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The Scream in Alice Munro's "The Time of Death"

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As several critics have pointed out, paradox is central to Alice Munro's fiction, and "The Time of Death" is no exception as signaled by its very title and its incipit. Indeed, despite its bold-faced and unflinching title, the "time of death" is precisely what the text will carefully avoid depicting, although it informs the whole story. The very first word of the short story, "Afterwards", suggests an event significant enough to be a watershed while it remains in the prehistory of the text, placing the reader in the uncomfortable position where he feels he ought to know something about which he has not yet read. The time of death is somehow taken for granted, at once natural, decisive and unaccountable. The text deals with the "before" and the "after," but through several ellipses the time of Benny's death as well as his funeral are left untold, haunting the typographic breaks on the page. This narrative silence is in stark contrast with Patricia's scream, a belated reaction to her little brother's death for which she is, however unwittingly, responsible. However this scream, towards which the whole short story seems to move as tension unrelentingly builds up is – by its very textual nature and its evolution from an articulated expression of hatred to pure sounds,¹ to a purely visual deformation of the face – a *silent* scream, a scream we read about but can only hear in the private recesses of our minds. This, I feel, is very close to the experience one has in looking at Edvard Munch's famous 1893 painting, *The Scream*, which likewise creates a visual, and therefore silent,

¹ This is emphasized by the repetition of the word *scream* four times within the space of six lines.

auditory impression in a moment suspended in time. In both Munch's painting and Munro's story, the silent explosion echoes long after the viewer of the painting has gone and the reader closed the book, its paradoxical nature making it all the more potent and suggesting unbearable horror and pain, the cause of which remains unrepresentable. What "The Time of Death" and *The Scream* give us are the effects on people of what escapes definition or description, and how this in turn affects their and our vision of the world around. The paradoxical nature of the short story therefore appears as partaking of its very essence as it makes us experience the epistemological dead-end death confronts us with.

Although it does not show the time of death, Munro's short story presents us with the times of death, each person involved reacting in their own way and differently in time. None of these reactions however seems to be appropriate. It is somehow Patricia's scream which appears adequate in its very inadequacy as it disrupts the appearances which everybody, Patricia included, has tried to keep up; it reveals an animality in man which civilization desperately tries to elide. As in Munch's painting, the world's solid reality seems to melt away, distorted by the deafening silent sound waves. Even though the short story ends on the snowflakes that do not melt on "the rock of the earth" and seem to cover up and silence the scream, Munro's narrative technique does not allow such fake firmness as it deprives the reader of any solid ground on which to base an interpretation, creating a similar experience to that of Munch's painting.

1. The times of death

Placed straightaway in the aftermath of Benny's death, the reader is first presented with Leona's reaction, her overpowering presence somehow already erasing the boy whose existence is only implied in the mention of "the mother, Leona Parry," the absence of the possessive adjective "his" redoubling as it were that effacement. Leona, the figure of the bereaved mother, indeed occupies center-stage as all the women circle around her and she uncomprehendingly goes over the moments that just preceded Benny's death, trying to exculpate herself from responsibility: "I wasn't hardly out of the house, I wasn't out of the house twenty minutes-" (89). The double negation foreshadows Allie McGee's aside, calling into question the truth of the statement. The latter's remembering of the time

just before the accident again focuses on Leona, who invades both Allie's domestic space and the space of the narrative. When mourning the loss of her child, Leona seems to value his effacement mostly, as if the child were already an absence even before his death: "He was so good, too, you never would of known you had him in the house. I always said, that's the best one I ever had" (92). Her hysterical reaction to Benny's death, screaming that she does not want to set eyes on her daughter Patricia, held responsible for the little boy's death, thus appears somewhat overdone, almost theatrical. This is corroborated by her later instant reconciliation with Patricia when the young girl is offered an opportunity to sing in a concert. Leona is shown to project onto her daughter the singing career she might herself have hoped for², and what she says about her actually reflects on herself: "[...] it just comes natural to her to perform" (90). The paradoxical wording that qualifies the idea of authenticity is confirmed in the next few lines where Leona prides herself on Patricia's "natural blond hair", the genuineness being guaranteed by a long lineage of natural blondes in the family and by the pleonastic use of adjectives: "that *real natural* blonde is a lot scarcer than natural curly" (90) (*my emphasis*), while the artificiality of the whole process is emphasized by the tedious routine performed every night to make Patricia's hair curly. Therefore Leona's attempt at restoring her self-image as a good mother intuitively attuned to her children cannot but raise the reader's suspicions:

And I went out the door and down the steps and down to the end of the garden and just as I took the hook off the gate something stopped me, I thought, *something's wrong!* [...] and Allie says, Leona, what's the matter with you, you look so white, she says—
Allie McGee heard this too and said nothing, because it was not a time for any sort of accuracy. (90-91)

² Although Patricia's name appears no less than five times in the space of a single paragraph, making her as obtrusive a presence as her mother, it is most of the time caught up in structures that turn her into a passive object in the hands of her mother: "Patricia *was supposed to* have the outfit for that night", "Patricia *was introduced* as the Little Sweetheart of Maitland Valley" (89), "Leona *had started her singing* in public when she was three-years old" (90). She is besides netted in her mother's discourse, with no voice of her own at this stage in the narrative.

Allie McGee's unvoiced inconspicuous comment³ is scathing and destroys whatever credibility might have been granted to Leona's self-reported premonition. Allie's reserve is instantly filled in by Leona's frantic cries. From the start, the grieving mother's reactions –the hysterical screams, the rambling talk, the self-justification, the isolation in her bedroom for weeks or the trite comfort of "You gotta go on" (98) – are stamped with inauthenticity.

So is the consolation brought by the mourning women of the village who gather around Leona after the news of Benny's death. Forming a protective circle around the mother and insulating her from Patricia, their silhouettes are vaguely disquieting and almost witch-like:

And the women in the kitchen would crowd around the couch, their big bodies indistinct in the half-light, their faces looming pale and heavy, hung with the *ritual masks* of mourning and compassion. Now lay down, they *would* say, in the stately tones of *ritual* soothing. Lay down, Leona, she ain't here, it's all right. (91 – *my emphasis*)

The repetition of the word *ritual*, associated with *masks*, and the iterative *would*, empty these conventional expressions of mourning of any meaning or true compassion. The words of religious solace uttered by the two Salvation Army women are likewise stilted, mechanical and insensitive to Leona's grief: "In the garden of heaven the children bloom like flowers. God needed another flower and he took your child. Sister, you should thank him and be glad" (91). Out of touch with the actual suffering of the mother, the religious cliché is all the more cruelly ironical as it clashes with the sterility of Leona's garden:

I stood there and I looked back at the garden and all I could see was the cornstalks standing and the cabbages there frozen, we never got them in this year [...] and the yards all empty, it was cold I guess and no kids playin' out– (90)

As the official language of religious authority, it silences the women placed in the position of children meant to believe what they are told, even against their better judgment: "The other women listened uneasily while these spoke; their faces at such words took on a look of embarrassed

³ Though the last sentence starts with narration, the second part seems to translate Allie's thought process in what comes close to Free Indirect Thought.

childish solemnity”⁴ (91). The support brought by the female community thus appears contrived, artificial, an impression also prompted by the narrator’s use of parallel structures for the opening lines of two successive paragraphs: “And the women in the kitchen would crowd [...]” followed by “And the girl from the Salvation army would say [...]” (91), the very repetitive structures adding to the use of *and* and *would* to make the actions appear automatic. Furthermore, the recurrence of the verb *say*, four times in the span of a few lines across these same two paragraphs, becomes self-destructive, increasingly suggesting that nothing of importance is actually uttered and no authentic message conveyed. Finally, in such a context, the reader is likely to intuit that, although the women weep with Leona, their compassion is tainted with contempt and petty jealousy, a point confirmed at the end of the story; indeed, a few weeks later, all traces of sympathy are gone, leaving only spite: “That is a prize kid of Leona’s, the neighbors said to each other as they went home. That *singer*, they said, because now things were back to normal and they disliked Leona as much as before” (99).

