

University of Alberta

**The Ordinary and the Epiphanic/Death and Eros:
Religious and Spiritual Questing in the fiction of Alice Munro**

By

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Department of English

Edmonton, Alberta

Fall, 2004



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Dedication

**To Sandy, and to our three children—Nigel,
Kelsey, and Avril**

May learning remain your life-long goal.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

THE ORDINARY AND THE EPIPHANIC IN ALICE MUNRO'S WRITING

Mystery and the “Ordinary”

Our postmodern cultural relationship with mystery or the mysterious is a complex and highly ambivalent one. We are fascinated by and drawn to mystery, yet, when we encounter it, quite determined to eliminate it as quickly and efficiently as possible. The contemporary Canadian writer Alice Munro, however, has developed an unusual relationship with mystery/the mysterious. In *The Tumble of Reason: Alice Munro’s Discourse of Absence*, Ajay Heble explains:

Munro’s desire to work within yet go beyond the inherited conventions of realistic fiction reflects her conception of the dual nature of reality. For Munro, human lives are, at once, ordinary and mysterious, and for us to be unable to see this is one of our greatest impoverishments. (16)

Another critic opines, “Munro circles mysteries of our existence...She doesn’t confront or explain them” (*Alice Munro* 15). Munro herself speaks of the primary aim of her writing as recognizing and approaching mystery, and also of a “kind of satisfaction in just approaching something that is mysterious and important” (Foy 167). It is this approach and attitude toward the mysterious and the ineffable that lies at the heart of what I term the implicit religious/spiritual vision in Alice Munro’s fiction.

In a 1973 interview with Graeme Gibson, Munro, grappling with a question about the sense of the mysterious in a number of her early stories, responded, “I can’t really claim that it is linked to any kind of religious feeling about the world, and yet that might come closest to describing it” (Martin 60). In many respects, Munro’s tentative response anticipates much about the nature of what I will be exploring in the following chapters. Munro’s typical reluctance to explicitly acknowledge any religious stance is shared by many people in contemporary Western culture, myself among them. Our reticence, like Munro’s, to name the religious, to attempt to identify the sacred, often produces elliptical, ambiguous, or ambivalent responses such as the one above. If we *do* wish to express something that might be termed religious or spiritual, but do not wish to frame it in the language or nomenclature of traditional religion, we discover that in a culture as secular, scientific, and technological as ours, there is really no other language readily available to

us to perform such naming. Perhaps we are surprised, even somewhat dismayed, to find ourselves thus stymied, forced to fall back upon—some might say regress to—the religious. As Jacques Derrida reminds us, however, our surprise is somewhat displaced, perhaps even disingenuous:

Why is this phenomenon, so hastily called the “return of the religions,” so difficult to think? Why is it so surprising? Why does it particularly astonish those who believed naively that an alternative opposed Religion, on the one side, and on the other, Reason, Enlightenment, Science, Criticism (Marxist Criticism, Nietzschean Genealogy, Freudian Psychoanalysis and their heritage), as though one could put an end to the other? (5)

In many respects, the following thesis was born out of my recognition of the kind of naivety Derrida identifies above or, less kindly put, my recognition of a naïve hubris shared by so many of us in modern/postmodern Western culture, particularly in intellectual/academic circles. There had arisen, particularly over the first two-thirds of the 20th Century, a kind of smug assurance that it was only a matter of time before the remaining vestiges of “primitive” religious thinking would dissipate. To provide a sense of just how widespread and pervasive this kind of dismissal was, here is a passage from Hent DeVries’s *Philosophy and the Turn to the Religious*, where he notes how religion has been dismissed, variously, as

‘truth in the garments of a lie’ (Schopenhauer), ‘anthropology disguised as theology’ (Feuerbach), ‘ideology and false consciousness’ (Marx), ‘infantile neurosis’ (Freud), ‘the nonsensical expression of feeling, diffused by metaphysicians without poetical or musical talent’ (Carnap), ‘a category mistake’ (Ryle), ‘a form of life’ (Wittgenstein), and so on (2)

However, as DeVries points out at the conclusion of this list, “whatever the merits of each of these dismissals they have proven unable to settle the debate and to silence the religious once and for all” (2-3).

Far from silenced, the religious, the sacred, and the spiritual—in various forms from the political to the occult—have returned with the remarkable energy that often attends the “return of the repressed.” In an essay entitled “A Trace of a Trace” from a

collection of essays on contemporary religion, including one by Jacques Derrida, Gianni Vattimo puts it this way:

Perhaps not by its essential nature, but *de facto*, given the conditions of existence in modernity (the Christian West, secularized morality, a *fin-de-siecle* state of anxiety over the impending threat of new and apocalyptic dangers), religion comes to be experienced as a return. In religion, something that we thought irrevocably forgotten is made present again, a dormant trace is reawakened, a wound reopened, the repressed returns.

(79)

The persistence of the religious and spiritual in the fiction of Alice Munro—a contemporary, ostensibly secular, realistic, Canadian writer—clearly illustrates ways in which the religious and the spiritual (I will distinguish these two terms shortly) have persisted in the broader culture, particularly in its art and literature, despite many indications that they had been, if not extinguished, then certainly marginalized. I am not arguing that the religious/spiritual have returned in traditional, organized forms—although, as Vattimo and others have noted, this has occurred on the broader cultural and global levels—and, in the literary realm, quite explicitly “religious” writers such as Graham Greene, Flannery O’Connor, and John Updike remain popular and widely read. Rather, I am interested in how religious/spiritual concerns have been “relocated,” to use William Closson James’ metaphor from his study, *Locations of the Sacred: Essays on Religion, Literature, and Canadian Culture*. James convincingly argues that there is much contemporary fiction that “relocates the sacred from its older abode beyond the earth to some place or other within ordinary experience” (ix). It is this type of “relocation” that is occurring in Alice Munro’s fiction from her first published collection of stories in 1968, *Dance of the Happy Shades* to her most recent 2002 collection, *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*.

Further, Munro’s work is especially representative of a broad section of the contemporary religious *zeitgeist* in that, unlike explicitly “religious” writers and like many other contemporary authors who also share a concern with the religious/spiritual, Munro is *not* religious in the conventional sense and certainly has no specific religious agenda. As Munro’s daughter, Sheila Munro, makes clear in her 2001 biography of her

mother, *Lives of Mothers and Daughters: Growing Up With Alice Munro*, “In our family we did not go to church. My parents were set against dogma and ritual, and the whole idea of original sin” (61). Aside from some sporadic involvement with the Unitarian Church, in her adult years (she is now 73 years of age), Munro has eschewed organized religion. However, as I will demonstrate in upcoming chapters, Munro has maintained a deep interest in matters religious/spiritual, and, very importantly, she has consistently and brilliantly approached the *mystery* that lies at the heart of the religious/spiritual. Before proceeding further, however, and as promised, it is important that I distinguish the key terms, “religion/religious” from “spirit/spiritual.”

In discussions with friends, colleagues, students, and others, I have often encountered statements such as the following: “Well, no, I am not religious, but I am spiritual.” Keeping in mind my earlier point about the unavailability of language in our secular culture, other than traditional religious language, to express one’s religious position, this sort of fumbling about is quite understandable. However, it is crucial in the present discussion to be as precise as possible with terms such as “religious” and “spiritual.” To that end, we must recognize that to say that one is “spiritual” is ambiguous at best, empty language at worst. The ambiguity and confusion surrounding the term “spiritual” is exacerbated when huge best sellers such as James Redfield’s *The Celestine Prophecies*, and similar new-age publications use the term “spiritual” in very loose fashion. The “massive human transformation” that is supposedly occurring in Redfield’s book is described as follows: “It’s not religious in nature, but it is spiritual” (4). This sort of vague usage of the term “spiritual” inevitably leads to the kind of connotative decline that William Closson James notes below:

The word “spirituality” has problematic overtones, suggesting not only inwardness and private faith, but something not entirely to be taken seriously, perhaps because of the implied associations with New Age movements. (5)

In order to avoid the problems associated with the term “spirituality” and to achieve as much etymological precision as possible, I turn to W.L. Reese’s *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion: Eastern and Western Thought*, wherein Reese sets out the following definition of “spirit”: “From the Latin *spiritus* (“breath”). Thus the breath of

life. The Greek term is *psyche*, and the term stood for the principle of animation or life” (547). The most challenging aspect in using the word “spirit” resides in the ineffability of what “spirit” denotes. Karen Armstrong reminds us that early Christians, Jews, and Moslems “all had suggested, at one time or other, that it was more accurate to describe God as ‘Nothing’ rather than the Supreme Being [or Spirit], since ‘he’ did not exist in any way that we could conceive” (352). What does become clear in all of this is that spirit—in keeping with its original meaning of “breath,” “air,” “wind,” resists containment. Attempting to *contain* spirit metaphorically parallels the futility of attempting to “contain” or to “catch” the wind. The title of W. O. Mitchell’s prairie classic rhetorically poses the question, “Who has seen the wind?” The answer, “No one,” is, of course, obvious, but in the opening epigraph of Mitchell’s novel, he makes clear that even if we cannot literally name the ineffable, we can approach it symbolically: “Many interpreters of the Bible believe the wind to be symbolic of Godhood.”

William Closson James reports how in the early 1980’s, Walter Principe undertook the daunting task of examining definitions of spirituality, “primarily understood as an aspect of personal piety and devotion, but becoming a branch of study within theology and religious studies” (16). Interestingly, Principe discovered that the term “first began to be used in English (initially in translation from French) only in the twentieth century” (16). This coincides, of course, with the period in Western history wherein organized religion was under the unprecedented pressure exerted by over fifty years of Darwinian evolutionary theory and rapidly increasing developments in astronomy, archeology, psychology and other branches of Western Newtonian-Cartesian science. Principe concluded that spirituality “points to those aspects of a persons’ living a faith or commitment that concerns his or her striving to attain the highest ideal or goal” (16). James goes on to point out, however, that even this quite vague definition of spirituality has since become “less specific and provisional in its ordinary usage” (16). Thus, as we can see, attempting to precisely define spirituality remains challenging due to the problems outlined above and, of course, due to the inherent ineffability of spirit.

In marked contrast to the ineffability of the terms “spirit” and “spiritual,” “religion” denotes and connotes containment. Etymologists—W.L. Reese among them—agree that one of the clearest sources of the word “religion” is the Latin “religare,” “to

bind fast.” Reese goes on to define religion as “a means of relating the individual to what is taken to be the ultimate nature of reality” (488). There is, though, a kind of reciprocity in this relationship between the individual and “the ultimate nature of reality”—or the spiritual. The more obvious denotation is that the dogma, ritual, rules, commandments, and so forth of a particular religion bind or “tie back” the behavior, beliefs, values of the adherents of that religion. A somewhat less obvious but nevertheless equally applicable meaning is that people are being religious to the extent that *they* attempt to contain, bind, “tie back”—that is, to articulate, formulate—the spiritual or “the ultimate nature of reality.”

When a writer such as Alice Munro—or, for that matter, anyone— attempts to “bind fast,” to articulate in any manner that which we discern as spiritual, he/she is being religious. Of course, I am not forgetting or overlooking the widespread understanding of the term “religion” as denoting any of a number of large cultural institutions, such as Christianity or Islam or Buddhism. I am differentiating, however, between the use of “religion” in this institutionalized sense and the term “religious”—the latter including *any* attempt, however individualized or marginal, to “bind fast,” articulate or contain spirit or the ineffable nature of reality. Moreover, in Munro’s fiction, the attempts of her various protagonists, narrators, or other characters to recognize, approach, and then in some manner—however provisional or tentative—to express or “bind” this experience invariably emerges out of some kind of *quest*; this accounts for the term “questing” in my title.

The decline in organized religion in Western culture over the last 150 years, and particularly between the mid 19th and the mid 20th centuries, produced a wide range of artistic and literary responses and a good deal of critical attention has been paid to these responses. It is not my intention here, however, to re-cover this critical ground. My aim, rather, is to place Alice Munro’s writing—in particular her focus on the religious and the spiritual—into the broader context of Western literature during this time frame and to set out the central precepts of Munro’s focus on the spiritual/religious. Then, in the balance of this introductory chapter, I will define and outline the historical development of two central terms in my thesis, “the ordinary” and the epiphanic. I will follow this with a

chapter-by-chapter overview of my discussion of the development of the implicit religious/spiritual vision in Alice Munro's writing.

As I briefly noted earlier, there are and have been a number of well-known "religious writers," for want of a better term, writers who have approached religious issues in their writing in quite explicit fashion, and who have also made clear their own quite traditional Christian religious perspectives. Among many such late 19th and then 20th century figures are writers such as Gerard Manley Hopkins, William Morris, Flannery O'Connor, Graham Greene, and John Updike. Such explicitly religious writers have, though, become an increasingly smaller minority. Increasing in inverse ratio, however, have been literary artists who are not religious in any conventional or doctrinaire sense, but who nevertheless are deeply concerned with matters of the spirit. Again, Alice Munro is a particularly representative writer among this latter group.

Munro is also equally representative in this regard within her native Canadian context, among writers such as P.K. Page, Margaret Laurence, Ethel Wilson, Robertson Davies, Morley Callaghan, or more contemporary authors such as Douglas Coupland, Gloria Sawai, Sharon Butala, Yann Martel—all writers who devote considerable energy and time to matters of religion and the spirit. Very importantly, Munro and these other writers (the foregoing list, of course, is representative but certainly not exhaustive) face the challenge of addressing matters of religion/spirituality in a culture that has become increasingly secular. They must seek avenues to express religious/spiritual issues, concerns, and experiences that are relevant, meaningful, and palatable, both for themselves and their readers, in a post-Nietzsche, secularized, materialist, techno-scientific world. At the core of such a daunting endeavor is the struggle to find expression for the sacred, the divine, the spiritual in a world that, to invoke Morris Berman, has been "disenchanted":

The phrase is Weber's: *die Entzauberung der Welt*. Schiller, a century earlier, had an equally telling expression for it: *die Entgotterung der Natur*, the "disgoddling" of nature. The history of the West, according to both the sociologist and the poet, is the progressive removal of mind, or spirit, from phenomenal appearances. (Berman 69)

Alice Munro did not begin publishing until the 1960's, but even in the latter half of the 20th century, it remained clear that we in the West were still struggling with the profound changes in our collective Western religious belief systems that had begun at least a century earlier. Nietzsche's apocalyptic, turn-of-the-century pronouncement was still ringing in Western ears: "God is dead...the belief in the Christian God has ceased to be believable" (*The Portable Nietzsche* 56). Earlier writers, such as Thomas Hardy, had certainly responded to the "death of God" at the time of its pronouncement. In fact, Hardy went as far as to create a poetic parting ceremony for God entitled "God's Funeral," which included the lines,

'O man-projected Figure, of late
Imaged as we, thy knell who shall survive?

Whence came it we were tempted to create

One whom we can no longer keep alive? (Wilson xiii-xiv)

However psychologically credible¹ and however poignant these and other late 19th, early 20th century literary responses to the "death of God" may have been, they clearly did not close the matter. In fact, as A.N. Wilson convincingly claims, "The individual journeys of modern men and women show that none of the compelling questions raised by the Victorian crisis of faith received final answers—else the matter would not continue to haunt us today" (14-15)

Alice Munro's treatment of the religious/spiritual in her writing is varied, complex and multi-leveled, ranging from very direct address of religious matters to highly metaphorical, oblique treatment of these issues, with more of the former treatment in the earlier stages of her career. For example, in Munro's second collection, *Lives of Girls and Women*, her protagonist, Del Jordan, grapples openly with her religious faith in stories such as "Baptism" and "Age of Faith" in ways that bear strong parallels to the struggles voiced in some of the works of 19th and early 20th century poets like Alfred Tennyson, Matthew Arnold, and, again, Thomas Hardy. Consider, for instance, the parallels between the projection Hardy refers to in the stanza above from "God's

¹ Note in the opening line, for instance, shades of the Freudian argument that religious beliefs in God are projections of a deep wish fulfillment—"they are illusions, fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most insistent wishes of mankind; the secret of their strength is the strength of these wishes" (Freud *The Future of an Illusion*).

Funeral” and the words of Del’s quasi-atheist mother: “God was made by man! Not the other way around! God was made by *man*. Man at a lower and bloodthirstier stage of his development than he is at now, we hope” (89).

Clearly such passages from Munro’s work—even entire stories—are quite explicitly religious in content. The difference, however, between Munro and the explicitly religious writers noted earlier, even in such passages/works, is that Munro never advances any type of religious agenda. Rather, she is doing exactly what she, in interviews, professes to do: she is recognizing and approaching religious/spiritual matters—circling their inherent mystery. Nor, though, am I suggesting that Munro’s protagonists/narrators/characters remain detached objective viewers, unmoved by the religious/spiritual struggles and experiences they encounter. Far from it. Munro’s characters are often more moved by these types of experiences than by any other. In the instance noted above from *Age of Faith*, for example, Del’s seemingly confident, scientific-minded, avowedly atheist mother—like so many people in Western culture over the century since the Victorian crisis of faith—even Del’s mother cannot bring herself to deny the existence of *some* type of divine force: “Not even she was prepared to say *Nothing*, and to see herself and every stick and stone and feather in the world floating loose on that howling hopeless dark. No” (84)

Notwithstanding the clearly explicit treatment of religious issues and beliefs in the stories noted above, generally speaking, as Munro’s writing career has progressed, her treatment of the spiritual/religious has become increasingly implicit—symbolic, metaphorical. This is, perhaps, one of the reasons that most Munro critics have steered clear of addressing these very important aspects of her work. As Nora Robson puts it in “Alice Munro and the White American South: The Quest,” “most critics and reviewers of Munro avoid mentioning any religious quest in her work” (77). The implicit nature of Munro’s treatment of the religious/spiritual is certainly not the *only* reason for this critical reticence, though. It is safe to say that postmodern academe has been decidedly reluctant to address such matters for a variety of reasons that I will address as my argument progresses. That said, that critics and reviewers have tended to focus on other aspects of Munro’s fiction and to overlook religious/spiritual aspects obviously does not mean that

these aspects are absent or unimportant. As Robson goes on to note, Munro critics and reviewers

dwell rather on the theme of growing up, her artistry in fiction, and her sensitivity to the sensuous and sensual. She does, however, share a bond with O'Connor in the God-proving field. Munro uses Del Jordan to explore the conventions of religion within Jubilee and Wawanesh County in *Lives* and, like the Southern writer, finds hypocrisy rampant among the townspeople, and revivalist exuberance thriving among the rural Baptists. (77)

Robson does not, unfortunately, go on to clarify that Munro does *not* share O'Connor's proselytizing motivation to jar or shock her readers into becoming, *themselves*, more genuine, less hypocritical Christians. As Loren Logsdon and Charles Mayer argue in *Since Flannery O'Connor: Essays on the Contemporary American Short Story*, O'Connor shows us "the grotesque, fantastic, often monstrously comic quality of modern life as it is lived by people without faith, without grace, and with only a world of physical appearance at which to look for meaning and significance" (7). Munro also presents us with the grotesque and the fantastic, and, at times, the "monstrously comic," but, as we shall see in stories throughout Munro's oeuvre, she is much more interested in exploring, circling the issues and the mystery of the religious/spiritual, and—unlike O'Connor—suspending moral judgment, or, more accurately, leaving that judgment to her readers

Establishing what kind of religious writer Alice Munro is *not* is a relatively straightforward matter. A considerably more challenging task, however, is to establish in what ways Alice Munro may be said *to be* a religious writer. On this point, I find the assessment of J.R. Struthers, a noted Munro critic, particularly perceptive and complete:

Alice Munro is certainly not a writer who deals in abstractions or dogma, but rather a genuinely religious writer—if we define "religious" as a mode of perception that attends so precisely, so intensely, to the details of our lives in this world that these come to be seen as filled with the sometimes dark, sometimes luminous image, the sense of ultimate possibility, that some people name "God." (294)

Struthers hits here upon the key characteristics of Munro's treatment of those aspects of the religious/spiritual in her work that are at the very core of my discussion in the chapters that lie ahead. First, although Munro does not come at religious/spiritual concerns in conventional ways, she nevertheless remains "a genuinely religious writer." Recalling my earlier definition of "religious," Munro's writing is religious to the extent that it attempts to "bind" aspects of "ordinary experience"—"the details of our lives in this world" "so precisely, so intensely" that it helps to reveal that which is "luminous" as well as that which is "dark" in ways that "recognize and approach" the divine—that which "some people name God." I am also struck here by the parallels between the kind of God that Struthers discerns in Munro's fiction and the notion of God that Jacques Derrida is advancing in some of his recent writing, particularly in his essay, "Faith and Knowledge." Derrida suggests an ambiguous goodbye, *Idau*, and a simultaneous approach:

"Idau": In all its ambiguity of a movement toward God, toward the word or name of God, and a no less dramatic farewell to almost all the canonical, dogmatic, or ontotheological interpretation of this very same 'God.' As if nothing save his name were untouched and left intact. (26)

My central task in the chapters that follow is to outline Munro's approach to the religious/spiritual—to that which is named God—and to identify and discuss those aspects of "ordinary life" most central to Munro's implicit spiritual/religious vision. I will then analyze how these aspects manifest in a representative selection of Munro's short stories from her first published collection to her most recent. The first step in this process is to define and explain two terms that are central in the title of my thesis, and, of course, in the body of my discussion: "the ordinary" and "the epiphanic." In that these two aspects are so vital to my overall discussion of the religious/spiritual in the fiction of Alice Munro, I will devote considerable time here to their respective historical development and significance. There are, of course, other key terms and aspects in my thesis, but I will set these out in the chapter-by-chapter overview that follows my introductory discussion of "the ordinary" and "the epiphanic." Briefly, however, these latter terms and considerations are Eros; the centrality of death and dying as catalysts of

the transcendent; the corollary decline of the earthly father and the Heavenly Father, the importance of the bodily, particularly the female body in religious/spiritual fulfillment; and Henri Bergson's concept of *duration*. Let us begin, however, with the most central and overarching consideration, "the ordinary."

The "Affirmation of Ordinary Life"

To bring my discussion of the "ordinary" in Alice Munro's writing into more specific and manageable focus, I turn to a philosophical framework that will be a touchstone throughout my thesis, that of the Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor's concept of the "affirmation of ordinary life." I am indebted to Taylor not only for this concept but also for an overall expansion and refinement of my thinking about the historical developments in morality and the religious in Western culture, particularly 20th century developments. The two texts by Taylor that I will be drawing upon most heavily are *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* and *The Malaise of Modernity*; the latter is the text of Taylor's presentation for the 1991 Massey Lecture Series. In both of these works, Taylor argues for the increasing importance of "ordinary life" in Western culture, from the Reformation through to the Romantic movement into modernity and post-modernity.² In that Taylor's conception of the development of "ordinary life" is so key to my overall discussion (and, incidentally, to his as well), I will quote his delineation of the "affirmation of ordinary life" at some length. The term, "ordinary life," writes Taylor, is intended

to designate those aspects of human life concerned with production and reproduction, that is, labour, the making of the things needed for life, and our life as sexual beings, including marriage and the family. When Aristotle spoke of the ends of politics being "life and the good life" (*zen kai euzen*), this was the range of things he wanted to encompass in the first of those terms; basically, they englobe what we need to do to continue and renew life. (211)³

It is important to recognize that the "affirmation of ordinary life" as a cultural phenomenon had its origins not in literature, per se, but in religion centuries before the

² Actually, a deep appreciation of the "ordinary" dates back to the Greeks who, as Nietzsche remarks, "were deep enough to stay at the surface of things" (qtd. in Taylor 467).

³ All quotations from Taylor are from *Sources of the Self* unless otherwise indicated

Romantic movement in Western literature. Again, it is worthwhile to quote Taylor in full:

We have to return to a theological point of origin. The affirmation of ordinary life finds its origin in Judeo-Christian spirituality, and the particular impetus it receives in the modern world comes first of all from the Reformation. One of the central points common to all reformers was their rejection of mediation. Their rejection of mediation was closely connected to their rejection of medieval understanding of the sacred. (215)

Taylor goes on to make clear how the relative democratization of the Christian church that occurred during the Reformation led to a greatly increased importance for ordinary life: “The rejection of the sacred and of mediation together led to an enhanced status for (what had formerly been described as) profane life” (216). There is little question of the revolutionary nature of this development: “By denying any special form of life as a privileged locus of the sacred, they were denying the very distinction between sacred and profane and hence affirming their interpenetration. The denial of a special status to the monk was also an affirmation of ordinary life as more than profane, as itself hallowed and in no way second class”(217-18).

The developments on the religious side of the ledger during the Reformation were complemented by similarly crucial shifts on the secular, scientific front. As the Cartesian-Newtonian scientific paradigm began to take hold in Western culture, other facets of the culture began to emulate science’s emphasis on the empirical, the concrete, the observable, quantifiable, and measurable—in short, aspects of “ordinary,” quotidian life. Dudley Young speculates that it was at this juncture in Western history that we suffered a serious cultural “wound,” and that we are still struggling to “heal the rift that opened in the Western soul some 400 years ago when science and religion went their separate ways” (xvii). Despite this separation, however, there was a strong parallel between the religious and the scientific in their mutual increased emphasis on the “ordinary.” Further, very few people were prepared to dispense entirely with traditional religion at this time—with rare exceptions such as Pierre Simon Laplace who notoriously remarked that his theories of planetary movement had “no need of the God-hypothesis.” Descartes himself struggled—albeit, ultimately unconvincingly—to retain God in his

view of reality. Despite such attempts, tentative alliances and compromises between religion and science had begun and would continue to multiply and accelerate. The increased importance of the “ordinary” was a compromise that many religious thinkers—particularly Protestant thinkers—were quite willing to accept.

There are a number of aspects of the origins and development of the increased status of the “ordinary” that are important for my purposes. First, the affirmation of the ordinary that is so central in Alice Munro’s fiction still retains its religious/spiritual significance. This affirmation is, in its origins, actually a *deification* of the ordinary—an attempt to locate the divine in the everyday, and—just as J. R. Struthers notes above—this remains its central function in Munro’s fiction. Secondly, the mutual religious and scientific emphasis on the ordinary that we see in the origins of the “affirmation of the ordinary” is reflected in similar reconciliation of the religious and the scientific in a number of Munro’s stories that I will be discussing, particularly in Chapters Five And Six.

To return to the historical development of the “affirmation of the ordinary,” however, it was during the Romantic period that this affirmation found its strongest foothold in Western literature. The best-known champion of Romanticism’s “rediscovery” of the “ordinary” was William Wordsworth. In his famous Romantic manifesto, the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, 1800, Wordsworth elevates and venerates emotions and aims to write in a “selection of language really used by men” (102)—“language closely resembling that of real life” (111). It is through a re-visioning of the “ordinary” that Wordsworth sees the greatest hope for authentic connection with the divine, or, in Wordsworth’s words, “something far more deeply interfused” (“Lines Written Above Tintern Abbey...” 131). Charles Taylor clearly and succinctly sets out Wordsworth’s contributions to increasing the importance of the “ordinary”: “Wordsworth shows us what is spiritually significant in the ordinary, both people and things” (426). Wordsworth, in both his stated intentions and in the content of his poetry, is the most obvious and explicit Romantic proponent of the “affirmation of ordinary life,” but he was certainly not alone in this pursuit. A shift toward the “ordinary” is apparent in the works of Coleridge, Shelley, and other Romantic writers as well, and this emphasis was crucial later in the works of the neo-romantic American Transcendentalists, particularly Thoreau

and Emerson. In his work, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism*, Stanley Cavell goes as far as to argue that Emerson and Thoreau are to be “recognized as philosophers” (11) and, further, as the “founding thinkers of American culture” (13). Moreover, Cavell asserts, Emerson and Thoreau merit this prestigious position in American cultural history primarily because of their respective emphasis on the “extraordinary of the ordinary” (9).

As the shift from Wordsworth and other Romantic poets to the prose writers of the American Transcendentalist movement anticipates, we see a general shift in dominant literary genres in the mid 19th century from poetry to prose, particularly with the rise of the novel and the emergence of the modern short story. These prose genres—with their more “ordinary,” prosaic style—are more congenial than poetry to an emphasis on the ordinary, both in content and style. The ground for the 19th century rise of the novel was prepared by earlier novelists such as Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding. Charles Taylor makes the important point that the work of these 18th century writers not only “reflected and further entrenched the egalitarian affirmation of ordinary life” (286) with their middle-class characters and their focus on the “ordinary” issues of love and marriage, but also that the *writing style* of these early novelists emphasized the ordinary, the mundane, even the profane: “The very form of narration, relating--the sometimes minute—particulars of life, puts all events and lives on the same stylistic footing” (Taylor 287).

By the beginning of the 20th century, as Modernism was taking serious hold in Western literature, the “ordinary” had become a complex, contradictory, multi-faceted literary and cultural phenomenon. Having emerged out of the Protestant Reformation, but also out of the scientific revolution’s emphasis on the concrete and the empirical, it became a central, defining characteristic in Romantic poetry—poetry that is frequently explicitly *anti*-scientific/industrial and implicitly resistant toward authoritarian, traditional Christianity. Then, in the hands of pre-modernists such as Chekov, and later in the works of high modernists such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, the “affirmation of the ordinary” is employed to anti-Romantic ends—as a means of attempting to deliver to early 20th century readers the dark, unvarnished reality of “ordinary life” in a decidedly unromantic, industrialized, post-WWI, secular culture. Quite an entanglement, I agree, but my task in upcoming chapters is to disentangle these

various threads of the “affirmation of ordinary life” as they manifest in the short fiction of Alice Munro, and to demonstrate to what extent—and to what degree of success—this contemporary writer employs this highly complex phenomenon called the “ordinary” in creating the implicit religious/spiritual vision in her writing.

As we shall see on a number of occasions, there are important and illuminating micro-macro relationships between key aspects of Munro’s implicit religious/spiritual vision and developments in modern/postmodern Western culture. Clearly, one of these is Munro’s focus on “ordinary life”—presenting quotidian relationships, events, and circumstances in a manner so brilliantly realistic that the term “photographic fidelity” has permanently attached itself to critical assessments of Munro’s fiction. Munro’s talent for verisimilitude involves a presentation of “ordinary” experience that is so precise and so intense—to echo J. R. Struthers—that this experience occasionally takes on religious/spiritual significance. In the broader culture, this turn to the “ordinary” may also hold religious/spiritual significance. In his illuminating study, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*, Morris Beja speculates insightfully on why the “ordinary”—what he also terms “the trivia of existence”—has taken on so much more cultural and literary significance over the course of the 20th century:

For as men have found themselves putting less and less trust in the truths and absolutes of the past, they have more and more come to stress the *trivia* of existence. They have sought meaning in what they could see, all around them, in the apparently inconsequential objects and events of everyday life. It is true that an interest in trivial detail has always been important in literature, but today it has taken on a special character and become so central that Erich Auerbach is undoubtedly correct when he regards concern with “minor, unimpressive, random events” as one of the hallmarks of twentieth-century literature. (17)

Thus, by the time that the “ordinary” finds expression in contemporary works such as those of Alice Munro, it carries a long literary and cultural history, and it has accrued a number of often competing effects. Just as a brief example, we can turn to a 1974 essay by Munro entitled “Everything here is Touchable and Mysterious.” At one point in this essay, Munro writes, “The ordinary place is sufficient, everything here

touchable and mysterious” (“Everything Here is Touchable and Mysterious” 33). Even in this brief sentence we see the complex array that the “ordinary” has become. This secular, physical, concrete place of which Munro writes is empirically “touchable,” but, concomitantly, the sentence also carries traces of the divine, the ineffable, in its invocation of the “mysterious.” Moreover, in some quite nebulous fashion, this simple place where the “ordinary” and the mysteriously divine meet seems—at least for Munro, and in this particular instance—to be existentially “sufficient.”

The Epiphanic

There are important and interesting parallels between the historical development of the “affirmation of ordinary life” and that of epiphany and the epiphanic. Even more than the “affirmation of the ordinary,” epiphany has clear religious roots that date back to Biblical times. Literally, a “manifestation or showing forth,” usually of some divine being, epiphany had its Christian origins in the festival of Epiphany commemorating the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles in the form of the Magi. This commemoration is celebrated on January 6th or Twelfth Night. It is, of course, the much more recent, secularized offspring of epiphany—most clearly articulated and employed by James Joyce—that will concern us most here, but the religious associations of epiphany remain significant in Munro’s works, just as they did in Joyce’s.

Secondly, like the affirmation of ordinary life, epiphany in its more secular sense established a strong foothold in Western literature during the Romantic Movement. Shelley, in his 1821 *Defense of Poetry* described the “best and happiest moments...arising unforeseen and departing unbidden...visitations of the divinity [which poetry] redeems from decay” (Abrams 57). Shelley coined the term “the moment” to identify these occasions in poetry. Wordsworth called these epiphanic moments “spots of time” (Abrams 57) and presented many such “spots” in his poems; two clear examples of such moments appear in Wordsworth’s “Two April Mornings” and “The Solitary Reaper” and throughout *The Prelude*. Note here that neither Shelley nor Wordsworth was using his respective term—“the moment” or “spots of time”—in a specifically Christian sense, but both are clearly drawing attention to the divine or spiritual nature of these occasions in their respective poems. For instance, in Book VIII in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth conveys the “moment” when he initially entered London in a stagecoach

passing over the “threshold” of the city. The “trivial forms/Of houses, pavements, streets” became suddenly invested with deep significance:

t’was a moment’s pause----
All that took place within me came and went
As in a moment; yet with Time it dwells
And grateful memory, *as a thing divine*. (emphasis mine)

It becomes clear that the epiphanic—notwithstanding its religious origins—flourishes most in times when traditional religion is facing questions and challenges—as it was during the Romantic Movement, and as it very obviously has during the past 150 years. Both Shelley and Wordsworth provide excellent examples of the “religious temper” of the Romantic Movement, and—as we shall see—a parallel temper emerges in the fiction of Alice Munro. Richard Tarnas adroitly describes this temper when he states that the Romantic’s rebellion

was against the hierarchies and institutions of traditional religion, against enforced belief, moralistic constriction, and hollow ritual... God was rediscovered in Romanticism—not the God of orthodoxy but of mysticism, pantheism, and immanent cosmic process; not the juridical monotheistic patriarch but a divinity more ineffably mysterious, pluralistic, all-embracing, neutral or even feminine in gender not an absentee creator but a numinous force within nature and within the human spirit. (372-73)

“Epiphany” as a specific *literary* term owes its origin, of course, to James Joyce, specifically in his early draft of *The Portrait of the Artist as a young Man* entitled *Stephen Hero*. Joyce adapted the religious term to an ostensibly secular experience wherein the individual experiences a “sudden sense of radiance and revelation while perceiving a commonplace object” (qtd. in Abrams 57). In Joyce’s own words, “by an epiphany [Stephen] meant a sudden spiritual manifestation... its soul, its whatness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance. The soul of the commonest object... seems to us radiant” (qtd. in Abrams 57). In *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*, Morris Beja coins the term “Criterion of Insignificance” to more precisely delineate what Joyce was striving toward in the epiphanies in his writing, and recounts how Joyce once told his brother, “It

is my idea of the significance of trivial things that I want to give the two or three unfortunate wretches who may eventually read me”(16).

The epiphanies in Joyce’s work from *Stephen Hero* to *Finnegan’s Wake* have been thoroughly explored, and I see little need to add to that examination here. I will, however, return to Joyce’s use of epiphany in later chapters to demonstrate important *differences* between the epiphanies in his work and the epiphanic moments we find in Munro’s. What remains, however, for this portion of my introduction is to distinguish between the terms “epiphany” and “the epiphanic.”

As we have seen above, the modernist, Joycean epiphany entails a quite distinctive and clearly delineated moment of “radiance and revelation while perceiving a commonplace object.” There are numerous epiphanies in Munro’s work that fulfill this description of epiphany. However, quite often in Munro’s fiction, the boundaries of the character’s experience are much more nebulous than in Joycean epiphanies, and his/her resulting feeling or insight less clearly revelatory. These moments in Munro’s fiction also often afford less of a sense of closure than do their counterparts in the works of Joyce and other modernists. In fact, the Joycean epiphany almost invariably concludes the story in which it appears, whereas a number of the epiphanic moments in Munro’s writing appear in the middle of her stories. The prevalence of epiphanic moments in Munro’s fiction, rather than of clear epiphanies, is also commensurate micro-cosmically with the increased nebulousness and ambivalence that attend the search for meaningful religious frameworks or expressions of the spiritual in contemporary Western culture.

The Chapters Ahead

Before setting out an overview of Chapters Two through Six, I want to briefly summarize key points made thus far:

- With a few notable exceptions such as James Carscallen’s *In Another Country: Patterns in Alice Munro’s Writing*, there has been very little systematic, focused critical attention paid to the religious/spiritual aspects of Alice Munro’s work. Despite this lack of critical attention, and notwithstanding the overall initial impression that Munro’s work is essentially secular, religious and spiritual considerations are of utmost importance throughout her *oeuvre*. I have set as my

primary task herein the exploration of what I term the implicit religious/spiritual vision in Alice Munro's fiction.

- Munro does not usually present religious/spiritual issues/aspects in explicit fashion, nor does her fiction present any type of moralizing or proselytizing. Rather, Munro is much more interested in recognizing and approaching aspects of the religious/spiritual and in "circling the mysteries of everyday existence" that these aspects present.
- Central to Munro's implicit religious/spiritual vision is a pronounced focus on "ordinary life." In exploring and analyzing this aspect of Munro's fiction I draw extensively upon the work of Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor, and what he terms the "affirmation of ordinary life." Munro's focus on key aspects of "ordinary life" constitutes much of the *content* of the implicit religious/spiritual vision in her fiction.
- The other central aspect of the religious/spiritual vision in Munro's writing is the epiphanic. The epiphanic is a crucial component of the *experience* of the religious/spiritual in Munro's writing.

With the foregoing fundamental points in place, what remains for this opening chapter is to provide a relatively brief overview of the structure, the rationale, and the central considerations of the chapters in the balance of my thesis with a view toward providing a kind of road map of my approach to the development and manifestations of the implicit religious/spiritual vision in Munro's fiction. As will become evident in the following overview, my examination of the religious/spiritual in Munro's work is for the most part chronological in structure. However, as I make clear in Chapter Two, I do not slavishly follow the publication chronology of Munro's writing in my discussion because many of the important aspects of the religious/spiritual—like most other important aspects in Munro's work—develop more through what I term a process of "accretion" rather than in a neatly linear, causal fashion.

Chapter Two

Chapter Two emerges out of a fundamental question: Why would Alice Munro, an individual who, to the age of twelve or thirteen, was quite immersed in a Protestant (United Church) upbringing and extended family (her grandmother was fanatically

religious), and who in her adult years apparently found the relatively conventional Unitarian Church a congenial enough religious “port”—at least for a time—why would Munro, when addressing the religious/spiritual in her writing, not turn to a more conventional Christian perspective than she has?

Focusing primarily on the quite early stories, “The Time of Death” (*Dance of the Happy Shades*) and “Age of Faith” (*Lives of Girls and Women*), I argue that although there is considerable ambivalence in Munro’s rejection of traditional Christianity—an ambivalence that persists to the present—Munro’s narrators/protagonists ultimately reject traditional Western religion because it fails to deal adequately with the ultimate mystery of death. Death is a particularly important consideration in Munro’s work, constituting at times a near *daemon* in her fictional perspective. Karen Smythe goes as far as to suggest, “Death is captured in Munro’s short stories” so effectively that Munro may “be considered an agent of Death” (128). We can only speculate on the reasons for Munro’s at times obsessive focus on death; they may range from the biographical to the ontological. An example of the former: In a recent biography of her mother, Sheila Munro notes that Alice Munro, growing up as she did on her father’s, Robert Laidlaw’s, fox farm, “in her childhood could not avoid seeing that death was real” (165). Ontologically, as I shall argue, death is the most powerful catalyst to considerations of the transcendent, the religious/spiritual, and as Roland Barthes opines, “Death must be somewhere in a society; if it is no longer (or less intensely) in religion, it must be elsewhere” (qtd. in Smythe 128). Munro places death at the core of her art and has her characters struggle with its profound mystery. In so doing, Munro is, perhaps, attempting to capture and portray what Julia Kristeva declares is one of the central dramas of our times, a “drama that imprints the malady of death at the heart of the psychic experience of most of us” (238).

Further, there exists a deep and pervasive connection in Christian religion between death and, first, the Heavenly Patriarch, Yahweh, and, secondly, between death and the male redeemer, Christ. The connection between death and the Heavenly Father finds important parallels in Munro’s work, particularly in her earlier fiction. Moreover, throughout Munro’s *oeuvre* there exists a corollary connection between death and *earthly* fathers. James Carscallen, for example, makes a chilling comparison between Del

Jordan's relationship with God in "Age of Faith"—a story from Munro's second collection, *Lives*—and her relationship with her father, Ben Jordan: "The God who horrified her in the church is like her mild father at home—both are revered, both are killers" (126).

On the other hand, there emerges a relatively positive association between death and dying and physical, bodily *female* figures in Munro's fiction. Although I will touch upon this positive relationship between female physicality and death and dying a number of times in my discussion of later stories in subsequent chapters, I confine my discussion of this phenomenon in Chapter Two to "The Time of Death," a quite brief look at "Boys and Girls"—both stories from *Dance*—and to "Age of Faith" from *Lives*.

Chapter Three

Having established in chapter Two what Munro's fiction presents as the fundamental shortcomings of Christianity as a vehicle toward spiritual fulfillment, in Chapters Three and Four I turn my attention to those aspects of "ordinary life" in Munro's writing that *do* hold promise of such fulfillment. Chapters Three and Four are companion chapters that set out, respectively, the failure and the relative success of questing for spiritual fulfillment in the realm of Eros.

My use of the term "Eros" rather than the more pedestrian "sexual" entails a good deal more than rhetorical flourish. Although the quests for religious/spiritual significance and/or fulfillment in Munro's fiction take place in the realm of "ordinary life," these quests still retain fundamentally archetypal qualities. The term "sexual" proves inadequate in that its postmodern connotations barely exceed its denotations of nothing more than coital, physical sexual interaction. Physical sexuality is certainly important in the quests of various Munro narrators/protagonists toward deeper spiritual fulfillment, but time and again Munro presents characters who fail to achieve any spiritual development or insight when they become solipsistic and self-indulgent and allow coital sexuality to become an end in itself. Thus, I adopt the term Eros, drawing quite heavily upon Iris Murdoch's modernized definition, but never losing sight of Eros's origin as the attendant of Aphrodite, whom in Plato's *Symposium* strikes that delicate Grecian balance between the physical and the transcendent: "Aphrodite Urania, the older of the two, is stronger,

more intelligent, and spiritual; whereas Aphrodite Pandemos, born from both sexes, is more base and devoted primarily to physical satisfaction” (qtd. in Morford 116).

In keeping with the archetypal qualities noted above, in Chapter Three I also introduce my usage of Kali, the Eastern goddess symbolic of a powerful female sexuality closely associated with death that finds its way into the depiction of a number of Munro’s female protagonists/narrators. As I shall set out in considerable detail in Chapter Three, other Munro critics, notably Beverly Rasporich and James Carscallen, have convincingly brought mythic and archetypal readings to Munro’s work. Rasporich, for instance, contends that Munro takes a number of her female characters and “shades them with pagan and mythic features,” with a view to “retreating from masculine Christian mythology that has provided her [Munro’s] identity” (34). Both of these critics provide very helpful perspectives for my purposes, but my aim ultimately parts with both of theirs, in that Carscallen is more interested in linking aspects of Munro’s writing to Christian influences, Rasporich to advancing more of an archetypal feminist perspective.

It is in chapter Three that I also initially draw attention to how repressive Pauline Christianity contributes in Munro’s fiction to a powerful ambivalence about Eros/sexuality as a fruitful avenue toward spiritual fulfillment. The vilification of aspects of the bodily and of the sexual that is so engrained in the writings of Saint Paul has contributed to Christianity’s overall contradictory and profoundly ambivalent attitude and approach toward the body and sexuality—particularly female sexuality. Neither Munro nor a good number of her characters are impervious to this deeply instilled Pauline disgust, infused as it also is with a pronounced misogyny. As I shall argue in Chapter Three, overcoming this internalized, repressive force is a central challenge for a number of Munro’s narrators/protagonists/characters seeking fulfillment in the realm of Eros. My focus in Chapter Three will be upon characters who ultimately fail in their endeavors to do so. However, these failures invariably illuminate some of the qualities and aspects necessary to the kind of relative *successes* that I will explore in Chapter Four. Although not all of these works receive equal attention, the stories upon which Chapter Three focuses are “Thanks for the Ride” (*Dance*); “Lives of Girls and Women,” “Baptizing” (*Lives*); “How I Met My Husband,” “Walking on Water,” “Forgiveness in Families,” (*SIBMTTY*); “Accident” (*Moons*); “Circle of Prayer,” (*Progress*).

Chapter Four

As a companion piece to Chapter Three, Chapter Four examines some key examples of protagonists/narrators/characters in Munro's fiction who *do find* at least some—and, occasionally, substantial—spiritual/religious fulfillment in the realm of Eros. Of necessity, I continue to emphasize in this chapter how relative such matters are. After all, love, Eros, the spiritual are not phenomena that lend well to quantification or empirical analysis. What is most important, I believe, in exploring the success or failure of human relationships in affording spiritual/religious fulfillment is bearing in mind that relationships entail openness and *process* rather than closure and end *product*. This is one of the main reasons why I adopt Iris Murdoch's definition of Eros. Murdoch stresses that Eros is “an *orientation* of our energy and appetites” (emphasis mine), and that Eros is “a *continuous operation* [emphasis mine] of spiritual *energy* [emphasis in the text], desire, intellect, love” (496).

In a number of Munro stories from earlier works such as “Heirs of the Living Body” (*Lives*) to mid-career works such as “Bardon Bus” (*Moons*) to more recent stories such as “The Love of a Good Woman” (*The Love of*), we encounter protagonists/narrators involved in the *process* of orientating desire and spiritual energy toward authentic spiritual fulfillment. Again, in that such processes carry archetypal characteristics and significance, they merit the term “quest” found in my title.

In Chapter Four, I also explore further the destructive, repressive aspects of traditional Christianity, particularly what Northrop Frye calls a “repressive morality founded on a sexual neurosis” (*Words* 194). Many of the Munro stories I discuss counter this religious, cultural neurosis with “ordinary life” alternatives that contribute to the revivification of the female body and female sexuality, and to what I term “Kali-energy.” The stories that I focus on in Chapter Four constitute a wide spectrum of Munro's writing from her second collection, *Lives*, to her tenth, *The Love of a Good Woman*. They include “Heirs of the Living Body” (*Lives*), “The Spanish Lady” and “Memorial” (*Something*), “Wild Swans” (*Who Do You Think*), “Bardon Bus” (*Moons*), “White Dump,” “The Moon Over the Orange Street Skating Rink” and “Circle of Prayer” (*Progress of Love*), “Friend of My Youth” (*Friend*), “The Love of a Good Woman” (*The Love*).

Chapter Five

Chapter Five entails a shift from an emphasis upon the characteristics and circumstances—essentially the *content*—of the religious/spiritual in Munro’s writing to an emphasis on the *experience* of the religious/spiritual. Central to this experience are epiphanies—what Munro calls “queer, bright moments”—and/or epiphanic occasions (As we shall see, there is a difference). Discussion of epiphanies/the epiphanic finds a place in every chapter of my thesis because they are such a crucial component of the religious/spiritual in Munro’s writing. However, because epiphanies/the epiphanic are so crucial to the implicit religious/spiritual vision in Munro’s *oeuvre*, they also merit the attention afforded by an entire chapter. Since I have already devoted a substantial section of this introduction to the background and development of the epiphanic, I will confine the balance of my remarks here to the following.

In Chapter Five, I break to some extent with the general chronological structure of my overall study when I take the first story of Munro’s first published collection, “Walker Brothers Cowboy” from *Dance of the Happy Shades*, and approach it as a microcosm of all the key aspects of the epiphanic in Munro’s *oeuvre*. It is quite remarkable how this story lends itself to such an interpretive endeavor, but Ajay Heble goes even further, suggesting that “Walker Brothers Cowboy” “operates, in many ways, as a microcosm for the whole of Munro’s works” (20). The key aspects of the epiphanic that the story presents include the strong link between epiphanies/the epiphanic and the religious/spiritual; how the epiphanic in Munro’s fiction works toward a reconciliation of the Romantic and Modernist perspectives/temperaments; how the epiphanic in her writing also provides a microcosm of the increasing manifestations of the epiphanic in the broader culture, particularly in the latter half of the 20th century; and, finally, how the epiphanic in Munro’s work provides a vehicle for what the philosopher Henri Bergson terms *duration*—“the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances” (*Creative Evolution* 4).

Although a good portion of Chapter Five is given over to an anatomization of “Walker brothers cowboyCowboy,” in the latter stages of the chapter I also trace the development of the epiphanic in the balance of Munro’s writing. Further, among the other important Munrovian characteristics that I examine in the four stories I discuss in

Chapter Six, I also explore the illuminating examples of epiphanies/the epiphanic that each of the four provides, thus rounding out my discussion of the epiphanic in Munro's *oeuvre* with a look at these very recent manifestations.

Chapter Six

The final chapter of my thesis aims toward a cumulative synopsis of all of the central aspects of the implicit spiritual/religious vision in Alice Munro's *oeuvre*. With a view to demonstrating how Munro's focus on this aspect of her work has, if anything, increased in the later stages of her career, I have selected for examination four particularly representative recent works: "Jakarta" (*The Love of*), "Post and Beam," "Comfort," and "Floating Bridge" (*Hateship, Friendship*). An in-depth discussion of these four stories illuminates how Munro's intense interest in the deepest mysteries of life—those of our relationship to the spiritual and the religious, and, of course, our attendant relationship to death—has evolved into a multi-leveled, intricately nuanced vision that qualifies Munro as one of our senior seers, not only on the Canadian literary and cultural scene, but also on the international scene. As Cynthia Ozick has perceptively noted, Alice Munro has become "our Chekov."

CHAPTER TWO

DEATH AND QUESTING IN THE REALM OF THE F/fATHER

Considerations of Death and Afterlife

“‘What is death?’ continued my mother with ominous cheerfulness. ‘What is being dead?’”(40). This question, which Del Jordan’s mother poses in “Heirs of the Living Body” in Alice Munro’s second collection of short stories, is but a particularly direct version of a question and an abiding concern that resonates throughout Munro’s fiction. Sometimes in the background, frequently in the foreground, death and considerations of death are ubiquitous in Munro’s writing from her first collection to her most recent. Various critics have noted and queried Munro’s pronounced emphasis on death. Ildiko de Papp Carrington, for example, notes how “the inevitability of death hovers over much of Munro’s fiction” (38). The oxymoronic, ambivalent “ominous cheerfulness” in the tone of Del’s mother’s voice is also typical, considerations of death in Munro’s fiction being as consistently ambivalent as they are omnipresent. Responses to what Munro’s protagonists or narrators often refer to as the “fact of death” are frequent, complex, and often profoundly ambivalent. Munro, of course, has her characters respond to the significance of death, but—as Karen Smythe argues in her study, *Figuring Grief: Gallant, Munro, and the Poetics of Elegy*—Munro’s focus on death and responses to it almost demand that readers, as well, “define both the significance and the signification of death” (108).

Nothing in human experience surpasses death—contemplating our own inevitable deaths and responding to the deaths of others—in urging us toward considerations of the spiritual. And formulating explanations of what death entails and what comes after death has been a quintessentially religious undertaking, time out of mind. As Dudley Young puts it in *Origins of the Sacred*, “It is a commonplace that theology begins with the awareness of death” (86). Gianni Vattimo, writing about the “return of the religious” in his essay, “Trace of A Trace,” observes that one of the “essential constitutive features of religion is to provide “help in facing the enigma of death” (87).

There is also broad consensus that, over the past century and a half, people in Western culture have increasingly struggled to face and deal with “the fact of death.” Ernest Becker, for example, has persuasively argued in his hugely popular work *The*

Denial of Death that the most common modern response to death is fear or even terror, and that “One of the great rediscoveries of modern thought [is] that of all things that move man, one of the principal ones is his terror of death” (11). Canadian philosopher, John Ralston Saul echoes Becker’s position, noting that, although the “list of fears which drive civilizations is endless,” the fear of death remains foremost on the list. He adds the important refinement that we moderns, in particular, suffer not only a fear of death, “but of ceasing to exist—that is, fear that life is followed by a void.” He continues, “None of our fears was conquered as civilizations became first sedentary and then urban. But doubt and anxiety over the most obscure of fears—that of an external void—grew in importance” (425-26).

Evidence of the fear of annihilation of personal consciousness upon death dates back to at least pre-Socratic Greece (Choron 31-46). However, our generally *increasing* fear throughout the 20th century and into the beginning of the 21st of an “external void” should not come as much of a surprise when we recognize that the past century or so marks the first epoch in Western history—in fact, in human history—wherein a civilization has not collectively subscribed to a religious framework that helps to explain (some might say explain away) death, and to comfort people in the face of death. In his essay, “The Sacral Power of Death in Contemporary Experience,” William May, notes that the 20th century decline in a belief in immortality exemplifies how “the consciousness of the 20th century has undergone a radical break with the recent Western past” (174). He further argues that, particularly in the last century and a half, the doctrine of immortality of the soul has been challenged by naturalist philosophers, psychoanalysts, social critics, existentialists, and even modern Biblical scholars who “have rejected the doctrine, as they usually distinguish today between the primitive Christian hope of the resurrection of the body and the Hellenic-idealist doctrine of the immortality of the soul” (174).

In this chapter I explore death and responses to death in Alice Munro’s fiction. Her work mirrors many of the fears outlined above, but it also provides some perspectives that are quite peculiar to Munro’s writing. Moreover, Munro’s near obsessive preoccupation with death and responses to death both reflects and serves as the impetus to her more general, deep concern with matters spiritual and religious. Just as it

does in the broader culture, death in Munro's fiction—because of the pain, loss, and fear it almost invariably engenders—prompts considerations of what comes *after* death. In *Locations of the Sacred*, William Closson James notes, “Death can become a catalyst of transcendence in fiction even where traditional modes of heroism or the prospect of eternity are not evident” (45).

Whatever else might be said about beliefs in immortality, they unquestionably provide those who hold them some degree of comfort and consolation in the face of death. Further, just as it does in the broader culture, death in Munro's writing is often an important catalyst to explorations of what makes *life* meaningful. As we shall see in many of Munro's stories, her narrators/protagonists respond to death in ways that confirm John Killinger's point in his essay “Death and Transcendence in Contemporary Literature”: “Death becomes the act of compression, packing life with sensibility and meaning” (150).

Munro's pronounced, consistent interest in death, the afterlife, and related spiritual/religious questions demonstrates, first, the perennial importance of coping with death, but also how numerous aspects of her fiction tap into some the most important but often submersed psychic, emotional, and spiritual issues and concerns in the broader culture. Noted Munro critic, Catherine Sheldrick Ross, makes a pertinent point that, again, makes clear the importance of “ordinary life” in Munro's fiction: “The perspective supplied by the threat of death can make the central character appreciate the precious value of ordinary life” (“At Least Part” 123).

Directly or indirectly, death plays a significant role in every one of the aspects of spirituality and religion that I am examining in Munro's fiction. In this chapter, however, I will confine my discussion to the powerful critique and the ultimate rejection of traditional Christian perspectives on death and the afterlife in Munro's writing, particularly in her earlier fiction. In short, what clearly emerges in the stories I examine in detail here, and what remains equally evident in all of Munro's work, is that—despite the often valiant efforts and deep hopes of various Munro characters to find fulfillment in traditional Christianity, particularly Protestant Christianity, they fail to do so. For these characters, Christianity fails in various ways to satisfactorily or convincingly explain

death and its aftermath and, thereby, fails to allay their fear of death *and* their fear of possible annihilation of consciousness after death.

However, in order to more fully appreciate how and why various Munro narrators/protagonists find Christian approaches to death and the afterlife wanting in various ways, it is helpful to at least briefly summarize those approaches and also to delineate some of the key distinctions between Old and New Testament responses to death and the afterlife.

Death and what comes after death have been central concerns of every major religion throughout history and remain so, and they are a particularly important focus in Christianity. However, if one turns to the Old Testament scriptures themselves, rather than to broadly held, popularized Christian beliefs about death, one finds that, in fact, the Old Testament is largely silent on the crucial question of what comes after death—that is, on the promise of immortality. As Jacques Choron points out in his very helpful study *Death and Western Thought*, “It would be in vain to seek in the Old Testament for comfort and consolation for the fact of death in terms of belief in immortality” (81). Passages such as Daniel 12:2 provide *some* hope—replete, of course, with a strong dose of fear of damnation—in its proclamation that “many of them that sleep shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt,” but even this quite tempered promise is, at best, a considerably deferred hope of life after death. What the Old Testament does make abundantly clear, however, is that the agent of death is Yahweh. It is He who places in the Garden of Eden the Tree of Knowledge, which, when Adam and Eve succumb to the temptation of the serpent, becomes, in effect, the Tree of Death. From that point in the Old Testament, “There is no escape from death, and there is no other life” (Choron 82).

Death and Earthly/Heavenly F/fathers

What the believing Christian facing the prospect of his/her own death or in responding to the death of others is cast back upon in the Old Testament, then, is, simply trusting or putting his/her faith in God: “It was faith in the unique and all-powerful Creator that brought solace in the face of death” (Choron 83). What is particularly important here for my purposes is fully acknowledging the quite obvious but crucial point

that it is an all-powerful, *male, paternal* deity in whom the believer must place his/her complete trust and faith. His/her position is very clearly that of an ignorant but trusting child who is to have complete faith in a mysterious but, nevertheless, supposedly totally trustworthy heavenly Pater: “God’s ways are obscure to the poor creature, man, but he can have complete confidence in Him” (Choron 83). However, as we shall see in a number of Alice Munro stories, not total trust, but a profound ambivalence emerges toward this Fatherly Deity, particularly in times of death. Before we turn to a more specific discussion of those stories, though, I will sketch the very important balance of the Biblical perspective on death and the afterlife—the “defeat of death” set out in the New Testament.

