“Want to go down and see if the Lake’s still there?”: Custom and Resistance in Alice Munro’s *Dance of the Happy Shades*

« Tu veux descendre pour voir si le lac est toujours là ? » *Habitude et résistance dans La Danse des ombres heureuses*

Carolyn Masel

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“WANT TO GO DOWN AND SEE IF THE LAKE’S STILL THERE?”: CUSTOM AND RESISTANCE IN ALICE MUNRO’S *DANCE OF THE HAPPY SHADES*

Carolyn MASEL

Australian Catholic University (Melbourne)

Frequently commented-upon themes in Munro’s oeuvre include the mores of small societies, gender roles, and episodes that transform people’s lives. Munro’s first collection contains additional, subtler sub-themes or motifs: the fragility of particular moments, the frailty and persistence of voluntary social contracts, the unpredictable behaviour of some individuals and the absurd nature of events. This essay connects the preoccupations of *Dance of the Happy Shades* with the creation of protagonists whose independence of mind is their only weapon against the larger forces of coercion. Both coercion and Munro’s strategies of resistance remain live issues, for Canadian and non-Canadian readers alike.

Les chercheurs qui travaillent sur l’oeuvre d’Alice Munro se penchent souvent sur les questions des mœurs dans les petites communautés, du rôle de la femme et de l’homme, et des épisodes qui transforment la vie. Sa première collection de nouvelles contient également d’autres motifs, moins saillants, plus subtils: la fragilité de moments particuliers, la persistance de contrats sociaux, les comportements inattendus de certains individus, et la nature absurde de certains événements. Cet article lie les motifs de *Dance of the Happy Shades* à la création de protagonistes pour lesquels la seule défense contre les forces de la contrainte, est leur esprit indépendant. La contrainte et les stratégies de résistance dans ce recueil, restent des problématiques vivantes, pour les lecteurs canadiens comme pour des lecteurs non-canadiens.

In Chris Wallace-Crabbe’s eloquent formulation, “Poets are linguistically aware, intensely aware, of the pathos of our situation as sentient beings, swimming in time” (WALLACE-CRABBE 2005: 21). By this token, Alice Munro is among the finest poets of our age; indeed, there is arguably something typically poetic in her response to temporality as a motivating force and creative principle. That is, there is something analogous to the way that poets pitch their verbal performances against the triple negation of silence/death/white space in the way that Munro shapes temporality through the rhythms of narration as a means of exerting a modicum of control over time, which is represented as entropic or chaotic. But to remark that, from her very first collection, her oeuvre manifests a preoccupation with transience is hardly original: Munro herself has declared as much (MUNRO 1999: 23; SMYTHE 1991: 493; TWIGG 1978), and a number of critics have analysed this concern in her work in various ways. One notes, in particular, Karen Smythe’s claim that Munro’s “‘realism’ involves the anti-entropic documentation of a life (or lives) as a stay against the natural process of decay – as a kind of shoring against its

ruin” (SMYTHE 1991: 497). That statement strikes me as truer of Munro’s work up to *Open Secrets* (1994), less so after that volume’s hard-won optimism, which perhaps marks a larger optimistic turn in her work. I will return to Smythe’s formulation later in this essay, but I want to begin with a more basic set of questions about Munro’s treatment of time, and I want, at the same time, to explore the analogy with poetry, which I think is connected with it. My sense is that if we can specify what is poetic about Munro’s work, we can begin to identify some of its compelling qualities, such as its linguistic and emotional intensity and the corresponding intensity it demands of its readers. We can, in other words, arrive at some idea of what it is like to read Munro and why readers are drawn to her work regardless of the extent of their local knowledge and corollary considerations of realism.

Here Wallace-Crabbe can help again. The focus of *Read it Again* (2005) is the many strategies developed in poetry for interrupting the smooth flow of our attention as readers, in order to point up its various kinds of multiplicity and shapeliness and to direct our thought toward the deepest implications of these things. It is, he contends, important for our humanity to have a genre that requires us to pay a particular kind of attention to language and to the metaphysical concerns it raises – metaphysics here being a matter of imagination and intellect rather than of belief. For example, he argues that, although John Keats does not exhibit the least nostalgia for a recognisable belief system, or any trace of the kind of respectable consistency that would mark him as a man on the pathway to maturity, his major odes all have “the density, the shaping conflict and the verbal resistance which are traditionally associated with great poetry” (69).

