

# BETWEEN THE HEDGEHOG AND THE LAMB: A REFLECTION ON A POETIC OF THE NON-HUMAN IN ALICE MUNRO'S *RUNAWAY*

## ENTRE O OURIÇO E O CORDEIRO: UMA REFLEXÃO SOBRE A POÉTICA DO NÃO-HUMANO EM *A FUGITIVA*, DE ALICE MUNRO

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**Abstract:** This work explores two approaches for a critical and literary reflection based on the short story “Runaway”, by the Canadian writer Alice Munro. The first, more evident, proposes a discussion of the ontological relation of the non-human based on the focalization on the character Flora, the protagonist’s pet and the driving force behind the plot. I believe that the parameters of irony and lack of definition in the configuration of the characters are based on the incredulity that today circles the Cartesian subject and tend, by extension, to relate to the projection of its counter-point, i.e. the non-human, definitely rooted in an anthropocentric perspective. Besides, the plot’s structure, by privileging systematically the non-closing of senses or subjectivities, establishes a spirally cyclical movement that resists a climax and suggests, at the same time, a singular relation of contiguity with Derrida’s view on poetry, which implicates a constant search, never an end in itself, half-opening in a subtle way, an intermittent experience of alterity and fruition of the poetic. Reading the poetic and the non-human, in Maciel, Derrida and others, as well as appropriations of Poe’s and Burke’s theorization will serve as support to this essay.

**Keywords:** Alice Munro; Irony; Non-human.

**Resumo:** Este trabalho pretende explorar duas vertentes que se abrem à reflexão crítico-literária a partir da leitura da ficção-curta “A Fugitiva” da canadense Alice Munro. A primeira, mais evidente, vislumbra uma abordagem da relação ontológica do não-humano a partir da focalização da personagem Flora, animal de estimação da protagonista e força-motriz do enredo. Acredito que os parâmetros de indefinição e ironia constitutivos da configuração das personagens fundamentam-se na incredulidade que hoje ronda

o sujeito-pleno, e visam, por extensão, à projeção do que seria sua contrapartida, *i.e.* o não-humano, definitivamente calcado dentro de uma perspectiva antropocêntrica. Além disto, a tessitura do enredo, ao privilegiar sistematicamente o não fechamento de sentidos ou subjetividades, estabelece um movimento cíclico espiralar que resiste a um clímax, e sugere, ao mesmo tempo, uma relação singular de contiguidade com a visão derridiana de poesia, a qual implica a busca constante, nunca o fim em si, entreabrindo, de forma sutil, uma intermitente experiência de alteridade e fruição do poético. Leituras envolvendo o poético e o não-humano, em Maciel, Derrida e outros, bem como apropriações da teorização de Burke e Poe servirão de apoio a este ensaio.

**Palavras-chave:** Alice Munro; Ironia; Não-humano.

Edgar Allan Poe, in his “Philosophy of Composition”, surprises the aspiring author-reader of his time by elaborating a syntax of poetic composition that is literally entrapping. The author-reader can only find his way out of this labyrinth if he observes cautiously, and in the correct order, the map of the mine. For such a task, data such as ideal number of words, or even the choice of certain vowels, for lighter or darker tones, are of paramount importance; in relation to themes, Poe ascertains the use of contrasting elements, in a suggestion of Edmund Burke’s theory of the sublime (albeit unmentioned), oscillating between the Beautiful and the Terrible. Further on, among other measures, Poe instructs the reader on how to inch along the way to an indispensable and indivisible climax, responsible for the impact that, without which, there would be no reason for a starting, or ending, point. The effectiveness of his intuitive method conferred upon him, as time went on, his recognition as a legitimate theorizer of the short story and the precursor of many other reflections such as formalism and the importance of reception in the process of literary creation. On the other hand, perhaps Poe had never realized the most productive side his work had to offer: mapping is not only a precious measure to recognize borders, but also to trespass them.

