

BEYOND PLUTO'S CAVE: VISIBILITY AND VISUALITY IN ALICE MUNRO'S "IMAGES"

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Happy the man who succeeded in baring the causes of things
And who trod underfoot all fear, inexorable Fate and
Greedy Acheron's uproar...
Virgil, *Georgica* ii. 490-91

1. Alice Munro's short stories rarely start from a preconceived idea or plan, but more often from a visual impression – a striking image, sometimes a picture, more frequently a perception leading to a “queer bright moment,” in the oxymoronic phrase the writer coined to capture the visual warp out of which many of her stories proceed (Munro *Moons* xv).¹ “Images” contains several “moments of loud clarity” – Jean-Jacques Lecercle's own phrase for such unsettling insights (35) – which the child-focalizer registers and the grown-up narrator re-envisioned as moments of writerly inception. It is the generative propensity of the image, the image as primer, that I propose to analyse in this article, starting from the distinction art historian Georges Didi-Huberman introduced between the visible and the visual in his ground-breaking essay *Devant l'image : question posée aux fins d'une histoire de l'art*.
2. The preposition “devant” in Didi-Huberman's title suggests that there is something openly confrontational in our physical encounter with the image, an idea aptly captured in the essay's English translation as *Confronting Images*. Didi-Huberman explains that the visible arrests the eye, tempts us with words, and reconfigures itself into the legible whenever an image is not seen but rather viewed as a system of signs. It is on the visibility of the image that art history thrives. With its reverence for the significant detail, art history has traditionally read, interpreted and constituted the visible into ideas (e.g., the Beautiful), fields of expertise (e.g., the Baroque), and knowledge (e.g., aesthetics). By way of contrast, the visual is a dimension of the image that always remains in excess of the visible insofar as it forces the viewer into silence. The visual leaves us speechless, dazzled by

1 “For Munro, stories start from a vision in her mind” (Lorre-Johnston 228). Christine Lorre-Johnston pays detailed attention to this moment of inception confronting what Munro expressed many times in interview with the textual transformations that can be retraced from the analysis of the story's many drafts.

what exceeds intelligibility, but insists within the image as the materialization of its own presencing. Distinct from what is understood as visible in representation, namely *la figure figurée* (or the figured figure), the visual pertains to the efficacy of form within the image, and lies in the virtual properties of matter actualized in the figuring figure (Didi-Huberman 1990, 173).

3. The two contradictory logics of the visible and the visual force the beholder into an untenable position regarding the image: knowing without seeing or seeing without knowing. Didi-Huberman's reversible aphorism captures the double bind inherent in the image since privileging knowledge about what is shown will obfuscate what is seen, while attending to what is seen ushers in another scene where figuring involves disfiguring through the characteristic detours – the displacements and condensations found in dream-work and the language of the unconscious (Didi-Huberman 1990, 86). Pleading for a reopening of the case of the image after the pronouncements of art history had seemingly sealed it once and for all, Didi-Huberman wields concepts such as the splitting of the image, that are indebted to the Lacanian analysis of the scission between the eye and the gaze, a caesura to which Didi-Huberman will return in subsequent essays, particularly in *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde*. My contention in this article is that “Images” is informed by the aporetic tension between visibility and visuality, between knowing and seeing. Between the signs the image represents and the symptoms it presents lies a vacant space, an interstice which writing may, however, invest and start from. This disjunction will be related to the unscripted spaces the story explores as well as to the (dis)figuration process at work in similes introduced by “like” or “as if” which create an ontological uncertainty since *being like* is certainly never quite the same as *being* (Toolan 209).

Pictures and Images

4. Munroian scholarship abounds in studies of the writer's use of photographs and paintings, her pictures of pictures, as it were, from the pioneer essay Lorraine M. York devoted in 1983 to photography in Munro's writing to more recent criticism which, particularly in France, has analysed intersemiotic relations in Munro's short fiction, drawing upon the theoretical apparatus Liliane Louvel developed in her *Poetics of the Iconotext*. Héliane Ventura's “L'Implicite dans *l'ekphrasis* ou le cryptogramme pictural dans ‘Boys and Girls’” is quite representative of this trend, just as Linda Collinge-Germain's more recent essay “The Text, the Image and the Implicit in Alice

Munro's 'Images' and 'Postcard'." Collinge-Germain pointedly recalls the affinity between the short story form and the instantaneity of pictures (84), all of which seek to achieve a unity of effect to be distinguished from a univocality of effect. To understand the pictorial dimension in "Images," she draws a parallel between Munro's story and a still life, foregrounding in the process the visual elements both of them display and leave out. The textual/pictorial comparison leads her to conclude that the gaps in the picture contribute to the poetics of silence characteristic of Alice Munro's art, as Corinne Bigot has amply demonstrated in a recent monograph.