At the very heart of the “good news” (gospel) of the *New Testament* is the promise of victory over death. The belief is that the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ essentially frees all humans from the age-old fear of death by promising immortality: “Death, this great terror, was after all not what it appeared to be—the invincible power, the inescapable fate. It had been conquered. The dead will rise again” (Choron 85). It will become apparent in upcoming discussions why the shift in perspectives on death and immortality from the Old Testament to the New Testament is particularly important for the characters, and especially for the protagonists, in a number of Munro stories. Central to this shift is the role of the heavenly Father, the Father, to whom, as Del Jordan reminds us in “Age of Faith,” Christ on the cross directs his agonizing, pleading question, “*My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?*” (91).

In *Locations of the Sacred*, William Closson James convincingly argues that the failure of Christianity, particularly Protestant Christianity, to satisfactorily address the “fact of death” that I am identifying in Munro’s fiction is but one part—albeit a crucial part—of a larger perceived failure of Christianity that runs through modern and contemporary Canadian literature at large:

If one were to generalize about how Protestant Christianity is problematic for numerous characters in Canadian fiction . . . it appears that they experience a dreadful isolation, being cut off from some nourishing source of vitality. They are alone in their guilt, their terrors, their failures, and *their confrontation with death*. (emphasis mine 37)

Because Christianity fails on the very fundamental level of alleviating the fear of death for many Munro characters, they are left to seek religious answers concerning death, and for overall spiritual fulfillment, along alternative avenues. James, again, adroitly sums up the situation: “With the collapse of the belief in eternity the location of the sacred is altered” (39).

Munro and Christianity

Despite the failure that ultimately awaits many Munro characters in their forays into Christian belief, it remains quite understandable that Munro would have her protagonists and narrators look first to traditional Christianity for answers about death and for comfort in the face of death. After all, Munro grew up in largely Protestant Southern Ontario and in a family that attended the United Church. However, Munro does not explore Christian options first in her early collections because of any particular attraction or loyalty toward the religion of her youth. On the contrary, we learn from Munro’s daughter, Sheila, in her biography of her mother, *Live of Mothers and Daughters: Growing Up With Alice Munro* that Munro’s youthful church experiences were quite similar to Del Jordan’s in *Lives*:

She was also quite a “churchmouse” who attended the Anglican Church with a friend and found it aesthetically much more appealing than her own United Church (as Del does in *Lives*). She lost her faith when she was about twelve; every time she asked for a “sign” from God and no sign was forthcoming her faith “went down a notch.” It didn’t matter much because at about this time “art took over.” Art became her religion. (152)

Clearly, I am not as prepared as Sheila Munro seems to be to accept that Alice Munro’s connection with Christianity simply ended one day in early adolescence because her prayers went unanswered. There is ample evidence in Munro’s work to suggest that Christian influences have not been so easily extinguished. Again, James Carscallen’s *The Other Country: Patterns in Alice Munro’s Writing* is an excellent source on this aspect of Munro’s work. Further, although her *parents* were not especially devout, a number of Munro’s stories reflect the significant influence of her fanatically religious maternal grandmother. In *A Double Life*, a biographical/critical study of Munro and her work up

to *The Progress of Love*, Catherine Sheldrick Ross discusses Munro's maternal grandmother, the mother of Anne Clarke Chamney:

Anne's mother was a carriage-maker's daughter, coming from "that small-town kind of entrepreneurial class, which has more ambition and is less conservative than the man she married, who was a very rich Irish Protestant farmer." (30)

Ross goes on to point out how Munro's maternal grandmother probably served, at least to some extent, as a model for the character Marietta in "The Progress of Love," particularly in terms of Marietta's having been "saved," and from that point on becoming impervious to the "vileness" that she wrongly imagines "spread out from "the various men that she passed on the streets of her home town:

It was only after she was saved that she could walk right past them. Armed by God, she walked through their midst and nothing stuck to her, nothing scorched; she was safe as Daniel. (12)

Again, Munro's character Marietta and a number of similarly fanatical characters may have been inspired to some extent by Munro's grandmother who, as Ross goes on to report, after her marriage "became crazed by religion and an enormous sense of self sacrifice" (Ross 30). The kind of obsessive cleanliness displayed by this "crazed" woman emerges quite frequently in various Munro characters ranging from Addie Jordan's mother (Del's maternal grandmother) to other fanatical adherents to the proverb, "Cleanliness is next to Godliness" that we encounter in characters as diverse as Callie in "The Moon Over the Orange Street Skating Rink" to Flora Grieves in "Friend of My Youth."

Although Munro's family and extended family background has clearly had some degree of influence in her writing, and almost certainly some on her personal religious/spiritual perspective, one salient aspect of Munro's adult religious development is quite clear: traditional church-based religion had little place in Alice Munro's *own* household. As Sheila Munro informs us, "In our family we did not go to Church. My parents were set against dogma and ritual, and the whole idea of original sin" (61). I certainly intend no simplistic biographical reductionism in any of the foregoing; frankly, I see no compelling biographical evidence that Munro's religious experiences as a child

or as a teenager would have left her either particularly well-disposed to Christianity or any that would have rendered her particularly *ill*-disposed. Regardless of the sources, though, what we can be sure of is that, overall in Munro's writing, we encounter a rejection of the central precepts of Christianity, tempered by a quite consistent ambivalence.

We may safely extrapolate, then, that Munro's near obsessive preoccupation with death, and her attendant deep concern with the spiritual and religious throughout her writing career, does not emerge simply from childhood church or religious experiences—or a lack thereof—nor from mere intellectual curiosity. The more likely source is Munro's strong attraction to the paradoxical mysteries of "ordinary life," and there is no greater mystery in "ordinary life" than the mystery of death. It is also crucial to recognize that Munro is not seeking in her writing to *solve* the mysteries of death or other mysteries of the spiritual. Hers is a much more intriguing motivation. In a 1983 interview, Munro put it this way: "I feel that all life becomes even *more* mysterious and difficult. And the whole act of writing is more an attempt at recognition than of understanding... writing is the art of approach and recognition" (Foy *Critical Essays* 167).

Ildiko de Papp Carrington has also noted the connections in Munro's fiction between her emphasis upon death and recognition and/or revelation. After commenting on how the "inevitability of death hovers over much of Munro's fiction," Carrington declares, "This sense of fatality, however, produces her compulsion to watch life" (38). Munro's *personal* feelings about death are quite revealing as well. In a 1975 interview with Ken Murch, Munro, commenting on the effect upon her of her mother's death, said, "[T]he thing I most want to do is *look* at things, and see the way everything is. And I only have a few years to do that. The collection of molecules that is me isn't going to be here very long" (Murch 70). Munro's words here subtly blend the crucial importance she places upon *seeing, recognizing* with her sense of urgency in the face of her own mortality—a sense that for Munro never seems far from the surface. Carrington's point above also puts me in mind of the nub of J. R. Struther's argument that Munro is a "genuinely religious writer." What Carrington intends by "*seeing*" seems very close to what Struthers intends by "a mode of perception that attends so precisely, so intensely, to the details of our lives in this world" (294).

Karen Smythe astutely observes, “Death is the point of departure in many Munro stories” (viii). This is clearly the case in Munro’s early story, “The Time of Death” from *Dance of the Happy Shades*, with the death of Benny Parry, the protagonist’s younger brother. Although “Age of Faith” from Munro’s second collection, *Lives of Girls and Women* does not begin with a death, it culminates in the impending death of the Jordan family’s dog, Old Major. In both stories, death prompts Munro’s respective protagonists—Patricia Parry in “The Time of Death” and Del Jordan in “Age of Faith”—to question and implicitly reject the religious perspectives on death and immortality they have inherited from their families and communities.

Central to this implicit, but nonetheless powerful, negative critique and ultimate rejection of Christian beliefs surrounding death and immortality in these stories is a motif that runs throughout Munro’s fiction to the present: the absent/ineffectual and/or ominously threatening, potentially murderous earthly father/father-figure *and* his similarly absent/indifferent and/or capriciously life-taking Heavenly counterpart. In “The Time of Death,” we see the ineffectualness and absence of Patricia Parry’s father and other father figures in the face of death. Conversely, in “Age of Faith,” we see Del Jordan’s father as all too present and effective in his “reasonable, blasphemous” (95) ritualistic killing of the family dog, Old Major. These primarily negative presentations of earthly fathers/father-figures parallel the negative, corollary involvement of the Christian Father in death. That is, implicitly in these and numerous other Munro stories, He is presented, variously, as absent/indifferent or ineffectual, or as a ruthlessly arbitrary—even capricious—agent of death.

Although my primary focus in this chapter is on Christian perspectives on death in Munro’s fiction, these two stories demand that I also acknowledge another crucial response to death central to “The Time of Death” and “Age of Faith” and that runs throughout her writing: the *relatively* effective/efficacious responses of various female characters. These responses are characteristically physical, bodily, implicitly associated with birth and physical nurturance—in short, “ordinary” human, primarily female, responses. John Moss in his oft-cited *Sex and Violence in the Canadian Novel*, argues that, for Del Jordan, death does not direct her only to traditional Christian perspectives for answers, but to the “darker,” more “ordinary” domain of birth and sexuality as well:

“Death, typically at this age, holds a dark fascination for Del which she connects with her knowledge of the processes of life, the dark areas of sexuality” (qtd. in Robson 74). Again, these “ordinary” responses to death are not explicitly Christian, and they are certainly not theological (except, perhaps, in their indirect connection to Roman Catholicism’s focus on the Virgin-Mary), but they serve as striking contrasts to the almost entirely negative male responses.

In Chapter Three, I will focus in considerable detail on the spiritual/religious possibilities in the physical, the bodily, and especially the sexual—primarily as manifest by female characters in representative Munro stories. What is germane for my present discussion, though, is that—although the stories examined here demonstrate Munro’s pronounced ambivalence toward, but ultimate rejection of, traditional, patriarchal Protestantism—even in these quite early stories, Munro presents her readers with potentially positive *female/feminine* spiritual/religious alternatives.

“The Time of Death”

In “The Time of Death,” a story from Munro’s first collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades*, we encounter a number of intellectually and educationally quite limited characters finding little understanding of the accidental death by scalding of 18-month-old, mildly handicapped Benny Parry, and even less comfort or consolation in the home-spun version of Christian beliefs about death and immortality foisted upon them by some visiting proselytizers. Further, in keeping with the pattern I set out earlier concerning the depiction of fathers/father-figures in the face of death in Munro’s fiction, this story presents a near-ruthless critique of Benny’s father as a profoundly ineffectual man—essentially lost and powerless in the situation in which he finds himself. Moreover, as will become apparent, the story leaves the pronounced impression that Benny’s father, his daughter, Patricia Parry (the protagonist)—in fact, all of the characters in the story—appear to have been cast into a dark, devastating “time of death,” with very limited religious resources at their disposal. Further, they have been cast there by the central figure in the religion to which they nominally adhere—God himself.

In “The Time of Death,” the accidental death of Benny Parry causes his mother, Leona, profound, near-hysterical grief. A woman and a girl from the Salvation Army—strangers to the neighborhood—have arrived with the intention of providing the bereaved

family with the comfort and consolation that should be afforded by the New Testament promise of immortality. Although the mother, Leona, is not cast in a particularly sympathetic light, these two women are even less sympathetically drawn. With “an oily, sallow face and an almost masculine voice,” the older woman trots out her considerably embellished, revised version of the scriptural promise of a heavenly afterlife for the dead child: “In the garden of heaven, the children bloom like flowers. God needed another flower and he took your child. Sister you should thank him and be glad” (91).

Important aspects here anticipate the quite negative portrayal of traditional Christianity’s treatment of death that we see in later Munro stories, and that also anticipate Munro’s complex and ambivalent overall attitude toward traditional, organized Christianity. First, it is clear that the Divine agent of death—He who took Leona’s son—is male; even the “masculine” voice of the female harbinger draws attention to this maleness. Secondly, it is not only Leona’s dead son or her other offspring who are children here; Leona, her husband—in fact, almost every adult in the story—is cast in the role of child, with the exception of the Salvation Army women who, at best, might qualify as somewhat older siblings (note, for example, how they address Leona as “sister”). What these “older children” have apparently already accepted and what they are asking their younger “siblings” to accept and believe—in fact, to rejoice in—is that in seemingly arbitrary fashion, their Heavenly Pater, in this instance in the guise of divine horticulturalist, has seen fit to render unto them extreme loss, pain, and suffering, and a potential mountain of guilt for Patricia—the adolescent girl whose negligence ostensibly caused Benny’s death—because, it seems, His garden was short a flower. Seen from this perspective, it is quite understandable that most of the “children” in the room are not particularly comforted by the message of divine Fatherly love delivered by the Salvation Army women. On the contrary, we are informed that they “listened uneasily while they [the Salvation Army women] spoke; their faces took on a look of embarrassed childish solemnity” (91).

It is interesting and perhaps somewhat disturbing to note that the accident at the center of “The Time of Death” renders this early work but the first in a number of what one Munro critic has dubbed “accident stories” (Carrington 55). They include “The Time of Death” (*Dance*), “Memorial” (*SIBMTTY*), “Accident” (*Moons*), “Circle of Prayer,”

"Monsieur les Deux Chapeaux," "Miles City Montana" (all three from *The Progress of Love*), and "Comfort" (*Hateship, Friendship*). Only in "Circle of Prayer" and "Comfort" are the accidents not central to the plot of the story. Not all of the accidents are fatal, but all of them involve children or teenagers. I will be examining "Memorial," "Accident," "Circle of Prayer," and "Comfort" in considerable detail in upcoming chapters, but germane to the current discussion, the perception seems to persist in Munro's fiction of a particularly negligent, if not capricious, paternal deity. This patriarchal God may not necessarily be the direct cause of these various accidents; however, for those characters who believe in this God, He may be seen as *allowing* them.

This underlying, implicit critique of the Christian Heavenly Father in "The Time of Death" is paralleled in Benny's mother's and the other women's treatment of the dead child's *earthly* father and his male cohorts (significantly, unlike every other member of the Parry family, the father is never named): "When the Men came in—the father, a cousin, a neighbor, bringing a load of wood or asking shamefacedly for something to eat—they were at once aware of something that shut them out, that reproved them" (92). Again, there are few clearly sympathetic characters in this story, but Benny's father seems particularly singled out for negative treatment. After ineffectually and drunkenly blustering about the futility of his wife's and the other women's tears of grief—"Yeah, that won't do Benny no good, they can bawl their eyes out" (92) (all this, of course, safely out of earshot of his wife and the other women)—he disappears from the narrative until after the funeral. We discover then that he "had got sick from so much beer in the back shed after the funeral" and, consequently, had "stayed away from the house" (97). He is not mentioned again in the balance of the story. In this early Munro story, earthly fathers *equal* ineffectuality and absence.

The connection between earthly and Heavenly f/Fathers in Munro's writing has caught the attention of a number of critics. For example, in her excellent work on mothers/mothering in Munro, *Mothers and Other Clowns*, Magdalene Redekop also sets out a number of perceptive observations on fathers, including their symbolic connection to the Christian Patriarch. For instance, Redekop explores the connection between Del Jordan and her father, Ben Jordan, in Munro's first Del Jordan story in *Dance of the Happy Shades*. In "Walker brother's cowboyCowboy," Del and her father take an

evening stroll down to “see if the lake’s still there” (1). In Ben Jordan’s ensuing explanation to Del of how glaciers formed Lake Huron, Redekop perceives a connection between this earthly father and the Divine Creator. As usual, though, the parallel yields a quite ambivalent picture of both earthly and Heavenly f/Father:

It is not, in the father’s account, a divine hand that made these lakes but rather “fingers of ice” that gouged out the deep places. Unlike those fingers, moreover, the father’s hand makes “hardly any impression” since he is working with rock, not with fabric or clay [as Del’s *mother* is]. This Gesture... is an absurd and failed miming of the action of the Father in *Genesis*. (38)

Later, Redekop argues that “no fatherly comfort is present, for example, in ‘Age of Faith’ when Del scares herself by trying to imagine ‘all those atoms, galaxies of atoms...whirling away in God’s mind” (149). However, although Redekop perceives a more negative portrayal of fathers in “Age of Faith” than do I, she acknowledges that Munro’s treatment of and attitude toward earthly and Heavenly f/Fathers grows increasingly ambivalent and complex as Munro’s work progresses, particularly—and here I fully concur—in later stories such as “The Moons of Jupiter.”

There is considerably less ambivalence, however, in certain feminist studies of the connection between mortal and Heavenly f/Fathers. For example, in Mary Daly’s study, *Beyond God the Father*, her scathing critique of the earthly patriarchy is inextricably tied to a similarly excoriating critique of the patriarchal Christian heritage:

The infamous passages of the Old and New Testaments are well known. I need not allude to the misogyny of the church Fathers—for example Tertullian, who informed women in general: “You are the devil’s Gateway,” or Augustine, who opined that woman are not made to the Image of God... Thomas Aquinas and his numerous commentators and Disciples who defined women as misbegotten males... (3)

I raise these points here for a couple of reasons. First, they help to establish a fuller socio-political context for Munro’s writing career; the rise of second-wave feminism was essentially concurrent with her early collections, *Dance of the Happy Shades* and *Lives of Girls and Women*, and it is important to establish how Munro’s perspective on patriarchal

Christianity was influenced by second-wave feminism. Munro's stance is clearly not *anti-feminist*; nor, however, does she embrace any simplistic anti-male stance, in either her fictive treatment of men, generally, nor in her treatment of male-centered Christianity. As Magdelene Redekop opines, though, "Munro's critique of patriarchal structures has led her deeper and deeper into the heart of the old religious stories" (210). Munro's overall approach is richly ambivalent, intriguing in its vacillation between the *relatively* simplistic negative portrayal of earthly and Heavenly f/Fathers in "The Time of Death," for example, and the significantly more complex, ambivalent treatment in stories such as "Age of Faith," as we shall see. It is, however, this latter treatment that prevails in the vast majority of Munro's work to the present.

With this somewhat broadened perspective in mind, let's return to the latter stages of "The Time of Death" to examine a particularly significant male figure who is briefly mentioned quite early in the story, but who does not actually appear until near the conclusion: Old Brandon, the "Scissors Man." Old Brandon makes his rounds, sharpening knives, scissors, and whatever other blades or tools might require his attention. This curious, somewhat grotesque character with his "stained brown overcoat, with the hem hanging ragged, and the same crownless felt hat" (98) seems to be yet another version of the ominous "man with a hatchet" that begins with Joe Phippen in "Images" from *Dance* and who appears in various guises in a number of later Munro stories. Interpreting Old Brandon in "The Time of Death" presents a challenge, but it remains difficult to explain the intensity of Patricia's response to him unless we recognize that the "scissors-man" is operating on some supernatural level.

Patricia has remained ostensibly oblivious to her mother's ostracizing; moreover, she has not only refused to acknowledge any responsibility for the accident that killed her younger brother; she has steadfastly refused to acknowledge that *anything* of import has occurred at all: "If someone cried she did not notice; with her it was as if nothing had happened" (97). For Patricia, death has simply not occurred; it remains repressed and hidden. For her, death is just what William James said it was: the consciously unacknowledged "worm at the core" of modern human pretensions to happiness (qtd. in Becker 15)—that is, until the arrival of the scissors-man.

In some inexplicable fashion, Patricia associates Old Bram, the Scissors-Man with what is depicted in this and other Munro stories as the madness of death. Again, Joe Phippen, the hatchet-wielding madman, but ultimately harmless eccentric, in “Images” is prototypical in this respect. Ildiko de Papp Carrington remarks this death-madness thematic thread in Munro’s writing as running through “Images,” “The Time of Death,” and “Heirs.” He points out how these and other Munro stories are linked by “Munro’s repetition of her key metaphor for death...the idea of a frightening power loose in the world, a power imagined as fire or electricity” (79). We are told that as Old Brandon approaches, the children hear “his unintelligible chant, mournful and shrill, and so strange that you would think, if you did not know it was the scissors-man, that there was a madman loose in the world” (98).

A number of details render this man who seems to come out of nowhere to sharpen the implements of cutting and potentially of killing a personification of death. Symbolically, Old Brandon becomes the agent of death, and, by extension, he becomes God or Yahweh himself—albeit an *especially* negative version of the Christian Patriarch. Old Brandon symbolizes a demented, de-crowned Yahweh—a God only marginally and in some merely utilitarian manner still connected with the community he serves (like Salvation Army personnel who show up only at times of death?) If one did not accept his itinerant role and unintelligible, “mournful and shrill” chant as an “ordinary” occasional occurrence, one certainly *might*, quite justifiably, consider him an incarnation of a kind of divine madness.

Admittedly, viewing Old Brandon as some version of a profoundly declined, even insane, Yahweh requires an interpretive stretch that some would not be prepared to make. However, the evidence in the story supports such a connection, and it certainly *does* help to explain Patricia’s incredibly intense, near-demonic response. The otherwise stoic Patricia—thus far, seemingly oblivious to her brother’s death—begins hysterically screaming at Old Brandon’s approach, and there can be no question that he is the source of her hysteria: “Patricia began to scream: I hate that old scissors-man! I hate him!” (98). What connection, conscious or unconscious, is Patricia making here? Earlier in the story, Benny’s attraction to Old Brandon is made clear—“The only words he knew how to say were Bow-wow and Bram” (93)—“Bram” being Benny’s best verbal attempt at

“Brandon.” Benny would run “out to meet him when he came” (93)—run out to meet the “scissor’s-man” who now, somewhere in the recesses of Patricia’s consciousness, becomes the personification of death and of the God who took her brother—the mad deity who carries and sharpens the scissors that “prune” earthly “flowers” (read children) for transplantation into Heavenly flower gardens.

Patricia’s deterioration into an inhuman, near-demonic state strongly suggests the presence of some supernatural, darkly divine force: “Her eyes were screwed up tight and her mouth wide open; her tiny pointed teeth were almost transparent, and faintly rotten at the edges; they made her look like a ferret, a wretched little animal insane with rage or fear” (99). This is an extreme reaction, but not inappropriate for someone—and this expectation applies to some degree to virtually *everyone* in this particular Munro story—who is expected to praise and thank a God who has burdened her at nine years of age with the horrific responsibility for the accidental death of her little brother, so that He could meet His Heavenly landscaping needs. In this rather strange, gothic tale, a Christian belief prevails that requires of believers devotion and gratitude to a deity that resembles more than anything else a “madman loose in the world.”

Critical assessments of Munro’s religious perspective in “The Time of Death,” of course, vary. Karen Smythe’s reading of the story as set out in *Figuring Grief* resonates with mine to some extent, except that Smythe does not seem prepared to go so far as to see Old Brandon symbolically as a demented Christian God-figure or, failing that, a similarly mad Christian perspective on death; nor, however, does her assessment of the “scissors-man,” exclude such a reading. Overall, she does see the story as a negative critique of the kind of Christianity we encounter in the story. First, Smythe astutely notes that the two songs that Leona chooses for Patricia to sing (some time after Benny’s death when she and Patricia have reconciled) clearly reflect Munro’s questioning of traditional Christianity’s effectiveness in helping people confront and respond to death: “Munro questions the religious attitudes that these songs/hymns [“May the Circle be Unbroken” and “It is no Secret, What God Can Do”] embody, since the consolation they might achieve cannot answer the questions raised in our minds when confronted with death” (117).

I agree; however, Smythe goes on to argue that “the epiphanic moment for Patricia”—her hysterical, screaming response to the scissors-man is a “release of repressed grief” and that Patricia’s “emotional condition eliminates any sense of consolation and places the reader in a continuing condition of suspended emotion, caught between different ways of seeing and of grieving”(117). First, given the near-psychotic nature of Patricia’s response, I would question its being one of grief, repressed or otherwise; it seems clearly much more one of terrified response to a dark supernatural force. Secondly, it seems equally clear to me that the evidence in the story *does* provide the reader some direction, if only negatively. That is, although the story does not direct the reader as to where he/she *should* direct his/her religious belief (something that Munro *never* does), it does make abundantly clear the profound inadequacies of the Christian God we encounter, at least in this story—and the futility, even madness, of turning to such a One for answers or comfort in the face of the mystery of death.

Coral Ann Howells in her book-length study of Munro in the *Contemporary World Writers* series assesses James Carscallen’s amazingly detailed and inclusive study of patterns in Alice Munro’s fiction, *The Other Country: Patterns in the Writing of Alice Munro* in the following glowing terms: “As Munro scholarship it will not easily be surpassed for Carscallen reads Munro’s fiction as a kind of secular scripture” (143). As Howells’ accolade suggests, Carscallen’s central aim is to discern parallels between Munro’s writing and Christian scripture, although Carscallen certainly draws upon a good deal of non-Christian mythology as well. As Carscallen himself puts it in the forward to *The Other Country*, Munro’s “work offers us the great human myths, but as half-concealed—both from the characters themselves and the reader—behind a surface ordinariness that seems anything but mythical” (viii). I have found Carscallen’s work immensely useful in my study of spirituality and religion in Munro’s writing and particularly illuminating of Christian influences in Munro’s writing. I have found Carscallen helpful even (sometimes especially) on those occasions when I do not entirely concur with his reading of a particular Munro story. His reading of certain aspects of “The Time of Death” provides such an instance.

Carscallen does see “Old Brandon” as a sort of God-figure, arguing that “Old Brandon with his ‘crownless hat’ and mournful call... [is] like the suffering King

pictured over the altar—though Brandon’s association with sharpened blades suggests a killer as well as a victim” (138-39). Such a reading rightly recognizes a certain level of ambivalence around the male Christian deity in the story. Carscallen and I part ways, however, when he goes on to argue that although “God the father is not directly a member of the cast” of the story, “his role is taken by the talented Patricia” (138). Carscallen bases this conclusion upon Patricia’s god-like role with her younger siblings and the fact that she literally *does*, albeit accidentally, cause the scalding that results in Benny’s death.

Although I see the logic in Carscallen’s interpretation, I find it considerably more convincing to view Patricia Parry as yet one more Munro character who struggles to reconcile belief in a loving, benevolent Heavenly Father with the apparently capricious cosmic madness that is visited upon him/her or other human beings. Patricia is a relatively limited individual; thus she opts for a quite limited response to this dilemma—she simply denies. Her denial serves her fairly well until Old Brandon returns. Other much less limited Munro characters, however—Del Jordan, as we shall see shortly, is an excellent example—struggle mightily with the same cosmic contradiction. The responses of these characters vary widely; the outcome, however, does not. Ultimately, Munro almost invariably turns her characters—and by extension her readers—away from this sometimes ruthless, contradictory patriarchal Deity, and, by extrapolation, away from traditional, organized Christianity.

Nine-year-old Patricia’s attempts earlier in the story to impose some sort of order and cleanliness on the chaos and filth of her family’s home may be seen as a kind of god-like imposition of order, but they strike me much more as particularly *human* gestures—and limited gestures at that. Patricia pathetically, but poignantly, attempts to clean up: “This place stinks...I’m going to clean this place up...It never gets cleaned up like other places”(94). Patricia also nurtures and mothers Benny—at some personal sacrifice: “Patricia knew he was stupid; she hated stupid things. He was the only stupid thing she did not hate”(93). Further, she rescues Benny from the abuse of his other siblings: “He grabbed at the catalogue and Irene hit his hand. He began to whimper. Patricia picked him up competently and carried him to the window”(94). She also makes some attempt to get Benny to speak like other children his age: “She would try to get him to talk,

repeating words after her, she would put her face down to his, saying anxiously, Hi, Benny, *Hi*, and he would look at her and smile in his slow dubious way”(93). All of these attempts qualify as clear examples of the concrete, “ordinary,” particularly female actions that I will address in more detail shortly. For now, though, it is suffice to recognize the following: That such efforts should culminate in Benny’s horrible death by scalding—more or less at Patricia’s hands—seems, without exaggeration, to point to a kind of cosmic madness at work. Moreover, the greater madness in the story lies in the expectation that *anyone* should rejoice in the belief that such a death results from a shortage of flowers in God’s heavenly garden.

If we are to look for any semblance of an effective response to Benny’s death in this early Munro story, it has to come—not, as we have seen, from the boy’s ineffectual earthly father or other mortal males, nor from their heavenly Paternal counterpart—but from the quintessentially “ordinary” actions and words of Allie MacGee and the attending neighborhood women. I fully acknowledge a marked ambivalence in the presentation of these women and their attempts to comfort Leona and her remaining children, but—if only briefly—these women offer the grieving Leona, Irene, and George some degree of genuine comfort. After the women endure with “embarrassed childish solemnity” the infantile theological pap doled out by the Salvation women, they set about the *real* work of assisting those who grieve death: “They made tea and set out on the table the pies and fruitcake and scones that people had sent, and they themselves had made” (91). They listen to, and actually *hear*, Leona’s recollection of nursing Benny when he was an infant, and their empathy is unquestionable: “ In the dark overheated kitchen the women felt the dignity of this sorrow in their maternal flesh, they were humble before this unwashed, unlike and desolate Leona” (92). The *imitatio Christi* nature of the women’s actions and attitude are clear, but there is no trace of abstract Christian theology, no mention of Heavenly Fathers. Their humble supplication before the “desolate Leona” echoes Christ’s washing of the feet of his disciple, but, again, it is highly unlikely that any of these women are consciously following any particular Christian precepts or examples. What is most striking about their ministrations is their “ordinary,” physical, *bodily* nature—“their maternal flesh,” “their big bodies indistinct in the half-light”(90).

I share Karen Smythe's doubts about the long-term sincerity of Allie McGee and the other neighborhood women in "The Time of Death": "The neighborhood women wear 'the ritual masks of mourning and compassion' and use 'tones of ritual soothing' but since Leona is disliked, we question the level of sincerity in their reaction" (116). The women, however, are sincere *in the moment*, and, even more importantly, their efforts are genuinely efficacious; they clearly help Leona Parry cope with the death of her son. Later, their efforts are equally effective in dealing with Patricia's hysterical reaction to Old Brandon: "They tried shaking her, slapping her, throwing cold water on her face; at last they got her to swallow a big dose of soothing syrup with a lot of whisky in it, and they put her to bed"(99).

These matters are relative. Again, however much we might doubt the longevity of the women's sincerity (later: "Because things were back to normal...they disliked Leona as much as before" (99)), they are present and relatively effective at *the time of death*. Munro's title underscores how this time stands somehow chronologically apart—perhaps even cosmically apart from the balance of the story line. They are *present* with their food and their female bodies, in marked contrast to the conspicuously absent and ineffectual father and other males in the story. In fact, set against *any* of the male responses to Benny's death—earthly or implicitly Heavenly male responses—the women's responses are clearly more helpful, notwithstanding quite valid questions about the longevity of the women's sincerity.

If we were to see "The Time of Death"—this story from Munro's first collection of short stories—as somehow representative of her overall treatment of Christianity, there would be little left to discuss regarding Munro's perspective on traditional Christian faith or belief structures. How, but in agreement, are we to respond to the Christian God in this story in his role as capricious divine gardener, or to Old Brandon, the ominous, "mad" "scissors-man" as some form of embodiment of this God of death? It seems clear that our response should essentially emulate Patricia's; we should flee screaming. But "The Time of Death," I am relieved to say, is far from Munro's final word on the fruits of spiritually questing in the realms of Christianity. This being so, a very legitimate question arises: why spend so much time examining this particular story?

I have paid a considerable amount of attention to “The Time of Death,” not because I see the story as Munro at her best—even at this early stage of her writing career—nor because Munro’s treatment of death and responses to death in this story are entirely prototypical for such treatment in the balance of her fiction. Neither the story nor her subsequent work supports such claims. I have devoted considerable space to the story because I believe it is important to see, reasonably fully, the perspective on matters of death—and, by extrapolation, important perspectives on matters of the spiritual and the religious overall in Munro’s writing—from which her subsequent writing *develops and evolves*.

“The Time of Death” clearly anticipate some crucial aspects of Munro’s later work that are of central concern in this thesis: Despite the story’s quite unmitigated implicit rejection of traditional Christianity, it still anticipates the ambivalence toward Christian perspectives on death and immortality—particularly Old Testament perspectives—in Munro’s later fiction. Secondly, it sets out the parallels between the weakening and decline of the power and influence of earthly fathers and their divine counterpart that recur in many later Munro stories; and, concomitantly, the story clearly prefigures the actual and the potential spiritual/religious power of the female/feminine—particularly as it manifests in the physical body, in birthing and nursing—that is so central in later Munro works. In these later stories, these aspects of the female/feminine expand in very important ways into the arena of female sexuality as well. Thus, with the “foundational” considerations anticipated in “The Time Of Death” in mind, we can turn to the richly complex development of these aspects in Munro’s subsequent fiction.

Del Jordan and “Age of Faith”

Del Jordan, the central character in Munro’s second collection of short stories, *Lives of Girls and Women*, is more intellectually sophisticated, better educated, and considerably more interesting than any of the characters in “The Time of Death.” None of these advantages or superior traits, however, exempts Del from the universal struggle with death. The truism holds: Death *is* the great equalizer. In fact, Del Jordan—prefiguring a number of later Munro protagonists/narrators—struggles with matters of death with an intensity and consistency that borders on the obsessive. Virtually every

story in *Lives of Girls and Women* deals with death and responses to death; some stories such as “Heirs of the Living Body” do so very directly, others less directly but, nevertheless, always in some significant way. Munro’s story, “Age of Faith,” belongs to this latter category.

Magdalene Redekop points out that when “Munro wrote ‘Age of Faith’ for *Lives of Girls and Women*, she may have thought she was finished with religion. To Hancock she explained: ‘That big section in *Lives*...[is] there because every child...in my generation went through some kind of religious crisis’ (210). Munro confides that one of the fruits of her particular crisis was the story, “Age of Faith.” As Munro’s fiction since “Age of Faith” amply demonstrates, however, she was clearly not yet “finished with religion” upon writing this story. On the contrary, “Age of Faith,” rather than closing religious matters in Munro’s writing, provides an especially rich point of departure for further examination of the development of key issues surrounding death and Christianity in Munro’s subsequent fiction.

In “The Time of Death” as in many other Munro stories, the explicit prompt or catalyst for the protagonist’s/narrator’s spiritual/religious quest is death. In “Age of Faith,” death remains the catalyst for twelve-year-old Del Jordan’s religious search, but the story is well along before this becomes explicit. It is not until Del’s inquisition of her younger brother, Owen—some eleven pages into the story—that the underlying driving force of Del’s quest becomes clear. For want of a more satisfactory interlocutor, Del drills her younger brother on matters that are clearly much more urgent for her than for him:

“What do you think happens to someone when they die?”

“I don’t know,” said Owen mutinously.

“Do you believe God keeps your soul alive? Do you know what your soul is? Do you believe in God?...

“You better in believe in God,” I said. (88)

By this point in the story, Del has begun to more clearly and specifically realize that her most pressing religious concern is fear of death, but let’s return to the beginning of the story to trace how Del’s concerns evolve from some broader questions that she formulates about God’s very *existence*:

The winter I was twelve years old...I wanted to settle the question of God. I had been reading books about the Middle Ages [another “age of faith”]; I was attracted more and more to the idea of faith. God had always been a possibility for me; now I was prey to a positive longing for Him. He was a necessity. But I wanted reassurance, proof that He actually was there. That was what I came to church for, but could not mention to anybody. (80)

A number of important aspects are evident here. First, we see a *considerable* development in linguistic and intellectual sophistication beyond that of *any* of the characters in “The Time of Death,” and, in Del’s quite atypical reading interests (“books about the Middle Ages”), we see a much more educated perspective as well. More important, however, is the significantly developed *theological* perspective. In “The Time of Death,” the central question about the Christian God is His *nature*; in “Age of Faith,” the central question is about His very *existence*. This shift mirrors an important development in the larger culture’s religious thinking from about the mid-19th century into the 20th.

Moreover, as in a microcosm, the story reflects some other key developments in Western religious thinking during roughly the same period. For example, in “Age of Faith” (as well as in other Del Jordan stories), Del’s mother—as we shall see—represents the voice of modern, positivistic science, Darwinian biology, and Freudian psychology in its questioning and undermining of literal belief in the Christian scripture. Empirical, Newtonian-Cartesian science finds expression, albeit subtle, even in Del’s desire for “proof” of God’s existence. Del’s questions about God’s existence also, by extension, draw attention to another important development in the collective Western consciousness mentioned earlier: the increasing fear that death is followed by annihilation, by a “void.” Finally, in Del’s articulate framing of her need for God and for “reassurance, proof that He was really there,” we see a significant increase from “The Time of Death” of a marked *ambivalence* as reflected in Del’s “positive longing” for a God whose very existence she has come to doubt. Thus, with the shape of her religious quest quite clearly delineated, Del sets out to “settle the question of God,” to settle her doubts about His existence and her attendant fears about death and possible annihilation.

Del's determination to "settle the question of God" sets in motion an especially clear example of one of the most significant and interesting recurring patterns in Munro's fiction. The pattern is relatively straightforward (although the content and outcome very seldom are): Munro's protagonist/narrator sets out to *resolve* an important question or issue; in the end, however, such resolution almost invariably eludes the protagonist/narrator. Munro has offered some quite illuminating comments on "certainty" and on resolving certain questions. In an unpublished interview, Munro answers a question put to her by Jill Gardiner about the relationship between child characters and adult narrators—as it applies to James Joyce's "Araby" (also significant because, as I noted in my opening chapter, Munro's strategies around epiphanies/the epiphanic are indebted—and different from—Joyce's prototypical modernist epiphanies). Earlier, I quoted briefly from the passage below, but since Munro's response is so important for my discussion of "Age of Faith," and at least as important in upcoming chapters, I wish to quote her entire answer:

The adult narrator has the ability to detect and talk about the confusion. I don't feel that the confusion is ever resolved. And there is some kind of a central mystery, as in "Walker brothers cowboyCowboy," that is there for the adult narrator as it was for the child. I feel that all life becomes even *more* mysterious and difficult. And the whole act of writing is more an attempt at recognition than of understanding, because I don't understand many things. I feel a kind of satisfaction in just approaching something that is mysterious and important. Then writing is the art of approach and recognition. I believe that we don't solve these things—in fact our explanations take us farther away. (qtd in Thancker *Probable Fictions* 54)

I have consistently found Munro's assessments about her own writing particularly astute and accurate, and her words above are no exception. Further, Munro's declarations here bring to mind some declarations put forward by Jacques Derrida in his essay "Faith and Knowledge: the Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone." Discussing what he terms the "return of the religious," Derrida makes clear how *anathema* "certainty" is in such discussions. The "certainty" of religious fundamentalists, for example, he describes as "the madness, the absolute anachrony of our time, the

disjunction of all self-contemporaneity, the veiled and cloudy day of every today” (13). Later in the same essay, Derrida says there are places in the discussion of religion that “situate in our eyes chasms over which a great scholar walks with tranquil step, as though he knew what he was talking about, while at the same time acknowledging that at bottom he really doesn’t know very much” (31). And, later still, he opines that religion is a “response that is both ambiguous and ambivalent” (51).

Turning again to Munro’s “Age of Faith,” one of the most important participants in the story’s ongoing discussion of religion is Del Jordan’s mother. As so often occurs even in the great archetypal journeys, especially those of adolescence, the questing hero must first get past a terribly mundane but always challenging obstacle: mother. As Magdalene Redekop has noted, many of Munro’s protagonists/narrators come up against the “obstacle” of mother. This is particularly true for Del Jordan, but Redekop points out that even in “Friend of My Youth,” a story Munro published a full twenty years after *Lives of Girls and Women*, mother remains a daunting challenge for many Munro characters—especially in matters of religion: “The emphasis on religion in ‘Friend of My Youth,’” Redekop writes, “shows that it is not so easy to get around ‘God’ when you are trying to get straight with your mother” (210).

In “Age of Faith” and other Del Jordan stories, Del’s mother is spokesperson for secular, logical positivism; hers is the voice of modern reason. As Jay Heble puts it in *The Tumble of Reason: Alice Munro’s Discourse of Absence*, Mrs. Jordan is “the rationalist par excellence who tries desperately to deny the value of elements in absentia” (54). Munro’s creation of this particular role for Del’s mother also exemplifies the evolution in *her* treatment of traditional Christian beliefs in her early writing. What is most important here is that Del Jordan—unlike characters like Leona and the other neighborhood women in “The Time of Death”—has the benefit of her mother’s articulate logical positivism, particularly around the question of death and immortality. It is a benefit that Del believes she could easily do without, but nevertheless one that Del can place against, or alongside, the explanations (or lack of explanation) that she encounters from various religious denominations in her hometown of Jubilee.

Del’s mother’s perspective amounts to a scathing critique of what she regards as the primitive bloodthirstiness of conventional Christian belief; she reviles a God “who

isn't satisfied until he has got somebody hanging on a cross for six hours, nine hours, whatever it was" (89). Del's mother's attack culminates in her version of one of most frequently invoked critiques of belief in anthropomorphic deities such as the Christian God: that they are projections of human wish fulfillments. Sigmund Freud's argument for such projection, as it appears in his work "The Future of an Illusion," still stands as the prototype of this position:

We say to ourselves: it would indeed be nice if there were a God, who was both creator of the world and a benevolent providence, if there were a moral world order and a future life, but at the same time it is very odd that this is all just as we should wish it ourselves. And it would be still odder if our poor ignorant, enslaved ancestors had succeeded in solving all these difficult riddles of the universe. (45)

When Del informs her mother that she will be attending the Anglican Good Friday service, her mother's argument is strikingly similar to Freud's: " 'God was made by man! Not the other way around! God was made by *man*. Man at a lower and bloodthirstier stage of his development than he is at now, we hope. Man made God in his own image'" (89).

Del's mother's agnostic logic, however, does not really touch Del's deeply emotional "positive longing" for God, nor could it ever provide the protection Del seeks against her fear of death or her attendant fear of the threat of "*nothing*" (84)—the annihilation that might follow death. It becomes evident, though, that Del's mother's argument has sewn *some* seeds of doubt in Del's mind. On her way to church, after this encounter with her mother, Del looks for proof "of the opposite point of view" and assures herself by speculating that if she were to stop, knock on doors, and ask people, "Did Christ die for our sins?" (90), they would—albeit, "startled and embarrassed" (90)—answer in the affirmative. Her mother's critique ultimately holds so little sway over Del at this point that even this imagined collective affirmation provides her sufficient assurance for the time being. The "threat" of secular reasoning and scientific positivism thus subdued, Del proceeds to the Anglican Good Friday service in search of the safety for which she so deeply yearns.

Del has earlier made clear that she is seeking God, not Christ, but that she will seek Christ, if that is what is required: “I only wanted God. But if Christ dying for our sins was the avenue to God, I would work on it” (90). Working toward this end, during the service, Del sets herself the task of imagining Christ’s pain on the cross; she even goes so far as to attempt a mild form of *stigmata*: “I held my hands together in such a way that I could press a single fingernail with all possible force into each palm. I dug and twisted but could not even get blood” (90). This mild self-mutilation is entirely in keeping with Del’s desire for a *physical* connection to the Divine—for that which will touch her in some *bodily* fashion, or which will appeal to her “ordinary” physical senses. Del’s desire for a physical, bodily connection with the Divine also draws her, for example, toward ritual and religious observations that involve her body and her physical senses—not just her abstract theological contemplation. This accounts for her pleasure earlier in the story with the bell in the Anglican church or with “the kneeling down on the hard board” (83), or with her attraction—from, of course, a safe Protestant distance—with the “voluptuousness and scandal” she associates with the Catholic church (79).

Although Del is clearly drawn to the *mystery* of God (“I wanted Him to move in a more mysterious way” (87)) and to more symbolic, ritualistic ways of honoring and approaching this mystery, it is clear that Del also desires a concrete, bodily, sensual connection with God. Such a connection is a clear example of what Charles Taylor in *Sources of the Self* identifies as the “affirmation of ordinary life.” In my introductory chapter, I outlined what Taylor means by this “affirmation of ordinary life” and how it is a central aspect in Munro’s overall spiritual/religious perspective. My introduction also traced the evolution of the “affirmation of ordinary life” from its origins in the Protestant Reformation to its much more secular variants in contemporary Western culture. Del Jordan’s search for a fulfilling religious framework and faith and her attendant search for “safety” against the threat of death and annihilation microcosmically reflect the Reformation’s aim of affirming—and to some extent, deifying—aspects of ordinary life. The aspect of ordinary life that is of uppermost importance for Del and one that is equally crucial for many later Munro characters/protagonists/narrators—but more removed for them from its Christian trappings—is the affirmation or deification of the bodily.

Christianity, particularly Protestantism, has, to varying degrees, always associated the body with the profane. This deeply entrenched depreciation of the body and the various deadly sins associated with the body—including lust, gluttony, sloth—remain to the present a strong underlying feature across all Christian denominations. However, as Charles Taylor argues, the Protestant Reformation also went some way to liberating the human body, with its various needs and desires, from complete profanity. The body is, obviously, the locus of what Taylor identifies as “ordinary life,” and thus “affirming ordinary life” entails affirming the body. Such affirmation, combined with the Reformation’s attack on previously “sacred” mediators contributed to the undermining of long-held distinctions between the “sacred” and the “profane”:

By denying any special form of life as a privileged locus of the sacred, they were denying the very distinction between sacred and profane and hence affirming their interpenetration. The denial of a special status to the monk was also an affirmation of ordinary life as more than profane, as itself hallowed and in no way second-class. (Taylor 217-18)

In later Munro works, the physical and the bodily—and particularly the sexual—are largely broken free from this Christian framework and become central components in alternative spiritual/religious possibilities. My central focus in Chapter 3 will be on these “ordinary” human aspects as religious possibilities in their own right, as well on the importance of what the famous Russian theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin, terms the “material bodily lower stratum” (368-436). My present purposes, however, require mainly the recognition that Del’s participation in the Anglican Good Friday service echoes a Reformation-like aim of bypassing all religious mediation and connecting directly—and, for Del, *physically*—with God. Del is striving here toward not only an affirmation of the “ordinary” human body, but toward a *deification* of the body as locus of her connection with God.

Of course, even within the framework of *Protestant* Christianity, a mediator *does* remain between humans and God: Jesus Christ. Del has earlier indicated that she wants “only God,” but also that she is willing, if necessary, to go through Christ as intermediary (“I would work on it” (90)). Given Del’s desire for a more physical, immediate connection with God, Christ in his passion, is actually her *best* avenue to such a

connection. Del begins to understand the place and importance of Christ's body—*Corpus Christi*—in His suffering and death upon the cross. Christ's "ordinary" human physical experience offers Del the most direct avenue to her original goal: safety from death and annihilation through immortality, because, of course, it is Christ's "ordinary," human suffering on the cross that purportedly secures for other humans the "victory over death" for which Del so deeply longs.

Del also discovers during this Good Friday sermon something else about Christ that is very important in her religious *and* secular life. She discovers the importance for Christ—and thus for all Christians—of human relationships, especially family relationships: "Even in the hour of His agony and passion He did not forget human relationships, how beautiful and important they were" (91). Charles Taylor stresses, first, how the "affirmation of ordinary life" was "foreshadowed and initiated, in all its facets, in the spirituality of the Reformers" (218) and, further, that for them, "the fullness of Christian existence was to be found within the activities of this life, in one's calling and in marriage *and the family*" (emphasis mine 218). We note that it is especially family relationships that Christ emphasizes—at least, in this sermon and to Del's ear: "*Woman, behold thy son...son, behold thy mother*, showed that his last words were for others, arranging for them to be a comfort to each other when He was gone" (91). For twelve-year-old Del Jordan, child-parent connections, although, of course, fraught with early adolescent tension and conflict, are still the most important ones in her quotidian, *ordinary* life.

This affirmation of "ordinary" human relationships, much like the affirmation of the physical and bodily aspects discussed above, increasingly shifts away from its Christian framework in later Munro works, and—again, much like the affirmation of the bodily and the physical—becomes of central importance for later Munro's characters/protagonists/narrators in their various quests for spiritual and religious fulfillment along avenues other than the traditionally Christian. Thus, we see that although Del ultimately does not embrace organized Christianity, like many people in modern Western culture, she *does* retain crucial features of the Christian perspective in her subsequent religious quests.

In the midst of Del's contemplation of Christ's suffering on the cross, amidst her further discoveries of what was most important to Him during his travail, and during her fleeting attempts at *stigmata*, a question arises in her mind—a question that presumably many Christians have struggled with. Del wonders whether Christ's physical suffering on the cross—suffering that obviously would have been as horrible for *any* ordinary human being—whether this suffering would *really* have been so awful if he knew all along that he was destined for Heaven:

Were they that bad, when you knew, and He knew, and everybody knew, that He would rise up whole and bright and everlasting and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty from whence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead? (91)

Again, what is most important here is Del's attempt to find a religious perspective that she can genuinely connect to her own *ordinary* human experience. If Del can be convinced that Christ did suffer genuine, human doubt—that his experience was “ordinarily” human enough—she should be able to largely overcome the doubts that have stood in her way of attaining genuine Christian faith. The Anglican priest reasons that Christ *did* briefly lose his connection with God and that this was necessary: “It was so we should know in our own blackest moments that our doubts, our misery had been shared by Christ Himself, and then, knowing this, our doubts would all the more quickly pass” (92).

Through her engaged imagination of Christ's suffering, Del comes close to experiencing *and to overcoming* her doubts and, further, to fully believing that Christ did resurrect and thus guarantee immortality for all humans. Del *almost* finds the Christian faith that would satisfy her “positive longing” for God and provide her sufficient safety from death and annihilation. Despite her remarkably tenacious and truly valiant efforts, however, Del is ultimately unable to make the connection with God for which she longs. In the end, Del cannot get past her all-too-human reasoning, and, more importantly, she cannot get past the Heavenly Pater, God.

Recall, it is God that Del really wants to connect with (“I only wanted God” (90)). Del knows that the passion play unfolding before her was directed by Him, and it is her reasoned questioning and her doubts about *His* role in that passion that—despite her best

efforts (“I could not stop this thinking though I knew it could bring me no happiness” (91))—finally will not allow her to believe that God heeded Christ’s pleas and took him up to Heaven. Del cannot get past the possibility that Christ’s cry “Why hast thou forsaken me?” may have been “the last true thing ever heard of Him”:

We had to at least suppose that, didn’t we? We had to consider it.

Suppose He cried that, and died, and never did rise again, never did discover it was all God’s difficult drama? There was suffering. Yes; think of Him suddenly realizing: *it was not true. None of it was true...* To look through the slats of the world, having come all that way, and say what He had said, and then see—nothing. *Talk about that!* (92)

When Del imagines Christ looking through the “slats of the world” and seeing “nothing,” she is identifying not only what Christ might have experienced, but also *her own* deepest fear and a particularly modern fear. It is the fear (and, paradoxically, sometimes the *awe*) of “the depths of a vast physical universe which is itself, over most of its measureless extent, lifeless, utterly insensitive to our purposes, pursuing its path by inexorable necessity” (Taylor 347). Christ apparently was saved and arose, but Del and many people in the West, particularly over the last century and a half, have grown increasingly skeptical that “death is not the absolute end, and that survival after is not an illusion” (Choron 27). Again, Jacques Choron adroitly encapsulates the “story,” the problem, and what is at stake:

It is also the story of growing skepticism as to these beliefs [in immortality]. The problem shifts more and more from that of demonstrating the unreality of death to that of a reconciliation, emotional and intellectual, with the fact that with the last fluttering of our pulse, all is ended. The two main aspects of this problem are mastery of the fear of dying, and the neutralization or refutation of the seemingly unavoidable conclusion that our brief sojourn under the sun is a senseless joke, an absurd tragicomedy. (27)

Del Jordan is, after all, not Soren Kierkegaard’s “Knight of Faith,” nor, at the fairly tender age of twelve, has she reached the juncture in her existential and religious

journey where she is able to formulate a Sartre or Camus-like position on the absurdity of life; we shall leave that to later and older Munro characters. Nor, though, does Del find the answers she seeks on death and the afterlife in organized religion. Her silent plea to the priest to “talk about that, drag it into the open and then—defeat it!” goes unsatisfied: “We do what we can, the minister could not do any more” (92). However, Del’s disillusioning experience in the Anglican Church does not immediately nor completely drive her away from Christian belief. It just brings her back, full circle, to God. As Nora Robson has noted, “the central issue at the heart of ‘Age of Faith’ is the challenge to God” (79)

To briefly encapsulate, Del’s quest for answers and comfort regarding death certainly finds no satisfaction in her mother’s brand of agnostic logic—*notwithstanding* Del’s brief doubts or her mother’s concession that “‘Yes, oh Yes, there must be something—some design’” (84). Nor, however, has Del found answers or solace in her Anglican Church experience of Christ’s supposed “victory over death.” Significantly, the source of Del’s failure—or, perhaps more accurately, her resignation—is not the crucified Christ, but His Heavenly Father—the cosmic director behind the whole divine drama. After Del’s Good Friday experience, her only remaining hope within Christian belief against “every stick and stone and feather in the world floating loose in that howling hopeless darkness” resides with God (84). Del has passionately insisted from the outset that the “only way it could be borne”—with the pronoun “it” remaining quite ambiguous, but almost certainly referring to existence in the face of the possible annihilation of death—that the only way would be “if all those atoms, galaxies of atoms, were safe all the time, whirling away in God’s mind” (84). Unconvinced of the ultimate success of Christ’s attempts to save us from annihilation upon death, Del turns again to the Heavenly Father, and, as in so many Munro stories, the connection with the Divine Father is symbolically revealed through connections with “ordinary,” earthly fathers.

In “The Time of Death,” Munro’s treatment of both Patricia Parry’s earthly father and his Heavenly counterpart was relatively straightforward—even simplistic. The concluding pages of “Age of Faith,” however, demonstrate a considerable development in the treatment of fathers, both in complexity and ambivalence, and we see in the connections drawn between Ben Jordan and the divine Father a number of aspects that

persist in Munro's treatment of earthly and heavenly fathers to the present. Moreover, some strikingly similar aspects of Del's relationship with her father in the "Age of Faith" appear in an earlier Munro story as well—"Boys and Girls" from her first collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades*. A brief comparison of these aspects in the two stories sheds considerable light on Munro's treatment of earthly and Divine f/Fathers in the latter story.

In "Boys and Girls," the unnamed narrator is eleven years old (Del is twelve), and in both stories the respective fathers are fox farmers (an autobiographical influence seems apparent here; Munro grew up on her parent's fox farm in Wingham, Ontario). In "Boys and Girls," the symbolic connection between the protagonist's father and the Christian God is much more muted than in "Age of Faith." The earlier story focuses more on gender issues and the narrator's deep need to establish herself in her father's eyes as more than "only a girl," the words with which her father "absolve[s] and dismis[s]e[s] [her] for good" at the conclusion of the story (127). "Boys and Girls," however, clearly presents the narrator's father, like Del's, as a calm but ruthless agent of death, and the earlier story does, albeit subtly, prefigure the much more evident connection between earthly father and the Christian Father so central to the latter stages of "Age of Faith." Both narrators struggle with profoundly ambivalent feelings towards their human fathers; Del Jordan's ambivalence, though, clearly extends to the Heavenly Father as well.

In "Age of Faith," Del, despite her strong urge to connect with her father, knows that he is, at times, an ominously threatening agent of death, and her Christian training, combined with her recent Good Friday experience, has engendered some troubling doubts about God's possible betrayal of Christ in his "time of death." Admittedly, Ben Jordan's killing has been confined to animals, such as foxes for their pelts and old or injured horses for fox meat. In "Boys and Girls," the narrator's father kills foxes and horses as well, but—very similar to Ben Jordan's punitive killing of the family dog, Old Major—he also kills the narrator's favorite horse, Flo, primarily as punishment. For the most part, both narrators accept their respective father's killing of farm animals as necessary. Actually, Del accepts her father's killing of farm animals with an equanimity almost equal to his—"I was used to things being killed" ("Age" 95)—and she accepts such deaths as common, "ordinary," and, if not entirely pleasant, justified and reasonable. However the execution of the family dog, Old Major—much like the killing of Flo in

“Boys and Girls”—comes much closer for the respective narrators to merciless murder—not unlike the cosmic ruthlessness we saw in the death of Benny in “The Time of Death.”

The narrator in “Boys and Girls” *intellectually* understands the reasons for killing Flo, and Del seems similarly resigned—again, intellectually—to the need to put down Old Major. He “had taken up criminality in his old age” (93) and was killing the neighbor’s sheep. Del’s dreams around this time, however, betray her waking “reasonable” acceptance of her father’s role as agent of death, revealing—against her outward equanimity—a deeper sense of her father as, in fact, a cold-blooded killer of *humans*, and, moreover, a killer of members of his family: “I dreamed my father had set up an ordinary humble block of wood on the grass outside the kitchen door and was lining us up—Owen, my mother and me—to cut off our heads” (95). A clear echo of Abraham’s near sacrifice of his son Isaac in Genesis further reinforces the underlying connection, in this story at least, between Ben Jordan and an Old Testament Yahweh. Although I fully recognize that Ben Jordan’s Abraham-like sacrificing here occurs only in Del’s dream, I am nevertheless reminded of another point that Jacques Derrida makes in his essay “Faith and Reason” about a religious faith that would place the “rights of man and of *human* life above all obligation towards absolute and transcendent truth of commitment before the divine order: an Abraham who would henceforth refuse to sacrifice his son and would no longer envisage what was always madness” (43).

Del’s dream *does* spill over into her waking life as she watches her father “ritualistically” call the unsuspecting and obedient Old Major to his death: “I did see again the outline of that reasonable, blasphemous face” (95). This is the face, the paternal face with its look of logical deliberation, that brings death into Del’s world: “Death was made possible” (95). Recognizing the connection here between Ben Jordan and God lies in recognizing that Ben Jordan, just like God in Benny Parry’s death in “The Time of Death,” could, presumably, prevent the killing if he chose to do so. He does not, however, and—as we shall see shortly—Del’s perceptions of his reasons for not intervening draw attention again to dark traits shared by earthly and Heavenly f/Fathers in these stories.

