

## Language and Loss in Michel Rabagliati's *Paul à Québec* and Sarah Leavitt's *Tangles*

**M**ichel Rabagliati's *Paul à Québec* (2009) and Sarah Leavitt's *Tangles: A Story About Alzheimer's, My Mother and Me* (2010) are comics that portray characters who experience and witness the debilitating effects of pancreatic cancer and Alzheimer's, respectively. As these diseases progress, the characters' relationships to language and to telling their stories inevitably shift.<sup>1</sup> In *The Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing, and the Human Condition*, Arthur Kleinman defines an illness narrative as "a story the patient tells, and significant others retell, to give coherence to the distinctive events and long-term course of suffering" (49). Much of the existing scholarship on the reading and writing of such stories stresses their therapeutic and pedagogical value for persons with illness, caregivers, and treaters of illness. According to scholars studying graphic medicine, comics emerge as an ideal medium for illness narrative because "[v]isual understanding is intuitive in ways that verbal understanding may not be" (Green and Myers 576) and because "[c]omics offer an engaging, powerful and accessible method of delivery and consummation of these narratives" (Williams, "Graphic Medicine" 25). Though it is a truism to argue that "[c]omics can show us things *that can't be said*, just as they can narrate experiences without relying on words" (Squier 131, emphasis original), we aim to investigate the deeper impact of this notion within individual stories of illness involving the breakdown of verbal communication and understanding. Foregrounding the function and effect of the words, or the lack of words, both within the world of the story and on a structural level, we argue that in *Paul à Québec* and *Tangles*, verbal and written language plays an important role in constructing

and telling the story of a life that ends in disease, but at certain moments is inadequate and ultimately unnecessary for communicating the truths of the experience of illness and of the people it affects.

Before undertaking our analysis, we wish to acknowledge that the notion of “language” in comics is much debated by theorists, who aim to define the relationship between words and images in order to shed light on how comics create meaning. For Scott McCloud, the text and the images within any given comic are inseparable and together form “a single unified language” (47). While Thierry Groensteen supports this premise (*System 2*), he largely ignores the verbal dimension of the medium to emphasize “the primacy of the image” in the meaning-making process (3). Similarly, Jan Baetens and Pascal Lefèvre note that the image is “materially superior” to the text, further arguing that the words should, ideally, “avoi[d] tautology” (188) and serve a “complementary” (189) role in relation to the image. Neil Cohn also chooses to focus on the visual dimension of the medium and posits that “comics *are written in* visual languages in the same way that novels or magazines *are written in* English. Potentially, comics can be written in both a visual language (of images) and a written language (of text)” (2, emphasis original). He therefore differs from the above theorists in that he argues for the existence of two separate languages within comics that nevertheless “shar[e] the same key traits (modality, meaning, and grammar)” (7). Finally, Hannah Miodrag also cautions against conflating text and image into a single language, but whereas Cohn argues that the verbal and visual languages create meaning through identical processes (7), Miodrag insists that as separate languages, they “generate meaning in different ways” (250). Like Cohn and Miodrag, we recognize that the words in comics are distinct from the images, but do not intend to weigh in on the theoretical discussion of their technical functions within the medium. Rather, we are interested in studying the *effect* of the words (or of wordlessness) on the creation of meaning through an analysis that considers how written or verbal language functions formally and thematically within two specific comics about illness.

### ***Paul à Québec***

*Paul à Québec* is the sixth work in Québécois author Michel Rabagliati’s oeuvre of eight semi-autobiographical comics, or *bandes dessinées*,<sup>2</sup> which recount formative and everyday events in the life of the author’s cartoon alter ego, Paul.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, *Paul à Québec* is a graphic novel<sup>4</sup> about Roland Beaulieu, Paul’s father-in-law, and recounts Roland’s experience with

