

Ethics and Love in the Aesthetics of Alice Munro

by

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Abstract

Whether classified as realist, modernist, or postmodernist, the fiction of Alice Munro combines a strong mimetic impulse with a recognition of the limitations of mimesis. This dissertation examines the ethical dimensions of the balance between mimesis and the recognition of its limits. Chapter one provides an overview of Munro scholarship and brings particular attention to the manner in which this balance between mimesis and metafictional self-reflexivity has been analyzed since the earliest days of Munro criticism. Chapter two draws on the Munro scholarship of Naomi Morgenstern, Robert McGill, and Robert Thacker to argue that Munro's fiction is connected, though not reducible to, her experience of reality. This connection, however imperfect, gives her aesthetics its ethical weight, particularly when the subject of her writing is the human Other. Munro's combination of a sense of alterity with a powerful feeling of reality reflects a desire to understand and represent the Other without compromising the Other's radical alterity. The tension that arises from this desire can find a resolution in an aesthetics of love akin to eros as described by Emmanuel Levinas and refigured by Luce Irigaray: a representation, inscribed in each story's form, of the possibility of a subject-to-subject relationship that preserves difference and ends in mutual fecundation. Chapter three compares the ethical vision in "The Ottawa Valley," which ends on a moment of continuing, uncompromised alterity, with the feeling of love and catharsis produced in "The Moons of Jupiter." Chapter four reads "Material" as an oblique gesture at the possibility that literature can open a relationship to the Other that is a kind love. Chapter five examines "Deep-Holes" as an attempt to reconcile the ethical tensions inherent in writing by representing a collaborative mode of meaning-making linked to love and

fecundity. This dissertation also, however, follows Derek Attridge and Munro herself in observing some distinction between the self-Other dynamic as a face-to-face relation and this dynamic as a problem of literary representation, even if the two cannot be neatly separated.

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Chapter One

Introduction

“Walker Brothers Cowboy,” the widely-anthologized first story in Alice Munro’s 1968 Governor General Award-winning debut collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades*, ends with a negative epiphany. The young female narrator, whose meagre economic circumstances in a small town on Lake Huron mirror Munro’s own upbringing, accompanies, along with her younger brother, her father on his rounds selling Walker Brothers products door-to-door. When the father ends his rounds, he visits a woman, Nora, who appears to have been of romantic interest to him in his younger days. This glimpse into her father’s past is a revelation for the narrator, but rather than a positive revelation in which she gains knowledge of his life, the epiphany in which it appears is represented as a recognition of the limitations of her knowledge. As they drive home, the narrator reflects on what she felt:

I feel my father’s life flowing back from our car in the last of the afternoon, darkening and turning strange, like a landscape that has an enchantment on it, making it kindly, ordinary and familiar while you are looking at it, but changing, once your back is turned, into something you will never know, with all kinds of weathers, and distances you cannot imagine. (18)

The stories from *Dance of the Happy Shades* conform most closely to the form of the realistic, well-wrought modernist short story as defined by David Crouse: the combination of a “vivid and lifelike world” with “characters who move and change” with the change culminating in “the traditional epiphany” that stresses “a single clear moment

of revelation” (51). Over the course of her career, and particularly in her collections from the 1980s and 1990s, Munro moved away from such aesthetic neatness as her work became less tied to biography and more experimental in form. Even in *Dance of the Happy Shades*, however, there exists a strong sense of the limit of the human capacity to know and represent. Then as now, her work blended mimetic power with a recognition that the world in its plenitude exceeds our every representational and conceptual framework.

This dissertation continues in the tradition of those studies of Munro that explore her ability to combine mimesis with a metafictional, self-reflexive sensibility. Its goal is to operate within and extend the rubric of ethics as defined by Naomi Morgenstern in her 2003 article “The Baby Or The Violin? Ethics And Femininity In The Fiction Of Alice Munro.” Morgenstern identifies in Munro’s work a desire to reduce the Other¹ to the understanding consciousness of the self without interpretive violence. Munro’s ability to suggest a sense of alterity that escapes the capacity of fiction and language to express even while she creates a powerful feeling of reality reflects the desire to understand and represent the Other without compromising the Other’s radical alterity. The close readings that comprise the bulk of this dissertation will focus on how the tension between representing the Other and recognizing the Other’s alterity can find a resolution in an aesthetics of love: a representation, inscribed in the aesthetics of the story, of the possibility of a subject-to-subject relationship that preserves difference and ends in mutual fecundation. “The Moons of Jupiter,” “Material,” and “Deep-Holes” all gesture at the possibility that literature, or at least shared intellectual creation, can be related to a

¹Following Alphonso Lingis’s translation of *Totality and Infinity*, this dissertation will use “Other” to refer to Levinas’s use of “*autrui*,” (the personal Other, the you) and “other” for “*autre*.”

loving, fecund relationship to the Other akin to the phenomenon of eros as described by Emmanuel Levinas and refigured by Luce Irigaray. This dissertation will also, however, follow Derek Attridge and Munro herself in observing some distinction between any self-Other dynamic as a face-to-face relation and this dynamic as a problem of literary representation, even if the two cannot be neatly separated.

Literature Review

Munro criticism began in earnest in the 1970s. The first scholarly works appeared after *Dance* and particularly *The Lives of Girls and Women* brought Munro to national attention, and by the mid to late 1970s, articles on Munro's work were published with some regularity. Attempts to come to terms with Munro's balance between her capacity for mimesis and her recognition of alterity stretch back to this period. Some early articles of note include J.R. (Tim) Struthers's "Reality and Ordering: The Growth of a Young Artist in *Lives of Girls and Women*," Hallvard Dahlie's "The Fiction of Alice Munro," and Brandon Conron's "Munro's Wonderland." Struthers examines *Lives* as a *Kunstlerroman* in the tradition of and clearly influenced by James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. He tracks Del, the protagonist, as she discovers the power of words and learns to order reality in satisfying fictional shapes. In the process, she recognizes the reality of what Struthers calls "the everyday world" as opposed to various and more artificial "false notions of reality" such as "the grotesque, sensational world of Uncle Benny's newspapers [. . .] her younger brother Owen's world of cardboard hockey players; and the exaggerated world of Del's early writings" (46). Struthers does,

however, assert that Del also discovers “Another reality which [. . .] was her own imagination” (46).

Dahlie’s analysis of *Dance of the Happy Shades* focuses on the basics of fiction, such as characterization, theme, and the prevalence of first-person narration, but he recognizes that “Mrs. Munro’s world is neither consistent nor readily comprehensible” and that “On the surface, much seems straightforward [. . .] but there is always something gnawing at the edges of our certainties” (43). In his reading of “The Office,” Dahlie also identifies an ethical dimension. Dahlie sees the following question inscribed in the story: “how far does one’s obligation to another human being go?” (43). He further observes a parallel between the narrator, a writer, and the antagonist, Mr. Malley, who is “if not a lecherous old man, certainly deceitful and unpleasant to an extreme” (47). This parallel calls into question the ethics of writing: “the narrator, a writer, re-arranges words to create an imaginative world or experience; and is this really much different from what Mr. Malley does, who re-arranges facts to create his version of the world, and a version that to the outsider is just as credible as any other tale of fiction?” (47). Similarly, Conron focuses on Munro’s “influences, talent, and developing technique” and discusses a sense in which Munro seems to exceed the genre of realism (109). Conron attaches the appellation “magic realism” to her work and attributes to her use of imagery “a super realism or magical and mysterious suggestion of a soul beyond the objects depicted” (110). The tendency to read Munro as a magic realist persisted into the 1980s.²

Helen Hoy’s 1980s article, “‘Dull, Simple, Amazing and Unfathomable’: Paradox and Double Vision in Alice Munro’s Fiction” proved influential³ in its focus on paradox

²See, for example, Linda Lamont-Stewart and George Woodcock.

³See, for example, Lorraine York and W.R. Martin.

as a technique in approaching the ineffable nature of reality. Hoy details Munro's use of paradox at the level of diction and explores its thematic importance; she notes Munro's predilection for concise, oxymoronic descriptions such as "ironic and serious at the same time" and observes a "thematic insistence on the doubleness of reality." Hoy argues that Munro's use of paradox "reflects her vision of the complexity of human emotion [. . .] and of the human situation more generally." According to Hoy, reality for Munro is "inherently contradictory" and "ordinary reality is shown to contain its own mystery." In *Who Do You Think You Are*, Hoy notes a greater ambiguity behind the attempt to express the contradictory, mysterious nature of reality: in this work, "distinctions between the illusory and the real have become less confident and straightforward."⁴

As Munro's reputation continued to grow over the late 1970s and early 1980s, primarily due to her publications in the *New Yorker*, the first academic books on her work were published. *Probable Fictions: Alice Munro's Narrative Acts*, published in 1983, is the first book-length collection of scholarly articles on Munro's work. In the introduction, editor Louis MacKendrick describes the collection as revealing "some creative ranges visible behind the familiar foothills of realism" and stresses that Munro's fictional worlds are "made, rather than rendered" (1). Robert Thacker examines Munro's retrospective narrative approach and notes that with this technique, Munro "creates a dialectic" that can give a story "two levels of reality" (45). Margaret Gail Osachoff analyzes the presence of autobiography, confession, and memoir and observes the ethical and mimetic paradoxes created by writing about other people: "Exploring the lives of others by

⁴In her 1991 article, "Alice Munro: 'Unforgettable, Indigestible Messages'" Hoy returns to these issues at greater length and with increased emphasis on the way "Munro holds up to scrutiny" the imaginative act of storytelling, the use of "bodily realities" as part of a "narrative strategy of inclusion" that "creates the illusion of undifferentiated experience prior to the sifting, classifying, ordering action of the appraising mind," as well as a narrative "rejection of a teleological or evolutionary view of experience" (5,7, 17),

writing about them involves the writer in ‘unavoidable lies,’ and yet, paradoxically, those lives have a ‘pure reality’ or truth about them” (62). John Orange reads Munro’s complex use of time to conclude that, for Munro, “any pattern of meaning and significance in human action can only be partial, and temporary, and probably illusory” (87). Lorna Irvine’s feminist analysis makes the case that “the ambiguous boundaries of female bodies” are what “make succinct summary, even closure, impossible” (103). Irvine calls the final paragraph of “The Ottawa Valley,” which consists of metafictional commentary on the final impossibility of adequately transforming the mother in the story into art, “a female aesthetic” (103). Gerald Noonan’s contribution analyses Munro’s narrative style and concludes that her “vision of reality and her methods of art in depicting it [. . .] grow progressively, if not steadily more complicated and paradoxical” (163). Noonan writes that Munro “challenge[s] art’s ability to present real life” (166). Lawrence Mathews goes farther; he writes that *Who Do You Think You Are?* demonstrates “an art which seems rooted in skepticism about, even hostility towards, the kind of ‘truth’ which most literature claims to deliver” (190). For Munro, “Art not only bears false witness to life, but we tend [. . .] to impose equally mendacious aesthetic patterns upon our own experience” (184). Not just art, then, but the human desire to making meaning out of life as a whole are both inadequate to reality.

Though *Saying the Unsayable* was published in 1984, the essays collected in it were based on a conference that pre-dated *Probable Fictions*. Some essays place Munro in a literary context: one, by Joseph Gold, relates Munro to Shakespeare, while another, by Nora Robson, finds a more direct resonance in white writers of the American South. W. R. Martin looks at the interplay among the stories in Munro’s collections; James

Carscallen finds patterns of symbolism; and Jean Tener details the creation of the Munro archive at the University of Calgary. Other essays blend philosophical or theoretical concerns with their analysis of form. Margaret Ann Fitzpatrick draws on psychoanalysis to discuss psychological projection as a literary technique in Munro's work, and Barbara Godard analyzes the way Munro's fiction makes language problematic and questions its binaries as she seeks a way to write the female body.

Running through the collection, however, is the sense that Munro's work dramatizes and pushes at the limitations of fiction and language even as she demonstrates their strength. Gold, like Godard, examines how "language is both an instrument in Munro's creation of women and a defining part of that creation" (2). In Munro's work, "balance, grace, effort, and the awareness of limitation" are all important as she moves "between the poles of sensation and language" while readers "are made conscious of a female consciousness being created" (7). Godard notices how Munro "Explore[s] the binary nature of language" and "Test[s] its limits" in an attempt, as a woman, to write both "the sexual body *and* the body of literature" such that these bodies are "experienced by women as subject of their desires not as object of men's desires" (43). J. R. (Tim) Struthers argues that Munro's fiction "is not just complex psychological fiction but fiction that investigates itself, self-referring fiction, stories about storytelling-
-metafiction" (103). Linda Lamont-Stewart similarly asserts that Munro's work pushes against the boundaries of realism, echoing Conron by locating Munro within magic realism: like a magic realist painter, Munro's "almost photographic depiction of an ordinary scene is startlingly disrupted by the presence of something strangely out of place"; reality in her oeuvre "defies all attempts to render it comprehensible" (114).

Also published in 1984 was Hallvard Dahlie's slender volume, *Alice Munro and Her Works*. Dahlie notes that Munro's work is "rooted in social realism" but also "insistently explores what lies beyond the bounds of empirical reality" (5). More importantly, he situates Munro's work and criticism in a larger context. Dahlie's book includes the basics of Munro's biography and places her in the context of "the artistic, cultural, and political coming-of-age of Canada after World War II" (3). He notes the influence of American writers of the South and the shared presence of "the regional and the Gothic impulses" in their fiction (6). Dahlie also includes not only an overview of Munro's body of work but also an overview of existing Munro criticism. Earlier articles, as J.R. Struthers noted, in "Some Highly Subversive Activities: A Brief Polemic and a Checklist of Works on Alice Munro," tended to operate in isolation. Of the "more than eighty articles and sections of books which discuss Munro's fiction," Struthers writes, "only three articles quote or comment on the work of other critics" (*Studies in Canadian Literature*). As compelling as the insights provided in these articles may be, there remained in the early 1980s a need for Munro criticism to root itself more deeply in existing study.

Thomas E. Tausky's "What Happened to Marion?: Art and Reality in *Lives of Girls and Women*" provides a strong example of later criticism that moves beyond the personal response of the critic. His attempt to come to terms with Munro's metafiction operates with reference to the facts of Munro's career; to scholarship by Margaret Atwood, Hoy, and Struthers; and with reference to the Munro archives at the University of Calgary. Tausky demonstrates that the stories in which Munro appears most explicitly skeptical of the representational capacity of her art and art in general appear "in the years

from 1970 to 1973.” His archival research and patient close readings demonstrate that this period was one of creative struggle for Munro. That his analysis is tied to a specific point in Munro’s career is also a strength, given the tendency in Munro criticism to speak to her entire career at once. His reading of the multiple drafts of *Lives of Girls and Women* makes a compelling case that the book embodies, through its protagonist Del’s coming of age as an artist, an attempt to balance the artifice inherent in art with a desire to represent real life. Del’s efforts to achieve this balance take the shape of a struggle to find an artistic voice somewhere between a Gothic, romantic vision and mimetic realism. Tausky also tracks how “The Ottawa Valley,” “Home,” and “Material” all “explore the artificialities and limitations of art in its attempt to deal with reality,” and he is admirably attuned to the variation in Munro’s oeuvre: although “Munro’s self-questioning about the legitimacy of her art, and art itself, has troubled Munro throughout her career, [. . .] for the most part, she has chosen not to make this concern evident in her fiction” (*Studies in Canadian Literature*). Tausky’s archival research and exegesis remain a solid complement to the information and analysis of this period that Thacker later provides in his 2005 biography, *Alice Munro: Writing Her Lives*.

Similarly, Hoy’s “‘Rose and Janet’: Alice Munro’s Metafiction” turns to archival research to provide a framework for understanding the evolution of both *Who Do You Think You Are* and *The Moons of Jupiter*. As discussed further in chapter three, these two collections began as one manuscript in which Rose, the protagonist of the first six stories and later the sole protagonist of *Who Do You Think You Are*, would be revealed to be the fictional creation of Janet, the protagonist of the last six stories and later the sole protagonist of “Moons”. Hoy draws on her reading of the original “Rose and Janet”

manuscript and analyzes Munro's correspondence and interview to detail how this original arrangement "transforms the parallel stories of Rose and Janet into metafiction" (74). Hoy locates the original arrangement of the stories alongside "The Ottawa Valley," "Material," and "Winter Wind" because they "all investigate the task of the writer" (74), and she locates the turn away from this metafictional arrangement in her belief that it was "too deliberate for Munro's aesthetic of indirection," that it threatened to "oversimplify the distinction between fiction and reality," and that it was incongruent with Munro's "growing impatience with overt metafictional strategies" (79).

Linda Hutcheon in *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction*, on the other hand, does not bring sustained attention to Munro's body of work; Thacker describes her references to Munro as "fleeting and minor" though he nevertheless finds her analysis compelling and even relatively⁵ "necessary to a sophisticated, thorough treatment of Munro's writing" ("Ask" 161). Hutcheon confidently claims Munro as a postmodernist;⁶ she lists Munro alongside Timothy Findley and Robert Kroetsch as "postmodern metafiction writers who are obsessed (as they all are) with both the power and the limitation of the printed word to invoke the absent object" (46). Munro's work does largely fit Hutcheon's definition of "historiographic metafiction;" it is "intensely, self-reflexively art" even if this self-reflexivity is sometimes subtle, and it is certainly "grounded in historical, social, and political realities" (13). Though Hutcheon does not flesh out her argument fully in

⁵Thacker calls Hutcheon's work "more necessary" to such an understanding than Michele Gapaille's analysis in *The Canadian Short Story*, Coral Ann Howells's in *Private and Fictional Words: Canadian Women Novelists of the 1970s and 1980s*, or Beverly Rasporich's in *Dance of the Sexes: Art and Gender in the Fiction of Alice Munro*.

⁶Stephen Regan similarly finds in Munro a "postmodernist scepticism about the capacity of language to signify intended meanings" as well as "a sympathetic concern for those who continue to search for such meanings (123). Regan, however, also feels it "would be wrong [. . .] to equate Alice Munro's fiction too insistently with the metafictional techniques of postmodernism" (124).

regards to Munro, she nevertheless makes a convincing case for the context of Munro's aesthetics as tied to the Canadian postmodern: following Marshall McLuhan, she writes that Canada is a "border line case" and an "ex-centric" nation peripheral to masculine and imperial centres of power like Britain and the United States (4). Detailed analysis of Munro's aesthetics and personal context, which are also vital to an understanding of Munro's artistic vision, fall outside the scope of her argument, however.

E. D. Blodgett's *Alice Munro* similarly and at greater length draws on discourses of theory -- primarily Derrida and Barthes -- to note both the centrality and the illusiveness of the real in Munro's work. In the preface, Blodgett writes that Munro is not "avant-garde in any contemporary sense"; he later notes that "there cannot be the slightest doubt that Munro's fiction is rooted in a living world of pained, perhaps even outraged, lives" (1). Yet he also argues that "it is an error [. . .] to argue that Munro is primarily a realist" because documentary realism is that which "her writing has struggled against in the three and a half decades of her engagement with her craft" (6). In a phrase that parallels Simon Critchley's definition of deconstruction as the attempt to attain a point of exteriority to logocentrism even though "the only language that is available to deconstruction is that of philosophy, or logocentrism," Blodgett writes that Munro "uses fiction to understand the limits of fiction" (Critchley 29, Blodgett 121). Unlike Critchley, however, for whom this attempt to "keep open a dimension of alterity which can neither be reduced, comprehended, nor, strictly speaking, even *thought* by philosophy" has an ethical dimension, Blodgett makes no explicit connection to an ethics of alterity (Critchley 29). He instead looks to Derrida for his concept of *différance* and notes a resonance between aspects of Derrida's thinking and the "tactics of delay" that defer

meaning in Munro's art (8). Blodgett turns to deconstruction and to theory more broadly for a critique of language and a sense of the limitations of human concepts, including those of self and Other. He writes that

no one with Munro's sensitivity to the way language fabricates a world can make the reader believe that there is a pure knowledge, unaffected by language. Thus her strategy is one that not only makes one wary of realism, but also heightens one's awareness of how fragile our sense of self and the other is, so utterly dependent as it is upon language and consequent conflict of meanings. (115)

Blodgett finds in Munro not a representation of radical alterity but "a process by which the self becomes a text, falling apart as it does so" (10).

Importantly for this dissertation, Blodgett also gestures at the possibility of a loving relationship to the Other in Munro's work (146). In language that suggests a caress, he notes how the Other is "eagerly sought and just as eagerly held at a certain distance" (68). In reference to "The Ottawa Valley," he writes that "the mark of [Munro's] style is always one of intimacy" and that the story enacts both "the desire to know the subject as profoundly as possible and not to possess it, but to set it free in some uncanny way, as if it were giving new life to the subject sought" (72). He also writes that "Love in its various manifestations clearly abounds in Munro" although any connection between love and the act of writing remains unexplored (130).

Even critics for whom the limits of representation were not a central concern, however, such as B. Pfaus and Ildikó de Papp Carrington, recognize their importance. Pfaus focuses on Munro's attempts to capture and reflect reality: she writes that Munro has a "moral impulse [. . .] that reality on its different cognitive levels must be confronted

and felt” and that “Her narrators and protagonists” are frequently “trying to break out of the disguises and evasions of the conventional world into the light of ‘truth’” (6). Yet the epigraph that opens the book reminds readers of the complexity and indeterminacy of this process. Pfaus quotes Munro from “The Spanish Lady”: “It is terrible when you find out that your idea of reality is not the real reality” (1). Carrington likewise focuses less on the inadequacy of language than on language as a medium of control and, paradoxically, shame and humiliation.⁷ She asserts as well that in Munro’s fiction, “things do connect and there is a coherent whole” (*Controlling* 3). Carrington notes, however, Munro’s “perception of a fragmented and constantly shifting world of disturbing irony, ambiguity, and painfully persistent paradox” and states that Munro’s “documentary realism connotes neither permanence or control” (*Controlling* 4).

W. R. Martin similarly makes no recourse to discourses of postmodernism or theoretical discussions of language. He brings “no *a priori* theory” to bear in his analysis and instead focuses on close readings finely attuned to the complexities of individual stories (xi). These readings reveal Munro’s work to be “a complex counterpointing of opposed truths in a memorable model of life and reality” (1). Martin recognizes, however, that this model of reality is by no means simple or complete. “Munro’s art,” he writes, “deals with oppositions, contraries, tensions, inconsistencies, and then sometimes failures, but more often resolutions, implied or achieved; in literary terms the oppositions produce ironies and paradoxes, but also sometimes moments of vision in which the oppositions are reconciled or are seen as parallel, at least in the imagination” (13).

⁷Though Carrington does not use the vocabulary of ethics, the connection she identifies between language as a source of control as well as humiliation implies an ethical concern with the act of writing, though one that differs from ethics as it appears in later work by Morgenstern and Robert McGill. If controlling language carries the risk of exposing the self or other people to shame and humiliation, the act of writing carries the risk of ethical failure not because it fails to recognize the Other’s radical alterity but because it represents aspects of the person that the writer has no right to make public.

Martin's book provides an important model for this dissertation, not only for its focus on close reading and desire to avoid the threat of tendentiousness that can adhere to works that involve a strong theoretical paradigm, but also because of his insistence that the tensions in Munro's stories can be resolved to some degree. The tension created by Munro's anxiety over ethics is one such tension: sometimes, as is most clearly the case in "The Moons of Jupiter," it is released in the literary production of a feeling of love.

Beverly Rasporich's often-criticized⁸ 1990 study *Dance of the Sexes*, by contrast, reads Munro primarily through a prism of Anglo-American feminist struggle. Nevertheless, her limited use of feminists like Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous to suggest that the lack of mastery, closure, and simple mimesis in Munro is related to her femininity puts this aspect of her analysis, at least, in good company. In her chapter "The Short Story Writer As Female," Rasporich argues that "for Alice Munro as a female author writing the body, fictional 'novelistic' structures built on correspondences and juxtapositions without ends and closure are much more natural texts than the traditional narratives of linear logic extended into climax" (162). Rasporich, who writes that Munro's art does not express "a singular mimetic relationship between art and life" (164), recalls Lorna Irvine's work from *Probable Fictions* and prefigures Adrian Hunter's reading of Munro as a postmodernist woman writer, though Hunter's work makes this argument with considerably more depth and rigor, as well as with a compelling and revelatory focus on the importance of the short story genre to Munro's work.⁹

⁸Thacker, MacKendrick, and Coral Ann Howells each observes that Rasporich's analysis misses much of the complexity and nuance in Munro's fiction because Rasporich seeks too inflexibly to read Munro's work through a lens of feminist struggle (see Thacker, "Ask" 163, MacKendrick, *Some* 24, Howells, *Munro* 144).

⁹Hunter writes that Rasporich is one of a group of critics who fail to discuss Munro's work "as short fiction" and that she "fails to place Munro's work within a sufficiently detailed understanding of the short story genre, hence the impressionistic and metaphorical vocabulary used to describe the form and the failure to advance at all analytically beyond the claim that that [the] short story is 'very likely a feminine art'" (222).

Despite Christa Canitz's contention about first generation Munro critics being "in awe of the mimetic qualities" of her work while only the second generation of Munro critics, publishing in the early 1990s in the wake of the internationally acclaimed collections *The Progress of Love* and *Open Secrets*, were able to bring "sophisticated theoretical frameworks to bear on her work" (247), as far back as the early 1980s and certainly by 1990, the major lines of inquiry into Munro's fiction had already been established. Her ability to blend powerful mimesis with a subtle metafictional sensibility had been tied to technical and narratological frameworks as well as postmodern, postcolonial, and feminist contexts. Over the following decades, as Munro's reputation continued to grow, critics would return to and expand upon such themes with varying degrees of success.

"The Rhetoric of Fictional Realism in the Stories of Alice Munro" by Canitz and Roger Seamon and "Resisting Reduction: Closure in Richard Ford's *Rock Springs* and Alice Munro's *Friend of My Youth*" by Crouse, offer particularly sophisticated close readings of the literary strategies behind Munro's attempt to combine a recognition of the limitations of language with a strong feeling of verisimilitude. Canitz and Seamon argue that Munro's apparent resistance to artifice is essentially a rhetorical strategy. They write that Munro, like all realists, "resists the fictionality of fiction" -- such as the satisfying patterns of legend and archetype -- and that this resistance ultimately strengthens her stories' sense of verisimilitude (68). They provide a catalogue of Munro's rhetorical techniques, such as the apparently "rambling nature" of her work; "the suppression of overt moralizing or thematizing, a mark of the realistic short story since Chekhov;" and her recurring representations of the "machinery of fiction-making" (68, 70). These

techniques ultimately frustrate any too-easy narrative desires and thus increase the power and verisimilitude of her writing. Their conclusion represents the ambiguity and paradox in Munro's artistic achievement: if her rhetorical strategies for opposing fiction to reality succeed, "it will not be because they reproduce reality, but because they, like the best stories in the realist tradition, alert us as readers to the presence of fantasy in our narratives about ourselves and others, and, hence, enable us to become more tolerant of the doubts, uncertainties, and blanknesses that legends obliterate" (80).

Like Canitz and Seamon, Crouse offers a sophisticated analysis of Munro's ability to create fictional worlds and characters that accord with our experience of reality by embedding within her stories a limit to the meaning-making power of the author or narrator. He takes a more aesthetic approach: he roots his analysis in a discussion of the writer's craft, and a desire shared by nineteenth-century realists, twentieth-century modernists, and contemporary amateurs to produce artistically satisfying and realistic fictional worlds. Crouse then locates Munro and American Richard Ford as part of a movement away from aesthetic neatness, closure, narrative authority, and explanation and toward more open-ended work that gains verisimilitude via its lack of cohesion and certainty. Just as the epiphany, or techniques like "Placing thoughts in the mind of a character or recasting them as images and locating them symbolically in the landscape can be seen as a way of opening up interpretation relative to previous, more narrator-dominated techniques," Munro, like Ford, finds ways to "open up interpretation relative to Joyce, Proust, and Woolf" (52-3). Crouse notes that Munro often avoids the traditional epiphany in favour of the "stacking of short, vague events" at a story's end, by offering "New and different interpretations of the same image," or by undercutting a character's

insight with “subsequent insight[s]” to juxtapose new, different, and even contradictory points of information (56, 59, 60). Crouse analyzes Munro’s ability to write realistic worlds and characters while nevertheless recognizing that “what each of us sees as the ‘real’ world is also a kind of fiction, as manufactured as the books we read” (63).

Other important articles include “Allegories of Reading in Alice Munro’s ‘Carried Away’” by Miriam Marty Clark, and “‘Every Last Thing ... Everlasting’: Alice Munro And The Limits Of Narrative” by Katherine J. Mayberry. Clark offers a compelling reading of Munro as breaking away from the realist tradition with particular force in *Open Secrets* and *Friend of My Youth*. She argues that the later stories “dismantle [. . .] the foundations of realist narrative” (50). She ties this shift to Munro’s “refiguring of the linked practices of writing and reading” and brings particular attention to “Carried Away,” which she argues “addresses allegorically the politics of the library and the ethics of reading” (50). Clark describes reading in these stories as a “marginal” activity that “occupies a space normally taken up in adults by sexual passion, domestic responsibility, and economic productivity” and states that “To read seriously is to [. . .] enter into a complicated and sometimes oppositional relation to the community that has established those institutions [of learning] and authorizes reading” (50). Reading, both for Munro’s audience and for her characters, possesses according to Clark a “kind of anarchic force, a power to create gaps and uncertainties, to proliferate meanings and unravel the very processes of meaning-making and realist representation” (52). Clark’s argument that Munro’s stories from this period work toward “denaturalizing realist representation and deconstructing its premises from within” is convincingly demonstrated through her reading of “Meneseteung” and particularly “Carried Away.” Given the variety of

nineteenth-century discourses on display in “Meneseteung,” Almeda Roth indeed appears “a character constructed out of the discourses of the past” such that the story “moves representation, if not subjectivity itself, out of the realm of nature and into the realm of discursive practice” (54). She demonstrates the extent to which fantasy and allegory pervade “Carried Away” at the expense of any pretense of mimesis and argues that the story presents “not parallel realities but two simultaneous and ultimately irreconcilable allegories of reading” (56).

Mayberry focuses less on style and more on character. She posits that “Storytelling is the central activity of the characters of Alice Munro’s fiction”; that storytelling is “the principal task” of her narrators and a “frequent activity of a large group of secondary characters” (531). Most of these characters, she writes, “come to recognize, if only dimly, the imperfection and inadequacy of their medium” (531). Mayberry focuses on the limits of language as felt by the characters, and as such, her discussion of aesthetics is limited; her analysis of *The Moons of Jupiter* is nevertheless convincing, particularly her assertion that in “Hard-Luck Stories,” the narrator’s attempt to gain Douglas’s participation is vital to her desire to use narrative to retrieve the past “so that she may know [and] understand the role of the other (Douglas)” (538). Narrative is a way, however imperfect, of retrieving the past and reaching out to the Other, even if ultimately “language and story-telling are mocked by the obdurate fact of death” (539).

Ajay Heble picks up similar themes with a more theoretically-informed approach in *The Tumble of Reason: Alice Munro’s Discourse of Absence*. Heble offers compelling close readings and fine insights into individual stories. He also displays an admirable command of poststructuralist theory. Heble has little to say about the powerful mimetic

qualities of Munro's fiction, however, and Thacker's assertion that Heble's selective readings do not sufficiently "advance understanding of Munro's art" to warrant a book length study is ultimately persuasive ("What's 'Material'?" 200).

Karen Smythe's *Figuring Grief: Gallant, Munro, and the Poetics of Elegy* is a similarly mixed success. Smythe recognizes that in Munro's work, "trust in language and art is questioned" (21). Moreover, as Thacker asserts, in her focus on death Smythe "Without question [. . .] is on to something: death -- whether impending, recalled, actual or imagined -- figures often and deeply in Munro's 'material'; indeed, *how* it figures in a Munro story is often as interesting as its specifics" ("What's 'Material'?" 200). In this sense, Smythe's work provides a model for this dissertation. Both are essentially thematic studies of facets of the human experience that exceed the limits of human consciousness: death in Smythe's case, and ethics and love in this instance. Despite Smythe's strong readings and solid command of existing criticism, the vast scope of her book and what Thacker calls her strong "drive to thesis" ("What's 'Material'?" 200) limit the work in a fashion that I hope to avoid by the tighter focus on the handful of stories discussed here.

Mothers and Other Clowns: The Stories of Alice Munro by Magdalene Redekop and *The Other Country: Patterns in The Writing of Alice Munro* by James Carscallen fare better. Redekop, whose analysis will be discussed in terms of ethics in the next chapter, applies a feminist analysis and focuses on the theme of clowning and the centrality of motherhood. The book is idiosyncratically structured and explicitly built around Redekop's admittedly subjective response to Munro's work; she makes no claims to mastery and calls the book "the story that I hear Munro telling *me*" (x). Nevertheless, she is finely attuned to Munro's sense of irony and concern with ethics, and Redekop offers

many compelling insights into individual stories. Her reading of “Miles City, Montana” forms a key plank of chapter five of this dissertation. Carscallen’s study likewise has an idiosyncratic density: in his review, Thacker writes that it verges on “a private system of meaning” (203). Carscallen, for example, begins his study with a consideration of the distinction between “reality,” which he defines as “like matter, the part of experience that cannot be spirited away,” and “truth,” which he describes as “the world here of things made up, including real things made over” (4). He then overlays onto these terms a distinction between “sense and sensibility,” with sense referring to “a relation in which two elements, while remaining distinct and different, join neatly together at the same time” and sensibility referring to its opposite: a lack of fit between two terms (6, 7). In chapter two, he then introduces a complex vocabulary of points, lines, and circles to describe Munro’s narrative structure; the weight of this critical apparatus threatens to overwhelm the insights of his reading. Carscallen does, however, identify a dense network of resonances with Biblical stories, fairy tales, as well as Scottish, English, and French history, and while these resonances are not in every instance convincing, they serve to demonstrate the complex intertextuality of Munro’s work. Reality-directed though it may be, Munro’s writing is also, of course, literary.

Neil Besner’s *Introducing Alice Munro’s Lives of Girls and Women: A Reader’s Guide*, by contrast, benefits from its conciseness and clarity. Besner begins, like Carscallen, by defining “the seemingly opposed impulses organized around the documentary, objective recording of a ‘real’ past and the imaginative recreation of a fictional one” (13). “The related tensions between realism and heightened realism, between memory’s recall and imagination’s artful reshaping of recollection,” he writes,

are central to the narration” (13). He also includes an overview of the critical reception of *Lives* and provides a fine close reading of the text. Besner first speaks to the work’s status as a novel but one that resembles a short story collection, and then he tracks its protagonist, Del Jordan, as she comes of age and continually attempts “to turn reality into fiction” even as she discovers “the limits of the knowable world” (34, 48). This book provides a strong introduction to a key work in Munro’s oeuvre.

MacKendrick’s *Some Other Reality: Alice Munro’s Something I’ve Been Meaning To Tell You* is similarly strengthened by its focus. MacKendrick brings sustained attention to just the one book and offers close readings that display a solid knowledge of context and nuance. Nevertheless, MacKendrick’s work is animated by his understanding that Munro’s work is “in the tradition of Canadian realist fiction” yet also “challenge[s] what is implicit in [this] tradition” (15). He recognizes that Munro’s work is “often metafictional or self-reflexive, though without consciously straining after these contemporary manners in fiction, and without ever losing narrative’s first obligation to the primary elements of character and event” (15). MacKendrick suggests that “studies of individual stories, not subject to large schematic argument, continue to reveal Alice Munro’s truer achievements as a writer,” which is a sentiment with which Thacker concurs: “Munro’s material [. . .] best lends itself to close textual treatment on the same narrow scale she adopts herself” (MacKendrick *Some* 25, Thacker “What’s ‘Material?’” 205).

