

TEXT AND TEXTURE. ALICE MUNRO, CHILD OF ATHENA
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Female ancestry - More of a problem - A sack over her head - A dirty shadow -
Noise of life - Save the baby - The joy to find herself forgiven - Female
offspring

Female ancestry

According to the common version of the myth, Athena emerged from the head of Zeus. However this oversimplifies the older story, which was told by Hesiod. Zeus made love with Methis who became pregnant. Zeus learned that the goddess was destined to give birth to a child stronger than himself, so as the delivery grew near he swallowed her, *having entangled her thoughts in illusions and enchanting words*. This is how Athena arrived through the head of her father, who prevented the birth of a rival male child and held Methis *in his own belly, that the goddess might devise for him both good and evil* (*Theogony*, vv. 888-900).

One of the basic texts of patriarchal Greek culture tells the story of the female voice *mèthis*, which means cunning intelligence. This voice is embodied by the uppermost god. The most widespread version of the story denies Athena's maternal origin. We usually think of Athena as the goddess of war and intelligence. Moreover, we remember that Ulixes was her favorite hero and that Athens, the polis, not only received its name from Athena, but was also protected by her. However, very few people know that her dominion included broidery and texture.

What do *knitted bonnets, sweaters and bootees and soakers, handmade tiny gowns ... with crocheted trimming and minute embroidered flowers and birds and lambs* (Munro, 1998, 312) have to do with the Greek goddess of battles and intelligence?

Alice Munro, together with very few contemporary writers, does not respect the coordinates of the patriarchal map. She opens a new perspective while rejecting the sublimated icon of an endlessly bountiful mother. In mythical terms, Athena tells the tale of her maternal ancestry, and Metis might even be disgorged by Zeus, who had once forced his father Cronus to reject his own children.

More of a problem

In the book she wrote about her mother, Sheila Munro states:

She never had any intention of resisting marriage and motherhood. For her it was always a matter of *both/and*, rather than *either/or* [...] She wanted a conventional life that included a husband and children, and beyond that she needed some kind of protective camouflage to conceal her raw ambition from the rest of the world. [...] Going off to Paris and declaring herself a writer [...] would have been sheer folly, a dangerous exposure. I've heard writers and critics who marvel at my mother's ability to be a writer and the mother of three daughters. I know myself that the domestic life can combine very well with the writing, if you get some time alone. (12-13)

To find time and space to write is not a real problem: when a woman complains about her lack of time and space she is really hinting at a repressed conflict. To give up an already acknowledged talent is the kind of private sacrifice that is required of a woman if she wants to be blessed by a dim household goddess. To allow one's talent to develop is an experience linked to the anarchic side of the psyche, which can only be steered by the blind god Eros. The golden god, "limb-loosing, tamer of mortals' and immortals' thoughts and wise aims" (Hesiod, cit., vv. 121-122), does not care about household matters or institutions like marriage and family. A true talent, *more of a problem* than of a gift, affects and inspires Alice Munro, not her daughter Sheila.

A woman, says Alice Munro, *is the house itself*, she cannot do anything unless it pertains to the care of her husband and children. A true talent may look like a mortal enemy, as if this anarchic human side should rule out maternal instinct.

Munro's short story "My Mother's Dream", found in her ninth collection entitled *The Love of a Good Woman* (1999), is about a young mother, Jill. Narrated by her twelve year daughter, the story tells of an event that took place in July 1945, when the narrator was just six weeks old. Jill, who had grown up in an orphanage, had just settled into the house of her husband, an air force pilot, who died before the end of the war. Jill is a violin player:

How can I describe what music is to Jill? Forget about landscapes and visions and dialogues. It is more of a problem, I would say, that she has to work out strictly and daringly, and that she has taken on as her responsibility in life. (1998, 318-319)

The artist's problem of realising his fateful connection with art, requires a woman to answer a major question: can she work both as an artist and as a mother? In this short story there is no

man who represses Jill's desire to play violin. Since her birth, the baby refuses her mother's breast and the only person who takes care of her is Iona, one of her sisters-in-law: Jill has a lot of time for herself. When she, with her fingers still stiff, but no longer puffy as they were during her pregnancy, decides to play some scales, another soloist comes onto the stage:

I woke without a whimper of discontent. No warning, no buildup. Just a shriek, a waterfall of shrieks descended on the house, a cry unlike any cry I'd managed before. (317)

The baby's cry is a violin solo, so acute that it does not allow any space, any time.

The letting loose of a new flood of unsuspected anguish, a grief that punished the world with its waves full of stones, the volley of woe sent down from the windows of the torture chamber.

Iona was up at once, alarmed for the first time at any noise made by me, crying, "What is it, what is it?"

And Aisla, rushing around to shut the windows, was calling out, "It's the fiddle, it's the fiddle." She threw open the doors of the living room.

"Jill, Jill. This is awful. This is just awful. Don't you hear your baby?" (317-318)

Jill is giving up her motherly duties and rights, but the baby still claims her.

This short story is not just a literal representation of a mother-baby relationship, or a paradigmatic one, but the tale of a woman facing a major problem. Its core is the black hole of patriarchal culture, an issue which is repressed because it is impossible to settle. All that our culture could not master has been repressed in the obscurity of the woman's womb. This makes the woman both the origin of offspring, *alma mater*, and the dark cave that dissolves every living being. This private knowledge is unutterable in clear speech and only rarely whispered among women, in the secret of their houses. Having grown up in an orphanage, convinced of the fateful connection between her and the violin, Jill was not aware of this problem.