Through a series of transpositions—fairly child-like transpositions, but not unlike those that adults often make in religious matters, and/or particularly on un or sub-

conscious levels—Del connects her dog and horse-killing father with all male adults and then with the patriarchal God of Christianity. A marked ambivalence characterizes all of these levels. For example, her father’s “reasonable, blasphemous” face (95) transposes a few lines later into the “kind implacable faces” of all adult “managers and executioners,” the vast majority of whom—at the time this story is set—would be male. Then, as we shall see in a moment, this adult male, cold-blooded reasonableness finds its corollary in the implacable indifference of a God apparently oblivious to the death of Old Major

What is approaching for Del is a darkly epiphanic realization that her earlier “positive longing” for God has shifted, at deeper levels that she has not been entirely conscious of, past ambivalence to rejection. Del’s rejection of the traditional Christian God who was, at the outset of the story “a necessity” for her does not become clear to Del until she vicariously experiences her brother Owen’s desperate but vain prayers to prevent the death of his dog, Old Major. It is not until Owen begs Del to pray for divine intervention in the death of his pet that she realizes—even in this relatively extreme circumstance—that it has not occurred to her to do so: “The thought of praying had never crossed my mind” (96). And it is through Owen’s agonizing ordeal that Del finally recognizes that the traditional, patriarchal Christian God that she has been so ardently pursuing is apparently not concerned with lived, “ordinary” life. Again, through Owen’s experience, Del finally recognizes, “with dismay the unavoidable collision coming, of religion and life” (96).

Munro’s treatment of Christian belief in “Age of Faith” is considerably more complex than that in “The Time of Death.” No aspect in the earlier story matches the compelling, rich ambivalence of Del’s quest for a God outside the bounds of the *too* ordinary, overly secularized United Church to which she nominally belongs. Despite quite striking differences between these two early Munro works, however, their outcomes are significantly similar: Belief in a traditional Christian God has been tested for its power against the age-old human enemy, death; and it has failed. The well-known phrase from the Lord’s Prayer—“on earth as it is Heaven”—is, ironically, apropos in these stories. Characters in these works, particularly Del Jordan, encounter a daunting amalgam of characteristics of both earthly and Heavenly f/Fathers: by turns, ineffectual, capriciously ruthless, plain indifferent, and fatally disconnected from “ordinary,”

quotidian life. Every male character—and, by extension, the male patriarchal God—is somehow compromised or debilitated. If the traditional God of Christianity is not dead for Del, he has become largely irrelevant. Del's words to her weeping, desperate brother sum up the overall outcome of her quest: "It won't work, it doesn't work" (97). And Del finds that to watch people cling desperately to this disconnected, irrelevant Deity is as hard as it is "to look at skinned flesh." Del painfully observes, "Seeing somebody have faith, close up, is no easier than seeing someone chop a finger off" (97).

The epiphany that gradually and finally emerges for Del is profoundly ambivalent—entirely in keeping with the ambivalence that pervades so much of her religious quest to this point in the story. At one and the same time, Del's epiphany reveals to her some clearly negative attributes of the God for whom she now will seek: He is "alien and unacceptable as death...indifferent" (96). Concomitantly, though, her epiphany suggests, albeit very subtly, other quite positive spiritual qualities: He is "real and really in the world...amazing" (96).

Munro consistently resists in the stories we have explored thus far, and in all of her fiction, the temptation to sentimentalize death, loss, and mourning. I see this as one of the strongest and most admirable aspects of her treatment of death; Karen Smythe shares this admiration:

Though her fiction involves "the fight against death," Munro's approach is not to sentimentalize the subject(s) of loss and mourning; rather, she figures grief in the form of fiction-elegy and suggests that "the fact of death" might be accommodated within life and within our fictions without false consolation. The reader is invited to participate in this fight and to evaluate various reconstructions of the past for their capacity both to achieve a fictional truth and to provide a model of mourning that might find a place in "real life." (152)

Del's epiphany emerges in increments of self-awareness. And this is also characteristic of many Munro characters in their search for understanding of important life issues—like death. In an interview with Geoff Hancock, Munro observes that "There are just flashes of things we know and find out... We think we've got things figured out and then they turn around on us. No state of mind is permanent" (qtd. in Smythe 152). In

Del's response to her bother Owen's pain and grief, we see her consider, and discard, aspects of organized religion that she can no longer accept. For instance, at first, she considers trotting out for Owen's comfort theological rationalizations that, obviously, she has heard coming out of the "kind, implacable" mouths of adults around her about, for instance, not praying "for things to happen or not happen, but for the strength and grace to bear what does" (96). But Del's intellectual and *spiritual* honesty will not allow her to do this; she sees such an avenue as "a fine way out, that smells abominably of defeat" (96).

Del and the reader have reached a crucial moment—the moment Karen Smythe identifies as "the experience of anagnorisis, that moment that Woolf describes with her phrase 'moments of being'" (17). In this moment, the full epiphany descends upon Del: "Praying for an act of execution not to take place was useless simply because God was not interested in such objections; they were not His" (96). Like the demented, Old Brandon Yahweh-figure in "The Time of Death," or the narrator's father in "Boys and Girls," or Ben Jordan calmly on his way to execute Old Major in "Age of Faith," the Christian God that Del has encountered in the churches of Jubilee is, for her, simply absent and/or ruthlessly indifferent to what is occurring here in the farm-yard at the end of Flats Road—in Del's "real life" world (significantly, Munro's first choice for a title for *Lives of Girls and Women* was *Real Life*). This God is simply not interested in "ordinary life"—nor, it seems, with what happens at the "ordinary" *conclusion* of life.

Unquestionably, it is difficult to acknowledge the "ordinariness" of death, particularly the death of someone near to us, or perhaps even more difficult, our own inevitable death. Difficult as this acknowledgment may be, however, death *is* ordinary. "Thou knowest it is common," Gertrude admonishes Hamlet, upon his seemingly exaggerated, overextended grieving of his father's death. And with a powerful simplicity, W. H. Auden in "Musee des Beaux Arts" observes how death occurs "while someone is eating or opening a window or just walking along" (668). What flashes upon Del in the midst of her encounter with "ordinary" death, and in her struggle to deal with her younger brother's response to this "ordinary" death, is that the God she has grown up with does not care about the "ordinary." This epiphanic realization leads Del to formulate a question that, in many ways, stands as a point of departure for her, and for

numerous other characters in later Munro stories. The quest for meaningful spiritual and/or religious approaches is far from over for Del or for these later characters, but—as Del’s [quest]ion so clearly anticipates, the God she/they seek is no longer the traditional patriarchal God of organized Western Christianity:

Could there be God not contained in the churches’ net at all, not made manageable by any spells and crosses, God real, and really in the world, and alien and unacceptable as death? Could there be God amazing, indifferent, beyond faith? (96)

Moments such as this in Munro’s fiction render particularly appropriate the title of William Closson James’ study of contemporary Canadian Literature: *Locations of the Sacred*. Del Jordan is beginning to relocate the sacred, and, in keeping with what James is saying of a number of contemporary Canadian works of fiction, the sacred is being relocated—just as Charles Taylor also argues it is—to the realm of “ordinary life”: “The sacred is ‘relocated’ in ordinary experience, in the here-and-now, and not in the kinds of activities usually conceived as being ‘religious’” (James 13).

With her epiphany near the conclusion of “Age of Faith,” Del effectively leaves traditional, organized Christianity behind (This is not to suggest that Alice Munro has done so to the same extent Del has; she has not). The concept of “horizon” provides another useful and illuminating angle from which to examine Del’s spiritual/religious experience in “Age of Faith” and to determine what this experience says about *Munro’s* position on these matters at this relatively early stage of her writing career. Del (and Munro) in “Age of Faith” is in the process of envisioning a new horizon. Recall how earlier in the story, shortly after Del’s Good Friday experience at the Anglican Church, there is a clear shift in the chronology of the narrative. On a Saturday, Del goes out to the farm where her father, Uncle Benny, and—when not at school—her brother Owen spend their days. When Del goes out to the farm, it is almost as if she is regressing from the modern world of school, modern scientific thought and progress (Del’s mother), and organized religion back to a primal time and place—a kind of *tabula rasa*. It is a place where distinctions between nature and human civilization remain blurred. For example, the house has grown so dirty, that it is “like some sheltered extension of the out-of-doors” (92) At this point, Del makes a very interesting and quite poetic observation: “Outside

were crows cawing over the muddy fields, the river high and silver, *the pattern of the horizon exactly, magically, the same as remembered and forgotten and remembered*" (emphasis mine 92).

Again, although Del is not yet fully aware of it at this point in the story, she has turned away from organized religion, and her gaze, both literally and symbolically, is upon the horizon. What Del here only intuitively senses, both physically and psychically, is what she is finally able to privately articulate in her epiphanic, "queer, bright moment" near the conclusion of the story. Charles Taylor's use of the term "horizon" and his accompanying observations are very useful here: "The forms of revealed religion remain very much alive, but highly contested. None forms the horizon of the whole society of the modern West" (17). Taylor's observation here I see as somewhat applicable to Del's spiritual position in the latter stages of "Age of Faith, but *entirely* applicable to Munro's position overall in *Lives of Girls and Women*. Taylor continues:

The term 'horizon' is the one that is frequently used to make this point [the point he makes above]. What Weber called 'disenchantment', the dissipation of our sense of the cosmos as a meaningful order, has allegedly destroyed the horizons in which people previously lived their spiritual lives. Nietzsche used the term in his celebrated "God is Dead" passage: "How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the whole horizon? ...But the loss of horizon described by Nietzsche's fool undoubtedly corresponds to something very widely felt in our culture. (17)

Another important parallel adheres between Munro's position as manifest in Del's literal and figurative scanning of new spiritual horizons in "Age of Faith" and Taylor's position near the beginning of *Sources of the Self: The Making of a Modern Identity*. Both are about to launch upon a journey along spiritual/religious avenues more open now that the avenues of organized religion have closed down and Christian horizons have faded. Upcoming chapters will trace Munro's literary journey—and, when they intersect in illuminating ways—Charles Taylor's philosophical journey as well.

If Alice Munro had been able to genuinely accept her own imagined character, Del Jordan, as making the breakthrough ("leap of faith"?) that she ultimately cannot

make in *Lives of Girls and Women*, then Munro may have gone on to spend far less time than she does in her later work grappling in various ways with the spiritual/religious questions, doubts, and struggles anticipated in *Lives*. This does not happen, however—not for Del Jordan, not for Alice Munro. If my readers will pardon a further personal note, I, for one, am deeply grateful that neither Del Jordan nor Alice Munro was able and/or willing to “resolve” or dismiss the tremendously important questions and doubts that arise in early Munro stories like “Age of Faith”. I confess that my reasons are quite selfish, but I suspect that many other readers of Munro share them. Had Munro satisfactorily resolved these doubts and questions at this early stage of her writing career, we would have been deprived of one of the most articulate, imaginative, and sensitive voices in contemporary fiction in the ongoing struggle that occupies so many of us in our ongoing quest for spiritual/religious avenues that work for us as individuals living in the “ordinary” reality of our primarily urban, secular, techno-scientific, postmodern Western culture. And, essentially, it is primarily the *questing* along these avenues that continues to provide some level of spiritual hope and promise in our *ordinary lives*.

CHAPTER THREE

QUESTING, LOSS, AND AMBIVALENCE IN THE REALM OF KALI/EROS

The Realm of Sexuality/the Body

In *Origins of the Sacred: The Ecstasies of Love and War*, Dudley Young's iconoclastic study of socio-political and spiritual/religious manifestations of ecstasy, Young focuses extensively on the best known and most widely available form of human ecstasy: sex. In the latter stages of his book, Young argues that early on sexuality became increasingly attached to the human sense of the spiritual and, eventually, central in religious narratives in the West. This is quite evident, for example, in the Genesis story of Adam and Eve. Young traces as well the age-old problem of unbridled human appetite and how this excessive appetite has led us to place an impossible burden of expectations on sexuality and sexual relationships. We attempt to appropriate too much:

Man is the animal who would *appropriate more than he can bear*, and the penalty we pay for wanting to unite ourselves to too much is that *all* our acts of appropriation and communion become problematic. It is this that makes the sex go bad. Waking to find ourselves alienated from Nature, we instinctively hold hands with the one who might symbolically restore us to unity. (266)

Young argues further that the sexual act "is now asked to bear and redeem the loneliness" (266) of us human creatures in a world in which we feel increasingly alienated from nature and God.

Young's point that we place too much of a burden on our sexual relationships plays out time and again in the stories of Alice Munro. Sexuality is of central importance in Munro's fiction from her first collection of short stories to her most recent. In fact, one Munro critic, Beth Harvour, contends that Munro has become "one of the major writers on sexual feelings in this country, in this century" (147) The centrality of sexuality for many Munro characters is encapsulated in the observations of Pauline, the protagonist in "The Children Stay," a story Munro published in 1998. She bluntly sums up how sexuality may drive people to desperate, often self-destructive measures:

So her life was falling forwards; she was becoming one of those people who ran away. A woman who shockingly and incomprehensibly gave everything up. For love, observers would say wisely. Meaning for sex. None of this would happen if it wasn't for sex. (209)

A number of Munro's critics have examined various aspects of sexuality in her fiction. To mention only a few book-length studies, we have Beverly Rasporich's excellent study, *Dance of the Sexes: Art and Gender in the Fiction of Alice Munro*, and Magdalene Redekop's *Mothers and Other Clowns: The Stories of Alice Munro*. Ajay Heble's *The Tumble of Reason: Alice Munro's Discourse of Absence* also quite extensively addresses aspects of sexuality in Munro. However, aside from some notable exceptions, Munro's critics to date have not explored in any concerted fashion the relationship in her fiction between sexuality and the sacred. A notable exception is Dennis Duffy in his essay " 'A Dark Sort of Mirror': 'The Love of A Good Woman' as Pauline Poetic"—a work I will draw upon quite extensively later in this chapter. Overall, however, the link between the sexual and the search for spiritual/religious frameworks remains relatively unexplored

My aim in this chapter and the next is to address this gap in Munro criticism by exploring underlying connections in a number of Munro stories between sexuality and the quests of a number of Munro's characters for spiritual and/or religious meaning and fulfillment. For reasons already anticipated in Dudley Young's words above, and for a number of other reasons that will become clear in due course, many of the quests for spiritual and/or religious fulfillment through sexuality and the body in Munro's fiction end in disappointment and failure. In the present chapter I will focus on a number of these failures. In Chapter Four, on the other hand, I will focus on a number of Munro stories wherein narrators/protagonists/characters enjoy a *relative degree of success* in their spiritual questing in the realm of sexuality and the body. In both chapters, I will examine in detail the various motives of characters who search for the sacred in the sexual/bodily; I will delineate recurring patterns of what transpires within the sexual relationships and liaisons that arise; and, finally, I will anatomize the nature of the failure or relative success of these spiritual/religious quests in the "ordinary" realms of sexual and the body.

What we discover about various Munro narrators/protagonists who originally pursue traditional religious avenues but then shift their attention to sexuality (Del Jordan is an excellent early example) is that much of what originally motivated these characters to search in traditional realms persists in their quests in the sexual realm. Death, for

example, remains a central preoccupation for them. The literal or figurative absence of effective father figures remains pervasive as well. The point I am driving at here is that key *existential* questions and concerns remain unchanged for these characters, but we now see them shifting the focus of their quest for answers and frameworks from the essentially abstract domain of religious belief to the concrete, “ordinary” domain of human relationships—particularly sexual relationships.

Very few important themes or motifs in Alice Munro’s writing develop in neat, linear fashion. More accurately, themes develop from story to story, from collection to collection, by a kind of accretion. This is particularly true of the theme of the sexual and the sacred. For example, as we shall see in a moment, the link between sexual activity and mysticism is quite explicitly expressed in “Thanks for the Ride,” a story from Munro’s first collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades*, but then does not appear again near as explicitly until the stories in the second half of Munro’s second collection, *Lives of Girls and Women*. By the time we reach these latter stories—I will focus in particular on the title story and on “Baptizing”—we see that crucial aspects have attached themselves to Munro’s treatment of the connection between sexuality/the body and the sacred. It almost seems as if these additions, these accretions, have been percolating underground in Munro’s imagination; they then appear in later Del Jordan stories with renewed intensity. Despite this lack of tidy linearity, however, we can still discern a more consistent focus on sexuality and the female body in stories from the latter half of *Lives* up to and including most of the stories in *The Love of a Good Woman*. I recognize that this span covers a significant portion of Munro’s published work, but the foregoing explains why I confine my discussion in the next two chapters to stories from within these collections.

Early Manifestations of the Sexual/Sacred: “Thanks for the Ride”

Although the shift from questing in the realm of traditional Christianity to questing for transcendence and the spiritual/religious in the realm of sexuality first emerges in Munro’s writing most consistently and explicitly in her second collection, *Lives*, the *potential* of realizing spiritual and religious ends appears with particular clarity in “Thanks for the Ride,” a story from Munro’s first collection, *Dance of the Happy*

Shades. This early story anticipates a number of the sacred possibilities that Munro develops further in later works; thus “Thanks for the Ride” merits some detailed attention.

First published in *The Tamarack Review* in 1957, “Thanks for the Ride” represented a clear departure for Munro, and, as Sheila Munro reports, editors of the CBC Radio series *Canadian Short Stories*—who had already broadcast a number of Munro’s stories—were “unanimous in their distaste” for the story (36). They objected primarily to the four-letter expletives and relatively graphic sexuality in “Thanks.” Editor Joyce Marshall, for instance, found the story “a bit dubious and very outspoken” (Munro, Sheila 36). Clearly, such responses said as much or more about the prevailing Canadian attitudes in the 1950’s toward sexuality and about expectations of women writers as they did about Munro’s story, but there can be no question that Munro was setting out a hitherto unexpressed interest in relatively explicit sexuality and was facing the predictable response. Munro remained stalwart in her defense of the story (Her husband at the time, James Munro, fully supported her, saying the story was one of Munro’s best—“as good a story as anyone had ever written” (Munro, Sheila 36)). The story, however, was not aired on CBC’s *Canadian Short Stories*.

“Thanks for the Ride” is the only story in Munro’s oeuvre that presents a first-person *male* narrator—Dick, a young man whose name borders on sexual parody. The central occurrence in the story, ostensibly at least, is Dick’s sexual initiation; however, of more interest to me—and, I suspect, to Munro—is the character Lois, the “cold, narrow, and pale” (49), but “mystically” sexual girl who orchestrates Dick’s initiation. Lois is also a decidedly “ordinary” girl, an all too typical product of female generational poverty in a working-poor family and community. At the same time, though, Lois also possesses a certain kind of power—a power vested in her body and her sexuality. Lois is, in fact, the first of a number of what I term “Kali-figures” in Munro’s fiction

The Indian goddess Kali is the wife of the god Shiva (alternate spelling, Siva), and is worshipped as the “great and terrible mother” (Reese 275). We must be mindful, here, however, of differing connotations around the term “mother.” In Indian religion and mythology, mother is synonymous with goddess, thus we are not to think of Kali in strictly Western terms as warmly maternal or as necessarily an older woman. I invoke

the archetypal forces represented by the goddess Kali to characterize a number of *traits* of various Munro female protagonists/narrators/characters more than as a designation of specific Munro characters. For example, Del Jordan at various points demonstrates Kali-like attitudes and actions, but in no story is she a Kali figure throughout. There are a number of minor female characters in Munro's fiction, though, that may be seen as Kali figures per se. Kartrud, the Finnish matriarch in "Accident," for example would qualify for this role—as we shall see in my discussion of "Accident" at the conclusion of this chapter.

I have chosen this particular archetypal female Indian divinity in order to illuminate important aspects of what Munro is doing with a number of female characters—both those who are searching for spiritual and religious directions and frameworks, and also some who facilitate such searching. In either case, these characters demonstrate the ambivalent and paradoxical nature of Kali. As Gavin Flood in his *Introduction to Hinduism*, points out, "Like Siva, the goddess [Kali] embodies paradox and ambiguity; she is erotic yet detached; gentle yet heroic; beautiful yet terrible"(178). These are the traits displayed by a number of female characters in Munro's fiction. Lois in "Thanks for the Ride," for instance, clearly demonstrates the kind of ambiguous power, detachment, and hostility associated with Kali. I cannot be certain whether Munro is intentionally invoking this Indian deity, but it seems highly coincidental that there emerge characters such as Callie in "The Moon in the Orange Street Skating Rink" or Calla in "Walking on Water"—both characters who very clearly manifest Kali-like traits.

Ultimately, of course, it does not matter whether Munro is intentionally invoking this goddess on symbolic levels or not; the parallels between various female characters in her fiction and Kali remain particularly illuminating notwithstanding. I should also point out that a number of other Munro critics have drawn attention to Munro's inclination toward mythic figures and qualities, particularly manifestations of female goddesses and deities, although none that I am aware of has specifically invoked Kali. Beverly Rasporich articulates this inclination especially clearly:

The inspirational nature of Munro's women signals a psychological journey that is also mythical and of feminist design. The artist-heroine is

in search of female muses in art and life; in order to authorize female experience, she reaches back into time, associates several of her characters with primal energy, shades them with pagan and mythic features, and creates an underground text of female goddess figures, suggestive of the pantheistic religions of the ancient world. *Retreating from the masculine Christian mythology that has provided her identity, Munro is drawn to that pagan religious context of Astarte and Isis where the life-giving powers of women and the earth were joined and acknowledged.* (emphasis mine 34)

Although Rasporich and I focus on different female deities in Munro's work, we concur on one of Munro's key motives for invoking these archetypal figures. Having found the "masculine Christian mythology" seriously wanting—as we saw with Del Jordan and other female characters in Chapter Two—a number of Munro's female characters seek alternatives. Moreover—and this is crucial—Munro usually invests these mythic female, essentially spiritual/religious traits in decidedly "ordinary" female protagonists/narrators/ characters. Thus, she establishes alternative sites to traditional Christianity for spiritual transcendence in the combined realms of the mythic feminine and "ordinary life." Recall, Charles Taylor makes clear that sexual relationships are a central component in the "affirmation and/or deification of ordinary life."

It also bears mentioning that a number of the works of one of Munro's Canadian literary mentors, Ethel Wilson, have also lent themselves to literary examination from an "Eastern perspective." Anjali Bhelände's study of Wilson's fiction, *Self Beyond Self; Ethel Wilson and Indian Philosophical Thought* sets out the connections between various female characters in Wilson's fiction and aspects and mythic figures of Eastern religion and philosophy. Bhelände's study includes Wilson's *Equations of Love*.⁴ Munro's admiration of and her admission of Wilson's influence on her own work is clearly in evidence in her "Afterword" in Wilson's *Equation of Love*.⁵

⁴See my review of Bhelände's book in *Canadian Literature*. The work of P.K. Page, another contemporary Canadian women writer, also lends itself to examination from an Eastern perspective. See my essay "Eastern Perspectives in the Work of P.K. Page" in *The Malahat Review*.

⁵J.R. Struthers draws interesting parallels between Munro's *Dance of the Happy Shades* and Wilson's work in "Alice Munro" in *A Reader's Companion to the Short Story in English*.

The power and profound ambivalence of Kali in Indian mythology and of Kali-like traits in various Munro female characters reside in her dual role as a sexual initiator/guide *and* as a strikingly hostile goddess. In “Thanks for the Ride,” for example, this paradoxical combination finds expression in Lois’s face, which, as Dick observes, “had no innocence in it that [he] could see; it was knowledgeable, calm and hostile” (50). Dick later, though, notes his discovery of Lois’s dual nature, “having discovered another force in her that lay side by side with her hostility, that was, in fact, just as enveloping and impersonal” (56). The other force Dick has discovered, of course, is Lois’s powerful Kali-like sexuality.

“Thanks for the Ride” is set in Mission Creek, a post-WWII lakeside tourist town in “cottage-country” Ontario. Dick, the protagonist, is in his late teens, and he and his cousin, George, are driving through the streets of Mission Creek in Dick’s father’s car. They are slated the next day to drive home their respective mothers, who have been staying at a local health retreat. George is also planning to borrow money from his mother, and some interesting conditions have been attached to this loan. Because Dick and George will not be picking up their mothers until the next day, they have some time on their hands, and, primarily at George’s urging, they have set out to find some “pigs.” A few pages into the story, we discover that they have not yet had much luck in their quest. As George so eloquently puts it, “ ‘Any other town I ever been...pigs hangin’ out the windows, practically hangin’ off the trees. Not here. Jesus! I guess it’s late in the season’ ” (47). Dick and George, although they are cousins, normally have little to do with each other—not surprising given the marked contrast between Dick’s sensitivity and George’s boorish obnoxiousness—but they have been thrown together temporarily by circumstances, and it’s clear that they have both decided to make the best of the situation. After some initial frustration in their “mission” (the town’s name presents some palpable ironies), they come upon two girls, first Adelaide, and then Lois, and an evening of drinking and sex ensues.

Key aspects in “Thanks for the Ride” connect the story with both “The Time of Death” from the same collection and “Age of Faith” from Munro’s second collection. These include the centrality of death—Lois’ father has been killed in a gruesome industrial accident—and the near complete absence of any positive fathers, father figures,

or—for that matter, with the possible exception of Dick—any positive or strong male figures at all. Thus, from the outset of the story, we are aware of two central themes that emerge frequently in Munro stories that involve spiritual and/or religious considerations: death is nearby and the earthly and heavenly p/Patriarchy is deeply compromised or absent.

The town in which the story is set, Mission Creek, suggests religious missions/missionaries, but this suggestion is thoroughly ironically undermined by the actual nature of George and Dick's "mission." Even without the entrance of these two "questing" young males, though, it is clear that Mission Creek is completely bereft of any spiritual or religious energy or hope. Traditional Christianity gets very short shrift in Munro's depiction of the town; the remnants we have render traditional religion as nothing more than an ancillary commodity. The "retreat" where Dick and George's mothers are, for example, is a place "where they had fruit juice and cottage cheese for reducing, and early-morning swims in the lake, *and some religion, apparently, for there was a little chapel attached*" (emphasis mine 46). Moreover, George has arranged a loan from his mother on the condition that "he stay over and go to church with her the next day" (46).

Overall, Mission Creek is a Southwestern Ontario, mid-20th century microcosm of a spiritual wasteland. A phrase from the first lines of Eliot's "The Wasteland"—"breeding lilacs out of the dead land"—finds an echo in Munro's Mission Creek, where "the only hardy things like red and yellow nasturtiums or a lilac bush with brown, curled leaves, grew out of the cracked earth" (46). The inhabitants of the town are as dry and wasted as the streets. "Pop" runs the local café, an establishment that sports signs such as, " 'If we knew anything we wouldn't be here'" (44). Even if another sign—" 'If you've got nothing to do, you picked a hell of a good place to do it'" (44)—does not intentionally invoke Dante's purgatory, it reminds us that we have entered with our young "heroes" a place wherein spiritual hope has been abandoned. In this 1950s Canadian micro-wasteland, the denizens are "deeply, deeply uncaring...as if they had sources of disillusionment they would keep, with some satisfaction, in the dark"(46-47).

Fathers and father figures in "Thanks for the Ride" run a bleak gamut from Pop, "huge and cynical and incurious" (46), to the boys' respective fathers who never actually

appear in the narrative. We have George's father with whom "he did not get along very well" (46), and Dick's, a chartered accountant with whom, it becomes clear, Dick has only a perfunctory relationship. Another absent but very significant father in the story is Lois's, killed in an accident at the local mill. Lois's mother graphically relates the details of his death to Dick, while Lois gets ready for their "date." While fathers and father figures like Pop are figuratively amputated from any positive, fatherly role in the story, Lois's father has been literally decapitated—his head, as Lois's mother relates, taken " 'clean off, imagine, and rolled on the floor!'" (51). This decapitation echoes the "de-crowning" of Old Bram, the "scissors-man" in "The Time of Death" and also prefigures the literal decapitation of Jack Agnew in a much later Munro story, "Carried Away" from *Open Secrets* (1994). As well as reinforcing the "de-crowning" of earthly males/patriarchs, these figurative and literal decapitations ironically call to mind the beheading of John the Baptist in the Old Testament.

Further, we might also be reminded of Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque and grotesque "uncrowning of the king" (337), part of the profound ambivalence of the "grotesque image of the body" and the tie between death and life. Whatever associations one draws to the figurative or literal "uncrowning" of males in "Thanks for the Ride," it becomes despairingly clear that in the story there are no earthly or heavenly f/Fathers or f/Father-figures to whom Dick can turn for guidance in his upcoming initiation, nor are there any to whom Mission Creek might look for any possible revivification of this "ordinary" small town wasteland. In fact, the only character who provides any semblance of revivifying potential is the female, Kali-figure, Lois.

Lois, much like Patricia in "The time of Death," is a significantly limited character in a number of respects. At sixteen and upon the death of her father, she left high school to work in the local glove factory to help support her mother and grandmother. She has little experience of the world outside of Mission Creek, and we learn that she has been sexually exploited by wealthy out-of-town men looking for summer flings. Despite these various impoverishments, however, there is a definite aura about Lois that Dick quickly recognizes, a power and depth mixed with her not so subtle hostility: "There was derision, and also great gravity about her mouth" (49). What Dick senses about Lois is her *only* source of power—the power of her sexuality—and it is a

power that is completely outside of Dick's experience to this point in his life. Dick is sexually uninitiated and also uninitiated to the socio-economic, female generational poverty he encounters when Lois subjects him to the parody of the "young man meets the girl's family" at her house. More importantly, however, Dick is uninitiated into the realm of Kali that Lois represents. Dick's upper middle-class, Protestant upbringing has in no way prepared him for his encounter with Lois, "this mystic of love" (57).

It becomes clear, however, in this early Munro story that—despite the power that Lois possesses—she and her maternal forerunners are profoundly *failed* versions of Kali-like figures. We can see strong suggestions of mythic Kali power in Lois, even *glimpses* of the earth mother in Lois's grandmother in, for example, "her old, strong voice, the rough voice of a country woman" (52). But this fleeting glimpse of archetypal female power—including the grandmother's potential role as crone—has been eclipsed by near complete decline. Dick observes of the grandmother that

she was not thin like the others, but as soft and shapeless as a collapsed pudding, pale brown spots melting together on her face and arms, bristles of hairs in the moisture around her mouth. Some of the smell in the house seemed to come from her. It was a smell of hidden decay, such as there is when some obscure little animal has died under the verandah. The smell, the slovenly confiding voice—something about this life I had not known, something about these people...(51)

What emerges here is a clear early example in Munro's fiction of another crucial characteristic of her treatment of sexuality and of the body—particularly of the female body—a characteristic that has a significant impact on the sacred or spiritual possibilities of sexuality. The "smell of hidden decay" emanating from Lois's grandmother's body is an example of what Dennis Duffey terms a "Pauline disgust" with the body—and, by extension, with the sexual—that permeates Munro's fiction from her first collection to her most recent. In his well-argued and provocative essay, "A Dark Sort of Mirror: 'The Love of a Good Woman' as Pauline Poetic," Duffey asserts that a palpable disgust with the body—again, especially the female body—is a motif of such endurance in Munro's work that the story "The Love of A Good Woman"—in which, Duffey argues, this Pauline disgust culminates—merits the term "poetic."

As Duffey reminds us, the *OED* defines poetic as “a piece of writing about the kind of writing the author has been engaged in over a period of time” (171). Although, as his title makes clear, Duffey’s essay focuses primarily on “The Love of a Good Woman”—a story written some forty years after “Thanks for the Ride,” there is much in his essay that sheds light on “Thanks for the Ride” and on many other works in Munro’s oeuvre. “The Love of a Good Woman,” Duffey opines, “oozes a Pauline revulsion both at the release of the body into pleasure and at what the body releases. Bodies not only stink here but also bloat, decay, shrink and disgorge” (184). The term “Pauline,” of course, takes us back to the most widely acknowledged source of Western unease with and vilification of the bodily and the sexual, “the posture found in the writings ascribed to Saint Paul, especially in his first letter to the Corinthians” (Duffey 182). The “smell of hidden decay” (51) in “Thanks” is a clear example of this enduring Pauline disgust. Dick’s description of Lois’s grandmother reflects how deeply instilled this revulsion with the smells and excretions of the body is. Dick is only nominally religious; his Protestant middle-class background is decidedly more secular than religious. This has not, however, prevented his internalizing one of the central prejudices of Christianity—one that dates back to the man many theological scholars designate as the founder of Christianity as we know it today: the Jewish merchant Saul who, after an epiphany on the road to Damascus, became the apostle Paul. In his book, *Paul: The Mind of the Apostle*, A. N. Wilson tells us, “If there is any single individual who can be labeled the ‘originator’ of Christianity...it would be Paul” (18).

The Pauline stance on the bodily and the sexual finds numerous graphic manifestations in Munro’s fiction. It is not only “The Love of a Good Woman” that “reeks of semiwashed bodies, of the dead and the dying, of soiled stockings, of greasy frying pans, of sour milk and stale food, of dried semen and feverish sweat” (Duffey 182). As early as “Images,” in Munro’s first collection, Del Jordan tells us, “at the name of Jesus, a kind of wretchedness and shame spread through me” (33). We see further manifestations later in “Lives of Girls and Women” in Del Jordan’s description of Art Chamberlain’s genitalia and of Del and Naomi’s speculations about Chamberlain’s and Fern Dogherty’s sex life.

This prevailing perception of and attitude toward the sexual and the bodily in Munro's fiction—"Men's bodies reek of sex...women's reek of death" (Duffey 177)—produces, of course, a profound ambivalence about sexuality for many of Munro's protagonists/narrators/characters. Sexual desire is not only a healthy and natural force acting upon various Munro characters; I am arguing that it is also the force that affords a number of Munro's characters an alternative avenue toward spiritual and/or religious fulfillment. Ironically, however, this path to potential religious fulfillment is impeded by religious prejudice. Further, as with other important themes/motifs in Munro's work, this one also provides a mirror for the larger culture. Dennis Duffey adroitly sums up how the Pauline unease and/or disgust that we encounter so often in Munro's fiction indicates that our "consumer culture of sexual liberation in fact rests upon a profound unease with the flesh that loops a postmodern culture back to the most discomforting of its Christian origins" (Duffey 185).

Of all the characters in "Thanks for the Ride," Pauline unease with sexuality has probably been most directly instilled in Dick, but no one in the story, including Lois, is exempt from this Christian prejudice. It permeates all of the socio-economic levels in the story—as it does in the broader culture. Even the bootlegging woman from whom the foursome get a bottle of "muddy-looking homemade liquor" (52) (the spirits in this bleak little wasteland as tainted as the spirit) weighs in with her snide, judgmental comment to Lois, " 'Change as good as a rest, eh?'" (52-53).

However, despite the overwhelming odds arrayed against her, Lois goes through with her Kali-like effort, replete with attendant violence. The palpable tension between her and Dick is finally broken by Lois's striking Dick's face: "She dropped the skirt and struck the flat of her hand on my face. This was a relief to me, to both of us" (55). Lois then demonstrates the total abandonment that typifies Kali-like sexuality—an abandon that is not lost even on the terribly insulated, middle-class Dick: "There are some people who can only go a little way with the act of love, and some who can go very far, who can make a greater surrender, like the mystics" (57).

Dick sees Lois as one of these mystics, but it is left to us readers to recognize the deeper significance of Lois's "total surrender." It is the complete surrender associated with the goddess Kali; it is also akin to the complete devotion to the power of sexuality

that lies at the core of religious movements such as the Tantric faith, based on a “series of esoteric Hindu books that describe certain sexual rituals, disciplines, and meditations...over two thousand years old, written in the form of a dialogue between the Hindu god Shiva...and his consort Shakti, who represents the female creative force and is sometimes called ‘the power of Tantra’” (Muir ix).⁶ But Lois’s “total surrender” remains only *akin* to this type of mystic sexuality. Lois could never hope to fulfill such expectations even if she were conscious of her attempts to do so, given that her attempts are completely overwhelmed by social and implicitly religious impediments.

It is also important to note that all of these impediments have gender origins. There is, of course, the obvious impediment of the lack of a male provider in Lois’s household. Magdalene Redekop notes that in many Munro stories, “When you take away the father, the head of the traditional family, the whole system is brought into question” (152). The effects on Lois’s mother and grandmother of the absent husband/son are bleak and clear enough; the effect on Lois is even more depressing in that she will likely remain vulnerable to the various “dicks” that come through Mission Creek. The other less visible, but in my view more potent, impediment countering Lois’s Kali efforts is the deeply engrained Pauline vilification of sexuality and the female body. We should not lose sight of the fact that this vilification has a gender etiology as well in that St. Paul, as A.N. Wilson reminds us, “is widely regarded as a misogynist, the father of that strand in Christianity which sees the female sex as inferior to the male” (*Paul* 14). This powerfully influential early father of Christianity significantly contributed to the “Madonna-whore” female dichotomy that informs “Thanks for the Ride” and numerous other Munro stories, a duality that we in “liberated” Western culture have not yet been able to completely overcome.

Despite the tremendous obstacles that she faces, however, Lois persists along the one avenue that she sees available to her to escape the wasteland of Mission Creek. Although she is, of course, not consciously aware of the deeper possibilities of her actions, Lois enacts the “total abandonment to instinctual depths” (470) that Charles Taylor sees at the heart of early 20th century movements such as surrealism and other radical artistic movements that championed the amorality of nature against the false

⁶ Tantrism declined precipitously in the 12th century due to *Islamic* repression of sexuality.

calumnies heaped on it by religion and morality with their supposedly “higher” spiritual demands. In throwing over “the dogmas of morality and taste,” [surrealists] embrace raw, unspiritual nature and thereby affirm its goodness. This, of course, can itself lead to something like religious attitude and experience. The extremes tend to touch. (471)

Again, it would be misguided to attribute this sort of conscious intention to Lois, but it is not at all out of the realm of possibility to attribute such intentions to Munro—just as critics such as Beverly Rasporich, Magdalene Redekop, and others do. The circumstances surrounding Lois’s “initiation” of Dick certainly support such a reading. She takes him out into the countryside: “Lois and I walked along a wagon track close to the bush. The fields were moonlit, chilly, and blowing” (53). This is Lois’s domain, the domain of feminine, lunar power: “She knew the countryside; she had been there before” (52).

Lois’s power and control here, albeit temporary, is that of Kali, nature goddess. This power and Lois’s independence—Adelaide earlier informs Dick and George that Lois “can do what she likes” (48)—are her only tools against the emotional, social, and spiritual stagnation that surrounds her. Her attitude and actions render her a kind of one-person liberation force—doomed to failure, of course—but nevertheless defying the deeply entrenched patriarchal Wasp mentality and morality of Southwestern Ontario in this early Munro story. Lois’s surrender to physical, bodily sex and “the headlong journey” (56) on which she takes Dick carry a force akin to Rose’s orgasm on a train to Toronto “at the hands” of a supposed United Church minister in a later Munro story, “Wild Swans.” Lois’s Kali-like sexual energy and actions also prefigure the kind of resistance to Pauline repression exerted by later characters like Del Jordan and Rose. Despite the ambivalence created by the Pauline disgust with the sexual and the bodily noted earlier, the sexuality of these female characters often achieves what Joseph Gold argues that Rose’s orgasm achieves in “Wild Swans”:

Here we find a *tour de force* of erotic double entendre that combines the biting satire of Ontario gentility, the irrelevance and hypocrisy of polite Christian pretension, with the energy of awakening, female, sexual hunger. The result is a kind of destruction of the familiar, Victorian

surfaces by the power of individual experience. Rose's orgasm blows up Ontario. (8)

Lois's "mystic" sexuality, however, does not achieve mystical or sacred results. It fails to do so for all of the reasons noted above, but it also fails because Lois's approach is essentially a distorted form of "Eros." My use of the term "Eros" here aligns with Iris Murdoch's definition in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*: "Eros, the high translated form of sexual energy, a daemon not a god, is our guide into the realm of the spirit" (146). This is the sexual energy embodied by the goddess Kali, and consistently in Munro's fiction, it is this type of sexuality that provides a relationship at least the *potential* of transcendence. Lois *does* make "a greater surrender," as Dick notes, but it is primarily a desperate surrender to the sexual act itself, not to this "high[er] form of sexual energy"—or to the potential mystery of the *sexual relationship*. Of course, one would not expect that Lois and Dick would ever achieve a relationship of any lasting depth, given the vast distances between them—socioeconomic, educational, even geographical distance. But as I shall argue in much more detail in the next chapter, when sexuality in Munro's fiction is not invested with what I am terming "Eros"—*and* balanced by some degree of other-centeredness, or "agape," the results are usually similar to those of Dick and Lois's sexual encounter. Beginning with "Thanks for the Ride," a clear pattern emerges in many sexual relationships in Munro's work. This pattern reveals that sexual desire, *in and of itself*, never brings the deeper fulfillment that might qualify for the designation of sacred or spiritual.

In his discussion of "Schopenhauerian will," Charles Taylor sets out an argument that helps to clarify what I am driving at above. Taylor argues that "ordinary" activities such as sexuality have taken on greater and greater spiritual and/or religious significance ever since the Reformation, but although sexual desire is a powerful force, unattended by what I am calling "agape," such desire is

nothing but wild, blind, uncontrolled striving, never satisfied, incapable of satisfaction, driving us on, against all principles, law, morality, all standards of dignity, to an insatiable search for the unattainable...we love and we try to attain happiness, but sexual desire is by its very nature incapable of bringing happiness. (442)

I hasten to add that Taylor is paraphrasing a position here as much as he is advancing one, but, that said, time and again in Munro stories we see her very realistically and very compellingly presenting sexual relationships that bear out Taylor's words above. Munro never explicitly sermonizes or moralizes on these matters. She demonstrates. As W.J. Keith puts it, "Munro's refusal, at least explicitly, to influence our moral responses to her characters forces us as readers to relate their actions to our own ethical principles" (16-17).]

I also wish to make it very clear that I am not placing all of the responsibility for the failure of her and Dick's failed "headlong journey" upon Lois, especially given her very impoverished circumstances. Dick's middle-class, vague Protestant containment plays a key role in the demise of the sacred possibilities he is offered. For all of his silent yearnings for more meaningful connection with Lois—"All of the things I wanted to say to her went clattering emptily through my head" (57)—his motivations and actions are all driven primarily by pressure from his cousin George and confused lust. His name suggests the location of most of his "thinking" during the evening. Thus we are not much surprised at the emptiness and sorrow he experiences as they drive back to Mission Creek. Earlier, Dick has sensed the possibility of some kind of liberation or transcendence, but as his post-coital, darkly epiphanic thoughts near the close of the story make clear, what he much more strongly feels is "*Triste. Triste est*" (57) The anachronistic Latin here suggests how Dick has yearned for something more "religious" in the losing of his virginity, but his participation has been born of a male-dominated Pauline ethos, as anachronistic as the language he resorts to.

Dick's vaguely spiritual yearnings dissipate along with Lois's Kali-like energy. Defeated as she has been in far too many similar encounters in the past, Lois sits "on the far side of the car seat, looking cold and ruffled, and utterly closed up in herself" (57). Ultimately, theirs has not been a "headlong journey;" it has been merely a ride—one that Lois appropriately "thanks" Dick for as he and George drive away: "And then we heard the female voice calling after us, loud, crude, female voice abusive and forlorn: 'Thanks for the Ride'" (58). Since there can be no doubt in any attentive reader's mind that the voice would have to be "female," we are left wondering at Munro's repetition of the word. Other possibilities arise, but the one that most strikes me is that Munro wants to

make very clear that the possibilities, the potential, that has been lost here is not simply sexual, but something more mysteriously sacred, and the gender of the source of that sacred potential—even if it is not realized in this early Munro tale—is clearly female.

Deepening Connections of the Sexual/Sacred, Deepening Ambivalence: Lives of Girls and Women

Despite the clear failure in “Thanks for the Ride” to achieve any kind of transcendence or spiritual fulfillment through sexuality, this early story prefigures crucial aspects that recur in later Munro stories wherein the sexual and the bodily *do* prove relatively successful avenues to the sacred. These aspects are thrown into clearer relief in Munro’s second collection, *Lives of Girls and Women*, particularly in the latter stories in this episodic novel, the title story and “Baptizing.” A characteristic that overarches all of these aspects is ambivalence, one of the most consistent characteristics of Munro’s fiction. The preponderance of various types of ambivalence in Munro’s writing is, of course, completely in keeping with her deep suspicion of certainty that I discussed earlier. Moreover, Munro’s fiction mirrors a number of the traits and values of modern/postmodern Western culture, and, modern/postmodern times have been nothing if not ambivalent.

Of course, ambivalence in general or in the works of Alice Munro is not all of a piece. That is, there are various forms of ambivalence, and in Munro’s work ambivalence runs along a continuum from a paralyzing and destructive ambivalence—we have seen some of this kind of ambivalence in “Thanks for the Ride”—to a deeply positive, carnivalesque, revivifying ambivalence—the kind of ambivalence that I shall be exploring in Chapter Four. Few aspects in Munro’s fiction are more profoundly marked or characterized by this entire continuum of ambivalence than the sexual and the bodily. As we move forward in Munro’s oeuvre into her second and subsequent collections, both forms of ambivalence become increasingly pervasive and also increasingly influential on the spiritual/religious outcomes of the various sexual relationships that we encounter.

In “Age of Faith,” “Lives of Girls and Women,” and “Baptizing”—all stories from Munro’s second collection of short stories, *Lives of Girls and Women*—another feature arises in the relationship between sexuality/the bodily and spiritual and/or religious aspects that is closely tied to the ambivalence identified above—an aspect that

recurs in a number of Munro stories to the present: the traditionally religious is directly *displaced* by sexuality/the body, even more clearly tying sexuality/the body and the sacred in Munro's work. A number of Munro critics have noted this emerging pattern; Beverly Rasporich, for instance, opines how in "Age of Faith," Del Jordan's "examination of conventional religion is vaguely sexual," and how in her view, Del's "sexual urge is confounded with religiosity" (47). It is my view that the connection is more than "vague," and that Del's displacing of organized religion with the sexual/bodily is not a "confounding," but a logical development consistent with Del's, and Munro's, growing disillusionment with traditional Christianity. Another critic, Ajay Heble argues that in "Baptizing," "Del continues her quest for self-awareness and fulfillment through an explicit entry into the realm of sexuality" (66). Although Heble does not focus extensively on the religious in Munro, he acknowledges that in "Baptizing," "two important thematic impulses, the sexual and the religious, are brought together" (66).

To more fully appreciate Del Jordan's struggle toward self-awareness and what she would find a fulfilling spiritual and/or religious framework, it is helpful to again briefly review Del's alternatives in this domain, including those that have emerged since "Age of Faith." First, we have Del's mother, Ida Jordan, whose agnostic stance comes at a cost both to Ida and to Del. Del tells us that her mother's "agnosticism and sociability were often in conflict in Jubilee" (145), although Del's mother remains steadfastly oblivious to these social drawbacks. Del, as we have seen earlier, will not adopt her mother's positivistic, agnostic stance, so as she enters high school, she finds herself with very little spiritual/religious guidance on the home front. Her father, Ben Jordan, is increasingly absent, spending most of his time with Uncle Benny and Del's younger brother, Owen, working and staying at the family farm out at the end of Flat Roads. Her father's *influence*, however, persists to some extent for Del. She tells us that her father, like other men, "had some look or way of moving that predicted chance or intended violence, something that could make disorder...though he was so moderate in his ways" (125).

Turning to the community outside of her family, we have Del's best friend throughout most of her high school years, Naomi. Naomi's religious perspective is completely conventional and superficial. She has none of Del's intellectual or religious

curiosity and certainly none of Del's urgent yearnings in the spiritual/religious realm. To the extent that Naomi gives these matters any thought at all, she blindly adheres to what she understands to be proper Jubilee religious "etiquette." Her limitations in this regard become evident, for example, in her opinions of Del's mother's religious stance:

"Your mother's an atheist," she would say with black relish, and I would say, "No she isn't, she's an agnostic," and all through my reasoned explanation Naomi would chant *same difference, same difference*. (122)

Her father, a man who—much to Naomi's despair—takes his religion very seriously, does not share Naomi's blithe ignorance, however. He is a religious fanatic, who, Del tells us, "belonged to some odd and discredited religious sect, and wandered all over town talking prophecies without putting his teeth in" (122). Naomi bemoans to Del, " 'It's all prophecies and prophecies... They have prophesized the end of the world three times now'" (129). This depiction of Naomi's fanatic father is not without its humor, but underneath the humor we see another example of Munro's consistently scathing dismissal of fanatical religion of any stripe. In her depiction of Naomi's father, Munro attacks not only religious fanaticism; we see here an increasingly direct attack on patriarchal Christianity. James Carscallen enumerates and connects a number of such characters in Munro's fiction from Pop in "Thanks for the Ride," whom Carscallen sees as yet another "Exodus figure," to other "superannuated men—the tired-looking preacher, the listless old-timers at Garnet's baseball games ["Baptizing"], and in a more Pop-like style, Mr. Buchanan the sardonic history-teacher and Presbyterian elder" (391). Carscallen singles out Naomi's father in particular for his "paternal" role in "Baptizing": "For an extreme case we can think of Naomi's white-haired father, reappearing here to beat his daughter for drinking; and yet this 'risen corpse' is one of the patriarchs in Munro whose strength betrays infirmity" (391-92).

Thus, it becomes very clear that the religious alternatives and/or role models in Del's life have, if anything, narrowed even further since "Age of Faith." There are none within her family that Del can seriously consider, and, outside of her family, she has her best friend who does not provide Del even an adequate interlocutor on spiritual/religious matters, much less an ally. Since "Age of Faith," Del has more or less abandoned any deliberate or conscious search for a meaningful spiritual/religious framework, but at other

levels, a kind of reverse sublimation is occurring. Increasingly, Del's sexual ventures reveal a submerged spiritual/religious quest.

Sex for Del and Naomi is a constant preoccupation that supersedes all other quotidian interests. This preoccupation entails a bizarre mixture of lust, grotesque sexual fantasies, a seemingly insatiable appetite for sexual information, and a powerful attraction for various forms of vicarious sexual stimulation. For example, when they were younger, Del tells us, she and Naomi "used to draw pictures of men and women with startling gross genitals, the women's fat, bristling with needly hair, like a porcupine's back" ("Lives" 120). Both girls are also, of course, prey to the deeply entrenched Christian "Madonna-whore" dichotomy of girls and women—what Magdalene Redekop terms the "Madonna and the harlot" duality that we frequently encounter in Munro's fiction, and in Western culture generally. Del's perceptions of this dichotomy are typically Munroian in their complexity and in the multi-layered manner in which they incorporate sexuality, the spiritual/religious, and the ordinary. For example, in "Lives," Del contemplates the nature and actions of one of Jubilee's "fallen women," Peggy McQuade:

I still thought of her as having gone right beyond human functioning into a state of perfect depravity, at the opposite pole from sainthood, but similarly isolated, unknowable. What appeared to be ordinariness here—the *Star Weekly*, dotted curtains looped back, geraniums growing hopefully out of tin cans in the whorehouse window, seemed to me deliberate and tantalizing deception—the skin of everyday appearances stretched over such shamelessness, such consuming explosions of lust.
(128)

Unlike Naomi, Del is an especially sensitive and intelligent teenage girl, and thus particularly sensitive to the confusing, mixed messages about both religion and sex from her family and community. She has, in fact, internalized and conflated both poles of the sexual continuum to the extent that she regards sexual desire and Pauline disgust as inextricably tied. For example, imagining sexual relations between Fern Dogherty—her mother's friend and their boarder—and Fern's boyfriend, Art Chamberlain, Del directly links sexual desire and disgust: "[I] liked to entertain myself with thoughts of their

grunting indecencies, their wallowing in jingly beds...Disgust did not rule out enjoyment, in my thoughts; indeed they were inseparable" (124).

Perhaps Del's ambivalence around sexuality reflects Munro's sexual feelings as a teenager, particularly if her mother's attitudes had any influence on her. In her biography of Munro, Catherine Sheldrick Ross relates Munro's assessment of her mother's feelings about sex when Munro was a teenager contemplating going to the University of Western Ontario and, potentially, pursuing fiction writing:

There was also the complication of knowing that her mother would have disliked her writing very much. "Her dislike of sex was, even for her time quite violent. So the kind of fiction I got into would have appeared to her an insult and a horrifying waste of talent" (unpublished interview[Ross]).
(*A Double Life* 40)

Munro has acknowledged in a number of interviews the extent to which she as a teenager and then as a young woman kept many of the most important issues in her life hidden from others. These included her writing aspirations and her real thoughts and feelings about sexuality. In a 1990 interview with Eleanor Wachtel, Munro discussed how pervasive this deception was: "I very early on got the notion that my real life had to be hidden, had to be protected. I didn't think you could go to your teacher or your parents, and really tell them what you really thought about anything...I just, I suppose, lived a very deceptive life" (qtd. in Ross *A Double Life* 19). This inclination toward privacy is as strong for the fictive Del Jordan as it was for Alice Munro. In the 1950s, a young woman's keeping her writing aspirations and what she genuinely thought/felt about sex to herself for fear of moral censure or perhaps ridicule is quite understandable. In the broader culture over the past half-century, though, there *has* been a considerable opening up of such discussion.

There has not, however, been a parallel opening up in the realm of religious discussion. It is a truism in Western countries that one's religious perspective is, and *should be* an essentially private matter between the individual and God. Charles Taylor sees this private self-exploration—"the Protestant culture of introspection"(184)—as one of the key characteristics of the Western "modern self." Further, this introspection is central not only in Protestant religion but also in literary art forms such as the novel: "Self-

exploration was part of the discipline of both Jesuits and Puritans, among others...it is arguably one of the sources of modern English literature, particularly the novel” (184). Alice Munro’s short stories—many of novella length—clearly demonstrate this focus on inner self-exploration, particularly spiritual/religious introspection. Del Jordan and many other Munro narrators/protagonists—like so many of us in the modern/postmodern West—have been encouraged to keep their spiritual/religious contemplations *and formulations* to themselves. This pronounced turn inward, of course, also has its downside. Again, Charles Taylor adroitly encapsulates how this inward turn involves a “disengagement” from what was previously a collectively held “cosmic order”:

“Disengagement from this cosmic order meant that the human agent was no longer to be understood as an element in a larger, meaningful order. His paradigm purposes are to be discovered within. He is on his own” (193).

Taylor also argues that many in modern Western culture have not been able to connect with any of the available religious and/or moral perspectives or even to accept the definitions: “They cannot prescribe with complete conviction to any particular definition, at least not to any of the ones on offer...Most of us are still in the process of groping for answers here. This is an essentially modern predicament” (10). Del is very much still in the “process of groping,” and having found no meaningful religious perspective around her, she begins to formulate her own—one that combines the most important, urgent considerations in her life: God, sex, and, increasingly, *art*. Charles Taylor and others contend that we have turned increasingly to artistic creativity to help formulate our spiritual/religious perspectives: “What meaning there is for us depends in part on our power of expression...discovering a framework is interwoven with inventing” (22). Iris Murdoch advances a similar argument in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*:

Art illuminates accident and contingency and the general muddle of life, the limitations of time and the discursive intellect...the art object conveys, in the most accessible and for many the only available form, the idea of transcendent perfection...[art] transforms into truthful vision our baser energies connected with power, curiosity, envy, and sex. (8)

Very importantly, Del Jordan moves toward the art of writing as her avenue—if not to “transcendent perfection”—than at least to coping with and understanding the “general muddle of her life.” Before examining Del’s sexual relationship with, in this order, Art Chamberlain, Jerry Storey, and Garnet French, it is illuminating and useful to have some sense of Del’s ongoing, introspective *artistic* “process of groping” during this time. Even the names of two of Del’s “lovers”—Art and Storey—suggest the underlying connection Munro is making between Del’s writing and her sexual cum spiritual quest. In “Epilogue: The Photographer,” we discover that Del is planning, but not actually writing, a novel about a local family, the Sherriffs, but she plans to change the family name in her novel to the Holloways. Typically, this is an entirely private endeavor for Del: “Nobody knew about the novel” (203). The central character that Del imagines is a strikingly clear example of key aspects I have been setting out throughout this chapter. Her female protagonist is a thoroughly ambivalent character. Her last name suggests “hallowed,” but, obviously, also “Halloween”: “Was she a witch? Was she a nymphomaniac? Nothing so simple!” (203). What we have here is a near parody of a Kali-like figure, depicted through the lens of Pauline aversion and chauvinism:

She had long black hair. She bestowed her gifts capriciously on men—not on good-looking young men who thought they had a right to her, not on sullen high-school heroes, athletes, with habits of conquest written on their warm-blooded faces, but on middle-aged weary husbands, defeated salesmen passing through town, even, occasionally, on the deformed and mildly deranged. But her generosity mocked them. Her *bittersweet flesh, the color of burned almonds*, burned men down quickly and left a taste of death. She was a sacrifice, spread for sex on moldy uncomfortable tombstones, pushed against the cruel bark of trees, her frail body squashed into the mud and hen dirt of barnyards, supporting the killing weight of men, but it was she, more than they, who survived. (204-05)

Del’s struggles to establish her identity as a writer and as a sexual being are inextricably tied with her struggle to clarify her relationship with God. This tripartite struggle to do so has engendered comparisons from a number of Munro critics between *Lives of Girls and Women* and James Joyce’s *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

Barbara Godard, for example, suggests that like Stephen Dedalus, “Del explores the forces of religion and sex on the shaping of an aesthetic” (66). J. R. Struthers’s essay, “Reality and Ordering: The Growth of a Young Artist in *Lives of Girls and Women*” is a particularly good source on the connections between Munro and Joyce. My greatest interest in all of this, is, however, Del’s spiritual and religious development and the complex manner in which she—and, by obvious extrapolation, Alice Munro—attempts to interweave her art, her body and sexuality, and other “ordinary” aspects of her life—almost entirely on her own and internally—into a meaningful spiritual/religious whole. Munro begins Del’s quest in earnest toward this goal with her relationship with Art Chamberlain.

Given Del’s complex interconnections between sex, art, and spirituality/religion, it is probably no coincidence that the name of the man with whom she has her first physical sexual connection is Art. Art Chamberlain is, significantly, close in age to Del’s father, and it soon becomes evident that he is another profoundly failed and flawed father figure. Art Chamberlain’s sexual advances toward Del are, of course, surreptitious and also relatively violent, confirming her perception that sex is, at once, hidden, exciting and brutal:

He went straight for the breasts, the buttocks, the upper thighs, brutal as lightning. And this was what I expected sexual communication to be—a flash of insanity, a dreamlike, ruthless, contemptuous breakthrough in a world of decent appearances. (135)

Del’s expectations of sex are, concomitantly, reminiscent of the “ferocious goddess Kali” (Flood 165), suggestive of nature at its most powerful—“brutal as lightning”; and epiphanic—“a breakthrough in a world of decent appearances.” Del’s conscious sexual desire here is primarily physical, but even at this very early stage of her sex life, she instinctively senses that sex holds deeper existential, even spiritual possibilities. For example, there is an echo of Nietzsche’s “beyond good and evil” in Del’s sense that “in the secret violence of sex would be recognition, going away beyond kindness, beyond good will or persons” (135). I am also reminded here by “sex would be recognition” of the importance for Munro, not of solving life’s mysteries, but of “approaching and recognizing” them. In her contribution to the collection of essays entitled *Violence in the*

Canadian Novel Since 1960, Sandra Djwa draws connections in Munro's fiction between sexuality and what Djwa terms the "violence of recognition." Referring specifically to "Thanks for the Ride" and "Walking on Water," Djwa notes, "'Munro's story makes us sense that it is not always the external act of violence that proves most shattering...it is the violence of recognition" (182).