As far back as 1986, Tracy Ware made a similar observation -- “Munro criticism must now move from the identification of general trends to the close analysis of specific stories” (Rev. of *Probable Fictions* 341) -- and indeed, over the last ten to fifteen years,

there has been an explosion of individual articles, collections of essays, and special issues of journals devoted to Munro, many of which bring sustained critical attention to individual stories. Given the volume of criticism, an exhaustive survey is no longer possible, but some articles of note include those by Isla Duncan, Ware, Carrie Dawson, Caitlin Charman, and Robert McGill. In “‘It seems so much the truth it is the truth’: Persuasive Testimony in Alice Munro’s ‘A Wilderness Station,’” Duncan reads “A Wilderness Station” as an epistolary story of narrative polyphony, and she offers a compelling argument that, contra Carrington, “Munro elevates the authority of her central character’s testimony over other characters’ accounts” (100). This article and her work on disparity and deception in “Lichen” and social class in “Sunday Afternoon” and “Hired Girl” constitute a substantial portion of her book, *Alice Munro’s Narrative Art*. Ware’s “Tricks with ‘a Sad Ring’: The Endings of Alice Munro’s ‘The Ottawa Valley’” and “‘And They May Get It Wrong, After All’: Reading Alice Munro’s ‘Meneseung’” also bring close attention to important stories. The former explores “The Ottawa Valley” as an expression of Munro’s 1970s pessimism regarding the act of writing and the mother-daughter relationship and describes it as a breakthrough story; the latter charts a course through the voluminous scholarship on “Meneseung” to conclude that in the end, the ambivalence of the story undermines any reading that finds a straightforward affirmation of feminist resistance.

Dawson, Charman, and McGill also offer fine readings of individual stories. Dawson’s “Skinned: Taxidermy and Pedophilia in Alice Munro’s ‘Vandals’” examines the way in which taxidermy in “Vandals” appears to represent self-evident, natural reality although it is revealed to be predicated on a violent process of production; taxidermy,

then, mirrors ways of knowing and not knowing, whether about pedophilia or the division between nature and culture, and the story as a whole demonstrates the necessity of analyzing what is thought to be natural. Charman's "There's Got to Be Some Wrenching and Slashing: Horror and Retrospection in Alice Munro's 'Fits'" examines how "Fits" uses elements of the Gothic tradition, conventions drawn from horror films and postmodern detective fiction, and the uncertain retrospection of its focalizer to create horrific affect and an enduring sense of mystery. McGill's "'Daringly Out in the Public Eye': Alice Munro and the Ethics of Writing Back" brings sustained critical attention to a key story in Munro's oeuvre, "Material," and will be discussed at length in chapter four.

Valuable articles that speak to larger issues and to Munro's work as a whole continue to be published. McGill, over the past decade, has made a substantial contribution to Munro scholarship. In "Somewhere I've Been Meaning to Tell You: Alice Munro's Fiction of Distance," McGill adapts Hutcheon's term -- historiographic metafiction -- to Munro's depiction of space, and he coins the term "geographic metafiction" to describe the importance of space in her fiction and the self-reflexive manner in which it is presented. McGill's "No Nation But Adaptation: 'The Bear Came Over the Mountain, *Away From Her*, and What It Means to Be Faithful" broadens a discussion of fidelity in Munro's story to a consideration of the meaning and value of faithfulness in adaptations across media, and his "Biographical Desire and the Archives of Living Authors" draws on JoAnn McCaig's *Reading In: Alice Munro's Archives* to read archival research as a process of fulfilling both interpersonal and academic desire. Morgenstern's theoretically-driven reading of Munro's ethics also falls into this category and will be discussed at length in the next chapter, and Adrian Hunter's "Story into

history: Alice Munro's minor literature" similarly draws on theorists in an analysis of the form and genre of Munro's work. Hunter draws on Hélène Cixous, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari but situates his analysis in a consideration of the short story as a genre to move beyond theoretically-informed interpretations. Hunter has an admirable awareness of existing feminist Munro criticism, and his focus on the short story genre is compelling; he demonstrates that Munro's investment in the short story is a crucial part of her "inscription of female alterity" as well as her post-coloniality and ultimately constitutes a rejection of the authority of traditional phallogentric narrative models (219, 220).

This time period in Munro criticism has also seen an increase in collections of essays and special issues of journals dedicated to Munro. *The Rest of the Story: Critical Essays On Alice Munro* from 1999 -- the first such collection since the early 1980s -- includes a number of influential essays. They follow Thacker's assertion in the introduction that "individual articles on individual stories or connected groups of them" provide a better fit for Munro's work than any overarching rationale (6). *The Rest of the Story*, Thacker writes, "offers essays that explore little-examined aspects of Munro's art" (6). They draw on the archival materials at the University of Calgary (JoAnn McCaig, Carol Beran); the stories of *Open Secrets*, which had then "not yet received much attention" in the academy (Carrington, Nathalie Foy, Martin, Warren U. Ober, and Robert Lecker); Munro's use of the blazon tradition (Marianne Micros) and the Scottish oral tradition (Redekop), as well as a reading of *Friend of My Youth* that focuses on Munro's return to the mother-daughter relationship though with greater complexity and "a newly focused interest in the construction of collaborative, shared narratives" (6, 68).

Subsequent collections demonstrate the increasingly international reach of Munro's reputation. A special double issue of *Open Letter* dedicated to Munro was published from a Munro conference at the University of Orléans that drew delegates from seven countries (15). The theme of the conference and the special issue -- Writing Secrets -- brings attention to Munro's writing "on the theme of the secret": her "pitting paradox against oxymoron [. . .] to strike the chord of silence, reticence, and mystery" (17). Jean-Jacques Lecercle's use of Deleuzian concepts of meaning and sense, Coral Ann Howell's exploration of the "limit of realism" and the "limits of knowledge" as operating against masculinist discourses yet "within the order of language and the conventions of realism," and Marta Dvorak's focus on Munro's longstanding distance from the realist mode each explores the way Munro's work pushes at the limits of language and fiction (42).¹⁰ *Reading Alice Munro in Italy* similarly grew out of an international conference in 2007. The majority of the essays continue the trend of bringing close textual attention to individual stories: "The Love of a Good Woman" (Caterina Riccardi), "My Mother's Dream" (Oriana Palusci), "Chance" (Gianfranca Balestra), "Soon" (Sabrina Francesconi), "Beyond the Pale" (Alessandra Contenti), and "Child's Play" (Laura Ferri). The book also includes an interview conducted by David Staines, a discussion by Jon Refern on teaching Munro's work, and a bibliography of Italian scholarship. Thacker also contributes an article in which he reflects on the reception of his biography of Munro.

¹⁰ Other articles in this double issue focus on class (Frank Davey), childhood (Miroslawa Buchholtz), or female characters as losers or lost (David Arnason). Still other articles return, with varying degrees of awareness of existing scholarship on the subject, to established areas of inquiry, such as the Gothic (Katarzyna Wiżckowska), the prevalence of literary allusions (Caterina Riccardi), the centrality of the mother figure (Laura Ferri), the importance of narrative frames (Stephen Scobie), the power of naming (Mary Condé), the complex use of time (Donna Bennett and Russell Brown), the presence of self-reflexive and metafictional elements as a reflection of a female artistic vision (Michéle Lacombe), the significance of the spaces between the stories (Cristina Sanchez), and the importance of memory, here in regards to the keeping of secrets (Sabrina Francesconi). Georgiana Colvile's focus on the importance of the olfactory in Munro's work, however, has little precedent in Munro criticism.

Most recent is a special issue of the *Journal of the Short Story in English*. This journal includes contributions from Canada, France, Germany, and Italy. Importantly for this dissertation, Héliane Ventura's reading of "The Bear Came Over The Mountain" attributes to literary language in the story a creative, even life-giving power. Ventura analyzes Munro's use of "a Nonsense charade" and a "parodic re-writing of mythology" to demonstrate the "power of poetic language"; she argues that through the use of language, "senile dementia is momentarily deferred and, if not defeated, at least challenged with 'the spark of life'" as the story offers a "reconfiguration of love at twilight" (174). Ventura also observes how Grant's actions in the story demonstrate the radical uncertainty of ethics in Munro. His selflessness "confirms the reversal of her faithfulness into faithlessness"; Ventura further notes that "the ambiguity of [Munro's] moral philosophy [. . .] has yet to be documented substantially" (179, 180).

Ian Rae's "Runaway Classicists: Anne Carson and Alice Munro's 'Juliet' Stories" stands out both for its ambition and insight, as well as for providing an important caveat regarding this dissertation. Rae's argument that "the character of Juliet" in *Runaway* "reflects Munro's interest in the poet and classicist Carson as much as it does Munro's biographical experience" is convincing (141-42). His reading demonstrates that Munro's literary engagement with Carson is a more fruitful interpretive lens through which to view these stories than Jonathan Franzen's biographical approach in his review of *Runaway* for *The New York Times*.¹¹ Though Rae moves his analysis away from biography, he still draws heavily on reality as an animating principle; much of his analysis consists of demonstrating that Carson herself provides the model for Juliet. Rae

¹¹"*Runaway*: Alice's Wonderland." Rev of *Runaway* by Alice Munro. *The New York Times*. 14 Nov. 2004. <www.nytimes.com/2004/11/14/books/review/14COVERFR.html>.

also, however, purports to offer a corrective to Thacker's biographical approach, which provides an important foundation for this dissertation. Rae's interest in establishing the primacy of "investigating the formal dynamics of [Munro's] imaginative craft" need not operate at the expense of knowledge that can be gained from biographical criticism (154). As Thacker argues in his 2005 biography, Munro's return to Huron County had a profound effect on the development of her craft, and Thacker's work in establishing the importance of this return cannot be held accountable for "encouraging the autobiographical fallacy" that Rae attributes to Franzen (142). Furthermore, Rae's assertion that "critics typically slot Munro's stories at the realist end of the narrative spectrum" takes little account of the large amount of scholarship that recognizes Munro's work is not based on simple mimesis (144). Rae's desire to "complicate biographical readings" like Franzen's constitutes a solid contribution to Munro scholarship, but the extent to which such readings dominate Munro criticism is never established (141).

While articles and collections of essays continue to flourish, the production of book-length studies has not kept pace. Over the last fourteen years, books on Munro continue to be published but not at the same rate. Coral Ann Howells' *Alice Munro* provides a fine, in-depth introduction. Her first chapter, "Contexts and intertexts," and her last chapter, "Critical overview and conclusion," situate Munro's work in her personal, aesthetic, and critical contexts, and each of the body chapters reads a book in Munro's oeuvre with considerable insight. Howells notes how Munro's fiction "exposes the limits of realistic fiction by its challenge to domestic surfaces" and also constitutes a "women's counter-discourses, suggesting alternative maps for women's destinies beyond traditional patterns of male authority and gender stereotyping" (4). She also notes a shift

in the vocabulary used to describe Munro's work: "The 1980s fashion for paradox as the key to interpreting Munro's fiction seems to have been displaced in the 1990s by the concept of 'layering'" (142). Howells further observes, like Tausky, Heble and later McGill, a shift in Munro's later work "toward increasing indeterminacy and multiple meanings, always contained within a realistic and domestic framework" (146). McCaig's *Reading In: Alice Munro's Archives* could have drawn on Munro's private correspondence to shed light on Munro's rise to international prominence; however, it was rather infamously hamstrung by Munro's refusal to allow McCaig to quote from her unpublished writing. As such, McCaig's book provides only a general, if theoretically driven, account of Munro's success.

Ailsa Cox's *Alice Munro*, like Howells's study, provides another strong introduction to Munro's fiction. Cox notes the elusive nature of reality in Munro's stories: "truth is never fully told. One story generates another; and this sense of incompleteness suggests a contingent, ongoing reality which ultimately escapes definition" (2). She also notes the important contexts for Munro's work -- postcolonial, feminist, realist, Southern Gothic, and modernist -- and provides appropriate biographical background. *The Fiction of Alice Munro: An Appreciation* by Brad Hooper is another introductory text but not a book of criticism in the scholarly sense. Hooper argues that Munro has effectively expanded the genre of the short story over her career, and he focuses on the importance of character and the past; however, his reading of her oeuvre as a whole makes scant reference to existing criticism and as such reads more like a personal response or extended review than a work of analytical scholarship.

Other recent monographs on Munro include Thacker's *Alice Munro: Writing Her Lives* and Isla Duncan's *Alice Munro's Narrative Art*. Though not a book of literary criticism, Thacker's biography is nevertheless a landmark. Displacing the earlier biography by Catherine Sheldrick Ross, this book builds on Thacker's longstanding scholarship on the importance of biography and place in Munro's work¹² to provide a wealth of biographical and other contextual information that makes it possible to situate each Munro story in the circumstances of its composition, publication, and reception in the press. Duncan's book displays a depth of understanding of existing scholarship and is filled with excellent close readings and detailed technical, textual analysis. Her narratological approach does indeed provide, as she claims, "a precise metalanguage for the description" of Munro's work (6), though her work is at its best when she makes room for "her own affective responses," as she does in her reading of "A Wilderness Station." Duncan also displays a strong understanding of the fundamental aspects of Munro's writing and the shape of Munro's career: she writes in her chapter on *Open Secrets* that Munro's fiction "is characterized by qualities that generate and deepen mystery -- indeterminacy, indirection, multiple layering, opaqueness, and the withdrawal of closure" (74). Nevertheless, Duncan's book is a slim volume that covers Munro's writing from the beginning of her career up to the publication of *Too Much Happiness*, and as such, it forgoes a certain degree of depth of engagement.

Writing a book of criticism on Munro indeed requires striking a difficult balance between depth and breadth; Thacker has written that given "the shape and the scope of Munro's art [. . .] the critical monograph is not really up to Munro at all" (6). A focus on

¹² See, for example, "Connection: Alice Munro and Ontario," "(Auto)Biographical Home Places in Carr, Laurence, and Munro," and "Mapping Munro: Reading the "Clues.""

individual stories is indeed best suited to analyzing her complex narrative strategies, even if such a narrow focus raises the issue of how to connect these readings into a cohesive whole. Though the context of publication for the stories under examination is by no means inconsequential, this dissertation will bring a thematic and technical, not chronological or period-based, approach to a small group of stories that explore the possibility of literature and intellectual creation as an expression of love: a relationship to the Other that provides connection and ends in fecundity yet leaves room for difference.

*

As this survey of forty years of Munro criticism indicates -- whether discussed as a technical matter of paradox, layering, or a rejection of aesthetic cohesion; as a result of postmodernity, postcoloniality, or gender; as an extension of realism or a repudiation of it -- Munro's combination of mimesis and metafiction and her commitment to preserving a sense of alterity have long animated scholarship into her work. Throughout her career, Munro's writing has often expressed a recognition that fiction, language itself, and even consciousness, as powerful as they are, are not fully adequate to representing and understanding both the world at large and the people within it in their plenitude. This combination of mimesis and metafiction must to some extent be a result of Munro's gendered position in a postcolonial and postmodern Canada. It must also, in a separate but related sense, be a manifestation of a desire for aesthetic innovation in the short story form. In a warning against reading Munro's work as simple biography, Cox reminds us that "Academic criticism has discarded the notion that a text is the *unmediated* product of a uniquely constituted self" (21, emphasis mine), and while this assertion is no doubt true, Munro's particular aesthetic is nevertheless, whatever else it might be, the result of a

personal and ethical impulse tied to the biographical and cultural circumstances that shaped her writing. Chapter two will explore the ways in which Munro's biography, cultural, and essentially reality-directed fiction have shaped her understanding of literature as part of the self-Other dynamic.

Chapter Two

Reality, Ethics, and Love

Munro's writing is fundamentally tied to reality, at least in her own estimation, and this attempt to reproduce reality lies at the core of her ethics as a writer. Munro has written that serious writers are those who develop a feeling of reality, even if this feeling is subjective and stops short of being complete: "all serious writers make a continual, and painful, and developing effort, to get as close as they can to what they see as reality -- the shifting complex reality of human experience. A serious writer is always doing that, not attempting to please people, or flatter them, *or* offend them" (qtd. in Thacker *Writing* 334). The reality that Munro seeks to approach in her writing has by and large been deeply personal and firmly rooted in her own experience, and this fact is especially true of her earlier work.

Yet Munro is keenly aware of the impossibility of fully capturing the real in fiction, and, as McGill writes, this awareness gives her artistic vision its ethical charge. In his discussion of *Who Do You Think You Are?*, McGill observes that "For Rose, as for many of Munro's narrators, the challenge is to record what is real, but to do so with complete verisimilitude is impossible, so that every story seems to be a failure, and potentially an unethical one" ("Daringly" 886). McGill convincingly broadens this observation to include the narrator of "Meneseteung," the narrator of "Home," and eventually, Munro herself: "For Munro, all writing is potentially a manner of betrayal, something indiscreet" (886). McGill argues that this potential for failure is made possible by the tie to reality:

Evidently for Munro there is a sense in which fiction, as much as non-fiction, is tied to the 'real' [. . .] Munro's anxiety about the real in her fiction suggests that, for her, fiction and non-fiction are vitally connected to one another and that she holds fiction to the same standards as non-fiction in terms of verisimilitude, if not in terms of referentiality. Consequently, in Munro's fiction the real is always calling the fictional to account (886).¹³

If Munro saw her writing as solely the product of her own imaginative, literary powers, no ethical risks would exist.

The potential for betrayal and indiscretion that is inherent in the imaginative engagement with the real was never more intense than during Munro's return to Huron County in the early 1970s. As Tausky first demonstrated and Thacker later elaborated upon, Munro's skepticism of the powers of fiction finds its clearest expression in her stories from this period. Huron County, Southern Ontario, where Munro was born in 1931, has throughout her career played a major role in her fiction. In 1951, Munro married Jim Munro and moved to British Columbia, but by the early 1970s, the marriage was disintegrating, and Munro was planning her return home. Thacker writes that Munro spent long periods of time in 1971 and 1972 in Southwestern Ontario, and in 1973, she relocated there permanently (*Writing* 242). Upon her return, Thacker argues, Munro found that Huron County was now "a place she could no longer imagine from far away in distance and time. It was real and immediate" (*Writing* 266). Whereas once the people

¹³Thacker demonstrates at least one instance in which Munro reversed her "usual method" of writing from fact to fiction: "Working for a Living" began as "a fictional story about a protagonist very like [Munro], a person who left university without completing her degree" (*Writing* 18). After the story was declined by the *New Yorker*, Munro revised it into a memoir (18). This anecdote underscores the close relationship for Munro between imaginative creation and fidelity to a feeling of reality: "By reversing Munro's usual method -- fiction becoming memoir rather than facts becoming fiction -- 'Working for a Living' shows how close the two modes in Alice Munro's writing really are -- the cherished fact is never far distant" (18).

and places of Huron County had simply been available to her memory and imagination for use in her stories, now she was every day confronted by their reality.

The stories written in the immediate aftermath of this imaginative readjustment are her most metafictional and most transparently concerned with the ethics of her writing. During this period, as Thacker puts it, Munro was “acutely concerned with the ethical position of the writer” and “produced some of her most starkly introspective pieces regarding her craft: ‘Material,’ ‘Winter Wind,’ ‘The Ottawa Valley,’ and, though she kept it out of *Something*, ‘Home’” (*Writing* 253). Together, he says, these stories “show Munro analyzing both the morality and the efficacy of what she was doing as a writer of fiction” (*Writing* 266). At the time, the results of this analysis were not comforting for Munro. Thacker calls this period “an artistic crisis” for Munro and notes that “the endings of ‘Home’ and ‘The Ottawa Valley’ sound like farewells to fiction because that might well have been what they were intended to be” (*Writing* 266). Thacker recounts how in 1974 Munro told Jack Hodgins that “she did not think she would write any more” and that although Munro has continued to feel this way and make this claim from time to time, “the feeling was especially strong during the time after her return to Ontario” (*Writing* 265). Never before or since in Munro’s long career has her fiction so explicitly displayed a sense of frustration with its own limitations.

This confrontation with the reality of Huron County was not only a matter of facing what had previously been available to her only in memory and imagination; it was also a confrontation with a culture and a people for whom the very notion of writing was suspect.¹⁴ In her essay “Remember Roger Mortimer,” Munro paints a picture of her

¹⁴ For an extension of my discussion of Munro’s cultural background, see “Doing Her Duty and Writing Her Life: Alice Munro’s Cultural and Historical Context.”

childhood as one in which reading and literary interests were more tolerated than celebrated: “reading in our family was a private activity and there was nothing particularly commendable about it. It was a pesky sort of infirmity, like hay fever, to which we might be expected to succumb: anyone who managed to stay clear of it would have been the one to be congratulated. But once the addiction was established, nobody thought of interfering with it” (34). The act of writing in much of Munro’s work, especially prior to the 1980s, appears of dubious value. Ildikó de Papp Carrington suggests that for Munro’s characters, “manipulating and controlling language – the imaginative act of writing itself – somehow becomes a form of shame or humiliation” (*Controlling* 15), and she notes an interview in which Munro says “although writing was ‘the only thing’ that she ‘ever wanted to do,’ she felt ‘embarrassment’ about ‘doing something’ that she could neither ‘explain’ nor ‘justify’ to her hard-working parents (16). This sentiment appears perhaps most clearly in the 1974 version of “Home.” The story’s narrator questions both her ability and her right to tell the story of her father as he approaches death, and she ascribes these doubts to “the hard voice of my upbringing telling me it is always better to dig potatoes, and feed sheep” (152).

Thacker notes that in general the Scots-Irish Protestants of Huron County had “little appreciation for fiction” (*Writing* 377). He also points out that Munro’s writing has at times brought her into conflict with her community. Local residents occasionally took offence at elements of the stories that they felt resembled their own lives: Thacker writes that one man “drunkenly threatened” Munro’s father, Robert Laidlaw, by “walking around [Laidlaw’s] house, firing a shotgun into the air” in response to Munro’s 1956 story “The Time of Death,” in which a toddler is accidentally scalded to death, because

he felt the incident was drawn from his family history (*Writing* 159). As late as the late 1970s, Munro found herself in conflict with elements of her community over the banning of books. Thacker recounts how “In 1978 [Munro] spoke out against attempts to ban three books from the grade thirteen English curriculum in Huron County high schools” (*Writing* 332). He describes her position in this debate as “especially precarious since she was living among the very people who were bent on banning the three books,” and he quotes William French’s description of Munro as one who “had the uncomfortable feeling of looking out at the somewhat hostile faces she usually encounters in more genial circumstances in the grocery store and on Clinton’s neighbourly streets” (*Writing* 333, 335). Despite such conflicts, feelings for Munro softened considerably in the intervening decades to the point even of pride at being the birthplace of such an internationally renowned writer. Wingham is now home to the Alice Munro Literary Garden, and its North Huron Museum offers a *Self-Guided Tour of Points of Interest in the Town of Wingham Relating to Alice Munro* (Foran).

In fact, Munro’s cultural background is not universally hostile to writing, and her heritage provides her with more than just a hard voice. If the enjoyment of reading was not, as Munro writes in “Remember Roger Mortimer,” seen as a particularly commendable activity, neither was it, like hay fever, altogether uncommon. Munro writes that as a voracious reader in her youth, her mother, “with a fatalistic gesture,” called her “Another Emma McClure!” in front of some visiting aunts (34). Emma McClure was a relative “who lived somewhere deep in the country, where she had been reading day and night for thirty- five years, with no time to get married, learn the names of her nephews and nieces, or comb her hair when she came in to town” (34). Though Emma must surely

be somewhat of a cautionary tale, Munro writes that “They all looked at me pessimistically, but nobody took my book away” (34). There was then, it seems, a place, if not a place of honour, for cultivating a life of the mind, as well as examples of such rural intellectual types around her. Thacker observes that Munro has said her father, Robert Laidlaw, “understood the artist in her” and was “Always a reader, always a thoughtful man,” who in the last years of his life “became a writer himself,” and published a novel, *The McGregors*, as well as “five memoirs, and a short story” (*Writing* 315).

Though the value of fiction may have been a bit suspect in her community, and perhaps to some extent to her family and even herself, the value of reading was nevertheless recognized. Munro has noted the place in Protestant culture afforded to the power of reading. In an interview on CBC radio with Shelagh Rogers, Munro points out that John Knox’s push for an educated peasantry led to the development of an intelligent community of critical readers with a suspicion of symbols but a belief in the power and value of reading (*Sounds*). Munro’s willingness to commit herself to a literary life was only partially a rejection of past and community. In “Material,” the unnamed narrator claims to “understand and value” the act of first-rate fiction on which the story centres, but she also notes parenthetically that “not everybody, of course, does understand and value this act” (43). Even in her early years, then, Munro was exposed both to people who did and people who did not value literature.

Perhaps in the aftermath of her period of artistic crisis in the early 1970s, Munro simply decided that she would remain the ultimate judge of the ethics of her fiction and that the reactions of other people, especially those who do not value literature as she

does, are not decisive. If, as McGill's analysis and Munro's own commentary suggests, Munro feels responsible for responding to the *reality* of the individual, then she is not accountable to any specific individual's intellectual response but rather to that individual as the Other that, like reality itself, exceeds in its plenitude any conscious understanding or representation. An individual's reaction, however, is not entirely irrelevant. Munro, according to Thacker, withheld publication of "Home" from *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* because of "its depiction of her father's situation and [the] precise, unflattering detail it contains about her stepmother" (*Writing* 244). "Home" initially appeared in an anthology because "Munro thought there was little chance either [her father or stepmother] would see it there" (*Writing* 244). Even though she made an attempt to spare her father and stepmother's feelings, she did publish the work, which underscores that even if she does not dismiss the reaction of her material outright, she nevertheless keeps her own counsel as to what is acceptable.¹⁵

Though this period was indeed difficult for Munro, ultimately it proved to be generative. Her return and imaginative readjustment to Huron County led to what Thacker describes as "a qualitative difference, a new-found complexity" in the stories she went on to write (*Writing* 328). Ware similarly notes that in her work from this era, "Munro learned to foreground her guilt" and "reached a new level of self-reflexivity" ("Tricks" 136). After this period, as Ware notes, "her work is less overtly metafictional" (136). One might also add that it is also less frequently and directly tied to her personal experiences. McGill notes a shift, if not a wholesale change, in Munro's fiction after those stories. He writes that Munro's "later work, in particular, gestures towards what is

¹⁵Incidentally, when "Home" appeared in *The View from Castle Rock* from 2006, long after her father and stepmother had passed away, it was stripped of much of its metafictional commentary, which is in keeping with Munro's general movement away from explicit metafiction and authorial hand-wringing.

unknown or only dreamed,” even if “her stories have always opened up a seam in the everyday to explore the ‘deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum’ that are people’s lives” (886-87). This shift, he posits, is related to Munro’s complex notion of reality. Given the connection for Munro between fiction and non-fiction, McGill asserts that “Munro’s fiction also calls non-fiction to account. If Munro’s implication throughout her career is that good fiction manages to show its readers ‘what is real,’ her notion of reality is a complex one” (“Daringly” 886). He points to a 1994 interview with Peter Gzowski to argue that “Munro suggests that because fiction is not bound by juridical standards of verification, it can explore more fully than non-fiction the presence of fantasy in the real” (887). For Munro, what is real and what is imagined are not fully discreet categories.

Whatever the reason for this shift in her writing, sometime after her return to Huron County, Munro did indeed seem to find a measure of peace with her artistic practice in a way that suggests she ultimately decided on the value of her fiction. Munro went from telling J.R. Struthers in a 1983 interview that she sometimes felt “just *tormented* by the inadequacy and impossibility” of writing to telling Peter Gzowski in 2001 that she was “very wary of stories where the writer says, ‘Oh, I feel so guilty, here I am, I’m using up these people.’ So I didn’t want to write that kind of story because the answer to that is, ‘Well, if you feel so guilty, quit doing it’” (MacKendrick, ed. *Probable* 28, Gzowski F5). Of course, the context for the quotation -- a discussion of “Family Furnishings,” which deals explicitly with the ethics of writing and is part of the 2001 collection *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* -- demonstrates that even if her stories from the 1980s onward became generally less metafictional and less

explicitly concerned with the ethics of writing, Munro's concern with ethics never disappeared.

Naomi Morgenstern demonstrates how questions of ethics continued to shape Munro's fiction. She offers a theoretically-informed close reading of Munro's dramatization of the ethical moment and provides a new philosophical vocabulary with which to consider this important aspect of Munro's work. Morgenstern draws on the work of Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Lacan, Maurice Blanchot, and Derrick Attridge in her close readings of "Meneseung," "Post and Beam," and "My Mother's Dream." She situates Munro's work in the context of Derek Attridge's definitions of ethics and morality: "Munro's stories represent the risks of the ethical (the possibility that the call from the other has been misidentified; the possibility that the other's otherness has been compromised in the work of responding; the risk that the subject of an ethical intervention will never recover herself) even as they insist on giving us nothing but 'specific obligations' and 'concrete situations' [the domain of morality, by Attridge's formulation]" (69).

Morgenstern illustrates how this ethical moment, in the world and in Munro's work, can be experienced as a potentially productive moment of crisis. She further brings into focus how gender is a constitutive factor both in Munro's writing and in discourses of ethics. Morgenstern argues convincingly that the ethical relationship between self and other is gendered: as she observes, "In Munro's stories, sexual difference is never left behind, but neither is it simply mapped onto the opposition between self and other" (72-73). At the heart of Morgenstern's analysis is this question she sees inscribed in Munro's

work: “How can one reach out to the other without doing violence to their otherness in the very attempt to fold them into the self’s understanding?” (71).

This question is not solely a literary problem -- reaching out to and understanding the Other is of course a facet of the broader human experience -- but it has particular significance for Munro as a writer. Any given Munro story, regardless of the extent to which it draws on biography, is the product of an attempt to get close to -- not fully express or represent perfectly -- some feeling of reality, constructed via literary form, that falls short of absolute truth or perfect representation. Munro’s writing, then, engages in reducing alterity to the writing, understanding consciousness and then expressing this sense of alterity, transformed, in literature. Though Munro claims that she and all serious writers are fundamentally reality-oriented, even if other serious writers are in fact driven primarily by form or imagination, they nevertheless are involved to some extent in a similar process of imaginative engagement with the real world, unless their work is drawn entirely from the imagination, if such a thing is possible. The ethical dilemma of a writer, then, is simply one facet of the broader ethical dilemma of how to engage with the world without violence.

Alterity encompasses all that is other to the self and therefore includes both space and the human Other. As McGill has demonstrated in his work on what he terms Munro’s “geographic metafiction,” Munro is highly aware that space, too, exceeds her ability to express and represent it fully in all its plenitude (“Somewhere” 10). The failure to understand and represent the human Other, however, carries a special ethical charge. Even a cursory examination of the titles which Thacker identifies as most explicitly concerned with ethics indicates the primacy of the ethical relationship to people, often

members of her family. All four stories are built around human relationships. “Winter Wind,” “Home,” and “The Ottawa Valley” are each “patently autobiographical,” as Thacker asserts, “drawing on verifiable family relations” (266). Even “Material,” which as Thacker relates, “The narrator and her husband [. . .] look very much like Alice and Jim starting out in Vancouver,” is a consideration of the ethical duty of a writer to a person: Dotty, a downstairs neighbour (*Writing* 259). While Munro’s imaginative relationship to space and her love for the geography of Huron County are certainly important factors, then, space has never engendered the kind of ethical anxiety that people, and especially family members, have. As Redekop writes, “At the deepest level of Munro’s writing is her constant awareness that a writer, in the act of writing, is *using* people” (131).

The encounter with the human Other as the ultimate source of ethics explains, in part, why Morgenstern’s theoretical paradigm provides a fruitful lens through which to consider Munro’s ethics. Morgenstern observes that the source of ethics in Munro’s work is the “ethical insight” that “the other exists beyond the self” (71). As Tina Chanter explains, for Levinas, “the relation between the I and the elemental world is accomplished through enjoyment” (186). Levinas writes that the “essence of enjoyment” is “the transmutation of the other into the same”; whether this other, this alterity, is “‘good soup,’ air, light, spectacles, work, ideas, sleep, etc. . . .” the self recognizes “an energy that is other, recognized as other” that “becomes, in enjoyment, my own energy, my strength, me” (*TI* 110-11). The Other, by contrast, is for Levinas always human, and is the being whose presence calls “into question my joyous possession of the world,” the being who is “beyond the capacity of the I” and at the root of the opening of the ethical

relation. The Other “puts the spontaneous freedom within us into question” as it “commands and judges it and brings it to its truth” (*TI* 76, 51). This face-to-face relation, as Chanter writes, establishes an “ethical origin” for Levinas’s metaphysics (189).

For Levinas, this insight that opens an ethical relationship occurs in the presence of the face of the Other. Levinas’s concept of the face refers to “The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea in me*” (*TI* 50). The Other, in this way “*expresses itself*” and exceeds our conscious understanding (*TI* 51). The Other, then, is radically exterior, and in Munro’s work, the radical exteriority of the Other leads her characters to experience what Morgenstern calls “an ethical crisis” in which they encounter demands that cannot be comfortably located or coherently translated” (72). The source of ethics lies in this face-to-face encounter with the Other that is radically exterior, and therefore ethical responsibility is at the root unlimited: it cannot be discharged in either the will of God or the structure of reason. And yet, Morgenstern continues, Munro’s fiction simultaneously recognizes that the “ethical insight is impossible to maintain because this simple truth -- that the other is radically exterior -- is simultaneously false” (71). Morgenstern asks “Would the subject be capable of ethical response if he or she were not already the subject of a constitutive alterity?”, and she turns to her reading of Levinas and Attridge to answer in the negative (71).

The ethical insight Morgenstern identifies applies not only to Munro’s characters, but also to her practice as a writer. Writing for Munro is an act of reaching out to the world around her and folding its alterity into her understanding consciousness so she can imaginatively render it into fiction. This act of writing takes on a particular ethical charge when a human Other constitutes her material. Because the act of writing for Munro bears

a significant if complicated relationship to the real, the difference between an ethical response to the Other in fiction is not wholly different from an ethical response to the Other in a face-to-face encounter: the two are at least structurally similar. As Morgenstern notes, Munro tends to blur the line between literature and life: her stories “suggest that we cannot but live in the stories we tell ourselves” and “if confusing life with literary narrative is a mistake, it is also an inevitable one (Munro’s stories insist on this again and again)” (71).

Morgenstern, however, makes little attempt to observe a distinction between life and literary narrative. Her readings neglect the extent to which Munro’s ethical insight is not only dramatized by the characters but inscribed in the aesthetics of each story. This aporia is particularly a problem in her analysis of “Meneseteung.” Morgenstern reads the story as if it were a simple representation told in third person, even though as Dermot McCarthy writes, “We cannot discuss Almeda Roth the way we discuss other fictional characters. She does not have the fictive existence of characters whose stories are told in the third person” (*Studies in Canadian Literature*). “Meneseteung” contains a narrator who frames the action; draws on the languages of poetry, journalism, and photography as modes of narration; and has two published versions with distinct endings. The original version in the *New Yorker* ends on a note that emphasizes the possibility of human connection through literature. The narrator describes historical research as an act performed “in the hope of seeing this trickle in time, making a connection, rescuing one thing from the rubbish” (“Meneseteung” 1988, 38). The story as it appeared in *Friend of My Youth*, however, includes these additional lines that undercut this possibility: “And they may get it wrong, after all. I may have got it wrong. I don’t know if she ever took

laudanum. Many ladies did. I don't know if she ever made grape jelly" ("Meneseteung" 1990, 73). In all, "Meneseteung" is a complex textual object that contains a strong metafictional sensibility and a significant degree of ambiguity. Though Morgenstern's exegesis of Munro's ethical insight remains compelling, her focus on discourses of theory operates at the expense of an analysis of how Munro's ethics inform her aesthetics.

While the theoretical background Morgenstern brings to bear provides a productive vocabulary with which to consider Munro's ethics, the depth of Morgenstern's engagement with theoretical discourses of ethics comes at the expense of a thorough grounding in Munro scholarship. Morgenstern's engagement with existing Munro criticism is largely confined to an end note (90). Surprisingly, the note makes no mention of Blodgett, whose theoretically-informed reading of Munro offers some similar assertions about the relationship between self and Other. Blodgett also troubles any absolute distinction between self and Other in Munro's work. In his reading of "Marrakesh," for example, he raises the question "if the self is realized through the other, is it possible to speak of the subject as something all by itself? For Munro this is problematic" (131). Narration, Blodgett argues, provides a way for the self "to draw the other somehow into its own signifying space" (130). The act of writing for Munro, according to Blodgett, contains the possibility of reducing the Other to the same of the understanding consciousness in a manner that changes and even constitutes the self.

