ALICE MUNRO'S "THE FLATS ROAD"

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For all its complexity and intricate density, Alice Munro's vision has often been envisaged as articulating "an essential tension between two sets of values, two ways of seeing, two worlds."[1] In the words of Rae McCarthy Mcdonald, there are two kinds of Munro people: "there are those of the world, of society, of the accepted norms and those 'from the other country.'"[2] There is no denying that Munro's world is strongly polarized, that throughout her five collections there prevails an opposition between benign fool saints (be they idiots, misfits, eccentric old people, the fatally ill or the fatally malajusted) and cruel normalcy emerging from the petty minded middle class. But the privileged position of outcasts in Munro's world does not result in a dialectic of isolation and exclusion.

True enough, some of her eccentrics, like belated dinosaurs, are doomed to disappearance and the eulogy of folly in her work is sometimes an elegy. The point I wish to argue, however, is that Munro allows her outcasts and her pariahs, her people from "the other country" to exist in and influence the world of everyday legality. I mean to look at their influence in terms of the opposition between two archetypal figures. One is Biblical: it is that of Jonah. The other is taken from folklore: it is that of the ogress. Jonah's fate is one of temporary confinement soon rewarded by greater freedom; the act of swallowing which brings about his imprisonment is opposed to the act of tearing apart symbolized by the devouring ogress.

These two figures can easily be traced in the opening story of *Lives of Girls and Women*, entitled "The Flats Road." The "Jonah Complex"[3] is introduced in the first paragraph of the story with the description of the young Del and her brother Owen catching frogs to provide Uncle Benny with baits for his fishing. The youngsters' activity provides us with the symbolic motif that dominates the story: that of swallowing. The frogs disappear into a honey pail to be swallowed by the fish which are, in turn, absorbed by Uncle Benny. The act of destruction is thus reduced, since each of the dead becomes food for the quick and helps maintain life.

The disappearance of the frogs is matched by the potential threat of the marshy area in which Del Jordan lives. Thus, Uncle Benny tells the children about the swamp that lies behind his house: "He said there was a quicksand hole in there that would take down a two-ton truck like a bit of breakfast."[4] Uncle Benny's house itself is presented as a dark cave in which "the deep, deep layered clutter and dirt of the place swallowed light" (p. 3).

In fact, it can be compared to the whale's belly which for three nights and three days carried Jonah over the sea until he was belched out onto safe land to celebrate the name of God. The prophetic dimension of Uncle Benny is unmistakable, as evidenced here:

> *In all his statements, predictions, judgements there was a concentrated passion. In our yard, once, looking up at a rainbow, he cried "You know what that is? That's the Lord's promise that there isn't ever going to be another flood." He quivered with the momentousness of the promise as if it had just been made and he himself was the bearer of it* (p. 2).

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When Uncle Benny says that "he was the only person who had been right through the swamps, not just made little trips in around the edges" (p. 1), we understand the full implications of his claim. Uncle Benny is a Jonah figure and his den is no less than the whale's belly.

An emissary, a bearer of important tidings, Uncle Benny is also a semi-illiterate who cannot write and only reads scandal sheets or tabloids on which Del feeds with a devouring passion: "I read faster and faster, all I could hold, then reeled out into the sun, on the path that led to our place, across the fields. I was bloated and giddy with revelations of evil, of its versatility and grand invention and horrific playfulness" (p. 5).

The image of Del bloated and reeling out shows what Gaston Bachelard calls "the complex of the super Jonah or the cubed Jonah."[5] In other words, through the absorption of Uncle Benny's newspaper, Del is taking in all of Uncle Benny's world, including Uncle Benny himself and the fish and frog that he carries within himself. It must be noticed, however, that Del's Gargantuan appetite is satiated by the sight of her parents' house and she seems to disgorge all she had absorbed at Uncle Benny's:

> *But the nearer I got to our house, the more this vision faded. Why was it that the plain back wall of home, the pale chipped brick, the cement platform outside the kitchen door, washtubs hanging on nails, the pump, the lilac bush with brown spotted leaves, should make it seem doubtful that a woman would really send her husband's torso wrapped in Christmas paper, by mail to his girlfriend in South Carolina?* (p. 5).

It is clear that the Jonah complex reduces the act of destruction by transfiguring the irrevocable into the transitory. It must be added that the schema of swallowing does not differentiate between active and passive. In the same way as Uncle Benny swallows fish which had swallowed frogs and is himself swallowed by the marsh, Del absorbs the newspaper but is equally absorbed by it. As a swallower swallowed, the hero is not deteriorated. There is a transmutation of the values of engulfing which restores the hero to society after his passage in the dark recesses of the cavern. In other words, through a negative operation, a positive one emerges because the negative act has destroyed a first negativity. This process of double negation is symbolically at work all through the first part of the story with Del transmuting the evil world of the tabloids into the mythic world of the imagination. By absorbing the tabloids, Del rules them out of existence; she transforms them into feats that have the glamour of inventiveness and are divorced from reality.