The incident of the violin music ruined by the soloist baby is something to be hidden by Aisla, then it becomes a joke she tells her neighbours.

Jill, who had "taken her music on as her responsibility in life", hears them laughing.

Suppose then that the tools that serve for her working on this problem are taken away. The problem is still there in its grandeur and other people sustain it, but it is removed from her. [...] My crying is a knife to cut out of her life all that isn't useless. To me. (319)

Is Munro telling us something about maternity, about individual ambition, about both, or about something else? Munro's stories do not present any sociological issue. No common sense, no cheap psychology may help to disentangle their closely knit structure. These are the same issues that concern psychoanalysts: issues that must be sought out with the eyes and ears, issues that must be taken on as one's responsibility in life. dealing with these kinds of issues means giving up any beliefs as soon as they reveal their deceiving nature. It also means freeing oneself from any illusions. In a woman's life, this new kind of odyssey is written in her flesh and on her page. Alice Munro is one of the rare story-tellers of this choral odyssey.

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A sack over her head

Munro is aware of a commonly repressed truth: women constitute the patriarchal order just like men. Women who think of the disjunction between males and females as issued by men are perpetuating this ancient social order: one positively ascribes men their fabulous power in a new way, while seemingly contending it.

No sane man or woman has ever really thought that women are lesser than men. If we look at ancient literature, Greek literature for instance, we find many stories of powerful women in heroic enterprises: without Ariadne, Theseus might never have been able to overcome the Minotaurus (*Ovidi Metamorphoses*, L. VIII vv. 152-176); without Medea, Jason could never have obtained the golden fleece (*ibidem*, L. VII vv. 1-158), and Socrates acquired knowledge about the demonic nature of Eros from a woman, Diotima (Plato, *Symposium*, 203A-204C). But Ariadne had to be abandoned before Theseus' return, Jason had to disavow the mighty Medea, and Diotima's far-reaching knowledge depends on Socrates to get its place in philosophy. Even when a woman does not use her power against a man, even if she devotes all her power to a man, as Medea to Jason, in the end she is unsuitable as a wife and a mother. Her father, her husband, her son, or even her lover, need to believe not only that she is devoted, but that she depends on them – the men must feel that they are able to dominate her.

While women are becoming independent regarding to their rights, profession, economic means, men try to defend their role, grounded on the ancient phallic supremacy. The breakup of a marriage comes from a root so difficult to see that divorce often looks like a tragedy of errors, lacking in sense that two opposite versions try to explain.

The title "The Children Stay" (1998) is taken from a line of the protagonist's husband when she leaves him:

"The children," he said, in this same shivering and vindictive voice. Changing the word "kids" to "children" was like slamming a board down on her - a heavy, formal righteous threat.

"The children stay," Brian said. [...]

The weight of Mara on her hip, yesterday. The sight of Caitlin's footprints on the floor.

Paw. Paw. [...]

Give in, give in, get back to them any way at all, how can she not do that?
A sack over her head.
A fluid choice, the choice of fantasy, is poured out on the ground and instantly hardens; it has taken its undeniable shape.

This is acute pain. It will become chronic. Chronic means that it will be permanent but perhaps not constant. It may also mean that you won't die of it. [...]
And still, what pain. To carry along and get used to until it's only the past she's grieving for and not any possible present. (211-213)

Although Paw is not an actress, she will play the role of Eurydice in Anouilh's 1930 version. The director, Jeffrey, has become her secret lover, and she experiences a sex initiation, which is an unforeseen occurrence for married women.

The thoughts that came to her, of Jeffrey, were not really thoughts at all - they were more like alterations in her body. [...]
She went right on talking, listening, working, keeping track of the children, while some memory of her secret life disturbed her like a radiant explosion. Then a warm weight settled, reassurance filling up all her hollows. But it didn't last, this comfort leaked away, and she was like a miser whose windfall has vanished and who is convinced such luck can never strike again. (200-201)¹

She is studying a scene of the drama on a rainy day while her children are in their beds:

Orphée says that it's intolerable, at last, to stay in two skins, two envelopes with their own blood and oxygen sealed up in their solitude, and Eurydice tells him to be quiet. "*Don't talk. Don't think. Just let your hand wander, let it be happy on its own.*"
Your hand is my happiness, says Eurydice. Accept that. Accept your happiness.
Of course he says he cannot. (199)

Orphée, son of Apollus, is the man led by his scopic drive: the eye is the best instrument of knowledge without touch, enabling an incorporeal wisdom. Orphée is in love and needs to encompass Eurydice, to be one with her: Eve was a rib *of* Adam, and in the Greek myth of the androgynous the lovers desire to be inseparable, to be one². Acting as Eurydice, Pauline can't appease the male scopic drive:

"[O]h, don't look at me, please, darling, don't look at me - perhaps I'm not what you wish I was, but I'm here, and I'm warm, I'm kind, and I love you. I'll give you all the happiness I can. Don't look at me. Don't look. Let me live.' " (186)

Pauline has ...*a problem ... that she has taken on as her responsibility in life*. Part of this responsibility demands that she doesn't stop dreaming, even when the dream doesn't coincide

with her man's dream. Just like sexual coincidence, the synchronized orgasm, it is simple and strictly a mythical perfection

Jeffrey gave her this character and asked her to stay with him:

All she said was: "Are you sure?"