Morgenstern does note that Redekop's study of Munro ends "with an insistent repetition of the word 'responsibility,'" and Morgenstern uses this insistence as a point of departure for her own consideration of gender and ethics in Munro (73). Redekop's analysis, however, also speaks to the centrality in Munro's fiction of the ethical dilemma

of the writer as well as Munro's avoidance of simple judgments. Redekop writes not only of Munro's awareness that writing is "*using* people" but also of her narrators confronting "the need to avoid prostituting their subjects" (131). Munro's work, Redekop continues, "positions the act of prostitution," literary or otherwise, "in such a way as to diffuse but not defuse the moral issues that we normally like to package into the figure of the whore" (131). Munro's writing, according to Redekop, notes and responds to the ethical dilemma of the writer but backs away from any easy judgment.

Redekop's central figure of the mock mother or mothering clown also has an ethical dimension. The mock mother, she writes, "is constructed as a result of the impossibility of picturing the 'real' mother" (4). The impossible separation between mother and daughter is the paradigmatic separation between self and Other: as Redekop writes, "The writing daughter's conscious failure to understand or represent the mother remains [. . .] at the heart of Munro's aesthetic" (209). The problem of representing, understanding, and relating to the mother creates an ethical pressure that cannot easily be resolved, either in fiction or in life. Ethical responsibility between mothers and daughters is unlimited, and negotiating this responsibility requires a precarious balance between the needs of the self and the demands of the Other. This difficult balance is apparent in the frequency with which daughters in Munro's work often in some way abandon or fail their mothers, as is the case for the protagonists in "The Peace of Utrecht," "The Ottawa Valley," "Winter Wind," and "Friend of My Youth," and later the daughters Nichola in "The Moons of Jupiter" and Penelope in the Juliet trilogy. It is also true for mothers like the one in "The Ottawa Valley," who feels compelled to give her daughter her own safety pin and thereby undoes her triumphant return to her former home by causing her slip to

show, and for the mother in “Miles City, Montana,” whose momentary lapse in parental attention leads to a near-drowning of her child (“Ottawa Valley” 241, “Miles City, Montana” 99). Redekop, then, situates the radical separation between self and Other in the mother-daughter relationship and notes the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of this separation.

Similarly, Morgenstern’s close readings make little use of existing analysis of Munro’s fiction, which, again, is a particular problem for “Meneseteung.” Generative as Morgenstern’s reading is, she offers little engagement with the existing critical discourse around one of Munro’s most commented-upon stories. Morgenstern does make brief reference to Pam Houston’s seminal article, but she does not engage with important readings by Carrington, Dermot McCarthy, or Deborah Heller. These articles track the ambiguity running throughout “Meneseteung” and stake out clear positions as to whether its narrator’s rejection of bourgeois materiality, coupled with her failure to write a great poem, constitutes a revolutionary breakthrough or a psychological breakdown. Both Munro scholarship and Mogenstern’s analysis would have been enriched had she situated her own ethical reading within existing critical discourse of the story and Munro’s career as a whole.

More significant, perhaps, is that as seminal as her analysis of Munro’s ethics may be, Morgenstern’s article also verges on the reductive. Based on a reading of three stories, Morgenstern makes claims regarding Munro’s oeuvre as a whole: for example, “Munro’s stories represent the risks of the ethical [...] even as they insist on giving us nothing but ‘specific obligations’ and ‘concrete situations’” and “Munro’s characters experience ethical crisis as an encounter with demands that cannot be comfortably

located or coherently translated” (69, 72). Her reading suggests that Munro’s ethical insight acts as a master narrative running throughout her fiction and that Morgenstern’s theoretical approach, insightful as it may be, provides an interpretive key that unlocks the true meaning of the work. Such a sweeping approach threatens to reduce the variety and complexity of Munro’s career, which has stretched over decades and contains a rich variety of themes and literary influences.

This dissertation will take up Morgenstern’s central question -- “How can one reach out to the other without doing violence to their otherness in the very attempt to fold them into the self’s understanding?” (71) -- but explore it in a manner more attuned to existing Munro scholarship, both in terms of individual stories and in the larger body of Munro criticism. This dissertation will also build its analysis around moments in Munro’s fiction in which the attempt to reach out to the Other ends not in an attempt at an aesthetic representation of the Other’s radical alterity, but in an aesthetic gesture toward love, or eros. Audre Lorde reminds us that eros comes from the Greek for “the personification of love in all its aspects” (55). The erotic for Lorde functions “in several ways, and the first is in providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person” (56). This “sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference” (56).

The terms eros and love are used in this dissertation not solely in regards to representations of sexual love between characters, as in the case of Ian Rae’s analysis or Don Fisher’s dissertation “The Ordinary and the Epiphanic/Death and Eros: Religious

and Spiritual Questing in the Fiction of Alice Munro.” Love, like ethics, is not simply represented as a relationship between characters but manifests itself in the aesthetics of these stories and is tied to the act of writing itself. McGill, in his analysis of the desire for the author function that often accompanies archival research and his observations about the connection between sex and writing in “Material,” finds a connection between the erotic and the act of writing; however, his approach does not focus on the capacity of writing itself to be a form of love as an orientation to the Other who is the material for fiction. Love in this sense is a self-Other relationship that mitigates interpretive violence and makes possible creation.

“Love,” for Levinas, “aims at the Other,” the Beloved, who is “at once graspable and intact in her nudity” and abiding “in virginity” (*TI* 256, 258). Levinas writes that “the relationship “between lovers in voluptuousness” is one in which “The Other is me and separated from me” in a way that makes possible fecundity (*TI* 264-65). Eros, then, is a unique and ambiguous relationship in Levinas’s work. As Tina Chanter writes, it is “both like and unlike ethics, and hence it is both capable of being sated, and in this respect it is akin to animality or need, and at the same time insatiable, and in this respect it is similar to metaphysical desire, to ethics, to infinity” (214). The erotic relationship in Levinas, then, bears a resemblance to the act of writing for Munro: it consists both of a desire to reduce alterity to the same of the understanding consciousness in a manner that recalls pleasurable consumption, yet it also includes a recognition of an alterity that continues to escape the consciousness of the same.

For Levinas, as for Luce Irigaray, eros is expressed in the caress. In Levinas’s writing on eros, “The caress, like contact, is sensibility,” in that it is enjoyment, but it

“also transcends the sensible” and “consists in seizing upon nothing” (257). Though Irigaray’s response to Levinas in her “The Fecundity of the Caress” is more alive to sexual difference and open to the concept of mutual fecundation -- for the feminine as a lover and not just the Beloved -- it too posits the caress as “the most elementary gesture” of love (186). She writes of the caress that “this touch binds and unbinds two others in a flesh that is still and always untouched by mastery” and calls the act of love an indwelling: “Dwelling with the self, and with the other -- while letting the other go” (186). Love, then, makes possible a different relationship to the Other, one that involves contact without possession, one with room for both the recognition of difference and for pleasure, and one that ends in mutual fecundation rather than a recognition of radical alterity. Love in this sense might fall short of a purely ethical relation -- Chanter writes that for Levinas “love both transcends and does not transcend” (205). Chanter further notes that by *Otherwise Than Being*, eros has essentially disappeared from Levinas’s work and his consideration of ethics (207). Munro, however, is not, as Anthony Beavers describes Levinas’s project, seeking to answer “The question of the source of the moral ‘ought’” (1). Her literary and not philosophical vision includes the possibility of writing as an act like love.

The primary stories under consideration here hold open the possibility of writing as an act of love: an approach to the Other that constitutes a caress rather than a grasp, that combines a recognition of the radical alterity of the Other with a partial reduction of that alterity to the same of the understanding consciousness. This type of love is at least a degree removed from love as a face-to-face relation, and it stops short of the full transcendence of ethics; nevertheless, it approximates a subject-to-subject relationship

and makes possible mutual fecundation. “The Moons of Jupiter,” written after Munro’s artistic crisis of the early 1970s and during the period in which she found success with *The New Yorker*, provides a strong example of this type of literary love. Chapter three will contrast “The Moons of Jupiter” with “The Ottawa Valley” and track the double movement in “Moons” between the self, Janet the protagonist, and the Other, her dying father. This movement operates as a sort of caress that moves from absolute separation to a coming together in a climactic, fecund moment of shared creation before the story ends in separation, death, and catharsis. Chapter four examines a work from Munro’s explicitly ethical period of the early 1970s: “Material.” Though “Material” excoriates the pretensions of the literary community and insists on the disjuncture between the capacity to write love and to be a loving person in the realm of face-to-face encounters, it nevertheless gestures at the capacity of writing to be a genuine, if “special, unsparing, [and] unsentimental” type of love (44). Chapter five will draw on Redekop’s reading of “Miles City, Montana” to analyze “Deep-Holes” as a revision of the watcher-keeper dynamic Redekop elucidates: rather than figuring writing as a selfish desire at odds with social responsibility, as is the case in “Miles City,” “Deep-Holes” suggests the possibility of writing, or at least intellectual creation, as a collaborative mode of meaning-making linked to love and fecundity.

These readings involve a step back from the work of Levinas and Irigaray. For Levinas, the face of the Beloved -- always a feminine face -- is separate from art: “The Beautiful of art *inverts* the beauty of the feminine face” (263). Art “substitutes an image for the troubling depth of the future” and “presents a beautiful form reduced to itself in flight, deprived of its depth” (263). The Beloved of art is explicitly not the Beloved, even

if the two have enough similarity to provide a basis for contrast. Furthermore, Levinas explicitly contrasts the product of fecundity, the son, with literature: “The son is not only my work, like a poem or an object” (277). Levinas calls paternity “a relation with a stranger who while being Other [. . .] is me, a relation of the I with a self which is not yet me,” and only a child, not any work of art, can create this relationship (277). The relationship between writer and material or writer and text is only derivative of this relationship, even if Levinas perhaps underestimates the extent to which writing is a social practice and a poem or a story cannot be *wholly* attributed to a single subject.

For Irigaray, as for Munro, sexual difference is fundamentally inscribed within the self-other division: “The other who is forever unknowable is the one who differs from me sexually” (13). Irigaray’s project, however, is the effort to return the “feeling of surprise, astonishment, and wonder in the face of the unknowable” to this locus of “sexual difference” in an attempt to replace the “attraction, greed, possession, consummation, disgust, and so on” with a sense of “wonder which beholds what it sees always as if for the first time, never taking hold of the other as its object” (13). Though Irigaray, like Munro, may be invested in attempting to “(re)discover a possible space for the feminine imaginary,” Munro’s fiction bears no such explicit focus on social change (*Sex* 164).

For the purposes of this dissertation, then, Levinas and Irigaray provide one possible framework with which to think through the ethical tension Munro’s writing manifests in her attempts to write the Other and particularly the way this tension between self and Other can be resolved in an aesthetics of love. Anne Carson, for example, might provide another such theoretical lens. Her syncretic study of eros, which begins with the ancient Greeks but stretches forward to include twentieth century philosophers, notes the

“ancient analogy between language and love” (55). Carson similarly contends that “we think by projecting sameness on difference” and that “There would seem to be some semblance between the way Eros acts in the mind of a lover and the way knowing acts in the mind of a thinker” in that both knowing and desiring involve “the delight of reaching and the pain of falling short” (171, 70-71). “What the reader wants from reading,” she writes, “and the lover from loving are very similar” (107). In this study, however, Carson does not link her analysis to a consideration of ethics or gender. As such, Levinas’s discussion of eros, particularly as it is refigured by Irigaray, provides a more fruitful lens through which to view the self-Other dynamic inscribed in Munro’s work.¹⁶

Levinas and Irigaray, then, regardless of their positions on art,¹⁷ provide a framework for understanding love as a subject-to-subject relationship that aims toward the Other but through a caress rather than a grasp. This theoretical lens provides a constructive framework through which to consider Munro’s practice as an writer and

¹⁶In a more speculative sense, Levinas and Munro might share a further resonance. Both in their own way are shaped less by the ancient Greeks and more by the religious values they have translated into a secular context. Levinas translates his Jewish ethics into the discourse of philosophy, while the “cultural Christianity” Margaret Atwood identifies as important to Munro’s work might similarly shape her literary ethics. Though Munro is not a practising Christian, Christianity provided “the general background” for the society in which Munro was raised and about which she writes; as Atwood explains, at the very least this “cultural Christianity has provided ample material for Munro” (xix).

¹⁷Levinas’s stance on art is source of some critical controversy. His early work, particularly the essay “Reality and Its Shadow,” displays suspicion at the idolatrous power of art, yet his positive evaluations of Marcel Proust in “The Other in Proust,” Paul Celan in “Paul Celan: From Being to the Other,” and Maurice Blanchot in “On Maurice Blanchot” indicate that for him, some writing manifests an ethical orientation to the Other. Some influential literary critics, like Jill Robbins and Robert Eaglestone, approach Levinas’s work with some trepidation. Robbins cautions critics who would seize upon the Saying – roughly put, the relation within language that is my exposure to the Other and cannot be formulated in constative propositions – in the hopes of extending Levinas’s “positive evaluations of art to an ethical poetics” (144). These critics, she writes, “should not take for granted that we know what we mean by the Saying” and must contend with the question of whether we can “ever be sure that we are in the presence of the Saying” (144). Eaglestone similarly notes the difficulty in applying Levinas’s thinking to an aesthetic; he asserts that many accounts that attempt to do so end up simplifying the work (99, 98). Henry McDonald, however, writes that “contrary to Robbins’ assertions, Levinas clearly asserts the potential of literature for ethical transcendence in aesthetic writings after 1956” (190). McDonald asserts that the assumption that Levinas believed his ethics could not be applied to literature “has no basis” (191).

particularly her stories that suggest literature and language are capable of producing something similar, but not equivalent to, love as a face-to-face relationship.

Because of this distance, this dissertation turns to Attridge not only for his distinction between ethics and morality, but also for the method of reading he outlines in *The Singularity of Literature*. Attridge identifies a structural parallel between the act of reading and responding to a text and the act of reading and responding to another person; he operates out of a tradition of deconstructive ethical criticism, and though his account of reading owes much to philosophers Jacques Derrida, Levinas, and Simon Critchley, he draws on a range of traditions and probably owes as much to J.M. Coetzee as anyone else. Attridge's method of reading borrows from the ethics of deconstruction an impulse to describe the phenomenological experience of alterity and a double movement of reading. This double movement combines scrupulous attention to the work in-and-of-itself with a necessary movement away from the work per se and into something new and original: an examination of the work as always already in deconstruction, perhaps, or its status as a cultural product, or to borrow a phrase from Attridge, simply the act of "responding to the singularity of [the work's] meaningful, affective movement" (110). This response, according to Attridge, never exhausts or achieves adequation with the work, and so is at once always renewable and always a betrayal, or a falling-short of a full accounting of the work. Ethics, then, at least as derived from the Derridean Other, provides both a powerful framework from within which to discuss the experience of reading and writing and the hermeneutics of criticism, all the while recognizing the impossibility of a logocentric reading of literature and the inadequacy of instrumentalist interpretations.

Like Munro, however, Attridge maintains some separation between the ethics of literature and ethics as a face-to-face relationship between people. He concedes that literature “understood in its difference from other kinds of writing (and other kinds of reading), solves no problems and saves no souls” (4). The Other, in Attridge’s formulation, is essentially a phenomenological relationship with newness that disrupts the “settled patterns” of our “mental world” and which occurs in both reading and writing (24). This process, in the act of writing, at least, requires some “relinquishment of intellectual control, and ‘the other,’” he writes, “is one possible name for that to which control is ceded, whether it is conceived of as “outside” or “inside” the subject” (24). Attridge writes that though some of the same values are at work in being an ethical reader and an ethical person, there “is no necessary correlation between being a good reader [...] and being a good person, just as there is no necessary correlation between being a good artist and being a good person” (130).

There may be some similarity between the ability to be attentive and respond creatively to the singular “otherness” of a human other and a work of art, but the two by no means go hand-in-hand. The ability of literature to disrupt conceptualization is typically not, in a Levinasian sense, a manifestation of the Saying or an encounter with the face of the Other but rather an encounter with aesthetics, with form. As Attridge writes, “a creative achievement in the literary field is, whatever else it may be, a *formal* one” (107), and as such, the relationship between the ethical responsibility to a text and the ethical responsibility to a human Other remain non-identical. Attridge also grants that the Other “is a somewhat overworked phrase in current academic discourse” (28-9). He uses the vocabulary of ethics largely to emphasize the singular and relational experience

of reading a particular work. Attridge even concedes that there is some validity to the criticism that the “use of terms like ‘responsibility’ and ‘ethics,’ lumping together kindness to other people, artistic creation, and acts of reading, is so broad in its compass as to empty them of any useful meaning” (127). This objection, about the displacement of “the primacy of interpersonal relations in the deployment of any such vocabulary” has, he concedes, “a certain validity and might lead to the use of different terms” (126). For the purposes of this dissertation, however, the specific terms are less important than the general parallel: for Attridge, as for Munro, though the relation to literature and the relation to people is similar, and though the line between the two is indistinct, they are not identical.

The Singularity of Literature provides a rationale for placing close readings at the heart of literary criticism and includes room for the affective response of the critic, and this dissertation is built around close readings that begin in my own affective response. These readings of “The Moons of Jupiter,” “Material,” and “Deep-Holes,” propose that these stories demonstrate both the impossibility of fully grasping the Other in the language of fiction as well as the possibility of gesturing toward the Other in something like an aesthetics of love: a caress that recognizes and preserves difference while still providing connection. This project by no means constitutes an interpretive key that unlocks the true meaning of Munro’s oeuvre; rather, the intention is to mark out one corner of Munro’s aesthetics and suggest that her reality-directed fiction, which self-consciously expresses its own representational limits, can sometimes strike a balance between a recognition of the radical alterity of the Other and a reduction of this alterity to the same of the understanding consciousness in a literary production of love.

Chapter Three

“An Appalling Rush of Love and Recognition”: Ethics and Love in “The Ottawa Valley” and “The Moons of Jupiter”

Both “The Ottawa Valley,” from *Something I’ve Been Meaning To Tell You*, and “The Moons of Jupiter,” from the collection that shares its title, are tributes to dying parents. Both draw on events in Alice Munro’s life, though neither are reducible to biography. “The Ottawa Valley,” however, works toward a sense of failure and disappointment; it is built around a recognition that the mother will always escape the writing daughter’s ability to understand and represent. The mother’s radical alterity constitutes a gulf that neither love nor writing can bridge. “The Moons of Jupiter,” on the other hand, builds to a climactic moment of love and unity between father and daughter, and it offers a more complete production of catharsis. The love in “Moons,” linked symbolically to the act of writing, provides a real though incomplete sense of both connection across difference and of consolation against death. If the “Ottawa Valley” is Munro writing ethics, then “The Moons of Jupiter” is Munro writing love.

According to Magdalene Redekop, “The Ottawa Valley” is “one of Munro’s most moving stories and her most profound and subtle tribute to her mother” (103). Indeed, “The Ottawa Valley” draws on autobiography, even if it remains fiction. Robert Thacker has examined the extent to which the story draws from a trip to the Ottawa Valley Alice Munro took with her mother and sisters in 1943: “Much of what is there, Munro has said, is autobiographical -- the elastic on her underpants did break and she did insist on taking a safety pin from her mother, whose slip showed as a consequence” (*Writing* 72). Of

course, the story is no simple account of the details of this trip; it is an imaginative construction that arranges incidents drawn from the real into an aesthetically satisfying form and as such is free to invent incidents to serve its creation of affect. As Thacker confirms, the “central scene, when the narrator confronts her mother about the symptoms of her illness, is imagined. Alice Munro did not do that” (72).

According to her own commentary, however, Munro found little laudatory about this freedom to invent. In her interview with J. R. Struthers, Munro directs attention to the story’s basis in reality, to her frustration at the limitations of her fictional strategies, and to her concerns about the ethical status of her writing: “In ‘The Ottawa Valley’ [. . .] I’m looking at real lives, and then I not only have to look at the inadequacy of the way I represent them but my right to represent them at all” (*Probable* 28). The metafictional ending of “The Ottawa Valley” bears this assertion out. An authorial voice appears first to pronounce the inadequacy of the representation of the mother -- though other characters “come out clear enough [. . .] The problem, the only problem, is my mother” -- and then to question the ambiguous purpose of this representation (246). The purpose of the story is “to get” or “to reach” the mother, but “With what purpose? To mark her off, to describe, to illumine, to celebrate, to *get rid*, of her” (246). Redekop notes that “the writing daughter’s conscious failure to understand or represent the mother remains [. . .] at the heart of Munro’s aesthetic” and that “the recognition of the persistent otherness of the body that was our origin is a means of recognizing, more broadly, the otherness of the reality that can never be reproduced in art” (209, 32). “The Ottawa Valley” provides perhaps the paradigmatic incidence of this inability to understand and represent the

mother.¹⁸ This representation of the impossibility of grasping the mother in the writing daughter's fiction and consciousness constitutes an representation of the "ethical insight" Naomi Morgenstern identifies -- that "the other exists beyond the self" (71) -- and this insight is inscribed as both a failure of the traditional short story and a failure to move beyond it.

"The Ottawa Valley" ends with three separate scenes¹⁹ that together move the story away from these traditional aesthetics. The first of these scenes, the one Thacker confirms is an imaginative invention, constitutes the climax and most closely follows the tradition of the well-wrought modernist tale. The narrator confronts the mother about her illness and demands reassurance: "Is your arm going to stop shaking?' I pursued recklessly, stubbornly. I demanded of her now, that she turn and promise me what I needed" (244). The mother denies this reassurance, however, in a move that should constitute a moment of maturation for the narrator and is represented as an epiphanic revelation: "But she did not do it. For the first time she held out altogether against me" (244). The language of this epiphany recalls a similar moment in "Walker Brothers Cowboy" in which the narrator reflects that the father's life is "darkening and turning strange" (18): "She went on as if she had not heard, her familiar bulk ahead of me turning strange, indifferent. She withdrew, she darkened in front of me, though all she did in fact was keep on walking along the path that she and Aunt Dodie had made when they were

¹⁸While Munro frames this failure in literary terms, as Tracy Ware observes, "Munro's commentaries tend to divert attention from the painfully vivid memories that often give her work its force towards less volatile metafictional issues" and "'The Ottawa Valley'" is about the problems of a daughter more than it is about the problems of a writer, not that the two are exclusive" ("Tricks" 127). The central ethical conflict of "The Ottawa Valley" is indeed the daughter's attempt to come to terms with her mother's disease and the threat of her death; the difficulty of representing this conflict in art is a secondary but related concern.

¹⁹For the observation that "The Ottawa Valley" has three endings that "cannot be unified," as well as for my analysis throughout this chapter, I am indebted to Ware's "'Tricks with 'a Sad Ring': The Endings of 'The Ottawa Valley'" (127).

girls running back and forth to see each other; it was still there”(244). Again, the epiphanic moment reveals the limitations of knowledge and the separation between the self and the Other, though it nevertheless adheres to a traditional form and offers a strong feeling of closure on this moment of insight and growth. The reference to the path from the mother and Aunt Dodie’s childhood further underscores the separation between the narrator’s knowledge of her mother and her reality in its plenitude: the mother’s childhood will remain forever unknown to the narrator, and in a fashion that prefigures a similar technique in “The Moons of Jupiter,”²⁰ also evokes a painful contrast to her current situation, in which she is haunted by the spectre of death.

The last two scenes, however, each move beyond epiphany and therefore subvert, or at least extend, the technique.²¹ In the penultimate scene, the mother, Aunt Dodie, and Uncle James sit on the porch and recite poetry. The narrator’s presence here is muted. The bulk of the scene consists of the adults reciting the poetry, and any references to the narrator’s vision of this recital or to any insight she gains are minor and fleeting. Redekop observes that this moment provides “a staged community of readers” and constitutes an emergence “into a social world which acknowledges and accepts different perspectives even as it enacts a unity of sorts” (113). Again, like “The Moons of Jupiter,” just before the final scene, “The Ottawa Valley” offers readers a representation of unity and even love represented in the shared creation of meaning: this time, explicitly through literature as the characters recite poetry. This collaborative act of meaning making acknowledges difference while it enacts unity, and as such, evokes a feeling like love; at the very least,

²⁰See page 78 of this chapter.

²¹Ware believes this moment, too, could constitute an epiphany (“Tricks” 134). Even if this assertion is true, however, inclusion of multiple epiphanies, as David Crouse observes (60), still constitutes a move away from previous modernist techniques.

it provides a sense of relief after the narrating daughter has just confronted her mother's mortality and her mother's radical separation from herself.

As much as this scene provides a sense of relief and love, however, unlike "The Moons of Jupiter," the act of meaning making here does not wholly absorb the narration to the same extent and the feeling of love is diminished. The daughter is not part of the collaborative act of meaning making; still a child and without the education or perhaps confidence to join in, she remains a spectator outside the moment of poetic creation. The recital itself is also not without complication. Throughout "The Ottawa Valley," as Redekop further observes, Aunt Dodie provides a discordant sense of humour and levity in this otherwise sad story (104), and in this scene, Aunt Dodie likewise introduces an ironic note. The reciting begins with Dodie quoting Thomas Babington Macaulay's "Horatius": "*How can a man die better*" she cries "cheerfully" (245). Beyond the discordance between the subject matter, death, and the cheerful delivery, Redekop notes the disjuncture between "The female voice" and "the stories of male heroism" (113). The mother's attempt to join in is similarly undercut: her attempt makes no sense because she begins by reciting a line from Alfred Lord Tennyson's "The Passing of Arthur" then interjects two lines from Charles Wolfe's "The Burial of Sir John Moore at Corunna" before returning to a much later passage from the Tennyson poem.²² The mother's recital is further undercut when her voice takes on "an embarrassing tremor" (245). Redekop attributes this tremor not to "deep emotion" but to her Parkinson's Disease while Ware attributes it to embarrassment at her mistake (Redekop 114, Ware 133). In either case, the tremor unsettles the positive affect.

²²For a more detailed discussion of these references, see Ware "Tricks" 133.

The final scene moves decisively away from closure and unity and into metafictional commentary that pronounces the story inadequate. In what Christa Canitz and Roger Seamon might identify as a typically Munroian move, the scene attempts to break out of the language of fiction in an effort to seem more real. The retrospective voice of the narrator, also the author of the story, appears in this final paragraph to contrast the ending -- three scenes, including this final one with metafictional commentary -- with what one would expect from a traditional, well-formed modernist story: "If I had been making a proper story out of this, I would have ended it, I think, with my mother not answering and going ahead of me across the pasture" (246). The narrator/author did not "stop there," however, on a symbolic image that would emphasize separation and provide a strong, resonant feeling of closure because, she says, "I wanted to find out more, remember more. I wanted to bring back all I could" (246). The story goes on after the epiphany and denies closure; it avoids being a coming-of-age tale ending on an epiphanic moment of maturation, which has been a staple of the well-wrought modernist tale since James Joyce's "Araby." The metafictional ending itself also, of course, moves the story away from tradition and also interrupts its power to enthrall.

The narrator describes the aesthetic as fragmentary and visual rather than narrative, and ultimately she pronounces her move away from conventional aesthetics as a failure. Looking at what she has done, the narrator finds the story to be "like a series of snapshots" (246). Lorraine York's work on photography in fiction by Munro and others reminds us that "Photography is [. . .] a form of narrative" and a photograph "does not necessarily imply a fully successful ordering or capturing of reality" (*Dailiness* 9,

50). York also notes Munro's hesitancy "about equating writing and photography entirely," yet she nevertheless identifies similar assumptions about life and the nature of reality between Munro and photographers like Walker Evans and Diane Arbus, as well as other visual artists (*Dailiness* 28). Painters and photographers who work within yet somehow exceed realism -- in genres York identifies as "'Superrealism, 'neorealism,' 'hyperrealism,' 'magical realism,' and 'photographic realism'" -- strike a similar balance between representation and a gesture at that which lies beyond representational capacities (*Dailiness* 23). The snapshots that constitute "The Ottawa Valley," according to the narrator, do not constitute a classic narrative arc or even "a proper story": only a "series" (246). They are far from a transparent representation of the real: they are "brownish" and have "fancy borders" (246). Yet the snapshots of Aunt Dodie, Uncle James, Aunt Lena and the children "come out clear enough" (246). Despite, or perhaps because of, their combination of artificiality and reference and their lack of a classic narrative shape, they reach some degree of adequacy.

The mother is the only exception: the narrator made an attempt "to reach her" and "it did not work" (246). Smythe asserts this "re-evaluation of her past methods of transforming the past" constitutes an epiphany, which would recoup the story for the modernist aesthetic (133). This re-evaluation, however, belongs to a narrative level outside the action of the story and comes with neither a clear visual image nor a sense of closure. The representation of the mother moves away from the language of photography in language that attributes to her movement, weight, and a lack of clarity: she "looms," she is "heavy," she is "indistinct," and her "edges melt and flow" (246). The mother will continue to exceed the narrating daughter's every attempt to understand and represent;

she will not be cast as a character in the narrator's drama. The mother remains an indistinct presence, almost a ghost. Even though the ending suggests an ongoing desire to reach the mother, it is a desire that cannot be discharged and ends always in futility. She has "refused to fall away," and the narrator "could go on, and on, applying what skills I have, using what tricks I know, and it would always be the same" (246). In this final scene, "The Ottawa Valley" moves decisively away from the conventions of modernism and through this movement stages a recognition of radical Otherness; the Other to whom the narrator bears responsibility, in this case her mother, continues to exceed her consciousness and her fiction.

E. D. Blodgett similarly reads this scene as a failure of the I to reach out to the Other; his analysis, however, is more classically deconstructive and makes no mention of ethics. Blodgett writes that the deferral of closure here and the failure to "re-present the figure sought" occurs because "the mother is so much a part of the narrating 'I'" (9). Indeed, the mother "looms to close, just as she always did" (246). Blodgett points to both the impossibility of gaining access to a point exterior to the subject and to the infinite deferral of meaning: with this ending, he writes, "We are left with the subject, and '[s]ubjectivity,' as Derrida argues, '-- like objectivity -- is an effect of *différance*'" (9). Blodgett's point here is accurate. The narrating 'I' cannot get at, or perhaps out to, the mother; she alone "looms too close" (246). However, she does not have this problem with the other characters; the problem, then, is not with mimesis as such: adequate, if not transcendent, representation is possible. Only the mother cannot be folded into the narrator's consciousness because the narrator experiences the mother as not only constitutive of her subjectivity but also radically Other; in other words, the mother

presents a Levinasian face to the narrator. Though a snapshot bears a not insignificant relationship to its subject matter, even the best, most accurate photo is an object without depth or movement. Any such object is always already inadequate to representing the Other in its plenitude. The final scene's staging of a failure of aesthetics, then, has an ethical character.

Of course, as Canitz, Seamon, and others would no doubt remind us, the plain-speaking narrator who offers metafictional commentary is ultimately another literary "trick," as Munro might say. The staging of an aesthetic failure is not a break from the language of fiction but merely the deploying of alternate aesthetic strategies. It is easy enough to compile a list of aesthetic traits that might dramatize a recognition that the Other exceeds the writer's capacity to represent them: self-interruptions and polyphonic voices, perhaps, a refusal of closure and completeness, or a metafictional sensibility that undermines the work's power to enthrall. These techniques, however, cannot be said to be ethical in any absolute sense and can only potentially achieve such a goal in a particular context of reading. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century such metafictional commentary might be better equipped to express the inadequacy of literary forms to real life than the traditional well-wrought modernist tale that relies on symbolism, character-based psychological realism, and a strong sense of closure. As David Crouse observes in a different context, however, the very techniques that Munro here subverts for offering too much closure were once a means of moving away from authorial authority: "Placing thoughts in the mind of a character or recasting them as images and locating them symbolically in the landscape" are ways of "opening up interpretation relative to previous, more narrator-dominated techniques" (52-3). "The

Ottawa Valley,” then, might fall short of a genuine representation of the Levinasian face or the Saying, but it at least gestures at an ethical moment in which the alterity of the Other, in its plenitude, exceeds the understanding consciousness.

The gesture at the ultimate failure of aesthetics constitutes, to some extent at least, an ethical moment, yet it also makes “The Ottawa Valley” perhaps Munro’s most pessimistic story. It registers not only the writing daughter’s failure to understand and represent the mother but also the failure of her art to connect her to her mother, to provide consolation in the face of death, or to ease the burden of ethics with a moment of love. The story denies closure to both the reader and the narrator, and continuing attempts to reach the mother are not generative or do not lead to fecundity. Rather, they are sterile and lead to nothing new: the results of any ongoing efforts “would always be the same” (246). Even the positive aspects of this project to “reach” the mother in fiction are ethically dubious (246). The retrospective narrator questions the purpose of her attempt to write the mother and concludes that it is “To mark her off, to describe, to illumine, to celebrate, to *get rid*, of her” (246). To mark off and describe carry no pejorative connotation, and to celebrate and illumine indicate a positive function to writing, yet the syntax of the sentence and the use of italics suggest these neutral or positive elements are subsumed under the effort to “*get rid*” of the mother (246). The sentence builds to this final, emphasized point, which gives priority to this attempt to get rid of her.

“The Ottawa Valley,” like other stories from this period,²³ read as an indictment of fiction. The failure of the story is not just contingent on the narrator’s abilities or relationship to the mother but also goes to the purpose of writing itself. Writing, according to the narrator, means aestheticizing away or getting rid of the Other because

²³See chapter two for a discussion of Munro’s ethical and artistic crisis in the 1970s.

the forms of fiction are inadequate to its plenitude. This aestheticization might be acceptable for subjects who do not present a face to the writer, but the realization that the Other exceeds the consciousness of the same makes any aesthetic success necessarily an ethical failure. Inscribed in “The Ottawa Valley,” then, is an attempt to mitigate or diminish its aesthetic success through a staging of failure. Moreover, unlike other stories from this era, such as “Material,” which is the focus of the next chapter, there is little explicit in the story to offset this pessimistic appraisal of fiction. Though the final paragraph articulates the failure of fiction, the story itself, moving as it is, offers little sense of connection or consolation. “The Ottawa Valley,” then, represents a high water mark for Munro’s dissatisfaction with art.

Of course, one story, and even one era, does not define the whole of Munro’s oeuvre or her stance on fiction. “The Moons of Jupiter” follows “The Ottawa Valley” by almost a decade and offers a much more positive evaluation of the power of art, yet it is in many ways a similar story. Both “Moons” and “The Ottawa Valley” are powerfully if indirectly tied to the real; each draws on autobiographical material and refigures it into a fictional tribute to a parent approaching death. The power of fiction to re-imagine and refigure, however, is much more in evidence in “Moons;” “The Ottawa Valley” is more closely tied to the real circumstances of Munro’s life. Though “Moons” certainly seems to draw on elements of Munro’s father’s life and death, another story, “Home,” more clearly mirrors the facts of his passing.²⁴ Nevertheless, both also combine elements of mimesis and metafiction; each provides a powerfully realistic-feeling representation of the dying parent but also inscribes a limit to the validity of this realism. The metafictional sensibility in “Moons,” however, is much more subtle than that of “The Ottawa Valley.”

²⁴See Thacker *Writing* 243.

Finally, both contain a structural parallel in that each moves from separation, to unity, to separation in an attempt at catharsis; only in “Moons,” however, is this catharsis a qualified success. “The Moons of Jupiter” and “The Ottawa Valley” are both skeptical of the power of art but the central scene of the former, the shared naming of the moons of Jupiter, suggests the capacity of writing, or at least a collaborative act of naming and patterning that recalls writing, to constitute an act of love, if only in a limited sense.

Consider the sequence of the endings of “The Ottawa Valley.” The first and most traditional scene brings a moment of separation: the mother walks away, “turning strange, indifferent” (244). Then comes the shared recital of poetry and the staged community of readers, which provides a moment of unity and even love, though this feeling is qualified by an undercurrent of irony, the mother’s decline, and the daughter’s status as a spectator. Then the last scene introduces a retrospective narrative voice that pronounces the inadequacy of all that gone before and the continuing radical alterity of the mother. Together, these three scenes provide, on a smaller scale, the same cathartic movement as “The Moons of Jupiter.” Because of the shortened scale, the absence of the daughter from the moment of love or unity, and the lack of closure and relief in the final scene, however, catharsis is never achieved. As Smythe puts it in her self-conscious mix of Greek and Latin, “it is a case of *katharsis interruptus*” (133).

