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The Relevance of the Chimera: Phantasy, Ekphrasis, Anamorphosis in Alice Munro's "Runaway"

Critical enquiry is fraught with danger; it sometimes brings death into the world. In Henry James's short story "The Figure in the Carpet", those who have found "the little trick", "the exquisite scheme", "the general intention", those who have been "initiated" and have seen "the secret" inexorably meet with an untimely death. George Corvick falls on his head and is killed on the spot; Hugh Vereker dies shortly afterwards, his wife follows suit and Mrs Drayton Deane, too, encounters death before she can utter the unimagined truth. There is a curse upon the critical enterprise, which equally affects the creator, the critic, and the creatures of fantasy both of them are supposed to produce.

Regardless of the danger, I would like to situate the relevance of theory precisely in its attempt at uncovering "the figure in the carpet", that is to say, in its attempt at grappling with the unreliability of perception, the trickery of vision, the enigma of appearances. The possibility of optical or phantasmatic distortion is a *caveat* that Plato, before Henry James, has repeatedly entered:

> *And the same objects appear straight when looked at out of the water, and crooked when in the water; and the concave becomes convex, owing to the illusion about colours to which sight is liable. Thus every sort of confusion is revealed within us: and this is that weakness of the human mind on which the art of conjuring and of deceiving by light and shadow and other ingenious devices imposes, having an effect upon us like magic (Plato 602).*

My analysis of the effect of the magic that narration works upon us will be subtended by a belief that has been worded by Jean-Jacques Lecercle: "I believe not only in the necessity of theory, but also in its ancillarity, or at least in its transitivity: the main and perhaps the only interest of theory is that it helps me to understand the said texts and pictures, the word and the world for they undoubtedly come first."[1] My test case, which will therefore come first, is a short story by Alice Munro entitled "Runaway" from a volume she published in 2004 under the same title and which is her 11th collection of short stories, that is to say her last but one so far. The analysis will address the issue of the resurgence of subterranean or clandestine signifiers, and test its validity through the correlation between visual representations and allusion, to propose a micro-reading of a single story based on the inferential elucidation of some of its covert or overt hypotexts and of their deployment through phantasy, ekphrasis, and anamorphosis.

Unobtrusive spatial markers enable the reader to understand that the story characteristically takes place in southwestern Ontario since the nearest city that the female protagonist escapes to is Toronto, nevertheless, it is conceived as a story with a rural setting which is geographically indeterminate, and may have affinities with bucolic eclogues and pastoral idylls of a remote Sicily ironically, if tacitly, re-sited in North America. The main protagonists are a young couple, Clark and Carla, who live in a trailer in the middle of a field, next to their riding barn, where they provide precarious shelter for their pet

[1] Jean-Jacques Lecercle, "Thomas Jones and Deleuze," Inaugural Address, Unpublished Communication, Fifth International British Council Symposium. "Seing Things: Literature and the Visual." Université de Tours, September 10th, 2001.

goat, Flora, their own horses and those which board with them. The trailer is equipped with a computer but the carpet, which is the same in all the rooms, is worn out and mouldy. It is also a symbolic motif and a programmatic index, which self-reflexively provides an injunction on how to read stories. Consider its description:

> *It was divided into small brown squares, each with a pattern of darker brown and rust and tan squiggles and shapes. For a long time she had thought these were the same squiggles and shapes, arranged in the same way, in each square. Then when she had had more time, a lot of time, to examine them, she decided that there were four patterns joined together to make identical larger squares. Sometimes she could pick out the arrangement easily and sometimes she had to work to see it (8-9).*

"The figure in the carpet" which Carla sometimes manages to get into focus and sometimes loses according to the way she accommodates, seems destined to draw attention to the trickery of the real though the possibility of optical distortions due to the subjectivity and arbitrariness of individual perception. Should the pattern on the carpet of the trailer be narrowly focused and considered through its seeming independence or should it be envisaged as an interconnected motif only acquiring meaning in the overall design? Is the overall arrangement which duplicates or quadruplicates the individual pattern the only one that can be found and wouldn't other patterns emerge if the squiggles and shapes were looked at from a different perspective? Is there a "legitimate," or necessitated perception which can be set up against a fraudulent or contingent one? If perception is dependent upon a parallax (Zizek) which deceivingly changes the placement of the figure, which mediation should be examined – the subject's or the object's?