prostate and pancreatic cancer, and his death surrounded by his family. Paul occupies the role of an observer or spectator to the events that go on around him, instead of assuming the role of protagonist or active participant as in the other works in the *Paul* series. In Rabagliati's own words, "dans *Paul à Québec* . . . [Paul] est vraiment en retrait, il est assis sur le banc en arrière, comme on dit, et puis il regarde ce qui se passe en avant" ("Michel Rabagliati").<sup>5</sup> To emphasize that the story is about neither Rabagliati nor Paul, but about the character of Roland and the last few months of his life, the final page of the volume features a painted portrait of Rabagliati's father-in-law in place of an author photograph ("Michel Rabagliati"). In the comic itself, this same portrait hangs on the wall of the Beaulieu family home (*Paul* 16). It visually blends author with protagonist, and reality with fiction, and becomes a symbol of the story that Rabagliati aims to tell: "[E]n fait je fais un portrait du père, du grand-père" ("Michel Rabagliati").<sup>6</sup> The title of the English translation, *The Song of Roland* (2012), further emphasizes that Roland's voice remains the focus of the volume. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson write, "[l]ife narrative is seen as a process through which a narrator struggles to shape an 'identity' out of an amorphous experience of subjectivity" (125). In *Paul à Québec*, Roland's identity as more than just a cancer patient, or a victim of his disease, is shaped in part through his changing relationship to the narrator and storyteller role.

Although Paul is the overall narrator of the story, Roland seemingly participates in his own process of characterization and meaning-making. When he goes for a walk with Paul and gives him a detailed account of his past, he emerges as a complete person with an interesting and complex life. In this sequence, which spans thirteen pages of the volume, Roland's voice replaces Paul's in the captions, and he officially becomes the narrator (60-72). Some of Roland's story is told pictorially by Rabagliati, such as when a young Roland wanders small and alone in the lushly illustrated streets of Québec (63), but every panel and sequence is accompanied or complemented by Roland's descriptive, narrating words. He tells a story about a resourceful, hard-working, and independent young man who perseveres through life's hardships, and becomes the successful vice-president of a company and the loving father of a large family. Rabagliati could have summarized Roland's memories with Paul's narration just as he summarizes an entire year of Paul's life in a few pages (55-57), or he could have inserted the sequence directly into the story as a flashback by rounding the corners of the panels to distinguish the sequence from the rest of the narrative (30). His choice to

make Roland the narrator at a formal level is significant. As Arthur Frank writes in *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*, when people fall ill and their life narratives are disrupted, “[t]hey need to become storytellers in order to recover the voices that illness and its treatment often take away” (xii). By granting his character Roland control over the verbal dimension of the text in order to tell his own life story, Rabagliati imbues him, and, by extension, his real-life equivalent, with agency, dignity, and humanity in the face of his disease.

In *Paul à Québec*, language is used not only to facilitate the telling of Roland’s self-story—and through that act, the formation of his identity—but also to define relationships between the members of his family, and to serve as a functional tool of communication and connection. As Rita Charon writes, “[h]uman beings do not become—or create—themselves in autonomous and deracinated acts of will but instead develop over time in concert with others” (75). The family’s favourite bonding activity is playing card and board games, and as Paul specifies, “[c]’est encore le Scrabble qui tient la vedette dans cette maison. Roland et Suzanne sont . . . [d]e véritables requins” (32).<sup>7</sup> Scrabble—the game of constructing, connecting, and assigning value to words—is a game that the entire family enjoys together, but it is most importantly something that they all share with Roland. When Roland becomes ill, playing Scrabble is one of the ways Paul, Lucie, and their daughter, Rose, keep him company when they visit him at the palliative care facility. As Roland’s illness progresses, he loses the physical capacity to formulate words and sentences, and becomes uncommunicative and unresponsive altogether. When he is no longer able to play, the game as a form of family entertainment no longer appeals: “[S]ans p’pa, c’est pas pareil . . .” (136).<sup>8</sup> The members of Roland’s family collectively turn instead to other ways of being and communicating with him, such as chatting by his bedside, holding his hand, and tending to his basic physical needs. *Paul à Québec* may be the story of an individual, and of that individual’s experience with illness, but the role of language in the text places an emphasis on the collective, and the community experience of living with illness and with caregiving.<sup>9</sup>

Within the comic, when Roland loses the ability to wield language to communicate clearly with his loved ones, and to express and shape his own life story, his son-in-law steps in to do so for him. This is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that Paul retakes control over the narration only after Roland is hospitalized for an intestinal blockage, and the cancer which has spread to his pancreas is discovered to be advanced and untreatable