Like “The Ottawa Valley,” “The Moons of Jupiter” is about the problems of a daughter more than it is the problems of a writer, though again, the two are related. “Moons” contains a subtle metafictional sensibility and a recognition of the limits of the human ability to understand and represent either the Other or the world at large. Nevertheless, it also dramatizes the power of ordering and patterning to bring comfort to

and make meaning for its characters, and it works, as a whole, to use the ordering, patterning, and meaning-making powers of fiction to create a sense of consolation and love. The temporal disarrangement in “Moons” – its abandoning of a natural chronology in favour of a more stylized presentation – draws on these imaginative powers to perform a cathartic effect: to moves from a feeling of separation, to unity, and back to separation. The catharsis is built around a climatic scene of love in which the narrator, Janet, and her father engage in an act of collaborative meaning making symbolically linked to the act of writing. “Moons,” then, demonstrates an orientation to the Other and to the act of writing that embraces the possibility of love rather than dramatizing an ethical recognition of radical alterity and the inadequacy of fiction, or any representation, before this alterity.

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Many critical monographs provide compelling insights into “The Moons of Jupiter.”²⁵ Magdalene Redekop offers one of the strongest readings of “Moons;” she skillfully articulates the unity and poignancy of the naming of the moons scene and adroitly tracks its refusal of an easy elegiac reversal. Ildikó de Papp Carrington, in her fine reading, departs from Redekop, who reads Nichola’s absence as “a way of showing respect [...] of acknowledging she needs no patron Saint Nicholas and no fussing mother to take care of her” (*Controlling* 171). Carrington notes that the death of the father and the departure of Janet’s daughters are in fact a “double loss” and that “the story is not so much about what Janet gains in perspective as about what she loses from her life” (*Controlling* 203). Ajay Heble details the process by which “Moons”—as well as many other Munro stories—displaces and defers the main issue at hand, death, and how its

²⁵An earlier version of what follows in this chapter appeared in *Canadian Literature* as “‘The Way The Stars Really Do Come Out at Night’: The Trick of Representation in Alice Munro’s ‘The Moons of Jupiter.’”

fictional world is subject to change and possibility. Karen Smythe accurately defines “Moons” as a cathartic fiction-elegy which offers a staged performance of grief work, while Coral Ann Howells offers a strong reading of the story’s cosmological imagery as an inherently limited attempt to “map patterns of significance on to changing circumstances” (*Munro* 81). None of these readings, however, devote sustained attention to the story as a singularity. These book-length studies tend to marshal readings, however adept, into some overarching rationale that encompasses Munro’s body of work or to situate the story in a collection. Such readings can devote little attention to the story’s specific form and its unique staging of meaning or affect.

By form, I mean not some static structure, easily separable from content or meaning, or from its cultural context, its author, or individual reader. Rather, I use form in Derek Attridge’s sense of the word: not “empirical structure” but “performed mobility,” the sequence of linguistic operations that “functions as a *staging* of meaning and feeling,” a staging of operations of “referentiality, metaphoricity, intentionality, and ethicity,” which is realized in the act of reading (111, 109). Form, in this sense, does not exclude context or semantics. ‘Contextual’ information—such as, in this case, the death of Munro’s own father, or her visit to the McLaughlin Planetarium (*Munro*, Intro, xiv) – cannot help but inform our experience of the story and can by no means be ignored. “Moons” has an undeniable stake in the real and also in the realist form, even if its self-consciousness and stylized arrangement challenge any simplistic mimetic understanding of language. It is largely this combination of ‘formal’ features that gives the story its power.

“The Moons of Jupiter” was one of a number of breakthrough stories for Alice Munro from the late 1970s and early 1980s. “Moons,” like much of Munro's writing that came out of her return to Southwestern Ontario from British Columbia, demonstrates a sophisticated, self-reflexive, and imaginative engagement with her material. It is at once highly stylized, highly self-conscious about language, and deeply involved in the real and representational. Connections between Munro and the narrator Janet are apparent: their careers as writers,²⁶ the deaths of their fathers, and even their visits to planetariums. Munro herself has written that this story “has something to do with [her] father's death,” as well as a trip she made following summer to the McLaughlin Planetarium, and both Robert Thacker and Magdalene Redekop note the significance of these autobiographical connections (Munro, Intro xiv, Thacker *Writing* 385, Redekop 155).

However, running through “Moons,” from the heart monitor on the opening pages, which dramatizes “what ought to be a most secret activity” (Munro “Moons” 217), to the planetarium scene, which Coral Ann Howells identifies “as the dominant narrative image of transcendent patterning which exceeds all human comprehension” (*Munro* 83), is a sophisticated examination of how the act of naming and patterning at the root of representation and comprehension inexorably carries us away from the real, and how the father exceeds Janet's every attempt to define him. In this instance, however, the inability to understand and represent the father leads not to an aesthetics of failure but to a moment of love in the scene in which Janet and her father name the moons of Jupiter. The love in this scene is represented only indirectly as the absence of anxiety; this indirection makes the feeling of love all the more poignant because it preserves the sense that the father

²⁶ In the original publication in the *New Yorker*, Janet was a painter – a change made at the suggestion of the magazine's editorial staff but reversed when Munro published the story as part of her own collection (Thacker *Writing* 341). This decision indicates Munro at least sees Janet's career as a writer as important to the story, even if it does not necessarily strengthen any autobiographical connection.

continues to exceed Janet's consciousness and that any reduction to her understanding is only partial. Janet connects with her father via a caress rather than a grasp before their final separation in death, and as such, the overall movement of "Moons" is cathartic: from separation, to unity, to separation.

Though "Moons" never breaks into the kind of metafictional commentary of "The Ottawa Valley," it nevertheless demonstrates clear skepticism about the human capacity to know. The key metafictional moment comes near the story's end, when Janet attends a planetarium presentation while trying to fill the time before her next hospital visit to see her dying father. This scene dramatizes an ambivalence regarding the ordering and patterning of meaning involved in reading and writing narratives, whether artistically or in an attempt to make sense of life. The planetarium presentation draws on, though it also exceeds, realist modes of representation. The show starts within the conventions of realism: the stars "came out not all at once but one after another, the way the stars really do come out at night, though more quickly" (230). The appearance of the stars, realistic though accelerated to suit the needs of the demonstration, produces what Roland Barthes has called a "reality effect" (148). Following the appearance of the stars is a list of scientific, objective facts, which give the size of the universe and provide a sense of scale for the earth's place within it. The style of the presentation shifts abruptly when, as Janet comments, "realism [is] abandoned, for familiar artifice" (231). Here the presentation abandons its realist pretense for a stylized simulation with more drama and excitement. A model of the solar system appears, "spinning away in its elegant style," as does "A bright bug that took off from the earth, heading for Jupiter" (231). Both the reality effect and the departure into stylized simulation, however, are part of the same process: both name and

pattern the facts; make them familiar, intelligible and dramatic; and work to evoke a false sense of awe. “The attraction of any pattern,” as Redekop notes, “lies in the illusion of control and the denial of chaos” (150), and the planetarium presentation provides such a pattern by essentially mapping the universe from the earth out. This naming and patterning bears more than a passing resemblance to the act of writing, which similarly arranges language into meaningful patterns, and which mixes representation and stylized drama in an attempt to create affect. That Janet is a writer and makes her living by constructing artifice through language strengthens this connection.

Janet’s reflections on this stylized naming and patterning demonstrate that she finds something inadequate and disingenuous about the presentation, and by extension, with any serene faith in the human ability to know and represent reality. In a line that prefigures 2006’s wholesale reorganization of the solar system based on a new definition for the term ‘planet’ (BBC, “Pluto”), she challenges the scientific basis behind these apparently objective facts. The new definition of Mercury’s orbit, in which the planet rotates three times for every two trips around the sun, not once per orbit, leads Janet to ask “Why did they give out such confident information, only to announce later that it was quite wrong?” (231). As Heble writes of this moment, “even the world of science – which seems to concern itself with measurable facts, with reality – can open up to new possibilities, to alternative versions” (128). Even patterns constructed out of authority of the scientific method, then, can be plain wrong.

Beyond this error of fact, Janet finds both the goal and the style of the presentation to be wrongheaded. Ostensibly an attempt to give schoolchildren a sense of the scale of the universe, the presentation instead seems to Janet to use its powers of

representation only to reduce the terrifying insignificance of human life to little more than a cheap thrill. When the presentation fails to tear the schoolchildren in attendance from their pop and chips, Janet states that it is “A good thing” (231). This effort to fix the children’s attention “on various knowns and unknowns and horrible immensities” has failed: children have a “natural immunity” to this sort of artifice which “shouldn’t be tampered with” (231). For Janet, at this point at least, the artistic pretensions of the presentation – the “echo-chamber effects, the music, the churchlike solemnity” – serve only to give a comfortable artistic gloss to these “horrible immensities,” to simulate the “awe that they supposed they ought to feel” at the size of the universe and humankind’s relative insignificance, and to reduce this awe to something like “A fit of the shivers when you looked out the window” (231-32). These “shivers” come as much and perhaps more from the well-wrought artistic elements of the presentation than they do from the knowledge gained about the universe. Real awe, according to Janet, is something more sinister: “Once you know what it is, you wouldn’t be courting it” (232). Our relative insignificance in the grand scale of time and space is actually terrifying, just as it is for the protagonist in “Walker Brothers Cowboy” (3). The protagonist of “Walker Brothers” listens to her father describe the formation of the Great Lakes by the gradual movement of ice caps, and finds “The tiny share of time we have appalls” her, though interestingly, her father seems to regard it with tranquility (3). Like the schoolchildren in the planetarium, perhaps, she does “not like to think of it” (3). These schoolchildren, thanks to the pop, the chips, and their own lack of interest in edu-tainment, are spared a confrontation with their own mortality, albeit a confrontation that could only have been domesticated and misrepresented by the artifice of the presentation.

Yet for all Janet's skepticism, and despite its failure to engage Janet and the rest of the audience, the presentation is not without its appeal. In a detail that in a linear story would have immediately followed the presentation but here is deferred to the end, Janet states that "The planetarium show had done what I wanted it to after all—calmed me down, drained me" (233). Inadequate as it is for coming to terms with the awe-inspiring immensity of the universe and the finite span of human life, the show nonetheless provides real comfort to Janet. This show, this naming and patterning, is one of a list of distractions, or tricks perhaps, that ease the burden of grief weighing on Janet. Fashion, food, crossword puzzles – any trivial thing that allows "Attention [to narrow] in on something," and become "fanatically serious" can provide temporary respite from the more serious matter at hand (229). Janet may recognize the futility of these obsessions, but her recognition does not rob them of their power. As a whole, the stories in the collection *The Moons of Jupiter*, as Redekop points out, "insist on a process whereby we are forced to confront false comforts and recognize them as such" (152). "The Moons of Jupiter" is no exception in this respect, yet as Tracy Ware writes, "We tend to swing too violently from full Christian consolation to a stark sense of its absence in skeptical contexts," and "the importance of minor comforts" in this story is "by no means a commonplace" (1). Meaning-making through naming and patterning provides comfort for Janet and helps lay the groundwork for a real emotional exchange with her father: something that neither food, drink, or fashion can do. Such stylized representations might fail to evoke immanent meaning, but at the very least, they have the power to distract: to absorb consciousness and temporarily defer anxiety and grief. Naming and patterning, and even comprehension itself, might fall short of capturing the world and the radical

alterity of the Other, but the shared, creative language in “Moons” nevertheless proves to be a vehicle for connection and love.

The planetarium scene, then, might cast doubt on our power to know and represent, but the story as a whole demonstrates the power of language to communicate and create affect. At first glance, this story appears to be a simple recital of events – a failed shopping trip, a show at the planetarium, a hospital visit – focalized through Janet’s consciousness. But the narrative is not linear, and the pattern that emerges from its disarrangement provides a cathartic movement: from Janet’s emotional separation from her father, to this poignant moment of unity and love, and finally, to the inevitable separation at the end, when Janet performs the hard work of mourning by letting her father go into death, and in a parallel process, letting her daughter go into her adult life. This movement from separation, to unity, to a new and more mature separation is also tied to a process in which Janet’s naming and patterning of her loved ones – the tricks she uses to keep them spinning neatly in their orbits around her star – collapses and is recognized for what it is: a series of convenient fictions, or representations, with only a tangential relationship to the plenitude of their existence.

The opening focuses on Janet and her father as stoic and self-contained. He was “pale and closemouthed” when she brought him to the hospital, and he initially seems more concerned with the cost of his room than his failing heart (217, 218); she is “pleased” with herself “for taking it calmly” and feels none of “the protest [she] would have felt twenty, even ten, years before” (219). When her father’s refusal of death “leapt up in him as readily as if he had been thirty or forty years younger,” she finds only that her “heart hardened” (219). When, the day after his admittance, he says “reasonably” that

he will “Give in gracefully” and live out his remaining days without gambling on a high-risk surgical procedure, Janet approves (220). It is what she “would have expected of him,” that man of “independence,” “self-sufficiency,” and “forbearance,” who “worked in a factory” and “in his garden,” who “read history books” and “never made a fuss” (220). She defines him as a man’s man with no need for messy emotional exchanges.

Mention of her father’s childhood and the physical fact of his body trouble her definition of her father as stoic, scholarly man ready to face death and momentarily weaken her resolve. “The thought of my father’s childhood,” Janet observes, “which I always pictured as bleak and dangerous—the poor farm, the scared sisters, the harsh father—made me less resigned to his dying” (219). Janet “didn’t care to think of his younger selves,” but “Even his bare torso, thick and white—he had the body of a working-man of his generation, seldom exposed to the sun—was a danger to me; it looked so strong and young” (220). Memories of a childhood long past and a body that still bears traces of a vigorous adulthood testify to the possibility of multiple, competing narratives of this man’s life and point out the self-interestedness of her chosen definition. Her attempt to define away her father is an ethical failure and a strategy to avoid risk. A recognition that the father overflows her definition of him would translate his death from being the end of the story she tells herself about him -- the final point in her definition -- into an absolute loss of his existence.

The next scene, a flashback to Janet’s arrival in Toronto, further develops the protagonist’s concern with the adequacy of one’s concept of a person to the person him or herself. Janet’s daughters, she realizes, have fixed her into their own concepts or definitions: “They would have talked about me. Judith and Nichola comparing notes,

relating anecdotes; analyzing, regretting, blaming, forgiving” (222); Janet herself “did the same thing at that age” (222). Janet now recognizes just how false these definitions are: “How thoroughly we dealt with our fathers and mothers [...] how competently we filed them away, defined them beyond any possibility of change. What presumption” (222). After reflecting on the inadequacy of the child’s understanding of the parent, she goes on to question her own definitions of her daughters. She observes her daughter Judith’s interaction with her partner Don and can feel “her sad jitters, [...] predict her supple attentions” (223). Janet asks herself “Why should I think she wouldn’t be susceptible, that she would always be straight-forward, heavy-footed, self-reliant? Just as I go around saying that Nichola is sly and solitary, cold, seductive. Many people must know things that would contradict what I say” (223).

This dramatization of the arrogance and self-interest behind these limited, one-sided definitions of loved ones comes just before Janet’s attempt to find relief from tensions of family life. She turns for this relief to an old lover, Tom Shepherd, who can provide a sexual relationship though not, it seems, a genuinely loving one. Janet’s relationship with Shepherd represents a freedom from responsibility: she calls him because she “wanted to see somebody who wasn’t related to [her], and who didn’t expect anything in particular” (223). Their relationship is far from deep or profound, and as W. R. Martin notes, this character “has the same name as Rose’s rather casual lover” in *Who Do You Think You Are* (160). Shepherd is not available, however, and Janet says she feels as though “he had deliberately let me down, as if we had planned to meet in a public place and then he hadn’t shown up” (224). Shepherd is not a partner on whom she can rely; Janet continues, “Once he had done that, I remembered” (224). Their casual

relationship, then, represents less another instance of the self-Other dynamic than an escape from this relation of responsibility. Her next phone call, by contrast, reveals her responsibility. She phones her father and discovers he needs to travel to Toronto for immediate medical care, so she drives to his home to collect him and take him to a Toronto emergency room in a process that takes seven hours (224).

This flashback demonstrates Janet's burgeoning recognition that her family members possess an alterity exceeding her understanding and denies her attempt to escape familial responsibility in a liaison with Shepherd; afterward, "Moons" moves to the process by which Janet begins to lose her grasp on her definition of her father and becomes open to a moment of unity and love across their separation and difference. Janet loses her faith that her concept of her father is adequate to the full reality of his existence, and shortly thereafter, experiences a moment of connection with him. Back in the hospital, her father recalls the phrase "Shoreless seas"—a phrase, as Redekop notes, evocative of the endless oblivion of death, of "a seascape without horizon or limit" like the "'horrible immensities' [Janet] glimpses in the planetarium" (170) — which provokes in Janet incomprehension and worry. She wonders "if he had found out how much, or how little, time he could hope for," if "the pills had brought on an untrustworthy euphoria," or if he has decided he "wanted to gamble" (225). This apparently nonsensical address, haunted by the specter of death, calls her to account in an almost Levinasian sense. The "said," or linguistic content, of this address is at this point largely immaterial, but its "saying," or the underlying relationship that linguistic communication presupposes, is undeniable. The father appears before her as Other: helpless, thanks to his leaky heart, his consciousness completely opaque, but her love and concern for him

crystal clear. Janet then realizes how partial and self-interested her understanding of him had been: “I used to tell people that he never spoke regretfully about his life, but that was not true. It was just that I didn’t listen to it” (225). Immediately afterward, the father reflects on “the great temptation [...] to make a mystery” out of the inexplicability of human consciousness, “to believe in – You know” (226). Janet completes his sentence – ““The soul?”” – and feels “an appalling rush of love and recognition” (226). The father, like Janet, is haunted by his impending death, tempted, but wary of, as he says, ““playing tricks on yourself”” (226). The tricks here are religious, but given Munro’s repeated use of the term to describe the art of fiction,²⁷ the parallel between these tricks and those of fiction is apparent. Janet and her father’s shared suspicion of, and perhaps longing for, these tricks unites them in a moment of love and recognition.

This moment of unity and exchange, in which Janet’s father breaks out of her definition and effects a more genuine connection, is not unambiguously positive. In this emotional moment, Janet’s father sees fit to pronounce judgment on her life in a way she finds hurtful. He implicitly conveys his disapproval of Janet’s divorce, and Janet experiences this moment as an instance of interpretive violence that is both incorrect and unjust: she is “surprised – not just at what he said but at his feeling he had any right, even now, to say it” (228). She considers gently reproaching her father, but stops short when she looks at the heart monitor and sees “the line his heart was writing” (228). As Redekop, Heble, and others have noted, in the opening pages, the father’s heart monitor marks a concern with exposure that has metafictional overtones. Its activity is described in textual terms – “On the screen a bright jagged line was continually being written” – and its “dramatizing” of “what ought to be a most secret activity,” Janet believes, “was asking

²⁷ See “The Ottawa Valley,” “Material,” and “Winter Wind,” for example.

for trouble” (217-18). She considers reproaching him by reminding him of his low opinion of her ex-husband, but instead finds herself “looking at the line his heart was writing”— an ““Unfair advantage,”” her father says (228). The ethical move, or perhaps simply the gracious move, is to avoid capitalizing on her knowledge and responding to him in kind. This chilly note complicates the previous sense of harmony, but the overall movement has nonetheless been from stoic separation at the beginning to a greater sense of connection.

The planetarium scene, which elicits Janet’s skepticism at representation yet still “calmed” her and “drained” her, just as she had wanted, also prepares readers for the penultimate scene, the naming of the moons (233). Redekop notes that this scene is not without ambiguity. Naming the moons is way of insisting “on the reality of space out there”: like the Copernican revolution, it unsettles our belief in the significance of our existence (156).²⁸ On the other hand, the act of naming also reappropriates the moons according to our own mythologies, so “we can pretend that they still do orbit around the earth, that we have mastered them with our classical narratives” (156). In an act of meaning making that, like the planetarium scene earlier, recalls the act of writing, Janet and her father name, pattern, and in a sense affirm the existence of the universe at large. This affirmation occurs in the face of their recognition that they exist in the open, expansive universe of Copernicus and Galileo, where no Christian consolation or afterlife is apparent.

Because the scene lacks any overt displays of affection or access to Janet’s consciousness, the sense of unity and love can be felt only obliquely. A biographical note

²⁸ The Copernican revolution, which held that the earth was not the centre of the universe around which all else orbited, was, incidentally, confirmed by Galileo’s observation of the moons of Jupiter, the first heavenly bodies shown *not* to orbit the earth (Redekop 156).

that Redekop raises accounts for some of the scene's power. Munro's father, Robert Laidlaw, wrote his novel *The MacGregors* just before he died, and Alice Munro was indispensable both to its writing (Laidlaw vii) and its publication (Thacker, *Writing* 338). That Laidlaw "was writing [...] side by side with [Munro] just before his death adds a poignancy to the father-daughter dialogues in this collection" (Thacker, *Writing* 155), and this poignancy is never more pronounced than in the naming of the moons. However there is no easy correspondence, and for readers unaware of her situation no correspondence at all, between the emotional resonance evoked by the story and whatever emotional response we might have to Munro's personal circumstances. Munro is explicit that this story is not an account of her father's death; such an account would be "quite different, not just in factual detail, in incident, but in feeling" (Munro, Intro xv). "The Moons of Jupiter" is fiction, and the power of this scene, and the story as a whole, comes from the language itself.

This story, and the others that come from personal experience, as they are crafted into art, "are carried inexorably away from the real," just as the stories based more on observation "lose their anecdotal edges" and are "invaded by familiar shapes and voices" (Munro, Intro, xv). Regardless of Munro's process of artistic creation, readers of "Moons" are relating primarily to Janet, a fictional character, with her own textual history as established both in this story and those connected to it. The Janet and the father in "Moons" are also the protagonist and the father from the two-part story "Chaddeleys and Flemings," which opens the collection: the story of the father's upbringing, of "the poor farm, the scared sisters, the harsh father" and of "running away to work on the lake boats" is related in greater detail in part two of "Chaddeleys,"—"The Stone in the Field"

(219-20, 29-30). “Moons,” the title story as well as the final piece in the collection, works with “Chaddeleys” – which also draws on and refigures elements of Munro’s life, such as her family history and class-based tensions in her first marriage (Thacker, *Writing* 28-29, 119) – to create a feeling of connection, a feeling crafted in and stretching across each story. The fictional world Munro evokes may be importantly connected to the real, but it is Janet, with her history and her relationship to her father, to which readers respond.

Despite the sense that, as Munro writes, people read such “first person, seemingly artless and straight-forward” stories and imagine that “just about all [she] did was write down everything that happened on a certain day” (xv), the power of “Moons,” and the planetarium scene specifically, comes from the text itself, regardless of any foreknowledge of Munro’s personal situation. “The Moons of Jupiter” is after all an artistic, textual achievement: its intricate pattern of flashbacks; its choreographed movement from separation, to unity, to separation; its oblique treatment of the act of loving and letting go, and its metaphoric take on the acts of writing and representing make it one of Munro’s best. “Moons,” like many Munro stories, might be embedded in her life, but it is by no means reducible to it. The original version of “Moons” accepted by the *New Yorker* was not even first person, but third: Munro later re-submitted it as a first-person story to create this greater feeling of intimacy (Thacker, *Writing* 385).

The formal features at work behind the power of the naming of the moons scene specifically, however, remain somewhat difficult to pin down. The text of the passage itself gives little indication as how to read the scene. In marked contrast to the rest of “The Moons of Jupiter,” this scene contains little narrative commentary. The passage is mostly dialogue, and though the narration contains some description and some self-

consciousness about diction, it lacks description of Janet's feelings or the state of her relationship to her father. However, it is precisely this *lack* that gives the scene its power. The naming of the moons, shared by father and daughter, is the only comfort, the only distraction, that wholly absorbs the narration. There is none of the skepticism of the planetarium scene and no realization of the triviality of the moment as is the case for Janet's temporary preoccupation with fashion. There is also none of the strain on their relationship caused by the father's teasing, or more seriously, by his subtle condemnation of Janet's decision, years ago, to leave her husband (228). The scene instead provides an absorbing moment of unity before the inevitable separation. Janet and her father join together in an act of shared naming that is personal, not public; affective, not technical; and mythic, not scientific. It connects Janet, her father, and the reader in a creative discovery of meaning. The father's recital of the moons of Jupiter, with Janet's encouragement, draws on the discourses of history, science, and mythology, and the solace that comes from insisting on the naming and patterning of the moons invests those discourses with human and secular, if not mythical and transcendent, significance. The scene both creates meaning collaboratively, across the self-Other division that Janet had felt so keenly, and acts against death.

Martin, too, reads love in this naming. He writes that we find in the father not only "an attitude toward impending death" but also "a fully loving relationship beyond sexuality" (158). He reads the mention of Ganymede in the scene's final lines as a reference to the father: "though we might mistake the father for a common and unremarkable man, a mere shepherd from Mount Hebron [. . .] because he responds and does honour to the created universe he is much more like a cupbearer to Jupiter, its god"

(162). He further reads here a bond between Janet and her father. “Moreover,” he writes, “like Ganymede, and Callisto, whom, Janet tells us, Juno ‘changed . . . into a bear and stuck . . . up in the sky’” (233) -- Janet has taken from her father his courage, his tone, and even his idiom: ‘You’ve turned pretty cheeky now I’m going under the knife,’ he says -- he will be enskied in a sort of apotheosis, at least in Janet’s mind” (162). Janet becomes, as Martin writes, “a loving daughter,” and part of her father lives on in her (162).

The extent to which this love can be opposed rather than related to sexual love, however, is debatable; the division here between sexual and parental love here is less than complete. The scene, after all, makes extended reference to the sexualized myths behind the moon’s names. Janet and her father both observe that the majority of the moons -- Io, Europa, and Callisto -- were named for “girlfriends” of Jupiter’s (233). Ganymede, too, carries a sexual overtone. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Classical Myth and Religion*, early versions of the myth stress the boy’s beauty and state the motivation for his being carried off to Olympus as “the need for a noble and presentable wine-steward,” but “a homoerotic interest on the god’s part” became explicit in later versions (226). Though clearly this scene has nothing to do with a sexual relationship in which the partner is only an object for pleasure, this reference to Ganymede, especially considering the symbolic weight it bears as the last words the father utters, complicates the distinction between sexual and parental love and indicates that both are potential instances of eros in the widest sense of the word.

This moment of shared creation has been generative and life-affirming. Their collaborative naming and patterning has offered Janet real consolation and connection to

her father across their difference, and the two have come together in an act of mutual fecundation. Over the course of the story, Janet's universe has shifted on its axis such that she recognizes that she is not the star at its centre. Perhaps, then, the father -- this affable host," (232) this father, this Other -- is not Ganymede but Jupiter himself. Janet orbits around him and is his cupbearer who responds and does honour to him in an act of love and fecundity. Regardless of the specifics of the symbolism, this scene provides one of Munro's clearest representations of love as a relation between self and Other, even if the representation remains oblique. Reading love here requires not only tracking the symbolism of the astrological references but also reading the silences between Janet and her father's exchanges.

The final scene complicates as it underscores the power of the human capacity to name, pattern, and make meaning. The story flashes back to Janet just after she leaves the planetarium and enters a Chinese garden. Feeling "calmed" and "drained" after the planetarium show, she contemplates a woman who vaguely resembles her daughter Nichola and decides that if it were her, she "might just sit and watch" (233). The anxiety she has felt over her father's health and her daughter's absence is temporarily relieved as Janet experiences a moment of real detachment, feeling "like one of those people who have floated up to the ceiling, enjoying a brief death. A relief, while it lasts" (233). The language here indicates both her connection to and her separation from her father. Like him, she experiences something like death; just as part of him will live on with her, perhaps part of her will die with him. Yet the phrase also indicates relief and draws a parallel between her separation from her father and her daughter, a dual separation she can now accept with equanimity: "My father had chosen and Nichola had chosen," she

says, the father choosing his life-threatening operation and the daughter choosing to remain incommunicado (233). Despite her real love, Janet has learned to withdraw in order to survive, just as she withdrew from Nichola: “measured” and “disciplined” her love during the moment in Nichola’s childhood when it was feared she had leukemia (230).

The movement to separation in this final scene, however, demonstrates the power of fiction. The temporal disarrangement – the abandoning of a natural chronology in favour of a more stylized presentation – artistically performs a cathartic effect as the story moves from separation between Janet and her father, to unity and love, to final separation. Were the events of the story to be arranged chronologically, the final scene would have to be the naming of the moons, the night before his operation, which Janet meaningfully refers to as his “last night” (232). To end at this point would be to draw the story to a close on a note of powerful emotional connection: of love and mourning. Yet the final scene moves back to that afternoon in the Chinese garden: an event that would have appeared around the mid-point of the plot. This move allows “Moons” to end on a note of separation and of letting go, so the staging of emotion – from separation, to unity, to separation – releases the reader into catharsis. “Moons”, then, provides an artistic staging of both love and catharsis, and as such it demonstrates that first-class fiction can do something that the mere artifice of the planetarium show or the cold facts of astronomy cannot: provide real, if not complete and transcendent, connection and consolation. The capacity of Munro’s writing to draw on and move away from the real -- to maintain a difference from as well as connection to reality and real human emotion -- makes such consolation and connection possible.

Derek Attridge argues that literature has the capacity to exceed the literal communicate function of language. He writes that reading literature involves not just “mechanical and instrumental interpretation,” which converts typographical marks or phonetic sequences into conceptual structures,” but also “an attempt to respond to the otherness, inventiveness, and singularity of the work,” to respond to it creatively and allow it “to take the mind [...] to the borders of its accustomed terrain” in a process similar to a creative, ethical response to another person (79, 80). The double movement he finds in reading could equally apply to writing, or at least to Munro’s aesthetic. She draws on the real people, real relationships, and real emotions, but she also recognizes her material possesses an alterity that escapes her capacity to understand and represent. Her writing inscribes within it the limits of fiction and also gestures at meanings and resonances beyond the instrumental level. This process is generative, pleasurable, and even loving, and as such, similar to the experience of eros.

Unlike “The Ottawa Valley,” which is tied even more closely to autobiography, “The Moons of Jupiter” embodies a much more positive assessment of the act of writing. There is no explicit metafictional commentary to break its artistic affect or reality effect, and there is no narrative commentary to foreclose the possibility of an adequate or loving relationship to the Other through fiction. “Moons” provides catharsis and ends without bitterness. Nevertheless, the last paragraphs do include a backing away from Janet’s connection to her loved ones and from the powers of representation. The image of the Chinese garden underscores both Janet’s determination to carry on and her continuing skepticism of artifice. The Chinese garden is a construction of high culture. It is adjacent to the museum; contains stone camels, warriors, and a tomb; and is surrounded by

evergreens and a high-grilled iron fence (233). Like “Moons” itself, the camels, warriors, and tomb are artistic representations meant to bring comfort and consolation in the face of death. Yet the garden is also a simulacrum; it is a reproduction completely displaced from its temporal and geographic context. Janet looks away from the garden, through the bushes and the fence to watch the people traveling by on the street (233). The image of the tomb is also significant. In ancient China, weapons, clothing, and sometimes people were buried along with royals to accompany them into the afterlife (Bush 1). Janet, however, will not throw herself into her father’s grave or into a state of despair over her estrangement for her daughter; she will not be, as Redekop puts it, a “keeper,” clinging to her attachment to her family, though it is not so much that she “escapes being trapped” in this “role” (172) as it is that she comes to accept these losses. The garden cannot hold Janet’s interest and neither can the tomb, with its relief carvings and stone pictures. Janet “always mean[s]” to look at the tomb’s intricate carvings, and yet she never has, “Not this time, either” (233). In the final lines of the story, Janet leaves the garden to escape the cold and “to have coffee and something to eat” (233). For the most part in “Moons,” representation seems to have a special power. At this moment, however, it fails in face of food and drink. Like the children in the planetarium, for Janet, this kind of artifice is no match for the tangible pleasures of food and drink.

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It may be tempting to read a progression from thesis, to antithesis, to synthesis in the movement from “Walker Brothers Cowboy,” to “The Ottawa Valley,” to “The Moons of Jupiter.” “Walker Brothers Cowboy,” the earliest story, remains truest to the modernist form, displays the least sense of the inadequacy of art, and inscribes its recognition of

alterity in a traditional epiphany. “The Ottawa Valley” moves away from this tradition and dramatizes the Other as overflowing every attempt at representation. Finally, “The Moons of Jupiter” uses a stylized chronology and a highly symbolic pattern of imagery to combine a metafictional critique with a qualified affirmation of the power of fiction to console and express love. Munro herself, however, would likely reject such a linear progression. Munro has said that she “disagree[s] with this picture of writing that you progress from one book to the next and that you do different things, you open up new areas of your own consciousness and for your readers, and that it’s supposed to be a kind of step-ladder” (*Probable* 12). Indeed, her career includes enough returns and revisions in her material to render any such theory of progression impossible. To complicate matters further, Munro said of her fiction in a 1974 interview with Harry Boyle that “I think there’s a kind of love involved, always, in the effort to get at the truth” (*Sunday Supplement*). This interview is closer in time to the composition of “The Ottawa Valley,” which Thacker identifies as taking place in late 1973, than it is to the composition of “The Moons of Jupiter,” which he states was written “during the late 1970s” and published in 1978 (*Writing* 244, 227). For Munro, then, the possibility that writing can be a kind of love existed years before the late 1970s.

Munro’s oeuvre shares more in common with the way she describes fiction in general: not like a road, but like a house. Munro has written that she “can start reading [stories] anywhere; from beginning to end, from end to beginning, from any point in between in either direction” precisely because she does not “take up a story and follow it as if it were a road” (“What is Real?” 224). For her, fiction is “more like a house,” and “Everybody knows what a house does, how it encloses space and makes connections

between one enclosed space and another and presents what is inside in a new way” (224). Munro’s stories and her body of work as a whole give us not a beginning and an end but a series of rooms one can walk around in to find new paths and connections. With this rejection of linearity in mind, this dissertation will now return to the early 1970s to read “Material”: another explicitly ethical story that also gestures at the possibility of fiction as an act of love.

Chapter Four

“This Is Not Enough:” Gesturing Beyond the Aesthetics of Failure in “Material”

As Naomi Morgenstern writes, Alice Munro has throughout her career written stories that “represent the risks of the ethical” (69). During the early to mid 1970s, however, this concern with the ethical was particularly pronounced. “Material,” like “Winter Wind,” “The Ottawa Valley,” and “Home,” was written during this period when, as Robert Thacker describes, Munro was “Acutely concerned with the ethical position of the writer” (*Writing* 253). “Material,” as Robert McGill writes, “considers the relationship between ethical writing and ethical living, and what the criteria for each may be,” though the relationship between the two is far from straightforward (“Daringly” 875). Though its plot is simple, “Material” is deceptively complicated, and critical readings have varied widely.

The unnamed female narrator of “Material” has read a short story by her ex-husband, Hugo, and has been reflecting bitterly on their relationship and on Hugo’s egoist qualities. The narrator tells us that Hugo’s story is first-class fiction and even describes it as “an act [. . .] of special, unsparing, unsentimental love” (*Something* 44). In the final scene, however, rather than writing a letter to Hugo that would consist of “A few graceful, a few grateful, phrases” as she had intended, the narrator writes the “short jabbing sentences” that follow: “*This is not enough, Hugo. You think it is, but it isn’t. You are mistaken, Hugo*” (44). Exactly how or why these shortcomings are not enough is never made explicit. Whether the story is “not enough” because of some aesthetic failing or because, despite its beauty, it does not compensate for his moral failings is a matter of

some debate. The narrator offers a clear critique of Hugo's egoist qualities, yet she is more ambivalent about the value of his story, and a degree of irony hangs over her praise for it.