He said: "Sure." He said sincerely, "I'll never leave you"

That did not seem the sort of thing that he would say. Then she realized he was quoting - maybe ironically - from the play. It was what Orphée says to Eurydice within a few moments of their first meeting in the station buffet.

So her life was falling forwards; she was becoming one of those people who ran away. A woman who shockingly and incomprehensibly gave everything up. For love, observer would say wryly. Meaning, for sex. None of this would happen if it wasn't for sex. [...]

With Brian [...] - there can never be this stripping away, the inevitable flight, the feeling she doesn't have to strive for but only to give in to like breathing or dying. [...]

She's hard-used between the legs, swollen and stinking. Urinating takes an effort, and it seems she's constipated. (209-210)

These words reject the hierarchy between the body and soul, between this imprint of the male felt in the bathroom, and a sentimental and literary suggestion:

What she was doing would be what she had heard about and read about. It was what Anna Karenina had done and what Madame Bovary had wanted to do. (207)

Paulina is not a runaway like Madame Bovary or Anna Karenina. Many male writers have written about women who pay the price of death for their lack of devotion to the traditional order. They die just like the heroines of Italian melodramas: Violetta, Traviata, Mimì, Bohème, Tosca, Madama Butterfly...ⁿ³ Tender and beautiful lovers, much more charming than any housewife, these sopranos must die singing their love. They must not upset the patriarchal order, which holds a place for them that is different from the family household. This is from the place where a woman can write as an artist. The heroines of love are merely day-dreams and women must give up all dreams that do not concern their family. If they cannot do this, they should abstain from having a family.

Leaving her family Pauline does not look at reality through the eyes of a man. She does this neither for a man nor against him. The old law is suspended:

Her children have grown up. They don't hate her. For going away or staying away. They don't forgive her, either. Perhaps they wouldn't have forgiven her anyway, but it would have been something different. (213)

Pauline has ...*a problem ... that she has taken on as her responsibility in life*. Part of this responsibility demands that she doesn't stop dreaming, even when the dream doesn't coincide with her man's dream. Just like sexual coincidence, the synchronized orgasm, it is simple and strictly a mythical perfection.

Alice Munro's wanders through dreams and reality, through illusions and disillusion. Giving up her faith in an ego capable of controlling both reality and herself, Munro, in all of her stories, represents what Sigmund Freud denotes the decentralization of the ego. This is something that is very difficult to experience, even for a psychoanalyst, no less a writer or anyone else for that matter. Dreams and reality are not separate reigns, and reverie, as a great mathematician once said, is the virtual catastrophe from which knowledge originates.⁴ The desire that drives Pauline to Jeffrey ravishes the side of her soul where artistic talent may spring, whose only master is the anarchic Eros. Life drive, said Sigmund Freud, is always interlaced with Thanatos, death drive (1920).

Then smiled the goddess, in her heart she smiled...

In the story "Save the Reaper,"ⁿ⁵ (1998) Eve, the protagonist, is on holiday, and her daughter Sophie, who has come to visit her with her children, Philip, seven years old, and Daisy, "barely three" . Sophie has lived far away from her mother since her marriage with Ian, Daisy's father, while Philip's father, like her own, belonged to "the family tradition of flyby fathers." (156)

Eve surmises that Sophie came to visit her after a problem with Ian:

This whole visit might have been tactical. Sophie might have taken the children off to show him something. Spent time with her mother, just to show him something. Planning future holidays without him, to prove to herself that she could do it. A diversion. (160)

Nevertheless, there is a change of plans: Sophie goes to pick up Ian who is coming in from Toronto. They want to take a trip together. Sophie will leave her mother earlier than anticipated. Eve thought that her daughter would be spending more time with her. Eve suggests that Sophie leave the children with her while she goes to Toronto. Sophie agrees. Eve knows that it wasn't Ian who called Sophie, it was her. Philip repeats his mother's words:

She said, "I can't stand it here, I'm sick of it, let's figure out some plan to get me away." (160)

The first thing Sophie did when she came back to visit her mother was to go swimming into the lake. From the shore, Eve tried to call Sophie back, but she, a strong swimmer, was

...heading, it seemed, for the middle of the lake. The first day she had done it she said: "That was wonderful. I felt so free." She didn't say that it was because Eve was watching the children that she had felt that way but Eve understood that it didn't need to be said. "I'm glad", she said - though in fact she had been frightened. Several times she had thought, Turn around now, and Sophie had swum right on, disregarding this urgent telepathic message. Her dark head became a spot, then a speck, then an illusion tossed among the steady waves.

What Eve feared, and could not think about, was not a failure of strength but of the desire to return. As if this new Sophie, this grown woman so tethered to life, could be actually more indifferent to it than the girl Eve used to know, the young Sophie with her plentiful risk and loves and dramas. (156-157)

It is a kind of death for the mother when her daughter leaves her, even if the mother fears it might be her daughter's death.

