered the terrifying, axe-bearing Joe Phippen along the river. Wary at first, Joe invites the narrator and her father into his primitive dwelling which the narrator discovers for the first time, just as she discovers the story which haunts him and subsequently re-evaluates her image of Mary McQuade.

The tenth story in the collection is “Postcard” and its position in the collection after “Images” creates a resonance which suggests that the postcard can now belong to the series of “images” proposed to the reader of the collection. The young woman protagonist narrating the story recounts what has happened in her life since “yesterday” when she received a Florida postcard from Clare MacQuarrie, a man twelve years older than her whom she hopes to marry but maybe not. Helen Louise, as her “Momma” calls her, learns from her well-informed newspaper-reading friend Alma that Clare is returning from Florida with his new bride, shocking news for Helen in spite of her ambiguous treatment of Clare, both as narrator and protagonist.

As if to confirm their initial reference to the pictorial in their title, both of these stories are indeed “pictorially saturated,” to use Louvel’s expression (2011a, 20); they contain numerous and striking allusions to the visual arts, some explicit, others implicit. Héliane Ventura has remarkably demonstrated how the pictorial in the incipit of Munro’s “Boys and Girls” announces in a very condensed form the story of the young female protagonist that follows.³ The *ekphrasis* of the heroic calendar hung by the kitchen door in the young protagonist’s house and depicting “plumed adventurers” and “magnificent savages” in the

³ Héliane Ventura. “L’implicite dans l’*ekphrasis* ou le cryptogramme pictural dans ‘Boys and Girls’ d’Alice Munro,” *L’implicite dans la nouvelle de langue anglaise*, Laurent Lepaludier, Ed, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2005, 157-67. The title of the article draws attention to the manner in which image, implicit, and text are articulated in the story.

Canadian landscape implicitly foregrounds the story's *topos* of stereotypical role-playing, and especially that of "boys" and "girls." The entire story, Ventura posits, comes back repeatedly to and resonates with that initial image.⁴ I argue here that in "Postcard" Munro uses a very similar technique. The incipit of "Postcard" introduces the eponymous object in two pictorial forms, first that of the still life, and then in the form of *ekphrasis*, before confronting the *ekphrasis* with the written message on the back of the postcard.

Liliane Louvel has identified the still life as being one of the pictorial genres used by writers attracted to the visual arts (2011a, 33). The second paragraph of "Postcard" begins as follows, mentioning the postcard for the first time:

It being Wednesday the wickets in the Post Office were closed, but I had my key. I unlocked our box and took out the Jubilee paper, in Momma's name, the phone bill and a postcard I very nearly missed. (128)

The second sentence is constructed on an enumeration and perhaps even a gradatio as the postcard, the final element in the enumeration, is simultaneously the element which most responds to the reader's expectation (created in the title) and the element which was the least visible to the protagonist who "nearly missed" it. This juxtaposition of static elements is precisely the technique of the still life, an aesthetic arrangement of objects, just as the pictorial effect produced by the sentence is of a still life: an open box⁵, the Jubilee paper, the phone bill and a postcard. The reader may well be tempted to entitle this still life *Postcard* and if we consider the remarks made earlier on the title of the story and its proximity to painting titles, we could then consider that the story's (picture) postcard is embedded in a still life called *Postcard*, itself embedded in a story/painting entitled "Postcard"/*Postcard*. This *mise en abyme* is also a pictorial device and one which operates on density, a

⁴ Liliane Louvel writes: "[M]any writers construct their worlds from a seminal image which, by triggering off a reverie, structures the work by representing its aura, a sort of creative horizon." (*The Poetics of the Iconotext*, 17). On the other hand, Mary Condé observes: "[Munro's stories] frequently end on a photographic image which encapsulates, in a self-consciously subjective way, the experience of the story" (99). "Postcard" and "Images" provide examples of each configuration, as we shall see.

⁵ The open box functions simultaneously as object in the still life and as container/frame of the painting.

characteristic of the short story genre, by creating multiple dimensions in a limited space.