Like many of her earlier stories, Munro's text of 2004 is subtended by the likelihood of a secret and by shifts in focus which affect directly all aspects of representation. It is a story which seems to be arranged through tangled blocks of "squiggles and shapes" now emerging as clear and easily perceptible to the naked eye, now as opaque and elusive. For example, Carla has told a story to Clark which

is, like the carpet, made of squares, which are added one after the other, night after night, and she has told it with "giggles," which resonate against "squiggles" as if with an internal intrasonance. It is also a story which, like the carpet itself, is very dirty: "A bedtime story, in which the details were important and had to be added to every time, and this with convincing reluctance, shyness, giggles, dirty, dirty" (15). The nominal sentence and final paratactic construction accentuate the effect of transgression and fragmentation, the simultaneous disruption and continuity, the making-up of a story with pieces occurring in small, discrete, increments.

The story is about Carla's neighbour, an ageing poet, suggestively called Leon Jamieson,[2] who is about to die and who is misrepresented by her as a randy lecher bent on seducing her. The man is actually drugged and shrinking, drawing closer to death everyday and when she goes into his house to help his wife with chores, she does not even come close to him since a nurse has been hired to look after him. And yet, to her husband Clark, she represents the old man as still capable of signalling his desire to her and prompting her into relieving it. She goes on indulging in these fictions every night to excite herself and to excite Clark. These abject stories are not actually embedded in the overall narrative, they are neither narrated discursively, nor discoursively; they are simply hinted at by the third person narrator, with occasional instances of direct dialogue between Clark and Carla interspersed in the narration. The noncommittal narrator, characterized by pragmatism and an absence of moralism, occasionally delegates focalization to the female characters, now Carla, now Mrs Jamieson, and does not depict Carla as a perverse mythomaniac but as an imaginative instructress, who knows how to assuage fear in the terrified first-time riders, and provide sexual excitement to her boyfriend.

Despite the fact that they are not actually narrated, the sexually arousing stories within the story, which are alluded to in the first pages, can be envisaged as a phantasy which highlights a process of preliminary and prospective *mise en abyme*, heralding and

[2] The filiation with Henry James is playfully suggested and redoubled with a first name alluding to a major figure from Russian literature that Munro has repeatedly acknowleged as one of her many influences.

reverberating, in advance, the story which is about to unfold. Let us posit the working hypothesis that they are not simply unrealised stories within the story but that they are a liminal fiction in the shape of literary anamorphosis which self-reflexively draws attention to the ways and processes of fiction-making. Consider Lacan's definition of a pictorial anamorphosis:

> *What does a simple anamorphosis, not a cylindrical one, consist of? Imagine a portrait which would be here on this flat sheet that I hold in my hand. You happen to see there fortuitously the blackboard, in an oblique position with regard to the sheet. Imagine that with the help of a series of threads or ideal traits, I transfer on the oblique surface each dot of the image drawn on my sheet, you can easily imagine what the result will be: you will get an enlarged and deformed figure according to the lines of what can be called a perspective.*[3] *(Lacan 1973: 80)*

The made-up stories inside the main story are a visual phantasy, a chimera elaborated through Clara's perspective and they seem to have cropped up directly from the elements which are to be found in the referential story as told by the noncommittal narrator. More precisely, the imaginary stories originate from a reversal of the referential story into its symmetric opposite as if the type of literary anamorphosis we were dealing with was neither a simple anamorphosis nor a cylindrical one but a mirror anamorphosis in which represention is distorted through inversion. Indeed, the metaphoric old lecherous billy-goat of the phantasy is symmetrically inverted from the actual young she-goat who bears a great resemblance to a "guiless girl in love" (9) and more specifically to Carla herself. Carla is frequently depicted with the adjective "giddy" (32) but she is also attributed a mature sense of humor, a trait which is equally shared by Flora, the goat. In the

[3] I have translated this paragraph from the original French : « *En quoi consiste une anamorphose, simple, non pas cylindrique? Supposez un portrait qui serait ici sur cette feuille plane que je tiens. Vous voyez là par chance le tableau noir, dans une position oblique par rapport à la feuille. Supposez que à l'aide d'une série de fils ou de traits idéaux, je reporte sur la paroi oblique chaque point de l'image dessinée sur ma feuille, vous imaginez facilement ce qui en résultera – vous obtiendrez une figure élargie et déformée selon les lignes de ce qu'on peut appeler une perspective.* »

made-up stories, the old billy-goat is depicted as trying to "nudge and finger Carla into complicity, into obliging stunts and intimacies" (15) while in the actual story, Flora is represented as having run away to find herself a billy and Carla herself escapes from her husband's trailer to try and embark on a new and independent life.