Despite a tendency to read "Material" as a story of the narrator authoring successful counter-narrative to Hugo's phallogocentric writing, however, ultimately "Material" ends with a sense of frustration and failure similar to other stories from Munro's ethical period. The narrator does not successfully write back to Hugo or even articulate a clear response. Any implicit critique of Hugo's aesthetic vision belongs not to the narrator but to the author function because this critique is embedded in the structure of the story rather than represented as the product of the narrator's internal struggle. The narrator's admiration for Hugo's story is genuine, and the sense in which it is "not enough" extends to literature itself: no literature, no matter how beautiful, can compensate for real-world moral failings, and neither can it adequately represent the Other in all its plenitude. The aesthetic of failure in "Material" registers these facts even as it gestures obliquely at the possibility of a literature responsive to such shortcomings, a possibility that might be even be realized in Hugo's fiction: a response to the Other that constitutes a feeling of literary love.

Given the enigmatic and ironic qualities of "Material," it should be unsurprising there is little consensus as to how the ending, or indeed the story as a whole, should be read. Readings of "Material" vary widely on both major and minor points. Some critics, like Magdalene Redekop and Coral Ann Howells for example, suggest that the narrator is a writer (Redekop 89, Howells *Munro* 3); others, like Bronwen Wallace and Louis MacKendrick, assume she is not (Wallace 59, MacKendrick *Some* 39). Ajay Heble and

MacKendrick assume that the story ends without the narrator writing to Hugo or another audience; Redekop assumes the narrator's account somehow reaches a reading audience (Heble 85, MacKendrick *Some* 39, Redekop 15, 31). E.D. Blodgett reads the key phrase "marvelous clear jelly" (43) from the narrator's appraisal of Hugo's work as ironic. The image, he writes, "of someone hanging in jelly" expresses "a false view of human life" (67). Yet Karen Smythe reminds readers that "jelly [...] is a flexible substance" and reads this passage as genuine praise for a kind of writing that involves the inclusion of "the unresolvable qualities of life, of the fictional truth that, once captured, may be viewed epiphanically" (119). Thacker also reads the phrase mostly positively. He uses in the title of his article describing Munro's "distinctive, retrospective narrative approach," which "is the catalytic factor in [her] substantial art" and allows her to present "a comprehensive understanding to her readers" (MacKendrick, ed. *Probable* 37, 58). Without irony, he applies the narrator's positive evaluation of Hugo's fiction to Munro herself: her writing too is "an act of magic"; "a special, unsparing, unsentimental love"; "A fine and lucky benevolence" (58).²⁹

MacKendrick, and to a lesser extent Smythe, find little laudatory about the narrator. MacKendrick calls her "taut, unaccepting, sour, suspicious," and "a master at finding fault" (*Some* 40). Smythe writes that the narrator learns from Hugo that it is "important to understand "how to ignore or use things" (44) and that her "inability to use the past honestly [...] is the cause of her continued 'unhappiness'" (120). Wallace and

²⁹Thacker does, however, also note an ethical element to this description of Munro's art. In his reading of "Good-by, Myra" he returns to these phrases to describe Myra as "lifted out of life and held in light, suspended in the marvelous clear jelly [Munro] has spent all [her] life learning how to make" in an act of magic, love, and benevolence (45). This loving act of magic, though, is also one that dramatizes the narrator, Helen, "purging herself of guilt" for an ethical failure: Myra's demand of "personal commitment" from Helen as Myra approached death from leukemia "was too much for an eleven-year-old [Helen] to bear" (45). A consideration of whether this purging of guilt through writing constitutes compensation for the earlier, understandable failure or an extension of it falls outside the scope of the analysis.

Lorna Irvine take the opposite approach. Wallace reads “Material” as one of many Munro stories that dramatizes the different ways men and women view the world: women do not seek control by “cutting out” and “denying” what they cannot use; they can “hold everything in a kind of tension” as “a way of coming to terms” (53, 61). Irvine similarly sees “Material” as demonstrating something positive: that women “see with eyes more sensitive to the complexities and necessary contradictions of human existence” (108-9). Isla Duncan does not valorize the narrator as possessing of a vision superior to Hugo’s, but she does find MacKendrick’s view “severe” and notes that the narrator’s account has a “confiding, self-critical quality” that mitigates any sourness (*Narrative* 30, 29).

The enigmatic and ambivalent qualities of “Material” have also been widely noted. Brenda Pfaus calls the narrator of “Material” “typical of most of Munro’s protagonists who find themselves in ambivalent and unresolved positions” (32). Carrington makes a compelling case that much of the tension in “Material” is internal to the narrator; the conflict is not just “between a woman's way of seeing the world and a man’s,” but also “between one particular woman's two very different ways of using language” (*Controlling* 61). The narrator’s story is by no means reportage: as McGill puts it, “Her elliptical manner makes it difficult for readers to form any opinion of [Hugo’s] story other than her own” (“Daringly” 880). The narrator’s subjective take on the events of her own life, perhaps, invites a subjective response by readers.

McGill’s reading is particularly attuned to the ambiguity that pervades the story. Though the narrator’s final statement to Hugo “seems a straightforward assertion that well-written fiction does not redeem bad behaviour and that authors of fiction who appropriate the stories of people they have wronged may be committing further acts of

selfishness and theft,” this condemnation is tempered by the narrator’s own ambivalence (878). McGill reminds us that “the narrator does admire Hugo’s story and uses language sufficiently open to interpretation that Robert Thacker can quote it as a straightforward encomium to the power of authors” (878). The narrator’s words here, McGill argues, can be read “as either praise or condemnation of Hugo’s fiction,” and this ambivalence “underscores the psychological dynamism of the story” such that “one cannot accept the narrator’s statements at face value, much less embrace them as expressions of Munro’s own perspective” (878). Though its condemnation of Hugo’s youthful egoism is clear, “‘Material’ is not only about Hugo’s moral failures, but about the efforts of his ex-wife to articulate her own sense of victimization, to express her anger with her ex-husband, and to make him understand the nature of his transgressions” (875). This struggle by the narrator to express and communicate her anger largely defines the story, and its conclusion is by no means explicit.

McGill observes that “the narrator’s description of marital life with Hugo shows her to be negotiating between resistance to his self-centredness and her own complicity in it” (878). The narrator is indeed ambivalent about her role in the marriage: “She recognizes that he expects her to serve as a biddable wife, and she feels a responsibility to coddle him, while acting as his agent in the wider world,” while at the same, she “resists” and feels “resentment” at this role (878-79). Yet McGill also states that “during this marriage, the couple functioned dyadically, with the affect and loyalty of each directed towards the other and with the two of them defined as one unit holding common interests” (879). The extent to which the couple functioned at all, however, is dubious. The narrator recognizes that it is her job to throw herself “between him and the world”

but she “was failing to do so, by choice perhaps as much as ineptitude for the job. I did not believe in him [. . .] I was not sure he would turn out to be a writer” (35). This ultimate failure to function dyadically undoes the marriage and it results in part from the narrator’s inability to decide if Hugo’s desire to be a writer constitutes a worthy common interest.

McGill points to the fact that the narrator “happily participated during their marriage” in deceptions like the ones Hugo employs in his literary biography as reason to cast doubt on “The extent to which the narrator has the moral high ground” (879); however, these games were not enough to hold the marriage together as the narrator’s ambivalence eventually caused her to lose interest in them. As McGill notes, the narrator says of her marriage to Hugo that “All our life together, the successful part of our life together, was games” (Munro qtd. in McGill 879). These games consist primarily of performing improvised dramas in which they attempt to shock an audience of strangers, or their friends, or themselves. They “made up conversations to startle people on the bus” (36); they called Dotty “the harlot-in-residence” and bragged about her to guests who “stood behind the curtains to catch a glimpse of her going in or out” (33), and they “played in bed that [the narrator] was Lady Chatterley and [Hugo] was Mellors” (36). The extent that their marriage was functional at all, however, is limited. As the narrator’s appositive phrase -- “The successful part” -- tells us, everything about the relationship that falls outside these games also falls outside her definition of success (36).

The narrator’s ambivalence over her role in the marriage comes to work against these games and leads the marriage to collapse. As Duncan observes, “From being a source of amusement to them, Dotty becomes the cause of conflict” (27), a conflict that

occurs long before Hugo's story and that has "serious consequences for the narrator's marriage, for it was never resolved" (29). The narrator eventually becomes less willing to participate in such games at Dotty's expense: "I got fonder of Dotty, used to her, less likely to store up and repeat what she said. I felt more at home with her than I did sometimes with Hugo and our friends" (37). "Material" moves from this observation directly to its central incident. During a rainstorm in the middle of the night, Hugo shuts down the pump that empties water from Dotty's basement apartment. The narrator wakes up and realizes what Hugo has done; they argue, but she does nothing, and the apartment floods (38-39). The narrator could have turned the pump on again, but instead she consoles herself with a litany of excuses: "I said to myself that I did not know how the pump worked, I did not know where to turn it on. I said to myself that I was afraid of Hugo. I entertained the possibility that Hugo might be right, nothing would happen" (39). Only in retrospect does she realize that failing to come to Dotty's aid is her way of turning against Hugo.

The narrator reflects in the present tense on the fact that she did not turn on the pump and figures it as both a failure of character and a lack of commitment to her marriage. Of the option of turning on the pump, she says "I think that is what a woman of firm character would have done. I think that is what a woman who wanted that marriage to last would have done" (39). Instead, she "wanted something to happen, [she] wanted Hugo to crash" (39). After the incident, the narrator is the one who must face Dotty in the morning, and when she discovers that "Dotty's expectation and thrifty relish of misfortune" led her to simply accept the flood as more of her bad luck, she is both

relieved and incredulous at her relief: “We were in luck, I saw. (*We were?*)” (40). This ambivalence, of course, reflects her continuing ambivalence in the marriage.

The flooding of the basement becomes a conflict between the two that they lack the capacity to resolve. Though she escapes a confrontation with Dotty, the narrator argues over the phone with Hugo, who refuses to accept any responsibility for what has happened. This conflict “subsided” but “was never really resolved” (41). Hugo wondered why the narrator made “such a fuss” over the incident, and “Long after” the marriage was over, the narrator “wondered too” (41). She wonders at her failure both to turn on the pump, “taking responsibility for both” of them, “as a patient realistic woman, a really married woman, would have done,” or to tell Dotty or someone else if she “thought it was that important” in this instance to push “Hugo out into the unpleasant world and let him taste trouble” (42). Only retrospectively can she understand this failure as a failure to accept her role in the marriage and also as a failure of voice: “I was not able fully to protect or expose him, only to flog him with blame, desperate sometimes, feeling I would claw his head open to pour my vision into it, my notion of what had to be understood” (42). She lacked the means to commit to a course of action and to communicate with Hugo to make him understand her vision. Her desperation at this failure leads to this violent, animalistic imagery.

In her own mind, the narrator holds this inability to choose, to speak, and to act on her resistance as a sign of weakness: “What presumptuousness, what cowardice, what bad faith,” even if it was “Unavoidable” (42). Her failure was intractable because of her failure to understand or articulate her resistance to fulfilling the role Hugo asked of her, or even to decide if this resistance was misplaced. “Material,” then, as McGill writes, is

“not only about Hugo’s moral failures, but about the efforts of his ex-wife to articulate her own sense of victimization, to express her anger with her ex-husband, and to make him understand the nature of his transgressions” (875). Her efforts to communicate this vision extend to her reflections on Hugo’s story in the present. McGill describes her retelling of Dotty’s story as seeming to rehearse

a process of angry, incomplete communication -- the same process she describes as dominating her interactions with Hugo after the incident with the water pump [. . .] She was unable to make up her mind about whether to oppose or ally herself with Hugo during their marriage, and her narrative is now marked by an analogous inability to speak to him directly or articulate her story for a broader audience. (883)

As my earlier survey of “Material” criticism indicates, however, whether or not the narrator is indeed unable to address Hugo directly or articulate her story for a broader audience is a matter of some critical disagreement. Even McGill writes that the structure of the narrator’s story is “frustratingly ambiguous: although “Material” seems a case of writing back, it is not clear that the narrator *is* writing” (875). The question of “whether the narrator actually *is* writing,” according to McGill, “may be the most important [one] that ‘Material’ poses to readers,” yet as McGill himself notes, the possibility that the narrator is a writer “cannot be corroborated by explicit textual evidence” (881). However, not only is there no explicit textual evidence that the narrator is a writer, but the balance of evidence indicates that she is not, in fact, writing or a writer.

The narrator’s only attempt at writing in the story is a letter broken off after three sentences, a letter which she deems unfit to send through the mail (44). Only a counter-

factual argument can recoup the possibility that the narrator is a writer. McGill raises this argument: “The question lurks: in what medium *would* it be appropriate? The obvious answer—one Magdalene Redekop assumes to be the case (31)—is that the narrator has found a better vehicle for her self-expression in writing” (McGill 880). Heble comes to a similar conclusion. He observes that “the narrator only *thinks* about writing to her ex-husband [...] she too has ‘something’ that she means to tell, but that ‘something’ finally remains untold” (85). Yet he dismisses the fact that there is no explicit indication the protagonist is a writer: “we realize,” he writes, “that she too is a writer” because “she is indeed a skilful manipulator of words and phrases,” which “is clear in the kinds of figurative devices she employs” (85).

Two problems exist in this argument. First, in the absence of any evidence that readers are to believe this story was written by the narrator, “the skilful manipulation of words and phrases” in “Material” must on some level be attributed to Munro, not the narrator; otherwise, every first-person story could be understood to operate at a metafictional level as a tale written by its narrator, rather than as a representation of a character’s voice. If, and I believe Heble is correct here, “her ostensible pose of artlessness, [...] her attempt to deliver a message in ‘some not-outright way,’ turns out to be an artful ploy” (85), then the ploy is Munro’s, not the narrator’s. Second, that “the narrator’s message in ‘Material’ reveals itself to be stylized, to be not simply real, but artistic” as Heble writes, presupposes a distinction between some type of writing that is “simply real” as opposed to “stylized and artistic” (85). It remains unclear what “simply real” language could be. The rhetorical strategies and figurative language he identifies—*anaphora*, *conduplicatio*—are equally available to a work of fiction or non-fiction, and all

discourse, not just artful discourse, is motivated. Perhaps, as McGill writes, the narrator “apostrophizes the absent Hugo as if her narrative were an extension of her letter to him” (880), but even in this instance, there is no necessary connection between the presence of these rhetorical devices and her ability to write.

Further evidence exists that the narrator is not a writer. She points out her own inability to transform her memories into art: both she and Hugo share the “same bank of memory,” yet for him it is “ripe and usable, a paying investment,” while for her it is “scraps and oddments, useless baggage” (43). She also states that she is “content with [. . .] clichés” when she constructs a mental image of someone; unlike Hugo, she has not “the imagination or good will to proceed differently” (29). Her daughter, Clea, appears to be such a cliché. Clea is almost a caricature of a superficial teenage girl. She is obsessed with her weight and interested in her father only “from the point of view of heredity:” was he skinny, “did he have a bad complexion, did he have a high I.Q., did the women in his family have big breasts?” (28). The narrator’s view of Clea is even more one-dimensional than the image of Hugo that she constructs from the “one smudgy picture” of him from his book (29). Furthermore, her husband Gabe almost totally escapes her ability to represent him: she “cannot describe him;” he “remained, remains, mysterious” to her (26).

The narrator cannot conceive of either her daughter, her husband, or Hugo with the honesty, the “special, unsparing, unsentimental love” that Hugo brings to his representation of Dotty; she lacks his mastery of the “clear jelly” of fiction that he “has spent all his life learning how to make” (43). Her lack of “the imagination or good will to proceed differently” and imagine a more life-like figure, more robust than the “shopworn

and simple [...] disguises” which “in life [...] are all we seem to want, all anybody can manage” are contrasted explicitly with fiction, “Hugo’s business,” in which “such disguises would not do” (29). Writing here is figured as a way to be more attentive and to push beyond whatever convenient and static mental images one might possess. The narrator continues to lack this ability. Hugo, though, has moved beyond using Dotty solely as a figure of fun. Previously, he dismissed the narrator’s suggestion that “he ought to pay more attention to Dotty if he wanted to be a writer” because “He was writing a verse play” (32-33). His story, however, shows that he has turned his attention to Dotty and realized she is a worthy subject of art. He has even remembered and represented a fact about Dotty that the narrator had forgotten: “When you were talking she would listen with her mouth slightly open, nodding, then she would chime in on the last word of your sentence with you” (42). Hugo uses this “touching and irritating habit” to craft his story, while the narrator had forgotten it completely (42).

The most telling indication the narrator is not a writer, however, comes while she considers Hugo’s claim he was once a telephone lineman. She knows the truth is that he spent two weeks painting telephone poles one summer before he quit because he could not stand the heat, just as she herself quit a boring job folding bandages at Victoria Hospital. She then reflects “if I was a writer, and was listing all my varied and colorful occupations, I don’t think I would put down *bandage folder*” (30). Her speculation of what she would do if she were a writer demonstrates at the very least that she does not consider herself a writer.

As McGill’s note about the use of apostrophe helps demonstrate, the best textual evidence indicates that the narrator is not a writer or writing, and that the first and third

sections, at any rate, have more of an oral than literary quality. McGill further notes, “an imperative remark – ‘Look at Hugo's picture’ – might suggest that she is speaking to someone present” (24). The repeated use of questions, rhetorical and otherwise – “will people really go [...] and sit in rows listening to these vain quarrelsome men?” (24), or “What happened to Mary Frances?” (29), or “He has been sporadically affiliated with various academic communities. What does that mean?” (29) also create the impression of a listener to whom such questions are addressed. Margaret Gail Osachoff also notes that the narrator “gives details of her past life that she would not need to remind herself of,” which indicates that her story “is confided to a listener” (MacKendrick, ed. *Probable* 75), though the presence of these facts could also be understood as the result of “an implied author ordering and transcribing the narrator’s thoughts and emotions,” a possibility that McGill raises (880-81). Beyond the diction and syntax, the protagonist’s frequent clarification and self-correction might also indicate that the story is crafted to create a sense of being extemporaneously composed and addressed to an implied auditor, either present, to whom the protagonist speaks, or imagined, as she thinks.

McGill attributes some ambiguity around whether the narrator’s account is written or spoken to that fact that “it has the shape of a written story but retains the apostrophic markers of a verbal invective that has gone unspoken” (884). The structure of “Material,” however, is varied. The opening section of “Material” is digressive and anecdotal. It is marked by exposition rather than dramatic conflict or a strong narrative drive. The narrator reflects on the literary life, her marriage, Hugo, her husband Gabriel, her daughter, and the biography on Hugo’s book jacket before making a subtle transition to a more typical first-person story of her life with Hugo and their interaction with Dotty. The

narration here includes a clear dramatic conflict between characters and a plot that drives to a climax – the flooding of Dotty’s apartment – and then a denouement. The final pages return to a style more like the dramatic monologue, with questions, such as “when did Hugo ever talk to Dotty?” (42), and imperatives, such as “Don’t be offended” (43). Plot is essentially absent as readers are returned to the narrator’s reflections.

Structurally, then, “Material” is something of a hybrid. While the second section has a simpler and more traditional story structure, the first and third parts might best be understood as a dramatic monologue: a form, as Redekop notes, associated with Robert Browning and his “fascination with the relation between art and evil” (88). Perhaps the continuity between these sections indicates each section should be attributed to the narrator rather than an author function, but in any case, there is little evidence to suggest that the character is *writing* a response to Hugo. If she is, as McGill suggests is possible, “another literary author in the family, one who has been effaced and oppressed by Hugo’s ambition” (881), then she continues to be effaced long after she has ended her marriage to Hugo because she still cannot realize any literary ambition.

Unlike the patterned movement in “The Moons of Jupiter,” the movement in “Material” from a sense of orality to traditional narrative and back to orality lacks the surreptitious pattern to create a clear sense of catharsis or closure. The effect in “Material” is rather one of surprise and even confusion when, after more of the narrator’s reflections, the story appears to be heading for a conclusion in which she sends a congratulatory, graceful letter to Hugo to recognize his talent, but instead breaks it off with her ambiguous condemnation: “*This is not enough, Hugo. You think it is, but it isn't. You are mistaken, Hugo*” (44). The narrator of “Material” lacks the intellectual control of

Janet in “Moons” as well as her ability to separate herself from her past and those around her: to ignore, in a way, the impending loss of her daughter and her father and pursue instead the practical comfort and necessity of a cup of coffee and something to eat (233). That Janet has these abilities and is a writer while the protagonist of “Material” lacks them and is likely not provides an illuminating contrast.

McGill notes that in contrast to Hugo, for whom “writing is auto-erotic, something for which he needs silence and solitude,” the narrator enjoys collaborative “creative pursuits” (882). Indeed, it is the narrator who teaches herself to play “Wolsey’s Wilde” on the piano so that the two can play a duet, and there is no indication this occurs at Hugo’s behest (30); it is the narrator who tries to contribute to Hugo’s development as a writer by encouraging him to “pay more attention to Dotty,” a tip that he at the time dismissed (33). Hugo’s life as a writer was in fact always a world apart from the narrator: “he lived,” she says, “in a world whose rewards and punishments were as strange, as hidden from me, as if he had been a lunatic” (35). Hugo had even “trained” her never to say the word “*write*”—that word, she says “was like a bare wire to us” (35). The “quasi-authorial activities” the couple performs remain fundamentally separate from Hugo’s writing. Even their improvised collaborative dramas are fundamentally different than the writing Hugo does now. They might both be tricks, but only Hugo’s are “lovely” and “honest” (43). These dramas are ultimately selfish and dishonest. McGill writes of one of these games in which “the narrator sat with Hugo in a bar while he berated her loudly for fictive infidelities, and they savoured the reactions of the people around them. Afterward, they laughed until they had to ‘hold each other up’” (879). In this game, as McGill articulates, though “they rehearse infidelities, in fact they are shoring up their allegiance

to one another, figuratively as well as literally supporting each other, savouring the intimacy of the public charade, and defining themselves against their audience, whose alienation is the point of the exercise” (879). These games exist to alienate their audience and also to stage and excise social risk. Even if these games are sexually charged, they are devoid of love: special, unsparing, unsentimental, or otherwise.

Elsewhere in Munro’s oeuvre, such games are associated with failed or wasted writers. In “Differently,” Georgia and Maya play similar games and have similar creative interests but are by no means writers. Georgia once took a creative writing course, but the instructor told her the story she wrote had “Too many things. Too many things going on at the same time; also too many people” (*Friend* 216). According to the instructor, at least, Georgia needed to “Think” and find “the important thing” she wanted readers to “pay attention to” (216). Though she does write a story that pleases her instructor, she feels it “was a fake” and makes “a long list of all the things that had been left out and handed it in as an appendix” (216). Georgia eventually gives up on writing: the course was “not a total loss” only because she went on to live with the instructor (216). Maya, her ex-husband tells us, “had a dazzling imagination” and “could have written fantasy or science fiction [...] She was a creative person, without any doubt about it. But you could not get her to seriously use her creativity” (221). Georgia and Maya are both creative, but rather than putting this creativity to serious use, they play “games” and “talked in a headlong fashion about their lives, childhoods, problems, husbands” (227). In restaurants Maya “pretended to be a widow who had served with her husband in various outposts of the Empire” while Georgia was “a grumpy, secretly Socialistic hired companion named Miss Amy Jukes,” or the two “pretended to be refugees from a commune, where they had

both been the attendants or concubines of a folksinger named Bill Bones” (227).

Significantly, perhaps, both Georgia and Maya are unfaithful to their husbands and enjoy indiscreet talk.

McGill is correct then to note a connection between such collaboration and eroticism in that there seems to be some links among creativity, game-playing, and infidelity, but these links and these collaborations come from the women’s lack of capacity to create art. In the opening, the narrator describes the women who attended literary events as falling “in love” with the authors, despite the fact she sees these men as “vain” and “quarrelsome,” “Bloated, opinionated, untidy men [. . .] cosseted by the academic life, the literary life, by women” (24). These women “imagine there is power” in such men and are attracted to them because they are removed from the literary life: they are “married to engineers or doctors or businessmen” (25). Their separation from the literary life makes it possible for most of them to attribute to literature some “enormous transitory hope,” even if this means they must “absorb the contempt of the men on the platform as if they deserved it;” in fact “they half believe they do deserve it, because of their houses and expensive shoes, and their husbands who read Arthur Hailey” (25). The narrator, like the men’s wives, must temper any admiration or transitory hope with the knowledge of the sense of entitlement belonging to Hugo and his ilk. The wives do not attend these events because

They are buying groceries or cleaning up messes or having a drink. Their lives are concerned with food and mess and houses and cars and money. They have to remember to get the snow tires on and go to the bank and take back the beer

bottles, because their husbands are such brilliant, such talented incapable men, who must be looked after for the sake of the words that come from them. (25)

The sarcasm in this passage indicates the difficulty women face in sustaining a belief in the power of the men's work or attaching any transitory hope to their literature once they are responsible for the unpaid labour that provides these men with their privilege.

Furthermore, the games that Hugo and the narrator played are at least a degree removed from the sort of literature that inspires this sense of power and hope. The games exist, rather, to amuse, to titillate, and to excise anxiety and social risk. McGill writes that the game in which Hugo and the narrator perform the roles of Mellors and Lady Chatterley literalizes the "association between literature, collaboration, and eroticism" (882); however, this game also stages social risks. On the one hand, the Chatterley-Mellors dynamic acts a theatrical reversal of the economy of their actual situation, in which the narrator's labour is expected to enable Hugo's intellectual and aristocratic pursuit of art. Unlike Sir Clifford, Chatterley's effete intellectual husband who writes stories and poems, Hugo has no domestic servants to attend his needs, so he looks to the protagonist to "throw herself between him and the world" (35). Hugo's expectation for a support system drawn from the ranks of his female companions, a trait for which the narrator excoriates him over the course of the story, makes conflict inevitable and therefore poses a social risk: that his relationships with woman will eventually collapse, leaving him to move on to seek another arrangement. The fact that Hugo has had at least three wives underscores the reality of this risk. In this fantasy, Hugo becomes Mellors the gameskeeper: a worker and source of sexual power who has nicknamed his penis John Thomas (Lawrence 315). The narrator takes the role of the Lady Chatterley, assumes a

“ladylike” voice, and becomes the sophisticated intellectual sustained by the invisible labour of others (36).

On the other hand, this fantasy also stages and excises risk to Hugo’s masculinity. Lady Chatterly, after all, finds satisfaction not with her husband Sir Clifford but with Mellors, an essentially common man who possesses a sense of mystery. Similarly, after the narrator’s relationship to Hugo, an aspiring writer and intellectual, the narrator finds herself with Gabe, the type of man who is “commonplace, perhaps” though she “had not known any” and to whom she was attracted to initially because of “some half-fraudulent mystery” she saw in his accent and his past (27). There is a clear, if by no means exact, parallel between Lady Chatterley’s lack of fulfillment with the intellectual aristocrat and attraction to the more practical, commonplace man.

The fantasy allows Hugo to take on the hyper-masculine identity of the working-class labourer. The biography from his book leads us to believe he craves such an identity, likely as a way of excising the threat that writing verse plays and playing the recorder posed to his manhood: the narrator describes these activities as “fey” (31). He wants the power of Mellors – to be masculine, sexual, and wise, though not intellectual – but his intellectual pursuits and social capital align him more closely with Sir Clifford, the impotent aristocrat. Their actual game expresses both his desire for the power of the phallus and his anxiety at lacking it: he “canna find John Thomas!” he says (36). By assuming the role of Mellors searching for his phallus, Hugo mitigates the threat to his masculinity that his lifestyle poses while expressing his anxiety over his identity as a man and an artist. The narrator as Lady Chatterley has swallowed his penis thereby relieving him of his anxiety while ingesting his power and consuming him just as he consumes and

then rejects his various wives. However, the fact that she ingests the phallus in her fantasy life actually underscores its absence in her own life.

Both Redekop and McGill point to the scene in which the protagonist and Hugo play-act in bed as Lady Chatterley and Mellors as a potential dramatization of the narrator assuming or reappropriating a male, patriarchal voice. McGill describes the scene as “a figurative incorporation of a phallogocentric voice” (884), while Redekop asks “Has the narrator appropriated some of the power invested in Hugo, the writer? [...] Is the voice of the woman writer powerful only to the extent that it has swallowed and digested the voices of male authors like Lawrence?” (31). Given the narrator’s inability to write, however, and the fact that this game too stages and excises social risk, the answer must be no. Neither can “The narrator’s eventual discovery of Hugo’s short story” be “akin to the revelation of a past infidelity” in which Hugo “has been turning literary tricks with Dotty, sharing an intimacy with her by representing her in his fiction and undermining the narrator’s faith that her collaboration with him was monogamous” (McGill 882). The games Hugo and the narrator played were different from the fiction that Hugo writes, and as intimate as Hugo’s portrait of Dotty might be, it is still something she has had “done to her” and of which she remains ignorant (43).

While the narrator certainly resented her role in the marriage and seemed to long for a more mutually satisfying relationship with Hugo, the extent to which she possessed literary ambitions, collaborative or otherwise, is also unclear. Not only does she not identify as a writer, but neither does she identify Hugo as one either. She “was not sure [Hugo] would turn out to be a writer [...] He did not have the authority [she] thought a writer should have” (35). She believed writers had “a difference about them, some hard

and shining, rare and intimidating quality they had from the beginning, and Hugo didn't have it," and that Hugo someday "would recognize this" (35). The games they played together, then – the clever phrases they held in common (31), the mocking of Dotty in front of their friends (33), the sensational made-up conversations to startle people on the bus (36), the Lady Chatterly role-playing in bed (36) – may have been collaborative and creative and perhaps even "quasi-authorial" as McGills states (882), but for the narrator they were separate from writing literature.

Contrary to McGill's assertions, the narrator does not seem to have a desire, ambivalent or otherwise, to return to a life with Hugo. McGill reads the narrator's vituperative response to Hugo as a possible manifestation of her desire for him: "Her description of women's misguided erotic devotion to male writers could suggest a bitter recognition not only of her past but of a continuing desire for Hugo: as her initial praise of his story makes clear, she is not as different from those women as she might appear" (882), or "Telling Hugo to shut up, she is creating space for her own voice. Yet it also manifests her continuing desire to converse intimately with him" (882). He reads her diatribe against Hugo as an attempt to "underscore her distance from Hugo," but one that is a continuation of "the same sorts of quasi-authorial activities she pursued with him during her marriage" and that therefore "also suggests a yearning for that relationship and an attempt to recapture her creative collaborations with him" (882). Her diatribe, however, is not collaborative but an attack, and it is an attack Hugo will never hear. This diatribe does not recall the games Hugo and the narrator played so much as it "seems to rehearse a process of angry, incomplete communication," as McGill writes elsewhere (883).

The narrator seems to continue to value literature as her commentary on Hugo's story indicates, yet there is little evidence she wishes to return to her old life. In fact, there is solid textual evidence that the narrator is happy to have left Hugo and the literary world behind. The phrase "I haven't opened a literary journal in a dozen years, praise God" is of course hyperbolic and perhaps fueled by bitterness as well as tinged with irony, but it literally expresses gratitude at being outside literary culture (24). Far from yearning for Hugo, the narrator seems to prefer Gabe, the man to whom she remains married. McGill claims that the narrator "protests that Gabe is reticent about himself" (883) and ascribes to Gabe a sense of "cold detachment" (877), yet the narrator never voices any sentiments regarding Gabe that are clearly pejorative. She does say that "Long after [Gabe] became my lover and after he became my husband he remained, remains, mysterious to me" but rather than protesting this lack of knowledge of the depths of his soul, this mystery seems to fuel a sense of attraction (26).

The passage goes on to catalogue Gabe's physical features and emphasizes his smoothness, substantialness, and sense of calm: "His face curves out smoothly and his eyes, set shallowly in his head, curve out too under the smooth pink lids. The wrinkles he has are traced on top of this smoothness, this impenetrable surface; they are of no consequence. His body is substantial, calm. He used to be a fine, rather lazy-looking, skater" (26). There is little reason to read this passage pejoratively, especially in contrast to her memories of Hugo: "crew-cut and skinny, with the bones of his body and even of his skull casually, precariously, joined and knitted together, so that there was something uncoordinated, unexpected about the shifting planes of his face as well as the movements, often dangerous, of his limbs" (26). Gabe is the embodiment of calm and substance while

Hugo is precarious and uncoordinated. The narrator, it seems, remains attracted to Gabe and appears content with him in a way that she did not with Hugo. Gabe is unreadable and unperturbable, in stark contrast to Hugo, but that is not necessarily a bad thing

The narrator “cannot describe [Gabe] without a familiar sense of capitulation,” or as she puts it more succinctly, she “cannot describe him” though she “could describe Hugo [...] in great detail” (26); however, rather than lacking any quality that Hugo possesses, Hugo seems to be the one who cannot measure up to Gabe. There was no “mystery of this sort about Hugo” (27). She “did not miss” this sense of mystery, “did not know about it, maybe would not have believed in it” at the time, because she “believed in something else, then” (27). But the fact that she believed in something else *then* suggests that now, she no longer believes in this same thing. Now, perhaps, she believes in mystery, in Gabe's lack of reflection, and would miss it if she were to lose it. Though she did not know Hugo “all the way through,” the part she “did know was in [her] blood and from time to time would give [her] a poison rash” (27). There is “None of that with Gabriel, he does not disturb me, any more than he is disturbed himself” (27). This recognition of distance and ability to coexist with difference could be evidence of a genuinely loving relationship, one in which each partner's individuality is recognized and is allowed to remain uncompromised: a direct contrast to the narrator's relationship with Hugo, in which she was expected to take a supporting role.

McGill is inclined to read Gabe's reluctance to disturb or to be disturbed as an ethical failure. Gabe and Hugo have an affinity, McGill writes, in their “unwillingness or inability to make sympathetic connections with others” (877). The primary evidence of this failure is that Gabe “pointedly chooses not to ask the narrator how she is feeling” in

the final scene (877). Yet in this scene, the passage in question states that Gabe sacrifices his own desire for social interaction in order to give her space and twice refers to this act as one of respect: Gabe “might have meant to talk to me, to ask me to have coffee, or a drink, with him, but he respected my unhappiness as he always does; he respected the pretense that I was not unhappy but preoccupied, burdened with these test papers; he left me alone to get over it” (44). Reading this scene as evidence of an ethical failure ignores both the selfless aspect of Gabe's inaction and the repeated use of the word respect. Using these lines as evidence that Gabe, like Hugo, refuses “to feel an obligation to others” in contrast to the narrator, who “remains intensely conscious of the call of the other” presumes that what constitutes an ethical response to the Other must always consist of an attempt to make a sympathetic connection (877). By contrast, within the context of both the story and the passage itself, a failure to respect the protagonist's unhappiness and a failure to respect her pretense of busyness might be understood more logically as an egoist action, one displaying a belief that her unhappiness is within Gabe's power to fix. Alternatively, such an action might also evince a desire to return the protagonist to social interaction rather than giving her the time and space to come to terms with her emotions.

In the final scene, the narrator has still not come to terms with her emotions. Gabe has “left [her] alone to get over it” (44); she is still struggling to put her bitterness behind her, and though the wording of the final line indicates she is confident that she will, she has not yet. Within the confines of “Material,” the narrator does not get over her emotional reaction or come to terms with it via an act of intellect: she simply waits for it to fade as she marks a pile of test papers (44). Far from authoring or even attempting to author a corrective or redemptive narrative, the narrator remains unable to articulate a

coherent response to Hugo's fiction, and she fails to write a response to the story at all beyond the "short jabbing sentences she had never planned" and cannot send through the mail (44). Perhaps the narrator's response to Hugo's story throughout "Material" should be understood as the result of her rhetorical capability rather than attributed to an author function, but even if this is the case, her response is nevertheless represented as primarily spoken or thought and spontaneous and not on par with literary fiction. The narrator's account, as McGill writes, indeed "traces the ethical and material foundations of Dotty's situation" and does not, like Hugo, turn "Dotty into an aesthetic product" (885); however, it does not create an aesthetic product at all. Moreover, because readers have no direct access to Hugo's story and precious little indication of how it is written, we cannot be sure that his account does not trace the ethical and material foundations of Dotty's situation as well as create an aesthetic product.

