

The Inside of a Shell

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Alice Munro's
Dance of the Happy Shades

Edited by

Vanessa Guignery

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The Inside of a Shell: Alice Munro's *Dance of the Happy Shades*

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To mothers and daughters:
Vivette, Karine, Léa, Emma

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INTRODUCTION

THE BALANCE OF OPPOSITES IN ALICE MUNRO'S *DANCE OF THE HAPPY SHADES*

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In his introduction to *The Rest of the Story: Critical Essays on Alice Munro* (1999), Robert Thacker argues that

[...] owing to the shape and the scope of Munro's art—story following upon story, reconnecting, redefining—the critical monograph is not really up to Munro at all. Rather, individual articles on individual stories or connected groups of them now seem, to me at least, to offer the better critical course. (6)

While there exist illuminating monographs on Alice Munro's work, the rationale for the present volume follows on from Robert Thacker's recommendation, in line with his own collection of essays but also with Louis K. MacKendrick's early edition of *Probably Fictions: Alice Munro's Narrative Acts* (1984), the special issue of the Canadian journal *Open Letter* (2003-2004) edited by Héliane Ventura and Mary Condé, Harold Bloom's recent edition of *Alice Munro* (2009), and the special issue of the *Journal of the Short Story in English* edited by Héliane Ventura in 2010. The specificity of the present volume (along with some recent publications) is that its chapters focus almost exclusively on Munro's first collection of short stories, *Dance of the Happy Shades*,

which appeared in 1968 and won the Governor General's Award for Fiction, Canada's most prestigious literary prize.¹

Since then, Munro has gone on to publish some sixteen books, the latest one a 620-page volume dating from November 2014 and entitled *Family Furnishings. Selected Stories, 1995-2014*, which comes as a welcome companion to her *Selected Stories 1968-1994* published in 1996. Considered as one of the world's finest short story writers, Munro was awarded the third Man Booker International Prize in 2009 (after Albanian novelist Ismail Kadare in 2005 and Nigerian author Chinua Achebe in 2007, and before American writers Philip Roth in 2011 and Lydia Davis in 2013) and the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2013. It is this worldwide recognition of her career that calls for a look back at her very first collection of short stories some forty-five years after its publication. Contributors to the present volume thus examine the first steps of a great writer and offer diverse critical perspectives on a debut collection that already foreshadows some of the patterns and themes of later stories.

Since the early 1970s, the body of critical analysis of Munro's work has grown considerably, as evidenced by Carol Mazur and Cathy Moulder's 2007 annotated bibliography of Munro's works and criticism, which amounts to more than 300 pages of references. Robert Thacker published two essays that thoroughly review the main volumes on Munro's production in the 1980s and 1990s,² and in another article he draws attention to the way some critics seem driven by a "desire to articulate some personal relation" to Munro's work, to "replicate in the criticism [their] feelings" upon reading her stories (1999, 129)—amongst these critics feature Thacker himself and Magdalene Redekop, two of whose seminal pieces are reproduced in the present volume. In 1995, A. E. Christa Canitz distinguished for her part two generations in Munro criticism, a first one interested in the "mimetic qualities" and the

¹ Recent publications on *Dance of the Happy Shades* include Corinne Bigot and Catherine Lanone's *Sunlight and Shadows, Past and Present. Alice Munro's Dance of the Happy Shades* (2014), Héliane Ventura's *Alice Munro, Dance of the Happy Shades* (2015), and Ailsa Cox and Christine Lorre-Johnston's *The Mind's Eye: Alice Munro's Dance of the Happy Shades* (2015), as well as special issues of *Revue Études Canadiennes/Canadian Studies* (December 2014), *Études de Stylistique Anglaise* edited by Manuel Jobert and Michael Toolan (2015) and *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* edited by Corinne Bigot (Spring 2015).

² "Go Ask Alice: The Progress of Munro Criticism" (1991) and "What's 'Material?': The Progress of Munro Criticism, Part 2" (1998). In the second essay, Thacker asks crucial questions which echo the present editor's misgivings: "What need do these books fill? [...] Do we need them?" (1998, 199).

biographical dimension of the short stories, and a second bringing in “sophisticated theoretical frameworks” (247).³ The essays included in the present volume take into account the extensive existing criticism on Munro’s work from both generations (and beyond) and draw from a variety of approaches (from the fields of narratology, gender studies, psychoanalysis and genetic criticism, to name just a few) to probe some of the main themes, stylistic features, narrative strategies, literary traditions, modes of writing and generic traits of the stories in *Dance of the Happy Shades*.

A first series of chapters connects short stories together and focuses on techniques, topics and concerns that are recurrent in Munro’s first collection (and earlier stories), such as the ambivalent forms of realism and their relation to the representation of place in a specific Canadian context (Omhovère, Rae), the implications of the use of first-person narration and the “double vision” of a child-participant and a reminiscing adult observer (Thacker), the deceptive ordinariness of the trope of the linoleum (Francesconi), the complex father/mother/children relationships (Wallart), and the figure of the epiphany and anti-epiphany (Hovind).

A second group of chapters offers a comparative approach which involves reading two stories by Munro together and analysing, for instance, patterns of entrapment in “Thanks for the Ride” and “The Shining Houses” (Bigot), and the portrayal of death as the “familiar stranger” in “Images” and “The Peace of Utrecht” (Dawkins), thus pointing to Munro’s frequent preoccupation with loss, bereavement and the passing of time, and her constant combination of the strange and the familiar. One chapter examines the ethics of responsibility in two stories dealing with the death of a mentally handicapped child, namely “The Time of Death”, composed in 1953, and “Child’s Play”, published more than half a century later in 2009 in *Too Much Happiness* (Ventura). Other contributors choose to compare a Munro story to a piece by a prestigious predecessor: Munro’s “Postcard” and James Joyce’s 1914 “A Painful Case” (Lanone), Munro’s “Dance of the Happy Shades” and Eudora Welty’s 1949 “June Recital” (Victor). The reader is also invited to listen to the dialogue between literature and eighteenth-century music in the title story “Dance of the Happy Shades” (Duplay), and relate scenes from Munro’s stories to Alex Colville’s eerie paintings (Lanone).