They had been living together without men, who appeared and disappeared like flybys. Lonesome female life is represented by the Lady of Shalott, the protagonist of Tennyson's poem (1842), which is echoed in the title of the story, and brought to the fore in the plot. Together with the myth of the Amazons this female world ends when a man rushes in, introducing his irreversible presence. The shattering of their world, which corresponds to the death of the hero in the male myths, brings about a catastrophic change.

This change involves the chiasma of the woman's soul, a crucial intersection where Eros and Thanatos are closely interwoven, and equally elude any phallic control. In the patriarchal order, on the contrary, a male who dominates a woman circumscribes this intersection together with its *unheimlich* configurations, and a woman who is enfolded by a man's protection is half relieved of its weight.

When Eve and Sophie shared "a family tradition of flyby fathers," they were united in such a way that they represented the almighty feminine, as narrated by the myth of the Great Goddesses, Demeter and Kore.

"Save the Reaper" starts with Eve driving her car and playing games with her grandchildren, while Sophie is going to Toronto to meet her husband. Eve plays the same game she played with Sophie, imagining that other drivers were alien invaders, strange foes to be detected. While driving, Eve remembers her own mother, and the way she enjoyed being driven by car, imagining she was in a royal coach. Later:

She began to hate trailing along with her mother and being identified as her mother's daughter. My daughter, Eve. How richly condescending, how mistakenly possessive, that voice sounded in her ears. (162)

A little girl gets her identity as *her mother's daughter*, with a feeling that in time becomes a cage, built by her mother to increase her own power. The daughter cannot grow up reflecting her mother, for it would be a kind of mythic perfection, maybe the strongest knot in human life: it ties two persons of the same gender, one coming through the other.

With Sophie the game never caused problems. With Philip, the alien in the female group, Eve is requested to follow a green pick up to an unknown place and trouble is looming ahead. Eve drives to a strange place that she must visit because she cannot turn her car around without the help of its strange dwellers: it is a modern cave, where common life is suspended. Everything looks *unheimlich*:

The trees were heavy old Scotch pines, probably dangerous - you could see their dangling half-dead branches, and branches that had already blown down or fallen down were lying in the grass and weeds on either side of the track. The car rocked back and forth in the ruts, and it seemed that Daisy approved of this motion. She began to make an accompanying noise. *Whoppy. Whoppy. Whoppy.*
This was something Daisy might remember - all she might remember - of this day.
(163)

After this motion and emotion of danger and pleasure, Eve remembers of a day from her childhood, when she notices a strange gatepost:

...Shaped something like crude minarets and decorated with whitewashed pebbles and bit of colored glass. ... She remembers of a place she went with her mother, an outdoor wall with pictures, stiff, fantastic, childish scenes ... made of pieces of glass ... the shape of her mother loomed in front of the wall, talking to an old farmer. (Ibidem)

All changes require regression – one must go back to where some precious mark has been left. The direction of Munro's short stories, just like the direction of a psychoanalytical case, is opposed to repression: there is no movement if the sense of this repression continues to be misunderstood.

In the stinky alien house, where there are no women cleaning to free the space from rubbish, scum, and filth, there are some drunken men and one of them is naked. Eve can even smell semen. An *unheimlich* fear envelopes her. Eve's quest for her childhood place may refer to the mirror where the Lady of Shalott saw the reflection of the world.

When Eve manages to leave the place and save the children, she has no time left to look at the iridescent pieces of glass: she moves.

Then one of the dwellers jumps into her car. The unforeseen guest looks like a boy, but then reveals herself to be a girl, a drunken young whore. She belongs in the cave-house but seems to share Eve's desire to escape from it. While Eve is wondering what this girl might do, and how to protect her grand-children, who are silent at the back of the car, the drunken girl slides her hand under Eve's shorts:

Blatant and half-hearted as it was, it had been enough to set some old wires twitching. And the fact that it could be effective in any way at all filled Eve with misgiving, flung a shadow backwards from this moment over all the rowdy and impulsive as well as all the hopeful and serious, the more or less unrepented-of, coupling of her life. Not a real flare-up of shame, a sense of sin - just a dirty shadow. What a joke on her, if she started to hanker now after a purer past and cleaner slate. (174)

This pure and clean slate reveals its deceiving nature and it later dissolves with that dirty shadow while Eve is looking at a field under the sun.

At the end of the story there are three generations of men – Philip, Ian, and the father that Eve remembers – together with three generation of women, introduced through bright lyric symbolism:

The big hay rolls in a field to the east of the highway were facing ends-on into the sun, so tightly packed they looked like shields or gongs or faces of Aztec metal. Past that was a field of pale soft gold tails or feathers.

“That’s called barley, that gold stuff with the tails on it,” she said to Philip.

He said, “I know.”

“The tails are called beards sometimes.” She began to recite, “ ‘But the reapers, reaping early, in among the bearded barley-’ ”

Daisy said, “What does mean ‘pearly’?”

Philip said, “Bar-ley.”

“ ‘Only reapers, reapers early,’ ” Eve said. She tried to remember. “ ‘Save the reapers, reaping early-’ ” “ ‘Save’ was what sounded best. Save the reapers. (177-178)

Noise of life

Bearded warriors, with metal shields. Tails and feathers, male emblazonry of ancient fighters. The “ancient man” evokes her father: the house Eve chose for their holidays, to receive the first visit from her daughter and grand-children, is on a stretch of Lake Huron where her parents brought her and her brother during their childhood.