In this study, I aim to develop a reflection on the ontological *status* of the human and non-human in Alice Munro’s “Runaway”. Through a blurring of the boundaries of the subjective, the author emphasizes this question, destabilizing the Cartesian concept of the “animal” as seen invariably from a hierarchical point of view, and juxtaposing a configuration of the “human” as catalogued in an anthropocentric view. I believe that Munro’s text is based on the characteristic of oscillation of the characters populating that small fictional space, elaborating a consistent

game of advancing the senses in which the notion of a revealing climax is atomized in particles that radiate through the text a feeling of loss and frustration, never properly resolved. Munro's particularity in resisting a conclusive *telos* results in the focus being often placed on subject-character and on the question not of who the character is, but of what he could or could not be. The vibrations emitted by the pain of not-knowing, which is one more postponed certainty, resonate in her prose like a blank verse, and reverberate, as we will see, at the end of the short-story with the same strength that Derrida detects at the birthplace of poetry.

As for the millenary question of what separates human nature from other animals, subtly embedded in the plot, it has been the constant focus of more recent discussions in the field of alterity. As Maciel (2007) puts it, the representation of the animal permeates the pages of literature since its beginning, but such representation is still in the level of something that is "strange by default" or something "that can only be apprehended through its relationship with the human" (10). This vulnerability would render, Maciel further states, "multiple representations and interpretations that convert not only into live signs of what always escapes our comprehension, but also into our 'possible unlimited' view, considering they assume innumerable registers, forms, intensity and functions in our imagination" (MACIEL, 2007, p. 11). Developing careful observation about how this relation of appropriation and mirroring has been processed since the Greeks, Maciel arrives at the XX century and faces a raw and naked truth:

Zooliterature also provides a space for critical reflection about the animal question in a world where man is defined based on the domination he exercises upon other living non-humans, and, simultaneously, utilizes the animal to justify the domination over other human beings. (MACIEL, 2007, p. 11)

The assertive above echoes a series of pre-concepts that have layered up in our culture. When the subject is frontiers, a paradox is established since the notion that something was, or is, theoretically divided comes always from a perspective that regards it so; from the critical viewpoint of logocentrism many other judgments are applied, which take over the construction of the said perspective. A good argument in this sense would remind us, for example, of the ontological state of the indigenous people in the age of discovery, considered "non-beings"

since they had no “soul”. It can be said that all theoretical production of gender, long before Derrida, grew from this basic perception. This perception would be in the center of Beauvoir’s first reflection, and still echoes still: if, then, being born a woman was not possible, today it is known, depending on circumstance, social level and class, that neither can man be readily born. Thus, a trajectory must be traced, with costs and benefits.

Following the high and lows of social values, the question of a supposed hierarchy of subjectivity around the animal vs. the human is raised. Without extrapolating the scope of this study, it can be mentioned how Montaigne, always cited as a reference already in the XVI century, rescues to the animal profile certain inherent capacities, which go far beyond not only our domain, but even our imagination (MONTAIGNE, in MACIEL, 2008, p. 68). Other studies could be listed here, such as Dominique Lestel’s “Les Origines Animales de la Culture”, which ironizes the arbitrary characteristics surrounding judgments perpetrated though time by common sense when the matter is the animal as subject (LESTEL, 2002). In short, the study explores a universe of surprising characteristics and abilities of the non-human, ranging from feeling to science, as is the case of one being once lost in the streets of a big city, and suddenly looking upwards and admiring the nautical competence of migratory birds.

An interesting point in the reading I here propose is to question the value that is put in language in the process of acquisition of subjectivity. According to Heidegger’s assumption on thought and language, the animal, bereft of language, is considered incapable of apprehending the world as such. Concerning death, a theme circumscribed to the short-story to be analyzed, one reads in Heidegger:

Mortals are those that can have the experience of death as such. The animal cannot. But the animal also cannot talk. The essential relation between death and language arises as lightning, but remains unconsidered. [...]

Death thus conceived is not, obviously, that of the animal, and not simply a biological fact. The animal, the ‘just-alive’ does not die, but ceases to live. (HEIDEGGER, 1982, p. 170-1)

Some theoreticians have rebelled against this unilateral posture, attesting first the possible incapacity from the receptor’s side, and not from the emitter’s;

in other words, our few resources for deciphering a horse's whine or bird's trill. This does not mean we cannot imagine that those sounds belong to a peculiar code to which we don't, and perhaps never will, have access.

