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FROM COCITO TO AVALON VIA SHAFT LAKE

Collapsing Story Frames in “Pictures of the Ice” by Alice Munro

ABSTRACT: Alice Munro’s “Pictures of the Ice” is a reflection on betraying and being betrayed that aggrandizes the ordinary to epic proportions and expands the personal and the local into the historical, the mythical and the canonical. Her pictures of the ice look like ordinary snapshots of a Canadian winter phenomenon, but they are indexed to several canonical counterparts evidencing felony and ranging from Dante’s frozen lake at the bottom of the *Inferno* to James Hogg’s *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) or James Galt’s *Bogle Corbet or the Emigrants* (1831) and including references to Walter Scott’s *Marmion: A Tale of Flodden Field* (1808) as well Tennyson’s “The Passing of Arthur” from *Idylls of the King* (1859-1885). Through the synchronisation of the distant and the near, the personal and the historical, the legendary and the biblical, Munro collapses frontiers between the infinitely small and the infinitely large and generates a new topography of the moral universe.

KEYWORDS: Treachery, Alice Munro, Dante, James Hogg, John Galt, Alfred Tennyson.

In Dante’s *Commedia*, down the ninth circle of Hell, at the lowest point of the abyss, there lies a frozen lake called Cocito which is divided in four parts: Caina reserved for those who have been traitors to their family, Antenora for those who have been traitors to their native land, Tolomea for the traitors to their guests and Giudecca for the traitors to their benefactors. Dante represents treachery as the most serious crime of all and Satan himself is locked in ice at the very bottom of the pit forever chewing and mangling in his triple mouth the bodies of three arch-felons, the most reprehensible traitors in the history of mankind: Judas, Brutus, and Cassius.

In her story entitled “Pictures of the Ice” from *Friend of My Youth* (1990), Munro seizes the theme of treachery against one’s family and against one’s benefactors to represent the death of a minister of the United Church in a frozen lake. The minister is said to have drowned in a boating accident North of Thunder Bay in a lake called Shaft Lake. “Shaft” is a very polysemous word that can designate a pole, a rod, a ray of light, or a vertical enclosed space but when it is used in its verbal form in vulgar language it means to take someone in, to betray someone’s trust. The story that begins with the revelation of a drowning in Shaft Lake revolves around a series of breaches of faith. However, the felons are no ordinary traitors. They present themselves or are described as “justified traitors”, vindicating their acts of treachery in the name of a higher good that justifies the means they deploy to achieve their deviated transcendent aim.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the metamorphosis of the figure of the traitor in Munro's treatment of the theme of deception.¹ Not only does she revisit the Dantean hypotext, but she also aggregates several other canonical or lesser-known figures of the traitor to the construction of her own characters in such a way that she creates a dialogical interchange between biblical, historical, legendary, and fictional figures drawn from Antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Victorian and the contemporary period. Her multi-directional and multi-temporal network of cross-references constitutes a reversal of commonly held assumptions about treachery leading to an ethical reassessment that generates a new topography of the moral universe through a subversive and ironic mitigation of guilt combined with a feeling of wonder.

The story revolves around three main characters, each of them engaging in acts of treachery, defined as a "violation of allegiance or of faith and confidence" (Merriam-Webster). Austin Cobbett, a retired minister of the United Church, invents a fake scenario and deludes the people who care about him. He tells his grown-up children and the community he has lived in for many years that he plans to marry a rich widow in Hawaii and live the leisurely existence of a contented pensioner, walking the sandy beach of a mundane paradise. He shows likely photographs to cover up for the fact that he has accepted a new posting as a minister in a remote community in Northern Ontario, where he will voluntarily or involuntarily get drowned in a treacherous lake.

The second main character is Austin's housekeeper, Karin Duprey, whose life is shadowed by a traumatic event: her baby died of meningitis during a winter storm when she and her husband were drunk and the road to the hospital was blocked. She left her husband in the wake of this trauma and experiences a bitter resentment against him. Austin offers her a job as a housekeeper to nurse his dying wife and finally entrusts her with the disposing of his material possessions when he leaves the community. She steals from him a few costly items that have taken her fancy.

The third character is Brent Duprey: Karin's former husband and Austin's former protégé. Brent is rescued from drunkenness by Austin who nurses him back to soberness. He becomes a hardline teetotaler and requires Karin to quit drinking and smoking causing her to leave him. He eventually shifts Austin out of the temperance house he had created and takes full control of the renamed establishment with several radicalized followers.