5. Productive as it is, I propose to depart from the pictorial line of investigation to shift the attention to the image as a visual impression that leaves a trace on the retina, in the memory of the viewer and which, as such, can be used as a textual impression. The word "picture" does occur twice in "Images": first as a noun, "like a pedlar in a picture" when the father shoves a dead muskrat into his bag, then as a verb – "That is the current, I thought, and I pictured the current as something separate from the water" (36 and 37 respectively). Each instance draws attention to the imaginative abilities of the focalizer, and how iconographic precedents stimulate her, even when their actual source remains unknown, as the indefinite article doubly insists in the reference to a generic yet unforgettable pedlar:

There is a double process of picturing at work here, first through a comparison that evokes a mental picture ('like a pedlar'), and then through the association of that mental picture with an actual image ('in a picture'). To the reader it evokes a certain type of pictorial representation of rat catchers (for instance Rembrandt's *Rat Catcher*, 1632), while the mention of the pedlar also evokes the wandering Jew, a figure of alienness. (Lorre-Johnston 234)

The strong indeterminacy, however, prevails over the identification of an antecedent that may serve as a textual matrix, should one detect an oblique reference to Rembrandt here. Instead, the statement is so general that it leaves room for countless, authorless illustrations of the kind found in the farmers' almanacs and popular magazines widely circulated in Canada in the early decades of the twentieth century, and all the more memorable since print had little penetration in rural households at that time. In the days preceding Eaton's mail order, pedlars played an important part in the introduction of such material in the backwoods of Canada, where they were met with the combination of expectancy and mistrust associated with figures of the vagrant, as the gypsy or the wandering Jew, as exemplified by the character of Skoot Skutari, the Jewish pedlar in Carol Shields, *The Stone Diaries*. The simile "like a pedlar in a picture" therefore aggregates these multiple semantic layers into a vivid image expressing the child's mixture of excitement and fear when

watching her father tending his trap line.²

6. In contrast with pictures and the impressions that remain attached to them, the word “image” is conspicuously absent from the narrative in blatant contradiction with the wealth of visual impressions the story records, the narrator remembers and the reader is enticed to interpret (Collinge-Germain 85, 91). Again, it would seem that “Images” has a lot more to show than to tell. My own hypothesis at this early stage is that, in contrast to overt or covert references to a *picture*, attending to the impression made by the *image* may help us better grasp where the seduction of the image lies, and how it operates in this specific story as well as in Munro’s writing in general.
7. The images Didi-Huberman discusses in *La Ressemblance par contact* all result from an imprint, an impression. As such they fall outside the mimetic paradigm art history has privileged since Vasari.³ When they are not used indifferently, the words *image* and *picture* make it possible to distinguish between the impression (which does not always require the intervention of a human hand) and the composition that results from a mimetic intent and, as a result, will conform to the classical requirements of *idea*, *disegno*, and *invenzione* (Didi-Huberman 2008, 121). In his ongoing critique of visibility, Georges Didi-Huberman never ceases to argue that even when images are given for the eye to see, they simultaneously yield tactile impressions, following in this Claude Merleau-Ponty’s remarks on the vision-touch system.⁴ The participation of touch in sight originates in the phenomenology of perception, but it also has a counterpart in the history of Western art. Didi-Huberman points out that the Latin word *imago* came into usage in relation to the emergence of genealogical concerns in Republican Rome, when death masks were moulded to preserve (and sometimes to enhance) the likeness of the deceased with their living descendants so as to assert lineage and origin, in accordance with the ritual pronouncement “*paternae imago substantiae*,” *i.e.*, “the image is the substance of the father” (Didi-Huberman 2008, 55-6). Resemblance through

2 The disturbingly *unheimlich* value of the picture endures in Cormac McCarthy’s much later use of it in his book-length meditation on the end of all things human: “When he looked back the old man had set out with his cane, tapping his way, dwindling slowly on the road behind them like some storybook peddler from an antique time” (174). In Munro’s “The Time of Death,” the peddler – an itinerant grinder – does not spring from the pages of a book or magazine, but his seasonal return triggers the same excitement shot with fear. The image of the peddler is again associated with the father in “Walker Brothers Cowboy,” where Ben Jordan is compared to “A peddler knocking at backwoods kitchens” (4).

3 The regime of the imprint is non-mimetic. In this sense, the impression created through contact challenges the requirements of classical *imitatio* and the supremacy of the eye in the appreciation of art. Whatever technique of transference produced it, the fossil, the handprint or the sculptor’s cast is a negative matrix encasing the enigma of its reference. Paradoxical as it may seem, resemblance through contact therefore frequently entails a reluctance to be recognized (Didi-Huberman 2008, 259).

4 See for instance Didi-Huberman 2008, 61 for a discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s claim that “every vision takes place in the tactile space” (Merleau-Ponty 252).

contact would thus compensate for the passing away of immediate, visible evidence with haptics intervening where optics failed (Didi-Huberman 2008, 61). The time-honoured practice that consisted in crafting images to record and resist disappearance therefore points to an original coincidence between the image and absence, but also between the image, the advent of death and the assertion of a legacy, all of which are central concerns in Alice Munro's "Images."