The controversy, not surprisingly, gains strength in allegations of Derrida, who argues against what he calls the "subjection" of the animal, in whatever circumstances:

Such a subjection, whose history we are attempting to interpret, can be called violence in the most morally neutral sense of the term and even includes a certain interventionist violence that is practiced, as in some very minor and in no way dominant cases, let us never forget, in the service of and for the protection of the animal, most often the human animal. (DERRIDA, 2002, p. 394)

Derrida rescues the Jeremy Bentham's ideas, which equate subjectivity no longer with language, but with the question of pain, a parameter he elected as a common denominator of the species which had so far been conceived as fixed. Summarizing his interpretation of Bentham, he thus writes:

Bentham said something like this: the question is not to know whether the animal can think, reason, or talk. [...] The first and decisive question will rather be to know whether animals can suffer. [...]

Once its protocol is established, the form of this question changes everything. It no longer simply concerns the logos, the disposition and whole configuration of the logos.[...] The word *can[pouvoir]* wavers henceforth. As soon as such a question is posed what counts is not the idea of a transitivity or activity (being able to speak, to reason, and so on) [...]. (DERRIDA, 2002, p. 396)

Exposing even more the vulnerability that characterizes the non-human, Derrida expands Bentham's rationalization of "Can they Suffer?" to the question of "Can they *not be able*?". Such would be the crucial question in his view, to which he adds:

Mortality resides there, as the most radical means of thinking the finitude that we share with animals, the mortality that belongs to the very finitude of life, to the experience of compassion, to the possibility of sharing the possibility of this nonpower, the possibility of this impossibility, the anguish of this vulnerability and the vulnerability of this anguish. (DERRIDA, 2002, p. 396)

The rationalization above reverts the old Cartesian parameter of *thought*. As Derrida states, not even Descartes could claim animals were insensible to suffering (DERRIDA, 2002, p. 396). Consistent with his practice of rethinking occidental metaphysics, the philosopher alerts us against the comfortable belief in the simple and pure rupture of what he characterizes as the “abyss between this ‘I-we’ and what we *call* animals” (DERRIDA, 2002, p. 398). Recognizing himself, in rhetorical fashion, as being incapable of rebuking it, he proceeds to problematize the *limits* that configure this distinction. To him, “the frontier no longer forms a single indivisible line but *more than one* internally divided line”, that, as such, “can no longer be traced, objectified, or counted as single and indivisible.” After all, “what are the edges of a limit that grows and multiplies by feeding on an abyss?” (DERRIDA, 2002, p. 399).

On the work under analysis, Derrida relates three rules that will, from now on, shed a new perspective on the non-human subject: according to the first rule, there should be distrust of the supposed line that separates man and animal; according to the second, this distrust should extend to History since its pretension dates back to the primordial days of representation and has delineated occidental perspective as invariably anthropocentric; finally, he repudiates the practice of grouping all species under the generic denomination of “the Animal”, something which would push towards his affirmation that there is a multiplicity of living beings, of relationships, of organizations that do not permit, according to him, “any simple exteriority of one term with respect to another” (DERRIDA, 2002, p. 399).

Against this uncritical practice, Derrida uses language one more time as a powerful tool and, beforehand, repudiates a “commonplace”, or in other words, “the usage, in the singular, of a notion as general as ‘the Animal’ ”, further counseling that “whatever the abyssal differences and structural limits that separate, in the very essence of their being, all ‘animals’ ”, the use of the term should, “to

begin with, [be kept] within quotation marks” (DERRIDA, 2002, p. 402). Thus, in the same diapason of **Différance** and **Différence**, distinct in writing but equal in pronunciation, Derrida creates the word “Animots” in opposition and, at the same time, complementation to “Animaux”. Making clear the construction aspects of language, he assumes there would be, or had been, in him, many versions of this hybrid element, which would not be a subject but a sort of sheaf of starting points of his subjectivity in process. Derrida states: “How to welcome or liberate so many animal-words [*animots*] *chez moi*? In me, for me, like me?” (DERRIDA, 2002, p. 405).