Each of these characters appears as a confirmed sinner: Austin is a liar, Karin is a thief, Brent is autocratic, ungrateful, and self-serving. All of them betray the confidence that has been placed on them and yet the story does not rest on clear-cut binary oppositions but rather on reversals of generally accepted ethical values. Munro performs a reevaluation of the meaning of deception, a transvaluation destined to probe its deeper

¹ I wrote an early paper on this story entitled "The Ordinary as Subterfuge" in which I did not investigate the numerous hypotexts Munro resorts to but concentrated on the linguistic deployment of narrative traps and red herrings, as well as the use of phrasal verbs, and I do not quote my former analyses in this paper.

significance. She conveys the sense that, far from doing damage to the community, Austin's lies ensure the continuance of his apostolic mission. If he had told the truth about being hired in a remote community of Northern Ontario, he might have been deterred from joining the faithful of his new parish because of the spartan terms of the contract. His lies and deceptions are acts of self-sacrifice that liken him more to a redeemer than to a traitor. Austin does not cast the figure of a traitor against his own family like Napoleone or Alessandro degli Alberti in Dante's *Inferno* (*Inf.* Canto xxxii, 42-138). Munro rescripts the figure of the traitor against his family by giving him the appearance of an ascetic, a saint, or a spiritual hero who at the age of 70 is willing to deny himself the amenities of a pension in order to be closer to those who are in need of spiritual enlightenment.

Some critics have gone as far as to suggest that Austin intended to go to Northern Ontario to commit suicide and covered the suicide with an imaginary tale of remarriage in Hawaii (de Pap Carrington 1991). This is a hypothesis that cannot be easily dismissed, as it reinforces the treacherous nature of the minister of the faith, who would not only commit the sin of lying but also of taking his own life, but I propose a different interpretation that relies on the symmetry of the depiction of three sinners in Munro's carefully designed story. Munro does indeed portray three traitors, but she also depicts three people who ironically vindicate their felony. Austin lies in order to save the souls of the northern parishioners who are left without pastoral care. Karin steals in order to heal her wounds. Brent shifts out Austin to impose stricter obedience and a more radical Christian practice.

Karin's vindication of her deceitfulness is particularly duplicitous. Karin has been entrusted with clearing out Austin's house. Austin wants to donate all his material possessions to the Temperance house which is now controlled by Brent. Out of respect for other people's taste, he has chosen to sell his goods by auction and present Lazarus House with the resulting amount in cash. He has suggested that Karin could keep a vacuum cleaner, but she feels dissatisfied with his offer and chooses instead to appropriate: "A willow-pattern plate. The blue-and-gray flowered curtains. A little, fat jug of ruby-colored glass with a silver lid. A white damask cloth, a tablecloth that she had ironed till it shone like a frosted snowfield, and the enormous napkins that went with it [...] Just as a start, she has already taken home six silver spoons in her coat pocket" (149). Karin not only steals these items from the minister, but she also depletes the possessions that will be converted into cash for Lazarus House. The comparison of the tablecloth to a frosted snowfield is remarkably congruent because it ties in with the frosted surface of the northern lake where Austin drowns. Both Austin and Karin are singled out as traitors having affinities with Cocito, the frozen lake of Hell.

Despite her unabashed stealth, Karin experiences no guilt, on the contrary: "she feels approved of – a most unexpected thing" (155). Karin convinces herself that she is doing no wrong, and the comparisons that are used are indicative of the sense of rebirth that she experiences with her new acquisitions. The stolen tablecloth is said to be very heavy

and to weigh “as much as a child” and she imagines the matching napkins flopping out of wineglasses “like lilies” (149). The comparison of the weight of the tablecloth to that of a child deserves examination. Karin has lost her child after failing to bring down his temperature with wet towels. The emphasis on the weight of the immaculate tablecloth and on the purity of the lily-like napkins acts as a compensatory mechanism that imaginatively makes up for her lack and justifies her choice of acquiring them by stealth. They also play an ambiguous healing role when she imagines herself redecorating her rooms with them: “A person sitting in such a room could turn and floor anybody trying to intrude. *Was there something you wanted?*” (149; italics not added). Karin literally turns herself into someone else, as evidenced by the use of italics in the text, which highlight the fact that she adopts the dismissive tone of superiority of the minister’s wife, in order to take revenge for the humiliations she has been subjected to.