In "Age of Faith," Del quests for God along traditional, organized religious avenues. In the passage below, Del recounts a remarkably Wordsworthian spiritual sense of nature—of something more "deeply interfused" that she has developed in the intervening years. In Del's interaction with Art Chamberlain, we see a clear example of the next stage in Del's spiritual development. Although implicit, there is still a direct displacement of previous avenues to the sacred with sexual ones, and as they drive toward their sexual "errand" we also see Del's profound ambivalence about her present avenue to the spiritual:

I looked out the window; the countryside I knew was altered by his presence, his voice, overpowering foreknowledge of the errand we were going on together. For a year or two I had been looking at trees, fields, landscape with a secret, strong exaltation. In some moods, some days, I could feel for a clump of grass, a rail fence, a stone pile, such pure unbounded emotion as I used to hope for, and have inklings of, in connection with God. I could not do it when I was with anybody, of course, and now with Mr. Chamberlain I saw that the whole nature became debased and maddeningly erotic. It was just now the richest, greenest time of year...I saw all of this as a vast arrangement of hiding places, ploughed fields beyond rearing up like shameless mattresses. (140)

What was previously a pantheistic experience of nature for Del, or what previously held "inklings of" the God of Christianity transposes here to potential sites of sexual activity. There is a strong suggestion here of Del as Kali-like, sexual, nature goddess, but the attendant ambivalence is not the revivifying Kali variety. What attracts Del is the "maddeningly erotic" nature of her encounter with Art Chamberlain, but her sense here of nature—and, by extension of herself—as "debased" reflects the destructive ambivalence of Pauline aversion

Del's encounter with Art Chamberlain falls despairingly short of a sacred experience. In fact, it falls well short of even a remotely satisfying *physical* experience for Del. During Chamberlain's frantic masturbation, Del, in quite detached fashion, observes that his penis was

not at all like marble David's [Del earlier looks at Chamberlain's photos of his time in Italy, including one of Michelangelo's David]...but like some strong-snouted animal whose grotesque simple looks are some sort of guarantee of good will (The opposite of what beauty usually is.) It did not bring back any of my excitement, though. It did not seem to have anything to do with me. (141)

The "grotesque simple looks" of Chamberlain's penis decidedly do not constitute the revivifying grotesque of which Mikhail Bakhtin speaks, and even the most oblique comparison between Chamberlain and David, "the ancestor and type of Christ" (Carscallen 9), borders on the absurd.

For Del, this is a woefully anti-climactic, inadequate, mutually self-absorbed, autoerotic encounter. She soon realizes that Art Chamberlain's "performance," like his penis, and like the man himself, has no real connection with her. Even if her hope has been largely unconscious, *any* hope Del held—unconscious or other—that this type of sexual experience would provide anything remotely sacred dissipates. Del notes, "My *faith* in simple depravity had weakened" (emphasis mine 144), and her feelings as they drive back to Jubilee are strongly reminiscent of Dick's feelings of "*Triste. Triste est*" in "Thanks for the Ride": "The landscape was post-coital, distant, and meaningless" (142). This observation, like Dick's, is not a sexual one, but essentially an existential, spiritual one.

After Del's woefully inauspicious "initiation" into physical sexuality, Art Chamberlain leaves town, and Del enters into a relationship with Jerry Storey, a fellow high school student who is Del's age and intellectual equal. As Del moves through these various sexual relationships, however, the need to balance what I earlier termed "Eros" with "agape" becomes increasingly evident. Del's relationship with Art Chamberlain was all distorted "Eros," at times "maddeningly erotic." On the other hand, her relationship with Jerry Storey demonstrates a certain level of "agape"—a willingness to risk

vulnerability by opening up to “l’autre” and to get past self-absorption—but it almost entirely lacks “Eros.”

This type of imbalance between Eros and agape recurs time and again in Munro’s oeuvre. A particularly clear example of the need for such balance is articulated by an old friend of the narrator’s in “Differently,” a story from Munro’s seventh collection, *Friend of My Youth*. The narrator, Georgia, is visiting her friend, Raymond—the husband of the now deceased Maya (the allusion to the Buddhist notion of *maya*, the all-encompassing illusion that obscures truth and reality, seems unmistakable). Schopenhauer’s use of “maya” might also be invoked here as well (Murdoch 58). Maya was also a close friend of the narrator’s. Raymond tells Georgia, “I’m very happy, and the reason is that I’m content to be an ordinary sort of person with an ordinary, calm life. I am not looking for any big revelation or any big drama or any messiah of the opposite sex” (240). Raymond has gotten past M/maya, and his words, reflecting a mature equanimity, encapsulate what Charles Taylor means by an authentic “affirmation of ordinary life.”

I hasten to add that no theme of any import in Munro’s fiction is ever steadfastly consistent, and certainly never straightforward. I also recognize the age difference here between Del Jordan and the characters in the much later “Differently.” That said, however, central to Munro’s vision of *any* possible connection between spiritual fulfillment and sexual relationships is the crucial tenet that it is a profound and inevitably painful mistake to place more of a metaphysical burden on sex itself or on sexual relationships than they are able to bear. Despite the tremendous power of physical sexual desire so apparent in many Munro stories, sexuality and sexual relationships clearly have their limits. This is precisely Dudley Young’s point about “misappropriation” that I noted at the outset of this chapter. Some might argue that the number of protagonists/narrators/secondary characters who persist in attempting to find some form of essentially spiritual fulfillment in unbalanced sexual relationships in stories from *Dance of the Happy Shades* to Munro’s most recent collection, *Hateship, Friendship...* reflects an *authorial* stubbornness in this domain. On the other hand, perhaps this is a point that Munro is particularly desirous to drive home

It is painfully clear from the outset of their relationship that Del Jordan and Jerry Storey are not going to strike the balance noted above. Del feels very little physical

sexual desire for Jerry, and she feels “humiliated by the disguises of high-school sweethearts which [they] had somehow felt it necessary to adopt” (163). With Jerry, Del feels no semblance of the “brutal lightning” or “the flash of insanity” that she had felt at times even with the pathetic Art Chamberlain. At this stage, however, Del seems driven to go down any path that will keep alive her quest for the sexual and the sacred, and she is perceptive enough to realize what *is* available in her otherwise unpromising relationship with Jerry Storey: “Each of us was the only avenue to discovery that the other had found” (168).

Del and Jerry’s relationship is not, however, *entirely* without its satisfying moments in their self-conscious sexual explorations and in Del’s less conscious pursuit of the sacred. One such occasion involves Jerry’s request to see Del naked. His academic rationalization is only somewhat disingenuous: “ ‘Wouldn’t it be educational? I have never seen a real live naked woman’ ” (169). We see in Del’s compliance a marked decrease in the ambivalence with her body and the sexual from earlier stories: “I often thought my body handsomer naked than clothed; I had often wished to show it off to someone” (169). Undressed and lying on Jerry’s bed, Del feels “absurd and dazzling,” and an oblique reference to Christ makes its way into her description of Jerry’s groping: “He put a finger against one of my nipples as if he was testing a thorn” (169). They are interrupted in this aesthetic exploration by the arrival downstairs of Jerry’s mother, and the entire scene becomes a kind of French farce.

However, as Del recounts, opening up even this much to her own body and its sexual possibilities—and, I would add, the carnivalesque actions that attend this whole encounter—ease the heretofore sexual/bodily awkwardness of their relationship: “Oddly enough, [we] got on after this fiasco much better than before. We treated each other’s bodies now with a mixture of wariness and familiarity, and no longer made demands” (172). Exploring the bodily has, to some extent, liberated both of them. For the most part, though, Del’s time with Jerry Storey is one during which her “need for love [goes] underground like a canny toothache” (173).

It is Del’s relationship with Garnet French in “Baptizing” that finally affords Del the level of reciprocal sexual passion that she has been searching for. Moreover, it is in her relationship with Garnet that we see Del’s sexual experience become, at times, almost

explicitly sacred and religious in its language and imagery. Their relationship begins with the clearest example yet of a direct displacement of the conventionally religious with the sexual. Munro has spoken about her near obsession as a teenager with Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*. She tells Beverly Rasporich, for example, "That was the biggest book of my life" (25). In many respects, what J. Hillis Miller in *The Disappearance of God* says of Cathy's relationship with Heathcliff applies to the early stages of Del's relationship with Garnet French—that in this relationship, "making love [is] a private religion in which the loved one is God and there is a single worshipper and devotee" (175).

Significantly, Del meets Garnet at a multi-denominational revival meeting that has been organized by the Baptist church to which Garnet belongs. In "Age of Faith," Del explored a number of organized religious denominations in Jubilee; in this story, her search symbolically supersedes all conventional religious denominations. What matters most for Del in the church service where she meets Garnet is not any denominational brand of theology, but her powerful sexual attraction to Garnet. Del's previous "positive longing" for God ("Age" 80) is directly displaced here by her desperate yearning for the physical touch of Garnet French.

The crossover is unmistakable. The congregation, including Del, is singing an evangelical hymn: "'News of Salvation we carried; said he/Nobody ever has told it to me'" (175). In the midst of this hymn, Del sees Garnet: "I desperately wished that he would come. I concentrated my whole self into a kind of white prayer, willing him to show up beside me" (175). Given the religious language—"white prayer"—and Del's religious marshalling of her will, it is no stretch to credit the alphabetical parallel between Garnet and God. Garnet, however, unlike the God or Christ that Del has previously sought, *does* answer her silent prayers. He comes up behind Del and, from the outset, the *bodily* passion that Del has sought is powerfully present: "My shoulder was grazed by his arm (it is like fire, just as they say) and he slipped into place beside me" (175).

Munro focuses for almost three pages on the few minutes taken up by the ensuing bodily, sensual, passionate encounter that welds Del and Garnet together. The interplay between the revivalist preacher's momentum that builds to a "roar like a lion" and the tortuously gradual coming together of Del and Garnet's hands makes clear from the

outset that Del's experience is akin to a spiritual revelation: "I felt angelic with gratitude, truly as if I had come out on another level of existence. I felt no further acknowledgement was needed, no further intimacy possible" (177). This genuinely epiphanic encounter is also marked by an explicit emphasis on the bodily, the earthly, and the "material bodily lower stratum":

A sharp green smell of sweat, like onions, smell of horse, pig manure, feeling of being caught, bound, borne away; tired, mournful happiness rising like a cloud. I had refused the hymn sheets which Mr. Buchanan and other churchmen were handing out but I remembered the words and sang. I would have sung anything. (177)

"Being caught, bound" also recalls the etymological root of "religion": "*relegare*—to tie back."

There is much in Del and Garnet's relationship that is prototypical for many subsequent sexual relationships in Munro's fiction. At times, Del clearly embodies the Kali-like, powerful sexual drive that recurs in later characters such as Eileen in "Memorial," the secondary character Kay, in "Bardon Bus," Trudy in "Circle of Prayer," or Pauline in "The Children Stay," to mention only a few female characters in Munro whose sexuality contains a force and drive that surpasses "ordinary" sexual boundaries and offers sacred possibilities. It is Garnet's rural roots—and, of course, the illicit, premarital nature of their relationship—that forces Del and Garnet to have sex out of doors most of the time, but Del takes to this natural environment for their lovemaking with an ease that betokens her symbolic connection to the pagan "female goddess figures" (34) of nature that Beverly Rasporich speaks of. Even the time that Del spends out at Garnet's farm in the carnival-like atmosphere of the farmhouse resonates with her desire for simple, agrarian life: "There is no denying I was happy in that house" (188).

Del finally loses her virginity, significantly, in her mother's flower garden, literally crossing the "peony *border*" (emphasis mine 188) that symbolizes her crossing of the moral and social borders that her mother represents. Gavin Flood notes how the Kali traditions are "more concerned with the power gained through impurity and going against social and religious norms" (184). The circumstances that surround the loss of Del's virginity clearly invoke nature, the earth, and the bestial. The violence to both

moral/social boundaries and the flower garden, and the bloody, bestial nature of her entry into physical sexuality are a source of pride for Del. She shows them off to her mother the next morning—insisting that she come out to see:

In the morning I went around to look at the broken peonies, and a little patch of blood, yes, dried blood on the ground. I had to mention it to somebody. I said to my mother, “There’s blood on the ground at the side of the house.”

“Blood?”

“I saw a cat there yesterday, tearing a bird apart. It was a big striped tom, I don’t know where it came from.”

“Vicious beasts.”

“You should come look at it.”

“What? I’ve got better things to do.” (189)

Behind Del’s necessary mendacity here lies a profound defiance of every moral precept that her mother stands for—and Ida Jordan’s agnosticism in no way entails any lack of moral stricture, particularly in matters of sex. Del also defies here every religious denomination in Jubilee and the repressive morality they represent.

At the same time, however, Del’s clandestine parading of her lost virginity and of the blood of the sacrifice of that virginity is, as Nora Robson argues still “a religious act” (79). In her essay, “Alice Munro and the White American South: The Quest,” Robson notes that Del turns “aside from organized religion” after the death of Major at the end of “Age of Faith,” but, this “is not the end of her religious quest. ‘Baptizing,’ with Del’s rebirth into the world of sensuous sex, must also be viewed as a ‘religious act’” (79). Robson, though, is primarily arguing that Del and Garnet are reaffirming the religion of the land, “linked to country people like the French family” (80). I am not ruling out this possibility, but I think Robson is closer to the mark when she notes in “Baptizing” references to Dionysus and to “the god of vegetation and wine” (80). Del’s attraction to sex “brutal as lightning” and her pride here with the blood, the broken peonies, and the inherent violence of the sex scene is much more in keeping with the “terrible earth-mother Kali” than it is with any of the “old verities” of patriarchal Christianity.

As usual, however, ambivalence towards Christianity figures strongly into the picture. There is good deal of evidence that Del is defying the moral precepts of patriarchal Christianity and, albeit unconsciously, replacing them with a Kali-like female sacred alternative. We should not forget, though, that Del is still a product of the Southwestern Ontario environment in which she has grown up, and however much she may have rejected Western Christianity on a conscious level, on some underlying levels, the blood that she so proudly displays to her mother is for Del, perhaps, authentic blood that displaces/replaces the blood of what Del sees as an anemic, guilt-mongering Christ. In "Images," Del characterizes Christ as the "everlastingly wounded phantom, sorrowing...over all the wickedness I did not yet know I would commit" (33). Del's ambivalence toward Christianity thus arises to the extent that she defiantly rejects Pauline Christian guilt while still clinging to some hope of salvaging her native Christian perspective through a radical feminization of that perspective.

There is in Del's relationship with Garnet French more sacred potential than in any relationship in Munro's work we have looked at thus far. It might be argued, in fact, that for brief moments in their relationship—for example, in their initial encounter at the revival meeting—that Del does achieve some kind of epiphanic breakthrough. However, as Del notes in "Lives," "One stroke of lightning does not have to lead anywhere, but to the next stroke of lightning" (135). These moments aside, Del's relationship remains essentially an advanced form of the "simple depravity" she experienced with Art Chamberlain. There are a number of reasons for the failure of Del's relationship with Garnet to achieve apotheosis, but the key ones are that Del, from the outset, has really sought to satisfy only her own sexual needs, and, much less consciously, only her own spiritual needs. Nora Robson argues that, for Del, Garnet "is symbolic only of passion and lust" (80). It is clear that at some level Del genuinely sees sex with Garnet as sacred, as a combination of "audacity and revelation [and] humility" (181). But she still sees these sacred qualities as arising from solipsistic autoeroticism: "Sex seemed to me all surrender—not the woman's to the man but the person's to the body, an act of pure faith, freedom in humility" (181). Munro leaves to subsequent female protagonists/narrators the crucial discovery that any possibility of the genuinely sacred in sexual relationships entails a surrender *to the other as well*.

That said, I agree with Joseph Gold when he argues, “It is essential that Del let this happen, essential to experience one’s Pre-Eve self before the return to the upper, apple world, the cortical world of words” (7). I part with Gold, though, in his implicit suggestion that Del descends into this Pre-Edenic realm, then ascends for good, essentially leaving the archetypal, Kali-like sexuality behind for a world of intellectual and/or artistic pursuits. The Kali energy that Del embodies in her relationship with Garnet—that is, before their relationship is literally “blown out of the water”—remains an underlying, crucial touchstone for many of Munro’s female protagonists/narrators in her writing to the present. Del’s relationship with Garnet French could never, of course, be much more than a powerfully passionate sexual, primarily physical one for Del; the distances between them are nearly as great as those between Dick and Lois in “Thanks for the Ride.”

Del and Garnet’s relationship also fails because of Garnet’s deeply held chauvinistic, religious conviction. Del’s sexual cum spiritual quest with Garnet French culminates in what may be seen as not only a failed, but an inverted baptism. From Garnet’s perspective—male-dominated, evangelical Christianity—this baptism is a total failure. From this perspective, Del’s soul is lost, but so is her subservience, because she battles against and ultimately rejects her “salvation” through baptism. For Del, however, this is an authentic baptism into her own adult, female identity. In the midst of her struggle, she experiences a powerful epiphany, the realization that others—in this instance, a very important other—have never really *seen* her. Garnet has already pushed her down into the water twice;

But when he let me come up just long enough to hear him say, “Now say you’ll do it” I saw his face streaming with water I had splashed over him and I felt amazement, not that I was fighting with Garnet but that anybody could have made such a mistake, to think he had real power over me. I was too amazed to be angry, I forgot to be frightened, it seemed to be impossible that he should not understand that all the powers I granted him were in play, that he himself was—in play, that I meant to keep him sewed up in his golden lover’s skin forever, even if five minutes before I had talked about marrying him. (198)

Munro's displacement of Del's quest for God by her sexual quest is never more evident than in Garnet's attempt to "baptize" her. Del here fights for her sexual and religious freedom. She is in full Kali-mode, in ways she has not yet been in her relationship with Garnet. In this baptism episode, Del metaphorically and literally battles the forces of chauvinistic, patriarchal Christianity as manifest in Garnet's attempts to physically subdue and "initiate" her into her "place" as a female in the religious and social world he represents.

Garnet does not, of course, manifest this world in the unequivocal manner in which, say, the Anglican priest does in "Age of Faith," or, more implicitly, in the way Uncle Craig does in "Heirs of the Living Body." Garnet French is more complicated and ambivalent than these earlier male figures. As Nora Robson convincingly argues, Garnett is "twice-born," representing, concomitantly, traditional Christianity and the pagan *male* god of "vegetation and wine"(80). However, *both* of these symbolic roles are based squarely on *male* religious power, and what Del represents is female divine, Kali-power—a power that defies religious and sexual subjugation of females and the feminine in any of its various repressive forms. We also see in the quote above, though, how thoroughly self-centered Del's "playing" was with Garnet. Such self-centeredness ultimately spells doom for any sacred possibilities in man-woman relationships, as so many later relationships in Munro's work attest.

Recovering later from her battle with Garnet—a battle for her sexual and spiritual freedom—Del repossesses her "ordinary life"—unconnected to the life of love, uncolored by love, the world resumes its natural and callous importance" (199). However, Del has done better than to merely survive the ordeal of her sexual quest in the realm of potentially divine sexuality. The overall shape of Del's initiatory experience comprises a crucial pattern, a pattern not only relevant to Del Jordan, but also to numerous subsequent Munro female protagonists/narrators. Initially, Del explored and found profoundly wanting traditional patriarchal Christianity. As she sexually matured, her attention—and a significant portion of her search for her psychic and spiritual/religious identity—shifted toward sexuality. She was empowered in her quest in the domain of "ordinary" human sexual relationships by a deep, albeit only vaguely formulated or articulated, connection

with what Beverly Rasporich describes as a “mythic return to the maternal body,” a return that is “for the female characters [in Munro] the source of female identity” (123).

Ultimately, however, Del Jordan—in keeping with her age and level of sexual and spiritual maturity—does not establish the crucial balance between a Kali-like “Eros” and the wisdom and power of “agape.” This imbalance has cost both Del and Garnet. Not only does their relationship fail; Del, in her preoccupation with sexuality, has neglected her studies and has thus missed her chances at a scholarship, her most obvious avenue out of the constraints of Jubilee. As we have seen, however, Del’s is not an unmitigated failure. She has established some important boundaries of her own spiritual identity and, through Del Jordan, Munro has in important ways begun a reclaiming of the divine from what Beverly Rasporich describes as the “male authority established by Christianity” (34).

At the conclusion of “Baptizing,” we are given a particularly clear picture of where Del’s quest has brought her. She is reading through the want ads of the “City paper,” circling “any job that seemed possible”:

After some time I felt a mild, sensible gratitude for these printed words, these strange possibilities. Cities existed; telephone operators were wanted; the future could be furnished without love or scholarships. Now at last without fantasies or self-deception, cut off from the mistakes and confusion of the past, grave and simple, carrying a small suitcase, getting on a bus, like girls in movies leaving home, convents, lovers, I supposed I would get started on my real life.

Garnet French, Garnet French, Garnet French.

Real life. (200-01)

Given what we have seen of the underlying religious/spiritual nature of Del’s adolescent/teenage journey from at least “Age of Faith” on, we are in a much better position to recognize the language and images here that convey underlying connections between the sexual and the sacred. There is the juxtaposition of “convents” and “lovers,” and, again, the suggestion of the persistently religious considerations around death and the afterlife in “grave.” Most importantly, Del with “mild, sensible gratitude” affirms ordinary life—elevates “real life” to the highest status. However, in her imagination, Del

repeats “Garnet French” three times, and this litany of a kind of trinity recalls all that he has represented: powerful sexual attraction, potentially sacred sexuality, Garnet’s playing of Shiva to Del’s Kali. His name does not carry the rhetorical emphasis of being Del’s last thoughts/words in “Baptizing,” but their repetition thrice nevertheless invests in them a force that symbolically carries all of the aspects above forward for subsequent Munro protagonists/narrators/characters.

Flying Boys/Christ Figures/Counter Culture: *Something I’ve Been Meaning To Tell You*

Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You is Munro’s next collection after *Lives*, and the connections between the sexual and the sacred remain central to Munro’s vision in a number of stories in this collection. My focus will remain on failed attempts to find spiritual/religious fulfillment in the sexual realm, but some key aspects other than those I have discussed thus far come clearly into play in these works. With a view toward illuminating these aspects, I will focus fairly briefly on two stories: “How I Met My Husband” and “Walking On Water.”

It is tempting to dismiss “How I Met My Husband” as a “comic story with a happy ending” (Carrington 100). I agree that this story from Munro’s third collection does present Munro in a somewhat uncharacteristic comic mode (this is not to suggest that there is not a good deal of humor in Munro’s work; there is), and—even more uncharacteristically—the story concludes with the female narrator, Edie, in a long-standing, apparently quite fulfilling marriage. As is always the case with Munro’s stories, however—even those like this relatively short, seemingly straightforward work—further layers of significance invariably emerge upon closer examination.

What is most relevant in “How I Met My Husband” for my purposes is not the *success* of Edie’s ultimate marriage to the postman whom Edie meets as she awaits, daily and vainly, for a letter from Chris, the pilot she has fallen in love with, but the *failure* of Edie’s initial relationship with the *puer eternus* flying-boy Chris. The pilot Chris is, if not the first such flying-boy character in Munro’s fiction, certainly the *clearest* early example. In *Alice Munro: Paradox and Parallel*, W. R. Martin’s study of Munro’s work

up to and including *Moons of Jupiter*, Martin draws attention to Chris's Christ-like qualities. Martin notes first how the innocent, rural, *very* sexually inexperienced Edie becomes infatuated with a " 'QUALIFIED PILOT' who takes people up to "SEE THE WORLD FROM THE SKY" and who is significantly named "Chris." Martin goes on to note further suggestions that Chris is a kind of Christ figure:

When this sky pilot comes for water, the girl sees "he was dark the way somebody is pressed up against a screen door with the bright daylight behind them. I only knew he wasn't from around here"; we might be reminded—a little ironically—of the Samaritan at Jacob's well in John 4: 7-30. (82-83)

(The Samaritan woman, of course, has not recognized her interlocutor as Christ). Chris is a clear early example of a recurring male figure in Munro's fiction, the sexual Christ-figure and/or *puer eternus* to whom the female narrator/protagonist is invariably attracted. As well as Chris Watters in "How I Met My Husband," we have the supposed United Church minister with his lack of "ordinary grown-up masculinity" (64) who facilitates Rose's orgasm. In "Wild Swans;" Dan, the narrator Trudy's waffling husband in "Circle of Prayer;" and another literal flying-boy in "White Dump," a pilot—this time unnamed—who combines strong sexual attraction with ascendant, Christ-like qualities. It is quite clear that every one of the female protagonists/narrators in these stories is searching for spiritual as well as sexual fulfillment. One of the key reasons they do not attain such fulfillment, of course, is that these flying-boy cum Christ figures take flight.

Nevertheless, these disappearing male characters often *do* offer something of value to the respective female protagonists/narrators. For example, as James Carscallen says of Chris Watters in "How I Met My Husband," he offers Edie "his own grace" (358). Chris is instrumental in Edie's development from an extremely naïve girl (She doesn't seem *entirely* certain, for instance, that one does not get pregnant from simply kissing (63)) to a quite self-possessed young woman who goes on to marry the mailman. In "Circle of Prayer," Dan's flighty waywardness is central to Trudy's movement toward at least *formulating* the following key existential and spiritual questions: "What are those times that stand out, clear patches in your life—what do they have to do with it? They aren't exactly promises. Breathing spaces. Is that all?" (372). However, despite this type

of backhanded assistance—what might be called a kind of unintentional grace—Munro clearly does not present these flying-boy lovers as bringing into their respective relationships that which might result in even a deeper, much less a sacred union. In her discussion of the story, Magdalene Redekop argues that, ultimately, Edie “refuses to read the last letter of the name as understood. She knows that the letter t will never come to be added to the name Chris, making up the perfect lover: Christ or Logos” (94).

In “How I Met My Husband,” we see once again Munro’s profound ambivalence about religious/spiritual avenues and alternatives. She presents these ungrounded male Christ figures, for the most part, in a negative light, but seldom entirely. They almost always possess some saving grace, some redeeming qualities. Munro quite consistently makes a point, however, about the nature of the *shadow* qualities of these male characters. It is helpful to recall Del Jordan’s attraction to the pre-Raphaelite painting of Christ that she encounters in the Anglican Church in “Age of Faith”: “He looked more regal and more tragic, and the background against which he appeared was gloomier and richer, more pagan somehow, or at least Mediterranean” (82). Edie describes Chris Watters as “dark against the screen door”—an image that recalls James Joyce’s image of Mangan’s sister in “Araby,” “her figured defined by the light from the half-opened door” (28). Although the genders are reversed, Joyce and Munro both present narrators/protagonists who have similarly conflated and confused the sexual and the traditionally sacred in their respective objects of adoration. However, the shadow aspect of male characters such as Chris Watters is not the *grounding* darkness associated with the painting of Christ in “Age” or with Mangan’s sister in Joyce’s “Araby” (recall Mangan’s sister’s “brown figure”(28)—literally her convent uniform, symbolically the color of earthy, female sexuality). These are the darker shades of earthy heathenism (literally, dwellers upon the heath). The shadow qualities of characters such as Chris Watters, however, or of characters such as the “minister” Rose encounters in “Wild Swans” is the negative shadow of impending betrayal and/or exploitation.

Further, the women in a number of these stories are sexual neophytes; this is certainly the case with Edie in “How I Met My Husband,” and largely the case with Rose in “Wild Swans.” They have not—with the clear exception of Sophie in “White Dump”(a story I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter)—yet developed or tapped

into that darker Kali power (Kali literally means darkness), and thus are especially vulnerable to these exploitative, flying-boy, sexual Christ figures. These male characters are clear examples of the ungrounded, lost *puer-eternus* described by central figures in the emerging field of Men's Studies such as John Lee (*Flying Boy*), Robert Bly (*Iron John*) or Sam Keen (*Fire in the Belly*). These male characters compound the failure of the earthly/Heavenly f/Fathers I discussed in Chapter Two, rendering even more urgent the need for female protagonists/narrators to seek and/or develop spiritual/religious alternatives.

In "How I Met My Husband," Edie's belief that Chris's letter will come is akin to religious faith: "I believed in it coming just like I believed the sun would rise in the morning" (65). However, just as in "Time of Death" or "Age of Faith," the word, the promise, the potential is never fulfilled: "It just struck me: No letter was ever going to come" (65). The symbolic significance of her failed relationship with Chris the pilot is not available for the naïve, inexperienced Edie, but it is for the reader. If sexual relationships are to hold out any hope for deeper sacred significance, there are at least two requirements. The male involved must have experienced and emerged from what Robert Bly terms "the road of ashes, descent, and grief"(56)—a journey that has tempered him and afforded him some genuine, life-affirming shadow power (a clear example would be Rupert Quinn in Munro's "The Love of a Good Woman"); and the woman in the relationship must assert Kali-like control and power. Edie in "How I Met My Husband" finally does this: "It came to me one day there were women doing this with their lives, all over. There were women just waiting and waiting by mailboxes for one letter or another" (65). Edie then decides, "If there were women all through life waiting, and women busy and not waiting, I knew which one I had to be" (65). There is, of course, no guarantee that such assertion will yield relationships with deeper, sacred qualities, but such assertion certainly increases the likelihood. The glimpse, the possibility emerges, just as the subtle possibility of the divine may be glimpsed in the name of the ordinary town where the postman asks Edie to go to with him to see a movie: *Goderich* (65).

"Walking on Water" presents an abrupt shift from the relatively light, comic tone of "How I Met My Husband." It also presents a rare phenomenon in Munro's fiction: a male protagonist ("Walking" and "Thanks for the Ride" are the only two Munro works

that do so). Notwithstanding the very direct allusion in the title, the story presents a contemporary, very ambiguous Christ figure in the character Eugene. The narrator, Mr. Loughheed, a widower and a retired pharmacist, has taken a strong liking to Eugene, and the religious possibilities that emerge in their relationship are the central considerations in the story. I will examine these quite positive possibilities further in Chapter Four; for now, I will focus on the much less congenial relationship between Mr. Loughheed and a rather nefarious collection of “hippie types” in the story. These are Rover, Rex and Calla, co-tenants of Loughheed’s and Eugene’s in a run-down apartment building in an unnamed Canadian city.

I include a discussion of “Walking on Water” at this point because this chapter focuses primarily on the failure in a number of Munro stories of realizing spiritual fulfillment in sexual relationships. Central to the overall thrust of the counterculture of the 1960s and 70s was an unprecedented collective experiment in probing the depths of sexuality for its spiritual possibilities. For a writer as consistently and intensely interested in exploring the spiritual possibilities of the realm of Eros as Munro, this counterculture would seem fertile ground. Munro’s interest in the counterculture and its sexual and spiritual aspects becomes increasingly evident in her third collection of stories, *Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You*, and she has returned to this interest in a number of stories right up to her most recent work. On a biographical note, Munro was a mother in her mid-thirties when the counterculture movement began, and, as Sheila Munro tells us, her mother paid a good deal of attention to popular culture at this time; she also demonstrated interest in the religious aspects of this culture. For example, Sheila Munro recalls that her mother “listened to my Beatles records and we discussed whether *Nowhere Man* was God” (207).

Munro’s feelings about what Sheila terms “the explosion of the counterculture” (208), however, became increasingly ambivalent. Like many women in her generation, Munro felt caught in the middle. She began to feel that her own liberal approach to parenting (e.g. recommending *Lolita* to Sheila when she was thirteen) had failed her children in some way. Sheila quotes her mother:

“I was into my own role but this had to be seen through the tremendous change of values that came in the late sixties and that split women of my

age. Some women decided to go against it, some women decided to be like their mothers. I wanted to be as if I were ten years younger.” (209) Still, Munro and her family were living in Victoria, B.C. at this time, and running Munro’s Bookstore kept aspects of the counterculture front and center in their daily lives:

Munro’s in the late sixties became something of a mecca for Victoria’s counterculture...Munro’s had art nouveau bookmarks, including one designed by my mother and one of the staff members with a drawing of a girl looking sadly into a mirror and the caption, “Seduced and Abandoned? Relax with a book from Munro’s.” There were all kinds of books on Eastern philosophy and religion...(210)

Munro went so far as to permit Sheila to smoke marijuana in her bedroom, on one occasion calling out to Sheila and her friends as they “sailed out the door on [their] way to a youth centre downtown [to] ‘Save a joint for me’” (212).

This very liberal approach ended, however, a few months later when the child of some of Munro’s friends from the Unitarian Church died of an overdose, and, shortly thereafter, someone at Sheila’s school died after sniffing glue. From this point on, Munro’s reservations about aspects of the counterculture, including sex, increased. Sheila notes that her mother “didn’t tell me not to have sex, but she warned me about the possibility of having a back-street abortion in Seattle” (213).

Munro’s ambivalence about counterculture lifestyles finds its fictive corollary in a number of her stories. For example, in “Circle of Prayer,” Trudy—for the most part a single mother of her teenage daughter, Robin—struggles with the amount of freedom she should grant her daughter. This struggle intensifies considerably when an acquaintance of Robin’s is killed in a car accident, and it seems that drugs may have been involved. Discussing the accident with her friend and co-worker, Janet, Trudy asks, “‘Was she drunk?’ Janet responds, “‘I don’t think so. Stoned, maybe’” (351). It’s interesting to note that one of Sheila Munro’s friends during the 1960s was named Robyn (213). It’s also interesting to note that “Circle of Prayer”—as the title suggests—focuses primarily on the *religious* responses to Robin’s death, counterculture and others, and that, in keeping with Munro’s ambivalence about the counterculture, no “correct” response is forthcoming in the story.

Munro's ambivalence about counterculture attitudes and approaches to drugs, sex, and spirituality plays out in a quite extended continuum of characters over the course of a number of stories. Rex, Rover, and Calla in "Walking on Water" mark the negative pole of that continuum. I was struck immediately by the suggestion of Kali in Calla's name, a suggestion reinforced by Calla's open promiscuity and her only thinly veiled hostility toward Lougheed. Calla, however, turns out to be only a pseudo-Kali figure, offering little life-affirming energy, sexual or otherwise. The names Rex and Rover, however, quite accurately denote the bestial qualities of Calla's cohorts. Of Rover, "a skinny, sickly boy with a twelve-year-old's body and some days a fifty-year-old face" (70), we are told, "Mr. Lougheed had seen him sleeping on a hallway carpet, like a dog" (70), and as Lougheed wryly observes, Rex and Calla were also strange names, "more properly belonging to an animal and a flower" (70). Lougheed regards these three as having "sprung up, armed as they were, from the earth" (70). Early in the story, the third-person narrative voice informs us that Lougheed had come upon Rex and Calla having sex with their door open, their coitus, of course, "doggie-style."

The sexual audacity of Rex, Rover, and Calla, however, is not the Kali defiance that attempts to liberate through the breaking or flaunting of repressive moral or social codes. It carries very little, if any, of the revivifying energy of what Mikhail Bakhtin terms the "carnavalesque" aspect of the "material lower bodily stratum." These characters are quite unequivocally pathetic, and Munro generates little sympathy for them. As I mentioned above, they mark one pole of a continuum of characters in Munro's fiction who espouse and/or live the tenets of 1960s style, counterculture "free love." These characters recur with relative frequency, cropping up in this story, later in "Progress of Love" (wherein they are responsible for "free love" painting and graffiti in the narrator's, Phemie's, childhood home), in "White Dump" (here a group of them violate the clothing and belongings of the crone-like character, Sophie—who, significantly, shares a number of character traits with the similarly elderly Mr. Lougheed).

This continuum of counterculture types, however, runs to much more positive—but, of course, ambivalent—characters such as Dan in "Circle of Prayer," or the near hippie-parody character, Raymond, in "Forgiveness in Families." The characters on this

continuum that we get to know relatively well are invariably seeking through their iconoclastic life-styles and/or sexuality some form of social or religious liberation. For example, in “Walking on Water,” Eugene patiently explains that even though Rex, Rover, and Calla have few redeeming qualities, they could be compared to early Christians: “ ‘I think that they’re more boring than artificial’ [artificiality being Lougheed’s strongest criticism of them], Eugene said reasonably. ‘Like the early Christians. They would have been boring’” (71). Despite Eugene’s attempts to attribute religious motivations to Calla and company, however, Munro makes some clear points about the folly of believing that meaningful love and/or sexuality can ever be “free.” Time and again in Munro’s stories, characters are brought up short who pursue “enlightenment” or fulfillment through essentially irresponsible, blithely hedonistic life-styles. This does not involve any heavy-handed moralizing or narrative sermonizing. Rather, Munro simply does not provide any positive consequences for such characters. Most often, they just silently slip out of the narrative.

Munro, however, certainly provides no redeeming qualities for Calla in “Walking.” Near the end of the story, Eugene—having failed in his attempt to walk on water—has disappeared, leaving Mr. Lougheed concerned that he may have taken his life. Lougheed goes to speak with Calla, and we are given a very clear portrait of one who is willing to offer her body up for more or less public sexuality, but who has no *semblance* of the compassion and empathy that attend genuine “agape”:

“He wasn’t one of us,” said Calla. “He was fairly old.”

“He might have wanted to do that, though,” she said in a minute. “It’s just another thing he might have wanted to do. If that’s what he was going to do, then nobody ought to stop him, should they? Or feel sad about him. I never feel sad about anybody.” (92)

Sex, Science and Death: “Accident”

The stories I have examined thus far effectively trace the genesis and the early development of Munro’s perspective on finding spiritual/religious meaning in the “ordinary” realm of sexual relationships, and the patterns I have discerned thus far persist up to Munro’s most recent collection. Further manifestations of failed attempts to find the

sacred in the sexual may be found in stories such as “Wild Swans,” “The Beggar Maid,” and “Simon’s Luck.” However, I have chosen to conclude this chapter with a quite close look at “Accident,” a particularly representative story from Munro’s fifth collection, *The Moons of Jupiter*. “Accident” appears slightly over halfway through Munro’s oeuvre; thus, an examination of this story reveals important developments in Munro’s treatment of the sacred possibilities of the sexual and the bodily that have accrued since “Walking on Water.” “Accident” also reveals how key aspects of this treatment have persisted since *Dance of the Happy Shades*. Finally, “Accident” very clearly anticipates the collision of science and the sacred that becomes increasingly important in Munro’s later stories.

“Accident” spans thirty years in the life of its narrator, Frances, covering the period of time from when she was a young music teacher in 1943 in Hanratty, one of Munro’s fictional small southwest Ontario towns, to the funeral of one of Frances’s Hanratty friends, Adelaide, some three decades later. The story presents a number of recurring circumstances and themes in Munro’s work to this point. First, it hinges on the accidental death (thus the title) of Bobby Makkavala, the son of Frances’s co-worker, erstwhile adulterous lover, and now husband, Ted Makkavala. The news of Bobby’s accident reaches Ted and Frances at the worst possible time—but, concomitantly, a symbolically important time: they are making love in the storage room of the science lab in the high school where they both teach.

Munro’s preoccupation with death is almost ruthlessly driven home in this story in that it begins with one death and concludes with another. These deaths are not, of course, simply occasions upon which to hang plot. Adelaide’s funeral provides the catalyst for Frances’s recollection of Bobby’s death, her earlier life in Hanratty, her earlier illicit affair with Ted, and the overall interconnections among spirituality/religion, life, death, sexual relationships, and marriage.

“Accident” makes clear that Munro has remained very interested in the outcomes of direct displacement of traditional, patriarchal, organized religion by sexual relationships. As a young woman, Frances is the organist for the United Church, and her access to this church provides her and Ted a venue for having sex. Moreover, Ted and Frances discover that they are not the only ones meeting for such purposes. Ted quips that there is a “whole relay of lovers” (100). It also becomes clear that, although Frances

is actively involved in the church, traditional religion provides little more than a social network for her, an opportunity to play music, and, of course, a convenient location for lovemaking. There is no evidence that the young Frances experiences anything like Del Jordan's "yearning" for God. More than anything else, she feels "entangled" in the traditions of the church, including its Christmas observations. She reflects on her figurative entanglement while walking home after hearing the news of Bobby's death. She sees that one of the locals, Cal Callaghan, has "got himself tangled up in a string of lights" (95). One might expect at such a time that Frances would turn to her ostensible religious faith for comfort in the face of death. On the contrary, Frances, at least to some extent, confirms Ted's logical, positivistic critique of Christianity as she further observes of the public ready-making for Christmas, "The incompetence, the ratty wreaths and ropes, the air of ordinary drudgery, all set in motion by some irrational sense of seasonal obligation" (96).

Ted is a near stereotype of the positivistic scientist, and we should recall that such a stance would have been somewhat harder to maintain in wartime Hanratty than it would have been in later decades. Ted, however, also ruefully notes the vestiges of his "vulnerability" to Christian belief when his son is dying (Bobby remains alive until later in the hospital). Ted at this time falls into "bargaining" with God:

What a flood of nonsense this was, what superstition, coming over him when he didn't expect it. And it was impossible to stop, impossible to disregard. What if worse was coming? What if the next idea to present itself was one of those senseless bargains? Believe in God, the Lutheran God, promise to go back to church, do it at once, *now*, and Bobby would not die. Give up Frances, give her up for good, and Bobby would not die...Bobby; Frances; what simplification; what nonsense. What powerful nonsense. (88)

There are few clearer examples in Munro's work of the clash between modern, scientific, logical thinking and the precepts of traditional, organized religion and few clearer of the clash between this traditional belief and sexuality. Although Ted has consciously rejected the traditional religious perspective he was raised in, it still has a powerful hold on him, else he would not be even *reluctantly* participating in this "powerful nonsense"

of bargaining. Ted clearly believes that he *has* rejected traditional Christian belief when he “after all, decide[s] so thoroughly in her [Frances’s] favor” (89). He is convinced that he has triumphed over the “powerful nonsense” and, further, that he has benefited from the lesson that even “the most rational mind could relapse and grovel” (89). Remarkably, he does not seem to recognize that any claim to rejecting the traditional Christian framework is nullified by his having made his choice *within that framework*.

However, although Ted’s struggle and decision here are important, the central spiritual/religious quest in “Accident” is Frances’s. As we have seen, traditional Christianity does not figure strongly in her life, but, like Del Jordan, she is not seriously inclined to an agnostic, atheistic position either. We learn that Frances has sought transcendent possibilities in her sexual relationship with Ted and in other “ordinary” phenomena such as scientific ordering of facts, nature or music in ways very reminiscent of Del Jordan’s search in these areas. Frances’s attempts to find fulfillment in her quest, however—at least to this point—have been futile: “And along with all this order and acquiescence there is a familiar pressure, of longing or foreboding, that strange lump of something you can feel sometimes in music or a landscape, barely withheld, promising to burst and reveal itself, but it doesn’t, it dissolves and goes away” (79).

Frances has not, though, lost hope that *love* may still present deeper, even sacred possibilities. She has decided, however, that she must be prepared to take risks, even if on the surface of things, she appears foolish: “But what about this, her affair with Ted Makkavala? She is not so far gone that she cannot see how foolish that would seem to anybody looking on...Never mind. If foolish means risky and imprudent, she does not care. Perhaps all she has ever wanted was a chance to take chances” (79). She is aware of the transformative power of sexual attraction and love—how it is capable of transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary. For example, as Ted prepares the place of their lovemaking, his “ordinary” actions are almost deified for Frances: “She had been powerfully moved by this simple preparatory act, by the way he spread the jacket open” (84), and we see the suggestions of prayer in Ted’s simple movements: “She was stirred by the memory as he knelt in this narrow space and spread out her coat” (84). We are reminded also of Del Jordan’s sense of the “brutal lightning” of sexual desire in Frances’s memories of her lovemaking with Ted: “Frances looking back at this time always thought

of lightning, a crazy and shattering, painful kind of lust” (85). Moreover, as with Del’s, Frances’s language takes on transcendent, almost liturgically repetitive qualities:

There was a peculiar code, a different feeling, for each time. The time in the science room with the lightning and wet paint. The time in the car in the rain in the middle of the afternoon, with sleepy rhythms, so pleased and sleepy they were then that it seemed they could hardly be bothered to do the next thing. The time had a curved, smooth feeling for her, in memory; the curve came from the sheets of rainwater on the windshield, looking like looped-back curtains. (85-86)⁷

The clear and strong *potential* for realizing the sacred and transcendent in Frances’s relationship with Ted, however, does not fully manifest, even though she ends up married to him. The possibility of filling the gap in Frances’s life left by the emptiness of her traditional religious faith, the gap in Ted’s which he has not been able to fill with logical, positivistic science—these are the gaps that their relationship might have gone some way to filling. It does not, however, partly for reasons we have encountered in earlier Munro stories. First, Ted is not willing, perhaps even able, to relinquish his egotistical need for control—to give over parts of himself other than his physical sexuality; in short, to strive toward agape. In an epiphanic moment Frances realizes this about Ted, as he proudly reports his “victory” over his powerful sister-in-law, Kartrud. Frances’s musings here about Ted’s self-serving strategies are reinforced by the similarities between his last name and that of the arch-strategist, Machiavelli:

He did it all for himself, Frances was thinking. He wasn’t thinking of Greta [his wife] for a moment. Or of Bobby. He was thinking of himself and of his beliefs and not giving into his enemies. That was what mattered to him. She could not help seeing this and she did not like it. She could not help seeing how much she did not like it. That did not mean that she had stopped liking him; at least, she had not stopped loving him. But there was a change. (103)

⁷ The epiphanic qualities of this episode are particularly striking—especially when viewed from the perspective of the theories of Henri Bergson that I will be exploring in considerable detail in Chapters Five and Six. What Frances experiences here are what Bergson would term “retrospective epiphanies.” Further, the suggestions that time here is “curved” and “looped back” resonate with aspects of David Bohm’s Holographic Principle.

The change is a crucial one, and it is still evident thirty years later when Frances returns to Hanratty for Adelaide's funeral. Significantly, Ted does not return with her. He, we are told, is in hospital with emphysema: "He goes into the hospital when there is a crisis, is relieved, comes home again. This will go on for a while" (108). Symbolically, Ted has been smothered by his own inability to open up—to breathe. The hospital becomes a kind of sanctuary for him—a kind of church predicated on the technological, scientific paradigm to which he has clung.

As so often happens in Munro's fiction, we are given the full range of the complexities of the human situation—in this instance, Ted and Frances's. It is true that Ted's brand of egotistical self-centeredness, his lack of agape, profoundly compromise the potential of a deeper, sacred connection between them, but Frances shares some of the responsibility for this as well. Frances, although she recognizes her own dissatisfaction with Ted's actions thirty years earlier, has decided to overlook them. She did not exert the kind of Kali force that might have rendered theirs a more sacred relationship, despite the fact that, in *Kartrud*, she was afforded one of the strongest "Kali-mentors" in Munro's fiction.

Upon Bobby's death, there arrive from Finland some members of Ted's wife's (Greta's) family. Chief among them in *every* respect is *Kartrud*. *Kartrud* is a particularly clear embodiment of the profoundly ambivalent, powerful "terrible mother" Kali. Sitting in the church before having sex, symbolically "under a picture of Jesus walking by the Sea of Galilee" (101), Ted relates to Frances his impressions of *Kartrud* and company. His words amount to a backhanded invocation of *Kartrud*'s power:

Greta's family descended on us. They drove all night, two nights. I don't know how they did it. They commandeered a snowplow to go ahead of them for about fifty miles in one place. Those women are capable of anything. The father's just a shadow. The women are terrors. *Kartrud* is the worst. She has eight children of her own and she never stops running her sisters and her sisters' families and anybody else who'll allow her.

Greta is just useless against her. (101)

We are also told earlier that "*Kartrud* is olive-skinned and slightly slant-eyed, very dark" (99).

Kartrud is a particularly clear example of what Beverly Rasporich means when she argues that Munro authorizes female experience and “reaches back into time, associates several of her characters with primal energy, shades them with pagan and mythic features” (34). Kartrud comes of the Finno-Ugrian tribes, “shrouded in mystery” (97). Further, we learn that “they believed in a god of the air, a god of the forests, a god of the water” (97). Ted has clearly rejected his pagan roots—“No pagan ceremonies lingered in his mind (rubbish, he said when Frances told him about sacrifices to ghosts)” (98), but this pagan force *does* resonate for Frances: “Frances learned the names of these gods and surprised Ted with them: *Ukko, Tapio, Ahti*” (97).

That Ted would sever himself from these pagan roots comes as little surprise, especially given the female-dominated structure of these ancient tribes, but Munro makes clear that Kartrud’s kind of female force is what is missing in his and Frances’s relationship. The most obvious person to infuse this ancient Kali force is Frances. Unfortunately, Frances does not. The choice she *does make* strikes me as an all too common choice in contemporary Western culture. Frances “had always believed something was going to happen to her, some clearly dividing moment would come, and she would be presented with a future” (107). For Frances, as for so many, the moment never unequivocally and clearly presents. Without active participation, it very seldom will. Frances had to take more than an academic interest in Kartrud’s kind of power; she had to take the risk of asserting some. She did not, and the results are drearily predictable. For example, every time she gave birth, “Frances felt relief” (107)—presumably relief that she bore Ted no sons to whom he would have passed along his kind of self-centered, male control.

At the conclusion of the story, Frances is visited by another epiphany, this one revealing her awareness that the kind of transformation of the ordinary and of people’s lives—of her life—that a deeper, Kali-infused relationship/marriage would have afforded her has not come to pass:

What *difference*, thinks Frances. She doesn’t know where that thought comes from or what it means, for of course there is a difference, anybody can see that, a life’s difference. She’s had her love, her scandal, her man,

her children. But inside she's ticking away, all by herself, the same Frances who was there before any of it.
Not altogether the same, surely.
The same. (109).

To conclude this chapter on such a negative note, however, threatens to distort its overall thrust. Like Del Jordan in her relationships with Art Chamberlain, Jerry Storey, and Garnet French, and like other characters discussed in the foregoing pages, Frances fails to achieve any genuine, lasting spiritual/religious fulfillment in her sexual relationship or subsequent marriage. This is not to say, though, that she and/or these other characters have *completely* failed in their sexual questing toward spiritual ends. Failure can be powerfully instructive. Despite the failures these characters have suffered—and this is *especially* true of Del Jordan—I would still concur with B. Pfaus' assessment that, overall, and in gradual increments, we can still see "Munro's protagonists moving to a more complete and 'whole dense vision of the world'" (qtd in Rasporich 112). We can now turn to protagonists/narrators who much less equivocally achieve at least relative success in their respective quests in the realm of sexuality and the body.

CHAPTER FOUR

SEEKING AND FINDING THE SACRED IN THE REALM OF EROS

Clarifying Eros

In *Locations of the Sacred*, William Closson James notes that many people in Western culture who seek the sacred outside of traditional religious belief systems have come to realize that, at this historical moment, “the sacred is located between what was and what is not yet” (xiii). During such a moment, the greatest challenge facing a realistic writer such as Alice Munro resides not so much in depicting the failures, disillusionment, and disappointment that some of her protagonists/narrators encounter in their various searches for spiritual and/or religious fulfillment. The foregoing chapter makes clear that Munro has successfully risen to *that* particular challenge. No, the greater challenge is realistically depicting *successes* for protagonists/narrators who seek the sacred along unconventional avenues such as in sexual relationships. This chapter sets out to demonstrate that Munro has risen to *this* challenge as well.

For the purposes of this chapter, however, I must further refine and clarify the term success and the crucial term, Eros: The successes I will be exploring in this chapter extend over quite a lengthy continuum. At one end of this continuum, we have the successes of characters such as the unnamed narrator in “The Spanish Lady,” the similarly unnamed narrator in “Bardon Bus,” Sam, one of the central characters in “The Moon In the Orange Street Skating Rink,” and Trudy, the protagonist in “Circle of Prayer.” These characters—of course, to varying degrees—achieve relatively modest levels of success, often no more than a considerably clearer understanding of what they had *really* been pursuing in their respective sexual relationships, and/or recognizing the sacred *possibilities* in the realm of sexuality and the body. Having these characters achieve such awareness clearly *does* constitute success, however, given the challenge noted above that Munro faces in maintaining her consistently high level of realism—what some critics have termed her “photographic fidelity.” Given the profoundly diminished spiritual and/or religious avenues in contemporary Western culture, even being able to articulate the *appropriate questions* regarding spiritual direction constitutes considerable success. Such questions are posed by at least two of the characters I will be discussing in this chapter. Trudy, in “Circle of Prayer,” for example, is finally able to ask herself the age-old, essentially spiritual question: “Is that all?” (372). And Sam, near the conclusion

of “The Moon In the Orange Street Skating Rink” sets out very similar questions: Do some moments, he wonders, reveal that “we have a life of happiness with which we only occasionally, knowingly intersect?” (218).

However, at the other end of this continuum of success—admittedly more sparsely populated—we find characters in Munro stories who achieve, variously, a considerable balance of genuine Eros, Kali-force, agape, *positive* ambivalence around the sexual and the bodily, and who—to varying degrees—achieve a certain degree of mature wisdom. Again acknowledging considerable differences, I place in this latter group characters such as Eileen in “Memorial,” Callie in “The Moon In the Orange Street Skating Rink,” Charlotte and Gjurdhi in “The Albanian Virgin,” and particularly Enid in “For the Love of a Good Woman.”

Eros is the other term that must be further refined and clarified for the purposes of this and subsequent chapters. As earlier discussions have made clear, it is crucial to recognize that Eros entails *much* more than physical, coital sexuality. Again, Iris Murdoch’s perspective on Eros, especially her connection between Eros and “the particular”—closely associated with what I have been terming “the ordinary”—is very helpful in illuminating how I am intending the term Eros in upcoming discussions:

The activity of Eros is orientation of desire. Reflecting in these ways we see ‘salvation’ or ‘good’ as connected with, or incarnate in, all sorts of particulars, and not just as an ‘abstract idea.’ ‘Saving the phenomena’ is happening all the time. We do not lose the particular, it teaches us love, we understand, we *see* it, as Plato’s carpenter sees the table, or Cezanne sees Mont Ste. Victoire or the girl in the bed-sitter sees her potted plant or her cat. (497)

Murdoch never specifically mentions Alice Munro in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, but phrases such as the one above about the “girl in the bedsitter” perfectly capture the sense of Eros in “the particular,” in “the ordinary” that we so frequently encounter in Munro’s work.

Murdoch also clearly acknowledges her debt to Plato in her formulation of Eros: “I have taken here the image (concept) of Eros from Plato. ‘Eros is the continuous operation of spiritual *energy*, desire, intellect, love, as it moves and responds to particular

objects of attention” (496). Underlying this Eros is “the idea of the loving good.” This “good represents the reality of which God is the dream” (Murdoch 496). The good Murdoch identifies here is very much in line with what Charles Taylor identifies as a “hypergood,”—goods that “command our awe, respect, or admiration” (Taylor 20). Murdoch declares that this same good “purifies the desire which seeks it,” and, further, that this good is “not just a picturesque metaphysical notion” (496). It is helpful when attempting to grasp what I intend here by Eros to recognize *distortions* of desire, rather than orientation of desire:

Desire for what is corrupt and worthless, the degradation of love, its metamorphosis into ambition, vanity, cruelty, greed, jealousy, hatred, or the parched demoralizing deserts of its absence, are phenomena often experienced and readily recognized. . . . People know the difference between good and evil, it takes quite a lot of theorizing to persuade them to say or imagine that they do not. (496-97)

I am beginning to be mindful, though, of the danger of rarifying the term Eros too much. Munro eschews—just as Murdoch does—any sense of smug saintliness in her manifestations of authentic Eros. I wish to stress that “ordinary” sexual desire and/or “ordinary” coital sexuality are crucial in the Eros I am identifying in Munro’s work. Again, however, as upcoming discussions will demonstrate, this physical aspect must be “oriented” to the good if the sexual relationship in question is to offer spiritual fulfillment. Manifesting the type of Eros outlined above seems a particularly tall order for *any* realistically drawn character in modern/postmodern, secular, contemporary Western fiction, and I am ever mindful of Munro’s refusal to idealize her protagonists/narrators. As I shall demonstrate in the balance of this chapter, however, in a number of her stories Munro does provide us with credible characters who succeed in varying ways in fulfilling the foregoing requirements of thus locating the sacred in the realm of Eros.

To the extent that Munro portrays such successes, she is implicitly setting out a kind of spiritual vision, and it should be abundantly clear by now that this vision emerges essentially from female/feminine sources. This vision presents two fundamental aspects. First, it clearly responds to the longstanding denigration and oppression of women and the feminine that lies at the heart of the Christian tradition. Northrop Frye argues that

this oppression of women and the feminine may be found, literally, in the *Genesis* of Christianity: “What Adam and Eve seem really to have got, as a result of eating of the wrong tree was a repressive morality founded on a sexual neurosis” (*Words* 194). This neurosis finds some of its most virulent expression in the words of some of the early “Church Fathers.” Karen Armstrong argues that figures such as Tertullian are responsible for a heritage of alienation: “Nowhere is this alienation more evident than in the denigration of sexuality in general and women in particular” (124). Armstrong goes on to illustrate the intensity of this denigration as found in Tertullian’s writing:

Do you not know that you are each an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live on too. *You* are the devil’s gateway; *you* are the unsealer of that forbidden tree; *you* are the first deserter of the divine law; *you* are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. *You* so carelessly destroyed man, God’s image. On account of *your* desert, even the Son of God had to die. (124)

The words may be centuries old; unfortunately, however, within much of contemporary traditional Christianity, the sentiment persists. Armstrong notes that Western Christianity has “never fully recovered from this neurotic misogyny” (124). Numerous examples of Pauline aversion and of the demonizing of sexuality—particularly female sexuality—in Munro’s fiction bear out the truth of assessments such as Armstrong’s.