It would escape our scope to explore all of the philosopher’s argumentations, which entangle through the pages of Greek and Hebrew literature, in the investigation of the origins of the process of “subjection”, which he so vehemently denounces. It is worthy of note, however, that Derrida associates the great downfalls in the bible, i.e. the original sin of the tree of knowledge, caused by ambition, and the murder of the shepherd Abel by farmer Cain, motivated by jealousy, to divine traps involving the presence of the animal. Cain would not have known how to keep dignity in loss, “in short to be careful not to fall into sin, not to fall victim to the wrongdoing that was waiting for him around the corner” (DERRIDA, 2002, p.411). And the consequent failure, punishment, nakedness and shame, makes him “hunted, tracked in turn like an animal” (DERRIDA, 2002, p. 412).

This “like” preoccupies the theoretician, as does the adjacent idea of “who\whom”, which will be referenced further on by Munro’s text. In a consideration, which is necessary to reproduce in its entirety, Derrida expands on his discomfort in relation to this not so distinguishable distinction:

Well, let us say of a certain ‘state,’ a certain situation-of the process, world, and life obtaining among these mortal living things that are the animal species, those other “animals” and humans. Its analogous or common traits are all the more dominant given that their formalization, that to which we are devoting ourselves here, will allow us to see appear in every discourse concerning the animal, and notably in the Western philosophical discourse, the same dominant, the same recurrence of a schema that is in truth invariable. What is that? The following: what is proper to man, his superiority over and subjugation of the animal, his very becoming-subject, his histo-

ricity, his emergence out of nature, his sociality, his access to knowledge and technics, all that, everything (in a nonfinite number of predicates) that is proper to man would derive from this originary fault, indeed from this default in propriety, what is proper to man as default in propriety-and from the imperative [*il faut*] that finds in it its development and resilience. (DERRIDA, 2002, p. 413)

In conclusion, it seems that it is no longer possible to retreat from the deeply rooted territory of language; it is necessary to live with it and renew it from within. Through it has the equivocal been carried on, and in it an exit must be found. Against the accusation,

The confusion of all nonhuman living creatures within the general and common category of the animal is not simply a sin against rigorous thinking, vigilance, lucidity, or empirical authority; it is also a crime. Not a crime against animality precisely, but a crime of the first order against the animals, against animals. Do we agree to presume that every murder, every transgression of the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” concerns only man (a question to come) and that in sum there are only crimes ‘against humanity?’ (DERRIDA, 2002, p. 416)

Derrida proposes that “the suffix *mot* in *l’animot* should bring us back to the word, namely, to the word named a noun [*nomme nom*]”, for that would make us rethink

the referential experience of the thing as such, as what it is in its being, and therefore to the reference point by means of which one has always sought to draw the limit, the unique and indivisible limit held to separate man from animal, namely the word, the nominal language of the word, the voice that names and that names the thing as such [...] (DERRIDA, 2002, p. 416)

Heading towards a conclusion, albeit inconclusive, Derrida admits, as it comes to ipseity, even the non-verbalization, but not the incapacity of the animal to feel itself:



[the animal] has been refused the power to transform those traces into verbal language to call to itself by means of discursive questions and responses"; such may be the case, but in nothing does this interfere with the animals aptitude "to being itself, and thus the aptitude to being capable of affecting itself, of its own movement, of affecting itself with traces of a living self, and thus of autobioparagraphing itself as it were. (DERRIDA, 2002, p. 417)

Radicalizing, he closes his syllogistic rationalization: if the self doesn't know itself, all other certainties also turn to doubts:

The animal in general, what is it? What does that mean? Who is it? To what does that 'it' correspond? To whom? Who responds to whom? Who responds in and to the common, general and singular name of what they thus blithely call the 'animal?' Who is it that responds? (DERRIDA, 2002, p. 418)

If we pay attention to the article's translated title, "The Animal That Therefore I Am (more to follow)", we can see that this designation inevitably betrays the original, omitting the ambiguity of the French word "suis" which can mean "I am" as well as "I follow"; in this case, the oscillation is lost and the possible allusion of sequential-temporal character, hence the addendum. I ask myself then, if the verb "to turn (into something)", or "return" could not present itself as a viable option. Perhaps it would be worth it to give up the Cartesian parody, disregarding the conclusive conjunction "therefore" ("donc", in French) resulting in "The Animal to which I return", or, even more boldly, "The Animal to Whom I Return", containing the subjectivity that is meant to be given to the non-human. The movement would be implicit.