So Obvious They Cannot be Missed: Images of the Quest in "Images"

8. "Images" is one of the childhood stories Alice Munro wrote especially in view of the publication of her first collection *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968) which gathered a dozen of the pieces she had previously published in various magazines. The short story is overtly designed like a tale of initiation that unfolds in three successive places: the grandmother's house, the parents' house, and Joe Phippen's house. Led by her father, the child's excursion away from home into the wild is followed by a return, and her descent into Joe's subterranean abode by an ascent back to the surface world of family life and good manners. Between these various locales, there is one trapline which also acts as a story-line, and connects the focalizer's childhood and the mature narrator's present, surface and depth, dreaming and consciousness, fantasy and reality (Redekop 46).
9. In her analysis of the story's early drafts, Christine Lorre-Johnston has shown that Munro took great care to erase explicit references to winter from the final version of the incipit. That is how the snow porch she had initially attached to the parents' house, along with its comparison "with an oversized coffin," disappeared from the published version.⁵ References to the summer heat at the time of the grandfather's demise are undermined by comparisons that evoke the winter cold through words like "ice" or "iceberg" in the very same sentence or paragraph.⁶ Blurring the contrast between summer and winter facilitates the transition (and possible confusions) between the two inaugural scenes – the grandfather's summer decline and the mother's taking to her bed the following winter. The resulting indeterminacy requires adjustments of the reader rather comparable to the revisions made necessary by the child's misconstruction of her mother's pregnancy.

5 In their explicitness, these details ran counter to the indeterminacy Munro sought to achieve (Lorre-Johnston 237). Lorre-Johnston's study also demonstrates that the ambivalence of the mother's sickness (is she about to die? is she about to give birth?) is built-in through the indirectness of the narrative account. The comparison of the grandfather's soft hair to a baby's (30) as he is about to die participates in the same ambivalence.

6 As in the following key passage: "I lay in my crib *too hot* to sleep [...] under the *sweating heat* the fact of death, that little lump of magic *ice*. And Mary McQuade waiting in her starched white dress, big and gloomy as an *iceberg* herself" (31, emphasis added).

10. Initially it is a *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy that causes the child to regard her cousin Mary as the cause for her mother's state of health, and to view the nurse as a harbinger of death, an iceberg. If indeed "Images" is the initiation story of a young heroine trying "to read the signs of invasion" (35), so as to be prepared when death encroaches upon the realm of the living, then the protagonist makes a number of wrong guesses in the process. And so do we, especially if we assume, like many other consummate readers and critics (Redekop 45, Toolan 196-97), that the child's mother is about to die. Hesitations regarding the time of year and the seriousness of the mother's condition are carefully constructed through the point of view of the child whose limited understanding encourages us to read closer and to be on the lookout for further evidence, much like the child herself.
11. But beyond the closeness this creates with the story's protagonist, the reader's indecision could also be envisaged at a second remove in relation to the story's seasonal setting that is belatedly identified through the mention of the "cold March air" (32). March is an uncertain month in Canada, a transition period when the cold relents, rivers thaw, and spring seems at once incredibly close and impossibly distant. The narrator's impatience to see winter end is perceptible in her choice of adverbs when she notes that the "willow bushes are *still* bare" and "the leaves not out *yet*" (37 and 42 respectively, emphasis added). The same can be said of the distinction she makes between "real snow" (35 and 39) and the cracking crust of the morning frost. Finally, descriptions of Mary McQuade also contribute to this seasonal ambivalence. Divested of the uniform she wears indoors, which makes her look like an iceberg glistening in the dark, the nurse momentarily acquires the attributes of a fertility goddess in the eyes of the child:

Out in the daylight, and not dressed in white, she turned out to be freckled all over, everywhere you could see, as if she was sprinkled with oatmeal, and she had a crown of frizzy, glinting, naturally brass-coloured hair. (31)

When yearning for the arrival of spring, one cannot but be reminded of one of the most powerful agrarian myths in Western culture: the abduction of Proserpina by Pluto, her gloomy bridegroom. As if to echo the great Greek myth, images from the depths are foregrounded with deliberate care when the father and his child reach the river:

Then we went along the river, the Wawanash River, which was high, running full, silver in the middle where the sun hit it and where it arrowed in to its swiftest motion. That is the current I thought, and I pictured the current as something separate from the water, just as the wind was separate from the air

and had *its own invading shape*. [...] The noise the river made was not loud but *deep*, and seemed to come *from away down* in the middle of it, *some hidden place* where the water issued with *a roar from underground*. The river curved, I lost my sense of direction. (37, emphasis added)

“Then” marks a turning point in the onward pull of the storyline (Forster 44), when the narrative takes a plunge and leaves the surface of an empirical reality to reach further down towards unseen regions where the child’s imagination comes to supplement what she cannot actually see. In her effort to give the current a shape, she resorts to an analogy that recalls her wariness lest death, in the guise of Mary McQuade, should invade her home.⁷ Out in the open, the same apprehension tinges her description of the surrounding landscape “with bare trees in wintertime that looked like bony little twigs against the sky” (37).