As for Allie McGee who first appears as the helpful and efficient neighbor, offering the shelter of her house to Leona and to the three children whom she gets ready for the funeral, her generosity also appears fake, as her disparaging comments to the store-man about the children’s uncleanliness or Patricia’s insensate reaction reveal. Thus, what could be thought of as the only appropriate reaction turns out to be mere hypocrisy.

Faced with the inauthenticity of female solidarity, the men’s reaction is one of escapism. Excluded from the domestic sphere and the mourning rituals, the father, together with the other men of the community, is made to feel inadequate. He therefore rejects those ritualistic expressions of grief and finds refuge in drink. The men’s absence from the mourning scene, a result of both exclusion and escapism, is matched by the peripheral space the text devotes to them.

Only the children, in their innocence, speak out what the other characters do not allow themselves to voice, and confront their elder sister with the horror of Benny’s death and her responsibility: “Is he going to die?” (95) George says, “He cried awful, Irene said, her face in the pillow.” (96) It should be noted that the children’s dialogue (95-96) is presented in indented lines which suffice as markers of direct speech and

⁴ As for Leona, she somehow reverts to an infant state, rocking herself back and forth.

of change of speaker. Because all the previous direct speech verbal exchanges between adults until this point in the text have been integrated within the narrative discourse, neither inverted commas nor paragraphing working as demarcation between quoted discourse and reporting discourse, the children's dialogue is endowed with a special status. The visual difference, because it corresponds to a return to more conventional speech presentation, seems to make the dialogue appear far more real, retrospectively confirming that no authentic communication has taken place between the protagonists until that stage in the short story. The dialogue concludes on a paragraph where direct speech is again narrative-integrated as it introduces Allie McGee back into the conversation: "He did so die, he did so! Patricia did not answer. *It's her fault*, George sobbed, and Mrs McGee said, Oh, no, oh, no!" (96): the children's sincere and immediate reaction is a foil to Ali McGee's disingenuously orthodox protestation, but they cannot get the full meaning and implication of their words.

Patricia, on the other hand, is old enough to understand, but her attitude is one of denial. She cannot face Benny's death, and even less so her own instrumentality in that death. Her reaction is thus first to refuse to consider the very possibility of his dying and to play down the suffering he must have endured, taking refuge in outrageous fantasy which she needs to assert very authoritatively: "[...] I never in my life heard of anybody that died of a burnt skin. Your whole skin could be burnt off it wouldn't matter you could just grow another. Irene stop crying or I'll hit you" (96). When Benny's death has become a fact, she behaves as though nothing had happened. Her complete indifference, the fact that she does not manifest any kind of grief and keeps paying attention to her own appearance (her shoes, her hair) and reading magazines, or continues her public singing, turn her into a kind of monster. Her complete insensitivity creates an uncanny atmosphere as she seems to live in a parallel world, cut off from reality. Time is suspended, like the snow which, throughout the short story, is about to fall but does not. The scream that suddenly breaks out thus almost comes as a relief, easing the tension that has been building up as Patricia, it seems, suddenly gets the full implications of Benny's death and of her own guilt. Although both Patricia's reactions – her denial that makes her keep up appearances as well as her insane scream – first appear as utterly unacceptable responses, their very inadequacy makes them perfectly adequate in response to a situation so horrible and monstrous that it precludes any idea of normality. There can be no rational and

adequate response to the death of a child, and this is what Patricia's extreme reactions show as they shatter the world of appearances set up by the little community.

2. Shattered appearances

Patricia's scream indeed disrupts the "return to normal" which the short story stages. The delayed shock of recognition breaks up the surface of everyday routine as the apparition of the old scissors-man, whom Benny used to run to – his name being one of the few words the cognitively-impaired child could pronounce –, has a *punctum* effect on Patricia. The *punctum* is defined by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* as: "[...] this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me." Karen Smythe, taking up Barthes' analysis, writes:

In Munro's stories, then, the *studium* is that which produces the 'reality effect,' while the *punctum* produces the surprise, the shock of revelation. The *punctum* is therefore that which is unnamable, since, Barthes writes, 'what I can name cannot really prick me'. [Smythe: 1991 495]

She further links this to Walter Benjamin's analysis which associates the *punctum* with Freud's exploration of trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and his discovery of the protective shield: "Benjamin suggests that 'shocks' are unconscious impulses which break through the protection of consciousness" [Smythe: 1991 495]. Patricia's scream indeed breaks through the protective screen she has been painstakingly building, imitating and carrying to the extreme the system of values the whole community sets up as a defense against its instinctive nature and animality.