The digression here is justified by the first motivation: to study how Munro's perspective is manifested in a story where, alongside the special dislocation suggested by the title, there would be another type of dislocation, that of the subject, ironically distanced from the idea of plenitude, unraveling at each page, in diverse, imprecise and even contradictory forms, amidst a bucolic scenery, contemplative, almost primitive. It is, before anything else, a masquerade

in which subjectivities in process alternate, and depth and perspective lines are drawn depriving the human, or supposedly human, of its pallid virtues. There is in “Runaway” a consistent evasion of the character in regard to herself, and from this tension results not simply the plot, but its disentanglement, constituting itself into a short story woven with many “evasive plots”; by extension, emphasis is placed on a rereading of what history has delineated as the nature of the living being, unraveling on the same razor’s edge, creating, on the level of the indefinite, a bitter trade of “inherent” characteristics, be it to man, woman and/or prey. In this masked drama a background is processed, going from prosaic to gothic, collaborating parody with stage actions.

Starting with their own names, Clark and Carla are sides of the same coin, that of a Hollywood movie in which brutes also love. She had met him, a horse-riding professor with dreams of having his own school, and one day, going against all of her parents’ expectations, noticed she had fallen in love with him. They live now in the country, with a modest income, with some difficulty depending on the hostility of the weather, but, mainly hostility from Clark himself. The text clarifies that “Clark had fights not just with the people he owed money to. His friendliness, compelling at first, could suddenly turn sour. There were places he would not go into, where he always made Carla go, because of some row” (MUNRO, 2005, p. 6). Carla saw him as

[...] both a handsome man and a silly looking man. Tall, lean, well built, but with a slouch that seemed artificial. A contrived, self-conscious air of menace. A lock of dark hair falling over his forehead, a vain little moustache, eyes that appeared both hopeful and mocking [...] (MUNRO, 2005, p. 37)

The stress on the significance of each one through the recourse of alliteration characterizes a case of alter-ego; she dependent, he lord of their will. The first triangulation of affections is thus established in the story: Carla develops a special bond with a little goat, white and defenseless like her, whom Clark will grimly chase, in the shadows, lurking like a stern beast.

Flora’s configuration, on the other hand, like that of all the other animals, is imbued with personifications, in opposition to Clark, who turns more inhuman at each movement:

The horses had seen Carla go across to the ring and they had all moved up to the fence- looking bedraggled in spite of their New Zealand blankets- so that she would take notice of them on her way back. She talked quietly to them, apologizing for coming empty handed. She stroked their necks and rubbed their noses and asked whether they knew anything about Flora.

Grace and Juniper snorted and nuzzled up [...].

[...] The horses would not look at her when she was unhappy, but Flora, who was never tied up, would come and rub against her, and look up with an expression that was not quite sympathy- it was more like comradely mockery- in her shimmering yellow-green eyes. (MUNRO, 2005, p. 7-9)

Clark had brought her one day because “he had heard about how a goat was able to bring a sense of ease and comfort into a horse stable and he wanted to try it” (MUNRO, 2005, p. 9). Hardly could he imagine that in that particular case he was sharing in a centuries old imaginary, for according to Gilles Aillaud “animals first entered the imagination first as messengers and promises”. For example, the domestication of cattle did not begin as a simple search for milk and meat. Cattle had magic functions, sometimes oracular, sometimes sacrificial. (AILLAUD, *in* BERGER, 2003, p. 11-32)

With time, however, and in a relationship of noticeable affinity, Flora changes her reference of belonging:

At first she had been Clark’s pet entirely, following him everywhere, dancing for his attention [...] but as she grew older she seemed to attach herself to Carla, and in this attachment she [...] seemed capable, instead, of a subdued and ironic sort of humor. Carla’s behavior with the horses was tender and strict and rather maternal, but the comradeship with Flora was quite different, Flora allowing her no sense of superiority. (MUNRO, 2005, p. 9)

Following is a sequence of useless inquiries regarding the whereabouts of the goat, to which Clark will, cynically, answer that the goat, which had never bore any signs of being capable of breeding, should “just gone off to find herself a billy” (MUNRO, 2005, p. 10)

From this point onwards, Clark assumes a villain role, and a real triangle is offered to the reader. Mr. Jamieson's widow, or, according to Clark himself, "Her Majesty. Queen Sylvia" enters the scene. Without being aware that danger lived next door, Sylvia requests the domestic services of the girl, as the latter had been of invaluable help when her husband was still alive. The configuration of Evil is revealed in Clark's intention of taking her to justice asking for a high indemnity for sexual harassment that Clara had possibly have suffered, in his own words, because of "things she could not now retract or deny." (MUNRO, 2005, p. 14). Dramatic irony is then made evident in the construction of a honorable personal image he makes of himself:

You were injured. You were molested and humiliated and I were injured and humiliated because you are my wife. It's a question of respect."