Hugo's story appears to be first-rate fiction that exceeds a simplistic or exploitative account. Of course, readers can never know precisely why Hugo's story is "*not enough*" because she never clearly articulates it, and she may not know herself. However, the narrator's respect for Hugo's fiction seems genuine on some level. Readers have little recourse but to accept her evaluation: "Hugo's is a very good story, as far as I can tell, and I think I can tell. How honest this is and how lovely I had to say as I read. I had to admit. I was moved by Hugo's story" (43). The narrator's previous denunciations of Hugo's biography were clear and vituperative; here, they are tempered only with "Ironical objections" of which she is "half-ashamed" (43). The narrator insists repeatedly on her admiration for the story: "I respect what has been done. I respect the intention and the effort and the result" (43). She says "*there is no getting around*" the fact that it is "an

act of magic, [. . .] of a special, unsparing, unsentimental love” [emphasis added] (43). It is as if she wishes there were a way around it -- a way for her to consider the story exploitative or flawed so that she would not have to struggle to reconcile her genuine distaste for Hugo with her genuine admiration for his story. The ambivalence that this tension creates could easily be the source of the irony in this passage.

Moreover, most of the objections the narrator raises, however ironic, seem to apply to literature as a whole as much as, and even more than, they do to Hugo’s story in particular. After the narrator expresses her gratitude for the story -- “I was, I am glad of it,” -- she says “and I am not moved by tricks. Or if I am, they have to be good tricks. Lovely tricks, honest tricks” (43). McGill has noted that tricks not only carries a connotation of treachery but also of “some special technique or knack” as well as “a sexual connotation” (881). The use of tricks here, however, is in reference to the narrator’s reading habits as a whole and therefore refers to literature in general as much as Hugo’s story. The narrator seems to think that his story might exceed the level of mere trickery, but even if it does not, at least his tricks are lovely and honest. Whether or not any fiction can surpass that level of honesty and beauty is not raised as a possibility.

McGill also draws attention to the narrator’s use of the word *lifted*: in Hugo’s story, she sees Dotty “‘lifted out of life and held in light” (Munro qtd. in McGill 887). McGill notes that “‘lifted’ from life carries the connotation of theft” (877), though it might equally mean merely to raise to a higher position. Of course, the prospect of being taken “out of life” bears a certain frightening implication, but regardless, the phrase as a whole attributes Hugo’s abilities to his mastery of the writing process. His ability to lift her out of life and hold her in light, however dubious on one level, is a result of “the

marvelous clear jelly that Hugo has spent all his life learning how to make” (43). There is no direct evidence, then, to suggest that his creation of a “special, unsparing, unsentimental love” reflects anything but the highest achievement of literature (43). Any pejorative connotations attached to her evaluation could attach to literary writing as a whole. As an individual, Hugo may be corrupted by masculine arrogance, but there is no indication that the same is true for his story. McGill writes that “Material” “documents the twin failures of Hugo and the narrator to depict Dotty’s position adequately” (885), but readers cannot know that Hugo fails to depict Dotty adequately except to the extent that all fiction, all language, fails to reach full adequacy with its subject.

The narrator’s speculation regarding Dotty’s reaction to the story might suggest something untoward about it, but even then such speculation is far from conclusive. To the best of the narrator’s knowledge, Dotty has not nor ever will read the story or know of its existence. The narrator can only guess that she “wouldn’t care for it, probably, if she did know” (43). Yet, the narrator’s parenthetic observation just a few lines previously reminds us that “not everybody [. . .] does understand and value” the act of fiction (43). The narrator might very well be speculating that the reason Dotty or anyone else would not care for the story has less to do with any of its shortcomings and more to do with an inability to understand and value the act of literary writing. Perhaps the story can be construed of as an invasion of privacy: that Hugo had no right to author a story based on someone whom he treated so shabbily. Even this possibility, however, pulls the critique away from the aesthetic and toward the material world; there is nothing wrong with his writing, only his behaviour. The narrator seems to be struggling not with anything

offensive about the text itself but rather with the fact that a man who is such an egoist in his personal life has learned to create something beautiful in fiction.

The letter she originally intends to write to Hugo would recognize his abilities. The letter would recognize that Hugo can do something she cannot: turn their shared memories into a “paying investment” (43). It would include “a few graceful, a few grateful, phrases” and offer an “Acknowledgement” that, contrary to what she had expected, he has become a writer. She fails to write such a letter and fails to craft a viable response at all: the sentences she composes are not fit to constitute “an argument to send through the mail” (44). The narrator’s failure then is not just, as McGill observes, to depict Dotty adequately because she treats “Dotty’s victimhood principally as an extension of her own grievances; telling Dotty’s story, she is still working out her own anger with Hugo” (885-86). The narrator fails to offer a coherent response at all. As McGill writes, the narrator “was unable to make up her mind about whether to oppose or ally herself with Hugo during their marriage, and her narrative is now marked by an analogous inability to speak to him directly or articulate her story for a broader audience” (883). This inability represents not just a failure to write but a failure to decide.

Significantly, the lines that follow the narrator’s “short, jabbing sentences” that condemn Hugo push her anger away from the literary. Her wrath is rather directed at men like Hugo *and* Gabe for their feeling of authority: “Both of them have decided what to do about everything they run across in this world, what attitude to take, how to ignore or use things [. . .] They are not *at the mercy*. Or think they are not” (44). The narrator continues to be unable to decide what to do, or what attitude to take, or how to ignore or use things. Her failure is less literary in this sense than one more broadly associated with a failure of

logos. The extent to which one should read this failure as bitterness at her lack of intellectual resources, as evidence of her continuing struggle against phallogocentrism, or as some combination of both is not clearly determined in the text. Hugo's male egoism is certainly offensive, and while we need not necessarily read Gabe as cold and detached, he does to an extent represent a lack of self-reflection and a lack of interest in fiction beyond the work of a man to whom he had "a plausible connection" (27). Yet logos, though not phallogocentrism, is no doubt as necessary for writing a story as building a bridge, and the narrator's inability to speak and decide remains a failure.

To an extent, this failure represents a paradox: "Material" articulates a recognition of the imperfection and inadequacy, on some level, of any attempt to decide, to speak, and to use, but it does so from within an aesthetic product that is itself the creation of a knowing, understanding consciousness.³⁰ This critique, however, must ultimately be attributed to Munro. Any successful struggle to go beyond a logocentric or phallogocentric mode of literature is not located in the narrator's internal conflict but rather embedded in the structure of "Material." As in "The Ottawa Valley," "Material" stages a failure of voice and of understanding. This failure exposes the limits of the mind to understand and language to represent, though in this case it is not just an aesthetic or personal failure but more a broadly intellectual one. The aesthetic of "Material" seems to be working toward a writing free from phallogocentrism and pushing at the limits of logos itself.

This critique, this pushing at the limits, can only ever be oblique because like deconstruction, Munro is working from within a tradition she seeks to exceed. McGill

³⁰Robert Fulford offers a similar observation. He calls "Material" a "marvelously duplicitous and contradictory act," attacks the literary world from within it but also "attacks through the narrator the idea of organizing life in print" even though "the story itself is superbly organized" (H5).

observes that all writing for Munro “is potentially a manner of betrayal” (886); as such, the narrator’s response to Hugo’s story is represented as a failure of voice and as a means of mitigating this betrayal. In its enigmatic conclusion, however, “Material” never forecloses the possibility that the sense of love in Hugo’s story is genuine. The reason Hugo’s story is never directly represented, then, might be less as a result of bad faith on the part of the narrator and more because such love cannot be directly represented, only gestured at, to preserve a sense of difference that escapes the understanding consciousness. Perceiving this sense of love involves reading silences in literature, like the ones around Hugo’s story or the naming of the moons scene in “The Moons of Jupiter.”

As McGill writes, “Material” remains “too complicated to be taken as didactic in some straightforwardly moralistic way” (887); however, that writing for Munro does have a moral dimension seems clear. Moreover, while the aesthetic critique in “Material” is oblique, its critique of Hugo’s sense of entitlement is apparent, which suggests Osachoff’s contention that in “Material,” “Perhaps [. . .] Art is not enough; Art is not a substitute for sympathy and understanding” (*Probable* 76) is indeed correct. As for Munro herself, while McGill reminds us that she has indeed “asserted her right to use real-world material in fiction” (886), she has also exhibited discretion in her publishing record, which suggests she holds that the rights of those who form the raw material of her stories are not inconsequential.

Thacker details how Munro kept “Home” out of *Something I’ve Been Meaning To Tell You*. “Home” was based on the real events surrounding Munro’s father’s failing health during the Thanksgiving weekend of 1973 (*Writing* 267). “Owing to its depiction

of her father's situation and precise, unflattering detail it contains about her stepmother," Munro withheld "Home" from the collection and instead published it in *New Canadian Stories*, "an annual anthology of new work published by Oberon," in which Munro "thought there was little chance either" her father or stepmother would discover it (244). Munro's reality-directed writing, then, involves a negotiation between the rights of her material and her rights as an artist: she did, after all, write and publish the story, although she took care to diminish any hurtful impact it might have had. The act of writing itself, for Munro, involves a similar negotiation between her artistic powers and her recognition that the Other will always exceed the grasp of her understanding consciousness. This negotiation carries the risk of ending in betrayal and ethical failure, but it also carries the possibility of producing something beautiful and akin to love.

Chapter Five

“The Honour of Knowing”: Loving Creation in “Deep-Holes”

The question of how to understand and create a loving relationship with the Other -- whether as a writer, a daughter, a partner, or simply a human being -- is one Alice Munro has returned to again and again. Such returns, as Robert Thacker notes, are characteristic of Munro’s work, in which “story follow[s] upon story, reconnecting, redefining” (*Rest* 6). “Deep-Holes” continues Munro’s investment in the risk of the ethical and the possibility of love in ways that recall and refigure stories like “Material,” “Meneseteung,” and especially “Miles City, Montana.” As in “Material,” near the end of “Deep-Holes,” a female protagonist experiences a moment of surprising anger directed at a former loved one who has re-entered her life after a chance discovery by a family member. In this instance, however, the rage is directed not at a former lover for his male chauvinism but rather at an estranged son, Kent. Kent has rejected bourgeois materialism and a role in social reproduction via the family in a way that recalls the actions of Almeda Roth in “Meneseteung,” yet he combines this rejection with an egotism similar to the chauvinist Hugo of “Material.”

Most striking, however, is how “Deep-Holes” revisits themes from “Miles City, Montana.” In “Miles City,” an unnamed narrator travels by car with her husband Andrew and her two children, Cynthia and Meg, from Vancouver to Southern Ontario via the United States. As Magdalene Redekop has explored in *Mothers and Other Clowns*, this narrator experiences an internal tension that defines the story. On the one hand, she feels a need to cultivate a sense of self separate from her social role in a process linked to artistic creation: to be what she calls “A watcher” (*Progress* 88). On the other, she feels a

responsibility to care for her family and maintain a social role that is opposed to this function: to be “a keeper” (88). The watcher-keeper dynamic is reflected both in the story’s form, which is closely tied to its narrator’s consciousness, and in its resolution: the narrator herself manages to balance her watching and keeping just in time to avert the near-drowning of her child Meg. In the final paragraphs, the narrator does not so much resolve the tension between watching and keeping as resign herself to it: the balance between the need to preserve her sense of self and the need to care for her children remains precarious.

“Deep-Holes” similarly begins with a family outing that dramatizes the tension between watching and keeping, but the dynamic here is not represented as internal but as an external gendered conflict between husband and wife. Sally, her husband Alex, and their children Kent, Peter, and Savannah are going on a family picnic. The picnic ends with a similar failure of keeping that leads to a near-fatal accident: Kent falls into a deep hole³¹ and is severely injured. This failure of keeping, however, stems not from Sally’s desire to retreat from her social responsibilities but from Alex’s pressure to be less attentive to the children. Sally is unambiguously a keeper, while Alex embodies many of the traits of the watcher, though not in the gendered sense of the term as Redekop uses it.

This external conflict is also reflected in its aesthetics and resolution. The structure of “Deep-Holes” is comparatively simple, and as such, it goes against the trend identified by Coral Ann Howells, in which Munro’s stories “have become increasingly complex and elusive, with their shifting narrative perspectives, their apparent digressions,

³¹The phrase “deep holes” also appears in Munro’s essay “Everything Here Is Touchable and Mysterious.” Munro refers to “deep holes, ominous beckoning places” in the Maitland River, which is a source of “myth” and “adventure” (33). The deep holes in the river are connected to artistic inspiration and creation; the deep hole that Kent falls into similarly leads him out of the everyday world but also into to a life essentially lacking in creation, artistic or otherwise.

their spatial and temporal gaps” (Ventura, ed. *Secrets* 40)³². “Deep-Holes” is less tightly focused on its narrator’s consciousness, and although it spans decades, it unfolds in a more or less linear fashion. The rescue of Kent, like the rescue of Meg in “Miles City,” restores the family, but it also sets the stage for a different conflict regarding the watcher-keeper dynamic, this time between Sally and Kent, which develops over the decades in which Kent reaches adulthood.

Sally may be a keeper and not a watcher, but she feels a keen desire for a love linked to mutual and collaborative intellectual creation: a love that recalls Munro’s own literary creation of a feeling of love. Kent frustrates this desire for love, however, by combining the worst aspects of watching and keeping. Despite his superficial appearance as a man dedicated to living his life for the Other, he is both incapable of forming loving connections to those around him and incapable of asserting himself over the needs of others. Sally does find something close to a loving, mutual relationship of fecundity with her husband, and she holds out hope that she may yet do the same with Kent. That she finds this feeling with Alex and that she continues to hope to do the same with Kent indicates both the importance and the possibility of such a relationship based on love and shared creation. In “Deep-Holes,” the representation of the watcher-keeper dynamic as an external rather than internal conflict raises the possibility of a mode of intellectual creation that, rather than merely tolerating the tension this conflict creates, reconciles it in a collaborative mode of meaning-making linked to love and fecundity.

The narrator of “Miles City, Montana” struggles to balance her social responsibilities as a mother and a wife with her desire to preserve her sense of self and

³²Gerald Noonan made much the same observation in 1983: “Munro’s vision of reality and her methods of art in depicting it [. . .] grow progressively, if not steadily, more complicated and paradoxical in the course of her work” (*Probable* 163).

engage with the world as an individual. As Redekop writes, “The ‘watcher’ and the ‘keeper’ are at odds in her” (4). She wants “to hide – sometimes from the children but more often from the jobs to be done and the phone ringing and the sociability of the neighbourhood [...] so that [she] could get busy at [her] real work, which was a sort of wooing of distant parts of [herself]” (88). During her day-to-day life, she “lived in a state of siege, always losing just what [she] wanted to hold on to” (88). The family trip allows her to hide from these demands and become “A watcher, not a keeper” (88). While on the trip, she “could be talking to Andrew, talking to the children and looking at whatever they wanted me to look at – a pig on a sign, a pony in a field, a Volkswagen on a revolving stand – and pouring lemonade into plastic cups, and all the time those bits and pieces would be flying together inside [her]. The essential composition would be achieved” (88). The use of the word composition, Redekop notes, indicates that this process is “related, by implication, to the composition of the story” (5). The narrator’s openness to alterity seems to parallel or at least pre-figure some kind of artistic or intellectual production.

Redekop asserts that in the narrator’s act of watching, “Nothing less than the survival of the self is at stake” (5). This act is, after all, both “essential” and her “real work” (88). However, Redekop notes that this watching “is dramatically at odds with her responsibilities as a mother” (5). To become a watcher, the narrator needs not only to minimize her social obligations -- most easily achieved during the special circumstance of the family car trip -- but also to have the ability to perform many tasks at once: talk to her family, look at landmarks, pour lemonade, and so forth. Redekop calls this careful balance between the self and her social responsibilities a “juggling act” and a “precarious

stunt,” one that ultimately leads “to a carefully staged failure,” the near-drowning of a child at a pool in Miles City Montana, where the family has stopped to let the children swim (4, 5).

The narrator herself is divided over the value of this essential composition, and this ambivalence manifests itself in her feelings for Andrew. She reflects that she cannot get her “feelings about Andrew to come together into a serviceable and dependable feeling” and that she is plagued with violent “contradictions” (91). Sometimes Andrew seems to her “a barrier interposed--quite consciously, even dutifully, and with a nasty pleasure in its masculine authority--between me and whatever joy or lightness I could get in life,” while at other times he is her “good friend and most essential companion” (91). The narrator sees Andrew as a barrier to watching: the references to “joy” and “lightness” recall her description of the “essential composition” making her “hopeful and light-hearted” (88). However, she also describes him as embracing the social role of the father in ways she finds admirable.³³ She would think “how humble he was, really, taking on such a ready-made role of husband, father, breadwinner,” and how she “in comparison was really a secret monster of egotism” (91). Because she is unsure of the ethical value of her watching, she cannot decide to what extent Andrew is her oppressor or her companion. In her mind, she might be only this monster of egotism.

Though this watching is essential, it is not explicitly generative. Redekop writes that the phrase “wooing distant parts of herself” refers to an act of “mothering her self”

³³Sympathy for men who embrace the role of the father as patriarch and provider is not unprecedented in Munro. See, for example, the following passage in “What is Remembered”: “Young husbands were stern, in those days. Just a short time before, they had been suitors, almost figures of fun [. . .] What a lot they had to learn, so quickly. How to be authoritative about mortgages, retaining walls, lawn grass, drains, politics, as well as about the jobs that had to maintain their families for the next quarter of a century” (*Hateship* 224). Munro has also commented that on a farm, “there is a sexual polarity [. . .] which feels good” (“Name” 69).

(4); however, the phrase wooing herself also carries an auto-erotic rather than generative connotation. The “essential composition” indeed appears related to literary or artistic composition, but the narrator never actually achieves any composition, only a certain openness to the world. On the one hand, the “essential composition” to which the narrator refers seems to be an act of logocentric reduction of the alterity of the world around her to the same of her understanding consciousness: the pig, the pony, and the Volkswagen are all “flying together inside” her (88). On the other hand, however, the passive voice pushes this act of composition away from being an act of the narrator’s intellect. The verb does not attribute the flying around or the essential composition to any specific subject; they appear to happen almost of their own accord. The narrator of “Miles City,” then, appears to be engaging in an act that recalls writing but is not explicitly identifiable to it and that leads to no specific, identifiable creation. Her wooing of herself appears as an act of intellect that requires both a passive openness to the alterity of the world and an exploration of her own subjectivity in a process that is indeed linked by implication to creative composition, but it is not necessarily generative and leaves some room for ambiguity.

Just before Meg falls into the pool, the narrator seems to be experiencing a moment of this essential composition. Earlier, in the car, the children had been tracing on a map the route they followed. Cynthia asks Meg if she knows what the line is on the map and then explains “it’s the road. That line is the road we’re driving on” (89). The children are making the connection between the representations on the map and the reality around them. Cynthia says to Meg “See where the road is all wiggly? [. . .] It’s wiggly because there are so many turns in it” (89). Now, out of the car, the narrator

reflects on her surroundings as if she has left representation and artifice behind and somehow broken through to the real. As she walks around the park while the children swim, the narrator thinks that “No place became real till you got out of the car” (99). Walking “slowly,” she “paid attention to a squashed leaf, ground a Popsicle stick under the heel of [her] sandal, squinted at a trash can strapped to a tree” (99). Driving had been like tracing a line on a map, but this way of being in the world is different and more attuned to the real: “This is the way you look at the poorest details of the world resurfaced, after you’ve been driving for a long time -- you feel their singleness and precise location” (99). Suddenly in the midst of this reverie, the narrator thinks “*Where are the children?*”, and this momentary outbreak of keeping prevents the drowning of Meg, who had fallen into the deep end of the pool unbeknownst to her sister or the lifeguard (99). Just in time to save the life of her daughter, the narrator restores the balance between watching and keeping.

The aftermath of the accident restores the family on both a literal and an emotional level. The narrator ultimately succeeds as a keeper. Her mother’s intuition initiates the rescue: Andrew says he “can’t get over” the fortuitousness of this intuition and attributes it to “some kind of extra sense that mothers have” (105). When the young female lifeguard fails to save Meg -- “Why would a lifeguard stop and point,” the narrator asks herself, “why would she ask what that was, why didn’t she just dive into the water and swim to it?” -- Andrew comes to the rescue in a fashion that demonstrates his physical strength: he climbs the fence separating him from the pool so quickly the narrator “had the impression that [he] jumped with one bound over this fence, which seemed about seven feet high” (100-01). The narrator, by contrast, “could not jump or

climb the fence” and in the final scene, she reciprocates Andrew’s praise for her by expresses her amazement at Andrew’s heroic act: “What I can’t understand,” I said, “is how you got over the fence” (101, 105). The narrator initiates the rescue with her mother’s intuition while Andrew displays the greater physical strength expected of a patriarch. Their daughter has survived, and they express their mutual appreciation.

In the denouement, the narrator reflects on the accident and makes her peace with the tension between watching and keeping through a technique that resembles an epiphany but is more layered and dispersed. First she feels “compelled to picture the opposite” of the “chain of lucky links” that allowed them to save Meg’s life: she pictures “Meg’s body being prepared for shipment” and “The scribbled drawings she had make this morning [which] would still be in the back seat of the car” (102-03). Then, however, she backs away from these thoughts because she finds “something trashy about this kind of imagining,” like “Laying your finger on the wire to get the safe shock, feeling a bit of what it’s like, then pulling back” (103). Death, like the relative insignificance of human life when measured against the immensity of the universe in “The Moons of Jupiter,” is something that should inspire real awe: those who really “know what it is, wouldn’t be courting it” (*Moons* 232). Both death and the immensity of the universe exceed and dwarf human consciousness, and those who appreciate the truth of these facts do not seek to be reminded of them. As Ajay Heble writes, both “The Moons of Jupiter” and “Miles City, Montana” stage “a kind of backing off from what cannot finally be known” (152).

After this realization, the narrator reflects darkly on the connection between sex and death, though finally she moves on from these dark thoughts. The narrator returns to her memory of Steve Gauley’s funeral and her realization, as Beverly J. Rasporich puts it,

of “the culpability of parents as mortal, physical agents who, by virtue of having brought one into the world, also ensure one leaves it” (80). The narrator charges the adults at the funeral “with effrontery, hypocrisy. On Steve Gauley’s behalf, and on behalf of all children, who knew that by rights they should have sprung up free, to live a new, superior kind of life, not to be caught in the snares of vanquished grownups, with their sex and funerals” (104). Ildikó de Papp Carrington similarly notes the narrator’s realization of “the painful paradox of parents as the begetters of death” and writes that “Miles City” is “deeply pessimistic” (*Controlling* 70). However the final scene moves away from this sense of darkness into a sense of relief, as if the narrator has been freed from these thoughts.

In the final paragraphs, the narrator finds “a surprising pleasure” in Andrew’s statement that they can stop at another scenic site “on the way back” (104). Of course she had believed they would return, “But it was a relief to hear him say it” (104). She refers to the children in the back seat as “trusting” their parents “because of no choice,” but also to the parents themselves “trusting to be forgiven, in time, for everything that had first to be seen and condemned by those children [. . .] all our natural, and particular, mistakes” (105). This mutual trust creates the sense that she is at peace, as if the impossibility of ever truly keeping children from death has lightened her burden. The adults at Steve Gauley’s funeral, with “their unnaturally weighted voices, oozing religion and dishonor,” believe in a simple and reassuring formula: Gauley “was neglected, he was free, so he drowned” (104). They want to believe that sufficient keeping would have kept him safe; had he been “warned enough and given chores to do and kept in check [. . .] he wouldn’t have drowned” (104). The narrator, in contrast, holds no such illusions, and when

Andrew lauds her for her maternal intuition, part of her “wants to warn him -- to warn everybody -- never to count on it” (105). These insights that lead her from horror to relief are not compressed enough to constitute a true epiphany, but they do provide a sense of resolution by moving quickly within her consciousness: from imagination, to memory, to reflection on present experience.

“Miles City” has a complex structure but stays tightly focused on the narrator’s consciousness. The story moves forward and backward in time and contains many interwoven layers, such as the narrator’s memory of Steve Gauley’s drowning, her memories of her father, and her reflections on her relationship with her husband and children. Phrases from the opening memory of Steve Gauley’s funeral, like “I don’t think I really saw all this” and “I must have heard someone talking about that and imagined that I saw it” (84) make explicit that the story is represented through what E. D. Blodgett calls “a filter of narration,” which belongs to a narrating, witnessing consciousness (135). “Miles City” is also told in first-person and ranges forward and backward in time according to her memory. The opening and penultimate scenes regarding Steve Gauley’s funeral are clearly recollections because they include reflections by the adult narrator. She likewise reflects on her childhood on the family farm and on a more recent incident, in which she and her father work to save his turkeys from a flood (93-94). Even the reflection on Andrew’s childhood is narrated by and explicitly mediated through the narrator’s perspective. She is not only the speaking “I” narrating these facts, but she also offers her feelings about them: “To my mind, Andrew’s urban life had been sheltered and fussy [...] it did not occur to me that hers was a hard or admirable life” (94). There is even a flash forward that indicates the narrative present of the story is also memory. The

narrator reflects in the present tense on losing touch with Andrew: “I haven’t seen Andrew for years” (92). These passages move back and forth in the manner of a reflecting consciousness and thus fit with the internal nature of the struggle.

In “Deep-Holes,” by contrast, the structure is much simpler, and though Sally is clearly the focalizer, the aesthetic choices do not create such a tight focus on her. Though time stretches over decades, it essentially progresses linearly along with the advancing action of the plot. The opening contains one flash forward from the narrative present in which Kent is a child to the future in which he is in high school, but for the most part, the plot proceeds in a linear fashion from the opening picnic until Sally and Kent’s climactic confrontation many years later. Sally’s perceptions are also related more sparingly and often only in moments of high drama, such as her feeling of “immense” gratitude that Kent survived the accident (99) or in the denouement, when her last encounter with an adult and estranged Kent leaves her “shaking with rage” and wondering “What is she supposed to do?” (115). These aesthetic differences create a broader if less intimate fictional world and reflect the essentially external rather than internal conflict.

The resonances between the stories exist more on the level of plot and theme than aesthetics. The opening of “Deep-Holes” recalls the watcher-keeper dynamic and also stages a similar failure of keeping, but rather than casting this dynamic as an ambivalence within the narrator, “Deep-Holes” makes it a relationship of gendered conflict between Sally and her husband Alex. Sally, the focalizer, is unambiguously a keeper, and her husband Alex, though also a patriarch, is something of a watcher. Sally, Alex, and their children Kent, Peter, and Savanna are going on a picnic to celebrate Alex publishing his “first solo article” as a geologist (93). The preparation for the picnic demonstrates that

Sally embraces her role as a keeper. She is finely attuned to the needs of her family and, on this special occasion, particularly her husband. Sally is sure to include something for everyone in the picnic, but her own preference for practicality is subordinated both by herself and by Alex. She has packed “devilled eggs,” which she “usually hated to take on a picnic, because they were so messy,” as well as “Ham sandwiches, crab salad, lemon tarts—also a packing problem” (93). Sally also brings “Kool-Aid for the boys” and “a half bottle of Mumm’s [champagne] for herself and Alex,” though “She would have just a sip, because she was still nursing” (93). Neither the champagne nor the Kool-Aid are primarily for her. Sally would prefer to use the plastic champagne glasses she has purchased for the occasion, but Alex “insisted” on real glasses and “took charge of them himself, the wrapping and the packing” (93). Alex makes sure to attend to his own needs while Sally is sure to attend to everyone else’s. Sally takes care to make the sandwiches the way everyone likes them: she tells Alex “which sandwiches have the mustard he likes and which have the mustard she and Peter like and which are for Kent who likes no mustard at all” (96). The narrator of “Miles City,” by contrast, disappoints Alex by forgetting to include lettuce in their sandwiches, which leads to a series of sharp exchanges that culminate in Andrew asking rhetorically, “How would it be if I didn’t bother to fill up the gas tank?” (91). Sally, though, makes sure to meet everyone’s needs and to keep the peace.

The tension in this opening section stems not from an internal ambivalence within Sally but a conflict with Alex. She perceives a sense of danger at the picnic site, correctly as it turns out, that Alex does not, and her resulting desire for more keeping and less watching fuels the conflict with Alex. On arrival at the picnic site, Sally discovers that

the location presents a hazard she “did not expect” to be so immediate: right at the entrance of the woods are “Deep chambers,” some of which are described, significantly, as “the size of a coffin,” though “some are much bigger than that” (94). The danger they present seems clear to Sally. The word “coffin,” obviously, connotes death, and she notices the lack of vegetation to cushion any fall: there are “Corridors zigzagging between” these holes that have “ferns and mosses” but “Not enough greenery, however, to make any sort of cushion over the rubble below” (94). Alex, however, seems to have little concern for this danger. Readers here have no access to his thoughts, but his parental injunctions – “‘No tearing around in here,’ Alex called. ‘No stupid showing off, you hear me? You understand? Answer me.’” – invoke only his patriarchal authority without conveying much concern or sense of responsibility (94). Indeed, Alex proceeds as if his parental duty has been discharged: he continues “carrying the picnic basket and apparently believing that no further fatherly warning was necessary” (94). Sally, on the other hand, continues to be concerned, and rightly so. As they approach the picnic site, she “stumbled” after Alex “faster than was easy for her, with the diaper bag and the baby, Savanna. She couldn’t slow down till she had her sons in sight” (94). Sally feels compelled to attend to her sons. Struggling to keep pace with Alex and the boys, “She was nearly crying with exhaustion and alarm and some familiar sort of seeping rage” (94). Sally is frustrated, exhausted, and enraged in a way that is familiar, which suggests that this conflict between Sally’s feelings of responsibility and Alex’s more *laissez-faire* approach occurs regularly in their marriage. Sally’s perception of the danger in the landscape and her subsequent desire to pay more attention to the children stands in

contrast to Alex's desire for greater independence from them and for a more adult sensibility to the picnic.

In other words, Alex acts like a watcher. Like the narrator of "Miles City," Alex has no interest in being "solemn" with what he sees as "trivial burdens" (90). The narrator of "Miles City" seeks to raise children like those in the magazine pieces: children who were "splendidly self-willed, hard-edged, perverse, indomitable" (90), and Kent is just such a child. Alex, at any rate, believes Kent is "a sneak and a trouble-maker and the possessor of a dirty mind (96). Alex also appears quite distant from Kent. He insists on a certain emotional distance from his children and maintains a clear commitment to himself. Moreover, while Alex is indeed a figure of masculine authority, unlike Andrew, he has little interest in his children as expressions of his patriarchal power. Andrew "took a lot of pictures of [his wife], and of the children, our house, our garden, our excursions and possessions. He got copies made, labelled them carefully, and sent them back to his mother and his aunt and uncle in Ontario [. . .] He liked to have this record go forth" (87). Alex has no such proprietary interest in his children.

Alex is also committed to his sense of self: to wooing the not-so-distant elements of his non-parental identity. The picnic is in honour of his intellectual achievement: his paper in the very academic-sounding journal, "*Zeitschrift für Geomorphologie*" (93). The picnic site occurs at a location significant for him -- "Osler Bluff," which "figured largely in the article" -- even though this beautiful area is also dangerous and proves to be a poor fit for a family with rambunctious children (93-94). At the picnic, Alex wants to drink champagne from real glasses and be free from seeing any breastfeeding or crying children. Watching his infant daughter Savanna "latched on to one side" of his wife, who

“with her free hand unfastened the picnic basket [...] was not how Alex had envisioned things,” and it is with a “sigh,” albeit a “good-natured” one, that he retrieves his champagne glasses (95). Alex would like Sally to stop breastfeeding Savanna entirely -- he has told Sally “You could have her on the bottle tomorrow” -- but Sally merely puts Alex off: “I will soon. Not quite tomorrow, but soon” (96). Sally knows Alex “dislikes the whole conjunction of sex and nourishment, his wife’s breasts turned into udders” (97). Alex does not wish to be reminded that his wife’s breasts do not exist solely for his sexual excitement, nor does he wish to be inconvenienced by child-rearing. Although the necessities of child rearing are primarily his wife’s responsibility, he still perceives them as an impediment to his desires.

While Alex seeks a similar assertion of self as the narrator of “Miles City” does, what separates him from this narrator, of course, is his male privilege. Alex does not need to use the “mock desperation” or “inflated irony of the professional mothers who wrote for the magazines” to which the narrator of “Miles City” refers (90). To maintain a sense of distance from their children, these mothers use quips such as “Is my embryo Hitler by any chance over at your house?”, and they “[cackle] clear above the milky fog” (90). Alex can simply assert his masculine authority directly and tell his children to “Shut up” (95). Because Alex does not bear primary responsibility for raising his children, he does not have to strike the kind of balance that Redekop describes between watcher and keeper, or between “Milk,” the “image of maternal self-lessness” and “gall [...] associated with the bitterness of self-interest” (5). Mothers in much of Munro’s fiction, according to Redekop, must contend with the opposition between milk and gall: “Voice mixed with milk will not show up on paper unless there is at least a little gall. Unless the voice uses a

little black ink, moreover, the woman will not achieve either identity or fame” (6). Alex, by virtue of his gender and social position, is largely excused from this balancing act. The narrator of “Miles City,” by contrast, cannot do so without real risk, as the near-drowning of Meg demonstrates.

Though the familiar tension between the keeper Sally and the watcher Alex is external rather than internal, as in “Miles City,” a lapse in this balance leads to a similar near-fatal failure: this one with lasting consequences. When Kent and Peter leave the picnic to urinate, “Sally clamps her mouth down on the automatic injunction to be careful,” as if it requires a physical effort for her to pull back on her parental attention (97). Immediately, “Alex looks at her and approves of the clamping down”: at this key moment, Sally pulls away from greater attentiveness and care for her children in an effort to please Alex (97). Kent then falls into one of the deep holes and injures himself badly: both legs are broken, one of which the doctor describes as “shattered” (99). Kent walks with a limp for the rest of his life and as such bears forever a reminder of this accident.

Nevertheless, the immediate aftermath of the accident similarly restores the family and ends on a note of uncomplicated gratitude. Alex initiates a heroic rescue in contrast to Sally, who initially appears ineffectual. Alex puts Peter in charge of the baby and then climbs down into the hole to retrieve Kent while Sally thinks fruitlessly of looking for a rope and reflects “Why should there be a rope?” (98). The effort to carry Kent from the hole taxes Alex’s physical strength to its limit: after Alex “stumbled a couple of steps,” he “dropped back down to his knees” and then had to crawl out the far end of the crevasse (98). Though Sally and Alex lift Kent from the hole together -- Kent

had to be “raised up by his father, pulled to the solid shelf of rock by his mother” (98) -- Alex had clearly taken the lead in the rescue.

While Kent is treated in a hospital, a doctor reiterates the male privilege that had dominated the previous scene, but Sally’s response to this sexism relieves any tension that Alex’s patriarchal assertions of authority had previously inspired -- for Sally, at least, if not necessarily the reader. The doctor says to Sally “Kids have to be watched every minute in there” and Sally thinks that with Alex, “he would have spoken differently. That’s the way boys are. Turn your back and they’re tearing around where they shouldn’t be. ‘Boys will be boys’” (99). Sally notes this sexist hypocrisy, yet she holds no lingering resentment and assigns no blame to Alex for Kent’s accident. She merely brushes the doctor’s judgment aside: “Her gratitude -- to God, whom she did not believe in, and Alex, whom she did -- was so immense that she resented nothing” (99). This total gratitude and insistence on Alex’s heroism end the scene with a strong sense of closure and unambiguous emotion.

In “Miles City, Montana,” the accident and the rescue provide the climax, but in “Deep-Holes,” these events merely lay the basis for the central conflict, which is between Sally and Kent. Sally feels a keen desire for a love linked to intellectual creation. What stands between her and this creation, however, is not her need for separation but a need for connection. Sally seeks a mutual and social mode of meaning-making that recalls the moment of love in “The Moons of Jupiter”: she wants a shared, creative act of naming and claiming that approaches the real, even if it does not reach adequation with it. This approach to the real can bond two characters together in a subject-to-subject relationship that ends in an act of creation.

Surprisingly, perhaps, it is the patriarchal Alex who comes closest to fulfilling this desire in Sally rather than Kent. Sally and Alex grow into this type of love while Kent continually rejects her. Kent superficially seems the paragon of self-sacrifice and a life lived for the Other, but in fact he combines the worst aspects of watching and keeping. He is a not-so-secret monster of egotism incapable of forming truly loving relationships, and he is horrified at the connection between fecundity and death, yet he is also incapable of asserting his own material needs over those of others and of judging and deciding. Kent's rejection of social reproduction and fecundity is tied to a rejection of logos and a rejection of the self. In all, "Deep-Holes" is more direct about not just the need for openness to alterity as part of the meaning-making process, but also the need for engagement. As is the case elsewhere in Munro's work, love in "Deep-Holes" remains a caress, a gesture beyond a logocentric reduction of the Other to the same of the understanding consciousness. Here, however, it is also clearly an act of logos: of attention to and active intellectual engagement with the Other that requires an assertion of self and the ability to think, decide, and create.