Patricia's scream is indeed one of anger and hate: "I hate that old scissors-man! I hate him! She screamed" (98). In the chapter he dedicates to the analysis of anger in *La Chair envisagée*, Denis Vasse points out that a fit of anger is usually a reaction to something that destabilizes the ego ideal, that is, the narcissistic image one has of oneself, the model one tries to conform to:

Elle apparaît souvent et avec une violence inouïe dans les moments de fausse sérénité qui précèdent la déconstruction de l'image de nous-mêmes centrée sur nous-mêmes au lieu d'être ouverte à l'altérité qui nous constitue comme sujet.

La colère annonce, en le dénonçant comme excessif ou insupportable, le signifiant qui décale l'image spéculaire et la fait choir, le signifiant du manque en tant que, dans l'économie du même, il est signifiant de l'ouverture et de l'Autre. [Vasse 78]

En nous faisant sortir de nos gonds, l'affect de la colère protège ou restaure un sentiment de plénitude ou de justice de nous-mêmes attaché à un objet que nous ne voulons pas perdre ou à une situation, un manque que nous ne voulons pas voir ou savoir. [Vasse 81]

The scissors-man, an avatar of the Grim Reaper, appears as *punctum* in the blind spot of Patricia's self, that part of the self and of reality she has steadfastly tried to ignore. The presence of the scissors-man suddenly brings to the fore the moments of communion Patricia used to share with Benny, moments of simple sincerity, unmediated by language, which contrast with her usual escape into the world of magazines that provide her with a model. His shabby appearance – "he wore the same stained brown overcoat, with the hem hanging ragged, and the same crownless felt hat" (98) – is also a reminder of the putrescent corporeal nature Patricia is desperately trying to fight. He thus shatters the perfect self she has been creating: the gifted girl with blonde curly hair, always clean and well-mannered. Patricia does not make any distinction between the ego ideal and her real self:

She did things the way a grown-up does; she did not pretend things. She did not play at being a singer, though she was going to be a singer when she grew up, maybe on the movies or maybe on the radio. She liked to look at movie magazines and magazines with pictures of clothes and rooms in them; she liked to look in the windows of some of the houses uptown.⁵ (92)

It cannot be forgotten that Benny dies from scalding precisely because of Patricia's obsession with cleanliness, her desire for a house as perfect as those she sees in glossy magazines or as Allie McGee's own house:

I'm going to clean this place up, she said. It never gets cleaned up like other places. The first thing I'm going to do I'm going to scrub the floor and you kids have to help me—
She put the pail on the stove.
That water is hot to start with, Irene said.
It's not hot enough. It's got to be good and boiling hot. I seen Mrs McGee scrub *her* floor. (94)

⁵ One may note here that the use of repetitions ironically saps any idea of progression and thus of growing up.

Allie McGee as the embodiment of the veneer of civilization is here designated as indirectly responsible as well for Benny's death, and with her, it is the whole society with its prescriptive norms and attachment to appearances which, we contend, is indicted. Indeed, from the start, Leona's slovenly appearance is insisted upon: her coming to Allie's place in her nightdress, her clumsy handling of Allie's sewing machine, her unkempt house and children. First anchored in Allie's perception, these judgments betray the attitudes of the women of the community at large: "Leona [...] threw her head down and then back (showing, as some of them noticed with a feeling of shame, the dirty lines on her neck)" (92). It is this sense of shame which is infused in Patricia as her reactions show when she washes her feet at the shoe shop for fear of the adults' comments—which indeed they do not fail to make about the younger children-- or again when she insists on good manners while the children are staying at the McGees's. Patricia's absence of reaction at Benny's death could actually be interpreted as a corrective to her mother's lack of restraint, another instance of the latter's indecorous attitude. There is indeed a form of indecency in exhibiting what ought to remain private, whether it be your daughter's singing, your body or your suffering, and this early description of Leona symbolizes her general attitude: "Her kimona fallen open revealed her lean chest, her wilted breasts with their large blue veins sloping into the grey-pink nightgown." (90)