It stood in the middle of a cornfield. She had told the children what her father had once told her - that at night you could hear the corn growing. (149)

Eve shares what her father taught her with her grandchildren. What Eve feels and sees what she is forced to understand, what we as readers are forced to understand since we cannot escape from the quest that Munro puts forward with this story. This is the same pivot from the Greek myth of the Great Goddesses.

Mourning the rape of her daughter Kore, whom Hades, king of the Underworld, had taken as his bride and queen, Demeter was so chagrined that she, Goddess of fertility, forbade the soil to give harvests, dooming humankind to famine. During her failing quest, she arrived at Eleusis, where Baubo, an old woman, offered her the kykeon to drink. When the goddess refused, Baubo:

...drew aside her robes, and showed a sight of shame; child Iacchus was there [...] Then smiled the goddess, in her heart she smiled, and drank the draught from out the glancing cup. (Clement of Alexandria)

Dionysos as a child was under the old woman’s robe: ancient figurines related to Baubo represented the inferior half of a woman with a face inscribed on their belly and vulva. ⁿ⁶

How stupid of Eve to think about sex, when the reality, the danger, were elsewhere. (175)

How stupid of Baubo to draw aside her robes showing a *sight of shame*, when the Great Goddess is mourning so intensely! Christian apologist, Clement of Alexandria, tells us about this event to show how *shameless* and *empty-headed* the people initiated to Eleusinian Mysteries were. The repression of this side of the feminine from any admitted rite led to its rejection in caves without any exit.

The obscure side of femininity did not disappear, even though it was severely repressed by the

Tribunal of the Holy Inquisition, which burned 8,000,000 women in Europe as sorceresses and heretics. The exorcism in the Catholic Church gives it a space as evil possession, and the devil takes on the classic features of Pan, horns and goat's legs. ⁿ⁷

At the end of the 19th century this dark side of women has been named as a nervous disease, hysteria, and the hysteric woman have been the first patients of Sigmund Freud, who, listening to them, gave up the ordered anatomic atlas to understand the odd migration of the symptoms everywhere between mind and body. Freud did what had been impossible for Orpheus: he gave up his and his patients' scopis drive, sitting out of their sight, to listen to them.

The vision of the *origin of the world* ⁿ⁸ means the irruption of Eros who puts an end to Demeter's time of mourning. The Goddess laughs when the smiling young Dionysos appears under Baubo's robe, and humankind escapes from extinction. A girl, shady enough to look like a boy, awakens desire in the grandmother Eve, and puts an end to her fear. The young drunken whore may be related to the god of ecstasy and inebriation, Dionysos, who is often represented with androgynous features.

There are some things that are better explained by a myth than by scientific terms, even we would prefer to explain them without figurines and goddesses. ⁿ⁹ There are things that cannot be expressed if we miss the journey through the cave.

Every house, as every woman, holds a fragment of this cave. Its images come up in silence, asking to be woven in a woman's text or in a woman's texture.

Close to the cave a virgin sings, weaving and embroidering her arras, with dreams and reveries refracted by her mirror, as well as by coloured pieces of glass. Her song and her work will last if she, the Lady of Shalott, never looks at Camelot. When Sir Lancelot's image sparkles on her crystal mirror, she leaves her arras and her tower, to go to Camelot and die.

Nobody listens to her song:

Only reapers, reaping early
In among the bearded barley,
Hear a song that echoes cheerly
From the river winding clearly,
Down to tower'd Camelot:
(A. Tennyson, 1842)

Someone knows her voice, someone knows how to tend her soil and get its harvests. The

reaper listens to her.

The cave represents the obscurity placed into the woman's womb, though which life comes, Philip through Sophie, Sophie through Eve, who came through a mother she loved, and later detested. There is no other way to come to life. If men are just flyby fathers this separation is impossible: feeling the male presence Eve remembers and amends the poem of the weaving lady. *Save*, while she is leading home her grandchildren and herself:

'But the reapers, reaping early... Only reapers, reapers early... Save the reapers, reaping early-' "Save" was what sounded best. Save the reapers. (177)

Save the baby

The language of this short story by Munro has a pregnancy that drives it nearer to a poem than a prose. It is not important identifying flash-backs or flash-forwards, prolepses or analepses, since there is no unidirectional thread. As in fractals, a pattern is repeated at every smaller scale, as in geometric topology, measures are non-influential.

As well as in psychic reality, infinite and measurable objects blend and sunder, and pregnant metaphors slip on metonymic chains, swamping to emerge in a shape that is new and old, loosing and gaining life and expression.

Munro is a hard experience for readers looking for a fixed truth. As in a dream or in a nightmare a sense may be felt just suspending one's judgment to open a space to listen and feel something repressed. A first analysis of Munro's stories leads the psychoanalyst to detect pregnant representations of his/her theory and clinical experience. A second analysis, that involves not only the content but also the narrative rhythm and the language, captures the psychoanalyst's interest because in every short story something *unheimlich* rushes in, and overthrows the order of the protagonist, family or town. This points out a hard side of reality: life drive and death drive, Eros and Thanatos, revealing their interlaced plot in every crucial experience. It is not *instead of* this awful interlacing, but *through* it that the story springs and flows. The end of a short story may be happy or sad: the reader has had a chance to touch this removed core.