12. On the bank of an Acheron-like river, a stranger comes to replace her father in the child’s field of vision through an uncanny doubling: “I could no longer see him. I looked around slowly and saw *something* else” (37, emphasis added). The pronoun used in place of the expected “someone” emphasizes the unspeakable nature of the scene. In a tentative description, the narrator resorts to an image, a simile, which returns her primal wish to her and leads to an oblique form of recognition: “So now I saw him and just waited, like a child in an old negative, electrified against the dark noon sky, with blazing hair and burned-out Orphan Annie eyes” (36).⁸ The reference to the American comic strip heroine – a modern, female version of the *picaro* whose adventures were extremely popular during the 1930s – confirms the latent content of the image, the murder of the father through which one gains unlimited access to all desired objects. Orphan Annie’s blank eyes similarly hark back to the punishment Oedipus incurred for his transgression, which leaves little doubt as to the fantasy charge the image contains. Something clearly akin to “the dirty little secret”⁹ of psychoanalysis is proffered here, except that the Freudian prism contains a number of blind spots when one attempts to analyse the riddle of the feminine.

7 The adjective “invading” picks up an earlier occurrence of the word “invasion” also signalling the need for watchfulness as the child observes her father’s and Mary’s gigantic shadows in animate conversation: “I was not dreaming, I was trying to understand the danger, to read the signs of invasion” (35).

8 Recognition is explicit in the narrator’s subsequent admission: “what hit me did not feel like fear so much as recognition. I was not surprised. This is the sight that does not surprise you, the thing you have always known was there” (38).

9 Orphan Annie’s benefactor and life-long companion insists on being called “Daddy Warbucks,” another rather obvious nod to “the dirty little secret of psychoanalysis.” Gilles Deleuze borrowed this phrase from D. H. Lawrence and used it in several contexts (see, for instance, his *Dialogues* with Claire Parnet 58-9). In the article he devoted to Alice Munro’s two secrets, Jean-Jacques Lecercle takes up Deleuze’s distinction between the “dirty little Secret” of psychoanalysis and its counterpart, the “great secret” of becoming inconspicuous when sense, because it is endlessly displaced along lines of flight, escapes all forms of assignation to a fixed meaning.

13. The murder of the father is a typically male fantasy in the Oedipal script. Why would a girl dream of killing her father, especially when she assumes that her mother is already going through the throes of agony, leaving her all the space she needs to become her daddy's sweetheart? Many critics have noted that something is going amiss in the traditional initiation story when the fence is down ("Images" 35), and a father takes out his young daughter on a hunting trip, a rite of passage usually intended for boys. For Magdalene Redekop, "Images" contains so many overt references to the quest that the motif loses its efficacy: "It's not that there is no quest," she explains, "it's just that the quest is repeatedly displaced" (47). And indeed, the many allusions the story contains to Pluto's cave, but also to Plato's allegory of the cave, or even to the Nativity cave (Lorre-Johnston 230-31, Redekop 46), undermine the driving force of myth, its seminal explanatory function, even as they seem to reflect and diffract more versions of an enduring story of entrapment and escape.
14. In "Images," the proliferation of images of the quest causes instability in the protocols of gender construction conveyed through archetypes found in Greek mythology as well as in fairy tales. Gender trouble is already present in "Walker Brothers Cowboy" – the collection's inaugural story where the father similarly takes his son and daughter out on a quest journey. Gender positioning in its relation to sexual difference subsequently undergoes a partial clarification in "Boys and Girls," when Del chooses the mare's side, that is Flora's side, against her father's command (Murray). Flora, by the way, is another minor fertility goddess in the Roman pantheon, a younger sister to Proserpina in her association with spring and a bountiful, blossoming nature. As Thomas Dutoit's studies of Proserpinean poetics have shown, Western writers have never ceased to take up, rewrite and sometimes unwrite the Proserpine story to address changing circumstances in the condition of women and attempt to evolve new versions of the feminine, including revisions of the mother-daughter relationships and the laws that give daughters into marriage (Dutoit 6-9, 11).¹⁰ Munro's story undoubtedly partakes of this tradition given the prominence of the images the narrator brings back from her excursion to the Netherworld.

10 The story of Proserpine, traditionally understood as a hymn to maternal love, is also a story of invasion, as the mother exerts her power on her daughter, on the fertility of the earth, and the prosperity of humanity to obtain Proserpine's periodical return to the surface. The myth does not take into account the possibility that the daughter may wish to leave the mother behind and stay with her husband. "The Peace of Utrecht" strikes a compromise with matriarchal power by dividing the figure of the daughter into two: Maddy, the one who stayed and Helen who chose sanity over madness and opted for another kind of hell (a pun the sisters like to make with Helen's name) when she left.