Over and over again he talked to her in this way and she tried to deflect him but he insisted. (MUNRO, 2005, p. 14)

Not less ironic is the fact the protagonist herself, apparently so chaste, also reprimands herself, aware of her complicity:

[...] the details were important and has to be added to every time, and this with convincing reluctance, shyness, giggles, *dirty, dirty*. And it was not only he who was eager and grateful. She was too. Eager to please and excite him, to excite herself. Grateful every time it still worked. (MUNRO, 2005, p. 15)

Mr. Jameson emerges then, to our eyes, at the same time like a laurelled poet and an inveterate womanizer. Part of the money Clark wanted so bad, differently from what is supposed in the local community, who suspected a marijuana farm was located at the farm, came from a prize that had been conferred upon him for his collected work.

With all the pressure from Clark, Carla, who had nobody to turn to for she had turned her back on her family to elope with the brute, decides to ask Sylvia for help. Had she foreshadowed the interest Carla had for her, when help was asked? The story insinuates this possibility of a third triangle in the explicit affec-

tion demonstrated towards the girl. When she returns from Greece, for example, there was reserved for her a present of sentimental value, something that is thus shown:

“This is for Carla,” she had said to her friend Maggie, who was walking beside her. “I know it’s silly. I just want her to have a tiny piece of this land.”

She had already mentioned Carla to Maggie, and to Soraya, her other friend there, telling them how the girl’s presence had come to mean more and more to her [...]

“There’s always a girl” Soraya said, with an indolent stretch of her heavy brown arms, and Maggie said, “We all come to it sometime. A crush on a girl.” (MUNRO, 2005, p. 21)

In the vague field of subjectivity, the character prefers the option of it being only “[...]stupid. Displaced maternal love”, an observation that does not erase the erotic aspect of a memory revealed previously in the narrative in which emphasis was placed on “her strong legs in her shorts, her broad shoulders, her big swipes at the glass, and the way she had splayed herself out as a joke, inviting or even commanding Sylvia to laugh” (MUNRO, 2005, p. 20). In the face of such emotional involvement, it could only be expected that Sylvia would feel empathy with the girl’s sufferings when she sees tears in her eyes:

“Has he hurt you, Carla?”

No. he hadn’t hurt her physically. But he Hated her. He despised her. He could not stand it when she cried and she could not help crying because he was so mad.

She did not know what to do.

“Perhaps you do know what to do,” said Sylvia.

“Get away? I would if I could.”

[...]

Carla said yes. She was shivering. She ran her hands up and down her thighs and *shook her head violently from side to side*. (my emphasis) (MUNRO, 2005, p. 23-25)

Carla's reaction incorporates the vulnerability of the goat, or of a non-human in whatever version that also found itself in distress. Sylvia, all tentacles, literally hoists herself into finding a way out for Carla, suggesting to her (another) escape to a friend's house in Toronto where she could restart her life. However, it could not be expected that, in this story, the fairy should turn to wolf and vice-versa. As she dwindles in her thoughts, she succumbs to the weight of the future:

While she was running away from him- now- Clark still kept his place in her life. But when she was finished running away, when she just went on, what would she put in his place? What else-who else- could ever be so vivid a challenge?

[...] And she would be lost.

[...] Her feet seemed now to be at some enormous distance from her body. Her knees, in the familiar crisp pants, were weighted with irons. She was sinking to the ground *like a stricken horse* who will never get up. (MUNRO, 2004, p. 44-45, my emphasis)

If it were just an amorous triangle, the story would be heading towards its tragic, or prosaic end, for the upcoming scene already shows Sylvia answering Clark's call to return the clothes she had lent to his wife, insulting her for her attitude:

"I came here to tell you I don't appreciate you interfering in my life with my wife."