The use of the verb “turn” is particularly remarkable because it is recurrently used throughout the story. When Karin was sitting in the doughnut place drinking a cup of coffee, she commented on Austin’s alleged decision to remarry and leave for Hawaii: “She swung around on the stool and said, ‘Listen, I could have told you he’s changed” (138). Similarly, Austin is first presented as trying new clothes in the local store and “turning around” to answer a newcomer (138). The house of temperance he created was originally called “Turnaround House” before Brent renamed it “Lazarus House”.

If a turnaround means a positive change, an improvement, it also designates “any change from one thing to its opposite” (Cambridge Dictionary) and as such it can easily be associated with a turncoat, that is to say someone who shifts allegiance and “switches to an opposing side or party” (Merriam-Webster). Brent evidences his propensity to change sides radically when he switches from irresponsible drunkenness to religious fanaticism, shifting Austin out of turnaround house in the meantime. Brent is a shifty character, presented as particularly obnoxious and offensive through Karin’s perspective. However, Austin casts a different look on his shortcomings and he stands up for Brent when he says to Karin: “Who’s to say whether Brent’s way isn’t closer to God than mine is, after all?” (142). Ironically enough Brent is being vindicated by the very man he ungratefully shifted out of his legitimate position. All three characters are eventually presented as justified sinners, whether the end allegedly justifies the means as the case occurs for Austin, whether they strain to justify themselves as Karin does, or whether they are justified by others as Brent is.

By vindicating or making her characters vindicate themselves, Munro departs from the Dantean tradition in which traitors are hopelessly and irremediably locked in ice at the bottom of the infernal pit. She draws closer to another canonical text which is related to her family history, the Gothic narrative written by her ancestor James Hogg, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824). The eponymous character of Hogg’s novel, Robert Wringhim, is a man with a mission, who feels directed by God and allowed to override commonly held notions of good and evil. Robert Wringhim feels himself justified by his Calvinist faith and antinomian beliefs in ridding the world of

unbelievers. Controlled by Gil-Martin, a supposed incarnation of the devil, he is prompted into familicide and the murder of reprobates before eventually committing suicide. Through kaleidoscopic fragmentation and a clever process of stories embedded one within another, Hogg achieves in this novel a striking de-legitimizing of the pursuit of truth, while exposing the excesses of ultra-Calvinist fanaticism. Munro has picked up from Hogg the themes of bigotry and self-delusion and adjusted them to a twentieth-century cultural and religious environment. In her story, the excesses of the zealots are no longer related to antinomian beliefs and the violence exerted is toned down. By shifting Austin out of his house, Brent commits a parricide which is only symbolic. However, his paranoid sense of being invested with a mission is closely related to Robert Wrighim's and the theme of self-delusions permeates the story. When Karin feels justified in her acts of stealing, she deludes herself into legitimizing what she is not entitled to do. When Austin lies and possibly commits suicide, he goes against the tenets upon which he had built his Christian life.

Munro's characters are traitors who disguise the truth of their conduct to others but first and foremost to themselves. They blur the boundaries between sincerity and treacherousness at the same time Munro blurs the boundaries between different story frames. By locating one of her traitors in a frozen lake and by allowing all of them to justify their treason through their own delusions, she collapses the frontiers between two very remote story frames while simultaneously suggesting further possibilities, through onomastics or partial quotations. Onomastics are particularly revelatory since one cannot overlook the fact that Munro's main character is given almost the same name as another Scottish, nineteenth-century hero. Cobbett is the close homophone of Corbet, which is the family name of the eponymous hero of John Galt's novel: *Bogle Corbet, or The Emigrants* (1831). This novel in three volumes strikingly bears the same epigraph at the beginning of each volume: "Truth severe by fairy fiction dressed," taken from Thomas Gray's *The Bard*. This is a framing device which, as demonstrated by Angela Esterhammer (2011), "blurs the boundary between truth and fiction" (175). It also helps to blur the boundaries between one fiction and another as there is little doubt that Munro, in "Pictures of the Ice" has borrowed her main character's name from John Galt and given him several of her predecessors' features.