³ Canitz reviews two books belonging to the second generation: James Carscallen’s *The Other Country: Patterns in the Writing of Alice Munro* (1993) and Ajay Heble’s *The Tumble of Reason: Alice Munro’s Discourse of Absence* (1994).

A last series of chapters proposes a detailed analysis of one specific story from the collection. “Images” is thus viewed through the motif of the departure/return journey and related to gender-specific issues (Redekop), while an examination of the various drafts of the story from the Calgary archives illuminates the evolution of Munro’s choice of images to better convey the sense of home (Lorre-Johnston). One chapter offers a psychoanalytical reading of “A Trip to the Coast” by focusing on the enigmatic desire of the m(O)ther (Maisonnat), while “The Peace of Utrecht” is examined through the polysemic motif of remains (Tollance), and the event at the heart of the title story “Dance of the Happy Shades” is scrutinized as a fracture in the surface reality of common life (Skagert).

Along a journey which offers panoramic views, diptychs and close-ups, the volume seeks to combine a macroscopic perspective and a microscopic vision to help situate Munro’s first collection of short stories within the broader context of her general *œuvre*. The fifteen stories may indeed be viewed as a portrait of the artist as a young woman in that they outline the evolution of Munro’s writing skills and techniques over fifteen years. This introduction will focus on three aspects of *Dance of the Happy Shades* that all relate to a pervading sense of paradox and indeterminacy, as Munro’s stories often allow contradictory impulses to coexist without aiming to reconcile them, an oscillation and uncertainty which could be attributed to the hesitancy of a budding writer, but is actually one of Munro’s aesthetic trademarks.⁴ Helen Hoy brilliantly analysed in Munro’s work the “linking of incongruities in language and action”, “the centrality of paradox and the ironic juxtaposition of apparently incompatible terms”, which all sustain the writer’s insistence on the “doubleness of reality” (1980, 100). In Lorraine McMullen’s words:

Paradox is central to her work: her characters are always becoming aware of, and often trying to come to terms with, the paradoxical nature of the world and of humanity—the coexistence of the dull with the exciting, the grotesque with the commonplace, the prosaic with the romantic, the mundane with the marvellous—and the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of distinguishing the real and meaningful from the illusory and delusive, the constant and immutable from the transient and elusive, the true and genuine from the doubtful, the misleading, the fraudulent. (144-145)

⁴ Several critics have analysed various aspects of Munro’s use of paradox, as indicated by Ildikó de Papp Carrington in *Controlling the Uncontrollable. The Fiction of Alice Munro* (4-5).

The aim here is certainly not to comment on the many oppositions delineated by McMullen, but to provide a few examples of such concurrent trends at a narrative, structural, thematic and linguistic level in *Dance of the Happy Shades*. Bearing in mind the well-known distinction Munro makes between “exercise stories” and “real stories”, this presentation will first highlight the slipperiness of such terms as “autobiographical”, “personal” and “real” in Munro’s production, and point to her simultaneous insistence on the fictional dimension of her work. A second part will focus on the unresolved tension in the stories between repetition and difference, between the persistence of a monotonous but reassuring routine and the sudden emergence of an event, however fuzzy and incomprehensible the “thing” that happens might sometimes be. Finally, in recognition of the contentious debate around Munro’s special type of realism, the examination will turn to her use of objects, clothes and surfaces as being both denotative and connotative, calling for multilayered interpretations.

Autobiographical, real, fictional

The stories collected in *Dance of the Happy Shades* were written between 1953—when Munro was 21 years old and composed “The Time of Death” but also the first version of “Day of the Butterfly” entitled “Good-By, Myra”—and 1967—when she was 35 and wrote “Postcard”, “Walker Brothers Cowboy” and “Images” (Ventura 2015, 37). Significantly these three later stories from the first volume were those ones that were chosen to be included in Munro’s *Selected Stories* in 1996, together with “Dance of the Happy Shades”. Munro explains that while composing many of these early stories, she was still a “journeyman writer”, tentatively learning her trade by practice (in Rasporich 19). As she told J. R. Struthers, the arrangement of the stories in the book does not correspond to the order of composition as the aim was to try “to not get all the stories that have a first-person narrator lumped together” and thus not lead the reader to expect “a kind of segmented novel” (in Struthers 20).

With regards to the seven stories written before “The Peace of Utrecht”,⁵ Munro unsparingly described some of them as “exercise stories”, “holding-pattern stories” (in Struthers 22), “almost formula stories” (in Metcalf 58), elaborated at a time when she was acquiring and

⁵ Namely, between 1953 and 1959, “The Time of Death”, “Day of the Butterfly”, “Thanks for the Ride”, “An Ounce of Cure”, “The Shining Houses”, “Sunday Afternoon” and “A Trip to the Coast”.