(81). However, Paul's narration never dominates the story, nor does it turn into Paul's subjective account of Roland's experience. For example, when Roland talks with Paul's father, Robert, Paul simply speculates about the details of their conversation: "De trucs de gars de leur âge probablement. Travail, femmes, enfants, petits-enfants, souvenirs de jeunesse" (111).<sup>10</sup> He does not presume to know, or attempt to relay, the details of Roland's thoughts, feelings, and memories. In the seventy-one pages preceding Roland's advanced pancreatic cancer diagnosis, there are seventy captions containing Paul's narration (9-80). During the eighty-four pages of Roland's illness, Paul's voice interpolates a mere thirty-two times (81-165), and after Roland's death, Paul narrates the final twenty-one pages of the volume across thirty-three captions (166-87). At the physical level of the text, therefore, Paul's narration recedes when Roland's cancer, and the various ways he loses language as a result of it, becomes the focus. According to G. Thomas Couser in *Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability, and Life Writing*, "many of the sick and disabled are simply too ill—too debilitated or traumatized by their condition—to imagine writing about it. . . . And for some disease annihilates selfhood, or ends life, before they can undertake a narrative—what distinguishes the autobiographical subject may also extinguish it" (5-6). Though identity can be linked to narrative ability, Couser's notion that the autobiographical self is destroyed when the self-story is lost or taken over by illness does not take into account the power of polyvocal narration, such as the kind on display in *Paul à Québec*. By ensuring that Roland's voice is always heard instead of and above Paul's own, even when that voice falters, Paul—and on a meta-level, Rabagliati—manages to preserve and continue asserting the individuality and personhood of Roland Beaulieu.

Ultimately, Roland's loss of language at the level of the story is balanced by the fact that verbal or written language becomes less important at the formal level of the text overall. There are frequently moments and entire sequences of complete wordlessness, which contrast visually and strikingly with the moments of verbal and audio overload when the family is together, whether they are talking (34), arguing (16), joking (14), singing (15), reminiscing, or explaining their family connections (31). For example, the sequence depicting Paul, Lucie, and Rose visiting Roland and going through the motions of their routine, which includes a game of Scrabble, is a rare moment in the text when togetherness is enjoyed by the characters in silence (101-02). As suggested by the sequence in which Paul's father and Roland converse in illegible squiggles, it is unlikely that the characters actually perform the

activities in these scenes without speaking (110-11), but in opting to ignore or de-emphasize the verbal dimension of such moments, the reader understands that the specificities of the words exchanged are less important than the fact that the characters are spending time together to exchange them. Language in the form of narration and dialogue is similarly absent from scenes of quiet contemplation, such as when Lucie takes a moment for herself to sit alone under the stars, inhabiting and reflecting on her place in the universe (132), and when Roland listens to an instrumental rendition of Schubert's "Ave Maria"—a sequence of five panels that is devoid of sound markings altogether, juxtaposed with a panel that depicts, with the conventional use of music notes, Paul's father whistling (106). Perhaps the most significant of these moments is when the palliative care doctor administers morphine to Roland in order to ease and hasten his passing "à travers cette épreuve ultime" (153).<sup>11</sup> In a surrealistic two-panel sequence, the medication spreads throughout Roland's body, leaving in its wake flowers and swirls that symbolize peace and tranquility (154). Words are not able, nor are they needed, to effectively communicate the significance of this moment for Roland at this stage in his illness, or for his family or even the reader.

Just as Roland's agency and dignity are not contingent on his ability to articulate them in his own authorial voice, his personhood is palpable even in moments of narrative silence. For individual characters, words are similarly inadequate and unnecessary for expressing, navigating, and coping with grief. When Roland's friend, Solange Thériault, passes away, there is nothing Lucie can say to the woman's daughter, Chantale, to alleviate her pain, and so she is silent (112-13). Language similarly fails Paul when he attempts to find words to explain to his young daughter the process of life and death, and what happens afterwards (126). Lucie's own overwhelming and complex thoughts, memories, and feelings about her father, her relationship with him, and his illness experience manifest as a wordless dream-turned-nightmare that spans six pages (142-48). The culminating moment of the text likewise lacks words from both the characters and the narrator: the reader follows Paul and Rose as they embark on a silent drive through three full pages of unremarkable road signs and storefronts, until they arrive at the palliative care centre and learn from a simple sign on the front desk that Roland has died (161-65). By employing two small words—"Roland Beaulieu"—to summarize pages of wordless action, and to encapsulate the meaning of an entire volume written to celebrate the life of one man, Rabagliati demonstrates that the use of verbal language can help to articulate and clarify meaning, but it does not

create it. The essence of Roland Beaulieu, at least as he is depicted in *Paul à Québec*—and the profound truth, beauty, and significance of his life story—transcends the language used to compose and convey it.