The invented story about sexual games with the old poet is represented with the help of a mental image, which is a visual fallacy paradoxically described as "true":

> *And in one part of her mind it was true, she saw the randy old man, the bump he made in the sheet, bedridden indeed, almost beyond speech but proficient in sign language, indicating his desire […] Now and then came an image that she had to hammer down, lest it spoil everything. She would think of the real dim and sheeted body, drugged and shrinking every day in its rented hospital bed, glimpsed only a few times when Mrs Jamieson or the visiting nurse had neglected to close the door. (15)*

The substitution of one image for the other is also represented as a process of inverted symmetry. The dying old man has been replaced with a vigorous billy goat. The metaphor of the hammer used to prevent the real image from overshadowing the invented one highlights another major component of the anamorphotic process: an anamorphosis is a visionary outflanking which cannot be contained, it erupts, it spills over, it overflows. It is this capacity to flare up which has led Lacan to draw a parallel between an anamorphosis and an erection: "How come nobody has ever thought of evoking here […] the effect of an erection?"[4] (Lacan 1973: 82). Munro herself provides the reader with the same unmistakable innuendo: when Carla reproaches Clark with his bad temper, she says "You flare up" and he answers: "This is what men do (6). It looks as if Munro, through apparently unrelated anecdotes, has paved the way for the sudden irruption of a clandestine image in the text. In a story entitled "Runaway", she takes pains to establish the presence in the text of a potential "stowaway."

[4] *My translation from the original : « Comment se fait-il que personne n'ait jamais songé à y évoquer […] l'effet d'une érection ? »*

As demonstrated by Jurgis Baltruisaitis, this transformation of perspective or sudden projection of shapes out of themselves is a major feature of the anamorphosis: "Instead of a progressive reduction to its visible limits, it is a dilatation, a projection of shapes out of themselves, arranged in such a way that they redress themselves at a determinate point: destruction followed by a straightening up, an escape implicating a return"[5] (Baltrusaitis 5). Thus a pictorial anamorphosis is a controlled disarrangement, which challenges its own frontiers but is circumscribed within its frame. Once it is turned into a discursive practice, it may lend itself to more extended outflanking and encroach upon further territory through further ramifications. For instance, what Carla does not anticipate is that she will be unable to contain the fallacies that she indulges in to excite her husband. After the aged poet's death, Clark tries to convince his wife to get financial compensation from Silvia Jamieson for sexual harrassment. The deformation of reality that Carla has engineered triggers off Clark's greed and his desire for revenge and reparation. A structural pattern, derived from anamorphosis, is thus established in the story and it is characterized by an uncontainable dilatation calling for an inescapable redress. In the particular case of Carla's invented stories, punishment will be meted out and she will be made to expiate for her lies.

Throughout the story a great number of deformed and widened figures are similarly allowed to spring forward and retreat. The most dramatic is probably the one which stage-directs the reappearance of a little goat called Flora:

> *The fog had thickened, taken on a separate shape, transformed itself into something spiky and radiant. First a live dandelion ball, tumbling forward, then condensing itself into an unearthly sort of animal, pure white, hell-bent, something like a giant unicorn, rushing at them. (39)*

[5] My translation from : *«Au lieu d'une réduction progressive à leurs limites visibles, c'est une dilatation, une projection des formes hors d'elles-mêmes, conduites en sorte qu'elles se redressent à un point de vue déterminé : une destruction pour un rétablissement, une évasion mais qui implique un retour.»*

> *Then the vision exploded. Out of the fog, and out of the magnifying light-now seen to be that of a car travelling along this back road, probably in search of a place to park-out of this appeared a white goat. A little dancing white goat, hardly bigger than a sheep dog. (39)*

This vision might be likened to a Fata Morgana, that is to say, an optical phenomenon which results from a temperature inversion, "a kind of mirage most frequently seen in the Strait of Messina between Italy and Sicily, attributed in early times to fairy agency." (OED) Indeed, the object Sylvia Jamieson and Carla's husband see in the distance appears elongated and elevated, like a fairy tale castle.[6]

But this apparition is not a castle in the air: the radiant dandelion ball condensing into the elongated giant unicorn is an optical phenomenon that bears a great semblance to it, with a major ontological difference. A Fata Morgana eventually dissolves into thin air leaving nothing in the very space where it first appeared because it is but a mirage. Flora's apparition is not a mirage: it is a fanciful delusion which redresses itself in the end to make way for the reappearance of the living pet goat as a character in the diegesis. The deformation of the object marks it off as a literary anamorphosis in which the process of escape and return has been literalized. After disappearing from the premises for a while, Flora the goat momentarily reenters the diegesis and dispells the visual delusion attendant upon her reappearance.