Further Down: Visibility in "Images"

15. Down in Phippen's hole, the narrator remembers that she "was falling asleep with her eyes open," (41) in a phrase that aptly captures the captivating effect the underground scene had on her. Because this sentence is followed by an ellipsis, we never see the father and child come out of Joe's "hole in the ground" and return to the surface (41). The absence of a transition leaves the memory of the evening intact, like a fragment detached from a dream sequence caught in the temporality of the imperfective where "we are in the midst of a process, without teleology, without retroaction, we are engulfed in a mist," in contrast with the vantage point the perfective aspect affords on the recounted events (Lecerle 33). In this sense, the girl's surfacing is rather comparable to Alice's return from Wonderland, when the latter wakes up to the "dull reality" of the family garden and is reinserted into the teleological temporality of an ideal Victorian femininity through a shift in focalization to her elder sister's thoughts, whereas Alice herself is last shown still absorbed in Wonderland, "thinking while she ran, as well she might, what a wonderful dream it had been" (Carroll 98).¹¹

16. So what does Alice Munro's own little girl see down the groundhog hole? In Didi-Huberman's terms of visibility (along with the legibility it implies), she sees a cat behaving like a man. There is much to be said about the legacy of the fable in "Images," the troping of animal into people and vice versa. Early metaphors (such as the old king rat caught in the father's trap) prepare for the appearance of the cat as Joe's partner in solitude. But the cat's becoming human also reactivates images from the fairy tales the mother used to tell her daughter, stories that warned little girls against their own becoming animal, imparting what would happen to them, should they fail to listen and allow small dogs to get under their dresses. Losing one's head comes in all kinds of guises.

17. Joe and his tomcat make a grotesque couple mimicking the homosocial habits of the Frontier where buddies live and drink and grieve together about women and the ways of the world, as in countless country and western laments.¹² Once Ben Jordan has patiently listened to Joe's raving about the Silases, the saner part of the conversation revolves around marriage, companionship, and

¹¹ *Alice's Adventures* ends with a provisional *coda* where, while young Alice is sent back home to her tea, her elder sister re-inserts her in a clearly teleological future: "Lastly, she pictured to herself how this same little sister of hers would, in the after-time, be herself a grown woman; and how she would keep, through all her riper years, the simple and loving heart of her childhood; and how she would gather about her other little children, and make *their* eyes bright and eager with many a strange tale [.]" (Carroll 99, author's emphasis)

¹² The father's mock ballad in "Walker Brothers Cowboy" is another avatar of the genre. The standards Patricia sings in "The Time of Death" also recall the popularity of country and western music north of the 49th parallel. Munro's stories bear evidence to the penetration of American popular culture in colonial Canada where it often assumes parodic overtones, as a subversion (but also a lesser version) of the original.

the need to put an end to this most unnatural state of things. But he who dwells in darkness has no intention to come back to the surface, and abide by the script of what a man's life should be or read like:

“What do I need a house for anyways? I got all the room I need here ... I don't say everybody should live in a hole in the ground, Ben. Though animals do it, and what an animal does, by and large, it makes sense. But if you're married, that's another story.” He laughed. “Me, I don't plan on getting married.” (39-40)

Phippen's story, of his own admission, is an alternative story, both outrageous and tempting, insofar as it contradicts the lessons of myth and diverges from the scripts that define the course of a human life in general, and gender roles in particular. For most of the characters in “Images,” marriage is an ideal to aspire to, especially for young women, as the song *Nita, Juanita, softly falls the southern moon* obliquely suggests for those familiar with its lyrics (31, see Rasporich 106). Failing to marry will cause an old maid to endure the endless teasing and taunting Mary has to contend with: “In my father's family of course it was what she was always teased about, what else was there?” (35). The afterthought, clearly the addition of a mature narrator judging by different standards, does not simply point to the limited choices faced by female characters such as Mary or Aunt Edith, but also to the paucity of the imaginative possibilities available to both men and women, even in jest. But Joe's underground house suggests other possibilities to the little girl:

It was all one room, an earth floor with boards... Perhaps if it had not had such a terrible smell... I would have recognized it as the sort of place I would like to live in myself, like the houses I made under snowdrifts... like another house I had made long ago under the verandah, my floor the strange powdery earth that never got sun or rain. (40)

This subterranean place appeals to the child's imagination. While she toys with fantasies of an underground existence which she views as a space where no searching gaze will find her, it is the unbearable stench that finally brings her back to her senses. Yet how sure of this can we be?

18. Again, images drawn from the Plutonic intertext suggest alternative readings. Perhaps the child never left Phippen's hole, perhaps part of her stayed, or periodically returns down there, at least in the imagination. The reader is encouraged to take this possibility into account insofar as the girl transgressed the two basic rules one should abide by when visiting the Underworld. The first rule is never to look back, whereas “Images” is clearly a retrospective story. The second rule forbids visitors to either eat or drink in the course of their underground sojourn. The girl, no matter how

reluctantly, does accept Christmas candies from Joe Phippen's tin: "They had a taste of nails," she remembers with disgust. The double meaning of the signifier "nails" and the images it conjures are worth considering. If one follows the metonymic logic of realism, the tin has communicated a metallic flavour to the sweets and that is why they taste so terrible. But "nails" also evokes Joe's fingers plunging into the same tin, and their fortuitous contact with the sweets is perhaps the closest one can decently come to evoking some sort of carnal commerce between a young girl and a fantasized sugar daddy (41). Here is another unscripted space where girls with a strict Scots-Presbyterian upbringing are not meant to venture.