The central conflict in "Deep-Holes" is about Sally's desire for love with Kent, and immediately after Kent's accident, the two share a scene of collaborative intellectual creation that provides a high point of love between them. While Kent is recuperating at home, Sally takes responsibility for helping Kent with his homework. Kent at this point has clear intellectual prowess. His school assignments are "completed in no time," and he moves on to an extra project: "Travels and Explorations -- Choose Your Country" (99). This project offers Sally and Kent the opportunity to engage in a private and mutually created fantasy. Kent wants "to pick what nobody else would pick": he wants a topic

unique to himself, a topic that reflects in some way his individual subjectivity (99). Sally responds to Kent's desire with a revelation about herself that is private and individual: "Sally told him something she had not told to another soul. She told him how she was attracted to remote islands. Not to the Hawaiian Islands of the Canaries or the Hebrides or the Isles of Greece, where everybody wanted to go, but to small or obscure islands nobody talked about and which were seldom if ever visited" (99). The two then begin a project together. They research "Ascension, Tristan da Cunha, Chatham Islands, and Christmas Island and Desolation Island and the Faeroes" (99). Their collaborative work is exhaustive, reality-directed to some extent, and shared only between the two of them: "She and Kent began to collect every scrap of information they could find about these places, not allowing themselves to make anything up. And never telling Alex what they were doing. 'He would think we were off our heads,' said Sally" (99). This work is private and non-instrumental and is therefore of value as an act of pleasurable intellectual creation to Sally and Kent only. To an outsider, especially one as practically minded as Alex, such feverish activity is incomprehensible and useless.

Part of Sally's attraction to these islands may be that they represent a meaningful relationship to the world that exceeds the instrumental, utilitarian concerns that dominate life in advanced capitalist societies. Upon learning that "Desolation Island's main boast was of a vegetable of great antiquity, a unique cabbage," Sally and Kent imagine an elaborate back story: "They imagined worship ceremonies for it, costumes, cabbage parades in its honour" (100). The worship ceremonies, costumes, and parades recall a more agrarian society filled with ritual. Sally and Kent's shared work and fantasy lead Sally to recall an incident that further expresses her desire for a sense of connection and

longing for a pre-capitalist, human-centred world. Sally recounts how before Kent's birth, "she had seen on television the inhabitants of Tristan da Cunha disembarking at Heathrow Airport, having all been evacuated due to a great earthquake on their island" (100). Her memory highlights her sense of their dignity and their difference: "How strange they looked, docile and dignified, like human creatures from another century. They must have adjusted to London, more or less, but when the volcano quieted down they wanted to go home" (100). These islanders seem to represent to Sally a different way of being in the world: one separate from the contemporary world and essentially pre-modern.

Sally longs for a sense of meaning that could infuse her everyday life and counteract the indifference of the late capitalist or postmodern world dominated by science and industry. Her longing recalls a similar moment in "The Moons of Jupiter" when Janet and her father name the moons. Redekop writes that the naming of the moons insists "on the reality of space out there" but also shows a desire to "pretend that they still do orbit around the earth, that we have mastered them with our classical narratives" (156). Sally looks to these islands as places free from the knowledge of a godless universe in which humans are essentially insignificant. These islands and their inhabitants represent a way to pretend that sacred narratives can still somehow master this essential indifference.

Kent genuinely shares this fantasy with his mother, and in the immediate aftermath of the accident, he appears both intellectually focused and open to love. After Kent returned to school, "things changed, of course," and presumably he became a more typical child who would be less inclined to spend time telling stories with his mother, yet

“he still seemed old for his age, patient with Savanna who had grown venturesome and stubborn, and with Peter who always burst into the house as if on a gale of calamity” (100). Even as early as this, however, there is a sense that Kent courts a sense of drama that is not completely legitimate. Kent “was especially courteous to his father, bringing him the paper that had been rescued from Savanna and carefully refolded, pulling out his chair at dinnertime. ‘Honour to the man who saved my life’ he might say, or ‘Home is the hero.’ He said this rather dramatically though not at all sarcastically” (100). Kent’s dramatic expressions might be genuinely felt, but they are nevertheless partially misplaced. Sally knows, as do the readers, that Alex’s role in Kent’s accident was more ambivalent. Alex’s pressuring of Sally to relax her keeping for his benefit played a role in Kent’s fall, and while Alex took the lead in Kent’s rescue, he also needed Sally’s help to complete it: they lifted Kent out of the hole together.

Kent’s dramatic gratitude is linked not just to the circumstance of his rescue but also to his anxiety about his father’s love. Alex and Kent have long had a strained relationship. Kent’s flair for the dramatic “got on Alex’s nerves” and not just after the accident: “Kent got on his nerves, had done so even before the deep-hole drama happened” (100). In a private conversation between Sally and Alex, Sally lays bare the logic behind Kent’s drama. She tells him that Kent is “saying you must have loved him, because you rescued him” (100). Alex, however, cannot countenance such a fantasy: “Christ, I’d have rescued anybody” he says, to which Sally responds “Don’t say that in front of him. Please” (100). Sally feels that denying Kent this fantasy would be too hurtful.

For the rest of his life, Kent remains sensitive about his father's love but is never capable of entering into a loving relationship with him; instead, Kent becomes progressively less capable of love as he rejects not only his parents' bourgeois lifestyle, but also the value of the very concepts of love, fecundity, and self. First, Kent tries to follow in his father's footsteps in a manner that indicates he may be trying to please his father or perhaps exceed him in some way. In high school, "things improved with his father" after "He chose to study science" and not "the soft earth sciences" like Alex but "the hard sciences" (100). If Kent intends some rivalry with this choice, Alex does not interpret it as such: "even this roused no opposition in Alex. The harder the better" (100). As a budding young scientist about to engage on a career of practical and useful knowledge creation, Kent's relationship with his father is at its best.

Nevertheless, a flash-forward in the opening pages indicate that even during this period, Kent's feelings for his father had some ambivalence. Kent, "in his teens and acing everything at school," remarks to Sally that "Dad is really a sort of bourgeois *gentilhomme*" (93). Kent is so "sure of becoming some sort of scientist that he could get away with spouting French around the house" (93). That speaking French is something he could "get away with" indicates that his home, or more likely his father, is not hospitable to intellectual pursuits that yield no immediate and tangible benefit, such as learning to speak a second language or being familiar with Molière's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, a seventeenth-century satire of both the middle class and the aristocracy. Sally understands this reference as some sort of slight: "Don't make fun of your father," she says "mechanically" (93). But Kent's response indicates his feelings are more complicated. He denies that his comment was meant as a slight: "I'm not. It's just that most geologists

seem so grubby” (93). “Deep-Holes” then opens with Kent expressing an admiration for as well as something of a hostility toward his father couched in terms that indicate his ambivalence for bourgeois life.

Kent’s dropping out of university and disappearing from family life constitute his first rejection of bourgeois values although this initial rejection takes the form of an embrace of a blue-collar lifestyle rather than the quasi-religious embrace of a life lived for the Other. He drops out of university and abandons the study of science to work “in a Canadian Tire store” (101). This decision leads to an open conflict with Alex, who tries to “order [Kent] back to his education,” but Kent refuses (101). He seems at home in this new environment: he tells his father he is “very happy with the job” and was “making good money, or soon would be, as soon as he got promoted” (101). When Sally visited him later, she “found him jolly and ten pounds heavier. He said it was the beer. He had friends now” (101). Kent briefly appears to be thriving in his new life, but this appearance is a mirage. By Sally’s next visit, she discovers Kent has quit, and Sally “thought she caught a smirk on the face of the employee who told her that” (101). The smirk is enigmatic but indicates that the employee knew something Sally did not; perhaps Kent’s life as a retail employee was not as blissful, and his friends not as true, as he had maintained.

After this “phase” as Sally called it, Kent’s life begins to take on more of the ascetic character it will later assume (101). The family loses touch with him for three years before he sends them a letter. He has taken on a wandering life: though the letter was mailed from Needles, California, Kent tells them “he was only passing through. Like Blanche” (101). Blanche, of course, from *Streetcar Named Desire*, claims in the play’s

final scene to be “only passing though” as she is taken away to a mental home: her sensitivity and appreciation for the finer things in life has allowed her spirit to be crushed by her brother-in-law, Stanley Kowalski, who is every bit the common, practical man (161). This reference is lost on Alex -- “Alex said, Who the hell is Blanche?” but Sally understands the reference: “‘Just a joke,’ said Sally. ‘It doesn’t matter’” (101). The reference to *Streetcar* underscores Kent’s interest in art, or theatre in this case, as well as his similarity to Blanche: caring and sympathetic, yet sensitive and impractical, almost completely lacking any utilitarian sensibility. That the reference is lost on his father but understood immediately by his mother also underscores his difference from his father, the patriarchal, practical Alex.

Kent has an almost total disdain for the practical matters of life and something like an artist’s sensitivity to the world around him, and while Kent’s search for meaning might be admirable in one sense, its representation in “Deep-Holes” is ultimately pejorative because it comes at the total expense of his connection to his family. Kent’s letter is an entirely selfish explanation of his life. The letter does not contain information that would be of interest to his mother Sally who longs to be his keeper: there is nothing on “the practical side of his life” such as “what he was working at or where he had been or whether he had formed any connections” (101). It also expresses no interest in or feeling for his family: “He did not apologize for leaving them so long without any information or ask how they were, or how his brother and sister were” (101). After establishing what is not in the letter, the narrative then tells us what it does consist of: “pages about his own life” (101). Kent’s contact with his family is completely self-focused.

The letter itself is earnest but also *jejune* and even hypocritical. Within the first two lines, Kent indirectly dismisses his father and his father's way of life as ridiculous and insinuates his own superiority: "It seems so ridiculous to me," he said, "that a person should be expected to lock themselves into a suit of clothes. I mean, like the suit of clothes of an engineer or a doctor or a geologist and then the skin grows over it, over the clothes, I mean, and that person can't ever get them off" (102). Kent, by contrast, is attempting to seize the "chance to explore the whole world of inner and outer reality and to live in a way that takes in the spiritual and the physical and the whole range of the beautiful and terrible" (102). Kent, then, with the certainty of an adolescent, dismisses the value of his father's life. The last excerpt from the letter apologizes for Kent's purple prose yet ironically attributes his writing style to humility rather than pride: "This way of expressing myself may seem overblown to you, but one thing I have learned to give up is intellectual pridefulness--" (102). Significantly, the excerpt breaks off here to highlight the irony between Kent's claim that he has given up intellectual pridefulness and the rest of the letter, which asserts his superiority over the common folk who wish merely to work and live without joining him on his quest. This letter, though "signed with love," is the last they ever hear from Kent (103).

Kent indeed has something like an artist's sensitivity to his surroundings or a sort of allergy to the alterity in the world around him that prevents him from claiming his place, asserting himself, or occupying anything but a marginal existence; this sensitivity, however, is not lauded in "Deep-Holes" because it is coupled with his pridefulness and because it ends in sterility. Alex explicitly ties Kent's rejection of family and bourgeois materiality to a rejection of fecundity, although he does it in the crass manner befitting

someone so practical. This connection comes to Alex in a single moment of insight: “In the middle of the night he said, ‘Sex’ [. . .] ‘That’s what makes you get into that state he’s talking about. Become a something-or-other so you can earn a living. So you can pay for your steady sex and the consequences. That’s not a consideration for him” (102). Sally comments dryly on the baseness of Alex’s assertion -- “My, how romantic” -- but she does not disagree (102).

Kent’s rejection of sex resonates with the childhood horror at the connection between sex and death that is felt by the narrator of “Miles City, Montana.” In her opening reflection on Steve Gauley’s funeral, she mentions that “Children sometimes have an access of disgust concerning adults. The size, the lumpy shapes, the bloated power. The breath, the coarseness, the hairiness, the horrid secretions” (388). Signs of sexual difference and maturity evoke in children this disgust, but the narrator says her feeling at the funeral “was more” (86). The narrator as a child finds the feeling “could not be understood or expressed,” and only when she returns to this memory at the end can she explain it as horror at the connection between sex and death (86). In “Miles City, Montana,” however, the narrator’s mature realization is essentially freeing: she realizes the futility and hypocrisy of believing one could ever be a perfect keeper. Even as a child, she recognized that her anger at this connection “had nothing sharp and self-respecting about it” (86). Kent, by contrast, continues to reject procreative sex just as he continues to reject love, fecundity, and family.

After Kent’s apparently final disappearance from her life, Sally’s desire for some collaborative intellectual creation to add meaning to her life continues but finds a more successful realization in her relationship with Alex. This success comes despite, or more

accurately because of, Alex's negative reaction to Sally's interest in remote islands. Years after Kent's estrangement -- long enough for Peter and Savanna to go, like their father, into the practical, lucrative, and respectable professions of medicine and law, respectively -- Sally turns to Alex in much the same way she had once turned to Kent (103). Sally, while "in a trusting mood after sex [. . .] told Alex about the islands -- though not about her fantasy that Kent was now living on one or another of them" (103). Rather than encourage this interest or share in its pursuit, however, Alex responds to this information by pushing Sally's desire away from fantasy toward reality. When Sally states that "she had forgotten many of the details she used to know, and that she should look all these places up in the encyclopedia where she had first got her information," Alex tells her that "everything she wanted to know could probably be found on the Internet" (103). Despite Sally's doubts -- "Surely not something so obscure, she said," Alex is able, "in no time," to find "information galore" (103). Rather than simply take up and share her fantasy, Alex challenges it and asserts himself against it.

Alex exposes Sally's fantasy to reality. He turns her away from this fantasy of a pre-modern world filled with meaning, a fantasy that she shared only with her son and culled from the private act of reading, to the contemporary, public, and high-tech forum of the Internet. By doing so, he essentially ruins the fantasy: Sally "was shocked and turned away, and Alex who was disappointed in her--no wonder--asked why. 'I don't know. I feel now as if I'd lost it'" (103). Alex tells her that her fantasy "was no good" and "she needed something real to do" (103). Rather than participate with her, as his child does, he pushes back against her fantasy and genuinely engages with her in more of

a subject-subject relationship, although this relationship is admittedly not one between equal subjects.

In losing this fantasy, Sally gains a more satisfying form of shared meaning-making with Alex, even if this meaning-making falls short of being a collaborative project of equals. Sally becomes his assistant in his retirement project to write a book, and “to her own surprise,” she develops an interest in his work (103). Though Sally does take part with Alex, their collaboration is by no means between equals: she is used “for scale, in the photographs” (103). Nevertheless, she grows via the experience: “Gradually she learned to use her eyes and apply new knowledge, till she could stand in an empty suburban street and realize that far beneath her shoes was a crater filled with rubble never to be seen, that never had been seen” (103). Sally learns something real and difficult. Knowledge of formations such as this one requires real intellectual expertise that transcends casual observation: “there were no eyes to see [the crater] at its creation or throughout the long history of its being made and filled and hidden and lost” (104). Learning about these things so hidden from the naked eye is a difficult undertaking and a genuine act of intellectual creation. Just as the narrator of “Material” respects Hugo for the “Lovely tricks, honest tricks” that he “has spent all his life learning how to make” Sally respects Alex for his intellectual work (43). She enjoys taking a small part in his work -- an opportunity Hugo consistently denied the narrator of “Material” -- and respects his achievement: “Alex did such things the honour of knowing about them, the very best he could, and she admired him for that” (104). Alex’s knowledge is less than complete -- it is only his very best, not exhaustive -- and it is also a way of honouring the

object of the knowledge, not an appropriation or a falling short of the plenitude of its true nature.

Alex's knowledge of deep geographical formations harks back to Jarvis Poulter of "Meneseteung," and the contrast between the two characters is revealing. Poulter, too, knows about the depths of the earth: "Drilling for oil," he "discovered salt," and his salt wells "are twelve hundred feet deep" (58). Poulter, however, uses this information strictly for commercial purposes and not for any honour that comes with knowledge. Like Alex, Poulter has little time for fanciful speculation: when Almeda Roth responds to his description of his operation with an evocative phrase -- "the salt of the earth" -- Poulter responds by merely saying "Yes" and "frowning" (58). While Roth would be too busy "thinking about that ancient sea" to discover how to get the salt out, "That kind of speculation is what Jarvis Poulter has, quite properly, no time for" (61). Poulter is a proper Victorian patriarch, and his nineteenth-century bourgeois respectability is opposed to Roth's feminine creativity. Alex, though, is a modern academic and has a genuine intellectual interest in geological formations. He does not drill wells; he writes books and articles. Though Roth ultimately rejects Poulter, she is attracted to him for his masculinity: his "garments, his smell, his movements all cause the skin on the side of her body next to him to tingle hopefully" (60). Sally is likewise sexually attracted to her masculine, even patriarchal, husband, but her attraction finds realization in their more or less satisfying relationship. Sally appreciates and responds to Alex's intellectual achievement, which, while not literary or artistic, is not reducible to commercial interest.

Sally's appreciation for and limited participation in Alex's work leads to a deepening of their marriage. After the moment of respect and admiration Sally silently

pays to Alex for doing things “the honour of knowing about them,” we learn that their marriage deepened in their last years as they “became good friends” before Alex’s unexpected death (103). After Alex’s death Sally even begins to internalize Alex’s voice as if his subjectivity has become a part of her: “She sometimes felt Alex talking in her head these days” (104). This internalization testifies to the veracity of their love. Despite Alex’s patriarchal qualities, then, Sally has a more loving and deeper relationship with Alex than with Kent. Here, as with the death of father in “The Moons of Jupiter,” Sally and the reader are treated to a moment of love before a final separation. This moment of love is not as complete, as absorbing, or as central to the story as it is in “The Moons of Jupiter,” but still it indicates the possibility of shared meaning-making as an expression of love.

This feeling of love and the renewed relationship between Sally and Alex acts as foil for her relationship with Kent. While Alex and Sally engage in an act of shared meaning-making that deepens their love, Sally’s relationship with Kent works towards open hostility. The climactic moment of “Deep-Holes” is a confrontation between Sally and Kent that underscores the hollowness and pretension of Kent’s rejection of bourgeois values, even if it stops short of condemning Kent entirely. This climactic confrontation occurs when Kent returns to Sally’s life after Savanna spots him on television heroically aiding the victims of a fire, and then she tracks him down.

Savanna’s initial conversation with Kent reveals him to be a quasi-religious figure who superficially at least seems the epitome of living for the Other but who is also something of a secret egotist. He indeed helped the victims in a fire and is “quite well known [. . .] in certain parts of the town and by certain people” (107). He used to dress in

“a kind of robe,” and he tells Savanna that “he lives in the present” (106). He also appears to have renounced judgment, but this renunciation contains potential ambivalence. After Savanna refers to the coffee shop in which they meet as “a dump,” he tells her that he sees it “differently” but “had no objection to her way of seeing it, or anybody’s” (106). When Savanna undercuts his lofty rhetoric with a joke -- “Well, that’s big of you” -- his response is ambiguous: “he sort of laughed” (106). Especially given that this scene is reported through Savanna rather than represented directly, it is difficult to say whether this laugh indicates a sense of humour, discomfort, or even derision. If this sort-of laugh is read as some expression of hostility, then Kent’s claims to have rejected judgment are complicated by his hostility to a humorous challenge to his personal philosophy. Kent also seems sensitive, still, to his father’s love. Kent brings up Alex’s obituary and asks “Had his father told them what names he wanted listed, before he died?” (106). When Savanna says no, that the rest of the family “decided Kent’s name should be there,” Kent seems quietly disappointed: “‘Not Dad,’ Kent said. ‘Well no’” (106). He still, then, feels some need for familial or at least fatherly love. Yet he also, as Savanna tells us, “sort of enjoys calling the shots,” an egotist action to be sure and one which suggests he is less than open to a loving relationship with his family (107).

Sally’s feelings for Kent leading up to their meeting are divided. Although she loves him, this feeling of love is complicated by the ongoing rejection of Sally and her family that Kent’s estrangement constitutes. After seeing Kent on television and believing it might be possible for Savanna to track him down, Sally was “overcome by a trembling, a longing, a weariness” (105). Sally’s initial response is to tremble, a physical manifestation of her desire to be reunited with her son, but she also feels a weariness at

the longstanding emotional trauma of his separation from her. When Savanna tells Sally that Kent has asked about her, Sally “felt a kind of inflated balloon in her chest” (106). Sally’s chest is swelling with emotion one presumes to be love, yet an inflated balloon is a fragile thing that can burst with a mere pin prick. Loving Kent is clearly a risk.

Her approach to her meeting with Kent underscores her trepidation and her hope as well as something of an ethical failure on her part. Kent contacts Sally with a note, which to Sally “was special, since most people she knew used e-mail or the phone” (107). Sally’s preference for a note over electronic means of communication recalls her preference for print-based research into remote islands; print for Sally has an intimacy or a privacy that e-mail does not. Yet she is also wary of too much intimacy with Kent: the reason “She was glad it wasn’t the phone” was that “She did not trust herself to hear his voice yet” (107).

Her arrival in Toronto begins both with her disappointment in Kent and her own failure to be open to Otherness. Upon emerging from the subway, she feels both “dismay and embarrassment” (107). The dismay is “because of Kent’s apparent absence,” but her embarrassment comes from her own feelings of latent racism: “she was feeling just what people from her part of the country often seemed to feel, though she would never say what they said. You’d think you were in the Congo or India or Vietnam, they would say. Anyplace but Ontario” (107). Sally is ashamed that she has a sense that these people are foreigners who have displaced her: “Turbans and saris and dashikis were much in evidence, and Sally was all in favour of their swish and bright colours. But they weren’t being worn as foreign costumes. The wearers hadn’t just arrived here; they had got past the moving-in phase. She was in their way” (107-08). Sally feels displaced and very

much out of her element, and as such she is not open to the Otherness she finds all around her. Her ethical failure contrasts with Kent's embrace of the city and willingness to live his life for the Other.

In this moment, Sally is so closed to the Other that she fails to recognize her own son. Kent is among a group of destitute men "sitting or lounging or sleeping" outside of an old bank building (108). Only after he approaches her and calls her name does she realize it was Kent, and her initial reaction is to recoil: "She would have almost as soon have run away" (108). Only after this initial reaction does she open herself to the humanity of the other men: "then she saw that not all the men were filthy or hopeless looking, and that some looked at her without menace or contempt and even with a friendly amusement now that she was identified as Kent's mother" (108). Ultimately, Kent's approach opens her to this Otherness. Kent, then, appears to some extent to be a genuinely ethical figure.

Their initial meeting, however, continues the ambivalence in their relationship and brings them further toward open conflict. Their first contact with each other is somewhat awkward. They do not embrace, and Sally's first words to Kent are "Do you still smoke your pipe?" (108). She has smelled smoke in the air, and Kent informs her that it is "smoke from the fire" she smells (108). This exchange provides a reminder of Kent's heroism, but the scene also conveys Kent's egotism and distaste, even disgust, for his mother. Superficially, Kent seems almost solicitous with his mother: "He spoke gently, readily, yet with an effort, like someone speaking, as a courtesy, in a foreign language" (109). His manner of speech contains a theatricality meant to convey his sense of separateness and superiority: "The special effort, the slight labour involved in speaking

to her, as if making a scrupulous translation, seemed something she was meant to notice. The cost” (109). When they do inadvertently touch, Kent seems to recoil from Sally: “As they stepped off a curb he brushed her arm [. . .] And she thought he gave a little shiver” (109). Sally initially thinks this reaction might be because Kent has AIDS, but Kent disabuses her of the notion even though she never voiced it: “‘No,’ he said, though she had certainly not spoken aloud. ‘I’m quite well at present. I’m not HIV positive or anything like that’” (109). Kent, then, is not only capable of heroically risking his life but is also remarkably intuitive, yet he also possesses a vague sense of disgust regarding his mother.

Kent’s rejection of familial bonds and bourgeois materiality may indeed be connected to his sensitivity to Otherness and his recognition of the unlimited nature of responsibility for the Other, but this rejection is also tied to a rejection of logos, of fecundity, and of social connection in general and Sally in particular. The description of Kent’s home reveals that he lives in filth: there is cardboard “tacked up” over a broken window, the floorboards are “bare and creaked underfoot,” and his house smells not only of smoke but “ancient cooking, burnt coffee, toilets, sickness, decay” (109). Kent is directly associated with sickness and decay, and he also rejects sex and procreation entirely. He tells Sally he is celibate, “Though ‘celibate’ might be the wrong word” he says, because his celibacy does not “have something to do with willpower” (110). Kent clarifies to indicate that “neuter” would be a better word (110). Just as Alex predicted, Kent has rejected not only love and family but also sex.

Kent’s relationship with Marnie, the cook in his house, reveals that the social connections he does have exist with minimal language. In Marnie’s presence, Sally

notices a change in Kent: “A relaxation, honesty, perhaps a respect, different from the forced lightness he managed with her” (110). Yet this relationship with Marnie relies on simple and constrained language. When addressing Marnie, Kent’s speech becomes much simpler. Kent’s sentences to Marnie are all short: “Hi Marnie. This is my mom. Can you say hello to my mom?” or “‘Marnie is our cook this week,’ said Kent. ‘Smells okay, Marnie’” (110). Kent’s initial address to Marnie sounds especially like he is speaking to a child because he literally asks her if she has the capacity to speak to his mother. Perhaps she does not; she remains silent throughout.

Kent’s description of his way of life rejects judgment and individual subjectivity in a fashion that takes on quasi-religious overtones but does not finally escape his egotism. Sally, after seating herself in Kent’s room “with a feeling of exhaustion,” is almost at a loss to communicate with Kent and can offer only this blunt inquiry: “What are you? [. . .] What is it you do?” (110, 111). Kent, however, describes his way of life with some eloquence and with pride. His home is not a halfway house and “Not even a quarter-way” because they “take in anybody that comes” (111). He is proud of his ability to beg for money on the street without shame and thinks of the concept of individual possessions as something that must be overcome. A reluctance to beg is “something [he] had to overcome” just as others have to overcome “the concept of ‘mine’” that might tempt them to keep the money they generate for themselves rather than the collective (111). Kent appears to have a leadership role in this household -- he states that he “could hardly ask [others] to do it if [he] wouldn’t” (111). This leadership role, however, carries no authority. Kent imposes no consequences on those who keep the money they acquire rather than share it with the collective. They are free to confess or not confess, or to

disappear and then return “when the going gets too rough,” or they can leave and never come back” -- any of these actions is “all right” (111). When Sally interjects, Kent notifies her that “Around here I’m Jonah,” after the biblical Jonah because Lazarus is “too self-dramatizing” (112-13). The fact that Kent has adopted a biblical name at all, however, and one given to a man who was swallowed by a whale and lived, indicates he is not exactly averse to self-dramatizing.

Sally’s attempt to connect with Kent pushes him away from his usually self-contained way and elicits first more rhetorical flourishes and then a more fiery response. Sally’s initial inquiry about his life provokes a response Kent recognizes as flippant; he first tells her “these people are my life” and then admits that answer “was kind of smart-arse” (112). Sally’s persistence, however, leads Kent to begin speaking in a way he recognizes as overly dramatic: “Man’s days are like grass, eh? Cut down and put into the oven. Listen to me. Soon as I meet you again I start the showing off” (112). Even his disavowals of such dramatic language, however, underscore his feelings of superiority: “Cut down and put in the oven -- I’m not interested in that. I live each day as it happens. Really. You wouldn’t understand that” (112). Kent is becoming increasingly hostile and defensive in the face of Sally’s efforts to form a connection.

Kent then takes action to stop Sally’s attempts. He interrupts himself to confront Sally with the reason he contacted her: to ask “where is the money” from his father’s estate (112). Finally, this response stops Sally’s line of inquiry. Sally responds “with flat disappointment but great self-control” that it is hers and there is no plan to include Kent in the estate (112). Although their conversation has become increasingly hostile -- Kent utters some terse words, such as “You think I’m that much of an idiot to want the money

for myself?”, before he becomes so agitated he has to leave to “get hold of [his] mood” -- Sally does not give up (112-13). After Kent leaves, Sally thinks of “running away” but does not because she knows “it would mean she would never see him again” although admittedly also because it she could not do so via “a route that didn’t go through the kitchen” (113).

The climax to “Deep-Holes” occurs after Kent returns and Sally exposes the superficiality and hypocrisy of Kent’s seemingly ethical lifestyle. At first, Sally continues to try to connect with Kent and reminds him of the letter that was the last the family heard from him. She lauds the letter as “a good attempt to explain” what he was thinking, but Kent responds with what sounds like fashionable cant about the decentred self: “My life, my life, my progress, what all I could discover about my stinking self. Purpose of me. My crap. My spirituality. My intellectuality. There isn’t any inside stuff, Sally” (113). He claims to be “happy” now that he’s “let go of that stupid self stuff” (112-13). He essentially claims to be wholly devoted to the Other and opposed to thought itself, or at least any thought that is not ethically oriented: “I think, How can I help? And that’s all the thinking that I allow myself” (114). He further states that he is not only after Sally’s money, but also “after” her, though explicitly not in way related to love: “I’m not saying I love you, I don’t use stupid language” (114). Love itself is stupid to Kent. He scrupulously avoids both talking to people and having relationships with them: “I don’t usually try to get anywhere talking to people. I usually try to avoid personal relationships. I mean I do. I do avoid them” (114). Here the conflict reaches a breaking point.

Sally’s responds to Kent’s hubris by quoting a biblical verse that compares him ironically to Jesus. Kent notices she is “trying not to smile” and when he presses her as to

why, she tells him she “was thinking of Jesus. ‘Woman, what have I to do with thee?’” (114). This passage comes from John 2:4. Mary and Jesus are at a wedding, and Mary informs Jesus that the guests have run out of wine. Given the way Sally has quoted this passage, it seems that she reads it as Jesus rebuking Mary and as insisting on his divinity, authority, and separation from worldly affairs. Sally sees through Kent to his nature as a “secret monster of egotism,” to borrow a phrase from “Miles City, Montana” (91). Kent has no love in his life. Indeed, his response to this ironic comparison is hateful: “The look that leapt to his face was almost savage” (114). The hostility between the two is now at a peak, though Sally preserves a modicum of hope in their final exchange. Kent instructs her, “Don’t say, ‘We’ll be in touch,’” but Sally cannot back away from the hope of connection entirely: “‘Maybe we’ll be in touch [. . .] Is that any better?’” (114).

In the denouement, Sally insists on her rights to pleasure and nourishment and also expresses her rage at Kent for denying her love and seeking to use her instrumentally. Sally returns home and enjoys the landscape of southern Ontario: because “she loves this countryside, this time of year,” she asks herself, “Must she now think of herself as unworthy?” (114). The pleasures she finds at home are entirely mundane: “The cat is glad to see her. There are a couple of messages from friends on her machine” (115). She prepares a “single serving of lasagna” that she has purchased “separated and precooked,” and “She sips from a glass of wine during the seven-minute wait” (115). Kent has disavowed all such comforts, but that does not make him ethical. When she thinks again of Kent’s pretentious biblical name -- “Jonah” -- she finds herself “shaking with anger” (115). Sally calls into question Kent’s apparent devotion to the Other as both impractical and disingenuous. She asks herself indignantly “What is she supposed to do,

go back to the condemned house and scrub the rotten linoleum and cook up the chicken parts that were thrown out because they're past their best before date? And be reminded every day how she falls short of Marnie or any other afflicted creature? All for the privilege of being useful in the life somebody else -- Kent -- has chosen" (115). It is not for Kent to determine for Sally how best to endeavor to be ethically responsible. By attempting to do so, he has assumed a god-like or sacred position to which he has no right.

This passage ends with a sense that her relationship to Kent is completely lost, though the story moves on to dissipate this sense. Sally contemplates sending Kent a cheque, but she states that "He'll not help himself with it, of course. He'll not stop despising her, of course" (115). But then she corrects herself: "Despising. No. Not the point. Nothing personal" (115). Their once-loving relationship has now disappeared, and no personal connection is left. Sally cannot give up hope on her son; two final epiphanies prevent the story from ending on this sense of rage and introduce a note of hope. Sally realizes "There is something, anyway, in having got through the day without its being an absolute disaster" (115). She recalls that "She had said maybe" they would be in touch and "He hadn't corrected her" (115). She further locates a sense of hope in her advancing years: "it was possible, too, that age could be her ally, turning her into somebody she didn't know yet. She has seen the look on the faces of certain old people -- marooned on islands of their own choosing, clear sighted, content" (115). Even if she cannot love Kent again, perhaps she can, over the years, come to terms with this loss. Such a disruption of closure that David Crouse has identified as characteristic of Munro's oeuvre, however,

does not change the hostility that has developed between Sally and Kent. Kent is unambiguously opposed to Sally because of his rejection not just of her but love itself.

In her review of *Too Much Happiness*, Joyce Carol Oates notes an important parallel between Munro and Flannery O'Connor. Munro, like O'Connor, "tracks her characters in their search for 'forgiveness'-- or grace," but "Where O'Connor's vision is other-worldly, and "grace" is a gift of God, Munro's vision is steadfastly secular: her characters lack any impulse toward transcendence, however desperate their situations; their lives are not susceptible to sharp, defined moments of redemption but to more mundane acts of human love, magnanimity, charity." Love, like ethics, is a face-to-face relation that lacks transcendence, yet for Munro's characters and perhaps readers it nevertheless feels much like an other-worldly phenomenon translated into a secular plane. Kent's rejection of love, then, constitutes a rejection of the highest value in Munro's fictional world.

Love in Munro's oeuvre requires both openness to alterity and intellectual engagement with it, and Kent refuses both love and logos. Here, as in "The Moons of Jupiter," love is a shared act of intellectual creation, one that combines a sense of Otherness that exceeds the consciousness of the self with a reduction to the same of the understanding consciousness. This feeling of love must gesture beyond a logocentric reduction to the same of the understanding consciousness and must resonate as a caress more than a grasp, but it nevertheless also importantly requires an act of logos: of attention to and active engagement with the Other that requires thinking, deciding, and creating. Kent's rejection of love is clearly a failure linked to his egotism, and as such, he shares something with Hugo of "Material." Though Kent lacks the capacity to produce

literature and he steadfastly refuses to exploit others, the way he lives his life, like the way Hugo lives his, is not enough for the female protagonist of each story. Kent's life is built around a similar egotism though it is one that is not phallogocentric but something like its opposite.

The narrator of "Material" is no writer, and there is no explicit indication that Sally is either. Like Janet of "The Moons of Jupiter," however, Sally finds love in a project of shared meaning-making. This love is not identical to the act of writing, but then again, neither is the act of watching by the narrator of "Miles City, Montana." There is no indication within the world of the story that this narrator will strike the appropriate balance between watching and keeping, or gall and milk, and become a writer. The flash forward that indicates she is no longer married to Andrew might suggest this possibility, however, given that it demonstrates at least a change in her circumstances.

Though there is no reason to believe Sally is a writer, her quest for love nevertheless is tied explicitly to intellectual creation: first and less successfully in her island fantasy and then in a more fulfilling fashion via her interest in geology. Solid extra-textual evidence also exists to indicate that Munro sometimes blurs the line between writers and non-writers. Thomas E. Tausky's "What Happened to Marion?: Art and Reality in *Lives of Girls and Women*" ends with an assertion from Munro that now that she has established herself as a writer, her stories "tend to be more about the human experience of a person who might indeed be an artist," which Tausky takes to suggest that she "continues, at least covertly, to write about artists" as well as "about crises of creativity" (76). While discussing the change in structure to her Rose and Janet stories, Munro also mentioned her tendency to "often write about the same heroine and give her a

different name and a different occupation and a slightly different background” but use the same “psychological make-up” (“Real Material” 30). Many of Munro’s heroines seem to have the psychology of a writer even if they are not one. Sally, for example, has a capacity for artistic or intellectual creation in much the same fashion that the narrator of “Material” might. The narrator of “Material,” however, is explicitly not a writer and ends her story frustrated, inarticulate, and alone; she has never successfully experienced a moment of genuine, loving intellectual creation. Sally, by contrast, has experienced a type of loving, mutual creation, which suggests that although writing and intellectual creation indeed require an assertion of self, this assertion need not be unethical in an *a priori* manner. In the right context, it can even be an act of love.