testing “tricks”, a polysemic word which is recurrent in her work⁶ and of which she is wary, as Robert McGill has rightly pointed out (881). Her daughter Sheila noted that, until the age of 23, Munro’s “writing was consciously imitative. She wanted to write like Virginia Woolf or Henry James, exploring the minute problems of people’s lives, trying to get at some ineffable experience” (Sheila Munro 37). It is also well known that she was enthralled by American “Southern Gothic” writers—Flannery O’Connor, Carson McCullers and Eudora Welty—, and such short story writers as Anton Chekhov, Katherine Anne Porter and Elizabeth Bowen. However, she told Catherine Sheldrick Ross: “[t]here’s nothing wrong with writing imitations. It’s the only way, I think, to learn” (in Ross 22).⁷ She described “The Time of Death”—as well as “A Trip to the Coast”, the story she “liked least in the book” (in Metcalf 58)—as “a kind of imitation Southern story” (in Struthers 23), written under the influence of people she admired. She also said she would willingly get rid of “Thanks for the Ride” and “The Shining Houses” (in Struthers 20), thus pointing to her retrospective doubts about these early stories. “The Peace of Utrecht” and “Dance of the Happy Shades” were both written in the summer of 1959 when Munro was 28 (a few months after her mother died), and they mark a new direction in the writer’s craft: she considers them as “the first real stories” she has ever produced, and ever since, as she told Struthers, she has been writing stories she considers all “real” (in Struthers 20)—an adjective which, together with “autobiographical” and “personal”, generally resists any clear definition but even more so in Munro’s case.

Significantly, the one approach which only sporadically features in the present contributions is the biographical, even if, as Robert Thacker has repeatedly pointed out, “[t]he autobiographical impulse is at the core of Munro’s art” (1988, 157), and

⁶ In her essay “The Colonel’s Hash Resettled”, Munro fears “the work with words may turn out to be a questionable trick” (1972, 182). In “Material”, the narrator refers to a writer’s techniques and notes that she is “not moved by tricks. Or if I am, they have to be good tricks. Lovely tricks, honest tricks” (1974c, 35); in “The Ottawa Valley”, the narrator uses the tricks she knows to describe her mother and try and get rid of her (1974c, 197). “Tricks” is the title of a short story in *Runaway* (2004). When reading “The Shining Houses” in public many years after writing it, Munro remembers “catching all the tricks [she] used at that time, which now seemed very dated” (in McCulloch 231).

⁷ Marcel Proust famously saw in the practice of pastiche the possibility of purging oneself of the influence of a writer, of operating a catharsis of his or her style. Writing about Flaubert, he stated that we need “to produce a voluntary pastiche so that afterwards we can become original once more and not produce involuntary pastiches all our lives” (269).

Munro's own progress has been one of using the factual details of her own life—at each stage of being: child, adolescent, young adult, mother and wife, single person, remarried, older person—as the litmus paper of her characters' beings. (Thacker 2005, 18)

This relative reticence on the part of contributors may be due to the fact that the parallels between Munro's life and those of her early protagonists in *Dance of the Happy Shades* have already been well documented, both by critics and by Munro herself.⁸ The reluctance may also be explained by the fact that one always feels on slippery ground when dealing with such words as “real”, “autobiographical” and “true”.⁹ Many critics have pondered over the meaning of what Munro called “real life”, the original title of her (partly autobiographical) novel *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), and a phrase she repeatedly uses in various contexts in many stories, as well as in several interviews (for example in Rasporich 23). Sensing readers' and critics' befuddlement, Munro delineated in an essay provocatively entitled “What is Real?” what her “fictional room, town, world” (1982b, 225) was made of:

Some of the material I may have lying around already, in memories and observations, and some I invent, and some I have to go diligently looking

⁸ To give a few examples, Munro talked about her “need to write about [her] childhood” when referring to “Walker Brothers Cowboy” and “Images” (in Quinn); she also remarked that the gender divisions in “Boys and Girls” reflected those that existed in her own family (in Rasporich 8) and she regularly admitted that “The Peace of Utrecht” was about her mother: “The first real story I ever wrote was about her” (in Hancock 215), “the story where I first tackled personal material” (in Struthers 21), “the first really painful autobiographical story” (in Metcalf 58). As pointed out by Marta Dvorak, “The Time of Death” is “based on a real event (a toddler scalded to death by his nine-year-old sister) which occurred in Munro's home town in 1939 when she herself was eight, verifiable in the archives of the local weekly, *The Wingham Advance*” (Dvorak 303). “Sunday Afternoon” is inspired by Munro's memories of her family having a maid (Thacker 2005, 61), and her own experience in the summer of 1948 as a maid for a well-to-do family in Forest Hill, Toronto (Ventura 2015, 109); “The Shining Houses” draws from memories of an old woman in North Vancouver whose house was on a road allowance (Sheila Munro 34). “The Office”, which she calls “the most straightforward autobiographical story [she has] ever written” (Munro 1978b, 259), is inspired by an episode of her life in British Columbia in 1960 or 1961, as recorded in her essay “On Writing ‘The Office’.”

⁹ Vladimir Nabokov famously referred to “reality” as “one of the few words which mean nothing without quotes” (310).

for (factual details), while some is dumped in my lap (anecdotes and bits of speech). (1982b, 224)

Significantly, while aiming to offer clarifications on the genesis of her work, Munro uses words that suggest vagueness (in particular the anaphora of “some” and the modal “may”). When asked by John Metcalf in 1972 “How autobiographical are your stories?”, she answered in a typically meandering way, claiming first “In incident, no ... in emotion, completely”, and then adding that most of the episodes in *Lives of Girls and Women* were “changed versions of real incidents” (in Metcalf 58). Some ten years later, she cautiously defined herself as a “writer who uses what is obviously *personal* material—and I always say as *opposed* to straight autobiographical material” (in Struthers 17, emphasis Munro’s), thus introducing another subtle distinction which might confound the reader further. During a trip to China in 1981, she added a new complication when quoting the novelist Jean Rhys in a speech she gave: “I write about myself because I am the only truth I know” (in Rasporich xix). Munro was thereby echoing one of her famous ancestors on her father’s side—the Laidlaws from Scotland—the poet and novelist James Hogg (1770-1835),¹⁰ who confessed in the first paragraph of his *Memoirs of the Author’s Life* (1832): “I like to write about myself: in fact there are few things I like better; it is so delightful to call up old reminiscences” (3). In a very different geographical and literary context, but in the same year of publication as *Dance of the Happy Shades*, a British writer known for his uncompromising radicalism, B. S. Johnson, claimed: “The point of writing it seems to me, why I write anyway, is to tell the truth about something that happened to me” (in Bergonzi 10). Obviously, the attachment to the idea of truth evoked by Johnson, Rhys and Munro does not entail a fidelity to an absolute or universal truth but a commitment to a subjective and local one, closely related to one’s own self, experience or perception,¹¹ and conveyed through novels and short stories, i.e. through fiction. The ground is therefore definitely slippery and the boundaries between supposedly distinct ontological realms are blurred.