"She is a human being", said Sylvia, though she knew it would be better if she could keep quiet. "Besides being your wife."

"My goodness, is that so? My wife is a human being? Really? Thank you for the information. [...]" (MUNRO, 2005, p.38)

The atmosphere of repression and abuse of authority which grows to a tension between protagonist and antagonist seems to be apparently solved by an *ex-machina* solution: amidst the verbal struggle of both, coming out of the mist that formed there during that time of year, cut by a car's headlights far away, an image steals their attention, and for a split second scares and unites

them, an image described as a “unearthly sort of animal, pure white, hell-bent, something like a giant unicorn, rushing at them” (MUNRO, 2005, p. 39). Sylvia is the first to recognize it was Flora, that hybrid element in between an animal and a delicate flower, as its name suggests. Clark manages to move her when he tells the goat that it “scared the shit out of us”. Her murmur, directed towards her own inner self, may even be seen on the text, italicized: “*Us.*” (MUNRO, 2005, p. 40). At that moment, Clark is seen by Sylvia as another subject, as stated in the text: “she might have seen a shadow of regret cross his face that this was so” (MUNRO, 2004, p. 41). They parted with a certain air of intimacy that would allow for silliness, so much so that in admitting she would find a way to take care of the house alone, “she added almost laughingly, ‘I’ll stay out of your hair.’” (MUNRO, 2004, p. 52)

In a loose fashion, the play on images around a poetic of the non-human persists. In the bustling commotion of the start of a new season, in between chores, they provoke each other:

“If you ever try to run away on me again I’ll tan your hide,” he said to her, and she said, “would you?”

“what?”

“tan my hide?”

“damn right”. He was high spirited now, irresistible as when she had first known him. (MUNRO, 2004, p. 54)

Regarding the comings and goings of the perspective over character and setting, attention is drawn to what the narrative voice describes, amidst “birds were everywhere” such as “red-winged blackbirds, robins, a pair of doves that sang at daybreak”, a constant image thus described:

[...] big turkey buzzards that sat in the branches of a dead oak about half a mile away, at the edge of the woods. At first they just sat there, drying out their voluminous wings, lifting themselves occasionally for a trial flight, flapping around a bit, then composing themselves to let the sun and the warm air do their work. (MUNRO, 2005, p. 43)

In the game of ambiguities that is processed in the text, an ever growing suspicion is risen by Munro's skillful technique, eventually reinforced by her use of an old device, *i.e.*, of approaching subjectivity through the broad perspective of epistolary narrative. Some days after what they call "Runaway Day" Carla opens the mailbox and receives from Sylvia a sort of farewell letter, given she did not expect any answer from her, in which she reveals all the enchantment of having reencountered Flora, and with her, the peace that sealed forever, in friendly, almost "miraculous" fashion, her relationship with them. Says she:

The strangest and most wonderful thing in this whole string of events seems to me the reappearance of Flora. In fact it seems rather like a miracle. Where had she been all the time and why did she choose just that moment for her reappearance? I am sure your husband has described it to you. (MUNRO, 2005, p. 45)

Ironically she speaks emotionally of the "bond" that formed between them because of the episode, and how Flora "has her place as a good angel" in their lives. (MUNRO, 2005, p. 45-6)

At this point, the apparent climax that could have possibly led to a good solution is undone because Clark retakes once again his treacherous side. It is clear then that evil is disseminated, but does not show its face. It spreads, evolves like a weed-root far from acutest perception. As in Burke, the attraction for beauty and terror complement each other. Carla denies her own conscience and breathes only that morbid sublime. Reads the text: "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". (MUNRO, 2005, p. 46)

The metaphor above brings about a phenomenon, typical of Canadian literature, an issue kept on purpose for this part of my argument. It shows Munro as part of a tradition which plays around with nature and representation as part of an intended reverse in the gender hierarchy. As a start one should accept that it is a truth, now universally acknowledged, that a single female voice lost in the woods is supposed to be Canadian. Wilderness in Canadian literature has been a key to access its core and has been highlighted as an exit for the reassurance of



female presence; and, as it should be the case here, authority. In manifold Canadian narratives woman finds in nature more than a background, an interlocutor, or rather a lively scenery to be foregrounded in parallel fashion to elements of characterization. Critics, such as Coral Ann Howells, would witness the bond:

The wilderness of environment seems to have evoked a corresponding awareness of unknown psychic territory within [...] as the wilderness became a screen on which women projected their silent fears and desires. (HOWELLS, 1996, p.15).