For all the ontological presence of the goat in the light of the car, and in front of the protagonists, there remains in the description of its reappearance, once its status has been elucidated, the figurative intensity of the evaluative adjectives ("radiant," "live," "unearthly," "giant," "magnifying") and the rhythmic strength of syntax characterized by nominal sentences, parataxis, incremental repetition. The figurative strength of the words and the rhythmic strength of the syntax endow

[6] Longfellow has provided a striking definition for the experience in his poem entitled "Fata Morgana" from *Birds of Passage*, "Flight the Third," 1873: "And forever before me gleams // The shining city of song // In the beautiful land of dreams. // But when I would enter the gate // Of that golden atmosphere, // It is gone, and I wonder and wait // For the vision to reappear."

this reappearance with a haunting and balletic quality. In the words of Lyotard:

> *We are no longer in the visual field, language here links up with dance irradiating its frequencies and its amplitudes in the body of the reader. […] At the level of stylistics, the figure immerged itself in words: but in order to support and govern the articulations of large unities in the narration. Nothing visible but narration is haunted by the visual. One draws nearer the matrix.*[7] *(Lyotard 249)*

Behind the unilateral, visible, goat there remains the hauntingly pluristable figures which preceded its recognition and which suggest a figure which is not completely, despite its hallucinatory dimension, what Lyotard calls an image and which is not either a form but something which is close to a "matrix" (Lyotard 271), a matrix which is complicit with desire and necessarily invisible because it is the object of primal repression. The visible goat which is represented as a projection of shapes out of themselves creates a powerful figure within the discourse, constructed to stand out against its narratable configuration and its repressed, non-narratable background.

The projection of clandestine shapes out of themselves is also present in the description of an art object to be found earlier in the text: a bronze statue of a race horse. This animal is presented as a gift to Carla, offered by the poet's widow:

> *Now she was standing with the tissue paper crumpled around the horse, which she had not fully unwrapped.*
> *"It's said to represent a race horse," Sylvia said."Making that final spurt, the last effort in a race. The rider, too, the boy, you can see he's urging the horse on to the limit of its strength." (19)*

[7] I have translated from the original French : « *On n'est plus dans le visuel, le langage ici communique avec la danse en irradiant ses fréquences et ses amplitudes dans le corps du lecteur. […] Au niveau de la stylistique, la figure s'est immergée dans les mots : mais pour soutenir et régir l'articulation des grandes unités du récit. Plus rien de visible mais le visuel hantant la narration. On se rapproche de la matrice.* »

> *It's a little replica, you know, it's a little replica of the horse they found under the sea. Cast in bronze. They dredged it up, after all this time. Its supposed to be from the second century B.C. (19)*

The resurgence of the horse, dredged up from the bottom of the sea is not a visual delusion undergoing visible deformation, it is a solid bronze statue which represents the straining forward of the animal and the rider. It is a powerful motif which redoubles in advance and prefigures the phantasmatic reappearance of the straining goat in the light of the car.

If we think in terms of the arrangements on the carpet, we realize that the race horse making the final spurt and the goat reappearing like a dandelion elongated into a unicorn act as intratextual doubles. The horse and the goat are two symmetrical representations: an anamorphosis versus an ekphrasis which are not separate, independent, randomly decorative pieces. Far from being loose ends, these two descriptions, the ekphrastic and the anamorphotic, are part of an overall arrangement that simultaneously allows the reader to take stock of the given data and to guess at the repressed, undisclosed figure in the carpet, a figure which is all the more elusive as it is multiple and pluristable.

To try and draw closer to this invisible figure, a final anamorphosis, also dependent on a similarly clandestine projection of shapes out of themselves, should be taken into account. It involves Carla's sudden metamorphosis into a horse, a metamorphosis which is all the more surprising as her interchangeability with the goat had been previously and clearly established on account of her appeance, her character and her actions. Like the goat reappearing as if it were a dandelion in the light of the car, Carla has a "resolute face crowned with a frizz of dandelion hair" (17), she is repeatedly described as "naturally happy" (17) and, like the goat, she runs away. Nevertheless, once she has settled down in the bus that carries her away to Toronto, the metaphors which are used to describe her no longer liken her to a goat but to a horse: "She was sinking to the ground like a stricken horse who will never get up."(35) The actual moment when she makes

up her mind to return home is also described with the help of the same metaphor:

> *The building behind them, the café that served as a bus stop, was also in motion. A liquefying wave passed through the bricks and windows as if they were about to dissolve. In peril of her life, Carla pulled her huge body, her iron limbs, forward. She stumbled, she cried out, "Let me off." (35)*

With the image of the flaring up of the stricken horse against the dissolving background, Munro provides us with a striking image of the "liquid present" (Bauman); it is also a literary anamorphosis which symmetrically quadruplicates the preceding visual phenomena. Carla's metaphorically rearing her iron limbs to return home is like the young boy urging the horse on, like Flora elongating herself into a unicorn, like the randy poet supposedly signalling his desire. There is the same phallic deployment and desperate straining forward in the phantasy, the ekphrasis and the two anamorphoses. The four squares out of which the carpet is constructed clearly provide a scenario in which the main actors are more or less clandestinely represented under animal guise: a billy-goat and a she-goat as well as a bronze and an iron horse. The striking symmetry within the four squares also conceals a major interpretive incoherence or unreliability, which comes from the changing roles in which the actors are cast. Carla in particular is allowed to move from one position to its symmetric opposite. At the beginning she occupies the position of the she-goat playing sexual games with the old billy and at the end she plays the horse rearing its iron limbs. The reader is therefore required to make sense of the ambiguous data which is provided, to account for the shifts in form and functions and to try and disentangle the figure that emerges out of the four squares on the carpet in the trailer.

This invisible figure, that Lyotard refers to as a matrix, may productively be investigated via Meir Sternberg's theory of quotation as representation.

> *In the theory's terms, the overall discourse of, say, the literary narrator counts (which also means reads and elicits judgement) as an inset, second order discourse. For, while the teller frames and quotes at will the speeches (and sometimes the thoughts) of the dramatis personae, he himself is in turn necessarily, if implicitly, quoted within the framing act of communication between author and reader. […] But the same holds true in principle for all mediated discourse, regardless of code: a painting within a painting, or one attached to or invoked by a text, or vice versa and so on, to the last frame/inset makeup (Yacobi 716).*

The ekphrasis describing the bronze horse given to Carla is an intermedial object, a verbal representation of what a visual artist had already represented in another medium; the anamorphoses depicting the reappearing goat and the woman rearing her iron limbs as well as the preliminary phantasy about the randy poet can likewise be considered as a series of "inset[s] within the frame of the reporting discourse" which are similarly "at a quotational remove" (Sternberg 1991: 63). In this model of how fictional communication works through quotation, the critic is led into considering the mediation of re-presented discourse by appeal to three categories: "frame, inset and transformer, with the latter (given or supplied by ourselves) intermediate between two discourses" (Yacobi 717). If the quote announces itself "with the help of an introductory clause or transformer" in direct or indirect discourse, "it dispenses itself with the transformer in free indirect discourse" (Yacobi, *ibid.*). It is this dispensability, this withdrawal of overt modulating devices acting as intermediate between two discourses, this invisibility of the modulation between frame and inset which creates the conditions for the reader's integrative and inferential activity. The reader supplies the missing transformers between the insets and the frames by establishing intratextual, intertextual and multitextual correlations between them.

By linking up the representation of the living goat with that of the bronze horse, the reader integrates the seemingly independent ekphrastic and anamorphotic objects in a discourse chain and activates "viewpoints (on the ekphrasis itself, as well as the scene or the speaker) other and higher than those of the immediate, 'dramatic' participants"

(Yacobi 722). The reader's integrative activity allows another figure to emerge on the carpet at the same time as another scene to lurk behind its surface. Put differently, the perceptual plurality which has been set in motion allows the reader to catch a glimpse either of an underlying narrative which, in the words of Lacan, is "half-uttered" or of an overlying arrangement which, in the words of Stern and Yacobi, makes its presence felt "at a quotational remove".