The flesh here appears as faded, an intimation of death, crudely revealing man's carnal nature. It is this carnal dimension which society tries to keep at bay by erasing any reminder of its lower nature. Thus Patricia tries to discreetly dispose of George's urine as Allie McGee's sophisticated mauve and yellow guestroom does not allow room for a "stinking old pot" under the bed (95). Once again, the children's spontaneous and unaffected reactions reveal the artificiality of society and its unhealthy relationship to the body and to waste, although – significantly – education prevents any direct wording. Allie McGee's house appears as the epitome of such artificiality: "it was covered on the outside with imitation brick and inside it had an imitation fireplace" (95). The balanced repetition of the word *imitation* points to the fake harmony that is sought after and proves as inauthentic as Leona's outbursts, or rather makes the latter appear more sincere. Patricia finds herself caught between the standards of good society which require the erasure and disposal of anything considered dirty and too corporeal, and the reality of her life at

home where bodies and refuse are not hidden.⁶ Her monstrous denial of Benny's death therefore exposes the denial at work in the whole of society which keeps upholding the lie of its ideal image while refusing to acknowledge the body.

However, thus denied, the animal body comes back with a vengeance in Patricia's scream which turns the blonde-haired soft-spoken girl into a wild animal with a voracious mouth:

She screamed, standing stock-still in the yard with her face looking so wizened and white. [...] 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. (99)

Patricia seems to lose her humanity. The mask of civilized attitude falls down with her distorted face which may recall Munch's barely human character whose face is reduced to its orifices – the eyes, the nostrils and the mouth – and whose whole body seems to be dissolving. Whereas the body was denied by language, it here seems to become one with it in this unarticulated form of language.

The clear-cut, neat appearances which Patricia was attempting to keep, symbolized in her painstakingly cutting the white edges around the paper clothes her little brother and sister were cutting out so that they may "stay on" (92), have melted away precisely with the arrival of the scissors-man. The game, consisting in cutting out a model family, as well as clothes for them from a catalogue, reveals the fantasy at work in society, a fantasy which covers up anything that may recall the corporeal nature of humanity. The schizophrenic dichotomy between body and language ultimately brings Patricia, and with her the whole of society, to the verge of insanity as all borders and limits eventually dissolve. Benny's scalded skin may stand for this utmost loss of protective barriers between self and world which cannot but lead to death.

⁶ Even Benny, her retarded brother with limited access to language, somehow reveals this animality since one of the two words he can pronounce is "bow-wow" in imitation of the dog's bark. The description given when he is scalded to death, brings to the fore this animality: "[...] Benny was making a noise not like crying, but more a noise like they had heard a dog making after its hind parts were run over, but worse and louder—" (92). Patricia feels slightly ashamed and unsuccessfully tries to teach some words to her brother, trying to bridge the gap between language and body. Benny's death may therefore be interpreted as a form of symbolical murder from society at large, an ultimate denial of the body to keep up the lie of perfect appearances.

Thus Patricia's insane, and therefore completely inappropriate scream, can be seen as doubly appropriate: it first shows how the death of a child remains far beyond the pale of human understanding and it reveals the impossible lie society forces upon its members in upholding an ideal image which cancels the reality of the body. The fact that it echoes Benny's awful animal cries precisely at the time of death confirms this adequate inadequacy. The mirror is shattered when reality can no longer be escaped. Yet, the scream which distorts Patricia's face, as in Munch's painting, also twists and deforms the world around, forbidding the grasping of any definite shape. The short story likewise does not allow any firm hold, and interpretation sways, wavers and vacillates when faced with the short story's unresolved tensions.