No matter the numerous points of contact between Munro’s short stories and “real life”, what readers are presented with in *Dance of the Happy Shades* is first and foremost fiction and should be treated as such.

¹⁰ In the first story from *The View from Castle Rock*, “No Advantages”, one section is entitled “James Hogg and James Laidlaw”.

¹¹ Katherine J. Mayberry writes that in the case of Munro “[t]his truth is wholly experiential and wholly personal, never going beyond the bounds of individual perception” (540).

This is for instance the case of Munro's Jubilee, a place she has compared to such other mythical towns as Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio and Eudora Welty's Morgana, Mississippi. To conjure up her fictional town, Munro drew from her memories of the atmosphere of her hometown (Wingham in North Huron, Ontario), a place whose "secret, plentiful messages" can never be totally "used [...] up" or "drained away" contrary to what the narrator of "Home" purports (Munro 2006, 300-301). As a matter of fact, as Munro remarked, the Ontario landscape, and the Maitland River in particular, still contains countless treasures that may spark one's imagination:

I am still partly convinced that this river—not even the whole river but this little stretch of it—will provide whatever myths you want, whatever adventures. I name the plants, I name the fish, and every name seems to me triumphant, every leaf and quick fish remarkably valuable. This ordinary place is sufficient, everything here touchable and mysterious. (1974a, 33)

The act of naming, set down here through a steady monosyllabic anaphora, is the prerogative of creators, be they gods or writers, and Munro resolutely claims this right for herself. With that "bit of starter dough from the real world" (Munro 1982b, 225), and her habitual sensitivity to the paradoxical and the oxymoronic ("touchable and mysterious"), Munro went on to let her fictional places rise. As she wrote in the inaugural issue of the Wingham, Ontario journal, *Jubilee*:

There are few pleasures in writing equal to that of *creating* your town, exploring the pattern of it, feeling all those lives, and streets, and hidden rooms and histories, coming to light, seeing all the ceremonies and attitudes and memories in your power. Solitary and meshed, these lives are, buried and celebrated. (1974b, 5-6, emphasis added)

The polysyndeton of "and" (a recurrent stylistic device in Munro's stories) and the string of plurals make the reader feel as if s/he were witnessing the steady construction of Munro's fictional house, with the way it "encloses space and makes connections between one enclosed space and another and presents what is outside in a new way" (Munro 1982b, 224). This is how Munro described "what a story does for [her]" and what she would like "[her] stories to do for other people", the way reading is experienced as a rambling journey along forking paths rather than a straight-line voyage. The image could also be an apt description of the way the reader roams back and forth between the fifteen short stories of the collection, the notion of an "enclosed space" being related to the generic characteristics of the

short story (with its concentration of effects, its condensation of form and its stylization of plot) rather than to any constricting sense of limitation.

Something happens

The lives mentioned in the quotation above—“all this life going on”, says the narrator of “Images” while observing the immutable rituals and “ordinary repetitions” in her house (31)—are the imaginary lives of the inhabitants of a fictional provincial town, maybe the “submerged population group” referred to by Frank O’Connor (18) in his famous study of the short story. There, as mentioned in “The Peace of Utrecht”, the “rhythm of life [...] is primitively seasonal. Deaths occur in the winter; marriages are celebrated in the summer” (1968, 194).¹² The “chronotope” Munro creates in *Jubilee*—an artistic configuration of time and space according to Bakhtin—is that of small-town cyclical life:

Here there are no events, only “doings” that constantly repeat themselves. Time has no advancing historical movement; it moves rather in narrow circles: the circle of the day, of the week, of the month, of a person’s entire life. [...] Day in, day out the same round of activities are repeated, the same topics of conversation, the same words and so forth. [...] Time here is without event and therefore almost seems to stand still. (Bakhtin 247-248).

In *Dance of the Happy Shades*, each short story seems to adhere to that cyclical and repetitive trajectory until an event of some sort¹³ introduces a glimpse of the exceptional within the ordinary landscape, and destabilizes the “accomplished pattern” of ritualized lives (Munro 1968, 203). Once the event has been absorbed however, life goes back to its regular routine, so that the stories oscillate between these two contrary pulls towards the familiar and the unusual. In “Walker Brothers Cowboy”, the mesmerizing use of the present tense illustrates the repetition of after-supper walks with the narrator’s father, afternoon walks with her mother (5), and drives in the country on the father’s Walker Brothers route, with the same old cars and pumps and dogs in “[o]ne yard after another”, the same “views of grey

¹² In “Boys and Girls”, the few weeks before Christmas are associated to “the whole pelting operation” of the foxes, i.e. the killing, the skinning and the preparation of the furs (111). The narrator finds “the smell of blood and animal fat” that penetrates the house “reassuringly seasonal” (112).