The goat with the dande-*lion* head elongating herself into a unicorn in the light of a car is a literary anamorphosis which allusively frames at least another narrative. This anamorphosis can be considered as a phantasy, a visual chimera, which self-reflexively points in the direction of the original Chimera. In Greek mythology, the Chimera (*Khimaira*), was a fire-breathing female monster with a lion's head, a goat's body, and a serpent's tail, who was killed by Bellerophon, whilst riding the winged horse Pegasus (Hamilton 184). In Hesiod's *Theogony*, she is represented as a three-headed monster and in the *Iliad*, she is called "the invincible Chimera," who keeps appearing and reappearing as an indestructible symbol of lust and perversion (Brunel, *Dictionnaire des mythes féminins*). The word *dande-lion* used in reference to Flora has a function of designation and no longer a function of signification: it transforms the relationship between the sign and the thing. To put it differently, it allusively encapsulates a reference which exceeds its context, and testifies to the phenomenon of quotation as re-presentation by allowing the reader to see the Chimera with the lion's head behind the word "dandelion" and to supplement the narrated story of Flora the runaway goat with the unnarrated story of a winged horse which was instrumental in killing a goat with a lion's head.

Other mythic or literary scenarios are allowed to come to the surface through the same phenomenon of quotation. For instance the lexemes "cast in bronze" used to describe the little Greek statue offered to Carla strikingly echo the predicates which are used to describe another statue in another text: they quote the description of the statue of Neptune in Robert Browning's "My last Duchess": "Notice Neptune, though, / Taming a sea horse, thought a rarity, / Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!". By establishing a correlation between the lexemes to be found in the poem by Browning and the

story by Munro, the reader activates the invisible scenario of a wife's tamer who happened to be her murderer and transfers it (or part of it) onto the Canadian scene.

Several supplementarily gruesome references are activated because they are similarly quoted or smuggled in through onomastics. One horse which is stabled at the Riding Barn and is presented as a favourite is called Lizzie Borden. The horse's name is that of one of the best known characters from American crime stories that has made its way into folklore as the subject of a doggerel: " Lizzie Borden took an axe // And gave her mother forty whacks. // When she saw what she had done // She gave her father forty-one"[8]. In 1987, Angela Carter dedicated two short stories to this gruesome news item, "Lizzie's Tiger" and "The Fall River Axe Murders" which are strikingly quoted in Munro's metaphorical transformation of human beings into animals. This repeated quotational play across and inside the medium of language contributes to establishing an ominous dimension, a forewarning of symbolic or actual violence re-presented "at a quotational remove" (Sternberg 1991: 63).

By quoting visibly or obliquely Greek mythology, British romantic poetry, British contemporary short stories, and American folklore, Munro's short story multiplies the textual markers which allude to assassination: Eros and Thanatos, murder and the relationship with death are the stowaway in "Runaway," like Death is the stowaway in Holbein's "Ambassadors,"a stowaway which insistently makes his presence felt, flaring up not only between the words but in the discourse chain itself.

In fact, the possibility of a brutal murder constitutes the major mystery which dominates this story as many others in Munro's often gothic corpus: "Images," "Executioners," "The Love of a good Woman," "Cortes Island," "Save the Reaper," "Before the Change," "Nettles," "Fits"... The list of stories revolving around the possibility or the actuality of murder could be almost all-encompassing because most of

[8] Lizzie Andrew Borden was in point of fact a New England spinster, a Sunday school teacher, who was tried but finally acquitted for the axe murders of her father and stepmother in the town of Fall River, Massachussets, in 1892. *See* Engstrom, Elizabeth, *Lizzie Borden*. St. Martin's Press, 1997.

Munro's stories highlight some type of foundational violence, symbolically wielded, or physically enacted on the body. In "Runaway," Flora the goat reappeared during the night of Carla's return home, but Carla was not informed about it and never saw her pet goat again. When she learns, by chance, that the goat actually returned, she is left to wonder about the fate of the missing animal. She forms a number of conjectures, involving her husband Clark's responsibility in her disappearance:

> *He could have chased Flora away. Or tied her in the back of the truck and driven some distance and set her loose. Taken her back to the place they'd got her from. Not to have her around, remind them.*
>
> *She might be free. (47)*

None of Carla's hypotheses are particularly convincing, given the fact that after both Carla and Flora's extraordinary returns, a number of crows and big turkey buzzards can be spotted sitting on the branches of a dead oak at the edge of the woods half a mile from the barn. The assumption is that Flora's body has become food for the predators, an assumption which is made almost explicit at the end of the story:

> *She had only to raise her eyes, she had only to look in one direction, to know where she might go. An evening walk, once her chores for the day were finished. To the edge of the woods, and the bare trees where the buzzards had held their party.*
>
> *And then the little dry bones in the grass. The skull with perhaps some shreds of bloodied skin clinging to it. A skull that she could hold like a teacup in one hand. Knowledge in one hand. (47)*

Is Carla indicting Clark with the anamorphotic skull in her hand? Or is the narrator reminding us of Yorrick's skull, tossed out from the grave, for the reader to establish a correlation between Clark's revenge and a revenge tragedy that revolves around incest and fratricide? Or is the author at a higher level deliberately refraining from

allowing the reader to move from *pistis* to *gnosis*? Munro's story plays with the unreliability of a "perspectival super*montage*" (Yacobi 728), denying quoter and quotee the privilege of univocal and unilateral resolution to the benefit of a truncated, elusive, allusiveness.