But not only does the syntax of the sentence produce a pictorial effect, the still life produced contains in a condensed form the entire short story (just as the post-office box *contains* the three elements). The story centers on a misunderstanding between Helen and Clare: indeed, Helen’s mother expresses her surprise when Helen suggests that she and Clare will be married: “Is that what he told you?” (132) and Helen’s answer, “It’s understood,” focuses on the potential for Helen’s misunderstanding of the implicit message. The elements of the still life are then ironical in the context of a breakdown in communication for they are all, albeit in one case metonymically, means of communication: a newspaper, a telephone (bill) and a postcard. They ironically and economically foreshadow the events to come. The three elements named also structure the story in its stages of revealing the truth to the protagonist, though in reverse order: the postcard is received (128), the telephone call is made:

I did go back and I heard her [Momma] using the phone, probably calling one of her old cronies about some news in the paper, and then I guess I fell asleep. (136)

and finally the newspaper is shown to Helen, revealing the facts:

[Momma] was holding the paper and she spread it out for me to read. “It’s in there,” she said, probably not realizing she was whispering. “It’s written up in the *Bugle-Herald*.” (137)

In her study of “Boys and Girls,” Héliane Ventura uses the term “pictorial cryptogram,” (157)⁶ a concept which functions well in the analysis of “Postcard”: the pictorial, here the still life as I call it, contains within it the secret of the story (Clare’s relationship with Margaret Leeson) and it both reveals and conceals the content of the story (Helen’s discovery of this). In this context, it is interesting to turn again to the passage quoted above containing the still life:

It being Wednesday the wickets in the Post Office were closed, *but I had my key. I unlocked our box* and took out the Jubilee paper, in Momma’s

⁶ A “cryptogram” is “a message or writing in secret letters.”

name, the phone bill and a postcard I very nearly missed. (128, my emphasis)

For though the narrator claims she had a key to unlock the box, it eventually becomes clear to the reader that in this case of almost tragic irony she did not have the key to unlock the mysterious cryptogram within the box. On the other hand, though this still life is a pictorial cryptogram, it is simultaneously the pictorial key to the story for the reader. One might even add that the signifier “still life” is also a possible key to the story, for when Clare “did what he did on top of [her]” (145), Helen, though she “never wanted to be a *heartless* person” (135, my emphasis), implies that inertia, both physical and emotional, is her *modus operandi* with Clare, that her sexual *life* with Clare is *still*: silent, motionless, dead. The image resonates here with the implicit and one of the possible interpretations of the implicit is that Helen’s still life determined Clare’s decision to marry another woman.

In the story, once Helen does take the postcard out of the box, she looks carefully at it. Her perception of the picture postcard appears in the text in the form of an *ekphrasis*, the description of a work of art, another pictorial marker in the story:

I looked at the picture on it first and it showed me palm trees, a hot blue sky, the front of a motel with a sign out front in the shape of a big husky blonde creature, lit up with neon I suppose at night. She was saying *Sleep at my place*—that is, a balloon with those words in it came out of her mouth. (128, 129)

In his semiological study entitled “The Best of Both Worlds: Home and Mobility in Motel Postcard Iconography,” Keith A. Sculle identifies such a view of the motel amidst “languid palms” and the “ubiquitous blue sky” as belonging to “pictorial conventions in motel postcards” (37, 30), which implies that Clare is conventionally predictable. But also, this particular picture signifies perhaps that Clare has “the best of both worlds,” as Sculle puts it, the “big husky blonde creature [...] [s]aying *Sleep at my place*” providing during his “mobility” the “hot” intimacy which Helen provided (or not) at “home.” And yet, though the narrator says the picture “showed [her],” it did not *tell* her the full story of Clare’s travels to Florida, something she was always anxious to know. “Tell me about your trip,” the narrator would say when Clare returned from his travels, “and he would say what do you want me to tell?”(129).

Or, “I used to say to Clare, write me a *letter* while you’re away, and he would say, what do you want me to write about? So I told him to describe the scenery and the people he met” (129). Ironically, the narrator’s own *ekphrasis* is a condensed way of “describing the scenery and the people he met,” but it remains elliptical and enigmatic. Additionally, the narrator only “suppose[s]” that the neon sign of the motel is “lit up [...] at night.” In other words, she attempts to fill in the blanks left in the picture, to decipher the implicit. Clearly, though the pictorial reveals, it also conceals.