It is difficult to think of something more dangerous than the entangled presence of Thanatos and Eros in the woman's womb. This knot crops up when a mother is not able to see that her daughter is away from her, like Eve with Sophie. It is even more *unheimlich* if a mother gives life and death. The happy ending, like the tragic one, may come at random and its pregnant meaning is an *après-coup*.

When the baby was born, and Jill "was all painfully stitched together", Iona put the baby's mouth in contact with its mother's nipple, but the baby just "screamed blue murder." (314) Iona held it, and appeased it just with a little warm water. Since the baby went on refusing the breast, the arms and everything else of Jill's body, Iona took care of it.

I soon got fatter and stronger. I could cry louder. I cried if anybody but Iona tried to hold me. [...] Iona had gone from being the most negligible to being the most important person in the house; she was the one who stood between those who lived there and constant discordance, unanswerable complaint. (315)

Jill had thought that the end of her pregnancy would have been the end of her troubles:

It would bring an end to the kicking in the permanent sore spot on one side of her belly and the ache in her genitals when she stands up and the blood rushes into them (as if she'd had a burning poultice laid there). (298)

Jill was quite unready, since she had repressed the danger, the fear, and the heroic aura hedging childbirth. Nor was she prepared to cope with women rivals. She had enveloped herself in a texture of sounds, interlaced and embroidered by her violin. Her mantle was between herself and her orphan life. Is it also between herself and her baby?

I screamed blue murder. The big stiff breast might just as well have been a snouted beast rummaging in my face. (314)

During the absence of the spinster sisters, Jill has to take care of the baby by herself. To survive the endless cries of the baby, she swallows sedative pills, sprinkling a bit of their white powder in the baby's bottle. When they come home the next day, they find Jill and her baby in a deep sleep. When Iona sees the baby she screams:

Dead. Dead. Murderer.

She knows nothing about the pills. So why does she scream "Murderer"? It's the blanket. She sees the blanket pulled up right over my head. Suffocation. Not poison. [...] She grabs me from the crib, with the death blanket twisted round me, and holding the blanketed bundle squeezed against her body she runs screaming out of the room and into Jill's room.

Jill is struggling up, doped, after twelve or thirteen hours of sleep.

"You've killed my baby," Iona is screaming at her. (327-328)

During the battle between her and her baby, when they were alone in the house, Jill decided to play music, the Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto she had to prepare for her diploma examination. She was attempting to appease her baby with her own sound mantle.

She starts to play it, she goes on playing, she goes on and on, she plays right through to the end. And her playing is terrible. It's a torment. [...] The violin is bewitched, it hates her. [...] Nothing could be worse than this - it's worse than if she looked in the mirror and saw her reliable face caved in, sick and leering. [...] It has shown her to herself as somebody emptied out, vandalized. Robbed overnight. [...] She sets the bow and the violin down on the living-room sofa, then she picks them up and shoves them underneath it, getting them out of sight because she has a picture of herself smashing and wrecking them against a chair back, in a sickening dramatic display.

I haven't given up in all this time. Naturally I wouldn't, against such competition.

(324-325)

The baby is the soloist of the whole piece, and the violin, her magic object, doesn't protect her any more.

In the baby's endless cry there is the cry of life, the voice of Eros as a demon, when he's beggarly and harsh, sleeping in the open, without blanket, naked like the owner of the house of the aliens that Eve visited.

Her first motherly performance out of her magic mantle of sounds is giving her baby the same white powder she is going to swallow.

Then the dream comes:

During the night - or during the time she had been asleep - there had been a heavy fall of snow.

My mother looked out from a big arched window [...] She looked down on lawn and shrubs, hedges, flower gardens, trees, all covered by snow that lay in heaps and cushions, not levelled or disturbed by wind. The white of it did not hurt your eyes as it does in sunlight. The white was the white of snow under a clear sky just before dawn. Everything was still; it was like "O Little Town of Bethlehem" except that the stars had gone out.

Yet something was wrong. [...] All the trees, all the shrubs and plants, were out in full summer leaf. The grass that showed underneath them, in spots sheltered from the snow, was fresh and green. Snow had settled overnight on the luxury of summer. (293)

The beauty of winter doesn't befit the blooming and fructifying earth, and the young mother cannot forget that the white powder she gave her baby could be lethal. The dream is going to become a nightmare:

[S]he had left a baby out there somewhere, before the snow had fallen. Quite a while before the snow had fallen. This memory, this certainty, came over her with horror. [...] Within her dream she awakened from a dream, to a knowledge of her responsibility and mistake. She had left her baby out overnight, she had forgotten about it. Left it exposed as a doll she tired of. And perhaps it was not last night but a week or a month ago that she had done this. (294)

Jill's magic mantel of sounds is torn and through the hole she must see her forgotten baby and herself as a mourning mother. The mother mourns with the bereft child: Jill is an orphan.

The sorrow that came to my mother was the sorrow of the baby's waiting and not knowing it waited for her, its only hope, when she had forgotten all about it. So small and new a baby that could not even turn away from the snow. She could hardly breathe for her sorrow. There would never be any room in her for anything else. (294-295)

In-between her daughters Sheila and Jenny, Alice Munro gave birth to a baby without kidneys, seemingly affected by Down's syndrome, who lived just fourteen hours.