3. The whirling world of the short story

As pointed out in the introduction, the paradoxical nature of the silent scream, central to the short story's interpretation, suggests an unresolved tension between voice and sight which translates in the ungraspable shifts in point of view and voice to be found in the short story. Indeed, the opening pages of the short story seem to posit Allie McGee as a reliable focalizer whose sensible practical point of view accessed through Free Indirect Thought is a corrective to Leona's small arrangements with the truth in her discourse. Allie's silent voice is superimposed on Leona's vocal story which it consistently debunks. The two voices run parallel, Allie's story providing a negative evaluation of Leona, an evaluation which we tend to take at face-value. The contest between the silent and the vocal voices of the two women is consistently emphasized, with no ambiguity as to who gets the upper-hand:

Allie McGee did not say, and Leona caught her breath and plunged on: Twenty minutes. (90)

Allie McGee heard this too and said nothing, because it was not a time for any sort of accuracy. Leona's voice had gone higher and higher as she talked and any time now she might break off and begin to scream: Don't let that kid come near me, don't let me see her, just don't let her come near me. (91)

The contest is all the more insidiously biased as, although Allie McGee's thoughts appear in parentheses, seemingly secondary to Leona's voice, the latter is embedded in Allie's point of view: the long stretch in parentheses

(89-90) is indeed mostly made up of Leona's rambling talk (while at Allie McGee's house at the time of Benny's death) as remembered by Allie, this remembered monologue filtered through an ironical perspective postponing, as it were, the present one actually delivered by Leona. Besides the bias may be traced as early as in the description of the voice "ragged and insistent, *but not yet hysterical*" (89) (my emphasis), a comment which we are retrospectively tempted to interpret as originating in Allie. Thus the first section of the short story is used to orient the reader's control of sympathy. However the end of the section introduces unobtrusive comments that instill in the reader some misgivings about Allie McGee's reliability. As the women gathered around Leona start crying, we are for the first time offered an outside description of the sensible neighbor: "She was stout, placid-faced, big-breasted; she had no children" (91). It is not so much the unflattering physical description that strikes a blow to the image of the competent woman as the mention of her childlessness. This sets her apart from the other mourning women, and suggests incapacity to empathize with the bereaved mother, questioning the legitimacy of her point of view: "In the dark overheated kitchen the women felt the dignity of this sorrow in their maternal flesh, they were humble before this unwashed, unliked and desolate Leona" (92). Her never having experienced in her flesh the bond of love may partly explain why Allie McGee cannot but look with contempt upon Leona's untidy body; her reaction to Leona's heartbreak is one of sympathy and falls short of true empathy. From then on, Allie McGee's point of view can no longer be considered as reliable, her hypocrisy being underlined when Patricia overhears her disparaging remarks to the shoe shop assistant, whether it be about the children's uncleanness or Patricia's completely inappropriate pride in her new shoes. This invites us to return to the beginning where some phrases take on a more malicious turn than had initially been perceived: "Allie McGee thought, but she did not say so, *not at the time*" (89). The last phrase, suggesting later unkind gossip, further contributes to a reevaluation of Allie McGee who becomes part of the meanness evinced in the neighbors' comments. However, this does not completely erase her remarks about Leona, and the reader is left with no safe ground for evaluation.

The second section is an analepsis which places the reader with Patricia and the children in the Parrys' house just before the accident. Point of view oscillates between the third person narrator and Patricia, allowing both proximity with the young girl and critical distance, thereby

creating a form of superior understanding that leads the reader to feel some sympathy and compassion towards Patricia. Hence, when we move to Allie McGee's house in the next section as the narrative shifts forward this time, to the night just after Benny's accident but before his death in hospital, we are led to feel some sympathy again for Patricia, even though her behavior becomes increasingly awkward, revealing her inability to face the reality of the accident. It is to be noticed that the third section calls into question the temporality of the first for it covers a period starting from the immediate aftermath of the accident to the children's return home and Patricia's concert a few days after the funeral, implying therefore that the events in the first section must have been part of the time span covered by this third section. Temporal shifts thus blur landmarks, as do the shifts in point of view. Indeed in this section, point of view and voice fluctuate between the narrator, the children, Patricia and occasionally Mrs McGee, though some sentences cannot be ascribed with certainty to any particular speaker:

Mrs McGee took them downtown to buy them all new shoes for the funeral. Patricia was not going to the funeral because Leona had said she never wanted to see her again as long as she lived, but she was to get new shoes too; *it would have been unkind to leave her out.* (97 – my emphasis)

Whether the last sentence is Leona's or Allie McGee's seems impossible to decide. As Patricia closes in upon herself, living in her own parallel world cut off from reality, point of view becomes more and more detached, with the section ending on a terse statement: "Patricia did not cry" (98).