Perhaps hoping to have the blanks of the postcard’s picture filled in by the message on the back, Helen “turned it over and read” Clare’s message:

I didn’t sleep at her place though it was too expensive. Weather could not be better. Mid-seventies. How is the winter treating you in Jubilee? Not bad I hope. Be a good girl. Clare.” (129)

Sculle refers to a study by Baeder who considers “the postcard sender’s written message as surrogate for traditional documents such as letters and journals” (22) and indeed this message with its truncated sentences is an inferior substitute for a more informative letter. The first sentence of the message both refers to the picture, and in so doing is an instance of dialogue between text and image, and, in its ambivalent agrammatical form which blurs comprehension, is also a proposed mode of communication. The agrammatical absence of the comma which could have been placed either before or after “though” creates confusion, I would suggest intentionally. The dialogue between text and image begins first with the erotic image of the “husky blonde creature” whose implicit is indeterminate: is Clare implying that he has found another lover (an incarnation of the “blonde creature”) in this exotic/erotic place or is he implying that this erotic life is one that he would like to share with Helen as she is the recipient of the card and often “sleeps at his place”? The text on the back neither confirms nor contradicts either of the hypotheses about the implicit message. Though he assures Helen that he “didn’t sleep at her place,” he does not, in this negative construction, say where he did in fact sleep. That the implicit of the text/image of the postcard is open to interpretation is what Helen understands. On the one hand she suspects perhaps that this card signals the end of their relationship as she shows the postcard to her mother saying “Clare sent you a postcard” (130), seeming to admit it lacks any sentimental value. On the other hand, she twice relies on the postcard as proof of Clare’s devotion to her after the newspaper has

finally objectively provided the information about Clare's travels: "A quiet ceremony in Coral Gables, Florida, uniting in marriage Clare Alexander MacQuarrie [...] and Mrs. Margaret Thora Leeson" (137):

"I just today got a postcard from him as Momma well knows." (136)

"I just had a postcard from him. Momma—" (137)

If the plot in "Postcard" develops from a compact initial image, "Images", I will argue, accumulates the eponymous images throughout the story which lead to a final revelatory moment. Indeed, an initiation story is a story of revelation, therefore the visual is inherent in the initiation story and so not surprisingly present in this one. As mentioned previously, the word "images" does not appear in the diegesis of the short story, an absence which generates a multitude of questions. What constitutes an image in the text? Whose images are they? How are they formed? What is their function? Do they evolve? As Ajay Heble has pointed out, critics often interpret this story as dealing with the narrator's confrontation with death as she meets Joe Phippen (30). Not an uncommon plight for young protagonists of initiation stories and the case for example in Hemingway's "Indian Camp" or McGahern's "Korea," the narrator's confrontation with death in "Images" is nevertheless only a part of her initiatory experience, for as we shall see, she will also come to better understand images.

Stylistic devices of imagery are used abundantly in the first pages of the story by the young narrator/protagonist to qualify Mary McQuade or immediate surroundings associated with her. Stylistic devices of condensation are more frequently used in modernist short stories than devices of expansion or repetition. The short-story theorist Suzanne Ferguson identifies simile and metaphor as devices used by modernist writers or "impressionists" in their "attention to stylistic economy" (21). Essentially, they show rather than tell:

Mary McQuade [...] was *the other island in the room*, and she sat mostly not moving where *the fan, as if it was tired, stirred the air like soup*. (30, my emphasis)

I could look up and see that emptiness, the stained corners, and feel, without knowing what it was, just what everybody else in the house must have felt—under the sweating heat the fact of death-contained, *that little lump of magic ice*. And Mary McQuade waiting in her starched white dress, big and gloomy *as an iceberg herself*, implacable, waiting and breathing. I held her responsible. (31, my emphasis)

Out in the daylight [...Mary] turned out to be freckled all over [...] *as if she was sprinkled with oatmeal* (31, my emphasis)

[Mary] was always waiting for [my father], some joke *swelling her up like a bullfrog* (34, my emphasis)

The noticeable accumulation of vivid and often amusing metaphors and similes in these passages attests to the narrator’s perception of the world in images.

The initiatory journey the narrator takes is instigated by her father’s invitation: “Do you want to *come* with me and *look* at the traps?” (35, my emphasis), a binary construction which very economically summarizes the initiatory story genre by pointing to its stages: a journey (“come”) and a revelation (“look”). At the end of the journey, the day is summarized by Mary McQuade in a similar economical binary construction: “all she’s *been* and *seen*” (43, my emphasis), the difference in Mary’s remark being that it draws attention to the multiple visual experiences of the protagonist, which result in “her eyes dropping out of her head.”