***Tangles: A Story About Alzheimer's, My Mother and Me***

Unlike Rabagliati's *Paul* series, Sarah Leavitt's *Tangles* is explicitly autobiographical. *Tangles* documents events that took place over eight years in the Vancouver writer's life (1996-2004), recounting her witnessing of her mother's experience with Alzheimer's disease. The author, narrator, and protagonist are presented as one in Leavitt's first-person story, and the narration lacks the distance that characterizes Rabagliati's *Paul*. Whereas *Paul* is somewhat removed from his father-in-law's experience of illness, Sarah plays a more involved role in Midge Leavitt's care, and has a more intimate connection to the content of the narrative. As Midge's illness narrative unfolds—beginning with her symptoms and diagnosis, going on to document her decline, and concluding with her death—so too does Sarah's story of how she used language to shape into a coherent narrative her own traumatic and overwhelming experience of watching her mother die.

Though Leavitt herself describes her book as a "graphic memoir" (7), one might also describe it as a *graphic pathography*, a term coined by Michael Green and Kimberly Myers to describe works which present "illness narratives in graphic form" (574). The term and its definition are adapted from Anne Hunsaker Hawkins' definition of prose pathographies, which she describes as published accounts of an individual's direct or indirect experience with illness and death, born out of the patient's or caregiver's "need to communicate a painful, disorienting, and isolating experience" of illness (10). Though *Paul à Québec* can also be considered a graphic pathography—or a *bande dessinée médicale* in French—such a term is perhaps too tidy to refer to Rabagliati's graphic novel.<sup>12</sup> Dardaillon and Meunier frame Rabagliati's text as a traditional pathography, arguing that "[r]ien n'est épargné aux lecteurs depuis les premiers symptômes jusqu'à la phase terminale" ("*Paul à Québec*" 87),<sup>13</sup> but the story skips over the early stages of Roland's cancer and treatments as he hides the diagnosis from his family (and therefore from the narrator, Paul) for months (*Paul* 43). Instead of focusing on Roland's suffering and struggle with cancer, *Paul à Québec* seeks to find meaning in the small, quiet moments of life that are too often taken for granted. Rabagliati's narrative thus de-emphasizes the tragedy in Roland's story to instead celebrate who he was in life, the

lives of those around him, and the beauty in the fact that those lives will continue even after his ends. *Tangles*, by comparison, largely focuses on who Midge becomes in illness and death through the process of diagnosis and the worsening of her symptoms, and on how her physical and mental deterioration affects how her family—and Sarah, in particular—sees and relates to her as her story is told.

In contrast to Paul's narration in *Paul à Québec*, Sarah's is never wordless. However, within the narrative, Leavitt repeatedly points to the failure of language to capture the detail and scope of her mother's illness. First, Sarah and Midge attempt to make a video about Alzheimer's with the dual intention of documenting their experience for themselves, and putting it into words to potentially "help other families" (49). When talking about her illness out loud proves to be more traumatic than healing for Midge, the project is abandoned (53), and Sarah seeks another outlet: "I decided to take a couple of creative writing classes to help me write about what was happening to our family. . . . It helps to get it down on paper" (89). According to numerous scholars, pathographies—graphic or otherwise—serve both didactic and therapeutic purposes for their writers and readers.<sup>14</sup> However, the curative value of the exercise for Sarah is again undermined when she shares her writing with her parents, verbalizing the impact of her mother's disease on all of their lives, and Midge is reduced to tears. Discouraged, Sarah "didn't try that again" (89). The final mention of Sarah's efforts to record her experience as a daughter and caregiver comes at the end of the story when she privately sketches Midge as she lies on her deathbed (121). In the introduction to *Tangles*, Leavitt explains that it was not until "nine months after [Midge] died . . . [that she] realized . . . [she] wanted to do a graphic memoir" instead of a book in prose (7). Leavitt relies heavily on the words of the comic to tell her story, and her simplistic, black and white style of cartooning allows—and perhaps even encourages—the reader to focus on the verbal element of the graphic memoir more than on the pictures. However, her choice to reflect on the form of the story that became *Tangles* within the narrative of the finished product makes language, the consequences of its limitations, and its uses beyond personal therapy and social education in an illness context, into important thematic questions of the text. In comparison to *Paul à Québec*, the narration is distinguished not so much by a lack of language in the sense of words on the page, but rather by a deficiency of language in terms of what Sarah and her mother are able to accomplish with it—both together and separately—as the illness experience unfolds.