On the other hand, the implicit spiritual vision in Munro’s work also presents *spiritual alternatives* that emerge out of female/feminine sources. Richard Tarnas adroitly sums up aspects of what he terms the “ascending feminine” within the general culture, aspects that dovetail in illuminating ways with what I am identifying in a number of Munro’s stories:

It [the “ascending feminine”] is visible also in the widespread urge to reconnect with the body, the emotions, the unconscious, the imagination and intuition, in the new concern with the mystery of childbirth and the dignity of the maternal, in the growing recognition of an immanent intelligence in nature...in the new awareness of the feminine perspectives of the divine, in the archeological recovery of the Goddess tradition and

the contemporary reemergence of Goddess spirituality, in the rise of Sophianic Judaeo-Christian theology. (443).

What Tarnas is noting here on a macro-cultural level is what critics such as Beverly Rasporich are noting on the micro-fictional level in Munro. This is what Rasporich is driving at in *Dance of the Sexes* when she talks about Munro's "heroines in the sexual dance" making the "mythic return to the maternal body"—a return that is for Munro's female protagonists/narrators nothing short of a return to "the source of female identity" (Rasporich 123).

The Female/Feminine/The Body: "Heirs of the Living Body"

This struggle to spiritually "rematriate" the female body begins early in Munro's fiction, so we now return to a story from her second collection *Lives of Girls and Women*, "Heirs of the Living Body," to explore the genesis of this struggle to retrieve the female body. The central occurrence in "Heirs" is the funeral of Del Jordan's Uncle Craig, and it is his *dead* body—a body that terrifies Del—that proves to be the catalyst for Del's realization of the revivifying force of the countervailing, *living*, female body obliquely alluded to in the story's title. Uncle Craig is in many ways the embodiment of patriarchal, God-like male power in the world in which Del has grown up. Del informs us that she had actually enjoyed a kind of passive freedom around her Uncle Craig, paradoxically *because* of his judgmental, patriarchal power: "He often thought me flighty and stupid and I did not care much; there was something large and impersonal about his judgment that left me free. He himself was not hurt or diminished in any way by my unsatisfactoriness, though he would point it out" (23).

However, Uncle Craig and the impersonal, judgmental, patriarchal power that he quite benevolently wielded are dead, and the funeral that marks the end of Uncle Craig and all that he represented in Del's world serves as an important and quite traumatic initiation for Del. Del's initiation in "Heirs" moves her from a quite comfortable, passive existence in a world of self-centered patriarchy into the considerably less comfortable, demanding, active, Kali-like realm of the bodily—Del's own body, but also the "mythic

maternal body” of which Beverly Rasporich speaks. “Heirs” also firmly establishes themes that become central preoccupations in Munro’s later work—particularly the spiritual and/or religious significance of the connection between death and birth/sex, and the attendant *positive* ambivalence of what the Russian literary and cultural critic Mikhail Bahktin terms the “grotesque image of the body” (303) and of the “material lower bodily stratum” (368).

“Heirs” pivots on two very significant interactions between Del Jordan and her cousin, Mary Agnes Oliphant. The first of these occurs when Mary and her mother are visiting the Jordans; Del’s mother suggests that Del take Mary Agnes to visit the barnyard. Reluctantly obeying—Del is not overly fond of her older, overly protected cousin—she takes Mary on what would seem a quite innocent, “ordinary” walk. Del and Mary come upon a dead cow—a dead *female* body that provides an anticipatory corollary to Uncle Craig’s dead male body later in the story. Coming upon this dead cow, Del, at first, discerns and traces patterns on the dead cow’s hide:

I took a stick and tapped the hide. The flies rose, circled, and dropped back. I could see that the cow’s hide was a map. The brown could be the ocean, the white the floating continents. With my stick I traced their strange shapes, their curving coasts, trying to keep the stick exactly between the white and the brown. (37)

The symbolism of this episode has not been lost on various Munro critics. Ajay Heble, for example, argues that Del “sees the cow as a kind of map, a referential tool, which when studied, will yield information and meaning” (55). Heble goes on to argue that for Del, “the cow’s hide, however, turns out to be a map which yields no such revelation,” because, “it is not the kind of map which Del’s mother likes” (56). I agree that Del’s cartographic explorations do not yield the kind of cerebral “information” that Heble is focusing on, but on a more mythic or religious level, Del’s intuitive “mappings” reveal a good deal.

First, I am struck by Del’s very graphic, bodily interest in death as demonstrated in her prodding and mapping of the dead cow’s body. Secondly, I am struck by a connection provided by Huston Smith in his recent book, *Why Religion Matters* in which Smith instructs us about

Hinduism's theory of the four *yugas*—four steadily declining ages that occur in every cosmic cycle. India likens the decline to a cow, which in the first stage stands solidly on all four legs, in the second limps on all three, in the third wobbles on two, and in the last teeters on a single leg before collapsing, whereupon the cycle starts all over again. (202)

This fourth and last stage is called *Kali Yuga*, the “dark” or “death” stage. This is the time (*yuga*) of transition—the death of an old age and/or paradigm and the coming of a new cycle. Further, as Gavin Flood reminds us, from the perspective of Indian mythology, particularly as regards Kali and Shiva, “the body is divine and contains the cosmic hierarchy within it” (160).

Quite unconsciously, Del is symbolically mapping out a fundamentally female/feminine response to death, the phenomenon that consistently preoccupies Del and her creator, Alice Munro. The cow's body becomes the cosmic female body, another version of the “great and terrible mother”—Kali. Del's quite literal rendering of the cow's body into a Mother Earth figure pushes her to deeper existential, implicitly spiritual, questions, and it is significant that the *dead* cow, not the living animal, has prompted these considerations: “I had never once looked at a cow alive and thought what I thought now: why should there be a cow?” (38). I find the Eastern mythic/religious possibilities here very intriguing, but I am also struck by some of the *Western* possibilities as well. In chapters Five and Six, I will explore—as they apply to some of Munro's fiction—connections between Henri Bergson's notions about time and existence and those of Martin Heidegger; here I am struck by the close parallels between Del's question, “Why should there be a cow?” and what Heidegger considered the central philosophical/existential question, “Why is there anything at all and not rather nothing” (Reese 217).

For now, however, my interest lies in how Del and Mary's encounter with what Del calls the “day-ud” cow (37) presents strong mythic undertones that—albeit subconsciously—help to prepare Del for her upcoming trials with her Uncle Craig's dead body. Like most critics, Beverly Rasporich is deeply impressed with Munro's ability to capture surface “ordinary” details, but in her discussion of “Heirs,” Rasporich is also struck by the mythic aspects of Del's response to the dead cow:

Despite the ordinariness of the surface lives of girls and women, the novel is not without its telling mythic moments and female characters of archetypal cast. When the child Del catches the beauty of the dead cow and stands hesitating mistress over it in “Heirs of the Living Body,” she recreates the attitude and power of Isis, the teacher of agriculture and goddess of fertility whose sacred symbol was the cow. (46-47)

I welcome Rasporich’s mythic reading of the passage/story and concur with her point about Del’s potential—and soon to be realized—role as Isis, fertility goddess. However, given that Del has demonstrated little interest in agriculture or animal husbandry, I see Del’s posture here as much more reminiscent of the goddess Kali, with her profound involvement with *both* death and sexual power and fertility. After all, we should not lose sight of the fact that this cow is “day-ud.” Dudley Young, though, reminds us of the underlying connections between various cultural manifestations of the archetypal female/feminine, what he calls the “Magna Mater.” Young notes that even Darwin’s idea of Nature can be seen “as an intriguing amalgam of Inanna, Isis, Demeter, and Kali; the inner circle of Magna Mater. These goddesses fall in love, give birth and kill: their matter is mortality and the earth that bears it” (34).

Back to our two young “priestesses”: Prompted by Del’s dare—“I dare you touch it...Touch a dead cow” (38), Mary Agnes emerges from her somnolent state and engages in a ritualistic, sacred interaction with the dead cow’s body:

Mary Agnes came up slowly, and to my astonishment she bent down, grunting, looking at the eye as if she knew I had been wondering about it, and she laid her hand—she laid the palm of her hand—over it, over the eye. (80)

There are strong suggestions and images in this ceremonial scene that might be seen as predating even the goddesses Isis, Istar, or Kali—that go back to primal, Neolithic times (Mary Agnes’ “grunting,” for example), but what is essential here is that these two “ordinary” young women transcend their usual petty differences and resentments. The epiphanic nature of Del’s contemplation makes clear that, at some level, Del is aware of this transcendence. Her insights here into herself and into Mary Agnes demonstrate her

recognition of the hidden power—female power—in the body of the dead cow, in herself, and in her ostensibly “fragile” cousin:

It often seemed then that nobody else knew what went on, or what a person was, but me. For instance people said ‘poor Mary Agnes’ or implied it, by a drop in pitch, a subdued protective tone of voice, as if she no secrets, no place of her own, and that was not true. (38)

Although Del does not yet know it, it is this hidden power that she—and, to some extent, Mary—will have to draw upon at the upcoming funeral of her Uncle Craig.

This power will help Del in the essentially spiritual task of coming to terms with death by recognizing the underlying connection between death and the body/birth/sexuality. Such power not only armors Del for her trials at her Uncle’s funeral, it recurs often in various ways for later female Munro protagonists/narrators. Very importantly, however, this power also emerges from transforming the profoundly negative ambivalence experienced by Del Jordan, Mary Agnes Oliphant, and numerous subsequent Munro female protagonists/narrators into the *positive*, revivifying ambivalence identified and anatomized by Mikhail Bakhtin. This transformation is *essential* to the successes of Munro’s female characters in realizing authentic Eros—in achieving some level of spiritual fulfillment through the bodily and the sexual. In tracing this move from a negative to a more positive ambivalence, it is helpful to identify the specific source of Mary Agnes’s negative feelings about her own body.

Quite early in “Heirs,” we discover that Mary Agnes was assaulted—although, technically, not raped: “They [five boys] took her out to the fairgrounds and took off all her clothes and left her lying out in the cold mud, and she caught bronchitis and nearly died” (36). Recalling what she was told about the assault on Mary Agnes, Del describes the profound degradation and shame *she* feels at any time she has to be naked. Because this strong aversion, disgust, and shame—associated with the female body and, by extension, with female sexuality—is such a crucial consideration in my discussion of the sacred possibilities of the sexual and the bodily in Munro’s overall oeuvre, I will quote this early example at some length:

Having to be naked myself, the thought of being naked, stabbed me with pain in the pit of my stomach. Every time I thought of the doctor pulling

down my pants and jabbing the needle in my buttocks, for smallpox, I felt outraged, frantic, unbearably, almost exquisitely, humiliated. I thought of Mary Agnes's body lying exposed on the fairgrounds, her prickly cold buttocks sticking out—that did seem to me the most shameful, helpless looking part of anybody's body—and I thought that if it had happened to me, to be seen like that, I could not live on afterwards. (36)

The deep aversion to her own naked body that Del describes here clearly goes well beyond ambivalence. It also makes it difficult to see what could possibly transform such aversion into what I am terming a *positive* ambivalence around the bodily. Fortunately, Mary Agnes' experience and Del's consequent aversion is not typical for all of Munro's female protagonists/narrators. Therefore, if Del can overcome this aversion—and as we have seen in discussions of “Lives of Girls and Women” and “Baptism,” she *does* largely overcome it—then hope prevails that Del and subsequent female protagonists/narrators will experience the much more positive, even transcendent, ambivalence identified by the Russian literary and cultural critic, Mikhail Bakhtin.

A number of Munro critics have drawn upon Bakhtin in their respective discussions of Munro's work, from quite fleeting references (e.g. Ajay Heble in *Tumble of Reason*) to quite extensive integration of the Russian critic's cultural and literary theories (e.g. Magdalene Redekop in *Mothers and Other Clowns*). Magdalene Redekop does enlist Bakhtin in some of her analysis of art and gender in Munro, but no critics to my knowledge have invoked Bakhtin to address specifically the ubiquitous ambivalence around the body and sexuality that we find throughout Munro's work. I have found Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque particularly useful in my examination of other Canadian writers such as Robertson Davies and Robert Kroetsch (unpub.M.A. thesis), and it is clear to me how key aspects of his theory of the “carnivalesque” apply to aspects of Munro's work as well. Bakhtin sets out his theories about the bodily and the sexual most extensively in his work *Rabelais and His World* wherein he postulates two of the concepts that I find especially helpful in studying Munro: “the grotesque image of the body” (303-67) and “the material bodily lower stratum” (368-436).

First, through these two concepts Bakhtin theorizes how the “ordinary” human body draws our attention to the inextricable links between life and death. As Bakhtin puts it,

...eating, drinking...as well as copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up by another body—all these acts are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world, or on the confines of the old and new body. In all of these events, the beginning and the end of life are closely linked and interwoven. (317)

The body, Bakhtin asserts, is the “inexhaustible vessel of death and conception...and the life of one body is born from the death of the preceding, older one” (318).

In “Heirs of the Living Body,” we see this connection between life and death played out, first, in Del and Mary Agnes’ interaction with the dead cow and, later, in Del’s response to her Uncle Craig’s dead body. For Del, a healthier, more balanced sense of her own body is borne out of these interactions and, further, these interactions begin to provide Del a spiritual perspective she has not been able to find in traditional Christianity. Del’s perspective increasingly emerges as Munro returns her, and the reader, again and again to the particular, the concrete and the “ordinary,” including the “ordinary,” *mortal* body. What Del is slowly beginning to gain—as reflected in her question, “Why should there be a cow?”—is an alternative cosmological framework to the abstract, patriarchal Christian one that has *not* spoken to her. Bakhtin argues that when a human becomes aware of the “material principle within himself [and, of course, *herself*]...in his own body, he becomes aware of the cosmos within himself” (336).

In what he terms the “ambivalent birth-death theme” (331), Bakhtin also stresses the connection between death/burial and the womb, giving us a “picture of the earth’s motherhood and of burial as a return to the womb” (327). Consider in this light, Del’s response to her Aunt Elspeth’s use of the word “tomb” in “Heirs of the Living Body”: “I loved the sound of that word when I first heard her say it. I did not know exactly what it was, or had got it mixed up with womb” (45). Moreover, Del imagines a light—a kind of life force—in this imaginary tomb: “I saw us inside some sort of hollow marble egg [again, a female womb image] filled with blue light, that did not need to get in from the outside” (45).

Moreover, the connection between Munro's imagery and aspects of Hinduism is also strikingly direct. In Hinduism, there are various forms of *Linga*, the essentially sexual, fertile life-force. One of the most prevalent is "the Cosmic Egg":

Totality is often represented in the form of an egg. The universe appears to man like an egg divided into halves, sky and earth. The egg is also considered the source of life, in which both male and female forms are united. (Danielou 228)

Again, I am not suggesting that Munro is consciously or deliberately drawing upon this Eastern religious/spiritual source; I am suggesting, rather, that Munro's explorations in the spiritual realm lead her further away from Patriarchal Christianity and toward more gender-balanced perspectives such as Bakhtin's or those of Hinduism noted above. (I am also reminded here of the Chinese tomb that the narrator, Janet, in "The Moons of Jupiter" visits just before returning to her dying father in the nearby hospital)

Although it would seem unlikely that the theoretical concepts of a 20th century neo-Marxist such as Bakhtin would share much in common with the qualities of the ancient Indian goddess Kali, there are a number of strong parallels between the two—all of which find some kind of expression in the spiritual and/or religious aspects we encounter in the fiction of Alice Munro. Both Bakhtin and myths about Kali, for example, emphasize profound but positive ambivalence, ambiguity, and paradox. Gavin Flood notes how Kali, like Shiva, "embodies paradox and ambiguity: she is erotic yet detached; gentle yet heroic; beautiful yet terrible" (177). As we have already seen, both also emphasize how the "ordinary" human body is a microcosm of the cosmic hierarchy. The connection between the god Shiva and his consort, Kali reveals the human body as divine, containing "the cosmic hierarchy within it, and the cosmic polarity of the male deity and his consort, the female energy... this union within the body is the symbolic expression of liberation" (Flood 160). Bakhtin: When a human becomes aware of the cosmic hierarchy within him/herself, he/she "becomes aware of the cosmos within him[her]self" (336). Finally—as has already been made clear—both Bakhtin and Kali place profound emphasis on the ambivalent revivification of death.

All of these aspects common to Bakhtin and the mythological Kali find some expression in "Heirs of the Living body." The central occasion in the story, as in so many

Munro stories, is a funeral, an observation of death. As the Jordans prepare for Uncle Craig's funeral, they express their various responses to and/or perspectives on death. Del's mother goes on at length about what she sees as the hypocrisy of the Christian perspective on death and immortality: "If they really believed in Christianity, it'd all be dancing and rejoicing—after all, they spend their whole life singing and praying about getting out of this world and on their way to Heaven" (39). Ida Jordan then goes on to tell her husband and Del about an article she recently read about organ donations; the title of the article is actually the title of the story:

"So all these parts won't die at all, they'll go on living as part of somebody else. Part of another combination. Then you won't be able properly to speak of death at all. 'Heirs of the Living Body.' That's what the article was called. We would all be heirs of one another's bodies, we would all be donors too. Death as we know it now would be done away with!" (41)

It is important to recognize that, despite superficial parallels, what Ida Jordan is putting forward is fundamentally different from what Bakhtin is saying about the ambivalent revivification of death. Bakhtin is speaking on a symbolic level about the *need* for the old body—various bodies including physical bodies, socio-political bodies, cultural bodies—to die off in order to make way for the new. What Del's mother and the article she has read are advancing is a Newtonian-Cartesian technological response to death borne out of a *fear* of death, and out of what Ernest Becker calls the widespread "denial of death."

As we have seen in "Age of Faith" and other stories from *Lives*, Del is not inclined to accept her mother's atheistic scientific worldview, but her mother's pontifications here *do* resonate to some extent with what Del *believes* she wants around death. Del wants "death pinned down and isolated behind a wall of particular facts and circumstances, not floating around loose, ignored but powerful, waiting to get in anywhere" (39). This clearly demonstrates Del's terror of death. At some level, though, Del feels that death and most of what happens in life are chaotic and out of control, for her *and* her parents: "I had the feeling that, to them as to me, everything that happened in the world was out of control, unreal yet calamitous" (26). As uncomfortable as this

feeling may be, it is this kind of chaotic life/death force that *does* lie at the heart of what Bakhtin terms the “carnavalesque,” and these are the calamitous, chaotic forces that Del and her now fellow “priestess,” Mary Agnes Oliphant, are going to bring into the midst of their Uncle Craig’s funeral.

The one thing Del least wants to do at her Uncle’s funeral is to see his body. Mary Agnes, however, unconsciously acting in the role of Kali initiator, pressures Del to do this very thing: “You come and—*see*—Uncle Craig” (46). What happens next is a crucial occurrence in Del’s finally coming to terms with death and is her symbolic initiation into the Kali realm of the bodily and death:

I dropped my head and got her arm in my open mouth. I got her solid downy arm just below the elbow, and I bit and bit and broke the skin and in pure freedom thinking I had done the worst thing that I would ever do, I tasted Mary Agnes Oliphant’s blood. (46)

There are a number of important ramifications of Del’s action—or, more accurately of Del and Mary’s *interaction*—of biting Mary Agnes and tasting her blood. Recall, these two young women, by virtue of their earlier “ceremony” around the dead cow are initiates of mythic, pagan, female death rites—of the mythic female realm that Beverly Rasporich and Magdalene Redekop identify in a number of Munro’s stories. Rasporich, for instance, says that “Heirs” is a clear early example in Munro’s work of “a mythic, pagan world where ordinary characters occupy another dimension as earth mothers and primitive, sisterly subdeities” (xviii). Here Del and Mary take their Kali-like sub-deity status one step further—into the realm of *human* life and death. Further, on numerous occasions, Gavin Flood draws attention to the goddess Kali as a “blood-drinker” (177-78, 183-84), and Del has tasted Mary Agnes’s blood. Del and Mary’s is a profoundly physical, bodily interaction, and the “pure freedom” that Del feels is linked to the liberation found in honoring the female body and female blood. Although one might read Del’s blood drinking as a kind of inverted Eucharist, her action is clearly not primarily Christian in manner or deed. It honors not the blood of Christ, or, by extension, the blood of the Heavenly Father; it honors the blood of the “Magna Mater.”

Del and Mary’s bloody and bodily interaction at Uncle Craig’s funeral celebrates the *female* bodily, sensory, “ordinary” response to death in ways reminiscent of the

female responses we saw to death in “Time of Death.” Further, their all too public female “blood-letting” recalls the much more private, carnivalesque celebration of the female body indulged in by Del’s aunts on an earlier occasion in the story. They were tumbling in the hay-mow, “their aprons flying, laughing at themselves...snorting sounds of pleasure” (43). Nothing could be more fundamentally carnivalesque, more Rabelaisian. We discover how the outwardly constrained, repressed, and “proper” aunts played carnivalesque practical jokes on a particularly pretentious hired man (one of the aunts dressed up and “blacked [her] hands and face to look like a darky” and badly scared him (28)). On another occasion, they fooled Uncle Craig—disguised, again, this time as a young engaged couple wanting to get married. Uncle Craig’s response says more than he or the aunts realize: “Elspeth! Grace! You pair of she devils!” (29).

All of these physical, bodily actions are dealt with at length in Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque. The subverting and overturning of established power structures—including, especially, the power structure of organized religion—draw upon the energy and power of the body. This strong focus on the body in “Heirs” and other Munro stories runs directly counter to the patriarchal, Protestant moral zeitgeist of Jubilee, described so scathingly by Joseph Gold in his essay on Munro, “Our Feeling Exactly”: “Post Victorian, sexually repressive, male chauvinist, narrow-minded Jubilee, a town whose name evokes with wry glee the notoriously unjubilant nature of Ontario’s Victorianism” (7). Gold goes on to decry how “protesting in Ontario is like punching a feather mattress in a sound-proof room” (7), but Munro’s is no conventional protest. In “Heirs” and numerous other stories, the potent force of the carnivalesque female body begins a process that, as Joseph Gold says later, “blows up Ontario.”

Moreover, it is mostly, but not only, Del and Mary who manifest rejuvenating female power at Uncle Craig’s funeral. We may rest assured that the abundance of food brought to the occasion is the work of the women of the family and community. Bakhtin points out the ambivalent connection between eating and death. “No meal can be sad,” he writes, “Sadness and food are incompatible (while death and food are perfectly compatible). The banquet always celebrates a victory” (283). Referring specifically to the funeral banquet, Bakhtin elaborates that such banquets are replete with the “ambivalence of all folk images. The end must contain the potentialities of the new

beginning, just as death leads to a new birth” (283). At the funeral, Del observes, “Everywhere I looked I saw food. A cold roast of pork, fat roast chickens...scalloped potatoes, tomato aspic...” (44). This cataloguing continues for an entire paragraph.

I am reminded that etymologically “Agape” is associated with eating as in the “love feast” of the early Christians, but the funeral feast at Uncle Craig’s funeral is much more connected with the underground, female carnivalesque at work—involved in the essentially spiritual task of, paradoxically, celebrating death with the stuff of life. Aunt Moira, whose name directly invokes *morir*, the Spanish verb for dying, sums it up: “No more than enough,” said aunt Moira *darkly*. They all bring their appetites to funerals” (emphasis mine 44).

Del’s biting of Mary Agnes encompasses all of these aspects of the “ordinary,” bodily, female response to death. Moreover, Del’s “barbaric” action (47) quite unexpectedly brings her into her immediate female community. Del recounts, “When I bit Mary Agnes, I thought I was biting myself off from everything” (46). On the contrary, she discovers herself “surrounded and taken care of, shepherded into this room and put on the sofa, blanketed, as if I were sick, given the cake and the tea” (48). Later, Del feels even further pulled into the collective body of *all* the people at the funeral: “The house was full of people, pressed together, melted together like blunt old crayons, warm, acquiescent, singing” (48).

As I made clear at the outset of this chapter, however, the successes experienced by various Munro characters in attaining some level of spiritual fulfillment through the bodily and the sexual are invariably *relative* successes. Like almost every significant development in the lives of Munro’s female protagonists/narrators, Del’s experience at her Uncle’s funeral contains a certain degree of negative ambivalence. Del’s is a world strongly imbued with Pauline aversion to the bodily and the sexual, and Del has internalized a good deal of this aversion and shame. When Del is first confined to one of the bedrooms after biting Mary Agnes, she experiences an almost unbearable claustrophobic aversion and humiliation: “I felt held close, stifled, as if it were not air I had to move through in this world but something thick as cotton” (48). Del’s negative feelings are also strikingly *physical*: “This shame was physical, but went far beyond sexual shame, my former shame of nakedness...” (48). What Del experiences here is a

very negative epiphany—in fact, Magdalene Redekop terms it an “anti-epiphany” (68). This “anti-epiphany,” however, marks the beginning of a kind of incremental death—the *necessary* death of the Jubilee mentality and morality that Del must leave behind:

To be made of flesh was humiliation. I was caught in a vision which was, in a way, the very opposite of the mystic’s incommunicable vision of order and light; a vision, also incommunicable, of confusion and obscenity—of helplessness, which was revealed as the most obscene thing there could be. (48)

To see the human body as “obscene,” as a source of humiliation and shame—this is the heritage of the apostle Paul and of Church “Fathers” such as Tertullian. These feelings run deep in the Western psyche, particularly—and tragically—in the Western *female* psyche. Del is young and has some way to go in her journey to a healthier spiritual perspective, one borne of authentic Eros and Kali power. Thus, at this stage, success for Del entails simply being able to survive this near paralyzing shame and Pauline aversion. Del does this and more: “By the time they sang the last hymn of the funeral I was myself again, only normally weak as anybody would be after biting a human arm” (48). Del then rejoins the “body” of the funeral community and goes to view her Uncle’s body.

Del’s response to Uncle Craig’s body is very reminiscent of her and Mary’s earlier encounter with the dead cow:

[Uncle Craig’s] face was like a delicate mask of skin, varnished and laid over the real face—or over nothing at all, ready to crack when you poked a finger into it. I did have this impulse, but at a level far, far removed from possibility...he was the terrible, silent, indifferent conductor of forces that could flare up, in an instant, and burn through this room, all reality, leave us dark... (49)

The dark forces of the patriarchy and of death are still very real for Del, but she has clearly gained some kind of protection from them, and this protection is clearly female/feminine in origin. When Del leaves off viewing the body, she makes her way to her *mother*, “who was sitting alone by the window” (49). Del registers her victory, her success, which—however modest it may appear on the surface of things—is very real on deeper levels: “I turned away with humming in my ears, but was relieved, glad that I had

done it after all, and survived” (49). Del has at least tentatively entered the mythic, spiritual realm of what Beverly Rasporich calls “the maternal principle,” guided, of course, by her author. Rasporich goes further in ascribing such intention to Alice Munro, identifying her as “the author as Mother-Goddess behind the text” (xviii).

Stronger Connections Between Eros and the Sacred: *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*

Foregoing discussions of stories from Munro’s second collection, *Lives of Girls and Women*—“Heirs of the Living Body,” “Age of Faith,” the title story, and “Baptizing”—make clear the importance of this early Munro collection in establishing central aspects of spiritual and/or religious questing in her overall oeuvre. *Lives* delineates the fundamental shortcomings of patriarchal, traditional Christianity, and, concomitantly, sets out the incipient forms of Eros, Kali power, and the centrality of the “ordinary” human body and of “ordinary” sexuality in what gradually emerges as Munro’s implicit spiritual vision. My focus in the present chapter, however, is on *successful* questing after the sacred through the bodily and the sexual; thus, it is time to move onto later Munro stories in order to trace these successes where they occur. It is not my intention, however, to enter into a tedious, repetitive cataloguing of aspects already firmly established; rather, I will focus on key stories in collections from *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* to *The Love of a Good Woman* with a view to fleshing out the continuum of success I spoke of earlier, and with a view to providing examples of female protagonists/narrators (with one male exception in Sam in “The Moon In the Orange Street Skating Rink”) who clearly manifest the key aspects of the sacred identified at the outset of this chapter. Turning to Munro’s third collection, *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*, we find one such example in the unnamed narrator of “The Spanish Lady.”

“The Spanish Lady”

“The Spanish Lady” presents a woman, our unnamed narrator, in the midst of a painful but crucial initiation/movement from a life of destructive self-centeredness—sexual and otherwise—to at least an awareness of what constitutes authentic Eros and to

some understanding of how death is connected with Eros. By the conclusion of the story, the narrator is on the verge of attaining a degree of genuine Kali strength and Sophia-like wisdom. Most of “The Spanish Lady” is set on a train traveling through the Canadian Rockies into Vancouver; the story “terminates,” both literally and symbolically, in the train terminal in Vancouver. During the course of this train journey, we are afforded—in typical Munroian flashback fashion—an overview of the narrator’s sexual, bodily, and spiritual journey to this point in her life. We see, as well, her current struggle to come to terms with the relatively recent infidelity of her husband, Hugh, with her best friend and teaching colleague, Margaret.

Although it comes ostensibly as a casual aside quite early in the story, the narrator’s pronounced fear of death is—as we so often see in Munro’s fiction—a crucial factor both thematically in the story and in the narrator’s growing awareness of the connection between death and Eros, an awareness that culminates with her observation of the death of an old man in the Vancouver terminal. The inextricable link between death and spirituality and/or religion has been clearly established in Chapter Two and earlier in this chapter; thus, death’s centrality in “The Spanish Lady”—both literal and figurative death—alerts us to the essentially spiritual/religious nature of the narrator’s journey. We learn that the narrator has been “visiting relatives in various parts of the country” (180). She tells us, “These are people to whom I feel bound by irritable, almost inexpressible bonds of sympathy, *and whose deaths I dread nearly as much as I do my own*” (emphasis mine 180).

The narrator of “The Spanish Lady” clearly has little, if any, traditional religious faith, and her dread of death anticipates a point strongly emphasized by Eileen, the protagonist in “Memorial,” an upcoming story in the same collection. In that story, Eileen—a character no more conventionally religious than the narrator in “The Spanish Lady”—insists that seeing “the fact of death set up whole and unavoidable, in front of everybody’s eyes” without religious belief is, in her view, impossible: “Without religion, that could not be done. That is, it could not be done” (215). It is quite evident that neither of these characters is about to adopt traditional Christian religious belief, but in both stories the “fact of death” propels these women to search for *some* kind of spiritual/religious framework that will help them cope with death. Further, their

respective approaches, albeit different in a number of ways, both involve their sexuality and their bodies.

The narrator in “The Spanish Lady” has relied on her relationship with her husband Hugh—and, later, on adulterous affairs with other men—to keep her terror of death at bay. She directly compares occasions in her relationship with Hugh to being saved from death. A key encounter occurred twenty-one years earlier, significantly, in the Vancouver train terminal when she had come out to marry Hugh. After getting past Hugh’s initial awkwardness with some flowers and with his own body—“When I touched him, he could never loosen. I could feel the stiff cords in his neck”—they “grabbed hold and hung on” (189). There can be no mistaking the symbolic rescue from death by drowning that this encounter entails: “We clung like people surfacing, miraculously rescued. And not for the last time. This could happen; it could happen again and again” (189). The narrator’s attempts to keep death at bay through her marriage and her other sexual relationships fail, of course, primarily because she tries to *avoid* death through sex. She has had some limited success in this regard, but this “success” has ended. She has long since lost touch with what Freud termed “oceanic bliss” and is now experiencing a kind of travesty of this feeling: “I sit watching the brown oceanic waves of dry country rising into the foothills and I weep monotonously, seasickly” (176). Her life has lost meaning: “Life is not like the dim ironic stories I like to read, it is like a daytime serial on television. The banality will make you weep as much as anything else” (176). The narrator now also faces the figurative death of her marriage to Hugh and the figurative death of her vain attempts to stave off her terror of death through compulsive illicit sexual relationships. At the end of the story, she also faces literal death as it graphically and ruthlessly obtrudes upon her life in the Vancouver train station.

What the narrator is in the difficult process of learning, however, is what various religious, philosophical, even psychological (for example, Freud’s connection between Eros and Thanatos) frameworks have proffered over the centuries: the inextricable link between death and Eros, between death and life, including, of course, the life of the body. As Mikhail Bakhtin constantly reminds us in his work *Rabelais and His World*, “the life of one body is born from the death of the preceding older one” (318). The narrator is learning about the connection between death and life that has given rise—not only in the

work of Rabelais, but in religions, myths, and a good deal of literature and art throughout the ages—to what Bakhtin calls the “ambivalent death-birth theme” (331). This theme is also integral to the ancient goddess Kali. Her involvement in death is physical and graphic. The Eastern perspective from which Kali emerges is predicated upon a central principle: “Ultimately everything arises from disintegration (*tamas*) and ends in disintegration” (Danielou 23). Ninian Smart notes how Kali is often depicted as wearing “a garland of skulls and a skirt composed of severed arms. . .she presides ferociously over destruction and death” (105).

To this stage in her life, however, the narrator of “The Spanish Lady” has developed only a dread of death and strategies for avoiding it. Paradoxically, though, it will be her immersion in the various figurative and literal deaths that she encounters in the story that will bring her much closer to a Kali-like attitude and response to death, and also to at least the beginnings of a realization that much of her adult life—particularly her sexual relationships—has been a flight from death. The narrator must figuratively embrace death, just as Kali literally does when she is in the cremation grounds and by the funeral pyres. Gavin Flood relates the belief that Kali even “dances on the corpse of her husband, Siva” (148); however, all of the ancient goddess’ connections to death are, paradoxically, central to her role as the “source of life” and “the power of time” (Flood 105).

It is through the narrator’s intense pain as she mulls over and speculates about Hugh and Margaret’s sexual liaison, in her encounter with a Rosicrucian whom she meets on the train, and in her encounter—alone—in the Vancouver train terminal with the death of an unnamed elderly man that she begins to connect in new and authentic ways with her own sexuality and, very importantly, with her own body. At a relatively early point in this process, she succumbs to her raw emotion and responds in a significantly *physical* manner: “A howl comes out, out of me, amazing protest. I put my arm across my open mouth and to stop the pain I bite it, I bite my own arm, and then I get up” (181). This action is strikingly reminiscent of Del’s biting of Mary Agnes’ arm in “Heirs of the Living Body,” but on this occasion, the action is directed at self. The narrator is beginning to abandon the ironic, teflon-like intellectualism that she has relied upon so much in the past. What Beverly Rasporich notes as the narrator’s “rational, civilized

understanding and psychological self-counseling” will serve her well no longer. What she experiences here is not her customary “reasonableness,” but an emotional response at its most basic, irrational level” (Rasporich 54). In short, the narrator is tapping into Kali-energy.

The narrator imagines turning her quite physical response outward as well, on to Hugh and Margaret:

I go into the bedroom and without a word pick up everything I can find—a vase. A bottle of lotion, a picture off the wall, shoes, clothes, Hugh’s tape recorder—and hurl these things at the bed; then grab and tear the bedclothes and kick the mattress and scream and slap their faces and beat their bare bodies with the hairbrush. (180)

Although the narrator is only imagining this attack, she displays a Kali-like hostility, and her violent fantasy illustrates the carnivalesque in full mode as well. Note also that in her attack the narrator shuns language—“without a word”—and imagines destroying objects associated with language, like Hugh’s tape recorder. Intellectual, reasonable language gives way, and the female body comes into full play. This is the body that “fecundates and is fecundated, that gives birth and is born, devours and is devoured, [and] drinks” (Bakhtin 319); the narrator drinks her gin and tonic—*spiritus*—“thirstily” (181).

Although the narrator in “The Spanish Lady” may not be fully conscious of it, her fantasized attack on Hugh and Margaret is also an attack on a widespread contemporary approach to love and sexuality that Hugh and Margaret represent—and, very importantly, to which *she* has also subscribed in the past. This approach is not Eros with its spiritual possibilities; it is the pseudo love and sexual “relating” that is parodied in the narrator’s unsent letter at the beginning of the story and in Margaret’s earlier response to the new teachers whom the narrator, Hugh, and Margaret to some extent, entertained earlier: “The trouble is I just don’t know if I *relate*,” quips Margaret, after the new teachers have left. “I don’t know if I relate to all of this interpersonal *relating*. I mean, sometimes I think all I am is head tripping” (179). The kind of “relating” caricatured here is, though, not far at all from the “relating” that went on among the narrator, Hugh, and Margaret. For all of its claims of honoring emotion, this manner of relating is really predicated on what

Charles Taylor terms “the ideal of the disengaged self” (21). It intellectualizes relationships, thus almost guaranteeing the mysterious and the sacred little or no place.

The narrator, however, has come to see that underneath their three-way lighthearted banter there was a coldness in Hugh and Margaret:

But cold underneath, you may be sure, colder than us easy flirts with our charms and conquests. They do not reveal themselves...I could claw their skin and it would be my own fingers that would bleed. (179)

As the phrase “easy flirt” reveals, the narrator has always had a strong connection with her own body and sexuality, but this connection has not yet afforded her authentic Eros. She has not yet struck the difficult balance between integrating and demonizing the Dionysian of which Charles Taylor writes. As Taylor points out, shifts in Christian perspectives around sexuality and the human body—especially the female body—have still not struck such a balance in the broader culture either:

We cannot cut ourselves off from this fermenting source of power, from the “Dionysian,” as we all too easily do in our civilization based on ‘reason’; for we find that our lives shrivel and dry up to insignificance. But at the same time, we dare not plunge too deeply, too precipitously, too unguardedly into it, because it is wild, formless, unreason itself. (445)

Although the narrator in “The Spanish Lady” would certainly not see her own struggles with her own sexuality and her sexual relationships in this psycho-historical light, this is very much what her struggle has been. Her efforts to honor and integrate the Dionysian into her own marriage, however, would probably *never* have succeeded with the “disembodied” Hugh: “Men have left marks on me which I did not have to worry about hiding from Hugh, since there are parts of my body at which he has never looked” (187). In this story, Munro’s spiritual vision manifests in both what the narrator experiences and moves toward, and in the implicit critique of everything Hugh represents. In classic Newtonian-Cartesian manner, Hugh compartmentalizes life, and his compartment for the bodily and for emotions associated with the body is one he seldom, if ever, opens: “Hugh wants life seen that way, he cherishes a dry tone. Bare feelings he must pass over, like bare flesh” (187).

To put it mildly, the narrator has been tenacious in her quest for the “something more to life” that she discusses later with a Rosicrucian whom she encounters. She recounts how she “used to be ready for almost any man” (182). She recognizes on one level what or who she was searching for: “I was always searching for –somebody passionate, intelligent, brutal, kind...[someone to] involve me in a volcanic affair” (182). Again, however, she has not yet come to see that she has been searching for something spiritual as well, and it is her encounter on the train with the Rosicrucian that begins to nudge her toward this realization.

The Rosicrucian is a particularly ambivalent and ambiguous character. Among other things, this character reflects Munro’s consistent ambivalence about various non-traditional avenues to the sacred, especially what might be called “new-age” approaches. The Rosicrucianist movement, of course, dates back to the 16th century and is thus far from “new.” However, it, like other ancient practices such as Astrology or Cabalistic doctrine, has been revived by what would be considered “New-Agers.” Despite the ambivalence surrounding the Rosicrucian, however, he qualifies as a capable spiritual mentor for the narrator for a number of reasons. First, unlike various “flying-boy” religious cum sexual male figures in Munro’s fiction, the Rosicrucian is a man who *has* descended, who has done his “time of ashes,” as Robert Bly would put it. He tells the narrator, “Six years ago I saw one of those ads. I was in a bad way. My marriage had broke up. I was drinking more than was good for me” (184-85). Moreover, his descent led him to an essentially spiritual realization and question: “That [his drinking] wasn’t the real trouble. I just used to think, *why am I here anyway*” (emphasis mine 185). Very importantly, the Rosicrucian attempted and found wanting conventional Christian belief: “Like religion—I’d given all that up. I couldn’t tell if there was such a thing as a soul” (185). Finally, the Rosicrucian realistically represents the widespread contemporary need in any type of religious paradigm for scientific validity: “This [Rosicrucianism] is not crackpot stuff. It is known, scientifically proven” (185).

This is not to say for a moment that Munro is advocating the Rosicrucian’s belief system as *the* contemporary religious “answer.” I am not aware of Munro at any point in her writing advocating *any* particular religious denomination or sect as the “answer” to anything. No, it is not the Rosicrucian’s “sales job” (he is a real estate salesman) nor his

claims of scientific validity that are most important here or that most touch the narrator. What speaks most to her is, first, that the Rosicrucian is alone (“Me too,” she thinks. “I’ve got nobody but myself” (186)), and, secondly, he offers the narrator the *possibility* of a way of coping with death, and the *possibility* of learning from the past if one is willing to open up. The Rosicrucian tells the narrator that the time between lives is 144 years; the narrator asks, “Do you remember?” The Rosicrucian responds, “From the one life to the next, you mean? Well you know yourself, the ordinary person doesn’t remember a thing. But once your mind is opened up, once you know what is going on, why then you start to remember” (185).

Despite all of these positive qualities, the Rosicrucian remains an ambivalent character. For example, Margaret Ann Fitzpatrick notes the violent, even sadistic possibilities connected with the Rosicrucian. In “‘Projection’ in Alice Munro’s *Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You*,” she notes that the Rosicrucian provides the narrator another context for sadistic revenge: “The motif of Spain’s brutal conquistadors introduced by the crazy Rosicrucian, who recognizes our narrator as a Spanish Lady of Spain’s most cruel period, ratifies the sadistic element in the deserted wife” (18). Notwithstanding the narrator’s anger with Hugh and Margaret, however, her desire to “beat their bare bodies with a brush” will almost certainly remain a fantasy. More than a figure of revenge (and setting aside Fitzpatrick’s somewhat heavy handed “crazy” descriptor), the Rosicrucian seems more than anything else to proffer the narrator a form of agape—the kind of compassion for a stranger emphasized throughout religious history in figures from the good Samaritan to the Buddha. The Rosicrucian also models a kind of dignity for the narrator—the sort of dignity she is sorely in need of as she struggles to deal with the various figurative and literal deaths she is facing: “He rises, he even bows to me slightly, with a Spanish dignity” (188).

The narrator’s mild impulse toward sex with the Rosicrucian never leads anywhere, either, mostly because he ensures that it does not: “The Rosicrucian has disappeared somewhere, he has vanished as if I invented him” (189). Thus the narrator is less distracted from seeing what he *has* given her—which is not yet another empty, illicit sexual encounter. Figuratively armored by the notion the Rosicrucian has left her with—that there just *might* be more to life and death than she has previously considered and

that, therefore, her life might not *have* to offer only a “banality that will make you weep as much as anything else” (176)—the narrator steps into the “death grounds” of the Vancouver train terminal.

The narrator recognizes something quite important about the cry of death, “a real cry,” that greets her in the station: She notes, it is “coming from outside myself” (189). Agape and self-absorption are ultimately mutually exclusive. Death does not have to *separate* people; it can *connect* us, despite ourselves. Other people in the station “continue with their baggage as if not a thing had happened,” and the other old men “continue reading the paper or staring at their feet” (190). These people who carry on, unaffected, are the “ordinary” people that the Rosicrucian referred to, but the narrator, it seems, is no longer “ordinary” in this sense.

I realize that these depictions of “ordinary” seem to contradict what I have previously been advancing about the “ordinary” and the sacred; thus, some clarification is required. The notion of the sacred emerging from the “ordinary” does not mean that *all* of the ordinary is sacred. Of necessity, a good deal of the “ordinary” remains unremarkable, even trivial and banal. What Munro’s implicit spiritual perspective envisions, however, are those situations or occasions when aspects of “ordinary life”—particularly aspects of “our life as sexual beings, including marriage and the family” (Taylor 211)—are transformed and take on deeper spiritual significance. More specific to “The Spanish Lady,” the “ordinary” people in the Vancouver terminal who are oblivious to the “ordinary” death of the old man clearly do not experience this kind of transformation, while our “ordinary” narrator clearly does. From this perspective, then, *all* of the “ordinary” holds sacred potential, but only some of the “ordinary” manifests in the sacred.

The narrator’s epiphany, triggered by the old man’s cry of death, reveals to her that the dying man’s cry is “more a cry of rage, of conscious rage and terrorization, than of pain” (190). Images of crucifixion attend the death of the old man. (Further, “old man” and/or “old men” are repeated no fewer than six times in the paragraph, strongly emphasizing mortality and aging). He “tries to hang onto the air with fully raised arms and open fingers” (190). The narrator feels as if she “should not leave, as if the cry of the man dying is still demanding something of [her]” (190). At some as yet unarticulated

level, it seems she realizes she must become some version of Kali who knows and embodies the ambivalent duality of death and life, Eros and Thanatos, and Munro makes very plain that this ostensibly unconnected death of a stranger is *deeply* connected to the narrator, to Hugh and Margaret, to everybody:

By that cry Hugh, and Margaret, and the Rosicrucian, and I, and everybody alive, is pushed back. What we say and feel no longer rings true, it is slightly beside the point. As if we were all wound up a long time ago and were spinning out of control, whirring, making noises, but at a touch could stop, and see each other for the first time, harmless and still. This is a message; I really believe it is; but I don't see how I can deliver it. (190-91)

Although the narrator has not yet fully understood what she has experienced or what “message” she “must deliver,” or even to whom she must deliver it, she senses, just as the reader does, that the “message” is not some clever psychobabble about “relating” or even some Rosicrucian-inspired message about reincarnation. It is, concomitantly, an extraordinary message about “ordinary” love, sex, death, about no longer mechanically “spinning out of control,” about stopping and seeing “each other for the first time, harmless and still,” and, very importantly, it is a message about not fleeing from death. Thus, it is, unquestionably, a message about that which is potentially sacred in human relationships—sexual and other.

“Memorial”

“Memorial,” the final story but one in *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*, echoes a number of the thematic preoccupations of “The Spanish Lady” and of a number of other Munro stories. Key among these is responding to death, as the title suggests. The death in this story is that of the protagonist's 18 year-old nephew. The protagonist, Eileen, has come to spend time with her sister, June, and her brother in law, Ewart, on the occasion of their son's memorial service. “Memorial” also presents a female protagonist who experiences, and to some extent creates, important links between death and Eros. The story also further reinforces spiritual/religious alternatives to traditional Christian perspectives and approaches to death and sex and, as importantly, presents alternatives

that challenge widespread *secular* middleclass values and attitudes towards death and sex as well.

“Memorial” also *differs* in important ways from other Munro works in its treatment of various themes and character development. First, Eileen—unlike her counterpart in “The Spanish lady,” for example—goes considerably beyond simply *recognizing* the inextricable and essentially sacred connections between Eros and death. Although she would certainly not consciously view her actions in this light, Eileen actively assumes the Kali-like role of the all compassionate “Magna Mater” (Young) who presides over death and destruction and who brings to the occasion and experience of death the profoundly ambivalent rejuvenation afforded by female sexuality and the female body. Secondly, in “Memorial” Munro is uncharacteristically explicit in her critique of middle-class smugness couched in “new-age” religious and psychological garb. There is nothing subtle about how June and Ewart embody middle-class materialism and the pseudo-morality and “correctness” that often attend it: “In June and Ewart’s house she [Eileen] felt all the time the weight of the world of objects, their serious demands, the distinctions she had disregarded. There was a morality here of buying and use, a morality of consumerism” (210). June and Ewart’s political correctness, compounded by the “religious correctness” of their Unitarianism, also becomes Eileen’s, and Munro’s, target. June and Ewart have decorated their house as “correctly” as they have managed their family and their lives—for example, displaying “some porous looking pots made by a former convict now being sponsored as a potter by the Unitarian Church. All these things had an edge of moral value and were decoratively acceptable besides” (211).

It is interesting to set this oblique attack on Jane and Ewart’s “convenient” Unitarianism against Munro’s own flirtations with this particular religious denomination. Sheila Munro relates how her mother responded to Sheila’s youthful enthusiasm with the Baptist Church by taking the family to the Unitarian Church: “Soon we were going to the Unitarian Church, where the concept of sin did not come up, where even the word ‘God’ was hardly mentioned” (62). The clear sense in the story that the Unitarian Church accommodates a certain kind of “correct” self-indulgence is further borne out by another incident Sheila Munro relates of how her mother’s initially very liberal approach to

Sheila's drug use came to an end: "A few months later, she changed her mind. The child of a friend of theirs from the Unitarian Church had died of an overdose" (212). What might, then, be viewed as a certain degree of *mea culpa* on Munro's part finds its fictive corollary in Eileen's admission of her own inclination toward a trivialization of important things. Eileen realizes that the world she has entered in June and Ewart's house is not entirely alien to her. She recognizes some of her own complicity in June and Ewart's desire not to offend—"their wish to avoid fraud, not to appropriate serious things for trivial uses, not to mock things by making them fashions. A doomed wish. She herself offended" (211). That said, there are important differences between Eileen and particularly June, and—despite Eileen's habitual ironic self deprecation—these differences reflect qualities in Eileen that qualify her as a much-needed Kali-force in June and Ewart's smug middle-class domain.

Some of these differences seem relatively trivial, such as June's organized, efficient control of everything from her coolly efficient arranging of rides for people to the memorial service to the way she organizes her trash for recycling. This efficiency starkly contrasts Eileen's disorganization in similar domains: "Her lazy garbage all thrown together, her cupboards under their surface tidiness bursting with chaos" (210). These seemingly minor differences, however, point to a much more fundamental difference between Eileen and June and, in turn, to a key theme at the core of the story: the difference between healthy, balanced control and rationalized, self-delusional manipulation. For example, June, a psychologist, has placed a good deal of faith in psychology as her guiding framework for "working through" her relationships with her parents and for coping with their respective deaths. She is completely confident, for example, that she has "worked through" all of her "mother issues": "'Years ago, and in Gestalt too. I *really* did it in Gestalt. I worked it all out and finished with it'" (221).

In the latter stages of *Sources of the Self*, Charles Taylor addresses the problems inherent in the kind of faith in the therapeutic demonstrated by June. Drawing upon Philip Rieff's study *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, Taylor discusses the impact of psychology, particularly the human potential movement, as a response to modern/postmodern spiritual malaise:

This emerges in the great importance given to methods of therapy and the sciences which supposedly underpin them: psychoanalysis, psychology, sociology. These two together, the subordination of some of the traditional demands of morality to the requirements of personal fulfillment, and the hope that this can be promoted by therapy, make up together the cultural turn which has been named “the triumph of the therapeutic.” (507)

Taylor goes on to draw the conclusions that Eileen has not quite formulated or articulated yet—the realization that “a total and fully consistent subjectivism would tend towards emptiness: nothing would count as a fulfillment in a world in which literally nothing was important but self-fulfilment” (507)

Although Elaine may not have entirely worked out the sort of conclusions Taylor gives us, her intuitive interior response to her sister’s orderly, psychological cause and effect, Cartesian “compartmentalizing” reveals much about her incipient Sophia wisdom:

I have not worked through anything, Eileen thought. And further: I do not believe things are there to be worked through.

People die; they suffer, they die. Their mother had died of ordinary pneumonia after all that craziness. Illness and accidents. They ought to be respected, not explained. Words are shameful. They ought to crumble in shame. (221)

Eileen’s thoughts here resonate with various insights from a Derridean distrust of “fixing” things in words and Munro’s rejection of “certainty” to a Buddhist-like reverence and respect for all aspects of life, and death. My main interest here, though, lies in the contrast between June’s clinical, Newtonian-Cartesian “disengaged reason” (Taylor 288) and control, and Eileen’s paradoxically Rabelaisian humility in the face of the ultimately mysterious, uncontrollable forces of sexuality and death.

Once again, we must recognize in “Memorial” as we have in many of the Munro stories discussed to this point, that there are few stronger motivators toward considerations of the spiritual/religious than the death of a loved one. It is also important to recognize that June and Ewart *are not without* a religious framework to draw upon during this time of death. Despite the shortcomings noted above of June and Ewart’s Unitarianism, it is others from their congregation that have helped arrange the memorial.

Moreover, we learn that their Unitarian Church has not—unlike more traditional Christian denominations—demonized or marginalized sexuality. On the contrary, June tells Eileen how she and Ewart “had gone to some pornographic movies with other couples from what was called a Growth Group in the Unitarian church. They were interested in exploring new stimuli” (216). Eileen, however, sees even this relatively radical religious approach as yet another form of control in an overall system of control: “Here was a system of digestion which found everything to its purposes. It stuck at nothing. Japanese gardens, pornographic movies, accidental death. All of them accepted, chewed and altered, assimilated, destroyed” (216)

Once again, in the microcosm of a Munro story, we see macro aspects of contemporary Western culture. The central aspect here involves how June and Ewart, particularly June, have brought to even the powerful and mysterious forces of sexuality and death what Charles Taylor terms the “ideal of the disengaged self”:

With the development of the modern scientific world-view a specifically modern variant has developed. This is the ideal of the disengaged self, capable of objectifying not only the surrounding world but also his [her] own emotions and inclinations, fears and compulsions, and thereby a kind of distance and self-possession which allows him [her] to act “rationally.” (21)

Taylor traces this deeply entrenched Western perspective back to what he sees as its primary source: Rene Descartes. Descartes, Taylor argues, directs us to “objectify the world, *including our own bodies*, and that means to come to see them mechanistically and functionally, in the same way an uninvolved observer would” (emphasis mine 145). (I am struck by how applicable this quote also is to the concluding thoughts of the narrator in “The Spanish Lady”—people mechanistically “spinning...whirring, making noises” etc. (191)). Taylor’s concept of the “disengaged stance of calculating reason, the view of nature from the outside, as a merely observed order” (370) is the stance that June has effectively assumed.

Of course, one of the central insights of modern psychoanalysis and psychology is that we do not necessarily possess the extent of control over our chaotic emotions and “issues” that we sometimes affect. Charles Taylor is keenly aware of this fact and

recognizes that the human unconscious—that domain burbling just below the surface in a story such as “Memorial”—is not easily amenable to the control of the “disengaged objective self”:

The unconscious is for us within, and we think of the depths of the unsaid, unsayable [not surprising that a collection of some of the most insightful essays on Munro’s works is subtitled *Saying the Unsayable*], the powerful inchoate feelings and infinities and fears which dispute with the control of our lives...we are creatures with inner depths; with partly unexplored and dark interiors. We all feel the force of Conrad’s image in *Heart of Darkness*. (111)

It is those individuals who are more attuned to their own bodies, their own sexuality, and who acknowledge and respect the autonomy of the darker, powerful forces of both the unconscious and of death who are most likely to offer alternatives to the culturally privileged mechanistic Cartesian paradigm. We have encountered such individuals in a number of Munro works, ranging from Lois in “Thanks for the Ride” to Del Jordan when she accesses Kali-energy, to the narrator of “The Spanish Lady.” Collectively and incrementally these characters constitute what amounts to the implicit spiritual and/or religious vision in Munro’s work—a vision that at least *begins* to provide an alternative to a moribund patriarchal Christianity and also to the secularized, psychologized derivatives of this Christianity that we find in stories such as “Memorial.” Further, Eileen is one of the clearest examples we have encountered yet of this sort of attuned individual. Eileen not only *recognizes* some of the key qualities identified thus far of this alternative spiritual/religious vision, she *enacts* then.

First, there is Eileen’s relationship to and understanding of the importance of the body—both her own body and the bodies of others. Eileen counters Cartesian mind-body duality in her observations about her sister’s “hurrying body” (213). Eileen’s hope is that what is in June’s mind and heart might be expressed in her body and voice: “She had thought June’s body might have loosened in her grief, that her voice might have grown uncertain, or been silenced” (208). Eileen also “reads” through Ewart’s breath that which belies his forced cheerfulness: “His voice was cheerful, but she caught in his vicinity a smell of bad, sad, sleepless breath, masked but not vanquished by mouthwash” (221). She

also detects his inner sadness in “his large sad butt, his vulnerable priggish look from the rear” (216). Eileen’s ability to “read” other’s bodies in this way emerges from her attunement to her own body and to her own sexuality. The third person narrative voice opines how such attunement is usually misunderstood—especially in a woman—but Eileen sees through this widespread misunderstanding: “Women like this, women who think like this, are generally believed to be lackluster, purely wanting in spirit, dazed receptacles, pitiable...Eileen knew this. She found it far from fact” (224).

Understandably, though, in the “correct,” clinical environment of June and Ewart’s home, Eileen still feels marginalized; in fact, she feels defeated by the memorial gathering. Certain gestures and words—such as the readings from Kahil Gibran’s *The Prophet*, “offered in fact with the modern equivalent of piety” (221)—she finds fraudulent: “No fraud in the words but what fraud in saying them. Silence the only possible thing” (221). Eileen begins to drink—reminding us again of the sacred possibilities of alcohol as “spiritus”—a possible avenue to the divine. In the rooms Eileen comes and goes, drinking and talking in Prufrock fashion “against the late afternoon, the early evening” (218). And also like Prufrock, Eileen has since her arrival deferred posing the “overwhelming question.” Instead, she finally retreats into the darkened guest room and lies down: “Douglas [the deceased boy] made no difference. Death made no difference. She was becoming paralyzed, she could not hold her own” (220). What saddens and defeats Eileen here the most is what she imagines as her own impotency: “Moreover, she had not been able to help” (220). At this stage, Eileen also shares Prufrock’s alienation from the body; significantly, it is through her eventual reconnection with her own body, and that of another, that Eileen makes her most important contribution

The narrative shifts back here to Eileen’s childhood memory of the death of her father, heightening our sense that Eileen, like Kali, is, at least figuratively, near the funeral pyres, the cremation grounds. Eileen’s archetypal connection with death is further reflected in Ewart’s clichéd but figuratively accurate description of her as being at this point “dead to the world” (223). The balance of “Memorial” presents powerful epiphanic moments that clearly render Eileen a contemporary, Western, Kali figure, and also a woman who clearly manifests what Mikhail Bakhtin declares about death and

endings: “Death is always related to birth; the grave is related to the earth’s life-giving womb. Birth-death, death-birth, such are the components of life itself” (50). When Eileen awakens, the funeral guests have gone, and June is asleep (knocked out by the products of medical science). It is nearing midnight—a time frequently associated with the apex of archetypal female, lunar power. Recurring references to water in the final pages of the story—water symbolically connected with revivification and with paradoxical powers of both life and death—begin with Eileen’s drinking “a full glass of cold water” (222), then stepping outside to find it raining. She encounters Ewart carrying a watering can; he has been tending to his Japanese garden: “I had to water the new shrubs. They take an incredible amount of water at first. You can’t depend on the rain being enough” (222).