The positioning of some of the teeming allusions in the overall arrangement may nevertheless constitute a reliable and productive index; the last lines in the story, for example, might be considered as occupying pride of place and are worth investigating because they equally situate Carla in an ambiguous position between cognition and illusion. Carla herself refrains from checking the place where the goat might have been killed: "The days passed and Carla didn't go near that place. She held out against the temptation" (47).

The refusal to provide the reader with the character's evidential testimony is an overt narratorial manipulation which enables the author to refrain from assigning the definite role of murderer to Carla's husband, Clark and to keep the story from being resolved. But Munro transforms reticence into salience because the last line activates further correlations. The allusion to temptation in the wilderness in correlation with two goats immediately suggests at least one biblical hypotext and helps the reader reconsider retrospectively the story of Flora which is sacrificed and of Carla, who lives in a trailer in the wilderness as directly inspired from Leviticus, 16

> *And he shall take the two goats, and present them before The Lord at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation. And Aaron shall cast lots upon the two goats; one lot for The Lord, and the other lot for the scapegoat. And Aaron shall bring the goat upon which The Lord's lot fell, and offer him for a sin offering. But the goat, on which the lot fell to be the scapegoat, shall be presented alive before The Lord, to make an atonement with him, and to let him go for a scapegoat into the wilderness. (Leviticus 16: 7-10)*

Carla, the goat-tending nymph, and Flora the kid with a mature sense of humor are simultaneously the pagan avatars of Amaltheia and the Christian version of the two goats in the wilderness: one is

sacrificed by a vengeful husband while the other is allowed to atone in a trailer in the middle of nowhere. Munro's short fiction has been repeatedly examined in terms of its phenomenological adequation to immanent reality. This story proves once more that she does not mimetically describe the reality of southwestern Ontario. She re-inscribes her twentieth century characters into the great codes and rewrites cosmogonic myths against a primeval landscape.

What is the common denominator between the clandestine signifiers conglomerated in Munro's text in a more or less covert and anamorphotic way? In what way can we inferentially try and integrate the slaying of the Chimera, the sacrifice of the scapegoat, the taming of the sea horse and the presumed axe-murders by Lizzie Borden? Derrida might lead the way toward a partial resolution of the enigma. In his essay entitled *Donner la mort* he highlights the link between secret, murder and forgiveness and suggests that the Abrahamic moment when the knife is raised against Isaac creates the possibility of literature. He improbably posits the act of intending "to give death" at the origin of literature and he ensconces this act in a double secret. To the secret of the father leading his son to his death, he supplements the secret of the son seeing his father draw the knife without the latter's being aware of his son having seen him. What Derrida proposes is a scenario for the origins of literature from which women are conspicuously missing.

Munro provides us with access to a story which may be considered as a self-reflexive scenario of production, of the engendering of texts through figures: she stage-directs the textual appearance of a number of visual chimeras and she allows her female character to indulge in a revelatory *lapsus calami*, which remarkably illustrates "the return of the remainder" as theorized by Jean Jacques Lecercle. When Carla runs away from her husband, she leaves a note which reads: "*I have gone away. I will be all write."* (27) This spelling mistake or "infelicity" allows language to speak for itself. The imaginative young girl invents stories about herself and about her life in that corner of the field in southwestern Ontario. And Carla's stories self-reflexively quote the stories that, at a higher level, the implicit author has narrated for

the past forty years. In this Canadian postmodern mock-pastoral highlighting the penning of fictions through visual figures, we are confronted with what Judith Butler calls "giving an account of oneself" and we find an allusive reticence which might be posited in the genealogy of secret and responsibility, in the filiation from the Abrahamic moment that Derrida suggests for the possibility of literature.