¹³ For an analysis of Alain Badiou’s concept of the event, see Ulrica Skagert’s essay on “Dance of the Happy Shades” in the present volume.

barns and falling-down sheds and unturning windmills" (9), the ternary rhythm of adjectives and plural nouns reflecting, along with the polysyndeton, the inert repetitiveness of the landscape. The monotony is only broken when the father steps across the line, "out of [his] territory" (10), leaving behind what Deleuze and Guattari have called the rigid "lines of segmentarity" (the social assemblages of marriage, work and religion in particular)¹⁴ according to which a space is "stratified, territorialized, organized, signified, attributed" (10), and opting instead for a line of deterritorialization or line of flight¹⁵ emblemized by the visit to his former girlfriend, Nora. The transgressive quality of the event is suggested by the fact that the Jordans do not come in through the front door as Nora is "afraid the hinges might drop off" (11): the façade of respectability might crumble, just as the walls of the short story might fall to pieces.¹⁶ Earlier on, the narrator had wondered at the purpose of the upper door of a farmhouse, "opening on nothing but air" (7).¹⁷ As suggested by Corinne Bigot and Catherine Lanone, this perilous aperture might be a metaphor "for the opening onto the past sought by the father" (76), but the door of Ben Jordan's trespass will only be cracked open and soon shut back so that he can return to Tuppertown where the sky is "always, nearly always" overcast (18). Repetition comes here with a difference.

Likewise, in "Dance of the Happy Shades", for Miss Marsalles' annual party, "[e]verything [is] always as expected" (214); the room where the mothers find themselves "year after year" (215) and where their children perform, is "the *same* room, exactly the *same* room, in which they had performed themselves" (214, emphasis added).¹⁸ And yet, despite the repetitiveness, there is a feeling that "anything may happen" (212)¹⁹ and

¹⁴ Deleuze and Guattari remark: "Segmentarity is inherent to all the strata composing us. Dwelling, getting around, working, playing: life is spatially and socially segmented" (208).

¹⁵ For an analysis of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of lines of flight, see Corinne Bigot's essay on "Thanks for the Ride" and "The Shining Houses" in the present volume.

¹⁶ In "Postcard", the illegitimacy of Clare and Helen's relationship is symbolized by the fact that they use the side door of Mrs. MacQuarrie's house and "tiptoe up the back stairs to Clare's room" (132).

¹⁷ For an analysis of the door leading nowhere in "Walker Brothers Cowboy" in relation to the anti-epiphanic dimension of Munro's stories, see Jacob Hovind's essay in the present volume.

¹⁸ The repetition is also intertextual as Munro creatively "re-cites" Eudora Welty's "June Recital", as analysed by Jean-Marc Victor in the present volume.

¹⁹ In *Lives of Girls and Women*, the narrator remarks that in Uncle Benny's world, "anything might happen" (31).

something does happen, an epiphany of sorts, its strangeness aptly conveyed by a foreign word, “communiqué” (224), which closes up the collection with an intimation of the *unheimlich*. Interestingly enough, the French word does not appear in italics, as might have been expected, probably as a way of naturalizing the unfamiliar, but the accent on the final vowel is the subtle mark that obliquely conveys the sense that the world has been slanted and unsettled, although the suburban mothers attempted to tone down the miraculous performance by reflecting that the girl was “just the *same* as before” (223, emphasis added).

In “The Time of Death”, when the scissors-man comes back in the first week of November, he is wearing “the *same* stained brown overcoat, with the hem hanging ragged, and the *same* crownless felt hat” (98, emphasis added)—the ternary rhythm of nouns and modifiers endowing the phrase with a lulling regularity—, and the children indulge in the cheerful repetition of his name, “calling excitedly, Old Brandon, old Brandon” (98). Despite his dismal figure and the (too?) obvious symbol of his trade’s cutting tool, Brandon is above all a reassuring sign of the recurrence of the same. However, since his last visit, the surface of the monotonous real has been torn asunder by the untimely irruption of death—significantly, the actual “Time of Death” remains unknown and the tragic event untold. The scissors-man’s return provokes Patricia’s belated scream, a delayed response to trauma after an “incubation period” or “latency” (Caruth 17), one that can only come “[a]fterwards” (89), the striking opening adverb of the short story, which destabilizes narrative time and the act of reading right from the start.²⁰

One should not draw from the examples above the hasty conclusion that Munro is excessively interested in what Henry James has called “the snap of the pistol-shot” (231), i.e. plot, action, incident, adventure, or even “the rising hope of adventure” (Munro 1968, 6). On the contrary, as she has repeatedly pointed out, “[w]hat happens as event doesn’t really much matter” (in Hancock 192), “the incident in a story isn’t what seems to me essential” (Munro 1978b, 261). What she finds fascinating instead, in Eudora Welty’s “The Worn Path” (1941) for instance—a story in which a woman journeys into town to seek medicine for her grandchild—is that “nothing much happens” (in Hancock 192), or in James Agee’s autobiographical novel *A Death in the Family* (1957), she particularly likes “the long scenes where nothing much seems to be happening”, the “lack of making something special happen” (in Struthers 7). To quote Deleuze and

²⁰ For an analysis of the traumatic event in “The Time of Death”, see Héliane Ventura’s essay in the present volume.

Guattari, the fact that “nothing has happened” in some short stories is precisely what makes us ask: “Whatever could have happened [...]? What is this nothing that makes something happen? [...] whatever could have happened, even though everything is and remains imperceptible [...]?” (193-194). In “Red Dress—1946”, the teenage narrator who does not want to go to the high school Christmas Dance but would rather stay safe “behind the boundaries of childhood”, significantly pleads: “Something had to happen, to keep me from that dance” (151); in other words, something had to happen so that nothing happens. At the end of “Sunday Afternoon”, the narrator recognizes that “there was something she would *not* explore *yet*” (171, emphasis added), thus postponing whatever might happen.