"Pictures of the Ice" strikingly opens with Austin Cobbett dressing himself up in a light and youthful disguise in preparation for his make-believe trip to Hawaii. Munro literalizes Galt's epigraph "truth severe in fairy fiction dressed" by allowing her character to dress himself up in fancy clothes and hide his real, stern intentions. Austin Cobbett appropriates the epigraph of Galt's novel to shaft the community. In addition to the close homophony between the male heroes' names and the initial insistence on tampering with truth, there are more similarities between the long nineteenth-century Scottish novel and the contemporary Canadian short story, closely united by a network of correspondences.

Consider the main protagonist of Galt's novel. Bogle Corbet is originally Jamaican born of Scottish planter parents. He is sent back to Scotland for his education and

chooses the profession of Glasgow merchant. He goes into partnership with another merchant, but his business falters and he is wrongly made to bear the entire responsibility for this failure. In the second volume, he ventures to the West Indies to try to repair his losses, and on his return to Great Britain, he marries and tries again to improve his financial prospects. This second attempt fails once more and he sets sail for Upper Canada where, in the third volume, he establishes a settlement named Stockwell. In Canada, he is more successful, yet the novel ends on a very pessimistic note, Bogle Corbet asserting that he has emigrated too late for his efforts to be fruitful. Bogle Corbet finally strikes the figure of the depressed romantic hero who has arrived too late in a world that was too new, a figure inherited from Goethe and Alfred de Vigny.

Bogle Corbet's fate is constantly opposed to that of Eric Pullicate. As Bogle Corbet gradually loses ground, so Eric Pullicate thrives, in a symmetrically inverted manner, and there lurks the constant suspicion that Pullicate's prosperity is indexed to Corbet's failure. Pullicate is described through an oxymoron, he is called "a virtuous Iago" (202, Vol. II). Although it is not made quite clear, his sudden fortune has a preternatural quality.

As for Austin Cobbett, he is presented in parallel with Brent Duprey whose success is similarly indexed to Austin's failure. Brent eventually dispossesses Austin of his greatest success, the house of temperance he had initiated, and turns the community against him. Both the novel and the short story introduce characters who confront rivalry and are led to emigrate or relocate. In the words of James Galt's narrator, they are characters who have decided to "cross the roaring billow, to wrestle with the primitive forests and dare the shelterless hardships of its labyrinth" (231, Vol. II). Bogle Corbet has literally crossed the ocean to settle in the dark forests of Canada, Austin Cobbett has left the safety of his small southwestern Ontario community, Logan, and ventured into the hostile North.

Another link between Corbet and Cobbett is their proselytizing zeal and their desire to bring about a change or a turnaround in their compatriots' lives. Bogle Corbet offers practical advice for potential settlers, all through the novel, and in an extended appendix.² Austin Cobbett is a stern minister responsible for the reformation of sinners who means "to wear himself out, quick, quick, on people as thankless as possible" (Munro 1990, 154). Through the delineation of the colonial or religious zeal of their characters, both Galt and Munro position themselves at intersecting worlds: the world of letters, corporate finance, and colonial expansion for Galt, the world of literature and metaphysical enquiry for Munro, who voices deeply repressed Presbyterian anxieties about predetermination, salvation, and damnation.

The common denominators between the two works are not limited to the delineation of romantic and depressed heroes wasted by a sense of failure. The novel and the short

² This type of propaganda testifies to Galt's engagement in the literary marketplace as a writer complicit with the Canada Company's goal of selling specific tracts of land at a profit.

story also incorporate common motifs directly drawn from travel literature, which are particularly concerned with the description of a sensational or exotic landscape. At the end of the second volume of Galt's novel is the description of an iceberg:

At sunrise in the morning, we had sailed out of the fogbank which then appeared like a stupendous chalky cliff stretching across the ocean; but as the day brightened, a light breeze blew out, and it thinned without disappearing, till all the transparent East became as it had been ground like the moon shape of a lamp, preserving its outline as distinctly as real glass. When the sun at last shone over its edge, the glory was as dazzling as when he looks from the unclouded horizon of the ocean. (254, II)