In the early hours after the birth, before the extent of the problems were known, my mother and my father talked about getting the baby into an institution of some kind. [...] For years afterwards she had dreams about a lost baby, dreams about leaving a baby girl out in the rain and forgetting about her, a theme that crops up in the recent story "My Mother's Dream" (*The Love of a Good Woman*). The dream kept recurring until my sister Jenny was born after we had moved to West Vancouver. (43-44)

The joy to find herself forgiven

The baby's cry and its sorrow felt by its sleepy mother resound in the wail of a puppy that goes on crying after its mother's death. Their despair is the only way they have to live, even though only death may answer their call. A mother has a drive - the greatest mythic instinct in the world - to take care of her baby, but she may be unable to feel it. Jill could have killed her baby, and Alice Munro tells us that this woman is not a monster.

The mystery of maternal love and hate, union and separation, is hard to face. It is better to repress it or deny it, through the mythic idealization of pure and bountiful maternity. The aim of unveiling of this reality is not to break that beautiful picture, but to give words to the tragic pain that it covers.¹⁰

The young narrator says: Iona's love "was certainly the most wholehearted love I will ever receive". (337)

The baby's demand for love is total, primal, and irrevocable pattern of the desire. If this mythic unlimited love becomes real, it is a kind of madness. Many women, like Jill, are unable to defend themselves and their babies from this materialized myth, which is personified by Iona, who has gone and risks going back to a mental hospital.

Before the child's birth, Iona invited Jill to her room to offer her a treasure. The mood was like that of a fairy-tale, reminiscent of the witch who invites Hansel and Gretel into her gingerbread house. The witch's wholehearted invitation turns into an oven mouth ready to swallow them.

The drawer was full of baby clothes - not plain necessary shirts and nightgowns such as Jill had bought at a shop that sold seconds, factory rejects, in Toronto, but knitted bonnets, sweaters and bootees and soakers, handmade tiny gowns. All possible pastel colors or combinations of colors - no blue or pink prejudice - with crocheted trimming and minute embroidered flowers and birds and lambs. The sort of stuff that Jill had barely known existed. [...] "Of course I don't know what you've got," Iona said. "You may have got so many things already, or maybe you don't like homemade, I don't know." Her giggling was a kind of punctuation of speech and it was also an extension of her tone of apology. Everything she said, every look and gesture, seemed to be clogged up, overlaid with a sticky honey or snuffled mucus of apology, and Jill did not know how to deal with this. (312)

Jill tries to resist Iona's gift, flatly answering that it is nice, and Iona goes on saying that maybe Jill would not like it at all. Then Jill says, "It's lovely." Finally, "I do need it ... I haven't got anything like this at all." (313)

To Iona's bidding, Jill answers three times, as if making three steps towards her coffer, unmindful of her perception:

Jill felt as if Iona's words and giggles and sniffles and damp looks (no doubt she had damp hands as well) were things crawling on her - on Jill - mites trying to get under her skin. (313)

It is easy to enter the gingerbread house, but difficult to find the exit, and in a woman's life the omnipotent maternal phantasma is easily evocable and hardly revocable.

We are finally arriving at the climax, with Iona and Aisla coming back after the night of the dream and of the white powder.

After a sorrow that left no room in her for anything else, Jill had awaked:

What a reprieve, then, to find her baby laying in its crib [...] its skin pale and sweet as snowdrops and the down on its head reddish like the dawn. Red hair like her own, on her perfectly safe and unmistakable baby. The joy to find herself forgiven. (295)

White as snow and red as blood was a famous princess, who was almost killed by her stepmother. Yet in Munro's story, the murdering mother disappears with the dream, and Jill:

[S]till thinking no doubt about the snow and the cold that usually accompanies snow, pulled the blanket up to cover the baby's bare back and shoulders, its red-downed head. (295)

Sheila Munro writes that she and her sister Jenny knew that the baby who died "had red hair." (43)

The baby sleeps under the blanket, Snow White slept in a crystal coffin. Through this awful heritage, the terrible wound that a daughter cannot refuse, blood and life flow away. Let us pull a blanket up on her red head, because no sun can warm the baby who died.

This short story is a poetic dream embedded in a nightmare and it melts an impossible sorrow.

While Aisla closes the windows to protect herself from scandal, Jill realizes that Iona's arms are empty. Nobody but her is now thinking about the baby:

Jill says, "What did you do with the baby?"
"Hid it," Iona says saucily, and makes a face at her - the kind of face a terminally frightened person can make, pretending to be vicious.
"Dr Shantz is going to give you a needle," Aisla says. (332)

With Aisla assisting the doctor, Iona tries to resist the injection:

In the midst of this Jill thinks she has heard a faint cry. She has climbed clumsily over the banister to get around Iona and Dr Shantz - she ran partway up the stairs again when Iona came running in that direction - and has lowered herself to the floor. But the faint cry comes again and she follows the sound to the sofa and looks underneath it.
That's where I am, pushed in beside the violin. (333)

Close to the lifeless magic object, there is the living baby. Jill holds it, and for the first time it does not refuse her mother. Like in fairy tales, the deserted child is rescued, and in the happy ending parents and children find each other. One misunderstand the miracle of the happy end, that is a victory of Eros upon Thanatos, when one look at it as unreal. It simply tells how life may go on, unforeseeable.