What Munro is aiming for in her early stories might well be the borderline between nothing and something, an ineffable and intangible in-between of the same order as Vladimir Jankélévitch's “I-know-not-what” and “almost nothing”, like the “unintelligible mark” Nora leaves on the fender in “Walker Brothers Cowboy” (17). One thinks of the paradoxical incipit of Katherine Mansfield's short story “The Wind Blows” (1915) after the heroine has woken up: “What has happened? Something dreadful has happened. No—nothing has happened” (137).²¹ As Anne Besnault-Levita rightly points out in her analysis of Mansfield's story, this “nothing” is less the antonym of “something” than its double (Besnault-Levita 26): it is not so much that “nothing has happened” than that *a* “nothing has happened”, that is, something. In Munro's “Images”, the dark man with a hatchet is “the *thing* you have always known was there”,²² made from “a hope of *something* final, terrifying” (38, emphasis added), but nothing dreadful—no horrific murder—takes place, the Silases are “nobody” and there is nothing to tell Mary (43). And yet, there is a Jankelevitchan “I-know-not-what” about this story and others in the collection, an “almost nothing” which is also a “something you will never know” to echo the conclusion of “Walker Brothers Cowboy” (18), a “something about this life” the male narrator of “Thanks for the Ride” had “not known” (51). For the narrator of “Red Dress—1946”, it is a “something mysterious” about herself that she has “known [...] all along”

²¹ The reference to Mansfield is not accidental. Héliane Ventura has pointed out that one of the hypotexts for “Red Dress—1946” is Mansfield's 1921 story “Her First Ball” (2015, 52-53) while Marta Dvorak evokes the “eloquent affiliations” between Munro's “Day of the Butterfly” and Mansfield's 1922 story “The Doll House” (308).

²² For an analysis of the combination of the strange and the familiar in this story and in “Peace of Utrecht”, see Laura Dawkins's article in the present volume.

and yet “had not known [...] for sure” (155), as well as “a mysterious and oppressive obligation” she would fail to fulfil every time and her mother “would not know” (160). In the case of the suburban mothers of “Dance of the Happy Shades”, it is a “something that they had forgotten they had forgotten” (222), in which the repetition seemingly doubles the memory lapse and makes the characters even more oblivious. In all these different stories, the various types of “something” remain undefined, obscure, uncertain, and the cognitive verb “to know” is often associated (usually in the negative form) with the vagueness of “things”. The blurriness and lack of knowledge are probably not surprising in a first volume in which many young characters are engaged in an epistemological process related to the construction of their own (gendered) identity, which provokes contradictory emotions.²³

Surfaces and depths

The blurriness and intangibility suggested by the shifting quantifiers mentioned above should not be interpreted as a sign that Munro’s stories are marked by an overwhelming evanescent and ineffable quality. On the contrary, they are also anchored in a concrete (but still fictional and often ambivalent) reality, which has led John Moss to refer to Munro’s “heightened realism” (8), and several critics to situate her work within a realist tradition, although Berverly Rasporich, among others, has rightly argued that “to label the form and genre of Munro’s fiction as realistic is highly misleading” (163). Munro’s is certainly not a “documentary” realism, a word which is “misapplied” according to Lorraine York as the writer’s desire to fix reality may start on the documentary surface but will always end on the imaginative level (York 26). In *Lives of Girls and Women*, the budding novelist Del Jordan frantically makes lists of stores and businesses, names on tombstones and street signs, titles of movies played over a dozen years in Jubilee, but she knows that the “hope of accuracy” is “crazy, heartbreaking”, and that it is utopian to suppose she may be able to capture “every last thing, every layer of speech and

²³ As suggested by the quote from “Dance of the Happy Shades”, adults, and more particularly mothers, are also sometimes presented as clueless. In “Boys and Girls”, the mother believes her son Laird will soon be able to help his father, which leads the young girl to declare (unaware of the irony of her rebuke): “It showed how little my mother knew about the way things really were” (118). In “The Peace of Utrecht” on the other hand, the adult narrator feels: “what I would be told I already knew, I had always known” (208). In both quotes and as shown in previous examples, the verb “to know” is bound with vague terms (“things” and “what”).

thought, stroke of light on bark or walls, every smell, pothole, pain, crack, delusion, held still and held together" (Munro 1971, 276).

Nevertheless, Munro's descriptions of landscape and townscape are certainly often characterised by a "careful visual composition or patterning" (Rasporich 128), like a painter's, a photographer's or a cameraman's, as analysed by Rasporich (127-129) in the main street description of "Thanks for the Ride" (Munro 1968, 46-47), the retreating trees in the opening paragraph of "A Trip to the Coast" (172) and the fade-out in the last paragraph of "The Time of Death" (99).²⁴ If places are often marked by a sense of incompleteness and uncertainty, the term "photographic" has also been used to refer to Munro's accuracy of observation and "celebration of detail" (York 22), and Hermione Lee recently referred to Munro's "fabulous naturalism" in her careful attention to and "special tenderness for landscapes", even "at their most indeterminate": "While Munro's characters are going about their business, not much noticing the scenery [...], she is noticing it for them" (Lee 30).