Eileen, still somewhat drunk, displays a mild hint of Kali hostility: “Her voice was drunk, challenging, but not really quarrelsome” (222). Munro’s presentation of Ewart is somewhat more sympathetic than that of June—his name suggesting, perhaps, the *potential* of more substance underneath the “warts.” His links to gardening and to water suggest a yearning for a stronger connection to nature, but this connection remains firmly Baconian in its control of nature—in its rendering of natural elements into human artifact: “Everything is to scale. That’s how you get the extraordinary effect. If you look at it and you’re not looking at anything else—well after a while it begins to seem like a real waterfall, a real landscape” (214). For the first time since Eileen’s arrival, something approaching open, honest communication ensues, with Eileen’s confession of impotence—“I haven’t done anything. I wish I could do something”—and Ewart’s very tentative acknowledgement of June’s controlling nature: “She seems—you know sometimes she seems a little—bossy” (223).

But the occasion of death requires more than this type of halting verbal communication. Ewart is “now maneuvering her, with more determination and adroitness than she would have expected, toward the back seat of the larger car” (224). Eileen and Ewart’s sexual encounter is, in many ways, “ordinary”—at points, near farcical: “Pinned down not too comfortably on a car seat—one leg crooked and held against the back of the seat in danger of getting a cramp” (224). Munro, however, with her own form of adroitness, weaves into this “ordinary,” somewhat drunken, potentially tawdry, adulterous liaison, a much deeper significance. Eileen is clearly not acting primarily out

of lust: “She supposed she was easily aroused. At the moment not very much so; she did not anticipate great pleasure from her brother-in-law Ewart” (224). Rather, she is offering Ewart “the natural thing for a man in pain to look for, who loves and fears his wife. The brief restorative dip” (224) (we note again the water imagery).

More than this—and despite Munro’s reluctance to ease up on her almost habitual irony—Eileen offers Ewart an avenue toward confronting/understanding/surrendering to/embracing death.

Eileen is aimless and irresponsible [but only by the criteria that makes June focused and responsible], she comes out of the same part of the world accidents come from [that mysterious domain called, variously, fate, God’s will]...He lies in her to acknowledge, to yield—but temporarily, safely—to whatever has got his son, whatever cannot be spoken of in his house. (224).

Ewart ‘lies in’ the womb/tomb of the body Female. Dudley Young in *Origins of the Sacred* draws our attention to the symbolic and theological importance of the womb over history and prehistory: “There is a theological disposition stretching back as far as may be, from the womb as sacred space all the way back to the ventral position on the savannah, to locate sexual power in the female...the womb would still have been sanctified as the opening for divinity” (211). Young then outlines what happened to this sense of the womb as sacred: “What in any case is undeniable is that under patriarchy the divine attribution was turned against woman and she became the scapegoat” (211-12). Centuries of Christian Madonna-Whore, Eve-Harlot duality will prevent Ewart—as it does most Western men—from fully acknowledging where he lies, but whether he consciously acknowledges or not, he lies in a place where the sexual/bodily and the sacred may genuinely merge:

A woman’s body. Before and during the act they seem to invest this body with certain individual powers, will say its name in a way that indicates something particular, something unique, that is sought for. Afterwards it appears that they have changed their minds, they wish it understood that such bodies are interchangeable. Women’s bodies. (225)

Munro's language is very telling around Eileen's and Ewart's sexual union. There is the subtle use of the Christ-like "suffer" when describing Eileen's attitude toward Ewart and, by extension, to other men: "She did more than suffer him. Nearly always she did more than that" (224), reminding us of phrases of agape such as "suffer the little children to come onto me" (Mark 10:14). The language describing Ewart's response also carries strong religious connotations: "She liked their seriousness—lovely devout and naked seriousness, attention to realities" (224). The two of them are brought back to what Iris Murdoch intends by the "particulars" of Eros. What Munro manages to do with this language and with her adroit handling of detail and characters is to create an entirely realistic situation—Ewart, in the role here of Everyman—will later brush this encounter aside, more or less refusing to see its deeper significance. But, *perhaps*, it has registered on some deeper level. And there is a very good chance that the significance will have registered for the reader.

Before Eileen leaves the next morning, she and June also finally communicate in a more honest and genuine fashion. Eileen, perhaps somewhat ironically and/or guiltily now, reiterates her sense of impotence: "'I haven't helped you the way I meant to'" (225). June responds by telling Eileen what really happened in the accident—how Douglas had been killed *after* the crash; he was outside the car, relatively uninjured: "The car just—it fell on him, and he was killed" (226). A piercing irony emerges in relation to June's obsessive need for *control*, and how completely irrelevant and impotent her control—*anybody's* control—was in the freakish accident that took her son. Again, I am reminded of the numerous accidental deaths, usually of children or teenagers, in Munro's fiction and of how such deaths implicitly call into question the notion of a loving divine patriarch.

On a more positive note, subtly religious language emerges around what June is giving Eileen at this point: "This *offering* had been made" (226). Eileen—not, of course, possessed of the reader's or of Munro's perspective on what she *has* offered on this occasion of death and memorial—feels enervated and anxious to depart: "She felt cold and tired, she wanted mostly to get away" (226). Eileen is, however, afforded at least a brief epiphanic insight, one that reflects her humility, uncertainty, and her growing Sophia-like wisdom—all important traits in Munro's implicit religious/spiritual

perspective: “Acts done without faith may restore faith. She believed, with whatever energy she could summon at the moment, she had to believe and hope that was true” (226).

Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You was published in 1974, a particularly challenging year, it seems, for Alice Munro. In an interview with Beverly Slopen after *Lives of Girls and Women* came out, Munro indicated that she was afraid she might have exhausted her sources for writing: “I went through a bleak period. And then I wrote the stories for the third book, *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*, almost desperately” (qtd. in Ross 73). Catherine Sheldrick Ross and other critics have commented on how *Something* registers the uncertainty Munro was experiencing at the time while, concomitantly, breaking new ground:

There are some seven stories concerned with urban life, adult experience, the complications of marriage [Munro did not separate from James Munro until two years after *Something* was published], and the barriers to communication between men and women, old and young. (Ross 73)

As we have seen, however, particularly in “The Spanish Lady” and “Memorial,” Munro was not as uncertain in some of the stories in *Something* about spiritual and/or religious aspects as she appears to have been about other issues and themes. Secondly, as we have seen in a number of Munro’s works, certainty is anathema, especially in matters of the spirit. I hear a good deal of Munro’s voice in her protagonist Eileen’s when Eileen thinks to herself in “Memorial,” “*I do not believe things are there to be worked through*” (221).

Finally, I am struck, once again, by how Ross and other Munro critics seem to almost entirely overlook Munro’s striking preoccupation with and quite explicit treatment of death, funerals, considerations of the afterlife—in short, aspects with clear spiritual/religious significance. As we have seen, though, these aspects are central to the stories in *Something*, and they persist and develop in various ways right up to Munro’s most recent work.

Contraction and Expansion: *Who Do You Think You Are?*

In Munro’s fourth collection, *Who Do You think You Are* (published as *The Beggar Maid* in both the United States and Great Britain), aspects of the spiritual and/or

the religious maintain their importance, but, recall, my central focus in this chapter is on relatively *successful* manifestations of connections between the sexual/the bodily and the sacred. I risk over generalizing here, but it is fairly safe to say that the “Rose and Flo” stories that make up Munro’s fourth collection focus more on negatively critiquing various aspects of patriarchal, traditional Christianity than on providing even *relatively* successful alternatives. However, I will still examine, at least briefly, “Wild Swans,” a quite representative story in this regard, to register how Munro’s interest in sexuality and the sacred does not flag even when positive connections between the two do.

“Wild Swans”

One of the most direct critiques of patriarchal Christianity is found in “Wild Swans.” The dark humor in this story does not disguise Flo’s and Rose’s internalized aversion to the bodily/the sexual. Early in the story, for example, Rose is planning a trip by train to Toronto; Flo warns her about the dangers of “White Slavers,” men who abduct young girls like Rose and turn them into prostitutes: “They kept you a prisoner in the White Slave place...until such time as you were thoroughly degraded and in despair, your insides torn up by drunken men and invested with vile disease” (55). Flo’s starkest warning is about “people dressed up as ministers. They were the worst” (55). Later, on the train, Rose does encounter a man who claims to be a United Church minister, although he is not “dressed up as a minister.” In fact, neither Rose nor the reader is ever sure whether this individual is a clergyman, but the question is almost incidental. What is abundantly evident is that he represents a repressed and exploitive Protestant clergy, and his “seduction” of Rose demonstrates how Christianity’s neurotic sexual perspective results in sexual distortions across the board, from lay people on up. Both feigning sleep, Rose and this “minister” indulge in a masturbatory interaction that brings Rose to orgasm, the orgasm that Joseph Gold says “blows up Ontario.” But it is very difficult to see much success, in the sense I am using the term in this chapter, in this quite tawdry, clandestine encounter. Moreover, passages in the story also provide some of the most unrelenting Pauline aversion to the sexual/bodily in Munro’s oeuvre. For example,

She [Rose] did feel disgust. She felt a faint, wandering nausea. She thought of flesh: lumps of flesh, pink snouts, fat tongues, blunt fingers, all on their way trotting and creeping and lolling and rubbing, looking for

their comfort. She thought of cats in heat rubbing themselves along the top of board fences, yowling with their miserable complaint. It was pitiful, infantile, this itching and shoving and squeezing. Spongy tissues, inflamed membranes, tormented nerve-ends, shameful smells; humiliation. (62)

All of this occurs, quite literally, “at the hands” of a supposed representative of Christianity. The story’s implicit critique of sexually repressive, patriarchal religion is not significantly mitigated by any expansion—if we can call it that—of Rose’s sexual experience. Overall, in fact, it is difficult to find anything in “Wild Swans” that successfully brings together the sexual/the bodily and the sacred.

That said, however, “Wild Swans” *still* yields up that almost inevitable Munroian ambivalence about sexuality. Although Rose’s and the “minister’s” encounter remains anonymous and mutually solipsistic, it presents such a *flagrant* defiance of puritanical, Pauline Christianity that it can be seen to serve an important cathartic function. This, I believe, is why Joseph Gold argues that Rose’s orgasm—the shudder in *her* loins—“blows up Ontario.” And the story’s ambivalence about the possibilities of spiritual fulfillment through sexual encounter does not end here. The allusion to Yeats’s “Leda and the Swan” lends the encounter a certain romantic beauty and power, and however ironically distanced Rose’s initiatory orgasm might seem from its mythic source, we are nonetheless reminded of this source. I am also put in mind of some of Yeats’s musings about how “Leda and the Swan” came about. Yeats tells us, “Then I thought, ‘Nothing is now possible but some movement from above preceded by some violent annunciation’” (Norton 1586). It seems almost absurd to ascribe similar motivations to the resoundingly “ordinary” masturbatory encounter Munro gives us on a train in Southwestern Ontario, but it is, after all, just such ambition that allows the “ordinary” to be invested with the sacred.

Increasing Cosmic Concerns: *The Moons of Jupiter*

As the title of Munro’s fifth collection, *The Moons of Jupiter*, suggests, with this collection, Munro’s interest and vision in matters spiritual/religious gradually begin to shift to somewhat broader, more “cosmic” perspectives. This shift is not particularly surprising for a writer entering her fifth decade (Munro would have been 51 when *The Moons of Jupiter* was published in 1982). I will discuss the title story of this collection in

some detail in the next chapter. That chapter and the following one will focus on these more “cosmic” considerations—the somewhat more abstract, metaphysical aspects that may be traced throughout Munro’s writing but which become more pronounced in the latter stages of her writing career. Of course, this is not to suggest that Munro’s focus on the bodily and/or the sexual as possible avenues to the sacred significantly falls off; it does not. Evidence for this has already been advanced in my earlier discussion of “Accident,” a story from *The Moons of Jupiter*. “Accident,” as you will recall, is a particularly clear example of a failed spiritual quest in the realm of Eros, but stories from *The Moons of Jupiter* also offer more fulfilling quests toward the sacred. One such quest appears in the story “Bardon Bus.”

“Bardon Bus”

“Bardon Bus” provides another example of a recurring pattern in Munro’s stories: A female protagonist/narrator has come to the end of a sexual relationship and is recovering. Coral Ann Howells argues that the narrator’s recovery in “Bardon Bus” entails her discovery that her “romantic fantasy” has turned out to be an “unreliable structure” (107). Howell’s reading of the story is echoed by other critics such as James Carscallen who places the story into his category of Munro “exile stories” wherein the narrator, “having passed through an ordeal, gets some refreshment in a restaurant and finds herself coming back to ordinary human life and society” (348). These quite self-evident observations, however, leave unanswered what are for me some key questions: What was the narrator searching for *going into* her largely self-imposed “exile,” and what has she discovered or gained from her ordeal? I am also quite interested in the symbolic significance of the narrator’s close friend, Kay—a character who manifests clear “Kay-li” qualities.

Magdalene Redekop addresses to some extent the question of what the narrator is initially seeking in her relationship with her former lover, mysteriously referred to in the story only as “X.” Redekop moves into what I find very promising terrain with her observation that “X”—an anthropologist with whom the narrator has just had an affair while they were both in Australia—is an uncharacteristically explicit symbol of Christ: “That this X is related to the man who died on the cross is made explicit by the ‘stubborn virgin’s belief’ in ‘perfect mastery’ and by the hymn she sings: ‘*He’s the Lily of the*

Valley” (157). James Carscallen draws similar conclusions: “ ‘X’ suggests four and it suggests Christ” (453). Redekop continues along these Biblical lines, arguing that “‘Bardon Bus’ reads like a parody of the Song of Solomon, rewritten as it might look to an abandoned woman walking on Queen Street in Toronto” (158). She convincingly attributes the Song of Solomon connection to the narrator’s fantasy of singing hymns to her former lover:

Dipping the dipper in the pail, lapped in my harmless craziness, I’d sing
hymns, and nobody would wonder.

“He’s the Lily of the Valley,

The Bright and Morning Star.

He’s the fairest of Ten Thousand to my Soul.” (111)

These, too, strike me as valid and perceptive interpretive connections, but why must these references point *necessarily* to a *parody* of The Song of Solomon or *only* to an ironic parody of Christ? As far flung as any equation between “X” and Christ may seem, a strong possibility remains that the narrator was seeking in a sexual relationship the complete surrender that mystics of every religious stripe have sought throughout the ages—in the narrator’s words, a surrender “to the moment when you give yourself up, give yourself over, to the assault which is guaranteed to finish off everything you’ve been before” (111).

Although the narrator is presently suffering through what she describes as “torment,” in her relationship with “X” she experienced at times something ineffable that she could not articulate. However, when the narrator *does* attempt to articulate, she couches her descriptions of these occasions in explicitly religious terms: “I can’t describe it very well, it sounds like a movie-dream of heaven, all banality and innocence. So I suppose it was. I can’t apologize for the banality of my dreams” (127). Resisting the strong temptation to read such observations entirely ironically reveals evidence in the text that the narrator is emerging from an experience of genuine Eros, an experience of a sacred kind of relationship with “X.” The clear connections between the narrator’s perceptions of “X” and Christ and/or The Song of Solomon are so clear, in fact, that Magdalene Redekop is prompted to note an “overtly meta-symbolic” mode in the story (158) which, she accurately notes, is uncharacteristic in Munro’s work. There is also

other, more subtle, evidence that the narrator was seeking some kind of sacred or religious experience at the outset of her affair with “X”—for example, her reference in the opening paragraph to her fantasies of the “preacher who rouses me every Sunday with lashings of fear and promises of torment” (110). That she found the actual equivalent of this fantasy in her relationship with “X” is strongly suggested in her somewhat surrealistic memory of an occasion when she is the woman “who has almost lost consciousness, whose legs are open, arms flung out, head twisted to one side as if she has been struck down in the course of some natural disaster” (123). Images of crucifixion, baptism, and of the Eucharist all arise in this memory as the woman “rouses herself and tries to hold the glass in her shaky hands”—a glass of water proffered by “X”. She “slops water over her breast, shudders, falls back” (123). If “X” here symbolizes Christ, his offer of the glass *and* the fact that he, too, “drinks out of the same glass” take on strong Eucharistic possibilities.

The preponderance of Christian imagery and symbolism in “Bardon Bus” does not, in my view, betoken some endorsement of a renewed or revised Christian perspective as much as it reveals the Western religious background of the narrator and the author. The references to Christ and the Song of Solomon suggest sacred potential, not religious prescription. The story also presents interesting, albeit subtle, Eastern spiritual connections. These range from the faintly probable suggestion of the presence of Kali in one of the narrator’s fantasies near the beginning of the story wherein she imagines following “the cows along the rough path” (110), reminding us of the link between Kali and cows. Somewhat less obscure is the fact that “X’s” wife is in India while he and the narrator are in Australia, and a comparison made by one of “X’s” quite disenchanted friends, Dennis, that “X’s” women are like terra-cotta Chinese soldiers “marching out of the earth” (119).

The most striking and intriguing “Eastern connection” in the story, however, is the narrator’s friend, Kay. The spelling and pronunciation link between Kay and Kali is striking enough to suggest deliberate intention. Whether or not such deliberateness exists, there can be no question that Kay’s approach to sexual relationships, and to life overall, is strongly suggestive of the ancient Indian goddess. It is also quite evident that the narrator aspires toward and has, in fact, emulated, some of Kay’s qualities and

actions, and that she regards Kay as a mentor. At one point, the narrator says of Kay, “The drift of her life is not discouraging to me” (117). Moreover, we should not forget that the narrator relates her entire story from Kay’s apartment where she is staying while in Toronto.

Kay is unquestionably a radical figure; but so is Kali—particularly from a Western perspective. Kay’s “loves are daring, some grotesque” (115). “Grotesque” here aligns with the positive connotations placed on the word by Mikhail Bakhtin. Kay’s sexual partners run a chaotic, carnivalesque gamut from an artist “ruled by signs from the spirit world,” who often saw around Kay’s neck an “ominous blue fire...a yoke or a ring” (115) to a paroled, Magwitch-type prisoner, a “swarthy tall fellow with an embroidered headband, long gray-black hair blowing in the wind” (115). Clearly, there is humor here, but the narrator, and Munro, appear to observe quite seriously that Kay’s “powers of recovery, her *faith*, are never exhausted” (emphasis mine 116). Most importantly, Kay manifests a universal, near archetypal female/feminine power: “In none of this is she so exceptional. She does what women do” (116).

To encapsulate, the narrator in “Bardon Bus” is another of Munro’s female narrators/protagonists who—lacking a satisfying spiritual or religious framework in her life—seeks in sexual relationship deeper sacred possibilities. The narrator in this story did not come upon this potential until she was twenty-one (still widely recognized as the age for substantive entry into adulthood) and was a nursing mother. She tells us that until she met “X,” “Sex had not begun for [her], at all” (118). For various logistical reasons, her affair with “X” comes to what appears an amicable end, but she discovers upon her return to Canada that her connection with “X” ran much deeper than she had realized. As with much of what the narrator discovers, a revelation of the sacred qualities of their relationship comes to her in a dream. On a literal level, her dream “seems far away from [her] waking state” (127), but on a figuratively spiritual level, this dream accurately reflects the sacred nature of their relationship:

X and I and some other people I didn’t know or can’t remember were wearing innocent athletic underwear outfits, which changed at some point into gauzy bright white clothes, and these turned out to be not just clothes but our substances, our flesh and bones and in a sense our souls. (127)

I am struck by the narrator's linking of the "ordinary" "athletic underwear" with "in a sense our souls" and, particularly, by the direct linking of "flesh and bone"—the body—with the soul, omitting even the comma that quite appropriately might have separated them. And, again, I see no good reason for reading this passage completely ironically. The more accurate descriptor it seems would be *ambivalence*, and given the secular, contemporary setting of the story—and of its writing and publication—such ambivalence is entirely understandable. The voice in the story that most firmly counters a completely ironic reading, and which at the same time contributes to a profound ambivalence, is that of "X's" friend, Dennis, who came to visit "X" when he was in Australia. As mentioned earlier, Dennis compared "X's" women to "row on row" of terra-cotta soldiers destroyed by their relationships with "X" (119). Dennis also opines to the narrator that his observations and experiences have led him to conclude that women are "the lucky ones" because they "are forced to live in the world of loss and death" (122).

Dennis' pronouncements here align directly with what I have been arguing about women's Kali-like connection with death, but the *source* of these observations in "Bardon Bus" is very significant. Dennis has about him what the narrator terms a "malicious sympathetic way" (121), an oxymoron that signals that Dennis' "wisdom" is not that borne of genuine compassion or agape. As "X" points out, Dennis also lives his life in a perpetual delay—never in the present, the "now" that Eastern religious practices consistently strive for. "X" observes that Dennis "always talked about the last place he'd been, and the last people he'd seen, and never seemed to notice anything" (119). However, Dennis' shortcomings—although they qualify his observations on women noted above—do not necessarily *negate* these observations, just as they qualify but do not negate his negative observations that X is an irresponsible philanderer. They do, however, perhaps register what I see as *Munro's* ambivalence about the characters she has created in "X" and Kay.

The profound ambivalence that characterizes so much of "Bardon Bus" becomes even more pronounced in the story's conclusion. Kay returns from a sojourn in the country and, among other things, reports to the narrator that on the previous *Sunday* (recall the fantasized preacher who aroused the narrator every Sunday), she met an anthropologist named Alex. The narrator has revealed near the beginning of the story

that “x” was one of the letters in X’s real name and that he was an anthropologist. Kay is clearly unaware that she is on the verge of a relationship with the man over whom the narrator has been agonizing. She tells the narrator that while a number of people were sitting around a fire that evening, this “nice man” came over to her, “just sighed, and laid his head on [her] lap” (128).

In keeping with the reading I have advanced above, this scene between Kay and X becomes a symbolic union of Kali and Shiva. The coming together of the male character who has been symbolically linked to the divine from the outset and “Kay-li” will almost certainly cause the narrator further pain; thus, it is difficult to ascribe any *immediate*, personal “success” to her sexual endeavors. In the narrator’s lack of such success and, perhaps, in what may be seen as X’s exploitive philandering, may also lie some of the authorial ambivalence in this story. However, the sacred possibilities of the sexual and the bodily offered by both Kay and X will, it seems, live on for at least awhile in their relationship. Munro gives us no more story to work with, so we cannot know these matters for certain. But even if the narrator does not recognize that she has missed her opportunity for a further relationship with X and the attendant opportunities for further ineffable experience in the realm of Eros—missed them primarily because, unlike Kay, she was unwilling to take the risks that genuine Eros demands—again, even if she does not recognize these things, the reader well may.

The Progress of Love

Munro’s interest in the sacred possibilities of the sexual and the body continues unabated in her sixth collection *The Progress of Love*. Although key elements of the connection between the spiritual and the sexual/bodily continue, others, such as a greater emphasis on elderly, “crone” female figures, lend to the sense of broadening and progress suggested by the title of this collection. For example, we encounter in “White Dump” a figure we have seen in “How I Met My Husband” from *Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You*. The central character in “White Dump,” Isabel, has a sexual liaison with a Christ cum flying-boy pilot character. Although this affair has disastrous, life-altering consequences for Isabel and her family, it also provides her an experience that is described in religious, almost archaic language: “She felt rescued, lifted, beheld and safe” (421). “White Dump,” however, also contributes to the broadening of Munro’s spiritual

perspective with the character Sophie, an elderly woman who has achieved the Western contemporary equivalent of the ancient, pre-Christian Crone. Sophie's name also seems to quite deliberately suggest the "Sophianic wisdom" that Richard Tarnas refers to, and her words, actions and attitudes often reveal such wisdom. Moreover, Sophie also reads old Icelandic poetry reflecting Kali-like associations with blood and death—poetry full of "the most terrible gore and hacking people up—women particularly, one slitting her own kids' throats and mixing the blood in her husband's wine" (382-83).

Beverly Rasporich clearly sees Sophie as connected with the archetypal female forces noted above, opining that Sophie is "a female goddess and fertility figure in the mythic substructure of the fiction" (152). Munro, however, with her usual realism, does not bestow any particular respect upon Sophie in the eyes of other characters in the story. Sophie's daughter in law, Isabel, and her son, Lawrence, for instance, ironically refer to her as "Old Norse," and at one point in the narrative Sophie suffers humiliation at the hands of a group of "hippie types" who tear up her bathrobe while she is out swimming in the lake. These forms of denigration make clear Munro's realization that modern/postmodern Western culture has some distance to go in recognizing and respecting Sophianic female wisdom—spiritual or other. However, some small "progress" toward this end might be seen in Lawrence's observation of Sophie's "strange," contrary qualities. He and Isabel *do* joke about Sophie's toughness—for example, " 'An Old Norse never takes a summer vacation...An Old Norse takes a winter vacation. And goes North'"—but then he wonders that "Sophie is such a pacifist and Socialist, isn't it strange" (382-83).

Further evidence of progress or of realizing relative success in finding spiritual fulfillment in the realm of the sexual/bodily is also found in the changes in Isabel since her affair with the pilot. Over the ensuing years, she has increasingly given herself over to sexual relationships. As she talks to her grownup daughter, Denise, about her experiences, the usual Munroian ambivalence attends, but we also see in the language describing these experiences a deepening of Isabel's insight: "In the years ahead, she would learn to read the signs, both at the beginning and at the end of a love affair. She wouldn't be so astonished at the way the skin of the moment can break open" (419). Isabel has also experienced powerful, near transcendent occasions of Eros: "Scenes of

such fusing, sundering pleasure that they left both parties flattened, and in a few cases, shedding tears” (420). The conclusion of “White Dump,” however, is particularly open-ended and inconclusive, even by Munro standards, and we are left to speculate to what extent Isabel’s journeys in the realm of Eros will continue to leave her feeling “rescued, lifted, beheld, and safe” (421).

“The Moon in the Orange Street Skating Rink”

In “The Moon In the Orange Street Skating Rink” (hereafter referred to as “The Moon In”), the central female character, Callie, seems in many ways a quite limited, all *too* “ordinary” girl/young woman. However, her name points toward a number of underlying connections with the ancient Indian goddess, Kali. Callie displays the paradoxically hostile compassion associated with her mythological namesake, and a willingness to give of herself bodily and sexually that is not based on lust; Callie—at one point, even dressing as a boy to escape to Toronto—also manifests an androgyny that betokens the “union of the sexes” that Alain Danielou identifies as being *within* the Indian sub-deity, Kali. Further, Callie manifests a deep sense of agape, one of the “hypergoods” that Charles Taylor argues lies at the very core of the “affirmation of ordinary life.” Callie—primarily through her devoted care for her husband, Edgar, an old friend of the story’s other central character, Sam—demonstrates another of the most important criteria of “hypergoods”: “Our acceptance of any hypergood is connected in a complex way with our being *moved* by it” (Taylor 73).

Sam, now an elderly man himself, has returned to visit his old friend Edgar who has suffered a stroke and who has been married to Callie for years. Sam is *moved*, in the sense that Taylor intends the word, by the warmth, love, and devotion he finds in the home of Callie and Edgar: “He [Edgar] is tall, frail, beautifully groomed and dressed. Callie shaves him. She washes his hair every day, and it is white and glistening like the angel hair on Christmas trees” (216). Sam, recalling the circumstances many years ago that brought the three of them together, also recalls and acknowledges Callie’s power—a power that has not dissipated, only changed forms: “At the moment, he saw Callie’s power...generously distributed to all of them” (214). Thus, it is entirely fitting that Callie’s “place upstairs” reflects both her “ordinariness” and her goddess/crone status: “Stunning gold brocade draped to suggest a large window where there was no window.

Gold plushy carpet, rough white plaster ceiling sparkling with stars...lights hang from chains, in globes of amber glass” (215). Most importantly, though, his visit with Callie and Edgar has clearly had a spiritual impact on Sam. Although he frames them interrogatively, Sam is clearly on the brink of some epiphanic insights into life and happiness:

The moment of happiness he [Sam] shared with them remained in his mind, but he never knew what to make of it. Do such moments really mean, as they seem to, that we have a life of happiness with which we only occasionally intersect? Do they shed such light before and after that all that has happened to us in our lives—or that we’ve made happen—can be dismissed? (218-19)

Munro ends a significant number of her stories with this sort of epiphanic *questioning*, and readers are left to provide their own answers; however we answer, though, our contemplation of the question(s) nudges us toward spiritual considerations. Moreover, we see once again that the source of the character’s epiphanic questioning is clearly female/feminine; in this instance, the source is Callie. Unlike Edgar, Sam has not experienced many such moments, but here he is at least acknowledging the mystery, in this case the mysterious possibility of parallel worlds. Sam also recognizes that most of his old friend’s life has been made up of the kind of moments he himself is presently experiencing. I would not completely rule out ironic possibilities, but I am struck with how “The Moon In” ends—it seems, without irony—with a word that very few Munro stories conclude with. Callie turns to Sam and says of Edgar, “He’s happy” (219).

“Circle of Prayer”

The last story from *The Progress of Love* that I will discuss is “Circle of Prayer.” This story merits detailed attention primarily because in its protagonist, Trudy, this work offers a particularly clear example of the type of individual in contemporary Western culture that I identified in Chapter One. Trudy is a quite “ordinary” young woman approaching mid-life and living in an equally “ordinary” mid-sized urban community. Like so many people in contemporary Western culture, Trudy has little traditional religious background. She is not hostile to traditional religion; she is simply indifferent to it and has not given it much thought. At one point in the story, Trudy tells her friend,

Janet, “I haven’t got anything against it [religion]...I wasn’t brought up to be religious” (365). Trudy’s life, however, has taken her in directions that are causing her to consider and grapple with spiritual issues.

One such direction has to do with Trudy’s failed marriage to her ex-husband, Dan. As I indicated in earlier, briefer discussions of “Circle of Prayer,” Dan is a particularly clear example of the *puer eternus*, “flying boy” male figure that turns up quite frequently in Munro’s fiction. Evidence in the story makes clear that Trudy was hoping for deeper, more spiritual possibilities in her marriage from the outset. Up to the point in her life where the narrative begins, however, Trudy’s “search” for such deeper, essentially spiritual, fulfillment has remained decidedly vague and unarticulated. Her search is brought into considerably sharper focus, however, by a catalyst we encounter so often in Munro’s stories—and in life: death. The death and the ensuing funeral in “Circle of Prayer” that has this effect on Trudy, as well as on her only child, sixteen-year-old Robin, is that of one of Robin’s classmates, Tracy-Lee, killed in a car crash.

Thus, we see in “Circle of Prayer” a number of recurring patterns around relationships and the connection between spirituality/religion and death that we have encountered in a number of previous works. As the title of this story anticipates, however, the story also focuses on a larger, figurative female “body”, the circle that Trudy discovers when her marriage to Dan collapses and when her relationship with her daughter comes under some strain. This larger female body *is* quite explicitly religious, but the circle of prayer that Trudy’s friend Janet invites Trudy to join is certainly not *conventionally* religious, and it is certainly not dogmatic: “ ‘It’s not strictly speaking religious,’ Janet says. ‘I mean, it’s not connected with any church’ ” (365).

An expanded sense of Eros in “Circle of Prayer” takes a number of forms beyond the strictly sexual/bodily. The prayer circle that Janet invites Trudy to join constitutes the clearest example of agape in the story, but here are other sources as well. Agape, what Charles Taylor sees as one of the most important “hypergoods” in modern Western culture, may also be found in Trudy’s job. With her friend Janet, she works at the local Home for Mentally Handicapped Adults (348). In her approach to her job, especially in her relationship with Kelvin, one of the patients in the home, we see the genuine compassion and caring that Trudy brings to her work. At one point, for instance, Janet

draws Trudy's attention to two new monogrammed coffee mugs that Kelvin has bought. He has hung the cups with those of all of the patients—thus forming another “circle” in the story. Janet's wry observation, shared by Trudy, reveals the genuine agape at the core of their work and of this story: “ ‘I'm not going to be too overjoyed seeing my name in that lineup...but I wouldn't hurt his feelings for a million dollars’” (370).

Again, the pivotal event in “Circle of Prayer” that initiates a string of other important events and encounters crucial to the story's implicit spiritual vision is the death of Tracy Lee. First, without consulting Trudy, Robin removes from a jug in their home a heirloom necklace that her grandmother (Dan's mother) gave her. During Tracy Lee's funeral, Robin drops the necklace into her classmate's coffin. A number of Robin's friends drop similar tokens into the coffin in their attempts to “religiously” observe Tracy Lee's passing. The events at Tracy Lee's funeral echo Elaine's observations in “Memorial” about what she sees as the impossibility of facing death without religion. Robin and her friends, having little or no traditional religious faith upon which to draw, essentially create their own “religious” ritual in the quite secular setting of the funeral home:

It was like a religious ceremony. The girls behaved as if they'd been told what to do, as if this what was always done on such occasions. They sang, they wept, they dropped their jewelry. The sense of ritual made every one of them graceful. (359)

Trudy, however, is understandably upset with Robin: “ ‘That girl wasn't even your friend. Christ, you didn't have a good thing to say for her this morning’” (348). The resulting tension between them further contributes to Trudy's increasing need for a broader, deeper framework that she can bring to the various challenges in her life.

Unlike Janet, however, Trudy cannot bring herself to embrace what is, essentially, a traditional Christian perspective, merely facilitated by the modern technology of telephones. Although Janet has scant religious background, she does draw upon the scriptures, telling Trudy at one point, for example, “It says in the Bible, ‘Ask and it shall be given’” (367). Again, Trudy does not flatly reject this offer of religious succor. But like so many other protagonists/narrators in Munro's writing, and like so many people in the broader culture, Trudy intuitively turns away from what seems, frankly, too simplistic

an alternative. And although it has remained largely unformulated and unfocused, Trudy possesses a considerable degree of female, Kali-like energy upon which she has often drawn. For example, when she first met Dan in a bar in a tourist lake town, she literally danced for him, casting him symbolically in the role of Shiva and herself as his consort, Kali: “She danced around by herself, giddy and drunk, in front of the table where he sat with Marlene, a meek-looking blonde with a pink shelf of bosom all embroidered with pearls” (356). (Interestingly, *Marlene’s* response to Dan’s departure was to join the “Fellowship of Bible Christians. The women weren’t allowed make-up and had to wear a kind of bonnet to church on Sundays” (356). There are responses and there are responses)) Trudy also displays Kali-like strength and hostility and Kali’s attendant willingness to “attack ego” (Kali is often referred to as “Ego-Slayer”) when Dan attempts to rationalize his infidelity with his latest conquest, Genevieve: “ ‘You stop telling me about your sweet fucking Genevieve and her sweet fucking bedroom and her asshole kids—you shut up, don’t tell me anymore! You’re just a big dribbling mouth without any brains. I don’t care what you do, just shut up!’ ” (361).

Trudy cannot find the depths she seeks with Dan ultimately because he lacks depth himself—he is too much the *puer eternus*. Trudy’s “failure” with Dan, however, contributes to her developing Sophianic wisdom. Their extended, on again off again separation, combined with her conflict with Robin and the overall demands of being a single working mother pressure Trudy into avenues toward such wisdom. Her conscious opening up to these spiritual/religious avenues begins, ironically, with her dismissal of Janet’s invitation into the “circle of prayer.” Trudy’s initial response to the invitation escalates from mild criticism—“Like at high school...there were secret societies and you weren’t supposed to tell who was in them. Only I wasn’t” (366)—to outright hostility that implicitly critiques some well known Christian narratives such as Lazarus’ coming back from death:

“All right...I’ll just get down on my knees right now and pray that I get Dan back. I’ll pray that I get the necklace back and I get Dan back and why do I have to stop there? I can pray that Tracy Lee never died. I can pray that she comes back to life. Why didn’t her mother ever think of that?” (367)

Clearly, Janet's well intentioned but somewhat simplistic version of faith does not hold much appeal for Trudy, but Trudy's hostility here is misdirected, and she quickly realizes it. At work a few days later, Trudy, working on ways to make up for her hurtful treatment of her friend, experiences an important epiphanic moment. This moment brings together key aspects of the story, and it also illuminates a number of the central aspects of what I have come to call Munro's implicit spiritual vision.

First, Trudy finds herself recalling an occasion in her honeymoon with Dan. They were staying at Dan's mother's hotel (a clearly Freudian moment) on an island on the lake. Dan's father has been dead for some years, the hotel is closed to the public, but his mother still lives there. Dan has gone fishing and Trudy, out for a walk, hears a "piano being played" (371).⁸ It is Dan's mother playing the piano: "A tall, straight-backed old woman, with her gray-black hair twisted into such a tiny knot. She sat and played the piano, without any lights on, in the half-dark, half-bare room" (371). Significantly, she is not playing a classical piece. Rather, she is playing, over and over, a very "ordinary," popular tune called "It's Three O'Clock in the Morning" (371). I sense here a tribute of sorts to female struggles, particularly in the realm of "ordinary" sexual relationships—the kind of struggle that at this early point in her life Trudy has yet to experience. Recall, though, that Trudy is *remembering* this scene from a vantage point years later when she is going through an experience that is bringing her closer to the Crone/Sophie wisdom of the old woman pianist.

The narrative voice muses about this memory: "Why does Trudy now remember this moment?" with its "clattering, faltering, persistent piano music" (371). Trudy also recalls aspects of Eros she was experiencing during her honeymoon, but, again, her journey since then has altered, deepened her initial, primarily coital sense of Eros into something closer to Augustine's definition of Eros: "The power which drives man [woman] to God" (qtd in May 71)—or to put it in more general, contemporary terms, toward the divine:

⁸ A brief aside: On a number of occasions in Munro's fiction—occasions often associated with epiphanic moments ("Jakarta" and "Carried Away" offer but two examples of this recurring motif) as in this story—we encounter images of a woman, usually elderly, alone playing a piano. There appears to be some corollary between this recurring piano-playing woman and crone-like Sophianic wisdom. Certainly an interesting motif but one that I will have to leave for another occasion.

Trudy remembers that so clearly and it seems she stood outside her own body, which ached then from the punishing pleasures of love. She stood outside her own happiness in a tide of sadness. And the opposite happened the morning Dan left. Then she stood outside her own unhappiness in a tide of what seemed unreasonably like love. (372)

Trudy's success in "Circle of Prayer" is obviously not to be measured by the "success" of her marriage to Dan, although her time with Dan has rendered her wiser. Trudy's success here emerges out of her experience of Eros in its broadest and deepest sense, replete with the agape and the "affirmation of ordinary life" she has found in her relationship with her daughter, with friends like Janet, and in her friendship with her patient Kelvin, with his "gentle head fog" (350). This is the success demonstrated by Trudy's hard-won wisdom—a wisdom that in contemporary Western life often affords no more than the requisite insight to formulate the important questions:

But it was the same thing, really, when you got outside. What are those times that stand out, clear patches in your life—what do they have to do with it? They aren't exactly promises. Breathing spaces. Is that all? (372)

At the very conclusion of "Circle of Prayer," Trudy moves beyond questioning her self to questioning someone else, although she is still not entirely conscious of her reasons for doing so. Trudy and Kelvin are together at the Home late one evening; all the other patients have gone to bed. "Kelvin, do you pray?" says Trudy. She didn't know she was going to ask him that" (372-73). There is no evidence in the story to suggest that such a question indicates that Trudy is going to embrace conventional Christianity, or that she would, for example, join Janet's prayer circle. Rather, Trudy's question reflects her new found ability and willingness to consider how "ordinary" experiences and relationships sometimes yield "clear patches" in life. Kelvin's quite clever answer—"If I was smart enough to know what to pray for...then I wouldn't have to" (373)—renders the moment epiphanic and, in its own "ordinary" way, spiritual. There is no certainty here, definitely no prescription or dogma. Once again, Munro has her character "recognize and approach the mystery," not attempt to resolve it:

Yet it radiates—what he said, the way he said it, just the fact that he's there again, radiates, expands the way some silliness can, when you're

very tired. In this way, when she was young, and high, a person or a moment could become a lily floating on the cloudy river water, perfect and familiar. (373)

The Quest Continues: *Friend of My Youth* to *The Love of a Good Woman*

Munro's seventh collection, *Friend of My Youth* and her eighth, *Open Secrets* both contain stories that lend themselves to the focus of the present chapter. However, I will confine my discussion in the balance of this chapter to explorations of two quite representative stories, the title story from *Friend of My Youth* and "The Albanian Virgin" from *Open Secrets*. I will then conclude with a detailed discussion of a pivotal, culminating work, the title story from *The Love of A Good Woman*. I will address works from Munro's most recent collection, *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* in Chapters Five and Six.

"Friend of My Youth"

"Friend of My Youth," the title story from Munro's seventh collection, offers further examples of the connection between the sexual/bodily and the sacred. Telling the story of Flora Grieves, the narrator's *mother's* friend in *her* youth, the narrator reveals a good deal about the development of *her own* present perspective around the sexual and the spiritual/religious. By extension, through this multi-generational story, Munro identifies broader cultural developments in this domain as well. Further, in a number of ways "Friend of My Youth" anticipates "The Love of a Good Woman," particularly in its treatment of the powerfully negative ambivalence that often emerges out of Pauline aversion to the bodily and the sexual.

Flora Grieves' last name reflects her martyr-like endurance of missed opportunities for a potentially sexually fulfilling marriage with a character named Robert Deal, and our narrator's conclusions about Flora Grieves leave little doubt about her own views of the destructiveness of Pauline disgust with sexuality, or about what she sees as important generational developments around sexuality and the staunch Calvinist/Cameronian religion to which Flora is so deeply devoted:

What made Flora evil in my story was just what made her admirable in my mother's—her turning away from sex. I fought against everything my mother wanted to tell me on the subject; I despised even the drop in her voice, the gloomy caution with which she approached it. My mother grew up in a time and in a place where sex was a dark undertaking for women. She knew that you could die of it. So she honored the decency, the prudery, the frigidity, that might protect you. And I grew up in horror of that very protection, the dainty tyranny that seemed to me to extend to all areas of life, to enforce tea parties and white gloves and all sorts of tinkling inanities. (22)

There are, however, numerous reasons for disagreeing with the narrator's assessment of Flora as set out above. Flora Grieves is certainly not evil—no matter how we are to understand that highly problematized term. She is a woman of extraordinary strengths, including the strength of her remarkably long-standing equanimity in the face of what would seem overwhelming disappointments. Moreover, how, ultimately, are we to read the concluding paragraph of the story with its backhanded admiration of the fiery Cameronians, their passion and their violence—"They hacked the haughty Bishop of St. Andrews to death on the highway and rode their horses over his body" (26)—or of the Cameronian minister's "firm rejoicing" and defiance in the face of death by hanging as he "excommunicated all the other preachers in the world" (26)? There is clearly a grudging admiration in the narrative voice here that throws into question the narrator's—and her mother's—anti-religious stance—and by extension—the narrator's assessment that Flora Grieves lost her opportunities for happiness by clinging to her "primitive" religion and not more aggressively pursuing Robert Deal—that is, by not more aggressively pursuing sexuality. In her essay "Alice Munro and the Scottish Nostalgic Grotesque," Magdalene Redekop notes the strong influence on Munro of her grandfather, James Hogg, going so far as to say "It would be difficult to exaggerate the influence of Hogg on the writing of Munro" (27); Redekop backs up this assessment by quoting Lynn Truss in her essay "Alice in Memory's Looking Glass," wherein Truss points out how Munro has referred to the " 'extremely crazy Calvinism' that she works with in herself"

24). None of this, of course, makes the final paragraph of “Friend of My Youth” any less ambivalent or mysterious.

Robert Thacker struggles as I do with the final paragraph of “Friend of My Youth,” acknowledging how tempting it is to “brush that paragraph aside and deal merely with the concluding, resonant image of the story proper (the narrator’s ‘bitter lump of love’ transformed ‘into a phantom’)” (18). Thacker is absolutely right, however, when he declares, “Munro does not allow it” (18). He then takes up Munro’s demand and concludes his essay with a response that I find so thoroughly compelling, I will quote it in its entirety:

And there that paragraph sits, mysterious, suggesting its meaning, offering not closure but continuance “just in the hope of seeing this trickle in time, making a connection, rescuing one thing from the rubbish.” Alice Munro, writing “Home,” tracing “The Progress of Love,” finding “The Friend of [Her] Youth,” wondering over the touchability and mystery of being, of being from and within Huron County, Ontario, Alice Munro, writing on... (18)

Yes, in “Friend of My Youth,” we are left with a profoundly ambivalent *overall* treatment of the connection between sexuality and religion/spirituality. The story *does* clearly demonstrate, though, that even well into her writing career (*Friend* was published in 1990), Munro is still struggling against her mother’s sexual mores and, more generally, those of her parent’s generation. The story presents a kind of generational palimpsest that ultimately does not register *any* position categorically, but that demands of the engaged reader a multi-leveled consideration of how the connection between the sexual and the sacred has developed and where it is at now.

Munro’s focus on the Cameronians in “Friend of My Youth” is followed in “Carried Away,” a story from *Open Secrets*, by a depiction of an obscure sect called the “Tolpuddle Martyrs” (42-43). In “The Albanian Virgin” from the same collection, one of the central characters is captured by, and then for a number of years lives with, a tribe of Serbian Christians who occasionally sell their female captives to neighboring Muslim tribes. This return to a focus on organized religions or sects reminiscent of early stories such as “Age of Faith” or “Baptizing,” however, does not signal a growing religious

conservatism on Munro's part. Munro invariably emphasizes issues of sexuality and gender in her presentation of these religions and sects, and she consistently critiques how all such groups repress bodily/sexual needs and/or desires, particularly those of females. In none of these stories is any religious group ever privileged, and certainly none is ever proselytized for.

"The Albanian Virgin"

"The Albanian Virgin" is a particularly fascinating and quite exotic example of a work wherein various religious perspectives—Christian, Islamic, and pagan—all impinge on the life of a central character in the story, Lottar (a.k.a. Charlotte). Like "Friend of My Youth," "The Albanian Virgin" presents a complex, multi-layered palimpsest narrative, although it differs from "Friend" in that there are not the same generational gaps among the various characters. The story is narrated by a woman named Claire who bears some uncanny similarities to Alice Munro, the most striking of which is Claire's bookstore: "I opened the store in March of 1964. This was in Victoria, in British Columbia" (104). Munro and her first husband, James Munro, opened Munro's Bookstore in Victoria in 1964, a similarity that Sheila Munro duly notes in her biography of her mother: "The Bookstore described in "The Albanian Virgin" (*Open Secrets*) sounds much like Munro's in the early days" (181). It seems a logical extension and interesting exercise, then, to compare Claire's philosophical/religious perspective to Munro's as Claire applies it in arranging the books in her store:

And I had set out these books, when they came, so that Political Science could shade into Philosophy and Philosophy into Religion without a harsh break, so that compatible poets could nestle together, the arrangement of the shelves of books—I believed—reflecting a more or less natural ambling of the mind, in which treasures new and forgotten might be continually surfacing. (105)

Whether the story is offering direct insights into Munro's religious/philosophical perspective must remain an open question; what is clear, however, is that through Lottar's/Charlotte's romantic, fascinating quest the story does offer some further intriguing possible connections between the romantic/sexual and the sacred.

The story begins with an account of Charlotte's capture by members of a Serbian, Albanian tribe who were out to kill the guide she had hired at the last minute to take her on a diversionary hike near her hotel. Her capture was entirely coincidental, in that—as the Franciscan priest later explains—her captors were not at all interested in her: “ ‘Oh, they are not robbers!’ said the Franciscan, shocked. ‘They are honest men. They shot him because they were in blood with him. With his house. It is their law’ ” (83). This bizarre incident initiates Charlotte's lengthy stay with the tribe in their mountain camp, during which she becomes less a prisoner and increasingly an integrated member of this community.

Charlotte experiences a profound metamorphosis from angst-ridden middleclass Canadian tourist, traveling begrudgingly with the likes of the middle-aged Cozzenses and Dr. Lamb, whom she “loathes” even more because “she believed the Cozzenses had summoned [him] from England to meet her” (84) into someone who experiences an often brutal education into becoming a productive woman of the tribe; who is nearly sold to a neighboring Muslim tribe for marriage; and who consequently is transformed into an “Albanian Virgin”—a “man” in every respect save the anatomical. The most important of all of Lottar's experiences in this completely foreign environment, though, is her gradual falling in love with the Franciscan priest who ministers to this nominally Christian but essentially pagan tribe. In the present time-line of the story in Victoria, the priest, it becomes clear, is Gjurdhi, Lottar's husband/partner.

Finding the thematic core of this uncharacteristically exotic, but typically complex palimpsest narrative entails tracing the connection between the quite Munro-like narrator, Claire, and Lottar *before* Lottar was captured by the Serbs. When we first encounter Lottar (then Charlotte), she is an aimless and dissatisfied middleclass tourist yearning for more adventure and meaning in her life. In the present time-line, Lottar has quite clearly become a kind of mentor figure for Claire who is gathering Lottar's story from her in St. Joseph's Hospital in Victoria (much the same way a fiction writer might gather material). Claire is also quite obviously living vicariously through Lottar and Gjurdhi, particularly in regard to their sex life. At one point, for example, when Claire is leaving Charlotte and Gjurdhi's place after an evening together, she mentally notes a “savoring and contented look” on Charlotte's face, that she “knew had to do with

Gjurdhi” (123). This glance triggers a powerful bout of Munroian Pauline aversion with all its usual ambivalent mix of disgust and desire:

It made me think that after I walked downstairs and left the building and went into the street, some hot and skinny, slithery, yellowish, indecent old beast, some mangy but urgent old tiger, was going to pounce among the books and the dirty dishes and conduct a familiar rampage. (123-24)

I am not entirely sure what to make of this charged and strange response but whatever else is unclear, it *is* clear that there have been very few, if any, such “familiar rampages” occurring in the narrator’s life, and that she clearly wishes there were.

The thematic core I mentioned earlier emerges incrementally out of comparing Claire and Lottar/Charlotte’s respective life journeys, and in noting how Lottar has overcome—through her very demanding experiences—the kind of alienation and *ennui* that Claire still suffers. Nowhere in the story is this alienation more clear than in Claire’s description—to the reader only—of her inner feelings when, quite late in the story, Lottar and Gjurdhi “vanish,” almost certainly for good:

I was tipped into dismay more menacing than any of the little eddies of regret that had caught me in the past year. I had lost my bearings. I had to go back to the store so my clerk could go home, but I felt I could just as easily walk another way, just any way at all. My connection was in danger—that was all. Sometimes our connection is frayed. It is in danger, it seems almost lost. Views and streets deny knowledge of us, the air grows thin. Wouldn’t we rather have a destiny to submit to, then, something that claims us, anything, instead of such flimsy choices, arbitrary days? (126-27)

Claire has lost the “frayed,” vicarious connection to the sexual, the sacred, the genuine vitality that the motley Lottar and Gjurdhi embody in the story. We have learned earlier that Claire had come out to Victoria on the heels of a messy affair that had clearly not met her deeper needs anymore than had the marriage it destroyed. In short, Claire is yet another example of a Munro female protagonist/narrator who has sought spiritual fulfillment in sexual relationships, has failed to find it, but who keeps on searching in the same realm, if only vicariously. Claire has failed to find deeper fulfillment in her own

relationships, but Lottar—a woman who started out very much like Claire—has not. Whatever else may be said of Lottar and Gjurdhi’s relationship, it is certainly not marked by “flimsy choices, arbitrary days.”

On the contrary, Lottar and Gjurdhi’s relationship is marked by a number of very difficult, life-altering choices. It is Gjurdhi, for example, who decides that Lottar will become a “virgin” in order to prevent her being sold to the neighboring tribes. Later, when he realizes that even her status as “virgin” will probably not prevent her sale, Gjurdhi orchestrates her escape—a lengthy, arduous walk to Skroda, the nearest town.

Lottar’s love for Gjurdhi develops gradually; it is characterized by her dependence on him, her attraction to his strong moral qualities, but also by her attraction to his physical qualities: “She had not understood how much she depended on the smell of his skin, the aggrieved determination of his long strides, the flourish of his black moustache” (109). The sacred quality of their relationship comes through clearly only at the moment when Lottar fears she may never see Gjurdhi again. He has delivered her safely to the British Consulate, and they have been separated. She calls out for him: “‘Xoti! Xoti! Xoti! which means ‘leader’ or ‘master’ in the language of the Ghlegs” (128). As in Munro’s earlier story, “Bardon Bus,” the possibility arises of a connection between “X” and Christ. This possibility is further reinforced by the almost iconic image Munro gives us at the end of the story’s penultimate paragraph. Just as Lottar is being led away by a Consul servant, the servant’s lantern illuminates Gjurdhi:

It was a wan face hanging in the tree, its melancholy expression quite impersonal and undemanding, like the expression you might see on the face of a devout but proud apostle in a church window. Then it was gone taking the breath out of her body, as she knew too late. (128)

Of course, the balance of “The Albanian Virgin” makes clear, as does the concluding sentence, that Lottar and Gjurdhi were not ultimately separated: “She called him and called him, and when the boat came into the harbor at Trieste he was waiting on the dock” (128). The mention of Trieste may remind other readers as it does me of Dick’s expression of loss and spiritual emptiness near the conclusion of “Thanks for the Ride” when he mentally intones, “‘That is what it is: *Trieste. Trieste est*’” (58). However, in this story some twenty-six years later we do not find an echo of Dick’s emptiness and

despair. Rather, the later story concludes with an uplifting connection, a man-woman relationship that holds genuine sacred qualities.

“The Love of a Good Woman”

Although the title story from Munro’s tenth collection, *The Love of a Good Woman* is certainly not her final word on successfully connecting Eros with the spiritual and/or religious, there is much in this story that constitutes a culmination of the present chapter. The culminating aspects I refer to, in fact, are quite clearly anticipated in the story’s title. The “good woman” referred to is the story’s protagonist, Enid, and the good that Enid manifests is very much in keeping with what Charles Taylor refers to as some of the “hypergoods” that he sees as central to the “affirmation/deification of ordinary life.” “Love” is the other key word in the title, with its obvious connections to Eros. In this story, however, Eros emerges in its broadest and deepest sense--from erotic, coital sexuality to the selfless love of agape. “The Love of a Good Woman” is also a long story—at 75 pages, near novella length—and it bears out Munro’s own assessment of the works of the latter stages of her writing career. In *Alice Munro: A Tribute*, a promotional booklet that accompanied the publication of *Selected Stories* in 1996, Munro opined that her “stories have grown longer, and in a way more disjointed and demanding and peculiar” (2). The interwoven multiple timelines and “demanding and peculiar” twists and turns of “The Love of Good Woman” certainly bear out Munro’s assessment, but I will confine my discussion to the story’s core narrative which traces the protagonist, Enid’s, journey through and out of her struggles against the Pauline aversion with the sexual and the bodily so endemic in Christianity into a balanced love for Rupert Quinn, whose embittered wife, Mrs. Quinn, Enid nurses through a terminal illness that culminates in her death. The preponderance of images of light and luminosity in the final stages of this story resist any irony around Munro’s use of the word love, and I will argue that Enid’s search for the sacred in the realm of Eros is one of the most successful in Munro’s fiction. To fully appreciate the intensity and nature of Enid’s struggle toward this success, though, it is necessary to trace aspects of her life over a period of some twenty years.

Enid's upbringing in 1930-40s rural Ontario was quite typically and predictably conventionally religious. Unlike Del Jordan and other Munro protagonists, however, Enid ultimately embraced traditional Christianity—the light, compassionate *imitatio Christi* aspects, as well as the darker, Pauline aversion to the sexual and the bodily. Regarding the latter aspects, when Enid was twenty and finishing her nursing training, her father, dying in hospital, wrested from her a promise not to nurse in hospitals: “I don't want you working in a place like this” (39). We see here again the strong parallel between earthly and Heavenly f/Fathers; Enid is devoted to both. Through her mother, she discovers that her father's deep-seated objection has to do with what he perceives as “the familiarity nurses had with men's bodies” (40). Enid's mother tells her, “He's got an idea that nursing makes a woman coarse” (39). It is also Enid's mother—an important secondary character in a number of respects—who recognizes in Enid's compliant promise to her father her daughter's propensity for martyrdom:

It seemed that her mother had known before Enid did just how tempting this promise would be. The deathbed promise, the self-denial, the wholesale sacrifice. And the more absurd the better. This was what she had given in to. And not for love of her father, either (her mother implied), but for the thrill of it. Sheer noble perversity. (40)

Despite Enid's mother's recognition of Enid's propensity for “perverse” self-sacrifice, she is also aware—as the reader and some Munro critics are—that there is more to Enid's religiousness than this “sheer noble perversity.” Coral Ann Howells, for example, acknowledges Enid as a genuinely good woman—“a Christian who is devoted to her nursing profession” (150), and we have every reason to take the narrative voice at its word in its observation that Enid's “hope was to be good, and do good, and not necessarily in the orderly, customary, wifely way” (42).

Enid is a woman of her word, but she is not above a certain amount of rationalizing if the cause seems sufficient. Wishing to nurse, she rationalizes to her mother (her father has died by this time) that if she were to become a *practical* nurse, if she “went into houses to nurse them, not as a registered nurse, she would hardly be breaking her promise would she?” (43). Her mother agrees, but, again, it is she who recognizes and subtly points out key elements that Enid seems to be ignoring in her life

plans: men, sexuality, marriage. Responding to Enid's point that practical nursing should not "coarsen" her in ways that her father feared, Enid's mother wryly notes, " 'If the only men you get to see are men who are never going to get out of bed again, you have a point'" (43).

Sixteen years pass during which Enid becomes a well-established practical nurse, genuinely compassionate and generous—for example, giving back most of the money she earns from poorer families "in the forms of children's shoes and winter coats and trips to the dentist and Christmas toys" (44). Her mother helps out by canvassing for "baby cots, and high chairs and blankets" and doing whatever else she can to help out Enid's "causes" (44). Enid's mother, however, is only partly joking when she says to friends, "But sometimes it's a devil of a lot of work...this being the mother of a saint" (44).

Saints, however, tend to have fairly limited sex lives, and just as her mother predicted, Enid's life is virtually devoid of sex. It is Enid's nursing of Mrs. Quinn that brings about her first real love interest in the form of her patient's husband, Rupert Quinn. We discover that Enid has known Rupert for some time. They went to school together, and Enid ruefully recalls how she and her girl friends "had teased and tormented" him (33). Enid has matured and developed in important ways since she was an adolescent, however, and her time at the Quinn household becomes a pivotal juncture in her further development. An important aspect of this development is Enid's discovery of what Jungians would call her "shadow" self, the darker facets of one's self that counter the more positive aspects that we usually have little trouble acknowledging. Her experiences with the Quinn children and to some extent with Rupert—although at first she refuses to acknowledge even to herself her attraction to him—provide the "light" side of Enid's experience, but she also encounters what Munro herself terms "the dark stuff [that] keeps coming back" (qtd. in Howells 149), primarily in her relationship with Mrs. Quinn.