Munro is a hard realistic writer, fairy-tales and myths whisper in her language as well as women's speeches inside the house, while cleaning, embroidering, cooking, taking care of a baby or of an elderly parent whose mind follows a bewildering anarchism. Her labyrinthine plots are like the maps of all the paths a woman daily traces in her house: maps of life.

After having given her baby a bottle of milk, Jill lays her down on a chair, asking her to stay still:

She knelt down and nudged and gently tugged the violin out of its hiding place. She found its cover and case and got it properly stowed away. I stayed still. [...] I don't believe that I was dead, or that I came back from the dead, but I do think I was at a distance, from which I might or might not have come back. [...] And Iona's love, which was certainly the most wholehearted love I ever received, didn't decide me. Her cries and her crushing me into her body didn't work, were not finally persuasive. Because it wasn't Iona I had to settle for. [...] I had to settle for Jill and for what I could get from her, even if it might look like half a loaf.
To me it seems that it was only then that I became female [...] I believe it was only at the moment when I decided to come back, when I gave up the fight with my mother [...] and when in fact I chose survival over victory (death would have been victory), that I took on my female nature. (337)

Just living, or surviving, we can tell or listen to a story. Death will have its victory, someday, and it will be total: until that moment time is ours.

Female offspring

Following an ancient codex Athena became pregnant by the most intelligent Greek hero, when she met Ulysses, so confused and doped that he was even unable to recognize the littoral of his beloved Ithaca. The goddess of intelligence, war and texture, hid her baby from the Olympic gods and goddesses' eyes and from Ulysses. Christian gladiators did not unveil this episode, nor was it uncovered by the Renaissance perspective.

Athena's offspring survived by commingling with mere mortals and they hanker for home while travelling on the sea without fixed itineraries. They learn the meaning of Freud's motto: *Navigare necesse est, vivere non necesse*. They try to understand labyrinths, not maps: there is no labyrinth where there is a fixed map. They endlessly weave stories to tell us how people loose themselves and find each other in uncharted spaces. The young narrator of "My Mother's Dream" is one of them.

Endnotes

¹ In these words there is an echo of the nature of Eros, son of Poros and Penia: it is the Diotima's speech in Socrate's speech, in Plato's Symposium. (203A-204C)

² Here we notice another echo from the Symposium, speech of Aristophanes. (191D)

³ There is a heroine who survives in Puccini's Operas, coming from a fairy-tale, Turandot - François Pétis de la Croix, *Les Mille et Un Jours. Contes Persans*, Paris, 1710-1712. In her opera, the typical heroine of Puccini is Liù, who dies for love. It is interesting to notice a weird coincidence: Giacomo Puccini wrote the music for the funeral of Liù, and died before attending the triumphal happy end of Kalaf and Turandot, the princess who, not to marry, had cut the head of her former wooers.

⁴ "...La rêverie n'est-elle pas la catastrophe virtuelle en laquelle s'initie la connaissance? Au moment où tant de savants calculent de par le monde, n'est-il pas souhaitable que d'aucuns, s'ils le peuvent, rêvent?". René Thom (1972), p. 366.

⁵ See also, in this volume: Valeria Medda, *The Threat*.

⁶ The clay figurine of Baubo comes from Greek Asian cities, V-II sec b. C., *Baubo Figurines from Priene*, Available on <http://mkatz.web.wesleyan.edu/cciv110x/hhdemeter/cciv110.Iambe.html>, consulted 10 August 2008.

⁷ In at least two works of the Renaissance Tyrolean artist Michael Pacher (1435-1498), the devil has taken on the human face that was sculptured on the Priene's figurines. His wood statue of Archangel Michael defeating the Devil (Rome, Museo di Palazzo Venezia) has a human antic face on the devil's abdomen and genitalia, and another antic face is painted on the posterior of the devil who is showing a codex to Saint Wolfgang (Hl. Wolfgang und der Teufel, München, Alte Pinakothek). Picture available on <http://www.mokkas.de/malerei/beruehmte-maler-pt/pacher-michael/>, consulted 10 August 2008)

⁸ See also Héliane Ventura, 2005, « Le tracé de l'écart ou « L'origine du monde » réinventée dans « Lichen » d'Alice Munro ». See also, in this volume: Catherine Fava-Dauvergne, *The fascinating missing origin. Littoral between the maternal and the feminine*.

⁹ Sigmund Freud, with the honesty that is proper to a genius, wrote that the sexual life of adult women was a "dark continent" for psychology. (1926, 213) Melanie Klein faced this field, and we could speak of the mother as partial and total object, as well as of good or bad breast. However, these Klein's terms, out of a psychoanalytic range, sound more as a poor mythology than as scientific words.

¹⁰ Quoting Schiller [Es liebt die Welt, das Strahlende zu schwärzen | Und das Erhabene in den Staub zu ziehen], Freud opens his "Eine Kindheitserinnerung des Leonardo da Vinci" (1910) inviting the lector to face a human expression even when it seems upsetting beauty. His analysis of Leonardo *does not strive* "das Strahlende zu schwärzen und das Erhabene in den Staub zu ziehen" (GW, 8, p. 128)

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