Let us begin with the expression “verbal resistance”, which easily lends itself to a discussion of fiction. Thinking about Munro’s stories, we might note the existence of particular locutions that are arresting when first encountered and prove to be durable enough to be recalled later, even many years later. It is often the case that these same powerful verbal hooks, or instances of “verbal resistance”, are what make her stories resemble parables – for when they are re-encountered and examined, one discovers that a large part of their memorability lies in their mysteriousness: they are suggestive, not wholly comprehensible. In two of her collections, *Open Secrets* (1994) and *The Love of a Good Woman* (1998), Munro issues an open invitation to the reader to participate in the resolution of particular mysteries (for example, by solving a whodunit). Frequently, such resolutions depend on the reader’s engagement with a single memorable elusive sentence.

But the same thing is true of hundreds of sentences in a great many stories. “The Time of Death”, from *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), provides a very clear example. What is it about Patricia Parry’s “tiny pointed” teeth, “almost transparent, and faintly rotten at the edges” (MUNRO 1968: 99) that is so telling – so memorable and poignant – in this story? There is what the image signifies: decay, and therefore mortality, and perhaps also malnutrition or a failure of self-care – a blighted start to an ambitious child’s life. Then there is when the image occurs: in the course of the inevitable, long-delayed reaction of Patricia to her brother’s death. Yet, more important even than these two aspects is a sense of the images being random: it is something apparently seized upon in the midst of chaos that, ultimately, gives it its power. Here is the whole sentence in its immediate context:

The shrill shaking cries brought Leona running out, and the neighbours; they pulled her into the house, still screaming. They could not get her to say what was the matter; they thought she must be having some kind of fit. Her eyes were screwed up tight and her mouth wide open; her tiny pointed teeth were almost transparent, and faintly rotten at the edges; they made her look like a ferret, a wretched little animal insane with rage or fear. They tried shaking her, slapping her, throwing cold water on her face; at last they got her to swallow big dose of soothing-syrup with a lot of whisky in it, and they put her to bed. (99)

When we return to this passage, hooked by the “verbal resistance” that makes it memorable over time, we presume that the perspective is that of the neighbours who come running in response to Patricia’s screaming, since they are mentioned in the sentences on either side of the one about the teeth. But the diction of the sentence with the teeth diverges from what can be reasonably assumed about the linguistic idiom of the neighbours (“faintly rotten”, “wretched little animal”), it does not voice their consciousness. Nor does it belong to an author’s constructed narrator-figure. It seems rather to fulfil Roland Barthes’ conditions for the death of the author (BARTHES 2001: 1466) being, ultimately, an unattributable – or at least incompletely attributable – utterance. Paradoxically, it is this exceeding of any ascribable perspective that lends the sentence about the girl’s teeth its peculiar authority – an authority that, according to Barthes, we readers give it.

The other telling instance of “verbal resistance” here is the refusal to specify the emotion that Patricia is experiencing. Munro refuses to *choose between* rage

and fear, and she refuses to *include both* emotions. The result is that we cannot read Patricia's emotion, and that gives her appearance an *unheimlich* aspect. In her otherness, she resembles some "wretched little animal" that, too, cannot be named – for the simile of "a ferret" is passed over in favour of an unfamiliar creature.

There is an odd parallel use of this technique earlier on in the story that one registers without yet quite knowing why. When Mrs. McGee tells the children that their brother has died, the two younger ones react emotionally, as does Allie McGee herself. "But", we are told, "Patricia sat still, with her face wary and polite" (96). This mixture of wariness and politeness – each signifying another emotion withheld – cannot help being intriguing, all the more so since the reader cannot see the face on which evidence of such complexity is registered. By the end of the story we know quite a lot about Patricia's ambition, perfectionism and capacity for self-determination; we know that she loved the brother for whose death she is responsible; but we do not *know* – that is, we cannot *read* – her heartfelt response to her situation, which is therefore, by implication, beyond the capacity of language to represent. There are the words that Patricia screams out – "I hate that old scissors-man! I hate him!" – an outcry with a symbolic freight we can hardly miss. But that cry against death is emphatically not an acknowledgement of the guilt and grief that we (like the neighbours) might surmise lie under the child's wariness and politeness; such an acknowledgement is never given. Similarly, we are given the ingredients of the boy's fatal accident but not the complete story, so we cannot judge it independently. As Russell Banks puts it: "Munro has the great moral force and intelligence to refuse to judge or idealise her characters, which would be easy to do, and she won't allow her readers to do so either" (BANKS 2006: 94). We are left with the image of the teeth – no longer belonging merely to a child who, in her individual nature, resembles a flesh-tearing animal –, but to a child who embodies the principle of destructiveness common to animal life that she cries out against. Strangely, through her outcry, Patricia Parry attains radical innocence and vulnerability. She is W.B. Yeats's stricken rabbit in "The Man and the Echo" (YEATS 1950: 395) rather than his hawk or owl.¹