Mrs. Quinn is a thoroughly embittered woman. Even her name suggests the bitter, alkaloid properties of Quinine; however, bitter Quinine also paradoxically has medicinal properties against Malaria. Coral Ann Howells notes how Mrs. Quinn and Enid "would seem to be opposites"—Enid, as noted above, a good woman, Mrs. Quinn "with her sickly malfunctioning is the personification of disorder, resentful, suspicious and

‘deliberately vile’” (Howells 150). “Seem” is the operative word here, however, in that it is through casting Mrs. Quinn as Enid’s dark doppelganger that Munro has our protagonist confront and defeat her own dark Pauline aversion to the sexual and the bodily—bestowed upon her specifically by her father and generally by Christianity, but then internalized. Thus again, we have an instance of an earthly father representing the Christian patriarchal perspective—in this case its repressive view of sex, a view that Northrop Frye sees as shaped by the “sado-masochistic cycle that dominates so much of our attitude to sex” (*On Religion* 59).

Munro’s intended subtitle for “The Love of a Good Woman” was “A Murder, A Mystery, A Romance” (Howells 149); the first part of this subtitle arising out of a story Mrs. Quinn tells Enid a few days before she dies. Mrs. Quinn tells Enid that her husband, Rupert, murdered Mr. Willens, an optometrist who had come to their home on a number of occasions to “examine” Mrs. Quinn. The description of Mr. Willens’ “examination” is couched in some of the most sexually violent, misogynist language in the story. For example, Mr. Willens was apparently “pushing and sucking and dribbling and digging into her [Mrs. Quinn] and hurting her all at the same time. He was a dirty old brute” (60). Mrs. Quinn’s “confession” to Enid is also foreshadowed by the clearest evidence in the story that Enid’s dying patient is in some ways her “dark doppelganger.” On the night prior to Mrs. Quinn telling Enid her story, Enid sleeps on the couch in Mrs. Quinn’s room, and she is awakened by what she terms some “trouble of her own.” It seems she is beginning to have “ugly dreams” (50).

Enid’s “ugly dreams” provide much of the fodder for Dennis Duffey’s argument that “The Love of a Good Woman” qualifies as a “dark mirror” and a “Pauline poetic” of some key aspects of Munro’s fiction up to the publication of this collection. One need not accept Duffey’s broader conclusions, though, to see that Enid’s dreams powerfully exemplify Christianity’s Pauline aversion to the body/sexuality, some of its key sexual taboos, as well as the “deadly” sin of lust. We might also recall that Paul’s Christ is the one who does not draw any particular distinction between actual adultery and the *desire for or thoughts about* adultery: “Whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart” (Matthew 5:28):

In the dreams that came to her now she would be copulating or trying to copulate (sometimes she was prevented by intruders or shifts of circumstances) with utterly forbidden and unthinkable partners. With fat squirmy babies or patients in bandages or her own mother. She would be slick with lust, hollow and groaning with it, and she would set to work with roughness and an attitude of evil pragmatism...And this coldness of heart, this matter-of-fact depravity drove her lust along. She woke up unrepentant, sweaty and exhausted, and lay like a carcass until her own self, her shame and disbelief, came pouring back into her...She lay there shivering in the warm night, with disgust and humiliation. (57)

This is the sort of sexual/bodily “sin” that would easily be associated with the “deliberately vile” Mrs. Quinn, but certainly not with “good woman” Enid. However, there are aspects of Enid’s dream such as “fat squirmy babies” or “sweaty...carcasses” that constitute the revivifying “grotesque realism” or images of the “material bodily lower stratum” that form the core of Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the life-affirming carnivalesque. Enid’s years of sexual/bodily repression render the “return of the repressed” in the form of her “ugly dreams” dramatically exaggerated, and, quite predictably and understandably, Enid’s conscious, waking response is “disgust and humiliation” (57). At subconscious levels, however, something quite different is occurring—something that again demonstrates how for all their obvious differences, Enid and Mrs. Quinn are connected in darkly important ways.

To clarify and encapsulate: Mrs. Quinn *is* a thoroughly bitter and vile woman. Her sexual behavior with D. M. Willens—whose name suggests a “demented will”—*is* “matter of fact depravity.” The at times omniscient narrative voice makes clear that Mrs. Quinn’s actions, such as her signaling for Willens “to get her down and thump her like an old billy goat...Dingey on him like a blow torch” (62), are also depraved. But it is not only her distorted sexual appetites that render Mrs. Quinn depraved; it is her thorough lack of compassion for her husband, her children, Enid, for that matter, for anyone. We immediately see the pronounced, genuine contrast with Enid in this regard

Despite this contrast, though, the seeming opposition between Enid and Mrs. Quinn remains in important ways an inverted connection. Mrs. Quinn’s distorted,

mechanical sexual appetite is the dark flip-side of Enid's sexless martyrdom. Mrs. Quinn is beyond recovery—physically and spiritually—but, unbeknownst to her, she provides a kind of healing, “osmosis” doppelganger effect on Enid; Enid seems to “catch” Mrs. Quinn's powerful, albeit distorted female sexual energy, and, paradoxically, through a mysterious kind of alchemy, this energy actually liberates Enid from the bodily and sexual constraints that her devotion to Christianity has visited upon her.

Tracing Enid's thoughts and actions in the latter stages of her caring for the dying Mrs. Quinn provides another macro example of key developments of Munro's overall implicit religious/spiritual perspective. First, as I have already indicated, Enid's quite understandable initial response to her “ugly dreams” is to regard them as sinful, and she turns to her religious beliefs to address them. She struggles, though, with praying to her Heavenly Father about them, feeling that bringing “the experiences she had just been through to the attention of God seemed absolutely useless, disrespectful” (51) (Recall, of course, her similar deference and disconnect with her earthly father).

Secondly, Enid's unacknowledged sexual attraction to Rupert Quinn has triggered a subterranean psychic and emotional explosion in her, and there is nothing in her religious beliefs that can help her to understand or in any way honor the resulting sexual feelings. The best she can come up with is “Evil grabs us when we are sleeping; pain and disintegration lie in wait” (52). These are hardly uplifting or helpful thoughts, and we see Enid's long-standing Christian faith finally begin to falter. Some time after her “ugly dreams,” for instance, Enid is putting the Quinn children to bed and listening to their prayers (an activity, incidentally, that she has taught them). Little Sylvia asks an innocent but crucial question about what it means to ask God to bless “Mama and Daddy and Enid” (53). Significantly, Enid leaves Sylvia's question unanswered.

Enid's faltering traditional faith, though, is not neatly or immediately replaced by a new spiritual/religious perspective. Rather, in typically realistic and subtle fashion, Munro allows the erosion of Enid's faith to open the way for other spiritual possibilities—possibilities that ultimately culminate in her coming together with Rupert Quinn. These possibilities begin with a suggestion that perhaps not all readers will credit, but which I advance here as an intriguing possibility:

In the little meadow between the house and the riverbank there were cows. She could hear them munching and jostling, feeding at night. She thought of their large gentle shapes in there with the money musk and chicory, the flowering grasses, and she thought, They have a lovely life, cows. (52)

Invoking the goddess Kali's connection with cows may be a reach that strains the interpretive grasp, but even putting Kali aside for the moment, there remain a number of occasions in Munro's writing wherein cows figure significantly, from the one that James Carscallen notes—"lilies and cows belong together, as we can also see from the connection of both with the dead muskrat in 'Images'" (314) to the images of cows that I noted in my discussion of "Bardon Bus"—to the crucial "day-ud cow" in "Heirs of the Living Body," to this occasion in "The Love of a Good Woman." Whatever else one makes of Enid's cows with their "lovely life" (52), it is clear they provide her some much needed comfort at a time when her usual source is weakening.

Again, the developments over the time from when Mrs. Quinn tells Enid her story about Rupert killing D.M. Willens to the story's conclusion may be seen as a micro corollary of Munro's overall implicit spiritual vision in that, first, we see how traditional, patriarchal Christianity fails even those such as Enid who attempt to fully embrace it. A primary reason for this failure is that Christianity's Pauline aversion to the bodily and the sexual and its deeply engrained misogyny leave no place for genuine Eros. This aversion and misogyny cause various distortions of sexuality, from the distortions of "demented" Mr. Willens and Mrs. Quinn to the less violent and odious, but nevertheless similarly life-negating guilt and sexless martyrdom of Enid.

At the same time, however, as Charles Taylor argues, Christianity, particularly from the Reformation on, has also provided a basis for the "affirmation of ordinary life" and for "hypergoods" such as compassion and selfless love in modern/postmodern Western culture. There is obvious value in such affirmation and "hypergoods." Thus, at least one approach would be to retain these positive aspects of Christianity while leaving behind its various shortcomings and distortions. This is the challenge that Enid (and Munro?) takes on in "The Love of a Good Woman." Once Enid has heard Mrs. Quinn's story about how Rupert supposedly killed Mr. Willens, and once she finally acknowledges her attraction to Rupert, she has the opportunity—on her own micro

level—to attempt to strike a balanced spiritual/religious perspective, to forge a renewed vision of the sacred and the sexual, as well as of the sacred in her quotidian relationships with others.

Initially, Enid accepts Mrs. Quinn's story as fact, and she devises a plan whereby she will confront Rupert in his rowboat, providing him the opportunity to drown her if he so chooses ("She had not learned to swim" (72)). This plan clearly casts Enid in the role of Rupert's "mother-confessor" and spiritual mentor. She imagines telling Rupert, for example, "*You cannot live in the world with such a burden. You will not be able to stand your life*" (72). She would then accompany him through "every step" of his "long, dreadful journey" (73). This plan, however, simply extends and intensifies Enid's longstanding sexless martyrdom. Even if Rupert cooperated with this plan, they would potentially be separated for years while he was in prison, and he might even decide that he wanted nothing further to do with Enid. Of course, there is also the possibility of Enid's full-blown martyrdom in dying at Rupert's hands.

What ultimately changes Enid's mind and her actions finds its source indirectly in her mother—a woman who is not only more pragmatic than Enid, but who is also more connected with her own body and sexuality than is her daughter (indirectly because Enid has told her mother nothing about Mrs. Quinn's story). It is Enid's mother's kind of pragmatism that prompts Enid to finally consider the possibility that Mrs. Quinn might have been *lying* about the entire "murder": "'Lies' is the word that Enid can hear now, out of all the words that Mrs. Quinn said in that room. *Lies. I bet it's all lies*" (74). Pondering these possibilities triggers for Enid a childhood memory of something that happened when she was four or five. At that time, Enid had told her mother that she had gone into her father's office and that "she had seen him sitting behind his desk with a woman on his knee...her blouse or dress was unbuttoned and there was one bare breast sticking out, the tip of it disappearing into Enid's father's mouth" (75) (If this actually happened, it seems that "coarsening" is a threat only for *women* seeing *men's* bare bodies). Enid's mother's response is remarkable in a number of ways, and it bears very clear marks of Sophianic wisdom: "Her mother then did a very unexpected thing. She undid her own dress and took out a dull-skinned object that flopped over her hand, 'Like this?'" (75). This childhood event exemplifies the counterbalance to patriarchal

Christianity's Pauline aversion to the body and to sexuality that has so profoundly shaped Enid's life. Significantly, the source of this counterbalance is female.

As so often happens in Munro's fiction, the recollection of an event or a feeling from the past has a significant impact on the protagonist/narrator/character in the present. I will explore such "retrospective epiphanies" in greater detail in the next chapter. For now what is important is that Enid's recollection of her mother's action allows Enid to finally access *her own* female wisdom around the bodily/the sexual and to bring them to bear on her relationship with Rupert Quinn. Enid goes to Rupert's house after the funeral when he is there alone. She observes that he has been drinking: "She could smell whisky when he spoke, but he didn't sound drunk" (70). Rupert agrees to her peculiar request to go out in his rowboat so that she can take a photograph, a memento of her time at the Quinns. As they prepare to go, some clear indications emerge of how much Enid's feelings and attitude toward the bodily/the sexual have shifted:

She smelled the deeply sweat-soaked skin of a hardworked man that no washing—at least the washing he did—could get quite fresh. No bodily smell—even the smell of semen—was unfamiliar to her, but here was something new and invasive about the smell of a body so distinctly not in her power or under her care.

That was welcome. (77)

Enid is relinquishing her usual control here, not only over Rupert, but over her own sexual, bodily attraction to him. And, once again, we have the cows: " 'The cows were supposed to keep the growth down,' Rupert points out, 'But there's things cows won't eat'" (77).

As I have noted earlier, the final paragraphs of "The Love of A Good Woman" abound with images of light and luminosity, but shadows and clouds intersperse as well: "The sun cast a level, dusty light on the bulk of the trees ahead. The air was clear in some places, then suddenly you would enter a cloud of tiny bugs" (78). This interplay between light and shadow is typical of Munro's realistic view of love, life, and matters spiritual. Spiritual fulfillment does not mean that the darkness disappears; rather, darkness contributes to an overall balance and reminds us that the great mysteries remain in darkness, are never "resolved." Another aspect of the epiphanic in Munro that I will

examine in greater detail in Chapter Five—her use of the second person “you”—is interesting here as well; perhaps she is subtly projecting Enid’s experiences and learning onto her readers as well:

When she and Rupert went underneath the roof of summer leaves it was dusk, it was almost night. You had to watch that you didn’t trip over roots that swelled up out of the path, or hit your head on the dangling, surprisingly tough-stemmed vines. The lit-up water near the opposite bank of the river, the trees over there still decked out in light. On this side—they were going down the bank now, through the willows—the water was tea-colored but clear. (78)

There are few, if any, clearer manifestations of the connection between Eros and the sacred in Munro’s fiction than this moment involving Enid and Rupert. Here they are, in their bodies, near each other’s bodies, in the body of Nature. This is a primal place of fertility, insects, rebirth, mud—“her boots sank into the mud” (78). This is a place beyond words: “If she concentrated on the motion of the boat, a slight and secretive motion, she could feel as if everything for a long way around had gone quiet.” This is the place of mystery that, again, Munro wishes only to “approach and recognize.”

Munro ends the narrative at this point, but wherever Eros and events take Enid and Rupert, they have already succeeded in finding the sacred in the realm of Eros. Enid has overcome the life-negating Pauline aversion to the bodily/the sexual and, with Rupert, has transformed the vile sexual distortion represented by Mrs. Quinn and D. M. Willens into a life-enhancing coming together reminiscent of the “dance” of Kali and Shiva. We also have every reason to expect that Enid and Rupert will retain and cultivate, with Rupert’s children and with each other, the compassion, the agape of fully authentic Eros. They are on their way to “orienting” their desire, to invoke Iris Murdoch’s definition: “The activity of Eros is orientation of desire” (497). They are now free to work toward the “ ‘salvation or ‘good’ as connected with, or incarnate in, all sorts of particulars” (Murdoch 497)—in other words, they are free to work toward the “affirmation of ordinary life,” which entails “life as sexual beings, including marriage and the family” (Taylor 211).

CHAPTER FIVE

THE EIPHANIC: *CLARITAS* AND MYSTERY

Epiphanies and the Epiphanic

The foregoing chapters have focused primarily on what might be termed the *content* of the implicit spiritual vision in Alice Munro's fiction. The focus in this chapter will shift to what might be called the *experience* of the spiritual/religious in Munro's writing. This experience manifests most clearly and intensely in the epiphanies and epiphanic occasions that are such consistent features of Munro's work. It is around these epiphanic moments—what Munro herself terms “queer, bright moments” that many of her stories “crystallize,” to use James Carscallen's term. Further, in the narrative buildup to these epiphanies/epiphanic occasions, and even more clearly in the occasions themselves, Munro achieves one of the most important, stated aims of her writing. Iidiko de Papp Carrington reports that “Munro has defined the genesis of her stories as her desire to get at some kind of emotional core that [she] want[s] to investigate or approach, ‘something that is important and mysterious’” (51). As Carrington further observes—using descriptions of violent nature just as Munro does on a number of her epiphanic occasions—these moments constitute “an underground stream that splits the earth, suddenly bursts through the seemly surface of everyday behavior” (39).

Most importantly, the present chapter will focus on how epiphanies and epiphanic moments lie at the very core of Munro's implicit spiritual/religious vision. Key aspects of this vision already discussed often culminate and become clearest in epiphanic moments, and, as we have seen, one of the most important and consistent of these aspects is death and dying. Munro's near obsessive preoccupation with death may, as Carrington surmises, emerge out of her personal history- the death of her mother: “Haunted by her mother's death, Munro believes that it imbued her with ‘a great sense of fatality’ and evoked a ‘tremendous guilt’” (38). Whatever the source, I certainly concur with Carrington's assessment that “the inevitability of death hovers over much of Munro's fiction” (38). Particularly relevant, though, to an exploration of the epiphanic in Munro is how, “for her, death is one of those intense... moments of experience in which she can ‘zero in’ on life” (Carrington 39). Thus, the “intense moments of experience” of death are often closely linked to and sometimes constitute the epiphanic moments in Munro's writing. Further, not only do *moments* of death constitute or link to epiphanic occasions, but also the prospect of death or experiencing the death of another.

Another key aspect that often culminates or manifests most intensely in epiphanic moments in Munro's writing is full and authentic Eros. Joseph Campbell reminds us of how the sexual aspect of Eros has been inextricably linked with death time out of mind. In his prodigious overview of the origins of our central mythologies, *Primitive Mythology: The Masks of God*, Campbell notes that the " 'mythological event'" *par excellence* " that marked humankind's coming into self-consciousness and "brought to an end [human's] timeless way of being and effected a transformation of all things" was an event "Whereupon death and sex came into the world as the basic correlates of temporality" (182). In Munro's fiction, epiphanic moments are frequently moments in which Eros and death—these seeming opposites—merge in powerful ways. Again, Carrington's observations on this "synergistic combination" are compelling and insightful; referring to Del Jordan in *Lives of Girls and Women*, Carrington observes that Del " not only senses the power of both sexuality and natural death, but also apprehends them in a particularly frightening synergistic combination" (40).

Carrington further notes the epiphanic nature of this combination, drawing attention to a central metaphorical pattern of the epiphanic in Munro—one that I will examine further in my discussion of the Romantic-influenced focus on nature in many of Munro's epiphanic occasions:

This pattern, which equates the power of both sexuality and death with electric power or lightning, is analogous to the function of the pattern of eruption that Munro repeatedly uses... They both split open surfaces to reveal what is inside or underneath. (40)

Again, it is during epiphanic moments in Munro's writing that such eruptions often occur, and this sort of splitting frequently produces spiritual and/or religious insights.

The preponderance of the epiphanic in Munro's writing parallels what has been a significant overall increase in the epiphanic in 20th century Western art and literature. This increase has motivated Charles Taylor to devote an entire section of *Sources of the Self* to what he terms the " Epiphanies of Modernism" (456-93). Another critic, Morris Beja, in *Epiphanies in the Modern Novel* provides an illuminating discussion of the development of the epiphanic in 20th century Western literature. Beja sees the role of epiphany as

both immensely important and unique to our time. These two qualities are most conspicuously reflected in the astonishing frequency with which sudden moments of intuitive insight appear in twentieth-century fiction, a frequency unmatched, and even unapproached in the fiction of the past.

(18)

Bringing both Taylor's and Beja's respective studies of the developments of the epiphanic to my reading of the epiphanic in Munro's fiction has further convinced me of the inextricable link between the epiphanic and the spiritual/religious, both in Western art and literature generally and, of course, in Munro's fiction specifically. The connection between the epiphanic and the spiritual that I discern in Munro's writing mirrors the link between the two in the broader culture. Further, as Charles Taylor argues, the increasing emphasis on the epiphanic is fulfilling an especially important function in Western culture: "The epiphany is our achieving contact with something where this contact either fosters and/or itself constitutes a spiritually significant fulfillment of wholeness" (425). Taylor is not often given to overstatement; thus his following pronouncement constitutes a powerful endorsement of the profound mystery and importance of the epiphanic: "The epiphanic is genuinely mysterious and it possibly contains the key—or a key—to what it means to be human" (481). Taylor traces the development and increasing importance of the epiphanic from the Romantics, to the Symbolists and Modernists, and through the 20th century. Again, the epiphanic in Munro's collections, which span the latter half of the 20th century and the early years of the present century, may be seen as a kind of microcosm of the development, increase, and manifestations of the epiphanic in the larger culture.

Although Munro is clearly a late modernist, the epiphanic in her fiction reveals the influence of both the Romantic and the Modernist epiphanic traditions. As I indicated in Chapter One, there are, of course, significant differences in the objectives and manifestations of the Romantic "spots of time" that we encounter, for example, in the poetry of William Wordsworth or the "good moments" in Shelley's and those that we find, for example, in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, his *Dubliners*, or in what Virginia Woolf calls the "privileged moments" in her various novels. Despite significant differences, however, the epiphanic in both the Romantic and Modernist

traditions share in common an essentially spiritual/religious function. The epiphanic in Munro's writing reveals the influences of both the Romantic and the Modern epiphanic streams, including, of course, their spiritual/religious purposes. A number of Munro's epiphanic occasions also combine, at times even reconcile, aspects of these two streams. Thus, in the stories I will be discussing in due course, we catch glimpses of how her implicit spiritual vision occasionally offers a kind of middle way through what has become an unfortunately bifurcated Western cultural perspective—a bifurcation within which, as Richard Tarnas notes, “we sometimes feel an intractable division between our minds and our souls” (375).

This bifurcation sets on one pole the logical, empirical, scientific, and all things quantifiable and explainable. On the other pole—what, broadly speaking, is seen as the Romantic—is set the emotional, the arts and literature, and all things ineffable and less explainable in “normal,” conceptual language. Again, aspects in Munro's fiction—particularly certain epiphanic occasions and the narratives leading up to those occasions—take both of these poles into account and sometimes present at least the possibility of reconciliation, although Munro's fiction quite consistently privileges the Romantic pole of this dichotomy.

Placing the epiphanic in Munro in this larger literary-historical context also fulfills the important ancillary function of further situating the work of one of the best short story writers working in English today into the larger Western literary tradition in ways that further reveal the significant contributions Munro has made to that tradition. It further confirms assessments of Munro's work such as those of John Updike who says of Munro's short stories. “One must go back to Tolstoy's ‘Hadji Murad’ and Chekov's ‘In the Ravine’ for comparable largeness” (*Alice Munro* 13).

Before embarking on a study of specific epiphanic occasions in Munro's writing, however, I want to emphasize that the prevalence of the epiphanic in Munro's fiction is far from accidental or arbitrary. The epiphanic is ubiquitous in Munro's writing *because* of its inherently spiritual nature. For at least two centuries, writers who have been disinclined, for a plethora of reasons, to pursue traditional religious avenues in their writing, have turned to the epiphanic. Munro is a late modernist writer who also finds the epiphanic a congenial avenue by which to explore and manifest the spiritual/religious.

The spiritual nature of the epiphanies/ the epiphanic in the Romantic tradition is abundantly evident. For example, Wordsworth's moments of illumination, such as the one in "Tintern Abbey" described as "a sense sublime/Of something far more deeply interfused," are clearly spiritual in nature. However, as Morris Beja insightfully points out, the Romantic epiphany also often reflected a decline in traditional religious belief and effected a bridging between the Augustinian and the Modern:

Men had become less preoccupied with God and more interested in man, less amazed by supernatural visitants than by the power of the poet . . .we are gradually coming from the moment of divine revelation of Augustine to the "secular" epiphany- the great new interest [in the 20th century] in which, as a matter of fact, dates from the Romantic movement. (32)

Beja goes on to argue that, in fact, the Romantic epiphanic is not necessarily superseded by the modern: "Indeed the epiphany, at least as it appears in literature from now on, seems essentially a 'Romantic' phenomenon" (32).⁹

I emphasize the Romantic aspect of Munro's writing for reasons directly related to my overall argument that key aspects of Munro's work often act as a kind of barometer of the Western spiritual/religious zeitgeist of the second half of the 20th century and the beginnings of the 21st. At the same time, aspects of Munro's fiction—particularly her employment of the epiphanic—implicitly offer avenues for coming to terms with the Western bifurcation noted above. In the bifurcated vision of modern/postmodern Western culture, the Romantic, including what is usually referred to as the spiritual, is often set in counter opposition to the basic tenets of the Newtonian-Cartesian scientific paradigm and the positivistic scientific materialism that has arisen out of that paradigm.

We have already encountered a number of characters in Munro's fiction who steadfastly adhere to such positivistic materialism, including Del Jordan's mother, Ida, in *Lives of Girls and Women*, Ted Makkavala in "Accident," even, to some extent, Mr. Lougheed in "Walking on Water." Such characters appear in Munro's most recent fiction as well. For example, in Chapter Six, I will discuss the story "Comfort" in which one character, Lewis Spiers acts as a near monomaniacal defender of the "scientific faith."

⁹ If one accepts this argument—and I do—one must also accept that the frequent epiphanies/epiphanic occasions in Munro's writing mark her as a much more Romantic writer than she is generally considered to be.

Munro quite often places these characters and the world views they represent into relationships with countering characters—such as Del Jordan with her mother in *Lives*, the narrator/protagonist of “Accident” with Ted Makkavala, or Nina, the protagonist in “Comfort” with Lewis Spiers. These relationships realistically portray both sides of the larger bifurcation but, significantly, ultimately privilege the Romantic/spiritual perspective.

Charles Taylor argues that such privileging is increasingly necessary because in our epoch of unprecedented secularity, not much attention or credence is given to the “makers of epiphanies” (Taylor 422). Taylor argues that these “makers,” and the spiritual insights, even guidance, that their epiphanic art may provide, remain as important as ever—perhaps even *more* important than ever, for essentially spiritual reasons:

There is a kind of piety which still surrounds art and artists in our time, which comes from the sense that what they reveal has great moral and spiritual significance; that in it lies the key to a certain depth, or fullness, or seriousness, or intensity of life, or to a certain wholeness. I have to use a string of alternatives here, because the significance is very differently conceived and often—for reasons which have to do with the very nature of epiphanic art—is not clearly conceived at all. But for many of our contemporaries art has taken something like the place of religion. (422)

Taylor goes further here than I am prepared to go—at least further than I am prepared to go with regard to the work of Alice Munro. I am not arguing that Munro’s art—or anyone else’s—can *take the place* of religion. That said, however, Taylor identifies above spiritual characteristics of the epiphanic that Munro’s epiphanic occasions frequently *do* achieve: “spiritual significance,” “a certain depth, or fullness, or seriousness, or intensity of life,” or “a certain wholeness.”

Risking repetitiveness, I wish to emphasize even further here the crucial connection between the epiphanic and the spiritual. I turn, once again, to Charles Taylor, first because he very deftly sums up key points, but also because what he says here about the epiphanic in general serves as an excellent springboard for a discussion of what Munro is doing specifically with the epiphanic in her fiction.

There are strong continuities from the Romantic period, through the Symbolists and many strands of what was loosely called ‘modernism’, right up to the present day. What remains central is the notion of the work of art as issuing from or realizing an ‘epiphany’, to use one of Joyce’s words in a somewhat wider sense than his. What I want to capture with this term is just this notion of a work of art as the locus of a manifestation which brings us into the presence of something which is otherwise inaccessible, and which is of the highest moral or spiritual significance; a manifestation, moreover, which also defines or completes something even as it reveals. (419)

Taylor sets a daunting task here for the epiphanic artist. Although there is much in what Taylor says above that very clearly applies to Munro’s work, as we shall see, the epiphanic in Munro—being much more open-ended, for the most part, than that of her Romantic or Modernist predecessors—certainly does not always “define” or “complete” in the ways that Taylor suggests. Nor, however, is Munro *aiming* for such definition or completion. I have already stressed how the openendedness and unresolvability of Munro’s epiphanic occasions, in and of themselves, mark the central meaning and function of the epiphanic in many of her works. Such openendedness reflects how Munro’s narrators, protagonists, and Munro herself—like so many modern/late modern/postmodern “spiritual pilgrims”—are involved in *ongoing, unfinished quests toward spiritual/religious wholeness and fulfillment*. Further, although Munro’s epiphanic occasions do not usually offer the kind of closure we find, for example, in many of Joyce’s epiphanies, they still function to *clarify*. This clarification takes us back to Shelley’s remarks in *The Defence of Poetry* wherein he presents the image of “the fading coal” to refer to one’s state during the “‘mysterious instant’ of *claritas*—that is, the moment of epiphany” (qtd. in Beja 35).

An exploration of the epiphanic in Munro must, of necessity, also direct us to James Joyce, the modernist writer who coined the literary term “epiphany.” First, Joyce went to considerable lengths to emphasize that his was a decidedly secular use of the original religious term. Joyce’s caveats, however, do not take away from the inherently *spiritual* nature of the epiphanic—a spiritual nature that comes through even in Joyce’s

formal definition of epiphany, and that emerges even more clearly in the epiphanies in his novels and short stories. Joyce, through his fictional persona, Stephen Dedalus, tells us that by an epiphany Stephen “meant a sudden spiritual manifestation.” Joyce was obviously not invoking the “Feast of the Epiphany” celebrated every January 6th to observe and celebrate the Magi’s encounter with the Christ child.

At the same time, though, Joyce makes clear that the spontaneous, ineffable, often inspirational nature of the epiphany distinguishes its essentially *spiritual* qualities from those of the cognitive revelation—perhaps the aha! experience that may come as the fruit of extended deductive, scientific reasoning. The epiphany as Joyce conceives it also differs from *anagnorisis*—the classical scene of recognition that we find, for example, in *Oedipus the King* or *Othello*. Moreover, Joyce’s *language* carries strong spiritual connotations, for example, describing as it does epiphanies as “the most delicate and evanescent of moments” (qtd. in Beja 15). Morris Beja’s paraphrasing of Joyce—much like M.H. Abrams’s, C. Hugh Holman’s, and that of other literary scholars—further confirms the wide acceptance of the Modernist epiphany, as set out by Joyce, as essentially a spiritual phenomenon: “An epiphany is a sudden spiritual ‘manifestation’—a showing forth, an illumination, a revelation” (qtd. in Beja 15).

As upcoming discussions of stories as early as “Walker Brothers Cowboy” (*Dance of the Happy Shades*) to Munro’s most recent stories, “Jakarta,” (*The Love of A Good Woman*) “Comfort,” “The Floating Bridge,” and “Post and Beam” (*Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*) will illustrate, the epiphanic in Munro’s writing—variously—echoes, transcends, and reconciles characteristics of both the Romantic and Modernist streams of the epiphanic. One aspect, however, remains constant throughout: the inextricable link between the epiphanic and the spiritual/religious. Of course, the only way to effectively illustrate such a link and to illustrate other points I have made above is to turn to Munro’s stories themselves. To demonstrate how the epiphanic has been a central feature of Munro’s fiction from the outset, I will begin with a discussion of the first story in Munro’s first published collection—“Walker Brothers Cowboy” from *Dance of the Happy Shades*.

“Walker Brothers Cowboy”: Microcosm of the Munroian Epiphanic

There are, of course, other very good reasons aside from its chronological precedence for beginning my discussion of specific epiphanic occasions in Munro’s fiction with “Walker brothers cowboyCowboy.” First, the story provides two clear examples of, respectively, the epiphanic and an epiphany. Secondly, “Walker Brothers” provides a kind of road map for a number of the most important considerations of the epiphanic—and by extension of the spiritual—in Munro’s oeuvre. In *The Tumble of Reason: Alice Munro’s Discourse of Absence*, Ajay Heble goes so far as to say that “‘Walker brothers cowboyCowboy’ operates, in many ways, as a microcosm for the whole of Munro’s works” (20). I do not intend to place quite *this much* interpretive burden on the story, but I will use “Walker Brothers” as a springboard to outline, at least briefly, a number of the central considerations of this chapter, particularly those aspects of the epiphanic that recur in subsequent Munro stories.

I will follow the well established practice in my discussion of “Walker Brothers Cowboy” of referring to the unnamed narrator as Del Jordan, and to her father as Ben Jordan, in that it is entirely clear from evidence in the story that this is the same Del Jordan who is the protagonist /narrator in Munro’s second collection, *Lives of Girls and Women*.

The plot line of “Walker Brothers” is very straightforward by the standards of subsequent Munro stories. There is only one primary time-line that begins with Del and her father taking a stroll down to the shore of Lake Huron and then—probably a few days later—Del and her younger brother, Owen, accompanying Ben Jordan on his rural sales route as a representative for the Walker brothers Company, selling farming, household, and personal care products. The former occasion is significant primarily because it establishes the context of Del’s relationship with her father and also reveals aspects of Ben Jordan that compare in important ways with those of Nora Cronin, the woman whom Ben and his two children visit later in the story. Moreover, key distinctions between epiphanies and the epiphanic in Munro’s overall work are illuminated when Del’s latter journey with her father culminates in a full blown, often quoted epiphany, while her

earlier evening stroll with Ben Jordan stops short of full epiphany and remains epiphanic. Further, these distinctions in “Walker Brothers” reflect important distinctions between the “traditional” epiphany—either Romantic or Modernist—and the epiphanic occasions that are more characteristic of Munro’s later writing. Although both occasions in “Walker Brothers Cowboy” present characteristics of both the Romantic and Modernist streams of the epiphanic, both—and especially the latter occasion—manifest and anticipate distinctively Munroian aspects of the epiphanic which subsequent stories develop further.

First, Del and her father’s walk down to the lake is a decidedly “ordinary” event. Del’s first person narrative voice leaves the distinct impression that this sojourn is almost ritualistic, beginning as it does with Del’s father’s saying “‘Want to go down and see if the lake’s still there?’” and proceeding, entirely predictably, to the usual and understandable exclusion of Del’s younger brother because it is his bedtime: “Sometimes he kneels on his bed and presses his face against the screen and calls mournfully, ‘Bring me an ice cream cone!’ but I call back, ‘You will be asleep,’ and do not even turn my head” (1).

The completely “ordinary” air of this activity demonstrates how Munro’s ability to render quotidian experience with a kind of “photographic fidelity” has been central to her work from the very outset. More importantly for my purposes, though, is that, also from Munro’s earliest work, we see the crucial connection between the “ordinary” and the epiphanic. The “ordinary” has been a key component of the epiphanic since at least the Romantics. In his preface to *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798, William Wordsworth sets out his poetic aim to “choose incidents and situations from common life...[and] to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect” (100). This “colouring” that transfigures “ordinary things” is most intense in Wordsworth’s poetry during epiphanic moments, or what he termed “spots of time.”

There is certainly no critical unanimity on how “common” or “ordinary” the language, characters, or situations are in many of Wordsworth’s poems. Notwithstanding Wordsworth’s claims and intentions concerning the “ordinary,” many of the epiphanies in his poetry arise out of quite *extraordinary* circumstances—for example, long walks in the

Lake Country that, frankly, would not have been possible, financially or otherwise, nor particularly congenial for most “common folk” in Wordsworth’s England. Still, there is little question that Wordsworth genuinely intended to shift the focus of poetry away from the cerebral, court-focused literature of his predecessors such as Andrew Marvell or Alexander Pope

On the other hand, the focus on “ordinary life” that we find in much modernist literature and in the epiphanic occasions therein more authentically captures the experience of “common people” than does Wordsworth’s. Further, although epiphanic occasions in the work of late 19th/early 20th century writers such as W.B. Yeats, Virginia Woolf, and James Joyce are markedly different from those of Romantics such as Wordsworth, they are certainly as spiritually intense. That is, modernist epiphanies/epiphanic are responding to a world considerably more secular, explainable, “disenchanted”—more “ordinary” in many ways—than that of their Romantic predecessors, and, if they were aiming for realistic fiction, it became increasingly necessary for Modernists to find spiritual significance in “ordinary life.” The extent to which various writers and artists rose to this challenge further solidifies Charles Taylor’s argument that increasingly in Western life a sense of fulfillment or wholeness—to the extent that it has emerged at all—has emerged out of what Taylor terms the “affirmation of ordinary life.” The epiphanic occasions that we encounter in modernist literature, or in the work of the late modernist, Alice Munro, seldom if ever arise out of spectacular “Saul on the road to Damascus” experiences. Nor do modernist epiphanies/epiphanic occasions usually arise out of deliberate Wordsworthian contemplation of nature or the kind of philosophical/metaphysical rumination found in poems such as “Lines Written Above Tintern Abbey.” Such occasions are simply not realistically “ordinary” enough.

That said, as Morris Beja, Charles Taylor, and William Closson James have variously observed, key aspects of the Romantic epiphanic mode—and the spiritual significance attending it—have persevered into the epiphanies/epiphanic in modern/postmodern art and literature. For example, as James notes in *Locations of the Sacred*, although locations of the sacred “do not disappear as we move from Romantic to modern times they do shift quite considerably” (66).. Further, even in Joyce’s definition

of epiphany, we hear in both the language and content a clear echo of the Romantic: “The soul of the commonest object seems to be radiant” (*A Portrait* 213)

Again, however, a key difference between the world of a Romantic writer such as Wordsworth and that of a modernist writer such as James Joyce was that the former was not coping with finding his spiritual/religious footing in a post-Darwinian or, later, a post WWI world. The Romantic age—if quite strictly delineated as beginning in 1798 with *Lyrical Ballads* and ending in 1835 with the death of Sir Walter Scott—was not contending, as Joyce and other modernists were, with a quite widespread decline and questioning of traditional religious faith. Morris Beja and Charles Taylor both argue that, in fact, the quite dramatic increase of the epiphanic in 20th century art and literature is, certainly in part, a response to this decline. As Beja sets it out,

Despite the general disillusion with religion during the past few generations a continuing need—perhaps even an intensified one—has been felt for meaningful, unifying, “spiritual” emotions or experiences that would provide men with answers to some of their burning questions. No longer confident, however, of a divine answer, men have wanted their own; no longer willing to wait for Truth until God calls them to it, they have sought for it today, on earth, here and now. There has been a general secularization of what once was inevitably regarded—and, of course, still often is—as the divinely inspired moment of new knowledge. (21)

Although the socio-historical, religious changes noted above were not historically immediate for Alice Munro, even at the outset of her writing career in the 1950s, neither she nor anyone in Western culture throughout the 20th Century and up to the present has been immune to these dramatic shifts. In keeping with these shifts, the epiphanic has remained one of the most frequently employed artistic avenues toward spiritual understanding and expression in an increasingly secular culture. “Walker brothers Cowboy,” although published in 1968, is set during the Great Depression, a time when the concerns of High Modernity from Darwinian theory to the effects of WWI were relatively fresh memories; thus the preoccupations of high modernity provide some context for the story. However, I want in the following discussion to keep in view the influence of *both* the Modern and the Romantic epiphanic streams.

To that end, I would argue that the narrative leading up to the first epiphanic occasion in “Walker Brothers Cowboy” is characterized by an “ordinariness” that echoes both the Romantic and Modernist epiphanic streams. The story also presents nature in quite Romantic ways, tempered, however, by a modern view. In short, we see in “Walker Brothers” an example of the kind of “complex interplay” between the Romantic and the Modern noted by Richard Tarnas—an interplay out of which arises “some powerful tensions” that, Tarnas further asserts, may “be said to constitute the modern sensibility” (366). In “Walker Brothers,” these tensions appear in descriptions of and responses to the central natural setting in the story, Lake Huron. As Del and her father move out of town and into the country, Del’s description of the setting is reminiscent of a Wordsworthian moving away from the “din” of the urban into unspoiled nature: “The town falls away in a defeated jumble of sheds and small junkyards, the sidewalk gives up and we are walking on a sandy path, burdocks, plantains, humble nameless weeds all around” (2). At no point, however, will Del and her father encounter untouched nature—a not so subtle reminder that even in 1930’s *rural* Ontario it is increasingly difficult to find idyllic scenes such as those near Wordsworth’s Tintern Abbey in July, 1798.

The complex interplay noted above continues as strains of early Modernist Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” emerge in the story. Del’s sentences describing their approach to the lake echo Arnold’s poem—a work that Munro seems quite taken with. In “Jakarta,” a much later story than “Walker Brothers Cowboy,” Munro refers to “Dover Beach” quite extensively as we shall see when I examine that story in detail in Chapter Six. In “Walker Brothers Cowboy,” Del notes how the water of Lake Huron is “generally grey in the evening, under a lightly overcast sky, no sunsets, the horizon. A very quiet, washing noise on the stones of the beach” echoes, albeit in subdued fashion, Arnold’s “on the French coast the light/ Gleams and is gone...you hear the grating roar/Of pebbles which the waves draw back” (Norton 363). All of this quietly reminds us that the “melancholy, long, withdrawing roar” of Arnold’s ocean was metaphorically the sound of a withdrawing “sea of [Christian] faith.”

This sort of subtle interplay and vacillation between the Romantic and the Modern marks a number of Munro’s epiphanic moments, as well as the narrative leading up to these moments, and the pattern continues on this occasion as Del’s modernist-tinged

description of the lake yields to a quite Wordsworthian depiction of the “common people”: “The pavilion, full of farmers and their wives, in stiff good clothes, on Sundays,” or the “tramps [who] hang around the docks and occasionally on these evenings wander up the dwindling beach” (2). This Romantic description, however, in turn yields to a more empiricist, scientific take on the origins of Lake Huron advanced by Del’s father. His explanation of how the glaciers formed the lake (subtly colored by Munro’s typical ambivalence surrounding earthly/Heavenly f/Fathers discussed in earlier chapters) takes the form of a “hands-on” demonstration:

Then came the ice, creeping down from the north, pushing deep into the low places. Like *that*—and he shows me his hand with his spread fingers pressing the rock-hard ground where we are sitting. His fingers hardly make any impression at all and he says, “Well, the old ice cap had a lot more power than this hand has.” (3)

Ben Jordan’s failure here to “make an impression” finds an interesting corollary later in Nora Cronin’s making a “mark in the dust,” albeit “unintelligible” (17)—subtly hinting that, right from Munro’s first collection, the impression that endures is not that of the patriarchal nor the masculine-inspired empiricist, but that of the sensual, the Romantic, sometimes mystical, feminine. In this instance, Del’s father’s historical-geology lesson seems less about making any lasting “impression” than it is about reflecting the declining power of an earthly father unconsciously assuming the role of Divine Pater/creator.

This preliminary epiphanic occasion in “Walker Brothers Cowboy” culminates with a focus on *time*, one of the most important aspects of epiphanies/the epiphanic in general, and a particularly important aspect in specific epiphanies/epiphanic occasions in Munro’s work. Parallel to the Romantic-Modernist vacillation we have seen thus far in “Walker Brothers Cowboy” are strong hints in the story of a bifurcation of Romanticist and empiricist perspectives on time as well. In that these perspectives on time are so central to the entire phenomenon of the epiphanic, I will set out here at least their basic perimeters before proceeding further with a discussion of “Walker Brothers Cowboy.”

Time as a central component of the epiphanic dates back to at least Jean Jacques Rousseau, “the arch Romantic of them all” (Beja 34). In his confessional autobiography, Rousseau finds “great significance in his ability to recapture lost sensations, in those

moments when we go back to the past and the whole returns again; I call to mind the time, place, tone, look, gesture, circumstances; nothing escapes me” (qtd. in Beja 34). The type of epiphany Rousseau describes here is what Morris Beja terms a “retrospective epiphany,” an epiphany that emerges out of an intense, detailed recalling of an event, attendant feeling/feelings, a set of circumstances, or an image that held little or no significance for the recalling individual when it first occurred, but that produces “a sudden sensation of new awareness when recalled at some future time” (Beja 15).

Another type of epiphany is what Beja terms “the past recaptured”(15). These epiphanies entail recalling in vivid detail an event, feeling/feelings etc. that *did* hold considerable significance when it/they first occurred and that holds as much or more significance when recalled. In this latter type, emotions are “not so much recollected as recaptured” (Beja 34); that is, there is a strong sense of *reliving* the experience.

Given Munro’s tremendous emphasis in her fiction on remembering/reliving the past—what Ildiko de Pap Carrington terms her “sliding up and down the time axis,” it is no surprise that both of these types of epiphanies, and various permutations of each, are frequent and important features in her writing. Moreover, as we have already seen in a number of Munro’s works, and as we shall see in “Jakarta,” “Comfort,” “Post and Beam,” and “Floating Bridge,” in Munro’s fiction, remembering is crucial to understanding self and to finding one’s spiritual center. Moreover, the importance of memory in spiritual/religious questing has also been noted by Northrop Frye. As B.W. Powe reminds us, it was Northrop Frye who instructed us that “memory is key to resurrection.” Powe goes on to note how to remember, “to enlarge sensibility,” and to “increase stores of inspiration” are key activities in “honing the spirit”:

“All attempts to find out what that point is are religious quests,” Frye wrote. The point he is referring to is life, though what he means by a quest is understanding what he calls “metaphysical cosmology,” which, in short, suggests that inspiration and epiphany, the awful plunge into the moment, will reveal all and is part of a unified process. (D8)

To more fully get at how time and memory are integral to this “unified process” and how the epiphany, “the awful plunge into the moment,” potentially unifies past, present, and future into a moment that is “eternal, atemporal, and repeatable” (Smythe

143), it is necessary to go beyond the literary practitioners of the epiphanic such as Wordsworth, Shelley, Proust, Joyce, Woolf, and, of course, Munro to those philosophers whose theories about time have profoundly influenced these practitioners, including Munro. I am not aware of Munro's having directly acknowledged Henri Bergson, but I will argue in the next chapter that it is no coincidence that in one of her most recent stories—"Floating Bridge" (*Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*), the central character, Jinny, spends a good deal of the story at a farm belonging to a family named the Bergsons, and that the most powerful, Bergsonian epiphanic moments that occur in the story arise out of an encounter with a young member of that family, Ricky Bergson. As Morris Beja puts it in *Epiphanies in the Modern Novel*, "Bergson is the most conspicuous representative of the philosophical concern with time that has had, directly and indirectly, so great an effect on literature" (54).

Further, it is abundantly evident how important memory is in virtually every story Alice Munro has published. Memory is absolutely crucial in Bergson's philosophy as well. Further,

Memory is also connected to Bergson's chief contribution to modern thought, his emphasis on duration, on the complete fluidity of time; for time is continuous rather than made up of a sequence of separate moments, while without the "survival of the past" through memory "there would be no duration, but only instantaneity [*Metaphysics*, p.45]." (Beja 56)

Secondly, intuition and emotion are central aspects in Bergson's theories of duration or *durée*, and we have already seen and will continue to see the importance of intuition and emotion for so many of Munro's narrators/protagonists. I will expand on Bergson's concepts of time as they apply to the epiphanic in Munro's work as the need arises. For now, however, with Bergson introduced and his fundamental points about "duration" and the "fluidity of time" in place, let us return to "Walker Brothers Cowboy" to see how even this very early Munro work reflects her consistent interest in merging the past, present, and sometimes the future in ways very much in line with Bergson's concept of fluid time and duration.

Del's father's demonstration of the effects of the glacial age prompts Del to consider how the Great Lakes "were *new*, as time went" (3). This thought in turn leads

Del to attempt to consider the more recent past, “the shore of the lake when the Indians were there” (3). On this occasion, however, duration and the attendant epiphany do not come. Unlike Del’s epiphanic experience at the conclusion of this story, at this juncture, time remains stubbornly compartmentalized into the present and at least two levels of the past—the ice age and the time when Natives populated the area. What stymies Del and disallows the insight that might attend a Bergsonian epiphanic moment is essentially Del’s fear of death—that old bugbear concern that so frequently brings Munro characters up short, *but which also* just as often prompts epiphanic or other insights into self and/or the spiritual/religious. We have seen such death-prompted insights emerge for characters as various as Del in “Heirs of the Living Body,” Elaine in “Memorial,” or the unnamed narrator in “The Spanish Lady”—to name just a few.

Ironically, however, at this point in “Walker Brothers,” the potential fluid epiphanic moment that might provide Del the comfort she so clearly seeks in the face of imagined death (the kind of comfort that is integral to virtually every religious/spiritual perspective time out of mind) is denied Del by her *fear* of death—her fear of her father’s death and her own:

The tiny share we have of time appalls me, though my father seems to regard it with tranquility. Even my father, who sometimes seems to me to have been at home in the world as long as it has lasted, has really lived on this earth only a little longer than I have, in terms of all the time there has been to live in...I will be barely alive—old, old—when it ends. I do not like to think of it. I wish the lake to be always just a lake, with the safe-swimming floats marking it, and the breakwater and the lights of Tuppertown. (3)

The connection between earthly and Heavenly Father examined in earlier chapters seems particularly apparent here in young Del’s notion that her father has been around since the world was created; however, we see here how this near-epiphanic moment moves Del closer to a realization of her father’s mortality—as well as her own. *These* are the matters she does “not like to think about.” Reflected in her fears about her father, however, is a fear that the eternal Pater’s time is limited as well. Del and her father’s walk down to the lake, her failure to experience epiphany, her fear of aging and mortality—triggered by her

reflections on time—and her general existential unease, however, have in some ways prepared her for her upcoming experiences on the road with her father and brother.

Ben Jordan maintains his usual cheerful demeanor on this less than stellar sales trip, even when on one occasion he experiences a quite carnivalesque near-dousing with urine: “Just then a window opened upstairs, a white pot appears on the sill, is tilted over and its contents splash down the outside wall” (9). Ben Jordan is not hit by the urine, but he nevertheless walks, “no longer whistling, to the car” (9). This carnivalesque episode prompts glee from Del’s younger brother—“He laughs and laughs” (9), but we are darkly reminded, first, that this is the middle of a severe economic depression and, secondly, that the *f*/Fathers have fallen; Del’s father, like so many men of his generation, is suffering through “reduced circumstances” and a clear decline of patriarchal authority.

It is, however, when Ben Jordan leaves his usual “territory” (10) to visit an old friend (flame?), Nora Cronin, that the narrative takes on its richest and darkest tones. It may be pushing the textual evidence somewhat, but, Nora is also the name of James Joyce’s wife, Nora Barnacle, and Nora Cronin’s entry into the narrative signals the beginning of some strong Joycean qualities leading up to and culminating in Del’s epiphany at the end of the story. First, Munro draws our attention to Nora’s religion; she is Catholic, which in predominantly Protestant rural Ontario is euphemistically referred to as “digging with the wrong foot” (14). Further, images such as the “picture on the wall of Mary—‘Jesus’ mother—I know that much—in shades of bright blue and pink with a spiked band of light around her head” Del mentally notes (14)—are reminiscent of the Irish Catholicism so central to Joyce’s epiphanic fiction from *Dubliners* to *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Finally, in Joyce’s fiction, Catholicism—or, more broadly, organized religion—frequently stands in opposition to the sensual/the sexual—as it seems it may have between Ben Jordan and Nora Cronin in Munro’s story.

Setting these possible Joycean connections in parentheses, there remain a number of other important qualities about Nora that augur directly toward Del’s upcoming epiphany on her journey back home and that also, in this early Munro story, prefigure key aspects of Munro’s overall implicit spiritual vision. Particularly when compared to Del’s often sickly mother, Nora exudes vibrant physical health—“Not on your life,” declares Nora, “I’m never sick” (15)—and a powerful sensuality and sexuality: “Her

breasts...with their warmth and bulk, rising and falling underneath her loose flowered dress, her face shining with the exercise [of dancing with Del] and delight” (17). Nora embodies and is associated with central aspects of the Romantic temperament—for example, Nora invites Del to dance, evoking the sensuality of dance, the loosening powers of whiskey (again *spiritus*) “laughing and moving with great buoyancy, wrapping me [Del] in her strange gaiety, her smell of whiskey, cologne, sweat” (16). There is a strong *life* force around Nora and in her “strange gaiety” a strong hint of a Romantic form of feminine divine power that counters the aura of death that surrounds Del’s mother or that characterized Del and her father’s earlier walk down to Lake Huron. Secondly, Nora embodies “not the juridical monotheistic patriarch but a divinity more ineffably mysterious, pluralistic, neutral or even feminine in gender” (Tarnas 373). Moreover, Nora’s last name, Cronin, suggests a crone-like figure with more spiritual depth and importance than her outward, “ordinary” self would suggest. There is no question that Nora—as well as reminding Ben Jordan of the “road not taken,” also has a powerful effect on Del as a crone-mentor, literally teaching Del to dance, to find and experience her body, figuratively teaching her the power of the sensual, sexual female/feminine. These are aspects Del would probably never have encountered in her relationship with her mother, Ida Jordan,. We have seen in “Heirs of the Living Body,” “Lives of Girls and Women,” and other Del Jordan stories how Del’s mother represents the opposite pole from Nora Cronin on the Romantic-Positivistic continuum.

Del’s father has moved a considerable distance toward a kind of liberating, Romantic perspective on this unusual afternoon—outside of his usual “territory,” but he will not go so far as to dance with Nora. He then also declines Nora’s invitation to supper (17). His excuse takes on a good deal of symbolic significance: “ ‘We’ve taken a lot of your time now.’ ‘Time,’ says Nora bitterly” (17). Earlier we heard Ben Jordan’s empiricist pronouncements on geological time; we now hear Nora’s, and they are in some ways a response to Ben’s notion of time as “man’s master.” Munro, however, has already subtly undermined Ben Jordan’s kind of time through his inability to make a deep “impression” on the “rock-hard ground” (3). Conversely, Nora’s bitter comment on time is also accompanied by a gesture: she “touches the fender, making an unintelligible mark in the dust there” (17). The “marking” made by Nora—embodiment in the story of the

Romantic sensibility—is only marginally more distinct than that of her male counterpart. It is, nevertheless, more distinct—and this, recall, is only the first story in Munro’s first collection.

Although the epiphany at the conclusion of “Walker Brothers Cowboy” is quite distinctively Munrovian (and it *is* an epiphany, not an epiphanic moment), it displays characteristics of both the Romantic and Modernist epiphanic as well. First, its positioning at the conclusion of the story is quite typically Joycean, providing—as most of Joyce’s epiphanies do—a kind of closure, if not a traditional climax, at the end of the story. Many of Munro’s subsequent epiphanies/epiphanic occasions *do not* appear at the conclusions of the stories in which they appear, and they are frequently more open-ended and/or unresolved than most Modernist *or* Romantic epiphanies. The concluding epiphany in “Walker Brothers” is also quite Modernist in its powerful sense of the isolation of the protagonist and in its emphasis on the difficulty—if not impossibility—of authentic human communication that plagues a number of High Modernist characters such as T. S. Eliot’s J. Alfred Prufrock, Virginia Woolf’s Septimus Warren Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway*, or, of course, Clarissa Dalloway herself.

Romantic *and* Modernist epiphanies, but particularly the latter, frequently convey a strong sense of personal isolation. Morris Beja addresses this “contemporary preoccupation with the sense of isolation” (47) and notes how common it is in the epiphanies of Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and other modernist writers. He notes

the despair of ever having true contact with another human being, the fear of always remaining an outcast and stranger among the rest of mankind. No one theme is more important than this in the epiphanies experienced by such outsiders as Marcel, Stephen Dedalus, Joe Christmas, Eugene Grant, and Septimus Warren Smith. (47)

Despite the despair and loneliness these characters suffer, their epiphanies nevertheless present a privileged, monologic voice that Munro’s later more dialogic epiphanies/epiphanic moments resist (It’s also interesting to note how many of the isolated characters Beja invokes are male).

Del's concluding epiphany in Munro's early story, "Walker Brothers Cowboy," however, is solidly in the modernist isolationist mode. Del describes her father's life as a "landscape that has an enchantment on it," and it becomes clear that her central insight in this epiphany is that she will never bridge the gap between herself and this man whom she thought she knew entirely; the "kindly ordinary and familiar man" has become someone she "will never know." There are, she realizes, distances between them that she "cannot imagine" (18). Although the separation that Del feels from her father in this moment—when she gets closer to home, the "sky" (read father) again becomes only "gently overcast"—certainly reflects some of the "despair of ever having true contact" with this man who is so important to Del, especially in her youth, we shall see how Munro's epiphanic occasions become increasingly dialogic and less isolationist in later works. For example, Janet in "The Moons of Jupiter" strikes me very much as an older Del Jordan—and even more as Alice Munro at about the age when her father, Robert Laidlaw died. Unlike Del in "Walker Brothers Cowboy," Janet connects in important ways with her dying father. This movement toward more dialogic epiphanic occasions is very much in keeping with the sense of female community that we saw in stories discussed in earlier chapters, and, more importantly, very much in keeping with the sense of female community that characterizes Munro's implicit spiritual vision

Returning to the romantic qualities of Del's epiphany at the conclusion of "Walker Brothers Cowboy," there is a quite muted reference to nature in Ben Jordan's suggestion to his son to "Watch the road and let [him] know if you see any rabbits" (18). There is also the romantically suggestive overall setting, as Del, her brother and Ben Jordan make their way home in "the last of the afternoon, darkening and turning strange, like a landscape that has an enchantment on it" (18).

In keeping with *both* Romantic and Modernist traditions, Del's epiphany arises out of relatively "ordinary"—if not entirely usual—circumstances: Del finds the "last of the afternoon...ordinary and familiar" (18). Finally, this epiphany, like Romantic and Modernist epiphanies, emphasizes the physical, emotional, and intuitive—characteristics that invariably mark Munro's later epiphanic occasions.

Notwithstanding these Romantic and Modernist influences, there is much in this very early Munro epiphany that anticipates the particular Munroian brand of

epiphany/epiphanic moment found throughout Munro's oeuvre. I have already noted, for example, how this epiphany, like many in her later work, is triggered, to some extent, by fear of death—Del's fear of her father's death and, more obliquely, her own. Other Munrovian characteristics that appear in this early epiphany include a shift to the second personal pronoun, "you"—a technique that becomes a near trademark signature in Munro's later epiphanies/epiphanic occasions. This epiphanic occasion also anticipates Munro's later frequent metaphorical treatment of *time as water*—a technique that also ties in closely with the Bergsonian notion of fluidity/flow of time in epiphanic "duration." Finally, Del's epiphany here at the conclusion of "Walker Brothers Cowboy" presents a clear example of the *central* and most important characteristic of epiphanies throughout the ten collections that follow *Dance of the Happy Shades*: There is a deep sense of *mystery* at the core of Del's epiphany. Again, it is this sense of "something important and mysterious...at the emotional core" that Munro has claimed provides the "genesis of her stories" (Carrington 51). It is also this prevailing sense of mystery that lies at the core of Munro's implicit spiritual vision as well. Having briefly set out these various characteristics, I want to look at some of them in more depth.