The scream episode is likewise described through external focalization, as though the narrator were trying to withdraw emotionally from an unsettling scene. About one of her characters in "An Ounce of Cure", Alice Munro writes:

When the girl's circumstances become hopelessly messy, when nothing is going to go right for her, she gets out of it by looking at the way things happen – by changing from a participant to an observer. This ... is what a writer does. ... I made the glorious leap from being a victim of my own ineptness and self-conscious miseries to being a godlike arranger of patterns and destinies, even if they were all in my head. [Metcalf 125]

When Patricia's defensive emotional insulation from reality collapses, the protective shielding is somehow transferred onto the narrator. As Karen Smythe points out: "the role of observer allows Munro (as model reader) to employ the 'twentieth century hybrid' of 'sympathetic identification and

aesthetic detachment' of which Lorraine York speaks" [Smythe 497]. Emotional detachment comes to a height in the last section with its impersonal outside description of the neighborhood which contrasts with the end of the previous section, an overhearing of the neighbors' nasty gossip. As opposed to this meanness – the only real target of Munro's condemnation – the plurifocalized and plurivocal narrative thwarts any clear-cut, side-taking judgment on the characters' behavior, leading the reader into a position of tolerance where, along with Munro, he becomes an observer of man's aspirations, limitations, and infinite complexity.

Denied the stability of point of view, the reader may also feel at a loss to give a coherent interpretation to the rich network of images and echoes that sometimes resists interpretation. The recurring presence of windows is one such instance. Indeed, Patricia is said often to carry Benny to the window, the 18-month-old baby enjoying to be thus held, looking out for hours at the dog and repeating "bow-wow", his only feeble grasp on language. Conversely, Patricia uses windows to look inside the houses uptown, prolonging the magazines exposition of rooms. Each time, we seem to be looking with the characters, be it inside out or outside in. The last image of the short story however places us outside looking at children behind the windows looking at us, their faces pressed against the windows. These children cannot but remind us of Benny, but the impression conveyed here is one of children caged in, as though we were the powerless witnesses to the antics of people trapped in their everyday environment. This placing of the reader on either side of windows is an apt metaphor for the handling of point of view in the short story with its constant shifts from internal to external focalization to eventually lead to a more remote overview.

In a similar way, the variation in voices is given a literal yet complex diegetic expression, from the awkward silence in the neighborhood just before the accident and at the very end of the short story, to the screams: Leona's hysterical shriek, Benny's atrocious squeaks, and Patricia's scream. In between are the whispers Patricia requires from the children at Mrs McGee's, the *soft* voice of Mrs McGee, thus described when she slanders the children with the shop clerk, and the "stately tones of ritual soothing" of the mourning women, together with the "gentle unchanging voice" and the "almost masculine voice" (91) of the two women from the Salvation Army. These controlled monotonous voices thus appear as insincere and artificial, without any anchoring in the body. They are to be contrasted with Patricia's strong voice and her beautiful singing, a

perfectly controlled voice but modulated and given resonance by her body, and of course with her scream, all the more striking since, as the uncharitable neighbors are quick to point out, she is destined to be a singer. As expressions respectively of culture and animality, the singer's voice and the scream are completely at odds, yet both are connected to the body. And so is the scissors man's dirge which elicits Patricia's scream, "his unintelligible chant, mournful and shrill, and so strange you would think, if you did not know it was the scissors-man, that there was a madman loose in the world" (98). This inarticulated chant appears as the authentic expression of mourning, devoid of the deceptive trappings of language, and at odds with the fake and artificial songs Leona chooses for Patricia's concert after Benny's death: "May the Circle Be Unbroken" and "It Is No Secret What God Can Do" (98). Both songs are a far cry from the experience of grief: all protective circles, that of the community, the family or the self are shattered by Benny's death, and God's designs when it comes to the death of a child remain far beyond human understanding, bringing the survivors close to madness, as the scissors-man unintelligible song aptly reveals. Besides, because of its inarticulateness and because of the connection between Benny and that man, we may be led to link this dirge with Benny's own modulations of his voice: "he would stand for hours just looking out a window saying Bow-wow, bow-wow, now in a low questioning tongue, now crooningly, stroking his hand down the windowpane" (93), the crooning also evoking Patricia. Thus a whole network of echoes, counterpoints is created, each with its own interest but almost to the point of saturation, which partly accounts for the fact that no consistent interpretation of the network as a whole is possible and Munro's figure in the carpet remains a secret.