This description is particularly striking because it operates several metaphoric reconfigurations: as it transforms the iceberg into a lamp, it joins the outside and the inside, the natural and the man-made, the otherworldly and the homely. It also brings together further antithetical elements: East and West, Northern imaginary and Oriental exoticism, the proximity and transparency of a clearly delineated outline, and the distance of moon-like artefact. Through its weaving of opposites, Corbet's description of the iceberg is a purple passage which extends the conjunction of opposites, as can be noticed in the following description:

The vast peaks, cliffs and pinnacles were like a gorgeous city with all its temples and palaces, shuddering as if shaken by an earthquake; the waters dashed from terrace to terrace, and every point and spire was glittering and gleaming with countless flames kindled by the sunshine. But it cannot be described. (256, Vol. II)

This pretended impossibility of wording the ineffable is a way to further emphasize the power of the written word: Galt has made the reader see the iceberg and register the impact of the antithetical elements that have been used to describe it, a monument of nature envisaged as a secular or religious edifice, the conjunction of ice and fire. In her analysis of Galt's novel, Katie Trumpener has contemplated the image of the iceberg as the ominous frozen embodiment of North America. She has contrasted the dark heart of Conrad's Congo and its horror of an inhuman colonial trade in commodities and lives to the icy heart of Corbet's Canada, with its white void reflecting back the hollowness of imperial industrial Europe, since Galt's description climaxes with the breaking up of the iceberg (Trumpener 2011, 43-56).³

³ Katie Trumpener has given the title "Annals of the Ice" to the comparative analysis she has produced of Galt's novel, *Bogle Corbet* and of Munro's two volumes *Lives of Girls and Women* and *View from Castle Rock*. Surprisingly, she has not, to my knowledge, specifically discussed Munro's "Pictures of the Ice" and yet place and history, as well as the formation of empire, are particularly relevant to this story, in which Munro spells out the need to come to grips with one's involvement in a buried or forgotten history through clandestine references to *Bogle Corbet's* emigration to Canada. In a former volume, she dedicated part of her last chapter to the analysis of emigrant amnesia in *Bogle Corbet* (Trumpener 1997, 278-288).

Galt's novel provides descriptions of nature which are anthropomorphic and Eurocentric. He performs an "*artialisation*" of nature to take up a concept originally coined by Montaigne and taken up by French philosopher Alain Roger (Roger 1997, 16-20). The iceberg is transformed into a work of art, a process Alain Roger describes as "*artialisation in visu*". Through this process the iceberg is equated to a palace or a temple but later in the journey when the *Mirimashi* is drawing near the island of Anticosti, the narrator resorts to a gruesome simile; he associates the island lying black on the horizon to a corpse "covered with a mortcloth" (Galt 1831, 260, Vol. II). This simile does not artialise nature, it paradoxically humanizes it by endowing it with a human likeness at the same time as depriving it of life.

In her description of the Ontario landscape, Munro seems to have followed the same process of successive *artialisation* and humanisation. She does not provide the description of an iceberg or of the outline of an island, but she supplies a description of "unlikely formations" created by the snow and the ice covering the landscape which give the story its title: "Pictures of the Ice". Munro's pictures of the ice are transmedial since they are at the same time literary descriptions of a natural phenomenon and a literary evocation of the photographs that are taken of this phenomenon by the main protagonist. Austin Cobbett drives with his housekeeper to the lake to look at the ice and to take pictures with his camera and this is the description provided by the third-person narrator who delegates viewpoint to Karin:

Sheets of ice drop from the burdened branches of the willow trees to the ground, and the sun shines through them from the west; they're like walls of pearls. Ice is woven through the wire of the high fence to make it like a honeycomb. Waves have frozen as they hit the shore, making mounds and caves, a crazy landscape out to the rim of the open water. And all the playground equipment, the children's swings and climbing bars, has been transformed by ice, hung with organ pipes or buried in what looks like half-carved statues, shapes of ice that might be people, animals, angels, monsters, left unfinished. (151)

The references to walls of pearls and golden honeycomb conjure up a biblical vision of a new Jerusalem (*Revelation* 21.21) which, like Galt's description, perform an *artialisation in visu* because they transform an ice formation into a work of art while similarly synchronizing the otherworldly and the natural.