Whereas language loss is an eventual result of Roland's cancer, Midge experiences it as a symptom of dementia. The relationship between language and Alzheimer's in *Tangles* has much in common with depictions of the disease in other Canadian Alzheimer's narratives that focus on how "Alzheimer's causes its victims to lose not just the ability to remember life stories but also the ability to narrate them through written and, eventually, spoken language" (Roy 42). However, one aspect that sets *Tangles* apart from other Alzheimer's narratives is the importance of language proficiency in Midge's life prior to the development of her illness. Professionally, Midge was a devoted kindergarten teacher and a designer of educational programs and curricula for New Brunswick's Department of Education (*Tangles* 18). She met Sarah's father, Robert, at Harvard University where they bonded over a mutual love of words, and both became "teachers and teachers of teachers" (39) who "built a life of books and art and creativity" for their two daughters (38). As a result, language appreciation also played a central role in Sarah and Hannah's early development and identity formation: "Our parents taught us, as very young children, that language, words, and books belonged to us, that they were exciting and powerful, and that being smart and good with words was one of the most important things to strive for" (39). When Sarah introduces her mother in the first chapter of the book, "Nightmares," she describes her as an embodiment of Miss Clavel, the beloved literary character from Ludwig Bemelmans' *Madeline* books (11). The repeated emphasis on Midge's affinity for language suggests that her declining relationship to spoken and written words is not only important in *Tangles* as a feature of her disease. Rather, it is primarily significant as a fundamental part of her identity—a part that is jeopardized when she develops Alzheimer's.

When Midge becomes ill, she, like Rabagliati's Roland, loses the ability to give her life story the ending she intended it to have. After her diagnosis, her husband asks, "It's not how we planned things, is it, Midge?" (41). Midge's loss of narrative control is reflected in her distance from the narrator role, despite Leavitt's care to represent her mother as someone for whom language has always been important for processing and shaping her own experiences. When Midge was young, after the death of her parents, she wrote poems about herself and her family (12). When her daughters were growing up, she wrote them humorous, fantastical short stories about banal everyday activities like hair-brushing (63), and when Sarah was away at university, Midge sent her weekly handwritten letters with news about herself and

the family (16-17). In the early stages of her Alzheimer's, Sarah catches her writing in a small notebook to "keep track of [her] blankety-blank headaches" (34), but even before Midge's dementia is officially diagnosed, her narrative impulse and skill begin to deteriorate. Sarah writes: "I asked [my mother] to write down some things about my childhood, since her long-term memory was still good and mine never had been. She was excited about writing a lot of lists for me, but she only managed one. It took me a while to decipher her new handwriting" (40). The transformation that Sarah observes in her mother's ability to represent herself is more than a sign of her illness; it is a symbol of the changes her daughter perceives in her identity. The only sequence that Midge narrates spans a single page and further marks the redefinition of who she is and how people see her. She tells a story about getting lost walking home on a familiar route, and being returned home by the police. The medical alert bracelet that she is made to wear from that point on reads "Midge Leavitt / Memory Loss / Call Police," and officially links her identity with her disease (50). Couser writes that "[w]hen the body takes a turn for the worse, the mind often turns toward words" (*Recovering Bodies* 295), but in Midge's case, the worsening of her condition is defined by her inability to wield language autonomously and in all of its forms for the first time in her adult life.