19. Christine Lorre-Johnston's study of the drafts of "Images" has shown that Munro's many rewritings did not tend towards disambiguation but, on the contrary, took up some formulations and reworked them, discarded some images and elaborated others to achieve a more allusive style.¹³ This overall tendency needs to be related to the foregrounding of images endowed with such a high degree of visibility – the journey to the Underworld, the subterranean place, the hellish groom, the little girl in the animal kingdom – that their legibility asserts itself like an evidence. But, as was previously seen with Munro's diffraction of quest motifs, the images most readers are likely to recognize as part of their cultural baggage also divert us from what they do show. Their high legibility stimulates meaning-making and encourages an array of interpretations with respect to, for instance, the limitations of the cultural scripts available to women, or the rules of conduct girls need to challenge and later accept before they can grow into proper little women, as evinced by the great deal of critical attention "Images" has received. These significations, however, bristle with contradictions, among which the suggestion that an imaginative girl may live *simultaneously* inside and outside the cave, in contrast to the alternation negotiated in the classical myth. Daring as its confrontation of cultural scripts admittedly is, Munro's story also restores some dimness to the places and choices on which the myth of Proserpine casts a light.¹⁴ Acknowledging this calls for a renewed approach to images also found in the story but which it is tempting to overlook on account of their poor visibility and equally elusive legibility, although their visual effect calls for attention.

20. Much has been written regarding the father's injunction not to tell, and the empowerment this

13 Munro removed the figurative pictures she initially had on the walls of the mother's bedroom, and replaced them by images working towards greater abstraction, such as the afghan squares the mother knits endlessly and forgets about (Lorre-Johnston 235).

14 Lorre-Johnston recalls that Alice Munro is notoriously wary of reductive interpretations of her stories. After several critics had written about the mythical aura emanating from Joe's cellar, Munro wrote "The Colonel's Hash Resettled," in which "she explained that elements from real life are not necessarily charged with symbolic meaning" (Lorre-Johnston 228, see also Rasporitch 43).

confers on his young daughter. If we follow Lecercle's distinction between Secrets and secrets, the omission of Joe's hatchet belongs to the first category, the one spelt with a capital "S."¹⁵ With the weapon and the exquisite, Gothic thrill attached to it, Ben Jordan removes the most salient, that is the most visible and legible detail from his tale. But is this the queerest (in Munro's words), the loudest (in Lecercle's words), or the most visual (in Didi-Huberman's words) aspect of the several images this story strings together, shoves into a bag and captures into a motif? The narrator's final words are wonderfully ambivalent in the plurality they assert: "dazed and powerful with secrets, I never said a word" (43). The unmistakable note of triumph in her voice forces an acknowledgement from the reader: although the girl never said a word, a mature version of herself does tell a story; now what is this story about?

Hidden in Plain Sight: Visual Patches

21. In *Confronting Images*, Didi-Huberman concludes on the dialectic tension between the visible and the visual – knowing without seeing and seeing without knowing – by transposing the binary into another contrasting pair – the detail and the *pan* for which the English translators chose to retain the original French word, although alternatives such as "patch," "smudge," or even "macula," were certainly envisaged to refer to the non-figurative, symptomatic intensities found in paintings by Fra Angelico or Vermeer:

The detail: it is, for example, a thread, in other words an easily located circumscription of the figurative space; it has *extension* (however minimal), a well-defined size; it pertains to a measurable space. The *pan*, by contrast, presents itself as a zone of colored *intensity*, as such, it has an "inordinate," not measurable, capacity of expansion – not extension – in the picture; this would be not a detail of colored thread, but, to continue with our example, a filet of red paint, in other words, an event more than an object. A detail is definable: its contour delimits a represented object, something that has a place, or rather has *its* place, in the mimetic space; its topographical existence is thus specifiable, readily located, like an inclusion. A *pan*, by contrast, does not so much delimit an object as produce a potential: something *happens*, gets through, extravagates in the space of representation, and resists "inclusion" in the picture because it makes a detonation or *intrusion* in it. (1990, 268)

The differences Didi-Huberman posits between the visible detail on the one hand, and the visual

15 Cf. note 9. The "Secret," in Lecercle's structural binaries refers us to the axiological dimension of narrative and leads to a final disclosure of which the family romance of neurotics is just one example. By way of contrast, the "secret" (which Lecercle spells with a low case "s") refers us to the open secrets found in so many of Munro's stories, and the way their ultimate signification is deferred.

patch on the other, can help us identify a series of visual impressions that do not yield the legible units critics are prompt to parse out and rearrange into the syntax of myth. In his own attempt to illustrate how the detail and the patch respectively operate within the picture, Didi-Huberman resorts to a writing analogy in which many would recognize aspects akin to Alice Munro's own style:

The woman of the detail, then, writes *romans à clefs* in which the questions posed at the beginning are answered at the end. If the woman of the pan were permitted to do likewise, she would write ekphrases that are endless, reticulate, aporetic. (1990, 269)