This filiation is nevertheless challenged because the son's murder is superseded by another: the one who is symbolically murdered in this gothic story from southwestern Ontario is the mother. Lacan has shown us that slaying the Chimera "*la chi-mère*" is before all getting at the mother, and behind the murder of Flora the goat, one can find the symbolic and vicarious elimination of the maternal function. All the mothers in the short story are eliminated, one after the other. There is first the biological mother whom Carla definitely separates from with a note left on the table. There is, afterwards, the substitute mother, Sylvia, who plays an ambiguous role in Carla's attempt at escaping to the city. Sylvia is represented as infatuated with the young nymph and conniving to separate her from her husband. After Clark's attempt at intimidating her, she moves out of Clark and Carla's lives for good. There is finally the goat herself, Flora, first presented as a daughter but finally assuming a mature and maternal role, like Amaltheia, the "tender goddess." In all likelihood, the goat is sacrificed by Carla's husband.

What Munro seems to repeat from story to story is always the same enterprise first uttered in "The Ottawa Valley" in 1974:

> *The problem, the only problem is my mother. And she is the one of course that I am trying to get; it is to reach her that this whole journey has been undertaken. With what purpose? To mark her off, to describe, to illumine, to celebrate, to get rid of her. (Munro 1974: 246).*

"To get rid of her" is written in italics as if to underline the necessity for this foundational separation.[9] Thirty years have elapsed

[9] Corinne Bigot has written a thesis on silence in Alice Munro's short stories in which she analyses in a very convincing and thorough way the uses and

between "The Ottawa Valley" and "Runaway" and Munro repeats again and again the process of symbolic elimination. The mother is a haunting and resurgent chimera which is seen everywhere no matter which perspective is adopted. In 1974 Munro asserted her failure in getting rid of her: "and it did not work, for she looms too close, just as she always did. She is heavy as always, she weighs everything down, and yet she is indistinct, her edges melt and flow." (Munro 1974: 246)

In 2004 the mother is successfully kept at a distance while the daughter returns to her husband's trailer at the same time as he gets rid of Flora/Amaltheia. But there is no unmitigated non-paradoxical ending to a Munro story. In the pluristable previously quoted last line of the story ("she held up against the temptation"), Carla is not only recast as one of the two sacrificial goats. She is also, on the one hand, given the position of a successful Eve, capable of resisting the trap into which her ancestress fell. But on the other hand she is also attributed the role of a female Christlike figure exposed to temptation in the wilderness. Her success in resisting temptation fades out and her doom as a soon-to-be crucified figure fades in, as she doubly endorses the role of the scapegoat: as the goat that is left to atone in the wilderness and a female Christ, Carla becomes the very embodiment of sacrifice. The ineluctability of her sacrificial role is confirmed by the recapitulative metaphor which is used to finish up her portrait: "It was as if she had a murderous needle somewhere in her lungs and by breathing carefully, she could avoid feeling it. But every once in a while, she had to take a deep breath, and it was still there" (46).

In "Runaway," Munro smuggles into language a feminine itinerary based on a series of escapes and returns, of onslaught and respite, and on a principle of paradoxical reversibility between giving life/being given life and giving death/being given death which is the recapitulation of a fight against annihilation, against "the minus phi of castration" [(- phi)], (Lacan). With the deployment in the text of one liminary sexual fantasy, and one supporting ekphrasis followed by two anamorphoses, she consecrates the triumph of the phallus as "a

values of italics. This thesis, which was defended at the University of Nanterre on December 1st, 2007 is due for publication in the very near future.

signifier of desire" and she provides the reader with four insets, which are like the four squares with identical motifs on the carpet of the trailer: they self-reflexively dramatize the working of the frame to highlight a process of paradoxical and ambiguous female empowerment. Munro documents a process of becoming woman which is first and foremost a process of becoming human, of leaving aside one's animal origins to integrate the human community, but this process is not represented as revolving around "the reversibility of seeing and being seen" (Merleau Ponty): it hinges upon the reversibility of killing and being killed as the foundation of the engendering of the self in fiction. Through perspectival distortions and quotations this process is shown to duplicate the engendering of the self in real life and to encapsulate a leaking secret which partly assumes a graphic shape on the linoleums and not so immaculate carpets of our daily existence. This secret which can only be half-glimpsed and half-uttered has sometimes been assigned to the reader's perception: "The secret of the text, of all texts, is to change the reader in a figure of secrecy"[10] (Sollers 121). It may also be ascribed to the partial perception of the potential flaring up of clandestine figures in the text. In "Runaway" as in many of Munro's stories, it has affinities with the slaying of the Chimera and the embracing of its murderer and it inescapably springs from and leads to the engendering of stories.

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10 « *Le secret du texte, de tout texte, est donc de changer son lecteur en figure du secret.* »

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