In an interview with Graeme Gibson, Munro speaks of her work in terms that blend intellectual and biological fecundity. Writing, she says, “has something to do with the fight against death” (243). She explains that in life, “we lose everything everyday, and writing is way of convincing yourself perhaps that you’re doing something about this. You’re not really, because the writing itself does not last much longer than you do; but I would say it’s partly the feeling that I can’t stand to have things go” (243). Writing, like producing a child, is a way to ensure something of the world continues after all the losses that come with the passage of time and the final, total loss that comes with death. Later, Munro even refers to stories she has been unable to finish to her satisfaction as “abortions” (257). Elsewhere in this interview, she mentions the difficulty of balancing writing and mothering: the “emotional demands made by children,” the problem of “getting enough time,” and the need to “withdraw” (249, 250). Love and fecundity in a literary sense, then, can certainly be at odds with love and fecundity in a biological or

face-to-face sense. “Deep-Holes,” however, revisits the tension between these two types of creation to suggest that their opposition is not inevitable: that in either realm, it may be possible to reconcile the responsibility to the Other with the needs of the self in love and mutual fecundation.

Chapter Six

Conclusion

Over the course of Alice Munro's career, her work has often been animated by the twin desires to write mimetically, thereby reducing the Other to the same of the understanding consciousness, and to recognize a radical alterity that cannot be represented without compromising its plenitude. The original 1974 version of "Home" offers a clear articulation of this dilemma. This version, like "The Ottawa Valley," is from the era in which Munro's stories most explicitly engaged with the ethics of writing, and it is also both highly autobiographical and highly self-conscious. The events it recounts closely mirror the circumstances of Munro's father's death and, again, as in "The Ottawa Valley," "Home" interjects metafictional commentary from a narrative voice representing a writer figure, though in this case, the commentary appears throughout. This commentary illustrates a tension between the power of writing, which the narrator clearly values, and the inadequacy of writing, which is cause for ethical concern.

At the end, this voice expresses the difficulty of closing the story appropriately. The writer figure finds she cannot make good on her original intention to compare herself, to her disadvantage, to the hardworking and decidedly rural Marge. Marge, the step-sister, will do the hard physical work of keeping up the father's farm and will provide support to his widow, her mother, while the writer figure will escape to a life "incomprehensible to her": a life "of a typewriter and three rooms and odd adventures [. . .] nothing she could ever call work, no animals to look after or vegetables to harrow and

dig” (152). The original intention was to end on this contrast between Marge’s steadfastness and the narrator’s life of trifling: “*She will stay here and live through this [. . .] I will go away and write my story*” (152). Yet the narrator finds this ending inadequate for reasons that blend ethical and aesthetic considerations. She does not want to introduce “so strong a character as Marge at the end of a story” because to do so is to use her “incidentally” rather than to “dwell on her; her beauty, her generosity, thank God not saintly but nicely marred by little pricks of malice” (152). Such incidental use is both a waste of good material and a less than robust attempt at expressing Marge’s depth. However, the ending also “seems too easy, and not honest”; ending on such a clear contrast unnecessarily reduces the complexity of the human relationships at play and too greatly denigrates the act of writing (152). The narrator really does value her literary prowess, even if she cannot or does not articulate why. She says that the ending she had originally intended “*makes me seem to condemn myself more than I really do, and to value what I am doing now less than I must really value it*” (152). Unless she is a hypocrite or being disingenuous, the fact that she continues to write indicates that she values the act of writing at least as much as the ability “to dig potatoes, and feed sheep” (152). The retrospective and metafictional narration here moves away from any clear and easy condemnation of writing.

Writing in “Home” is not just a source of ethical anxiety but also vital to the metafictional narrator’s sense of self and ability to engage with the world. The last scene before the metafictional commentary saw the protagonist standing in a stable feeding the sheep and feeling panic at the thought of being stuck in this community and having no artistic outlet. Farm labour, far from being ennobling, honest work for the narrator,

constitutes a threat to her identity. Had she failed to leave the community in which she was raised, she would have become “like those few half-mad, nearly useless, celibate, rusting captives there are around this country”; she can see herself as “the middle-aged daughter who reads all night and won’t answer the door, who comes out in a trance to spread hay for the sheep” (151). The failure to distance herself from her background and embrace a life of writing would have left her effectively wasting away: not only half-mad and useless but also celibate, unable to have sex and create life, unable to engage with the world and love. Dedicating herself to rural farm life and sacrificing her literary desire might have been more ethical in that it represents a life of self-sacrifice that requires no imaginative, literary reduction of the Other, but it would also have led to spiritual death and sterility.

The final paragraphs demonstrate both the mimetic power of her writing and her ambivalent feelings about this power. Her alternate ending would contrast this scene that demonstrates her alienation from her rural routes -- her impractical “water-buffalo sandals” that “let bits of hay and sheep pellets [. . .] get squashed between her toes,” her desire to “scream and run” from a lifetime of such work (151) -- with her first “true memory” (152). As a young child, she stood at that “very corner of the stable” and watched her father milk the black and white cow that would die of pneumonia in the winter of 1935 (152-53). The narrator renders this scene and then addresses the reader: “You can see this scene, can’t you, you can see it quietly made, that magic and prosaic safety briefly held for us, the camera moving out and out, that spot shrinking, darkness. Yes. That is effective” (153). She describes her ability to represent an event drawn from

memory³⁴ not only as an act of magic, but also in cinematic terms and as a source of shared enjoyment: the camera moves, the “prosaic safety” is “held *for us*,” and the narrator affirms the effectiveness of the scene. Her writing, then, is both vital to her sense of self and a way to create powerful, even magic, effects.

The final lines, however, throw the ethical status of this aesthetic and mimetic effectiveness into question. Again, she addresses the reader directly in an expression of ambivalence: “I don’t want any more effects, I tell you, lying. I don’t know what I want. I want to do this honour, if I possibly can” (153). She values the effects of fiction but is wary of them. She cannot express exactly what she wants, but she does want to continue exercising her powers as a writer. She wants to write with honour if possible, but honour here remains an unsubstantiated possibility, and she offers no explicit statement about whether or not she will continue to write should doing so with honour prove impossible. Honour, after all, seems at odds with the kind of unlimited responsibility for the Other at the core of Munro’s ethical vision in that it implies a specific moral code with which one can be in harmony. “Home” does offer a glimmer of hope in that it does not foreclose on the possibility of writing with honour, yet there is little evidence in this story or elsewhere in Munro’s oeuvre of any code by which one might judge a writer and possibly lift the burden of ethics from the enjoyment of fiction.

Though a code remains elusive, love is a presence in Munro’s oeuvre, and the possibility of a loving connection to her material at least suggests that one can write without dishonor. Her aesthetics of love, however oblique, opens the possibility of an engagement with her material that recognizes and preserves difference in a collaborative,

³⁴Thacker writes that this memory is not a complete imaginative invention and is indeed drawn from Munro’s life (*Writing* 51).

loving, and even life-giving act of creation. “Material” gestures at this possibility without representing it; even if Hugo is an unrepentant egoist and particularly disinclined to feel responsible for the Other, his story *is* “an act of magic, of special, unsparing, unsentimental love” (44). This love might in some enigmatic sense be “*not enough*,” but it nevertheless exists (44). “The Moons of Jupiter” stages a movement between the self and the Other that culminates in a moment of loving and collaborative creation, and the story as a whole demonstrates the real if incomplete power of literature to connect, to provide consolation, and to express love. In contrast to “The Ottawa Valley,” which offers a more purely ethical recognition of the mother’s continuing radical alterity, “The Moons of Jupiter” ends not with sterility or futility but with genuine catharsis made possible by the move from separation, to unity and love, and then final separation. “Deep-Holes,” which lacks the metafictional sensibilities of these other stories and is the simplest structurally, refigures the ethical dilemma at work in the watcher-keeper dynamic from “Miles City, Montana” and represents the possibility of shared intellectual creation not as selfish but as an act of love. Writing that engages with the real, whether fictive or otherwise, can approximate a shared act of creation linked to biological fecundity. This mode of writing does not necessarily entail ethical compromise but is rather an honourable form of creation. To love, then, might not bring honour to the writer but can instead be a way to honour one’s material.

Throughout her oeuvre, and even during her period of artistic crisis, Munro’s writing has expressed both the ethical risks inherent in writing *and* the positive, even life-affirming, possibilities it provides. The early 1970s indeed saw Munro at her most transparently concerned with the ethics of writing; after this time, she seems, to some

extent, to have put those issues to rest. Perhaps, given that her subsequent work became less explicitly tied to autobiography as well as more complex and imaginative, Munro embraced to a greater degree the capacity of literature to express a loving, rather than exploitative or inadequate, relationship to the world and the people within it. In Munro's aesthetics, this capacity to express love comes from her ability to recognize, or at least gesture toward, a radical alterity that escapes her conceptual and fictive structures while nevertheless partially reducing this alterity to her understanding in an act that combines representation with imaginative creation.

The Munro stories that express literary love stage something akin to *logos* as Anne Carson describes it. Carson notes how for Plato, the attempt to control or possess the object of desire can damage the beloved of an erotic relationship in a fashion similar to the interpretive violence the reader or writer can commit to the written word: she writes that "eros does harm to the beloved when the lover takes a certain controlling attitude, an attitude whose most striking feature is its determination to freeze the beloved in time. It is not hard to see that a similar controlling attitude is available to the reader or writer, who sees in written texts the means to fix words permanently outside the stream of time" (130). Plato, Carson argues, believes both sorts of damage "act on the soul in analogous ways and violate reality by the same kind of misapprehension" (130). Carson then turns to Socrates for his assertion that while writing indeed poses this threat, it also has the capacity to point beyond static or fixed meaning:

Like painting, the written word fixes living things in time and space, giving them the appearance of animation though they are abstracted from life and incapable of change. *Logos* in its spoken form is a living, changing, unique process of thought.

[. . .] The *logos* written down by a writer who knows his craft will approximate this living organism in the necessary ordering and interrelation of its parts. (132)

In her aesthetics of love, Munro follows the tradition of Socrates in recognizing the threat of damaging her material by fixing it in text but also believing in her capacity to approximate life. Carson is vague regarding how a writer might make this approximation, but the phenomenological accounting of eros provided by Levinas and Irigaray provides a useful analogy. Literature approximates life when it gestures toward a subject-to-subject relationship that moves, like a caress, across difference. This caress preserves a sense of alterity and does not wholly reduce the Other to the grasp of the understanding consciousness, and it ends in a creative, life-giving expression of mutual fecundation.

Literary love provides the potential for relief from the seemingly intractable dilemma of how to reduce the Other to the same of the understanding consciousness without interpretive violence, but if it is a potential solution, it is not without risk. The failure to imbue writing with this sense of life and love risks reducing the Other to what Carson calls the “dead letter” of the text (132). The questions of how to write and live ethically, then, are not ones that Munro simply answered in the early 1970s. They remain live questions, and if Munro appears to have become less interested in demonstrating the ethical risks of writing over her career, the reason for the absence of this ethical angst could be less that she has figured out how to negate these risks and more that she is resigned to taking them.

“Family Furnishings” from the 2001 collection *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* shows Munro returning to the question of the relationship between ethical writing and ethical living, and while her take on this question seems more

positive, it is still pervaded by ambiguity. In "Family Furnishings," Munro provides another portrait of the artist as a young woman. Another protagonist whose circumstances mirror Munro's own -- a small-town and semi-rural upbringing in Southwestern Ontario, a scholarship to a university in nearby London -- harbors literary ambitions. These aspirations bring her into conflict with the values of her taciturn community and with her family. The final scene returns to the protagonist early in her career and employs the retrospective narration Robert Thacker calls the "catalytic factor" in Munro's art (*Probable* 37). Here, just as Thacker observes of "Good-by, Myra," Munro presents "a commingling of [a] remembered event, vividly described so as to lend immediacy to it" along with an adult narrator's "detached understanding" of the event made possible by the passage of time (*Probable* 45). The young narrator has just visited her Aunt Alfrida, to whom she had once been close but who she now finds gauche. Alfrida has given a vivid recounting of her mother's death; the protagonist will later fashion a story out of the details of this account, a story that Alfrida will regard as an intrusion. The last paragraphs blend the feelings of power, of isolation, and of consuming that the youthful narrator attributes to the act of writing with the older narrator's sense of wariness. The passage bears quoting in its entirety:

Such happiness, to be alone. To see the hot late-afternoon light on the sidewalk outside, the branches of a tree just out in leaf, throwing their skimpy shadows. To hear from the back of the shop the sounds of the ball game that the man who had served me was listening to on the radio. I did not think of the story I would make about Alfrida -- not of that in particular -- but of the work I wanted to do, which seemed more like grabbing something out of the air than constructing stories. The

cries of the crowd came to me like big heartbeats, full of sorrows. Lovely formal-sounding waves, with their distant, almost inhuman assent and lamentation. This was what I wanted, this was what I thought I had to pay attention to, this was how I wanted my life to be. (117)

These last lines suggest the kind of “comprehensive understanding” Thacker believes is made possible by Munro’s narrative dialectics (*Probable* 58), but if the retrospection indicates greater understanding on the part of the narrator, the specifics of this understanding remain opaque.

The passage creates a tension between the youthful protagonist’s vision of writing as a process of taking from the world and the retrospective narrator’s suggestion of a move beyond this vision. For the young protagonist, writing is born out of isolation and is a pleasurable assertion of her powers of perception and expression. She is happy to be alone and to be taking the world in through her senses. Writing, for her, is less a process of production than one of consumption: the work she wants to do “is more like grabbing something out of the air than constructing stories” (117). At this stage in her career, the act of writing carries no ethical weight; there is no sense of interaction with or responsibility to her material. Everything is there for the taking via a pleasurable act of reduction to the same of her understanding consciousness and then representation in aesthetically pleasing forms.

The final lines describing this moment make the unethical nature of this process apparent. While thinking of writing and projecting forward to her future career, she perceives people as stripped of their humanity and feels no sympathy. Their raw emotions -- the “big heartbeats, full of sorrows” -- come to her in “Lovely, formal-sounding

waves” (117). The life pulse and the pain these people feel appeals to her and seems already to have taken a formal shape, as if they provide a basis for art more than an expression of humanity, and the coordinating conjunction between “assent” and “lamentation” flattens the difference between these very different expressions, which suggests the distinction is unimportant. People, like the sights and sounds she perceives, lack a face in the Levinasian sense and exist only to feed her literary ambitions.

The last sentence, however, suggests a more comprehensive understanding by passing an oblique judgment on this vision of writing. From a point of maturity that enables such retrospection, the narrator offers her reflection of her youthful vision. It *was* what she wanted, *was* what she thought she “had to pay attention to,” *was* how she “wanted her life to be” (117). The repetition of “was” brings emphasis to the separation between the retrospective narrator and the youthful protagonist and creates a clear implication that she has somehow moved on from this jejune understanding. This separation does not imply judgment, necessarily; it may even imply a sense of forgiveness for her youthful naïveté. Nevertheless, it certainly represents a distance from this youthful vision and even a sense of progression.

The exact nature of this new, more mature vision, however, remains unwritten. This new understanding could result from a more mature and ethical aesthetic vision. Perhaps she is now paying attention to different things; she may be more alive to the individuality of the people who constitute her material and more aware of the way they, in their alterity, overflow formal and conceptual structures. On the other hand, perhaps she is simply better at using discretion; she still reduces people to such formal structures but with more awareness of what might be hurtful about those from whom she takes her

inspiration. There is no way to know if she has found a new and more ethical, or more loving, way to write, or if the nature of writing as reduction and even use remains the same.

An earlier scene, in which the ethical significance of her writing begins to dawn on the protagonist, indicates that the latter is the more likely possibility. When the protagonist first learns that Alfrida took exception to the story, her initial reaction is dismissive: she “could not even think, at first, what Alfrida might be upset about,” and then she “was surprised, even impatient and a little angry, to think of Alfrida’s objecting to something that seemed now to have so little to do with her” (110). Her first impulse is to emphasize the separation between the fictive representation and the person who provided the detail and to deny the representation any ethical weight. She emphasizes the distance from reality and the significance of her own literary powers in the creation of the character: she tells her father that “it wasn’t Alfrida at all [. . .] I changed it, I wasn’t even thinking about her. It was a character. Anybody could see that” (111). Yet she cannot deny that there is some connection, even if this connection between Alfrida and the story in question might be clearer to readers of “Family Furnishings” than it is to the narrator.

Important details were borrowed directly from Alfrida’s account of her mother’s death. After asserting the distance between her fiction and Alfrida’s life, the protagonist reflects “But as a matter of fact there was still the exploding lamp, the mother in her charnel wrappings, the staunch, bereft child” (111). Readers also know that the story originated in a conversation the narrator had with Alfrida. When Alfrida relates a particularly personal aspect of the story of her mother, the narrator’s reaction evokes violence, possession, and isolation: “it was as if a trap had snapped shut, to hold these

words in my head [. . .] they jolted me and released me, right away, to breathe a different kind of air, available only to myself” (109). Though the story that came from this conversation “would not be written till years later, not until it had become quite unimportant to think about who had put the idea into [her] head in the first place,” ultimately the narrator cannot deny the connection between her writing and reality, or more importantly, the connection between her writing and Alfrida (109). The story’s specific aesthetics are less important than the fact that the details were included at all.

The story dramatizes no clear aesthetic solution to the risk of appropriation or ethical failure this connection to Alfrida constitutes. After the narrator recognizes the ethical implications that her story’s connection to Alfrida’s life raise, she moves away from thinking about her story and instead reflects on the difficulties she has caused for her father: “I did feel sorry to think that he had had to bear the brunt of what could be taken as my thoughtlessness, or even my wrongdoing” (111). She refuses to concede fully that the story constitutes an ethical failure -- her writing only “could be” taken as thoughtless or wrong -- yet she recognizes the possibility. Returning to the place of her upbringing gives her a sense of the ethical risk inherent in stories that draw upon real experience. She reflects that when she is on “home ground,” there is the danger of “seeing life through eyes other than [her] own” (111). In the eyes of her community, her literary life appears “as an ever-increasing roll of words like barbed wire, intricate, bewildering, uncomfoting -- set against the rich productions, the food, flowers, and knitted garments, of other women’s domesticity. It became harder to say that it was worth the trouble. Worth my trouble maybe, but what about anyone else’s?” (111). The comparison here recalls the one between the narrator and Marge in “Home”; traditional

domestic labour provides women with a clear place in the community, but literary pursuits do not.

Though this comparison also seems to operate at the narrator's expense, it, too, stops short of a full condemnation of her writing life. The narrator recognizes only the potential to view herself and her work in this fashion: she does not afford it the status of absolute truth. Moreover, her ethical insight here is based not on any recognition of the absolute alterity of the Other, to which any representation -- literary or otherwise -- would fall short, but rather on a sympathetic connection to hypothetical members of her community. The sense of violation her writing represents, then, is not an inevitable one inherent in fiction and not an ethical failure that haunts her. It simply might not be worth the trouble it causes, particularly, one assumes, to her father.

It could be, of course, that in a paradox reminiscent of the one at the heart of "Material," "Family Furnishings" itself provides this ethical aesthetic. The story dramatizes the inherent ethical risk of writing personal and reality-directed material, and it offers an oblique condemnation of the writer as a consumer of the world and people's lives. It does so, however, from within a sophisticated rendering of a fictional world, and it only gestures at the limitations and risks of mimesis rather than inscribing them in a metafictional aesthetics that ruptures its reality effect. Even if it offers no throughgoing critique of mimesis or writing in general, then, "Family Furnishings" nevertheless points to the limits of the human capacity to understand and represent and also to the power and importance of stories. The narrator, after all, "had to consider that the rupture" that occurred between Alfrida and her father "might have had nothing to do with" her (112). The narrator goes on to acknowledge the limits of her own importance and grants Alfrida

and her father a depth and complexity she had previously denied them. This rupture may only have been “one of the changes, the wearing-out of old attachments, that [she] understood so well in [her] own life but did not expect to happen in the lives of older people -- particularly [. . .] in the lives of people at home” (112). Like Janet of “The Moons of Jupiter,” she had defined her father and aunt “beyond any possibility of change” (222).

The penultimate scene, again like “The Moons of Jupiter,” demonstrates that new information can upend human understanding. Just as the new definition of Mercury’s orbit changed the scientific understanding of the universe, new information shifts the narrator’s understanding and definition of Alfrida. At her father’s funeral, the narrator learns that Alfrida gave birth to a daughter whom she gave up for adoption. She learns this information from the daughter herself, who first flatly reveals the information -- “Alfrida was my birth mom” -- but then proceeds to give the facts a narrative shape: it is a “*story* she must have told often” (114, emphasis mine). The revelation “stagger[s]” the narrator and gives the woman “some sense of triumph” at her “balmy moment of power” (114-15). Here story telling, tied to reality, is an assertion of individual power that can shatter the listener’s staid mental concepts and lead to separation rather than unity. Indeed, the woman’s moment of power is “so complete that she felt the need to apologize” (115).

Once again, however, this moment of separation precedes a moment of unity, though ultimately this unity leads not to love but to something closer to hate. The revelation that Alfrida gave birth to a child alters not only the narrator’s image of Alfrida, but also of the woman standing before her. This woman is not, as the narrator had first

suspected, “a friend of [her] stepmother’s” and a stranger, but a blood relation (112).³⁵ Their common heritage facilitates a brief coming together that occurs after the woman’s apology as the two share a story from the father and Alfrida’s collective past. “Family Furnishings” opens with this story: Alfrida and the father are together in a field when bells ring to announce the end of the First World War. Alfrida remembers vivid details about playing with the father’s dog and stomping on the ice in the furrows to enjoy “its crackle underfoot” (84). Alfrida and the father dispute the story in their playful, teasing way: the father asserts that she could not remember “a thing like that” and she must be making it up, though Alfrida twice insists that she “did not” (84). In the penultimate scene, the woman retells her version of the story. This retelling too, leads to a moment of hostile rather than loving exchange and demonstrates the threat that even stories drawn directly from autobiographical experience are distorted, if only due to the vagaries of memory.

When Alfrida’s daughter and the narrator exchange versions of the story, the narrator gains a richer though less clear understanding about the events in question. Alfrida’s daughter says the two had been walking home from high school, while the narrator thought “they were just children” (115). Upon reflection, the narrator realizes the

³⁵The narrator and the woman are, at the least, half cousins, but the possibility exists that they might be half sisters. The relationship between Alfrida and the narrator’s father bears some similarity to a sexual one. The father and Alfrida playfully tease each other, and the narrator describes the teasing as mirroring the way “young girls torment boys at school, when arguments are a peculiar delight to both sides and insults are taken as flattery” (92). Alfrida’s daughter also informs the narrator that despite their enjoyment of each other’s company, Alfrida and her father could not walk all the way home from school together because “in those days, a boy and a girl, they would just get teased something terrible” (115). At the time of their adolescence, then, a sexual relationship between the two cousins would not have been out of the realm of possibility to their peers, even if only in jest. “Family Furnishings” also demonstrates the extent to which Alfrida and the father exceed the narrator’s understanding and that both dramatic and mundane events about their lives remain unknown to her, and what the narrator does not know includes the father of Alfrida’s daughter. Of course, this possibility cannot be corroborated by explicit textual evidence, but it remains another instance in Munro’s work in which ethics, the erotic, and meaning making are staged within a family dynamic.

other version is more likely correct: she realizes that her “father was born in 1902, and that Alfrida was close to the same age. So it was much more likely that they were walking home from high school than that they were playing in the fields” (115). This revelation casts doubt on other details from the version of the story the narrator remembers: “Maybe they had said they were in the fields, that is, walking home across the fields. Maybe they had never said ‘playing’” (115). By sharing their stories, the narrator and Alfrida’s daughter both gain a more complex vision of the truth. The daughter picks up the possibility that Alfrida and the father were accompanied by a dog: “Maybe they had the dog all right. Maybe he came to meet them” (115).

This moment of shared meaning making provides a prelude to an emotional exchange, but the exchange in this instance is far from loving. After the shared storytelling, “the feeling of apology or friendliness” the narrator had felt disappears, as the woman relays an insult from Alfrida to the narrator: ““She said you were smart, but you weren’t ever quite as smart as you thought you were” (116). The capacity for a shared process of meaning making, then, here shows not the capacity for coming together in a moment of love but to express animosity. The threat contained in storytelling, then, is not just the threat of reducing the world and the Other to the dead letter of the text; if storytelling has the capacity to approximate love, then it also has the capacity to approximate hate.

The dialectic between ethics and love does not wholly define Munro’s oeuvre, or even the representation of writing across her body of work. Two stories from *Too Much Happiness*, for example, trouble any easy correspondence between an ethical insight, a desire for love, and the act of writing or intellectual creation. In “Child’s Play,” the

narrator, Marlene, is an anthropologist whose academic writing is a solitary act and primarily related to other texts: her book “grew out of a thesis [she] had been discouraged from writing,” and it was criticized for being “too literary and for getting all [her] information out of books” (210). The project, however, is not without autobiographical significance. As a child, Marlene hated her one-time neighbour Verna, a girl who had a mental disability. Her book, *Idiots and Idols*, explores the attitude of people in various cultures those “who are mentally or physically unique,” with unique here replacing “words like ‘deficient,’ ‘handicapped,’ ‘retarded’” which had been “consigned to the dustbin and probably for good reason” (210). Marlene can “see a connection” between her past and her scholarship, but far from creating anxiety over the ethics of representation or from reflecting a desire for love, Marlene, at least, finds it “distant and unimportant [. . .], only a starting point” for her scholarly achievement (210).

Readers may have cause to question Marlene’s assertion upon finishing the story, however, when it is revealed that the impetus for the book lies not in an intense but childish hostility to Verna but rather in an act of murder. The final scene reveals that when Marlene and Verna coincidentally attend the same camp one summer, Marlene and her friend Charlene act on an impulse and drown Verna during a swimming excursion (223). Yet there is no direct textual evidence that guilt for this murder has haunted Marlene or even significantly impacted her life, and there is no metanarrative level in the text from which readers are invited to judge Marlene. Though the murder haunts Charlene, who on her deathbed seeks Marlene’s help in getting absolution from a priest, Marlene has no such guilt. While attempting to bring a priest to Charlene, Marlene addresses the reader: “Was I not tempted, during all this palaver? Not once? You’d think

that I might break open, be wise to break open, glimpsing that vast though tricky forgiveness. But no. It's not for me. What's done is done. Flocks of angels, tears of blood, notwithstanding" (220). Though Marlene recognizes that she should perhaps desire this "tricky forgiveness," she does not.

Neither her lack of a feeling of responsibility for the Other nor her resistance to love proves any impediment to her ability to write. Her book is at least a moderate success: it won her "small flurry of attention in the outside world" that included mention in *Maclean's* (210, 209). Yet for her entire adult life, Marlene has resisted any subject-to-subject relationship of love. As a graduate student, she "decided never to get married, though [she] did not rule out having lovers" (208). Of her lovers, though she would not "want to call most of them lovers," only two were "important" enough for her to consider sharing her life with, but far from seeing this potential for love as a missed opportunity, she sees represents it as a threat to her sense of self that she narrowly avoided (211). Falling in love for Marlene seems a violation of her individuality and a surrender: with these two lovers, "the time would come when you want to split open, surrender far more than your body, dump your whole life safely into one basket with his. I kept myself from doing so, but just barely" (211). For Marlene, at least, the capacity for intellectual creation and the ability to write are isolated from considerations of either ethics or love and are fundamentally solitary.

"Child's Play" lacks the earnest ethical consideration of some Munro stories. Like "Fits," it is closer in spirit to a crime or horror story than any ethical insight into the radical alterity of the Other. Though certain patterns and themes recur in her work, Munro's oeuvre is nonetheless rich and varied. Many of her stories draw on elements of

crime, horror, or mystery fiction. Others display a well-documented Gothic sensibility. Still more draw on oral traditions (Redekop, Thacker *Rest*) or specific literary conventions, such as the blazon or Arthurian romance and *emboîtement* (Micros, Thacker, ed. *Rest*; Luft). Though ethical concerns, and specifically, an anxiety over the ethics of writing, are often apparent, they do not in every instance dominate her artistic vision.

Because Munro is first and foremost a writer, aesthetic pleasure and the free play of the imagination at times override, or perhaps sidestep, literature as a relation to the Other. For Levinas, by contrast, as Richard Kearney writes, “poetic imaging is fine, as long as it remains answerable to an ethics of alterity” (91). Kearney points out that Levinas “fails to address, [...] the right of art as art to explore a realm of imagination that, in Ricoeur’s phrase, ““knows no censorship”” (94). “If the ultimate origin and end of art is ethics,” Kearney writes, “the rest belongs to poetics,” a poetics free to play and imagine without limit, so that it is not constrained by ethics any more than it is Lenin’s “hammer of the benevolent propagandist” or Sartre’s words that “are loaded pistols” (94). Art as a relation to the Other, then, constitutes one aspect of Munro’s oeuvre; it may be a large aspect, but it does not define her work the way that ethics defines the work of Levinas, who is, after all, a philosopher and not a writer of short fiction.

Munro does, at times, feel free to engage in this free play of the imagination and to write stories that do not manifest any anxiety over ethics or desire for love. Perhaps this freedom stems from her apparent uneasiness with any direct equation between either love or ethics as a face-to-face relation and love or ethics as a function of literature. Literature may open a relationship to the Other that parallels and even overlaps with the

face-to-face relation, but it is not quite the same. The capacity of literature both to represent and to perform something like love is not necessarily a reason or justification for writing, but it is a possibility that some stories explore.

“Fiction” offers a clear if oblique gesture at the experience of literary love, yet it too works against any easy equivalence between love as a function of literature and love as a face-to-face relationship. Joyce, the protagonist and focalizer, is a music teacher who years ago taught the child of the woman for whom her husband had left her. The child, Christie, grew up to be a writer and wrote a short story based on her relationship to Joyce. Before this story is introduced, Joyce takes an “instant dislike” to Christie (46). Later Joyce happens by chance upon a copy of Christie’s book; she buys it and that evening reads a story from it that draws on the details of Joyce and Christie’s relationship. Joyce initially believes “she knows the turn the story will take” but finds herself surprised: it is not about “The child all mixed up in the adults’ dealings and delusions” but rather “Everything is hinged on the child’s love for the teacher” (54).

Near the end of the story-within-the-story, Joyce feels “horror” at the thought the story will take a dark turn into child abuse: that “the writer would graft her ugly invention onto the people and the situation she had got out of real life, being too lazy to invent but not to malign” (56). The combination of the tie to reality and imaginative invention creates the possibility, particularly if done in bad faith, of an ethical failure that Joyce would feel as a violation. Yet Joyce is again surprised as “something happens” and there is a “surprise ending”; the child no longer feels “bitterness” at her recognition that the teacher was interested in her because of her former love interest (58). Instead she feels “Love,” despite everything, and it “seemed as if there must be some random and of

course unfair thrift in the emotional housekeeping of the world, if the great happiness -- however temporary, however flimsy -- of one person could come out of the great unhappiness of another” (58-59). This love and this sentiment resonate with Joyce, and she affirms them: “Why yes, [she] thinks. Yes” (58-9).

This moment is typical of Munro’s representations of literary love in that it is represented indirectly and as a collaborative creation. At first, the story-within-the-story is presented directly. Joyce reads aloud the first line to her husband: “‘She lived with her mother,’ she reads, ‘in a house between the mountains and the sea --’” (51). This line constitutes the first line of the paragraph that follows, after a line break. This block of text, then, appears to be the story itself. After the next line break, “Fiction” returns to being focalized through Joyce: she “puts the book down on the kitchen table and looks at the picture of the author” (52). What follows blends dialogue, and perhaps even lines, quoted directly from the story-within-the-story with representations reflected through Joyce’s consciousness. Lines of dialogue, like the teacher congratulating the student -- “Good for you. You’ve really made the grade today” -- must come directly from the story within-the-story (54). Other lines, like “Is this the beginning of a change? Is it because of spring, the preparations for the recital?” appear to come from Joyce’s consciousness (54). Yet there is nothing textually to mark off these observations from the text of the story-within-the-story, so it becomes difficult to tell whether many lines come directly from Christie’s story or are being reported and refracted through Joyce. Lines like “The teacher says it is a pity to be scared of the woods all the time” blur the distinction between direct presentation and representation through Joyce (56) This line could be reported speech quoted directly from the story or Joyce reporting a line of dialogue.

As the story-within-the story progresses, Christie's text and Joyce's reading of it fuse into one more-or-less seamless whole. The climax, which appears to be an epiphany³⁶ in which Christie's protagonist realizes that her love for the teacher was genuine after all, blends Christie's writing and Joyce's reading in a single act of literary love. In the following passage, it is difficult to say exactly where Joyce's words end and Christie's begin.

Her feelings about the teacher and that period in her childhood one day change. She doesn't know how or when, but she realizes that she no longer thinks of that time as a cheat. She thinks of the music she painfully learned to play (she gave it up, of course, before she was even in her teens). The buoyancy of her hopes, the streaks of happiness, the curious and delightful names of the forest flowers that she never got to see. Love. She was glad of it. (58)

Sentences that simply report the action, such as "her feelings about the teacher and that period in her childhood one day change," or "she realizes that she no longer thinks of that time as a cheat" might represent Joyce's retelling. The literary quality of phrases like "The buoyancy of her hopes, the streaks of happiness," with their greater parallelism and heightened imagery, might come directly from the story, but it is impossible to know with certainty. This literary love, then, is a shared act that is represented obliquely. Readers do not directly see the text that inspires this emotion, but only glimpse it through Joyce's eyes.

Genuine as this love may feel to Joyce in the moment, however, the final pages seem to underscore the distance between this literary love and her actual relation to

³⁶Given that the story-within-the-story is represented indirectly, here, any assertion about its literary techniques remains conjectural.

Christie. Previously, Joyce had expressed her mystification at the fact that people might want to have their books signed by an author: “Joyce has never understood this business of lining up to get a glimpse of the author and then going away with a stranger’s name written in your book” (49). When Christie has a book signing at Joyce’s bookstore, however, Joyce not only lines up to have her book signed but also brings a gift: “a small box from Le Bon Chocolatier” (59). In line, Joyce is “actually trembling a little” and “finds it hard to speak” -- the signing is clearly a heady emotional experience for her (59). Joyce’s actual encounter with Christie, though, is devoid of love or connection. Christie is clearly indifferent, even hostile, to Joyce’s first attempt to connect. Joyce asks, “You were born in Rough River?” and Christie replies in the negative and “with some slight displeasure, or at least some diminishing of cheer” (60). Joyce’s expression of gratitude and her gift then prompt an intervention from the saleswoman: “‘Isn’t that a wonderful story.’ The saleswoman takes the box. ‘I’ll just hang on to this’” (60). Whatever love Joyce felt is gone.

This encounter, mediated by the conventions of literary culture and economics, has no space for such a connection. The love Joyce felt as a textual phenomenon is nowhere apparent:

There is not a scrap of recognition in the girl’s face. She doesn’t know Joyce from years ago in Rough River or two weeks ago at the party. You couldn’t even be sure that she had recognized the title of her own story. You would think she had nothing to do with it. As if it was just something she wriggled out of and left on the grass. And as for whatever was true, that the story came from -- why, she acted as if that was disposed of long before. (60-61)

This scene seems to express the disconnection between love in literature and love as a face-to-face relation.

And yet, "Fiction" as a whole demonstrates the fragility of both types of love. The opening half of the story narrates the dissolution of Joyce's marriage to her first husband, Jon. If literary love is fragile and tenuous, so too is the love in any relationship. Jon falls in love with another woman and one day announces to Joyce that their marriage is over: "There is no 'we,'" he said" (38). Christie's story may be only a reminder or an echo of what passed between her and Joyce, but there was something there: something "true, that the story came from" even if it has long since passed (61). Literary love is not identical to love as a face-to-face relation, but neither is it wholly different or without power. Munro's stories that enact this love remain separate from love unmediated by fiction, but that does not make this love insignificant. Munro's aesthetics of love remain something to be glad of.

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