¹ In this late poem, the dialogue of man and echo, or self and soul, is interrupted, thus:

Up there some hawk or owl has struck,
Dropping out of sky or rock,
A stricken rabbit is crying out,
And its cry distracts my thought.

Two things seem worth remarking at this point. One is simply that a discussion of the “verbal resistance” of a particular sentence in a story has also involved the “density” and the “shaping conflict” of that story – that is, all of the factors that Wallace-Crabbe describes as the components of “great poetry” (69). The other (quite different) thing is that access to the kinds of meaning I have been describing is not confined to Canadians, or to people who have lived in small towns in regional areas, or to people of a particular generation. Such people will have particular insights about the communities that inform Munro’s stories and the way that the stories illuminate the communities.

Munro’s small towns are not merely repositories of customs and characters, speech patterns and habits of thought, although they include all of those things. And even though memory is of fundamental importance – being both a method of composition for Munro and the material out which the fabric of her stories is cut, the basis of her attraction for readers is not necessarily memory, I would argue, or even verisimilitude. As with any great writer, it is difficult to specify any single quality that accounts for his or her particular magnetism, but in Munro’s case it would seem that the very rhythms of her sentences, the rhythms with which the narrator’s perceptions are registered, compose a psyche that performs engagingly, insightfully and with its own special bravura. I would suggest that the basis of Munro’s wide appeal is psychological: she has come to stand for a kind of daring, a passionate curiosity, a determination to articulate what is known most deeply. Her protagonists are marked by their independence of spirit, and it is, I think, this quality that compels us, who are drawn to Munro’s stories from different times and places.

From my experience of teaching Munro’s stories in England and Australia and watching students two generations away from Munro respond to them, I would conclude that the details of a different local culture do not necessarily engage younger readers. However, the acumen of the narrator-protagonist, her verbal energy, her ironic humour, certainly resonate with them. Young people also empathise with Munro’s young protagonists who feel themselves pressured to conform to an array of social conventions. The strategies of resistance to all kinds of coercion exhibited by fiercely independent-minded women are highly appealing for this group of readers. (The same thing is true for the single male narrator in *Dance of the Happy Shades*: the immensely sympathetic “sidekick” in “Thanks for the Ride”.)

Indeed, the fact that there are so many readers of Munro’s fiction in the world seems a most encouraging sign. It suggests that her protagonists’ capacity for

repeated resistance to coercion constitutes a model of a kind. And I think there is substance to Daniel Menaker's comment, "To read a writer like Alice Munro is to be understood. To be understood is to be in a community. Munro's readers create an invisible and often silent community for themselves" (Menaker in AWANO 2006: 101). Perhaps it is time to become a little more audible.

Munro's work is deeply haunting. To read her is to engage with the rich secret inner lives of ordinary people, whose complexity and reasonableness and capacity for accounting for themselves to themselves give them a particular dignity. This is often at variance with their outward circumstances, but they typically exhibit an expert defence against that outsider's gaze, or else a magnificent disregard for it. In "Postcard", Helen, newly jilted by her long-term partner, demonstrates an exemplary resilience:

Inside the store they were waiting, oh, how nice, good morning Helen, good morning Helen, such quiet kind hopeful voices wait to see if I'm going to fall flat on the floor and start having hysterics.... I said good morning perfectly cheerfully and went on upstairs thanking God I have my own washroom and thinking, I bet this will be a big day for Children's Wear. It was, too. I never had a morning with so many mothers in to buy a hair ribbon or a little pair of socks, willing to climb that stairs for it. (MUNRO 1968: 139)

The connection between emotional resilience and linguistic energy is clear. It is not that Helen is inured to suffering – one of the reasons she is glad to have her own washroom is that she can seek solitude there. We can hear that in the emphatic "thanking God I have my own washroom", which is also faintly ludicrous. Grief might well be one of the faces she allows herself in private.

