

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 transcendent 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.

¹Rae 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.

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

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

⁵Gaston 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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