In an interview with Robyn Read, the editor of *Tangles*, Leavitt explains that communicating how her mother "kept on being herself, the woman [she] loved, no matter how sick she was" was one of her primary motivations for writing her graphic memoir ("Strange Little Creatures"). However, for much of the text, Sarah perceives and describes her mother's illness as a linear process of decay—decay of the body, of the mind, of language, and of the self. As Midge loses the ability to articulate her observations, participate in conversations, and be fully present during the time she spends with her daughter, Sarah sometimes talks about her and treats her as though she is absent or already dead (108, 115). At one point, she confesses: "I realized that part of me believed the real Mom lived somewhere else, unchanging, immortal, observing the new Mom" (94). Renata Lucena Dalmaso argues that the way Leavitt uses "visual metaphor[s]" like "the split body" and "the blank stare" to visually portray Midge's disease reinforces the problematic "notion that Midge as someone with Alzheimer's [is] inherently disconnected from the person Midge" (82). Dalmaso reads *Tangles* as a story of two Midges "coexist[ing], in a balance of some sort. At one moment, however, a shift occurs and . . . [t]he marked Midge, who at first appeared

only episodically, begins to completely eclipse the familiar Midge” (84). Kathleen Venema similarly frames Alzheimer’s as an “identity-erasing disease” (63) and suggests that *Tangles* is a story about “disappearance” (62, 66, 69), “effacement” (63), and “the irreversible deterioration of one’s capacity to be oneself” (49). In Leavitt’s representation, Midge also struggles to reconcile who she is in illness with who she was in health as language slips in and out of her control.

In Midge’s lucid moments, she declares a connection between her Alzheimer’s and the loss of her personhood by stating and repeating variations of the notion that she “[isn’t] a real person anymore” (67, 75, 89, 98). Neither Dalmaso nor Venema considers the ways that Leavitt herself denounces such statements and views as problematic within the story. One such example is when Sarah’s partner, Donimo, scolds her for speaking as though her mother is, to use Dalmaso’s term, a “non-person” (84; *Tangles* 115). Rather than presenting an account of an ill person who needs to “reclaim her personhood from Alzheimer’s” (Dalmaso 81), Leavitt, therefore, affirms the personhood of the ill subject when she loses the ability and the will to do so herself. By further depicting herself learning to accept the process and effects of language receding from her relationship with her mother, Leavitt communicates how Alzheimer’s does not erase Midge or make her into a wholly new or different person. Rather, Midge’s Alzheimer’s leads Leavitt to expand her understanding of her mother’s personhood and humanity—specifically, that she retains it throughout the disease.

As in *Paul à Québec*, in *Tangles*, verbal language becomes less essential overall by the end of the story. As Midge becomes increasingly impaired (70-71), Sarah learns to use non-verbal methods of communication such as touching, body language, and facial expressions to relate to her in a new, but still intimate, way. She becomes uncomfortably aware of her mother’s body in order to provide her with adequate care, and at first she is hesitant and reluctant: “Like I ever wanted to be so familiar with her body, her bad breath, her smelly underarms” (85). Later, however, she begins to desire and initiate such contact in order to remain physically and emotionally close to her (92, 114). The act of brushing Midge’s hair becomes particularly meaningful to Sarah: “I never used a comb or brush on Mom’s hair, just my fingers. At some point I started putting little balls of her hair in my pocket . . . [a]nd then I started collecting my own hair. . . . Some of my friends found it disturbing. I found it comforting” (63). No longer able to relate to Midge intellectually or creatively, Sarah searches for other things that they have in common, and discovers that

she can relate to her through a physical trait that they share—their curly, tangled hair. Sarah adapts to these changes in their relationship and ultimately recognizes that the connection between her and her mother transcends their mutual love of language, and words like *mother* and *daughter* that previously described their roles. Sarah writes, “[s]he had very few words. But in some way she recognized me. My voice and face had some meaning for her” (115). Though *Tangles* is in part Sarah’s story “des transformations subies par sa mère et de ses propres transformations” (Miranda-Morla 257),<sup>15</sup> we argue that it is not fundamentally “about a mother’s heartbreaking disappearance [woven] inextricably into an account of a daughter’s permanently reshaped identity” (Venema 61-62). Rather, *Tangles* is about how Midge’s disease turns mother and daughter into veritable strangers who have to fight back towards familiarity without the aid or uniting force of language in a continual process of loss and rediscovery.