It is equally clear in the argument she has with her mother, which is the only literary mother-daughter argument that I can think of where the daughter is wholly right:

"No, I'm not the one that ought to be ashamed," she continued, weeping. "I am an old woman but I know. If a man loses respect for a girl he don't marry her."

"If that was true there wouldn't be hardly one marriage in this town."

"You destroyed your own chances."

“You never said a word of this to me as long as he was coming here and I am not listening to it now,” I said, and went upstairs. (MUNRO 1968: 142)

We glimpse here also the coercive society of women so prominent in *Dance of the Happy Shades*. Its victims are younger females, and it should not be underestimated: it can anaesthetise a child, as we have seen in “The Time of Death” (99), or pimp a daughter (“Thanks for the Ride” : 52), but more commonly it just deals out humiliation (“Boys and Girls” : 127; “Sunday Afternoon” : 170-1). Such communities of coercion always need to be resisted.

However, one of the distinguishing features of *Dance of the Happy Shades* is that for every instance of resilience against such a one, there is another instance of community fulfilling its function – providing, if not support, then at least a sense of commonality. The characteristic expression of this aspect of commonality is lyrical, even melancholy. For example, in the middle of “An Ounce of Cure”, which is a sharply comic story, comes this moving sentence about the dance that the narrator did not attend, because of her failed romance:

But the dance was held in the Armouries, which was only half a block away from our house; I had been able to see the boys in dark suits, the girls in long pale formals under their coats, passing gravely under the street-lights, stepping around the last patches of snow. (78)

It is the ritual aspect of this description that works so powerfully. It suggests not just the dance on that particular night but a whole set of customs, with the coming together of boys and girls exquisitely timed to coincide with the change of season; there is a later reference to the last of the snow again and to the “huge sweet winds of spring” (79). The formal, the courtship ritual of a particular community, has more universal elements: the colours of the boys’ suits and the girls’ features are not discernible beyond being “dark” or “pale”. The couples going to the dance become types of courting couples, seen against a background of a parade of courting couples, a parade of humanity. One is reminded of the narrator of “Bartleby the Scrivener” recalling “the bright silks and sparkling faces ... in gala trim, swanlike sailing down the Mississippi of Broadway” and contrasting the happy world that courts the light with the hidden world of misery (MELVILLE 1853: 21). So, too, in her comic-ironic way, the narrator of “An Ounce of Cure” contrasts the parade of couples with her misery at not attending the formal. We might note that the ceremonial aspect of this depiction is indistinguishable from the realism of its detail: the girls need to

wear coats over their dresses, the couples have to step carefully around the patches of snow. The adverb “gravely” is very powerful, with its own ritual import; it describes the body language that must substitute for the facial expressions we are too distant to read, the words we are too distant to hear. Perhaps for that reason, it suggests silence as well as seriousness. It is, in fact, a favourite word of Munro’s, and there is a certain consistency in its usage. The same word (the same technique of verbal resistance) is used to describe the deliberation with which the narrator-figure pours herself her first drink: “Gravely, with a glance at my set face in the black window above the sink, I poured a little whisky from each of the bottles... until I had my glass full” (80). Many years later, the sublimely dignified protagonist of “Carried Away” will assert her independence by pouring herself a glass of wine or spirits, as she pleases, with her evening meal, irrespective of the view of her dining companion, the dentist, and the word will again catch in the reader’s consciousness: “‘It is for my health,’ said Louisa gravely” (MUNRO 1994: 3).

“Walker Brothers Cowboy”, from which the title of this discussion comes, functions as a template for the rest of the collection. “Want to go down and see if the Lake’s still there?” is only a semi-facetious question. The concept of object permanence – and its contrary, the propensity of objects to disappear – runs right through this story. It operates on a variety of scales. To begin with, there is the transience of human life as measured in geological time, as explained by a father to his daughter – a dauntingly large scale. The reader gets a measure of the protagonist immediately through her response to this knowledge, which entails both fear and fearlessness. “The tiny share we have of time appals me” (MUNRO 1968: 3), she says, but she notes apparently without pathos that her father’s outspread fingers imitating the effect of the ice-cap by pressing the ground on which they are sitting “make hardly any impression at all” (MUNRO 1968: 3). She has a detailed understanding of the formation of the Great Lakes, but she cannot imagine the place where she finds herself in any other time – for example, inhabited by dinosaurs or without the township where her family lives. Her imagination only engages with the thought of mortality, and half of that thought, which concerns her father’s death, is not even stated but takes place between a pair of bookending sentences: “He was not alive when this century started. I will be barely alive – old, old – when it ends.” (MUNRO 1968: 3)

A couple of pages later, object permanence has become a site of emotional blackmail. While feasting on that staple of transience, ice cream (celebrated as such by this family who have no refrigerator), the protagonist is subject to her

mother's attempts to induce nostalgia for their life at Dungannon, which they have had to leave behind them:

"Do you remember when we put you in your sled and Major pulled you?" (Major our dog that we had to leave with neighbours when we moved.) "Do you remember your sandbox outside the kitchen window?" I pretend to remember far less than I do, wary of being trapped into sympathy or any unwanted emotion.