As Munro has said in several interviews, she is a great admirer of the work of such painters as Edward Hopper, Andrew Wyeth, Alex Colville,²⁵ Jack Chambers and Christopher Pratt, who have been associated—rightly or wrongly—with such trends as superrealism, neorealism, hyperrealism or photographic realism. Munro has sometimes hastily been called a "super-realist" herself (Gervais 6), and when she was asked "Do you see yourself as trying to record things, like a representational painter?", she answered: "what I admire is a kind of super realism" (in Gibson 256). Referring to the town of Jubilee, she also said that the town was "not 'real,' not on the map, but super-real to [her]" (Munro 1974b, 5). In line with this form of supposedly heightened realism, Munro explained her fondness for describing all the objects in a house in a meticulous way: "I just love doing everything in the room and everything in the cupboard [...]. I like people's clothes, too" (in Hancock 211). The surface ordinariness of domesticity however always conceals deeper layers of complexity. The reader's attention is drawn to very specific objects in a household, for instance in "Images", when the narrator refers to the dining room and mentions in passing: "(where with a little brass-handled brush my mother cleaned the white cloth, and the lighting-fixture over the round table hung down unlit flowers of thick, butterscotch glass)" (31). The profusion of minute details of texture, colour and size is counterbalanced

²⁴ These passages are also precisely analysed by Claire Omhòvère in the present volume.

²⁵ See Catherine Lanone's essay on Munro and Colville in the present volume.

by the confinement of the microscopic vignette between brackets, as if reflecting the partial but acute vision of the young girl who has stored such distinct memories of her childhood just beneath the surface of her consciousness. The sharp visual memory is thus both conjured up as in a snapshot and put aside within brackets.

As for clothes and accessories,²⁶ they are not mere surface layers covering the body as they often metonymically bespeak the characters' social standing and induce lexical echoes across the short stories, thus weaving inconspicuous threads between fictional figures of varied backgrounds, distinguishing between those who don "good" dresses and white shirts, hats and shoes in a way that strictly abides by gender divisions, and others who wear "loose", "dirty" and "ravelling" garments that destabilize gender lines.²⁷ On the lower rungs of the social ladder feature Mrs. Fullerton from "The Shining Houses", "her clothes slatternly-gay, dime-store brooches pinned to her ravelling sweater" (20) and the unshapely grandmother from "A Trip to the Coast", wearing "a blue apron rubbed and dirty across the stomach, an unbuttoned, ravelling, no-colour sweater that had belonged once to her husband" (175). In "Walker Brothers Cowboy", the narrator's mother emphatically sets herself apart from the indistinct group of "housewives in loose beltless dresses torn under the arms" (5), where the echo in the fricatives [s] and [z] contributes to the general impression of sloppy shapelessness and slack morals. The spotless whiteness of the mother's ladylike attire which embarrasses the narrator—"a good dress, navy with little flowers", "a summer hat of white straw" and "white shoes" (5), matched by her daughter's "white socks" (5) and her husband's "white shirt" (6)—contrasts with Nora's masculine "farmer's straw hat", "loose, dirty print smock and running shoes" (11), which she then swaps for androgynous "Cuban heels" (these can be worn by men and women alike) and what she considers a "decent dress", one which is still "loose" (17) and "flowered [...] lavishly" with surrealistic "green poppies" (12).²⁸ Both the solid-looking Cuban heels (with the

²⁶ For an analysis of the semiotics of clothes in *Dance of the Happy Shades*, see Bigot and Lanone (82-87).

²⁷ As pointed out by Ann Oakley, "[t]o be a man or a woman, a boy or a girl, is as much a function of dress, gesture, occupation, social network and personality, as it is of possessing a particular set of genitals" (8).

²⁸ For Corinne Bigot and Catherine Lanone, the green poppies "symbolize erotic appeal and frustration, they never bloom into the right colour" (82). For Héliane Ventura, the dress is a "marker of heterodoxy", being "synchronized neither with the colours of nature nor with the community's practices" (2015, 73-74, my translation). Magdalene Redekop (40) aptly points to the echo between Ben

foreign connotation attached to the name) and the unnatural green poppies exclude Nora, who “*digs with the wrong foot*” (14, 17),²⁹ from the norm and emphasize her position of excentricity. While femininity is challenged by characters who subvert the accepted codes of nature and gender, one should not forget that most mothers in the collection abide by their traditional roles as (sometimes inventive) seamstresses, choosing the cut and pattern for their daughters, thereby ascribing them a place, an identity and a destiny.³⁰

Within individual stories, distinctions along social lines are thus often metonymically conveyed through a meticulous description of clothes but also through a subtle intertwining of the senses of sight, touch and hearing. In “Sunday Afternoon”, the maid Alva has to wear a blue uniform, “the predominant kitchen colour”, and “white Cuban-heeled shoes that clomped on the stones of the patio—making, in contrast to the sandals and pumps, a heavy, purposeful, plebian sound” (164). The alliteration in the plosive [p], the deep vowels and the ternary rhythm of ponderous adjectives all mirror the plodding gait imposed by the condescending upper class upon their submissive servants. As suggested by Héliane Ventura, the hypallage of “plebian” (transferring the epithet from the person to the sound produced by the shoes) as well as the metonymic displacement pit patrician women against common ones (2015, 110), an opposition perhaps also visually marked by the severe dash. By contrast, the delicate and elegant Mrs. Gannett flashes “the polished cotton skirts of a flowered sundress” (161) and her teenage daughter Margaret proudly spreads out on the bed her “smooth little bodices, expensively tucked and shaped” and “the crinolines with their crisp and fanciful bursts of net” (168). This time, the fricatives let out swishing, swooshing and swirling sounds that already announce the dances at the Ojibway hotel, upper-class dances that differ greatly from Nora’s sweaty dance round the linoleum in “Walker Brothers Cowboy”

Jordan’s boyish wonder that there could be “such a thing as green poppies” (Munro 1968, 12) and Stephen’s remark in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: “But you could not have a green rose” (Joyce 12). Both floral oddities are against nature, just as Nora belongs to an alien world.

²⁹ The italics further ostracize Nora by highlighting her difference. As mentioned by Julien Gracq, the italics were originally “meant to formally indicate the introduction within language and under duress of a foreign body” (183, my translation). For an analysis of the use of italics in Munro’s stories, see Bigot (57-80).