The scene opening “Images” contains such an *ekphrasis*. The image stands out as a composition in white – a Malevich of sorts¹⁶ – because it is not included within the mimetic space of the visible, but tests the limits of representation as a visual intrusion that expands in the narrative where it captivates the eye:

The ceilings of the rooms were very high and under them was a great deal of dim wasted space, and when I lay in my crib, too hot to sleep I could look up and see that emptiness, the stained corners, and feel without knowing what it was, just what everybody else in the house must have felt—under the sweating heat *the fact of death-contained, that little lump of magic ice*. And Mary McQuade waiting in her starched white dress, big and gloomy as an iceberg herself, implacable, waiting and breathing. (31, emphasis added)

The white patches above (ceiling / ice / dress / iceberg) coalesce into one of the most illegible images found in the short story, because it is also one of the most stubbornly visual. And in characteristic Munroian fashion, this image is proffered at an early stage in the development of the short story, which creates a mesmerizing effect of surface.¹⁷ The verbs of perception “look up,” “see” and “feel” are all on the same syntactic plane. So are the direct objects “emptiness” and “stained corners” followed by “what it was” and “what everybody in the house must have felt.” Yet, the referent of “what *it* was” is postponed beyond what English syntax normally tolerates. When “the fact of death-contained” finally crops up, the grammatical object is visually separated from the verb “feel” by a dash, and its occurrence is further delayed through the interpolation of the

16 Kasimir Malevich (1878-1935) was the founder of the abstract art movement known as Suprematism. His composition *White on White* (1918) remains one of his best known experimental works.

17 The collection contains several other examples of images where the visual *pan* or patch is foregrounded to the detriment of visible (and legible) details of the image. In “Postcard,” for instance, Helen is looking for a personal message at the back of the card her lover sent her from his holiday in Florida. Yet what she is being shown, although she cannot acknowledge it, is displayed in the garish colours and bold curves of the neon sign on the very front of the motel shown on the front of the postcard (129). I am grateful to Kathie Birat for this insight.

prepositional phrase “under the sweating heat.” The syntax gets further stretched, and meaning-making jeopardized, through the addition of the metaphor “that little lump of magic ice” in a concluding apposition. The trope is then taken up and magnified in the final simile that compares Mary McQuade to an iceberg. The systematic delay in reference and the remarkable shift from a visible emptiness to a visual whiteout both raise a number of questions. What exactly does “the fact of death-contained” mean in a phrase where the hyphen inscribes both a junction and a split between words, belying the very possibility of containing death?¹⁸ Similarly, how are we to understand the metaphor “that little lump of magic ice”? Does an explication of its figurative content suffice to exhaust its significance as an image? Or shall we try and respond to this perfect iambic tetrameter as a block of sensation carved from the materiality of language? Maybe it is only through the beating pulse of the tetrameter that writing may poetically approach the conundrum of death for which shape-changing ice offers a visual analogue when it melts and drips between the fingers that attempt to hold it, or sublimates into thin air, leaving no trace, only to come back with the first frost with a vengeance.

22. Further in “Images,” other patches or *pans* call for attention to the figuring/disfiguring process at work in the visual and the symptomatic intensities it materializes.¹⁹ Such is the case with the landscape the girl discovers from the top of the hill, when her father puts her down and enjoins her to wake up and see:

My father set me down. “*You’re woken up now. Stand up. See. I can’t carry you and this sack full of rats both.*”

We had come to the top of a long hill and that is where I *woke*. It was getting dark. 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, with scales of snow faintly striping them (like the field we had walked across hours, hours earlier in the day) and the tiny fences and colonies of grey barns, and houses set apart, looking squat and small. (42, emphasis added)

18 The drowned muskrat is another “fact of death” which neither the father’s explanations, nor his dark bag suffice to contain, as indicated by the girl’s recoil: “I only wanted, but did not dare, to touch the stiff, soaked body, a fact of death.” (36)

19 A similar visual patch (and surface effect) can be found in “The Shining Houses” when Mary looks at the clearing sky on her way to the birthday party: “the clouds had broken, revealing a long, thin triangle of sky, its blue still long and delicate, a winter colour” (24). With the double apposition that elongates the triangular shape, the expansion of the syntax is coterminous with the stretching line of blue. The colour patch contrasts with the ground level, where the neat, geometrical subdivisions of Garden Place morcellize space into always-smaller lots, lives and ambitions. For a far-ranging analysis of Munro’s use of the colour blue in “The Shining Houses,” see Dutoit 2015.

The father's imperative to "see" can be heard as an encouragement for the girl to agree that he has been carrying her long enough, but also as an injunction to open her eyes to what lies out there in front of her. The child, as a result, wakes up twice – in her father's gentle admonishment, and then again, in the retrospective narrative that returns to the split second when she regained consciousness. The iteration has the effect of stretching the instant into an awakening, all the more so as the child's coming-to has all the appearance of a coming back to life, when she ceases to be a dead weight, as heavy and unwieldy as a bag full of muskrats. The child's awakening, however, does not serve as a prelude to a contrived sunset revelation. It is not visibility that is achieved here, but a "darkening and turning strange" reminiscent of the ending of "Walker Brothers Cowboy" (18) where a car's rear-window frames the impossibility of framing the tumultuousness of life past as well as the fascination this very impossibility exerts on the faculties of the imagination.