My mother has headaches. She often has to lie down. She lies on my brother's narrow bed in the little screened porch, shaded by heavy branches "I look up at that tree and I think I am at home," she says. (MUNRO 1968: 5-6)

It is difficult to sympathise with someone who seems to have such quantities of nostalgia and self-pity. Moreover, since the move from Dungannon to Tuppertown represents a loss of economic stability due to the failure of the fox-pelt trade, which business was run by the father, it is impossible to sympathise without engaging in divisive family politics. Both of these allegiances are questioned in stories later on in the collection. "Images", where the daughter-protagonist is allowed an adventure outside the bounds of gender, is usually taken to be the type for "Boys and Girls", which ends with gender treachery trumping filial love; however, "Walker Brothers Cowboy" is, I think, equally implicated. "Walker Brothers Cowboy" links in a different way, through the gravely ill mother in "Images" and, later, the poignant story, "The Peace of Utrecht".

The undermining of object permanence prefigures death. It follows that to turn away from shared memory is to deny the other's experience. To forget is to kill. The "main action" of "Walker Brothers Cowboy" is the encounter with the father's old flame and the sense that the man whom the daughter thought she knew so well made choices in the past that determined his present position, including his relationship to his children. Every discussion of the story I have read cites the penultimate, irreducible, lyric sentence:

So my father drives and my brother watches the road for rabbits and I feel my father's life flowing back from our car in the last of the afternoon, darkening and turning strange, 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. (MUNRO 1968: 18)

To my mind, this sentence presents a literal rendition of the economy of object permanence I have been outlining.

Against this sense of transience, which is nowhere more overwhelming than in the collection's first story, there are many small signs of community, and I think it is important to register these. Even though they are frail and tenuous, they offer, I would argue, an alternative to Smythe's view of Munro's "anti-entropic documentation of a life (or lives) as a stay against the natural process of decay – as a kind of shoring against its ruin" (SMYTHE 1991: 497). Smythe's account suggests a kind of atomisation, whereby the accounts of the particularities of lives are pitted against the ineluctable operation of entropy. What I am suggesting by way of qualification is that the fact of community, no matter how frail, constitutes a kind of bulwark against the sense of individual loss; it is a comfort and a benediction without necessarily requiring further action. While the narrator is awed and frightened by comparing the brief time of her life with the unimaginably huge stretches of geological time before and after, she derives comfort from part of time which she shares with her father (MUNRO 1968: 3). There is a benignity in the old maple trees that still shade some parts of main street in Tuppertown (1) and in the park that is really a vacant lot except that "it is kept clear of junk" (2). We are not told who is responsible for this, but we know that the impulse that informs it is fundamentally benign. Someone built the breakwater at the lake and someone inserted the "safe-swimming floats" (3). The children's games may be "ragged [and] dissolving" (2) and the single bench overlooking the lake missing a slat, but the provisional is still a form of provision. Even the better-equipped part of town, with the Pavilion and the lifeguard's chair, is not really better provided for: the grain boats are "ancient [and] rusty" (2), the lifeguard's "throne" is "rickety" (2). Although, as we have seen, the narrator resists her mother's nostalgia for the past, when the story begins, she has still to separate from her father. The strange part of her father's life that she comes to discover when he and his former girlfriend re-encounter each other is not a cause for either jealousy or insecurity. It is a sign of her father's otherness, his possession of a story without her in it; it is, ultimately, a way of ceding him his independence and of separating off her own inner life.

If, in this story, the mother's strategy is to resist change, Munro asserts her own contrary strategy through her protagonist of accepting it. For all intents and purposes, the lake will always be there, even though one is aware of a much

large scheme of things according to which it will last the briefest moment in time. The point is, I think, that the amount of time that it lasts is enough: it is enough to sustain her father's jokey reassurance of permanence. It is enough for a human.

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