³⁰ Mothers are seen making clothes for their daughters in the openings of “Walker Brothers Cowboy”, “The Time of Death” and “Red Dress—1946” (1, 89, 147), as well as in “Boys and Girls” (117).

(16).³¹ In “Day of the Butterfly”, Myra Sayla’s “good dress” is of a faded blue so that she “glimmer[s] sadly in sky-blue taffeta, in dusty turquoise crepe” (106) while Gladys Healey, whose father runs a Dry Goods and Ladies’ Wear store, twirls in her “Royal Stuart tartan skirt” and sports “flashing plaid skirts and organdie blouses and velvet jackets with brass buttons” (102). The accumulating plurals, the polysyndeton and the diversity of fabrics testify to the variety of her wardrobe and speak of her father’s middle-class social standing. The polarities between the two girls’ outfits are consistent with the process of persecution and victimization, which is at work in the story, as analysed by Héliane Daziron (12-14) and Darlene Kelly.

In addition to such careful attention to objects and clothes as social metonymies of polysemic content, Munro remarks that she “do[es] a lot on surface things” (in Hancock 211) and these are scrupulously described, circumscribing spatial limits, while simultaneously concealing greater and more complex depths. Among them features first and foremost the linoleum, “one of Munro’s key words” (Blodgett 1982, 66),³² but also, for instance, “the little six-sided white tiles, which lay together in such an admirable and logical pattern” on the bathroom floor as acutely observed by the drunk young woman in “An Ounce of Cure” (81), or “the square of worn carpet” which defines the children’s bedroom-space in “Images” (113). However, just as objects can never be “innocent objects to be touched” as the narrator of “Day of the Butterfly” rightly ascertained (110), domestic surfaces are treacherous and deceitful, hiding “deep caves” (Munro 1971, 276) and calling for an excavating type of reading and interpretation that moves beyond the denotative to suggest a plurality of implications. To quote Rose in *The Beggar Maid* (1978), “the patterns of linoleum can leer up at you, treachery is the other side of dailiness” (19).

Instead of aiming for the illusory transparency of smooth surfaces, Munro therefore often chooses subtly oblique and deviant paths, for instance offering up unexpected similes which conjure up a more eloquent picture of a given scene or character than would a supposedly straightforward, objective or realist description, and sometimes introduce a comic or grotesque dimension.³³ Thus, in “Images”, the narrator remarks

³¹ For an exploration of the motif of the dance in the stories of *Dance of the Happy Shades*, see Mathieu Duplay’s article in the present volume.

³² For an analysis of the trope of the linoleum in Munro’s stories, see Sabrina Francesconi’s article in the present volume.

³³ More generally, Munro uses images to implicitly convey meaning. Héliane Ventura gives a thorough analysis of the *ekphrasis* of “heroic calendars” at the

that “the fan, as if it was tired, stirred the air like soup” (30)—an unlikely combination of pathetic fallacy with a culinary image in a domestic setting—, while the freakish Mary McQuade is “big and gloomy as an iceberg” (31), “freckled all over [...] as if she was sprinkled with oatmeal” (31), her legs “round as drainpipes” (32), jokes “swelling her up like a bullfrog” (34). The grandmother in “Thanks for the Ride” is “as soft and shapeless as a collapsed pudding” (51) while her counterpart in “A Trip to the Coast” has arms “veined and twisted like whips”, a stomach “like a four-months’ pregnancy” and “the look of an under-nourished and maliciously intelligent baby” (175).³⁴ These disparate similes are just a few examples of the way Munro frequently takes detours via surprising images, extravagant metaphors, paradoxical phrases and startling oxymorons, “minor bombardment[s]” (Munro 1968, 194) that open up a multitude of interpretative roads. According to Lorraine McMullen, paradox “is a structural as well as a technical or linguistic attitude in Munro”: she “uses the paradoxes of language to reveal the paradoxes of life and the ambiguities of language to reveal the ambiguities of existence” (145). Like paradox, her “startling metaphors and similes” are meant “to reveal the unusual, the complex and the contradictory in events” (146). Helen Hoy, among others, has drawn attention to “Munro’s delight in incongruity, her interest in what does not fit” (1991, 8), but these instances of discordant, dissonant or disconcerting juxtapositions are meant to get “the detail precisely right in every phrase and word” (Lee 30).

In her debut collection, Munro thus brings together various levels of (invented) reality, mixing what has been seen as personal and fictional, real and fabulous, strange and familiar, concrete and ineffable, domestic and wild. As E. D. Blodgett remarks, Munro’s is “an art of accommodating contradictions” (1988, 126), and, to quote from the title story of *Dance of the Happy Shades*, “[t]he facts are not to be reconciled” (223). The Canadian writer thus offers minute descriptions of scenes, objects and surfaces, which hide or only partly reveal the shimmer of kaleidoscopic secrets. Their paradoxical “touchable and mysterious” quality (Munro 1974a, 33) is similar to the sky in “A Trip to the Coast”, “pale, cool, smoothly ribbed with light and flushed at the edges, like the inside of a shell” (174). Munro’s gift lies in this unique ability to

beginning of “Boys and Girls” (Munro 1968, 111) and shows how this inaugural cryptogram clandestinely programs the act of reading (Ventura 2005, 157).

³⁴ Corinne Bigot and Catherine Lanone see the grandmother in “A Trip to the Coast” as “a hybrid creature mingling the ages of man, fusing into one the different stages of life”, “a grotesque allegory of the passing of time, an anamorphic portrait which bears the symptoms both of youth and decay” (70).

simultaneously perceive the monochromatic and the multicoloured, the miniature and the panoramic, both inside and on the edges of a shell.

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