This is no better evinced than precisely in her treatment of what could be seen as the epiphanic moment of the scream. Indeed the arrival of the scissors-man and Patricia's scream appear as a moment of revelation for Patricia: the sudden and violent facing of Benny's death and of her own responsibility. As suggested earlier, the fact that the snow – which is expected throughout the short story, as though time were arrested because of Patricia's unnatural behavior – starts falling right after the episode, could seem to point to a restoration of the cycles of the seasons and of time, as Karen Smythe points out while immediately questioning this

assertion⁷. However, the last paragraph undermines, without completely invalidating it, such an interpretation. Patricia's scream is indeed silenced and erased in the insentient description of the topography of the hamlet whose unchanging features are emphasized with the repetition of the existential phrase "there was" (99). The impression of stasis thus created seems to cancel the epiphanic moment of the scream, the release of tensions and return to normal. The snow does not melt on the "hard rock of the earth", which therefore cannot be seen as welcoming back Benny's dead body and turning it into one of the flowers in God's garden. The epiphany is also derided by the Star-of-Bethlehem quilt at Mrs McGee's, for the traditional design is part of her doll's house, and has lost all spiritual and religious meaning. The emphasis on this design comes besides as a cruel irony since what the children learn at her place is the death of their young brother. But conversely, it could also be argued that the first scene when the women are gathered around "the mother" could be seen as a scene of birth rather than of death:

Afterwards the mother, Leona Parry, lay on the couch, with a quilt around her, and the women kept putting more wood on the fire although the kitchen was very hot, and no one turned the light on. (89)

The indefinite nature of the *afterwards*, Leona's position, the hot kitchen, and the plaid – which we could imagine to be the Star of Bethlehem one – create confusion which, though soon dispelled, is nevertheless part of Munro's strategy to refuse the reader the comfort of a stable ground for interpretation. That the writer should apply this strategy of blurring and opacification to the time of mourning depicted immediately after the title, is telling of the extent to which she is bent on building a dense and elusive world around a central hole, a world which, like the liquefying world of Munch's painting, wavers and melts.

The scream does not bring any kind of resolution on the diegetic or the textual level, and cannot be explained; nor can Benny's death. This makes Munro's domestic Gothic stories – as she called them in an

⁷ "Though the snow falls, suggesting a normal continuation of the life cycle and a release of repressed grief for Patricia, the lack of any acceptable adult reaction to the original accident, or to Patricia's emotional condition, eliminate any sense of consolation and places the reader in a continuing condition of suspended emotion, caught between different ways of seeing, and grieving". [Smythe 1990: 46]

interview with Harry Boyle in August 1974⁸ - truly fantastic, to take up Todorov's definition. Indeed though steeped in everyday reality, describing events which were often reported in local newspapers of the time, the stories restore to these events their mysterious aura and prevent their being dismissed as banal. Though the insentient earth seems to silence the scream, the scream echoes and resonates in the reader's ears. The short story presents at once the times of death and the time of death, understood as an everlasting present, for nothing can ever erase the grief. Munro does not judge the characters and simply observes people trying to cope as they may with the unimaginable. The time of death, and the experience of the bereaved is a mystery which forever lies beyond the scope of language, be it rational or religious, and can only be approached through a poetic language which leaves tensions unresolved and obliquely suggests the horror and beauty of our mortal life.

⁸ This interview is mentioned by Robert Thacker in his biography where he says that both Boyle and Munro feel there is an element of the macabre, what Munro calls "a Canadian gothic", in the life of rural southwestern Ontario. As she points out, people were always being maimed by horrible accidents, living with untreated disease, singling themselves out by some excessive behavior.

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