This enchanted landscape in which sheets of ice are compared to jewels is also evocative of the vision Dante experiences in Paradise:

E vidi lume in forma di riviera
Fulvido di fulgore, intra due rive
Dipinte di mirabil primavera.
Di tal fiumana uscian faville vive,
E d'ogne parte si mettien ne' fiori
Quasi rubin che oro circumscrive; (*Paradiso*, xxx, 61-66)

There are, however, major differences between Dante's Empyrea, and Galt's and Munro's landscapes: Dante's river of light burns with spiritual ardour, its magnificence lies beyond the human: it has the unadulterated splendour of celestial glory. Galt's iceberg is destabilized by the comparison with the earthquake, it is trickling, flowing, breaking, multiplying, whereas Munro's pictures of the ice are a "freeze": a series of snapshots which arrest movement and evolution and have a *rigor mortis* which is particularly uncanny. For instance, the homely metaphor of the sheets of ice, although heightened by the comparison with pearls has a disturbing resonance. They can be equated with winding sheets or a linen shroud because they find an echo in the last part of the description in which the children's swings and climbing bars are said to be "buried", signalling anxieties which are linked with the repressed. A secret lies at the heart of the description, a secret which, to resort to Derrida's use of etymology, is secreted by the landscape (Derrida 2001). The metaphors of "the sheets of ice over pale lumpy monstrosities" provide an additional clue that partly suggests the unspeakable event repressed under these shrouds of memory, all the more as what is "buried" in ice is precisely the children's playground. There is a ghost hovering on the playground equipment, that of Karin's baby who died of meningitis during a snowstorm when the road to the hospital was blocked up and his parents were too drunk to take care of him. The baby's return through the language used to depict the ice-covered landscape constitutes the major anamorphosis in the story: through the word "buried" we are made to see the baby hovering about the bright blank as a spectral embodiment of Karin's guilt.

In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida suggests that learning to live necessitates learning to live with ghosts (Derrida 1993). Both Galt's and Munro's landscapes are haunted: both are suffused with spectral figures or spectral intimations which have long been part of the vocabulary of Gothic romance, but which are revised in their respective works with slightly different inflections. In Galt's vision of the island of Anticosti, there is the outline of a place which is a "haunt" taken over by European settlers, and the memory of the shipwrecked European settlers who, stranded on the island, resorted to cannibalism to survive. The metaphor of the body covered with a mortcloth to designate the island together with the description of the iceberg breaking up condense the deadly hollowness of the colonial enterprise. In Munro's "Pictures of the Ice", the presence of ghosts seems at first to be more personal or familial: it points in the direction of private loss and mourning but as often with Munro, the personal develops into a larger framework and ultimately designates a politics of descent and affiliation which is not simply individual but cultural, historical, and metaphysical. After Austin Cobbett's death in a northern lake, Karin finds herself with the legacy of the pictures of the ice that he has taken and entrusted to her. This legacy entails a politics of memory and of mourning which continues to shape her life and dictate her actions:

Karin looks at these pictures of the pale, lumpy ice monstrosities, these pictures Austin took, so often that she gets the feeling he is in them, after all. He is a blank in them, but bright. (155)

The radiance of the ice formation acquires a supernatural dimension which lends the pictures a somehow sinister aspect. The bright blank does not seem to be constructed as the irradiating brightness of the godhead shining through the ice formation. What Karin sees is a series of lumpy ice monstrosities amongst which Austin Cobbett seems to be lodged.⁴ These frozen monstrous shapes suggest the monstrous shapes of traitors locked in ice in Dante's frozen lake of Cocito rather than the primeval vision of rubies to be found in Paradise. Yet it is Munro's art to bring together unusual conjunctions. Munro's pictures of the ice combine the pearly gates of Paradise and the monstrosities of the Inferno and like Galt's iceberg and Dante's infernal lake they have "the appearance of glass and not of water."⁵

Further Scottish references are made in Munro's story through deviated or partial quotations. For instance, Austin, talking to Karin about his relationship with his daughter Megan and his son Don, exclaims: "Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first—we have children" (Munro 1990, 146). As rightly identified by Ildeko De Papp Carrington and Caterina Ricciardi, Austin partly appropriates Walter Scott's lines: "O what a tangled web we weave/When first we practice to deceive" drawn from *Marmion, A Tale of Flodden Field*, (Scott 1808, 161). Ricciardi rightly suggests that Austin puts the begetting of children and the practice of deception on the same level and develops her point like this:

Thus, like Marmion, he is weaving a web of deceptions, he is fooling his friends and community including perhaps – unlike Marmion – his own children. But how and why? The truth is that even Marmion's questionable exemplum is hardly matchable with Austin's small universe. (Ricciardi 2003-2004, 129)

I would like to suggest that Munro's art precisely lies in her capacity to match the most unmatched occurrences. Munro incorporates the immense into the minuscule, the canonical into the anecdotal, the historical into the personal.