Liliane Louvel suggests that “strong images” in short stories are “short cuts to reach meaning more quickly and more efficiently” (2011a, 25). The strong images in “Images” are the series of images which strike both the protagonist and the reader, leading both to an epiphanic moment of “meaning.” Michelle Gadpaille, as mentioned previously, noted that the title “Images” “suggests a story with an episodic quality that will unfold in a set of stop-action photographs.” In what appears to be an objective correlative of this series of images, the narrator recounts: “My mother crocheted squares for an afghan, in all shades of purple” (33). An objective correlative is another device of economy, used to show rather than tell, leaving the implied message for the reader to decipher, here, that “squares [...] in all shades” are diverse images meant to be brought together to form a coherent whole, a textual “afghan,” a “unity of effect.”⁷ It is also interesting to note that in the free association which follows this sentence in the story, the narrator equates the afghan squares with stories, reinforcing the hypothesis that squares/images contain and condense content to tell:

⁷ Though in her article “A Comparative Essay on the Sociology of Literature: Alice Munro’s Unconsummated Relationships” Silvia Albertazzi interestingly remarks “[I]n an almost Eliot-like way, Munro substitutes the description of experience with its image, its objective correlative” (44), she does not illustrate or expand on this idea.

[The squares] fell among the bedclothes and she did not care. Once they were finished *she forgot about them. She had forgotten all her stories* which were about Princes in the Tower and a queen getting her head chopped off while a little dog was hiding under her dress and another queen sucking poison out of her husband's wound. (33, my emphasis)

Returning to the father's invitation—"Do you want to come with me and look at the traps?"—, which is the starting point of the accumulation of initiatory images, we can notice that this invitation is in fact metonymically euphemistic, for though the father invites his daughter to "look at the traps," he is well aware that she will see not only the traps but the dead animals caught in them. And she does:

At first I saw [the muskrat] waving at the edge of the water, like something tropical, a dark fern. My father drew it up and the hairs ceased waving, clung together, the fern became a tail with the body of the rat attached to it, sleek and dripping. Its teeth were bared, its eyes wet on top, dead and dull beneath, glinted like washed pebbles. (36)

The pictorial markers in the passage are numerous. The narrator "saw" the muskrat, the father "drew it up" to isolate it as if framing it, the hairs "ceased waving" as if to fix the image, and stylistic devices of imagery are used: "waving [...] like something tropical, a dark fern" and "its eyes [...] glinted like washed pebbles." The father draws attention to the muskrat as pictorial when he says "This is a big old king rat. *Look at his tail!*" (36, my emphasis), as does the narrator: "He put the rat's body in a dark sack which he carried slung over his shoulder, like a pedlar in a picture." She explicitly associates this first initiatory image with death: "I did not understand [how the trap worked] or care. I only wanted but did not dare, to touch the stiff, soaked body, a fact of death" (36).

A second striking image the narrator encounters on her journey is that of the ominous Joe Phippen and especially the axe he carries. Unlike the muskrat's, this image is not one the father had planned for his daughter to encounter, which is no doubt why the axe is not to be mentioned at home on their return. Joe appears to the narrator initially in a rather long passage which could be considered filmic as the narrator first "see[s] his head and the upper part of his body", then "the rest of him" and finally "what he carried in his hand, gleaming where the sun caught it—a little axe, or hatchet" (37). The structure of both the passage and the final sentence draws attention to the axe by delaying its appearance. The

axe will then be further isolated as a strong image in Joe’s cellar which the narrator discovers as she descends the steps and walks through the door:

It was not completely dark. There were the old cellar windows, letting in a little grimy light. The man lit a coal-oil lamp, though, and set it on the table. (40)

The text simultaneously (so economically) identifies this place as a locus of initiation and fixes this scene as a vivid image. The contrast between light and dark marks this place as one in which the character will become enlightened. At the same time, the dark rustic interior with a table, a coal-oil lamp and a single figure as its focal point is reminiscent of a 17th-century painting whose chiaroscuro effect is obtained by candlelight, an overall pictorial effect which heightens the intensity of the moment. Then with no transition the hatchet enters the painting as the focal point:

But I was wary, sitting on the dirty couch, pretending not to look at anything. [...Joe] sat by the table, and there the hatchet lay. (40)

Though the narrator “pretend[s] not to look at anything,” the thematization of the hatchet in the syntax of the sentence makes it the focal point of the “painting,” marking it as the object of her mesmerized gaze. Earlier “gleaming where the sun caught it,” the hatchet is now illuminated by the “coal-oil lamp.” The Silases “chop [...] trees and pull [...] down fences,” Joe Phippen “chops down at the table, splitting the rotten oilcloth,” no doubt reminders to the narrator of the queen in her mother’s story “getting her head chopped off.” These death threats, metonymically crystallized in the image of the hatchet, along with the image of the dead muskrat, eventually lead the narrator to her epiphanic moment at the end of the story as Mary bends over her: “I did not for some time realize that I was no longer afraid of her” (43).

It should be remarked however that this epiphanic statement makes no mention of death, does not establish a cause for the effect obtained (not being afraid) and does not link Mary explicitly to the initiatory images. Indeed, these gaps are sites of the text’s implicit. The logical chain of events must be reconstructed by the reader and the content of these gaps appears in this text primarily in the form of images. That she associated Mary with death is apparent in the previously quoted similes, both using ice imagery: “the fact of death-contained, that *little lump of magic ice*. And Mary McQuade waiting in her starched white dress, big and gloomy

as an iceberg herself" (my emphasis). Then, when the narrator sees the dead muskrat, she concludes: "I only wanted but did not dare, to touch the stiff, soaked body, a fact of death." The "fact of death" has now become more real for her, something she wants to touch, and the use of the term in both contexts consolidates the link between Mary, death and the possibility to transcend it. Interestingly, Suzanne Ferguson has identified this modernist text/image/implicit dynamics and names it "metaphoric plot":

[T]here are stories in which the elements of the hypothetical plot are represented at the surface level by *sets of images* or events—often [...] *unrelated to each other*—that are analogous to and substitutes for events in the hypothetical plot; that is, they stand in relation to the theme of the story as the chain of events does in a normal plot, and the *chain of events is left implicit*. These I call "metaphoric" plots." (18, my emphasis)

Just as seeing frightful images has transformed the narrator, those same images will in the end be transformed, and this second transformation is a new stage in her initiation. The narrator has been instructed by her father not to mention the axe and he himself leaves it out of the story of Joe Phippen told to Mary. The pact of secrecy between the two is sealed when "[her] father looked steadily down the table at [her]" (43). The images, which were so striking for the narrator, are now covered with a veil of secrecy, tainted by the unsayable. Indeed, each of the father's answers to the young initiate's questions about Joe was a negation:

"Why did he have an axe? [...]
"He don't mean any harm with that axe. [...]
"Who is going to burn him and his bed?"
"Nobody."
"Who is the Silases?"
"Nobody," my father said. Just nobody."

The young initiate has learned that along with knowledge comes the weight of secrecy, of what must remain unsaid. After seeing the images, the young girl "[fell] asleep with [her] eyes open" (41), an apt means to express here the mode of perceiving, to express how memories have been imprinted, blurred by lack of knowledge. Munro draws attention to the young girl's visual memories of childhood and her coming to understand the ways of the adult world: there are things to understand and things which remain obscure, mysteries or secrets, ambiguous implicit which adults (and short-story writers) will not elucidate, those "shadowy and

shifting areas,” those “various facets of uncertainty,” as Dahlie Hallvard puts it.

In a construction very similar to the still life of “Postcard,” “Images” nears its completion:

[Mary] served my father his supper and he told her the story of Joe Phippen, the roofed cellar, the boards across the dirt floor. He left out the axe but not the whisky and the cat.

Once again the enumeration evokes a still life which contains and condenses a story, but significantly, whereas the hatchet abruptly entered the painting earlier, it now exits the painting just as abruptly, leaving a hole in its place. This is perhaps a paradigm of the dynamics between text, image and the implicit in these two stories: a striking pictorial effect is produced (a still life) whose individual visual components each concentrate an event, a story to be told, and one missing element exemplifies the blank or the gap: the painting’s blank, the story’s blanks that remain silent, that will “never sa[y] a word.”

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