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Thus, when Uncle Benny asks for a sample of her handwriting, Del decides to write Uncle Benny's name and the address in full and the result is: "Mr Benjamin Thomas Poole, The Flats Road, Jubilee, Wawanash Country, Ontario, Canada, North America, The Western Hemisphere, the World, the Solar System, the Universe" (p. 9).

The process of expansion initiated by Del can be considered as the logical counterpart to the process of swallowing in which she had previously engaged. These two movements, one toward the dark interior of Uncle Benny's cavern and the other toward the outside world that reaches out into the cosmos, represents a single unbroken axis that highlights the quest pattern of the Munro protagonist.

As a Jonah figure, the behaviour of the Munro outcast stands in sharp contrast to that of another pariah, the cruel ogress amplified by Madeleine, the bride who Uncle Benny has acquired through a newspaper clipping. Whether she is armed with a stove lid lifter, a shingle or a poker, Madeleine's role is one of destruction. With "her long legs going like scissors" (p. 14), with her cutting up Uncle Benny's new suit into shreds and, more importantly, her indulging in child abuse, Madeleine appears to us as the model of all the sorceresses which people folklore and iconography. Dirty, hideous and one-eyed (or at least short-sighted), she represents the archetype of the terrible mother, the ogress that devours her litter, the black soul of the world. Although she disappears from the Flats Road eventually, never to return, Madeleine almost brings about Uncle Benny's fall: he attempts to find her again in the big city so as to retrieve Diane, the child whose fate – in Madeleine's hands – worries him.

Uncle Benny's descent into the labyrinth of Toronto is completely opposed to his crossing the marsh behind his house. It is no longer the penetration of the belly of the earth, the slow descent into wonderland. It is a confrontation with the cave of fright, the passage into the various circles of Dante's Inferno. In Toronto, the cavity has been transformed into an abyss and Uncle Benny runs the risk of crashing at the bottom. But precisely because he is not able to come near the ogress, he is belched out by the city whale and allowed to land back in the Flats Road unharmed. His failure in finding Madeleine is, in fact, a success. He has weathered the destructive element and extirpated himself from the clutches of the ogress.

The danger that Uncle Benny weathers in Toronto is the same as the danger from which Del is rescued every night when she looks at the protective image of her parents playing cards by the lamplight:

> *It was the same as in the winter sometimes, when they would deal out two hands of cards and sit down at the kitchen table, and play waiting for the ten o'clock news, having sent us to bed upstairs. And upstairs seemed miles above them, dark and full of the noise of the wind. Up there you discovered what you never remembered down in the kitchen. That we were in a house as small and shut up as any boat on the sea, in the middle of a tide of howling weather. They seemed to be talking, playing cards, a long way away in a tiny spot of light, irrelevantly; yet this thought of them, prosaic as a hiccup, familiar as breath was what held me, what winked at me, from the bottom of the well as I fell into sleep* (pp. 22-23).

The Jonah complex reaches here its full definition by transfiguring the belly of the whale into the Arch, the reassuring, protective hull, the closed binnacle that will carry its inhabitants through the perils of the sea and safely land them on *terra firma*. This vision of the Arch does not eradicate the well or the abyss of Toronto. It absorbs them in order to transmute their danger into wonder. The world that Del describes encompasses the bottom of the well and the attic where she sleeps, the interior of the swamps and the vault of heaven, the darkness and the glory.

"The Flats Road" could finish on this complex symbol of the Arch that reunites all the polarities of the story. Yet a coda is added dealing with Madeleine. Although she has vanished from the Flats Road, she is still talked about and made into a story, which is a fitting end for the ogress. Thus, Del has managed to transmute the destructive woman into an innocuous legend. Her feat is that of the writer-to-be. It is also that of Munro herself whose characters are graced with a trancendent dimension. No ordinary mortals, they visit our world under different guises. These celestial beggars must return to the country from whence they came and their eclipse is sometimes long lasting (particularly in the last collections), but even their one visitation leaves a deep imprint on our minds.

[1]Rae McCarthy Mcdonald, "A Madman Loose in the World: The Vision of Alice Munro," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 22 (Fall 1976), p. 365.

[2]*Ibid.*, p. 366.

[3]Gilbert Durand, *Les Structures Anthropologiques de l'Imaginaire* (Paris: Bordas, 1969), p. 233.

[4]Alice Munro, *Lives of Girls and Women* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1971), p. 1. All further references are to this edition.

[5]Gaston Bachelard, *La Terre et Les Reveries de La Volonté* (Paris: Corti, 1948), p. 135. My translation.

the fat woman finds her level

the fat woman sits in the corner
her belly flows over her thighs onto the floor around
so much space, at any rate, is mine

the fat woman goes to a party
you thought you could touch me at will
I bet you don't know where to find me in all this

the fat woman is growing, expanding and healthy
you couldn't see me before
I'll grow so terrific that you'll never see me again

the fat woman stands in the sea
dolphins play, curving, round her belly
the fat woman feels complacent

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