23. In the above quotation, the observer initially perceives the Wawanash drainage basin as a totality, yet the sense of composition afforded by the commanding view dissolves in the long enumeration following the dash. The conjunction "and" loosely connects patches of colour into a gradation of brown, green, yellow and white that does not serve to sharpen contrast or enhance details. Instead the brown monochrome has a disruptive effect upon the three successive planes of the landscape, pointing to the seasonal changes that constantly alter and blur its contours, but also flattening perspective, as the gaze does not extend towards the horizon, but moves from the darkening bush in the background, to the fields in the middle-ground before focusing on the human constructions in the immediate foreground. Seen from above, places of fear and desire still exist and insist as a "smudge" in the distance, whereas close below, they now appear "squat and small," as if the journey that took the child provisionally away from home had rendered them less daunting because relative and related.

24. Invitations to see are ubiquitous in "Images," from the visual emptiness the child contemplates in her crib, to her father's offer to come and look at the traps (35), down into Joe's cellar where the lighting of a coal-oil lamp – "There you can see where you're at" (40) – serves as an ironical prelude to the display of Joe's darkest torments. Once returned to what she now perceives as the safety of home, the girl asserts her newfound confidence through silence and the store of images she will keep for herself:

Like the children in fairy stories who have seen *their* parents make pacts with terrifying strangers, who have discovered that *our* fears are based on nothing but the truth, but who come back fresh from

marvellous escapes and take up *their* knives and forks, with humility and good manners, prepared to live happily ever after—like them, dazed and powerful with secrets, I never said a word. (43, emphasis added)

The girl's triumph cannot be entirely measured in terms of the perils she overcame and the apprehensions this taught her to master, a profound reassurance found in the plot of most initiation stories. Instead it comes with the realization that in fear lies the inexplicable truth of the desiring subject. An abrupt swerve in the syntax followed by a realignment in the possessive adjectives enjoins the readers to consider for themselves the disturbing fact that no fear can be dismissed as a figment of the imagination because, to paraphrase Georges Didi-Huberman's title, the images we see always look back at us, and the dazzling gaze they return to us is precisely what writing thrives on.

Conclusion

25. Fundamentally, that is visibly, "Images" is an initiation story intimating that the access to sexuality is linked to mortality and the acceptance of one's finitude as a human being. Except that women and their desire, because they are only partially subjected to castration, exist in relation to and in excess of the Symbolic order (Lacan 68). "Boys and Girls," which may be read as a sequel to "Images," proposes a striking image of the girl's division in her affiliation to the Law of the Father in the climactic scene where Del runs *inside* the fence towards the gate her father commands her to shut, while Flora – Del's wild-eyed, animal double – gallops in the field *outside* the fence towards the heavy gate the girl lifts, almost shuts and unexpectedly re-opens (Murray 31). Her last minute act is ultimately rationalized and made acceptable by the father: "she's only a girl" (127). The verdict acknowledges in his daughter's gesture the irrational, emotional impulse that serves to posit the feminine in reference to what it is not, or lacks. "Images" also attempts a journey to the wild side, beyond human laws and the common sense they guarantee. The girl's encounter with "Old Joe Phippen that lives up in no man's land beyond the bush" (43) unleashes images shot with the fear of and desire for a paradoxical life led at once inside and outside the bonds of custom.
26. At a more intermediate level, "Images" belongs to a cluster of initiation stories comprising "Walker Brothers Cowboy," "Boys and Girls," and "Red Dress—1946," all of which are concerned with legibility and the scripts available to young girls in the making. These stories oppose patterns

of reproduction to invention for which there is no pattern (Redekop 38; Birat 126). That is one of the reasons why Munro's initiation stories are so concerned with issues of representation, and beyond them, the conundrum of creation.

27. Closer to the surface of "Images," the patches and smudges left by the visual help us intuit (rather than comprehend) what triggers the process of creation in Munro's writing. One such instance takes us back to the moment of descent, when the girl is about to fall and embrace the darkness awaiting her:

The trees chilled the air, and underneath them was real snow, left over from winter, a foot, two feet deep. The tree trunks had rings around them, a curious dark space like the warmth you make with your breath. (39)

Much like the bumpy linoleum emblematic of the richly textured surfaces of Munro's stories (Francesconi 94-5), the rings around trees signal intervals where things, their shapes, and the tentative words we have for them never quite coincide. Such interstices leave space for play, for the writer to pick at them and tease incongruous similarities out of them. When the visual image is proffered, "a curious dark space like the warmth you make with your breath," the simile lets us visualize the inscription of a round O, the signature left by an open mouth, a silent threshold from where to glimpse the wonders of the underworld.

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