Despite becoming less central to Sarah’s understanding and appreciation of her mother by the end of the text, Midge’s connection to language remains important until the end of her life and after her death. As in *Paul à Québec*, language in *Tangles* serves the additional purpose of defining relationships and facilitating co-operation and intimacy between *all* family members. The section of the book titled “Language” (38-39) focuses on the ways in which this theme is central to the majority of the Leavitt family interactions. As in Rabagliati’s text, “cutthroat Scrabble” is one of the family’s favourite pastimes (39), and in the Leavitt household, language is seized upon and put to use in a variety of other imaginative ways:

In junior high, Hannah took our language play to the next level with a collection of acronyms and made-up words that were so apt that Dad and Mom and I adopted many of them for our own use. Like if a couple was having an overly affectionate goodbye, we’d say they were being “piss,” short for “parting is such sweet sorrow.” (38)

Lucia Miranda-Morla argues that Leavitt’s emphasis on the collective importance of language is meant to highlight how the impact of Alzheimer’s on Midge’s ability to communicate clearly and coherently is a family tragedy as much as a personal one (261). Ultimately, however, we argue that it serves to establish their shared love of reading, writing, and wordplay as Midge’s personal and professional legacy, a part of Midge that will live on in everyone she loved. The turbulent relationship with language that she and her family experience in the last stage of her life does not negate the value it previously held for her, or undermine the role it will continue to play in the lives of her family members.

Before Midge loses language completely, her capacity to deliberately manipulate language and meaning increasingly dissolves into accidental gibberish and non sequiturs, not unlike Hannah's invented language. She develops a new way of speaking that consists of fragmented sentences and nonsense that Sarah refers to as a series of "poetic mistakes" (54). These "mistakes" include synesthetic observations, such as when Midge comments that "the grass feel[s] lovely and green today" (54); perceptive reflections, like "[d]oesn't this music just reach right in and grab your heart?" (54); and poignant declarations, like "I think it's going quite sadly" (82), "I just can't tell what is and isn't" (88), and "[o]h broccoli, who are simple" (103). The breakdown of standard and conventional syntax and language usage and the development of a new, fragmented language seem to mark the erosion of the old Midge, and the emergence of a new Midge. However, it is perhaps more accurate to view her confused but strangely precise use of words as evidence that her intellect and her creativity are increasingly obscured or rendered inaccessible by her Alzheimer's, but remain fundamentally part of her identity. Midge herself lends this reading support when she says, "[l]et people hear you, Midge. Let people see you, Midge" (98). That Midge's self is present even as she loses the capacity to express or externalize it directly with language is reminiscent of the wordless, full-page panel in *Paul à Québec* that depicts Roland tapping his fingers to his favourite music (157-58), even though he has been unresponsive for days and recently administered a dose of medication meant to ease his disconnection from the world (154). According to Miranda-Morla, "[l]a question centrale de *Tangles* est peut-être celle de la vérité de l'être et de ce qui peut la définir" (296).<sup>16</sup> In her view, "*Tangles* ne donne pas de réponse" (296),<sup>17</sup> but by the end of the story, it is clear that Leavitt, like Rabagliati, has demonstrated various ways a self can be defined without and beyond language. Ultimately, *Tangles* is the story of Midge, a woman with Alzheimer's, holding onto, or continuing to possess, selfhood, and not just in her lucid moments as Dalmaso argues (81). It is also the story of her daughter coming to terms with the challenge of recognizing and communicating with her mother without recourse to a stable linguistic code.

## Conclusion

Both *Tangles* and *Paul à Québec* demonstrate that words are not always adequate or necessary for capturing and communicating the truth of a life, especially when that life is affected by a terminal disease such as Alzheimer's or cancer. Rabagliati's exploration of how meaning is amplified when

language is absent at the structural level of a story culminates in the final pages of *Paul à Québec*, which are completely wordless except for a brief exchange between Rose and the spirit of her grandfather (182-83). Over multiple pages, the panels slowly pan out from the scene at the cemetery until Roland's grave and the little girl beside it are just specks in the universe (179-87). Just as Roland has said goodbye to his family, and they to him, the reader gradually withdraws from a deeply personal yet universal story of life, love, and loss. In contrast, Leavitt's continuous narration in *Tangles* ensures that the reader remains at a distance from the highly individualized experience of her mother's illness throughout the account. Whether we call them graphic pathographies, graphic memoirs, or something else entirely, *Paul à Québec* and *Tangles* both function at the intersection of medicine and literature where the story of an illness is transformed into narrative, not just for the sake of ordering and processing the trauma, but to commemorate the lives forever changed by the experience. At the same time, both authors reveal that one cannot rely on language to capture every nuance and truth of what one sets out to record and describe. As Sarah discovers when she begins saying the mourner's Kaddish for her mother after she passes away, sometimes the language that one uses is not as important as the act and effort of using it, because the meaning of the experience surpasses the meaning of the words: "I didn't care what the words were. I wanted the ritual" (125). Overall, the human experience of illness resists straightforward representation and classification. As Ann Jurecic maintains, "[t]hose who write about illness, an experience that can break a life in two, face the nearly impossible task that confronts all who write about trauma: how to speak the unspeakable. If illness is beyond expression in language, translation of the experience into words misrepresents, even contaminates, the real event" (10). Ultimately, *Paul à Québec* and *Tangles* can be taken as examples of how comics—a medium in which the narrative can continue to unfold even in the absence of words—are perfectly suited to telling stories about the breakdown of verbal and written communication due to illness, and the importance of forging a connection beyond language.

