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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 “eerie 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 disjunctedness 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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