For instance, in "Pictures of the Ice," she resorts to allusions or quotations which pave the way for the equation of an individual's life with the epic narratives of a nation. Consider the allusion to *Marmion*. *Marmion*, in the words of Ricciardi, is "the epic narrative of the overthrow of Scottish knighthood at Flodden in 1513 when King James

⁴ Munro's pictures of the ice, like Galt's icescape and landscape, are particularly uncanny. They remind us that within settler nations, the land seems to remember, to keep an account: in the words of Gelder and Jacobs "a condition of un-settled-ness folds into this often taken for granted mode of occupation" (Gelder and Jacobs 1999, 182). There is a deadly legacy conveyed through the description of landscape in both the novel and the short story, the legacy of theft, fraud, violence, and other betrayals of the colonial past.

⁵ "... e vidimi davante
e sotto I piedi un lago che per gelo
avea di vetro e non d'acqua sembiante". Dante, *Inf.* Canto XXXII 22-24.

IV was bitterly defeated by the English amid ‘shafts’ thick as ‘snow’ (Scott 1808, 168)” (Ricciardi 2003-2004, 128). In her partial transference of *Marmion*’s lines to Austin’s discourse, in her naming the lake where he drowned Shaft Lake, and in condensing snow into pale lumpy ice monstrosities, Munro is surprisingly drawing a comparison between Austin’s situation and Marmion’s. She expands Austin’s loss of his house of temperance and Brent’s victory over him to equate them with the historical moment which marked the defeat of Scotland and the advent of a new era.

She reinforces this expansion by also introducing another comparison between Austin and King Arthur. When Austin, for instance, tells Karin “the old order changeth, yielding place to new” (149), he appropriates the deceased Arthur’s farewell words when departing on his barge for the Island of Avalon. This word-for-word quotation from Tennyson’s *The Passing of Arthur* performs several tasks at once. It synchronizes the local twentieth-century Canadian frame of reference and the Arthurian legend as presented through the Victorian poem. It aggrandizes the personal moment of Austin’s departure for another world into the legendary time of Arthur’s demise. It conflates the life of a modest minister from southwestern Ontario with that of a legendary king, after having synchronized it with Marmion’s. These series of combinations of one small experience with larger historical or mythical ones appear devoid of significance to Ricciardi who refuses the principle of matching what appears unmatchable.

In order to understand Munro’s very transgressive processes, one might investigate the ambivalence of the historical or legendary characters she has chosen to compare with her own characters. Marmion is often envisaged as the figure of “the arch traitor” (Ricciardi 2003-2004, 129). But Byron, for instance, provides a very different interpretation of the character when he writes in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*:

The golden-crested haughty Marmion,
Now forging scrolls, now foremost in the fight,
Not quite a felon, yet but half a knight,
The gibbet or the field prepared to grace;
A mighty mixture of the great and base.
(Byron 2009, 23)

Marmion is a blemished man, distinctly unheroic, who cynically betrays Constance de Beverley among other moral lapses, but he is also in the words of Pikoulis “tormented, solitary, brave, guilty, and finally ascendant in the anguish of defeat,” a description which partly matches Austin’s portrait and also resonates congruently with Arthur’s death (Pikoulis 1971, 749). Arthur’s last battle with his sister’s son is a war against his people and his knights and, as he himself acknowledges, he commits a fatal mistake by turning against them:

The king who fights his people fights himself.
(Tennyson 1899, 72)

Like Arthur, Austin has lost the support of his community because he set up his house of Temperance according to his own vision and authority, building a community without taking into account the desires of this very community. Austin's comparison with Marmion and Arthur emphasises the disintegration of a community: it conflates the fall of Turnaround House with the defeat of Scotland at Flodden Field and the decline of the ideal community of Camelot. After the battle of Camlan, when Arthur dies at the hand of Modred, the son who betrayed him, he finally embarks for the island valley of Avalon which is described in these terms:

Where falls not hail, or rain, or any snow,
Nor ever wind blows loudly; but it lies
Deep-meadowed, happy, fair with orchard-lawns
And bowery hollows crowned with summer sea,
Where I will heal me of my grievous wound. (Tennyson 1899, 473-474)

This description of Avalon ties in with the way Austin describes his imaginary retirement in Hawaii. Like Arthur, he will heal his wounds on the sand "pure as cream" of eternal summer seas with "jewel-bright waves breaking" (Munro 1990, 140) and on the postcard he shows to Karin the name of the town where he will stay "is written in flowing letters like a silk ribbon" (140). This silk ribbon has a quasi-medieval look and assimilates the Hawaiian town to a fortified castle with a keep on which floats a standard. Not only does Munro bring together Avalon and Hawaii but she even suggests the possibility of combining the hedonistic mundane paradise of Hawaii and the spiritual splendour of Dante's Paradise as well as the Celtic Elysian fields of Avalon. In Dante's Emyrean paradise, primeval flowers scintillate like rubies because they are lighted up by sparks of light while in Hawaii, we find "lampposts with brimming flower baskets" against "turquoise skies" (140). As for the island valley of Avalon, it has been variously interpreted as the "island of apples" connected with Celtic mythology traditions of Elysium, but it has also been designated as the "isle of glass" inhabited by deceased heroes (Encyclopedia Britannica).

By choosing to make references to the passing of Arthur towards the island of glass, to the death of Marmion among "shafts as thick as snow" and to Austin's drowning in Shaft Lake, Munro extends the allusion to the frozen lake of traitors that has the appearance of glass in such a way that she brings together Cocito and the Celtic Elysian Island. Munro allows the inferno and the paradise to combine through similar semantic and metaphorical attributes.

With her pictures of the ice, Alice Munro weaves a rich intertextual web of cross-references based on the simultaneous building and collapsing of antinomic polarities. She simultaneously opposes and likens the pearl-like ice formations in Ontario to the glassy ice of Dante's *Inferno*, and to the celestial jewels of *Paradiso*. It is Munro's art to

foster a dialogue between stories and to dissolve antinomies by allowing the most unlikely rapprochement.

Her minister of the faith is no God-inspired scribe, no King Arthur of the round table: he is not guided to the Empyrean abode by Beatrice or finally led to the enchanted island under the beneficent care of Morgan Le Fay. He is humbly driven back from the lake by his maid because he is too weak to hang on to the wheel. Munro turns the canon upside down in unrepentant fashion by creating “a mighty mixture of the great and the base” (Byron 1809, 23)

There results the fact that Munro’s use of unreconciled contradictions does not make for a sense of collapse, waste, and desolation. On the contrary, she manages to engineer a re-enchantment of the world that is born out of new combinatory possibilities. At the beginning of Walter Scott’s poem “Marmion: a tale of Flodden fields”, the poet laments the disappearance of the heroic times of chivalry and romance:

It will not be—it may not last—
The vision of enchantment’s past:
Like frostwork in the morning ray
The fancied fabric melts away; (Scott 1808, Canto 1)

Despite his sense of loss, he still asserts the possibility for “dwindled sons of little men, [...] to break a feeble lance/In the fair fields of old romance (*Marmion* Canto 1). It is this same possibility that Munro asserts claiming for her short stories an annalistic method, calling attention to lowly personae, and aligning her characters’ “small universe” with larger historical contexts through which the individual experience is uncannily aggrandized, highlighted, and reconfigured.

In “Pictures of the Ice”, the subaltern figure of the maid acquires considerable agency. Not only does she drive Austin back to safety after contemplating the ice formation along the shorefront of the lake, but she is the one who is finally entrusted with the pictures of the ice that Austin has taken, and she is the one who decides to put one of them in an envelope and send each one to three people. She sends one to Megan, Austin’s daughter, one to Don, Austin’s son, and one to Brent, her former husband. The story ends on the justification of her act: “She just wants to make them wonder” (Munro 1990, 155). In this last subversive gesture, Munro transforms anonymous letters into apostolic message. The magnificence of the pictures of the ice advertises the glory of creation and reinstalls a vision of enchantment distributed to a trinity of characters whose mission it will be to prove themselves true to the responsibility they have been entrusted with, a responsibility to celebrate the wonder of creation, the aim that Munro, the descendant of a Scottish bard has endorsed in the very first place.

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