#### NOTES

- 1 The diseases affecting Rabagliati's Roland and Leavitt's Midge have very different symptoms vis-à-vis language, and in comparing these two texts, we do not mean to suggest that they are equivalent. The neurodegenerative nature of Midge's Alzheimer's affects directly, and early on, those cognitive functions most closely associated with narrative discourse, language, and self-fashioning. These symptoms differ considerably from those experienced

- by Rabagliati's Roland, whose loss of language is not a primary symptom of his terminal pancreatic cancer, and which manifests itself only in the final days of his life.
- 2 For more on the French *bande dessinée* in general, see Groensteen. For a discussion of the various forms of life storytelling in French comics, see Alary, Corrado, and Mitaine.
  - 3 Rabagliati's mix of fiction and true-to-life storytelling makes his texts difficult to classify using existing labels for autobiographical writing in comics. Rabagliati states that his *Paul* series fits most appropriately within the genre of *autofiction* ("Michel Rabagliati"), "the French term for autobiographical fiction, or fictional narrative in the first-person mode" (Smith and Watson 186).
  - 4 The term "graphic novel" is contentious, with comics scholars and fans alike viewing it as imprecise (Hatfield 5), as a marketing ploy invented to legitimate comics as literature (29-30), and as an arbitrary umbrella term "for a vague new class of cultural artifacts" (El Refaie 5). In describing Rabagliati's semi-fictionalized accounts of his life, however, the descriptor 'autobiographical graphic novel' seems appropriate. Rabagliati himself argues that *Paul* "reads . . . like a novel" ("Michel Rabagliati," translation by the authors). Michel Hardy-Vallée further acknowledges that "for an anglophone, *Paul* reads as a graphic novel" (90) and Rabagliati reads as "heir to the graphic novel movement" (91).
  - 5 All translations of quotations from *Paul à Québec* are taken from the English version of the comic, *The Song of Roland*, translated by Helge Dascher. All other translations, including the following, are done by the authors: "in *Paul à Québec* . . . [Paul] really takes a back seat, so to speak, and observes what's happening around him."
  - 6 "[I]n fact, I'm painting a portrait of a father, a grandfather" ("Michel Rabagliati").
  - 7 "But the family favourite is Scrabble. Roland and Suzanne were in a league of their own. Real sharks" (32).
  - 8 "without Dad, it's not the same..." (136).
  - 9 For a discussion of language and Québécois identity in *Paul à Québec*, see Dardaillon and Meunier ("*Paul à Québec*").
  - 10 "Stuff men their age talk about, I guess. Work, women, their kids and grandkids, memories of their youth" (111).
  - 11 "through this last stage" (153).
  - 12 *Paul à Québec* is listed as a *bande dessinée médicale* on [www.bdmedicales.com](http://www.bdmedicales.com) under "Albums." Ian Williams broadly defines the term as designating "franco-belgian BD's which deal with health matters" ("bandes dessinées").
  - 13 "[n]othing is left out, from the first symptoms of the disease right through its terminal phase" ("*Paul à Québec*" 87).
  - 14 See El Refaie 43-44, 179; Green and Myers 574; Kleinman xii, 50; Charon 10; McMullin 154; Couser, *Signifying Bodies* 15; Frank 110; Jurecic 12; Holmes 157; Hawkins 11; Williams, "Graphic Medicine" 21; Williams, "Autography" 354.
  - 15 "of the transformations that both she and her mother undergo" (Miranda-Morla 257).
  - 16 "Perhaps the key question in *Tangles* is the truth and definition of being" (296).
  - 17 "*Tangles* does not answer this question" (296).

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