As a strategy Howells clarifies the process in which such reverse of a traditional discourse occurs:

Such a variety of treatments not only illustrates the transformation of the wilderness myth in women's fiction but also signals women's appropriation of wilderness as a feminized space, the excess term which unsettles the boundaries of male power. (HOWELLS, 1996, p.18)

Howells shows the relevance of Munro's intuition, as she aligns her *Lives of Girls and Women* along with Atwood's *Surfacing*, and Laurence's *Diviners*, all of them providing the reader with the awareness that "the geographical signals locate narratives in specific Canadian places, yet the perspectives on Canadian social and cultural values are unmistakably plural." (HOWELLS, 1996, p. 27)

Non-coincidentally, but differently from Atwood's and Laurence's protagonists, Munro's female protagonist remains in the threshold of nature at it comes to identification and subjectivity. At the compass of Carla's injured heart the narrative seems to restart then, or to have no end. And this suspension impregnates the text, including previous episodes already woven, which acquire new contours. Its spiral movement opens a window through which the atmosphere identified by Derrida as inherent to poetry, enters; both the "poetical" construction of Munro and the ideal poem of the philosopher seem to share the same dynamic. In his study, he compares poetical creation to a circumstance, that of the injunction of letter and body that meld and go hither on a journey on which the way is unknown, or, in the his own words, "an imparted secret,

at once public and private, *absolutely* one and the other, absolved from within and from without, neither one nor the other, the animal thrown onto the road, absolute, solitary, rolled up in a ball, *next to (it)self*. And for that very reason, it may get itself run over, *just so*, the *hérisson*, *istrice* in Italian, in English, hedgehog.” (DERRIDA, 1991, p. 223)

There arises from this oscillation the title of this study: in comparing the poetical to a “hedgehog”, which retracts to become offensive, lethal; in seeing it as an “event”, which according to Derrida comes “at the moment in which the traversing of the road named translation” (we would substitute for “revelation”); and in recognizing it “as improbable as an accident”, however wanted, in that stage in which through definite manner doesn’t he close up leaving “something to be desired?” (DERRIDA, 1991, p. 227)

Even though, it must be admitted, the focus is exclusively limited to poetry, the same tendencies, the same configuration of hidden subjectivities, are found in Munro’s text. Carla’s breathing can be felt, when Derrida says that the poem consists of

a converted animal, rolled up in ball, turned toward the other and toward itself, in sum, a thing- modest, discreet, close to the earth, the humility you surname, thus transporting yourself in the name beyond a name, a catachrestic *hérisson* [hedgehog], its arrows held at ready, when this ageless blind thing hears but does not see death coming. (DERRIDA, 1991, p. 235)

Equally, when the text preemptively denies opening itself up, and withholds within all of its spikes, there proceeds to a memory of a future never beheld, thus described:

As the dry golden days of fall came on- an encouraging and profitable season- Carla found that she had got used to the sharp thought that had lodged in her. It wasn’t so sharp anymore- in fact, it no longer surprised her. And she was inhabited now by an almost seductive notion, a constant low-lying temptation.

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. The edge of the woods, and the bare tree where the buzzards had held their party.

And then the little dirty 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.

Or perhaps not. Nothing there.

Other things could have happened. 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, reminding them.

She might be free.

The days passed and Carla didn't go near that place. She held out against temptation. (MUNRO, 2005, p. 47)

According to Derrida, the question "what is?" in itself already takes away from the poetic the object of the question, and stipulates from there, the "birth of prose" (DERRIDA, 2003, p. 10). In a literary text such as Munro's, woven by the thread of indeterminacy in which the human is diluted in the possible non-human and vice-versa, in which the sublime is appropriated via horror, and in which the prose reverberates as verse, even in forgetfulness, the poetic is traced in each step, reminiscing Blake, and making us think, "whoever made the tiger and the lamb would know the distinction?"

## Notes

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