It is, for example, quite striking to note how often Munro shifts to the second person "you" when she is setting out epiphanies/epiphanic occasions. In "Walker Brothers Cowboy," the narrative begins solidly in the first person—"my father drives and my brother watches...and I feel" (18). The shift to the second person is actually quite jarring as Del reports that the landscape is "kindly, ordinary and familiar while *you* are looking at it, but changing once *your* back is turned" (emphasis mine 18). Having explored dozens of epiphanic occasions in Munro's fiction, I have been struck by how frequently Munro makes this shift to the second person, and I confess, slightly bewildered by certain aspects of this shift. Munro is, of course, perfectly aware that formal usage dictates reserving "you" for direct address, but Munro is also a highly realistic writer who handles the colloquial extremely well when the narrative situation calls for it. The colloquial use of "you"—like any other use of the colloquial—creates a kind of intimacy between narrator and reader, author and reader, and Munro's use of the second person usually achieves this end effectively. What I find somewhat bewildering about her use of the colloquial "you" on these occasions, however, is that it seems these

would be occasions when the narrator/protagonist experiencing the epiphanic moment would be *least* inclined to the kind of deferral of personal responsibility and/or ownership of the epiphanic experience that *also* results from the use of the colloquial “you.” Shifting to “you” in these instances, just as it does in others, subtly distances the narrator/protagonist from the experience being conveyed. Arguably, though, “you” in these instances may serve to increase reader participation, to effect a kind of sharing of the epiphanic insight and/or to enhance the dialogic nature of the experience in ways that outweigh—at least in Munro’s estimation—the attendant deferral of the narrator’s/protagonist’s ownership of the epiphanic experience.

The epiphanic—whether in its Romantic, Modernist, or contemporary manifestations—stresses the emotional, intuitive, and the physical over the cerebral, logical, or the deductive. Morris Beja notes this “stress on intuition and emotion, rather than on reason” and, further, “the intense sensibility of many of their [the epiphanic writers’s] characters, particularly to physical sensations” (230-31). These are also consistent characteristics of the epiphanic in Munro as well. Munro’s emphasis on the emotional, for example, is what Carrington is drawing attention to when he notes Munro’s “desire to get at some kind of emotional core” in her stories (51). On the drive home near the conclusion of “Walker Brothers Cowboy,” the connection Del feels with her father is quintessentially intuitive and emotional. It is, in fact, almost telepathic. At Nora’s, Del has caught a glimpse of her father’s former life—of her *former father*—of which she was previously unaware. She has seen aspects of her father that run deeper than his usual garrulous, upbeat persona. When Del’s brother—quite oblivious to these aspects that have so deeply affected his sister—asks their father to sing, Ben Jordan answers “gravely,” a descriptor that not only subtly suggests death, but which also suggests his deeper, more serious side. Del senses all of these changes in her father intuitively and emotionally, telling us, “I feel my father’s life” (18). Significantly, Del does not use “sees” or “understands” or some other descriptor that would suggest anagnorsis after extensive reasoning and consideration of the “facts” she has gleaned over the course of the afternoon. Thus, this early epiphanic occasion in Munro’s work prefigures—along with a number of other aspects—how virtually all such subsequent

occasions in Munro's fiction will be marked by an emphasis on the intuitive and the emotional, as opposed to positivistic, Cartesian "knowing."

Another distinctive characteristic of the epiphanic in Munro's writing that emerges in the concluding epiphany in "Walker Brothers Cowboy" are images of and metaphorical connections between time and water. Water is both symbolically and literally important on many occasions in Munro's fiction, but it takes on particular significance in many *epiphanic* occasions. Water is, obviously, elemental, but it may also emphasize profound ambivalence, being, as it literally is, a source of life and, potentially, a source of death. We have seen the literal and symbolic importance of water in stories such as "Baptizing," "Walking on Water," "The Love of a Good Woman," and numerous others. Munro often depicts time as a river or stream. Robert Thacker in his essay, "Alice Munro, Writing 'Home': 'Seeing This Trickle in Time'" for example, observes that in Munro's story "Menesetung," the Menesetung river's flow is a "metaphorical equivalent to the passage of time" (5). Water in its various forms—rivers, streams, lakes (Lake Huron in "Walker Brothers," for example), and oceans—takes on symbolic significance in Munro's writing in ways that are often connected to the spiritual/religious. As we shall see, closely associated images and metaphors are those of swimming/drowning and bridges.

In "Walker Brothers Cowboy," Munro quite uncharacteristically mixes her metaphors in what seems to me a logical slip, such that Del's father's life flows "back from our car in the last of the afternoon," in ways obviously suggesting a river or stream. Then, however, Del observes that her father's life flows "like a *landscape* that has an enchantment on it" (emphasis mine 18). This is not an *entirely* unworkable metaphor, but it strains in ways that might easily have been avoided.

Notwithstanding this metaphorical awkwardness, the image of Ben Jordan's life flowing back anticipates Munro's subsequent extensive employment of water symbolically on epiphanic occasions, an employment that allows her to invoke a Bergsonian sense of simultaneity of past, present, and future all embodied in the particular river, stream, lake, or ocean that the narrative presents. In *Creative Evolution*, Bergson writes, for example, that if a "mental state cease[s] to vary, its duration [will] cease to flow" (1). Employing water symbolically also allows Munro to play/work with

the inherent ambivalence of water mentioned above and to express her pronounced ambivalence around spiritual—and particularly religious—matters. Finally, water symbolism also lets Munro invoke numerous spiritual/religious connections with water, including initiatory baptism and cleansing/purifying.

Again, in “Walker Brothers Cowboy,” the most important aspect in the concluding epiphanic occasion—an aspect that strongly characterizes subsequent epiphanic occasions in Munro’s oeuvre—is its essential *mysteriousness and unresolvability*. Munro’s emphasis on mystery and unresolvability extends to her overall implicit spiritual vision, and it is crucial to recognize that seeing the spiritual as ultimately mysterious is *not* tantamount to some kind of failure of perception or of faith. On the contrary, acknowledging the ultimate mystery is the central pillar of Munro’s implicit vision. An important corollary to acknowledging this ultimate mystery—as we have seen on a number of occasions in Munro’s work—is her quite unequivocal resistance to *positivistic certainty* in any of its various forms. Karen Smythe in *Figuring Grief* notes this characteristic of Munro’s writing, observing that late modern writers such as Munro and Mavis Gallant “often disclaim the value of inventing a pacifying resolution of conflicts between memory and truth, past and present, life and death, life and writing” (13). Munro’s epiphanic occasions do not solve or resolve; in fact—as Carrington argues—they place considerable “emphasis on her inability to understand the insoluble mysteries of life” (13).

For Del Jordan in “Walker Brothers Cowboy,” the most obvious insoluble mystery is her father’s previous life, but even more mysterious are his *feelings* about that previous life. Del resigns herself to these mysteries, and, by extension, she also resigns herself to the impossibility of fully understanding the mysteries of sexual relationships—the mystery of her father’s possible sexual relationships earlier in his life with Nora Cronin, and, implicitly, his sexual relationship with the woman he *did choose*, Del’s mother. These mysteries implicitly anticipate, for Del, the greater mystery of her *own* sexuality.

Closely aligned to these mysteries in Del’s epiphanic experience—and anticipated by her earlier evening walk with her father—are Del’s feelings about death, once again drawing attention to the frequent connection in Munro’s fiction between

sexuality and death—Eros and Thanatos. As Joseph Campbell instructs us, such connections are deeply imbedded in both the collective and individual human psyche. Del's experience at Nora Cronin's—this "ordinary" little visit to an old friend of her father's may be seen as an individual microcosm of the experiences of our "pre-sexual, pre-mortal ancestral beings of the mythological narrative [who] lived the idyll of the beginning, an age when all things were innocent of the destiny of life in time" (182). What I am urging here is metaphorically reading Del's time at Nora Cronin's and her subsequent epiphanic experience on the way home as an individual playing out of the archetypal movement from innocence to knowledge—what Campbell presents as the " 'mythological event' *par excellence*, which brought to an end its timeless way of being and effected a transformation of all things. *Whereupon death and sex came into the world as the basic correlates of temporality*" (emphasis mine 182). Read from this perspective, the profoundly spiritual nature of Del's experience becomes abundantly clear. Thus, at the conclusion of the story, Del is at least moving toward what she quite steadfastly resisted earlier in the story—her thoughts and feelings about death and sexuality. Earlier she decided. "I do not like to think about it" (3). Now, she allows herself to "feel her father's life flowing back from our car" (18).

It is this kind of acknowledging and honoring of the profound mysteries of death and sexuality and of the other great mysteries of life that characterize so many of the epiphanic occasions in Munro's oeuvre. Acknowledging the unresolvability of these mysteries engenders an open-ended quality that distinguishes Munro's epiphanies/epiphanic occasions from those of both her Romantic and Modernist predecessors. This open ended quality resists positivistic certainty and also implies that the quest toward the spiritual/religious remains very much "in progress" for Munro's protagonists/narrators and for Munro—just as it is for so many in contemporary Western culture. The quest remains one "with all kinds of weather, and distances you cannot imagine" (18).

The Development of the Epiphanic after *Dance of the Happy Shades*

As I indicated at the outset of my discussion of "Walker Brothers Cowboy," this initial story in Munro's first collection provides a microcosm of many important and distinctive aspects of Munro's overall work, particularly her deployment of the epiphanic.

The foregoing discussion of “Walker Brothers Cowboy” touches upon virtually every important aspect of the epiphanic in Munro’s writing, from its fundamental underlying connection to death and Eros to its ultimately mysteriousness and unresolvability. However, no matter how clear a template for the epiphanic in the balance of Munro’s oeuvre “Walker Brothers Cowboy” provides, we still cannot gain a sufficient grasp of this quintessential aspect of Munro’s implicit spiritual/religious vision without examining at least some of the key epiphanic occasions in the collections that succeed *Dance of the Happy Shades*. However, in that I have examined a number of epiphanic occasions in earlier discussions, and in that I will be examining in considerable detail epiphanies/epiphanic occasions in four recent stories in Chapter Six, I have decided to confine my discussion here to a kind of “snapshot survey” of important epiphanies/epiphanic occasions from a number of Munro’s stories that I do not address elsewhere in my thesis. I have also selected the following epiphanic occasions with a view to further highlighting key developments in Munro’s overall spiritual/religious perspective that I have already discussed and, occasionally, to addressing developments that I have not as fully explored.

Among these latter developments, for example, I include Munro’s consistently connecting the epiphanic and water/water imagery in her writing. Among other considerations that I will address momentarily, we should keep in mind the fundamental archetypal connection between water and the feminine aspect of spirituality. Riane Eisler reminds us, for example, that “the association of the feminine principle with the primal waters is also a ubiquitous theme” and that the symbolism of water is “often in association with the primal egg” (21), a motif I touched upon earlier in connection with Hindu mythology. In Munro’s fiction, however, the archetypal aspects play out in the photographic realism of her depiction of “ordinary” girls/women in “ordinary” situations. In the story “Privilege,” for instance, Rose, from Munro’s Rose and Flo stories, develops an adolescent crush on Cora, the “queen” in Rose’s high school. Rose’s infatuation has her imagining “stories of danger and rescue, accidents and gratitudes. Then all was warmth, indulgence, revelations” (32). Munro utilizes images of water to convey the intensity, the warmth and power of Rose’s erotic feelings, as well as the potential folly:

The opening, the increase, the flow of love. Sexual love, not sure yet exactly what it needed to concentrate on. It must be there from the start, like the hard white honey in the pail, waiting to melt and flow. There was some sharpness lacking, some urgency missing, there was the incidental difference in the sex of the person chosen; otherwise it was the same thing, the same thing that had overtaken Rose since. The high tide; the indelible folly; the flash flood. (33)

Images of water as an overwhelmingly powerful natural force often attend what might be called sexual epiphanies in Munro's writing—epiphanic moments prompted by sexual activity or the promise thereof.

Later in the title story from the same collection, Munro again employs water imagery in Rose's epiphanic reliving of a conversation and a relationship with Ralph Gillespie; however, the force of the water here is considerably tamed. The conversation and the relationship are both characterized by a peculiar mixture of "sexual warmth, sexual curiosity" and agape: "When Rose remembered this unsatisfactory conversation she seemed to recall a wave of kindness, of sympathy and forgiveness, though certainly no words of that kind had been spoken" (205).

The mystery and depth of sexual relationships and love are conveyed with water imagery and metaphors in "Five Points" from *Friend of My Youth*. Seeing Neil was "like hitting water when you're dead of heat...the lapping sweetness of it...the cool kindness soaking up all your troubles in its sudden depths" (36) (note again the shift to the second person). In "Differently" from the same collection, Munro, through an ocean metaphor, conveys the paradox and the ambivalence of the protagonist Georgia's illicit affair with a man named Miles. Georgia recalls Miles' eyes while they are making love becoming "cloudy, calm and somber" (233). This sky metaphor gives way to one of the ocean: "That way she trusted him—it was the only way. She thought of being launched out on a gray, deep, baleful, magnificent sea. Love" (233). Few other choices of metaphor can as effectively bring together the mysterious paradox of that which is, at once, "baleful" and "magnificent."

In fact, at times in Munro's writing it seems that nothing *but* water imagery/metaphors will do to make the link between the epiphanic and the spiritual that Munro is striving for. In "Carried Away," from *Open Secrets*, for example, the

protagonist, Louisa, experiences a powerful epiphany near the conclusion of the story, just after she has essentially hallucinated her dead ex-lover (another Munro accident victim, on this occasion decapitated). This is one of the most striking epiphanic occasions in Munro's work, replete with a number of her usual epiphanic characteristics: a sense of time as completely fluid—past and present occasionally merge entirely—and the more direct water/ocean imagery/metaphor; powerful physical and emotional feelings; the typical shift to the second person; and clear spiritual/religious significance. Louisa, waiting for a bus, has been surrounded by a group of Mennonites involved in quite “ordinary” activities: “They seemed quite cheerful, passing around a bag of candy, adults eating candy with children’:

No wonder she was feeling clammy. She had gone under a wave, which nobody else had noticed. You could say anything you liked about what had happened—but what it amounted to was going under a wave. She had gone under and through it and was left with a cold sheen on her skin, a beating in her ears, a cavity in her chest, and a revolt in her stomach. It was anarchy she was up against—a devouring muddle. Sudden holes and impromptu tricks and radiant vanishing consolations. (50)

Again, perhaps water metaphors with their marked flexibility might be the only way to convey such paradoxical, oxymoronic feelings, ranging as they do from stomach revolt to radiant consolations.

Although water is often Munro's first metaphorical choice, she occasionally opts for other aspects of elemental nature such as light, and what Ildiko de Papp Carrington terms “recurrent metaphors of splitting—lightning and earthquakes, for example” (4). These metaphors run the gamut from the relatively gentle epiphanic light that Georgia, the protagonist in “Differently,” experiences near the conclusion of the story—“the light in the street, the complicated reflections on the windows”—to what Ajay Heble calls the “spark and spit of craziness” that characterizes occasions such as Art Chamberlain's sexual attacks on Del Jordan—“brutal as lightning” or a “flash of insanity” (135). Munro's proclivity for these nature metaphors or for those involving man-made electricity may be at least partly explained by Charles Taylor's argument that

the “theistic horizon has been shattered, and the [spiritual] sources can now be found on diverse frontiers including our own powers [e.g. electricity] and nature” (496).

At times, however, even Munro’s considerable ability for conveying epiphanic experiences through metaphors of powerful nature or electricity falls short. This occurs when she is attempting to depict or describe that which is, frankly, beyond description. Returning to “Carried Away” for a moment, we find an example of being stymied in this fashion when Arthur Doud is experiencing an epiphanic moment just before he proposes to the protagonist, Louisa. Arthur is attempting to describe his feelings about Louisa:

He could no more describe the feeling he got from her than you can describe a smell. It’s like the scorch of electricity. It’s like burnt kernels of wheat. No, it’s like a bitter orange. I give up. (40)

It actually remains an open question here who “I” is in the final sentence above, but it seems quite likely it is Munro personally and directly acknowledging something beyond her grasp.

“Miles City, Montana”

Usually, of course, Munro quite effectively conveys the power and importance of epiphanic occasions, and in doing so almost invariably combines a number of the epiphanic techniques and characteristics outlined above. The epiphanic moments in “Miles City, Montana,” from *The Progress of Love* certainly qualify as some of the most powerful in Munro’s writing, and as they develop throughout the story, we see how they manifest central aspects of Munro’s deployment of the epiphanic. The central occurrence in the present time-line of the story is the near drowning of the narrator’s young daughter, Meg.¹⁰ Just prior to noticing that Meg is nowhere to be seen, the narrator is immersed in—if this is not *too* self-contradictory—some *particularly* “ordinary” observations/activities. That is, this occasion amply fulfills what Morris Beja terms the “criterion of insignificance” regarding the details that give rise to epiphanies. The narrator reports that “dazed with the heat, with the sun on the blistered houses, the pavement, the burned grass, I walked slowly. I paid attention to a squashed leaf, ground a Popsicle stick under the heel of my sandal, squinted at a trash can strapped to a tree” (13).

¹⁰ In *Lives of Mothers and Daughters*, Sheila Munro reveals the biographical basis for this incident (69-70).

This kind of attention to “trivial” detail and Munro’s strong inclination to the epiphanic has understandably prompted comparisons between her writing and that of Marcel Proust, primarily his prodigious work *Remembrance of Things Past*. In an interview with J.R. Struthers, Munro herself recounts that she was reading Proust while writing *Lives of Girls and Women* and why:

Well, I was reading Proust all the time I was writing *Lives of Girls and Women*—[laughter] reading him mostly for encouragement because I used to worry about going into too much detail about things, then I would go and read several pages of Proust, and you know how long he will take to describe... There’s an enormous reassurance there that anything is worth one’s attention and that everything is worth attention. And I love that about him. (14)

In “Miles City, Montana,” the process of observation becomes increasingly self-conscious to the point where Munro almost seems to be giving a mini-workshop on deployment of the Proustian epiphanic: “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 and the forlorn coincidence of your being there to see them” (135). Note, again, the use of the second person “you,” a technique that in this instance works to strengthen the reader’s dialogic involvement. The self-referential aspect of the deployment of the epiphanic continues in “Miles City” as the narrator speculates upon the “moment” of Meg’s immersion into the pool and how it must have been the same moment when—as the narrator learns later from her other daughter—the lifeguard and a girl were, significantly, kissing:

That must have been the moment under the trees when I thought, Where are the children? It must have been the same moment. At that moment, Meg was slipping, surprised into the treacherously clear blue water. (138)

After Meg is rescued and the narrator, her husband, Andrew, and their two girls are driving away from Miles City, the narrator experiences the kind of epiphany in which, according to Morris Beja, the past is recaptured:

In addition to the type of epiphany that stresses the significance of the present point of time alone, there is the one that recaptures the past—a

type of epiphany greatly encouraged by the Bergsonian view of time as duration, for it is easier to recapture a past forever part of the present than one ineluctably separated from it. (Beja 56)

The narrator's recapturing of the past in this epiphanic moment also once again makes clear how crucial death is in epiphanic occasions in Munro's fiction, and, by extension, in her overall spiritual vision. The narrator recalls the funeral of her childhood friend Steve Gauley; he had drowned:

When I stood apart from my parents at Steve Gauley's funeral and watched them, and had this new, unpleasant feeling about them, I thought that I was understanding something about them for the first time. It was a deadly serious thing. I was understanding that they were implicated. Their big, stiff, dressed-up bodies did not stand between me and sudden death, or any kind of death. They gave consent. So it seemed. (140)

And in some mysterious manner, in that moment—and, now again, in the moment recaptured—for the narrator, death and sex become “synergistically combined”:

But I did blame them. I charged them 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. (140)

At the same time, the narrator's past-recapturing epiphany critiques and dismisses traditional Christian approaches to death through its praise of the one adult who did not accept these approaches, her friend Steve's father:

He was the only grownup that I let off the hook. He was the only one I didn't see giving consent. He couldn't prevent anything, but he wasn't implicated in anything either—not like the others, saying the Lord's Prayer in their unnaturally weighted voices, oozing religion and dishonor. (141)

As the title *Remembrance of Things Past* clearly indicates, Proust's epiphanies were frequently the kind that Munro gives us here—that is, ones that recapture a past moment. Further, there are strong indications that this epiphanic occasion in “Miles City,

Montana” is an example of what Charles Taylor would call an “intertemporal, Proustian epiphany.” Taylor writes,

The Proustian epiphany occurs when a recurrence, or something sufficiently close, triggers off the memory. Proust himself says that when the original experience occurs, it hinders the epiphany; it dominates our attention and obstructs the vision behind it, as it were. Only when we recall it in memory can we see behind it to what was revealed through it. Here again, the epiphany can't be seen *in* an object but has to be framed *between* an event and its recurrence, through memory. (479)

Thus, this epiphanic occasion in “Miles City, Montana” reveals some important insights not only into the narrator’s spiritual/religious development, but quite likely—given the biographical parallels—into Munro’s as well. Sheila Munro writes, “One of the most autobiographical stories, ‘Miles City, Montana’ is based on a true incident that was legendary in our family history” (69). It is also very interesting to note that “Miles City” is one of Munro’s last openly autobiographical works, suggesting, perhaps, that in this story she is finally personally coming to terms with certain key issues involving death. The first sentence of the story presents a powerfully striking image: “My father came across the field carrying the body of the boy who had drowned” (113). Here is yet another version of the earthly cum Heavenly f/Father associated with death—a motif that haunts Munro’s writing from her earliest stories on—stories such as “Images,” “Time of Death” or “Age of Faith.” “Miles City” may be seen—if not as closure—at least as a kind of sufficient response to what is, arguably the most important underlying spiritual question in Munro’s oeuvre: *Wherefore Death?*

As we have seen before, the narrator as a young girl places the responsibility for death squarely on her parents and other adults. However, as we have seen in those earlier stories such as “Time of Death” or “Age of Faith,” earthly fathers elide into the Heavenly Father, and he becomes the ultimate agent of death. In “Miles City,” the narrator recalls herself as a young girl still seeing death in this way. However, in this story, written some eighteen years after “Time of Death,” fifteen after “Age of Faith,” Munro also gives us an adult narrator who is no longer as inclined to place all of the responsibility for death elsewhere. *She* is now the parent, and her daughters trust her the

way she once trusted her parents, and she is now keenly aware that she might have been as responsible for Meg's death as she felt the adults, fathers—earthly and Heavenly, save Steve Gauley's—were for Steve's death. Significantly, the narrator's epiphanic, remembered vision of her own father carrying the body of Steve Gauley is replaced by her husband Andrew rescuing Meg: "I had the impression that Andrew jumped with one bound over the fence, which seemed about seven feet high...He was carrying her now, the lifeguard was trotting along behind" (136-37). F/father is not entirely redeemed here—"He just had to reach over and grab her, because she was swimming somehow, with her head underwater" (137)—but nor is he any longer condemned.

The final epiphanic moment of the story, however, is not entirely free from condemnation; it has been shifted, though, in crucial ways:

So we went on, with the two in the back seat trusting us, because of no choice, and we ourselves trusting to be forgiven, in time for everything that had first to be seen and condemned by those children; whatever was flippant, arbitrary, careless, callous—all our natural, and particular, mistakes. (142)

This ending offers an almost disconcerting number of possible readings. For example, is the narrator moving toward, even embracing what Heidegger calls *Angst*, accepting death—her children's, her own—within what Heidegger termed "Being toward Death"? I am not sure the story's conclusion can bear that much weight. Various critics have struggled with the story's conclusion. Ajay Heble, for instance, concludes that "Although the story begins in a manner which seems to suggest the possibility of an accurate representation of the narrator's past, it ends up...unable to offer a guarantee of its own truth" (152). Heble goes on to surmise that perhaps the narrator at the end is involved in a "kind of backing off from what cannot finally be known" (152). Heble's latter point holds up better than his former, in that as the story—like so many of Munro's works—does not ultimately offer any kind of certainty.

I find Ildiko de Papp Carrington's conclusion about "Miles City" quite compelling; he writes that the story ultimately does offer some kind of acceptance of the paradox it explicitly develops: "Sexual desire sows the seeds not only of life but also of death" (69). Finally, though, I find the most appealing and convincing conclusion we

may draw about the story is the one articulated by Coral Ann Howells; moreover, it is the kind of conclusion that has a place at the core of *any* fulfilling spiritual/religious perspective. As Howells puts it, the story ultimately offers “forgiveness or hope of it” (92).

“Labor Day Dinner”

I will conclude this chapter on the epiphanic in Munro’s writing with a look at the darkly powerful and representative epiphanic occasions found in the concluding pages of “Labor Day Dinner” from *The Moons of Jupiter*. In preceding chapters and in the present one, I have emphasized the mystery that lies at the core of Munro’s implicit spiritual vision. In that Munro so frequently depicts protagonists/narrators/characters striving toward spiritual fulfillment through relationships, particularly sexual relationships, it logically follows that a certain degree of mystery will be found at the heart of such relationships. This is precisely what J.R. Thacker argues in his essay “Alice Munro, Writing ‘Home’: ‘Seeing this Trickle in Time.’” More accurately, Thacker argues “for the appropriateness of Eudora Welty’s essay ‘How I write’” for describing aspects of Munro’s work. Welty writes,

Relationship *is* a pervading and changing mystery: it is not the words that make it so in life, but words have to make it so in a story. Brutal or lovely, the mystery waits for people wherever they go, whatever extreme they run to. (12)

Nowhere is this description of the mystery in relationships more appropriate to Munro’s writing than in the complex, paradoxical relationships that we encounter in “Labor Day Dinner.”

The central characters in this third person, largely omniscient narrative are the couple Roberta and George; their mutual friend Valerie; Roberta’s two daughters, Angela and Eva; and Valerie’s two offspring, twenty-five year old Ruth and twenty-one year old David. A quite peripheral but symbolically important character is Kimberley, David’s “born again” Christian girlfriend. Munro’s presentation of this latter character is analogous to her overall presentation of Christianity in the story. That is, Christianity, like Kimberley, may seem incidental at first read, but further probing reveals its pervasive importance in the narrative. I am struck, for example, by the

Biblical/religious/spiritual connections/suggestions in the names of all of the children: (Angel)a, Eva, Ruth and David. Kimberley is the only exception in this regard; again, though, she is quite explicitly fundamentalist. I am not convinced that this naming is entirely ironic, but at the same time it seems especially odd in a story that so clearly dismisses Christianity as a spiritual alternative. Perhaps these names align somehow with Munro's invocation of the archetypal fish in the conclusion of the story—an aspect I shall address shortly.

Further, conversation at the Labor Day dinner turns on two occasions to matters religious/Biblical. One of these occasions presents George pontificating extemporaneously and without serious regard for historical accuracy on how the pointed arch “ ‘was just a fad...it was an architectural fashion’ ” (155). He goes on—obliquely dismissing Jungian archetypal theory as well—to announce that the pointed arch “ ‘wasn't dreamed up by the collective unconscious to honor Jesus any more than I was’ ” (156). Of course, none of this sits very well with Kimberley, but little matter, as she is dismissed as fundamentalists of all stripes invariably are in Munro's fiction. Kimberley, though, is dismissed even more scathingly than usual. Roberta who is going through considerable emotional strife and vacillation about issues in her own life is uncharacteristically and ruthlessly clear in her unspoken assessment of fundamentalist Kimberley. She notes first that Kimberley is “strong enough to hold her smile in the face of George's attack on her faith,” but Roberta muses,

Does her smile foresee how he will burn? Not likely. She foresees, instead, how all of them will stumble and wander around and tie themselves in knots; what does it matter who wins the argument? For Kimberley all the arguments have already been won. (156)

The foregoing quotation is particularly representative of the struggle for religious/spiritual perspective/fulfillment throughout Munro's work. Yes, Kimberley's fundamentalism is dismissed, primarily because it—like all fundamentalism or positivism—allows no place for all-important mystery. *But*, under the dismissal there remains that slight tone of envy as well, because what Roberta surmises Kimberley is thinking about her and others like her—their stumbling and wandering and tying themselves up in knots—is, unfortunately, quite accurate. Thus, for Roberta and other

“stumblers and wanderers,” there will have been, and will be again, certain moments when Kimberley’s certainty will seem very appealing. Of course, though, the price of such certitude is much too high.

Clearly, Roberta possesses little certainty or confidence at this point in her life, especially in her relationship with George. Nor, for all of his apparent order, control, and confidence is George clear about his feelings and his relationship with Roberta. There are mysteries afoot. George admits to himself, for example, that he’d hoped on the previous evening to get closer to Roberta, but, mysteriously, “something still held him back” (150). It is also a mystery to him how Roberta can have emotionally deteriorated as she seems to have: “How out of this [previous strength] could come such touchiness, tearfulness, weariness, such a threat of collapse he cannot imagine” (150). Thus we are privy through third person omniscience to the fear, angst, and mystery that underlies these quite “ordinary” relationships on this quite “ordinary” Labor Day.

A second Biblical reference in the story directly addresses the mysteries of love. Ironically recited here by George is the hymn that contains Paul’s oft invoked pronouncements on love: “ ‘Love suffereth long, and is kind’ ” (154). One may discern in the course of “Labor Day Dinner” a kind of background, point-counterpoint argument on the vicissitudes of love—an argument of which the “debating” characters are unaware. For instance, a response to George’s ironic rendering of Paul’s hymn to the Corinthians comes from Roberta, who, earlier in the narrative, reflects that *Valerie’s* life “and her presence, more than any opinion she expresses, remind you that love is not kind or honest and does not contribute to happiness in any reliable way” (140).

Thus, by the time we reach the conclusion of the story, a number of typical Munroian perspectives have been firmly established. The most sympathetic protagonist, Roberta, has rejected traditional Christianity and has sought spiritual fulfillment in the mysterious realm of Eros with limited success. Actually, traditional Christianity has been critiqued and dismissed in a number of ambivalent ways. Further, we learn that George, the central male protagonist, certainly less sympathetically drawn than Roberta, nevertheless sees their relationship as being on more solid ground than does she, but thus far has been relatively defeated by the mysteries of that relationship. Valerie seems to have avoided bitterness, but—albeit with a certain degree of dignity—seems to have

conceded defeat to the same mysteries that have stymied Roberta and George. Despite all of this apparent defeat, however, the *yearning* for something deeper and more meaningful has *not* yet been extinguished for any of these characters, nor, it seems, for the narrative voice that oversees them. Evidence of this yearning may be found, for example in Roberta's musing to Valerie at one point, " 'Isn't it funny how you're attracted—I am [an unusual revision of the indirect "you"]—to the idea of a pattern like that? I mean the idea is attractive, of there being a balance'" (149). Roberta is still seeking here the kind of pattern/balance in life that religions/mythologies provide, but the narrative to this point has made abundantly clear that no such traditional pattern will do.

It would be inaccurate to say that the epiphanic conclusion of "Labor Day Dinner" provides the equivalent of such a traditional religious/mythological pattern, or even that it *answers* or *directly responds* to the yearning noted above. It would, however, be accurate to say that the epiphanic conclusion puts all of the relationship struggles and angst that the story presents into a different perspective, without reducing their importance. As George, Roberta, Angela, and Eva leave Valerie's, George remarks the "gibbous moon": "It was Roberta who told George what a gibbous moon was, and so his saying this is always an offering. It is an offering now, as they drive between the black cornfields" (158). The word "offering" carries religious/ritual connotations, and this is an offering that George makes as the narrative, like their truck, carries them into the blackness of mystery as well. This move into darkness was prefigured earlier when Roberta noted to Valerie, " 'It's not the house, it's not the children. It's just something black that rises'" (149).

In the blackness of this country Labor Day night, a car, "a dark-green 1969 Dodge" without lights is "traveling at between eighty and ninety miles an hour" along a road that, due to the high corn fields, intersects blindly with "Telephone Road" along which Roberta and company are coming home. Paradox abounds. For instance, the "gibbous moon" that might be an "offering" between Roberta and George is the same moon that has allowed the drunken driver of the Dodge to forget to turn on his headlights: "He sees the road by the light of the moon" (158). Further, a story that almost summarily dismisses traditional Christianity presents an epiphanic symbol central to Christianity, the fish: "It [the Dodge] comes out of the dark corn and fills the air right in front of them the

way a big flat fish will glide into view suddenly in an aquarium tank” (159). A little further on, the symbol recurs, “the ghost car . . . the black fish” (159). Of course, Christianity borrowed this ancient symbol of fluidity and transition from the pagan Greeks, and in this respect, it is perfectly in keeping here with Munro’s recurring symbolic use of water to capture the profound paradox of life/fertility/growth—the cornfields and the lunar imagery—coupled with the dark threat of violent death.

The initial encounter is beyond language for Roberta and George: “There isn’t time to say a word.” Roberta has had no time to register an emotional response either—“Roberta doesn’t scream”—countering her recent, somewhat exaggerated emotions. George has had no opportunity to exercise his usual control: “George doesn’t touch the brake.” The “black fish” car comes out of the realm of mystery and darkness, perhaps out of that same realm from which, in “Memorial,” Eileen comes for Ewart when she makes love with him on the night of his son’s funeral: “the same part of the world accidents come from” (SIBMTTY 224). In “Labor Day,” the car comes without lights, “seemingly without sound.” From the time of their near miss until they arrive at their home—perhaps a few minutes—Roberta and George are in a kind of stunned silence, a silence that counters their earlier “murderous silence” on their way to Valerie’s (136). From the moment that the “big car flashes before them” to the end of the paragraph/story is the moment of Bergsonian *duration*. When they arrive home, the narrative voice makes the further attempt to capture this “queer,” but not-so-bright moment:

What they feel is not terror or thanksgiving—not yet. What they feel is strangeness. They feel as strange, as flattened out and borne aloft, as unconnected with previous and future events as the ghost car was, the black fish. (159).

The word “thanksgiving” here, rather than “thankfulness” or “gratitude” carries subtle religious connotations, as does the phrase “borne aloft.” Tim Struthers offers some very perceptive comments here on Munro’s use of “thanksgiving” in the process of making some insightful observations overall on “Labor Day Dinner.” Struthers notes, for instance, that as readers we “find ourselves overwhelmed, exhausted, a good deal wiser and humbler, feeling as if we have very narrowly escaped not just actual death, the dark form of a speeding car, but a *more terrible death of the spirit, the death of a relationship*”

(emphasis mine 294). Struthers goes on to argue that “Labor Day Dinner” qualifies as “great art” with deep spiritual qualities:

We are brought to a point where we know we are in the presence not only of great art, but also of a greater presence suggested by the appearance near the story’s end of a “gibbous moon,” to which the only appropriate response may be to raise our voices in prayer, and, as Munro writes, “thanksgiving.” (294)

As with Munro’s use of the “black fish” here, however, although the words/phrases/images noted above carry spiritual significance, none is exclusively Christian. As Ewing Campbell reminds us, for example, the fish—in Greek, *Ichthys*—is strongly linked to Christ: I(esous), Ch(ristos), Th(eou), Y(ios), S(oter)—but it is also “one of the oldest and most persistent symbols of redemption” (11). Charles Taylor is writing about Adorno’s “model of total fulfillment” when he makes the following comment, but it strikes me as entirely applicable to the present discussion: “What we can look for, and what the best art can give us, are hints and intimations of full ‘redemption,’ in addition to a keenly critical eye for the shortcomings of the present reality” (478). In many ways what Roberta and George require most at this juncture is a redemptive deepening of their relationship. They catch a glimpse of such redemption in the epiphanic moment of duration that extends from their near miss up to Eva’s question. What Henri Bergson terms *duration* is occurring here in that the present moment is “unconnected with previous and future events” because such distinctions disappear in the “atemporal” moment of *duration*. There is only *the* moment.

How much this powerful, atemporal epiphanic moment in such proximity to death will help Roberta and George to find genuinely compassionate, loving connection with each other is left open. There are, however, some promising hints in the images and brief dialogue that close the story. First we are told that under the “shaggy branches of the pine trees...the moonlight comes clear.” This is the light from the “gibbous” moon, not full, but convex, moving toward fullness. As we have seen, though, it is also the moon that illuminated the path of the “black fish” of death. Ultimately, however, it shines clearly on “the hesitant grass of their new lawn” (159). Throughout the story a parallel has emerged between the renovations and improvements George is making to his

acreage and the health of his and Roberta's relationship. This image of the grass hints toward continued growth, albeit hesitant. Finally, however, we are left with Eva's question: "Are you guys dead?" Eva says, rousing them" (159). Rousing them out of their stunned silence, out of a dying mode into a living one? There is no certain reading here, but I opt for the suggestion of unity and security in Eva's final question, "Aren't we home?" The chances now seem considerably greater that Roberta and George may begin answering this question in the affirmative.

CHAPTER SIX

FOUR RECENT STORIES

Questing Continues

In this final chapter I will take a close look at four recent Munro stories: “Jakarta” from *The Love of a Good Woman*, then “Post and Beam,” “Comfort,” and “Floating Bridge” from *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*. To suggest that these four stories provide a culmination or some kind of closure of Munro’s overall spiritual vision would be an exaggeration, but a close look at these works does reveal Munro’s vision at its most multi-leveled and mature. These stories also clearly illustrate that the spiritual and religious realms remain of central, even increased, interest for Munro in her later career. Examining these four recent stories also affords me the opportunity to sum up key points of my overall thesis and to complete my discussion of the epiphanic in Munro’s writing. Every one of these stories presents striking epiphanic occasions, and each concludes with an epiphany as well. These stories provide clear manifestations of what is most attractive—indeed, a necessity—to Munro in the structure of her stories: “An epiphanic moment when characters and readers alike may lose or find, as Munro phrases it the story “Simon’s Luck,” “ ‘a private balance spring, a little dry kernel of probity’” (Struthers, “Alice Munro” 294). Central to this probity is authentic self-awareness—as far as such awareness may be achieved—and, as we shall see, this awareness invariably involves an awareness of the mysteries of death and Eros—Eros in the sense outlined in the early pages of Chapter Four

These four stories present some striking similarities, all directly related to Munro’s implicit spiritual vision. First, although it is not at all unusual to find death/dying at the center of a Munro story, they are of particular significance in all of these stories. More specifically, the three stories from *Hateship* directly present or strongly suggest a particular kind of death, suicide, reminding us of Albert Camus’s position in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that the only genuinely important existential question is whether or not one should take one’s own life. More directly germane to these Munro stories, though, we see how suicide in these works often points to the attempts by various characters to have at least some *control* over life and death—that is, at least to be able to control the time and cause of death.

Secondly, every one of these recent Munro stories presents authentic Eros—that is, Eros that entails/contains both sexual love and the selfless love of Agape. In all of

these stories, genuine Eros provides, variously, a counter to death, an option—at times, even an antidote—to anxiety about death or the fear of what Iris Murdoch terms “the void.” As Murdoch delineates it in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, “void” can also be described as “‘despair’ or ‘affliction’ or ‘dark night’” and, further, “it can be placed in opposition to ‘transcendence’” (498). This opposition between the void and transcendence arises in a number of Munro’s stories from Del Jordan’s struggle with this opposition in early Munro collections to those struggles I shall examine here in her most recent collection. Emerging out of the circumstances leading up to the various epiphanic moments in the four stories that I will examine next, and out of the epiphanic moments themselves, is ultimately a kind of faith. Beverly Rasporich in *Dance of the Sexes* notes that she, too, has found this faith throughout Munro’s fiction, or, as she puts it, “The dramatization of the conjunction of existential desperation and existential possibility within a total vision that is actually much closer to faith than it is to despair” (112).

Finally, in upcoming discussions of these four recent Munro stories, I will draw increasingly on the philosophical and spiritual concepts of Henri Bergson, particularly as he sets them forth in his work, *Creative Consciousness*. My primary interest lies in Bergson’s concept of *duration*. There are clear traces of Bergson’s influence throughout Munro’s writing; those critics who have noted this influence trace it indirectly to Marcel Proust, who, of course, made very clear his artistic debt to Bergson (Beja 56). Karen Smythe, for example, tells us that Munro has “stated that Proust was influential on [her] own artistic development” (12), and, as I pointed out in Chapter Five, Munro acknowledges reading *Remembrance of Things Past* while writing *Lives of Girls and Women*. However Bergson’s influence found its way into Munro’s writing, it manifests in a number of her stories—particularly those I shall examine shortly.

Central to Bergson’s concept of *duration* are aspects that are also central to Munro’s overall artistic vision: memory, intuition, and the profound connection of the past and the present. As Bergson puts it,

Duration is the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances...memory, as we have tried to prove, is not a faculty of putting away recollections in a drawer, or of inscribing them in a register. There is no register, no drawer...In reality,

the past is preserved by itself, automatically. In its entirety, probably, it follows us at every instant. (*Creative Consciousness* 4-5)

Bergson's concept of the development of *character* refers, of course, to actual human beings, but it may also be brought to consideration of fictional characters as well:

What are we, in fact, what is our *character*, if not the condensation of the history that we have lived from our birth—nay, even before our birth, since we bring with us prenatal dispositions. Doubtless we think with only a small part of our past, but it is with our entire past, including the original bent of our soul, that we desire, will and act. (*Creative Consciousness* 5)

Moreover—and central to my overall argument—Bergson unequivocally links his concept of *duration* to spirituality via memory. In *Matter and Memory*, Bergson writes, “Memory must be, in principle, a power absolutely independent of matter;” therefore, if “spirit is a reality, it is here, in the phenomenon of memory, that we may come into touch with it” (8).

More broadly, Bergson was one of the earliest philosophers to resist the positivism so deeply entrenched at the turn of the century. As Jacques Choron points out, Bergson pushed, for example, to bring consideration of death back into philosophical discourse:

In philosophy it is only around the turn of the century that a reaction against the exclusion of death from philosophical reflection sets in. William James and Henri Bergson rebel against the exclusion of all personal and “tychic” elements from philosophy. (Choron 269)

Morris Beja notes the influence of William James and Henri Bergson as well, but gives the nod to the latter in terms of his impact on literature:

But an even more significant figure is Henri Bergson, with whom James agreed on many essential points, and whom he greatly admired. For in addition to stressing intuition, Bergson is the most conspicuous representative of the philosophical concern with time that has had, directly and indirectly, so great an effect on modern literature. (54)

Although Bergson insists that “the philosophy he contemplates is not so much in opposition to science [read Vienna Circle positivistic science] as an extension of science”

(Kitchin 19), what emerges clearly in much of Bergson's work is his opposition to the positivism/empirical "certainty" so prevalent in the science of his time. As we have seen with Munro's characters from Ida Jordan in *Lives*, to Ted Makkavala in "Accident," to Mr. Lougheed in "Walking on Water"—only a few of the many characters in Munro's fiction who struggle in various ways with rigid positivistic thinking—Munro's consistent critique of such thinking, in any of its guises, reveals a strong affinity with Bergson—in addition to their affinity on intuition and the importance of death. Nowhere, however, is Munro's affinity with Bergson more evident than in "Floating Bridge," the last story I will discuss in this chapter. The story's protagonist, Jinny, experiences intense epiphanic moments while at a farm owned by Matt and June *Bergson*. These experiences culminate for Jinny in an especially powerful epiphanic occasion imbued with Eros while she is with the Bergson's son, Ricky.

It is this intensive and important focus in "Floating Bridge" on epiphanic moments manifesting Bergsonian *duration* that has prompted the order in which I will discuss stories in the balance of this chapter. I will approach the *collections* chronologically, beginning with "Jakarta" from *The Love of A Good Woman*, but I discuss the three stories from *Hateship, Friendship* in inverted order, reserving the privileged position of final discussion for "Floating Bridge."

"Jakarta"

Like almost all of Munro's stories, "Jakarta" plays out on a number of time-lines, but this story is notably distinguished by a particular kind of link between the past and present—a link that involves the story's two central characters, Kath and Kent. Somewhat of a doppelganger effect emerges between these two characters, an effect initially suggested by the similar spelling and length of their names. Kath and Kent may also be seen as a kind of past (Kath) present (Kent) composite character. They are married in the past time-line of the story, divorced in the present time-line.

Although Kent appears in the past time-line of the story, Kath's story/quest is the primary focus of this section of "Jakarta." Kent's quest is the main focus of the present time-line and the latter stages of the narrative. In the past time-line, Kath attempts—like so many previous Munro characters—to find some level of spiritual fulfillment in man-

woman relationships—in Kath’s case, in her marriage to Kent, and, to some extent, in her role as mother to their infant daughter, Noelle. As with a number of the characters discussed in Chapter Three, however, Kath’s attempts fail, and she and Kent are ultimately divorced. While they were married, Kent was clearly not inclined to pursue anything spiritual; he remained steadfastly “grounded,” positivistic, and—most importantly—in control. His profession as a pharmacist, although mentioned very parenthetically, speaks volumes about his overall scientific and “prescriptive” approach to life and relationships. In the present time-line of the story, however, Kent is dying of terminal cancer, and despite his continuing resistance, the spiritual is increasingly intruding into his daily encounters and—given his increasingly tentative control of his mental and emotional processes—increasingly intruding into his consciousness.

Munro does not, however, offer up some tidy resolution whereby controlling, positivistic male protagonist fulfills by proxy the spiritual quest of the earlier controlled female protagonist. First, as we shall see, Kath was strongly attracted to Kent’s particular brand of control and to his “mathematical” view of life. Secondly, and more importantly, as Karen Smythe astutely observes, writers such as Munro “often disclaim the value of inventing a pacifying resolution of conflicts between memory and truth, past and present, life and death” (13). Consistently, Munro offers no such pacification in “Jakarta” either.

In their own ways, Kath and Kent are both struggling for some kind of spiritual perspective that might help them cope with their respective challenges. Kath’s central challenge in the past time-line is the impending figurative death of her marriage to Kent; Kent’s main challenge in the present time-line is his impending literal death. Given the significant range in the ages and circumstances of the characters in “Jakarta,” it is interesting that in the face of death and dying not one of these characters—not even the otherwise quite conservative and terminally ill Kent—adopts a traditional Christian position/belief about death. That said, though, death and dying remain of crucial interest to all of these characters and—as it almost invariably does in Munro’s fiction—death here acts as a strong impetus for these characters toward spiritual/religious considerations and, directly or indirectly, provides a powerful trigger for epiphanic experiences.

Let us turn first to the past time-line of “Jakarta.” The quite uncharacteristic *omniscient* third person narrative focuses first on Kath in the early years of her marriage

to Kent. Near the beginning of the story, Kath and her close friend Sonje get into an “unexpected and disturbing” (84) argument while on Kilsilano Beach in Vancouver. They disagree about aspects of D.H. Lawrence’s story *The Fox*. Sonje is quite deeply moved by and attracted to Lawrence’s near religious views on man-woman love. The narrative voice paraphrases Lawrence:

March is still struggling against him, to hold herself separate from him, she is making them both obscurely miserable by her efforts to hang onto her woman’s soul, her woman’s mind. She must stop this—she must stop thinking and stop wanting and let her consciousness go under, until it is submerged in his. Like the reeds that wave below the surface of the water. . . . And that is how her female nature must live within his male nature. Then she will be happy and he will be strong and content. Then they will have achieved a true marriage. (84)

On the other hand, Kath reacts strongly *against* Lawrence’s idea of marriage:

“Sex leads to getting pregnant [Kath has just had a baby]. I mean in the normal course of events. So March has a baby. She probably has more than one. And she has to look after them. How can you do that if your mind is waving around under the surface of the sea?” (84).

Kath’s ostensibly pragmatic and defensive response reveals a good deal about what she is *actually* yearning for in her marriage to Kent, and the fact that they have been long separated in the present time line of the story suggests that her relationship/marriage to Kent never fulfilled this yearning. In the past time line, Kath, in fact, recognizes that “She herself is the very woman that Lawrence is railing about.” The narrative voice makes clear that not being able to satisfy this yearning amounts to “an impoverishment in Kath’s life” (85).

Like Lawrence, Munro—to employ Beverly Rasporich’s phrase—may be seen as a “romantic realist.” However, Munro is clearly as ambivalent as her character, Kath, about Lawrence’s spiritual/religious perspective on man-woman love. Moreover, it is extremely unlikely that Munro would subscribe to Lawrence’s intense and categorical argument regarding the spiritual importance of man-woman relationships. Lawrence’s

letter to A.W. McLeod in 1914 serves as a brief reminder of his tremendous emphasis on the emotional and spiritual importance of man-woman relationship. Lawrence writes,

The source of all life and knowledge is in man and woman, and the source of all living is in the interchange and the meeting and mingling of these two: man-life and woman-life, man-knowledge and woman knowledge, man-being and woman-being. (255)

Harold Bloom refers to Lawrence's "kind of eloquent desperation" in expressing "the necessity for both a spiritual rebirth in our mercantile society and a sexual resurrection in the body of the individual" (704), and goes on to argue, I think accurately, that "Lawrence's spirituality was apocalyptic...yet it remains authentic spirituality, in itself and in Lawrence" (707).

However, although there are some intriguing echoes of Lawrence in some of Munro's depictions of man-woman relationships, Munro's ambivalence about finding a Lawrentian spiritual fulfillment in sexual relationships—as we discovered in Chapter Three—plays out in how often such "spiritual" quests end in egotistical, solipsistic promiscuity. Note, for example, that despite Sonje's apparent willingness to "immerse herself" in her marriage to Cottar, he essentially left her—perhaps even went so far as to feign his own death to leave her.

The beach party at the center of "Jakarta" provides one of the clearest examples in Munro's work of the usual results of the confusion of coital sex/eroticism with genuine Eros. The party is a farewell celebration for Sonje's husband, Cottar, who is leaving for the "Philippines or Indonesia or wherever he was going" (94) (If we accept Sonje's later theory, it was Jakarta, where Cottar supposedly counterfeited his own death). At this party and earlier, Kath experiences a strong attraction toward the partner swapping—"temple prostitution," she calls it—that she and Kent have encountered in Cottar and Sonje's social circles. Kath finds this "obligatory copulating exciting as well as disgusting" (96), demonstrating the profound ambivalence we find so often in Munro's fiction. Here again, ambivalence arises out of a clash between Pauline aversion and sexual desire. Kath surmises that "trying it with someone else would mean a change of circuits—all of her life would blow up in her face. Yet she could not say that she loved Kent agonizingly [as Sonje has told Kath she loves Cottar]" (97).

The spiritual yearning that underlies this beach party—both a collective and an individual yearning—becomes most apparent when Kath and a man at the party enter into a banter which progresses from the poetic to the mildly sexual. Interestingly, Kath has learned earlier that “in another life,” the man “had been a minister” (100). Shades of “Wild Swans” emerge here with another sexually tempting “man of the cloth.” As the man’s naked wife swims toward Kath and this man (an ironic exchange casts the man’s wife as Europa and him, therefore, as Zeus—“That makes you Zeus,” said Kath boldly” (100)). Kath and the man begin quoting Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach”:

“ ‘The sea of faith was once too at the full,’ he said humorously. “ ‘And round earth’s shore, lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled’—I was married to a completely different woman then.

He sighed, and Kath thought he was searching for the rest of the verse.

“ ‘But now I only hear,’ ” she said, “ ‘its melancholy long withdrawing roar, down the vast edges drear and naked shingles of the world.’ ” (100)

Significantly, Kath breaks off this ostensibly playful, ironic poetic banter: “Then she stopped, because it seemed too much to go on with ‘Oh love let us be true—’ ” (100). Given what we learn of the state of Kath’s marriage, of Cottar’s disingenuousness, and of the superficial nature of most of what is going on at this *soiree* supposedly celebrating Eros, Kath’s reluctance to quote Arnold’s hope that man-woman love might replace the lost human connection with the divine seems entirely justified. With characteristic complex ambivalence, however, Munro does not entirely close off the possibilities of finding genuine spiritual fulfillment in sexual relationships/marriages. Through Kent’s epiphanic experiences in the present time line of the story, we discover how an unwillingness or refusal to risk at least some degree of Lawrence’s “immersion” or to allow some degree of Arnold’s hope for human love will often result in spiritual emptiness and solipsistic isolation.

Turning to the story’s present time-line, we find Kent recalling key aspects of his marriage to Kath, and the sense grows that Kent is, in some ways, completing Kath’s earlier quest, again, rendering them a kind of past-present and male-female composite character. Kent and his very young second wife, Deborah, are making a number of what amount to “death visits.” They have been traveling across the United States and Canada,

visiting members of Kent's family and old friends such as Sonje, whose home they are at while the entire present time-line of the story unfolds. It is important, though, to recognize from the outset that Sonje was *much* more Kath's friend than she was Kent's, and, we learn, Sonje and Kath have maintained that friendship to the present.

Furthermore, Kent's impending death is not the only death in "Jakarta." The death—albeit only alleged—of Cottar, Sonje's husband, is equally important in the story—important enough, in fact, to merit the story's title. Cottar supposedly died of some tropical disease somewhere in Jakarta decades prior to the present time-line of the story. Although "Jakarta" does not present suicide as directly as do all three of the stories from *Hateship, Friendship*, the circumstances surrounding Cottar's death do suggest the manipulation of life and death that suicide affords. Kath and Cottar's mother—without telling each other—have both suspected for years that Cottar is not actually dead. Sonje reveals her theory to Kent when he and his current wife are visiting; Sonje's theory about Cottar's dying, or not dying, came to her in an epiphanic moment:

Sonje said, "You know, I have a theory"...

What was her theory? About the price of real estate? No, it was about Cottar. She did not believe that he was dead.

"Oh, I did at first," she said. "It never occurred to me to doubt it. And then suddenly I just woke up and saw it didn't necessarily have to be true. It didn't have to be true at all." (108)

Delia, Cottar's mother, has already died by the time Kent is making his "death visits," but she had confided to Sonje before she died that she too was quite sure that Cottar was still alive. Although somewhat incidental to my reading of "Jakarta," what we learn of Delia's response to the possibility that Cottar may have feigned his own death raises interesting considerations of existential, spiritual shifts in responses to death that may come with age. Sonje recounts for Kent her conversation with Delia about Cottar's still being alive:

Then I told her what I'd been thinking and she laughed. We both laughed. You would expect an old mother would be grief-stricken talking about how her only child had run off and left her, but no. Maybe old people

aren't like that. Really old people. They don't get grief-stricken anymore. They must figure it's not worth it. (109)

Although the years have mellowed both Kent and Sonje and obscured their earlier differences, they are clearly still as far apart in their perspectives on relationships and life in general as they were years ago when Kath and Sonje were close friends. However, even if Kent is not fully conscious of it, his visit to Sonje is not a casual kind of reconnection. Nor have been his sojourns to his daughter Noelle's, his decision *not* to visit Kath when he and Deborah (his current wife) were at Noelle's and easily might have, nor his visit to an old friend in Arizona, "obsessed with the dangers of life, in spite of his expensive residence in a protected community" (110). Kent is searching for something in the time left to him, and it becomes quite evident that it is something he has not found in his marriage to Deborah—who is only a couple of years older than his daughter Noelle—nor in the "hard-headed" pragmatism that marks his right-winged socio-political views and overall approach to relationships and to life. Kent—like the equally "hard-headed" left-wingers he argued with over dinner at Cottar's and Sonje's so many years ago—certainly was then, and by and large is still, one of those persons who, as Kath puts it, is "certain of everything." Time and again, we see in Munro's stories how Kent's brand of certainty is anathema, just as it is to Kath who further notes of Kent and those who argued with him, "When they paused for breath it was just to draw on an everlasting stream of pure virtue, pure certainty" (95). It becomes clear, though, that Kent's "certainty" is a persona, a façade from which he is now struggling to free himself in his essentially spiritual struggle to understand what his marriage, his other relationships, his *life* have meant.

Munro's strong resistance to various types of positivistic certainty finds support in Charles Taylor's argument that "our loss of a rooted certainty is an epistemic gain." I would go one step further to argue that the concomitant loss of *religious* certainty is for many protagonists/narrators in Munro's stories—and for many people in postmodern Western culture, including me—a *spiritual gain*, even a spiritual necessity. Kent's certainty has clearly not served him very well in important realms of his life, and, clearly, for Kent, the "void is threatening." Thus, upon the mention of another's death, or supposed death, that is, upon Sonje's explanation of her theory of Cottar's feigned death

and her explanation of her plans to “find Cottar, or find the truth” (109), Kent experiences his first epiphany in the story. We learn that the “unpleasant jolt” that attends this epiphany is but one more in a series he has experienced over the past weeks:

Off her rocker, thought Kent with an unpleasant jolt. With every visit he made on this trip there had come a moment of severe disappointment. The moment when he realized that the person he was talking to, the person he had made a point of seeking out, was not going to give him whatever it was he had come for. (110)

The “moments” on those occasions that Kent is referring to, unfortunately for Kent, are not what Shelley would call “good moments.” Rather, what is collapsing in on Kent during these moments, and what over the balance of the story he finally consciously recognizes and acknowledges, is his own failure to achieve or even work toward what might have afforded him the spiritual peace or wholeness that he yearns for in his dying days. In this initial epiphanic episode, Kent is still projecting onto others his *own* failure to enter the dialogic interaction that might have led to spiritual fulfillment. Kent realizes that time and again on each on these occasions, “the person he had made a point of seeking out” was not going to give him whatever it was he had come for. Moreover, when he opines that his daughter and her husband’s lives “seemed closed in now, somewhat predictable,” it is clearly his own shortcomings, his own life, that he is talking about. Kent has never “entered into the dance,” taken the risks and, thus, is suffering that horrible ennui wherein *nothing* moves or touches him any longer; for example, he does not even find it “interesting” that his daughter Noelle “was on the verge of leaving her second husband” (113).

Munro does, though, provide through Sonje a version of the possibilities that Kent has refused to explore. At first, however, Kent dismisses Sonje as “having a screw loose” or of “stupidity” (114). Kent dismisses in this perfunctory manner a woman who has and who still is taking the chances, who is still prepared to enter into the chaos, disorder and possibility of death that Jakarta represents in the story. Sonje demonstrates all of the Kali-like attributes discussed in earlier chapters. She is in touch with her body, declaring, for example, that she would only find Cottar or “the truth” (109) by going to Jakarta, immersing herself in the human chaos—“in places like Jakarta people don’t shut

themselves up” (111)—and by “being there”: “You have to confront them *in the flesh*. You have to be there. Be there” (emphasis mine 111). Further, Sonje trusts her dreams; she does not believe that Cottar is dead because she does not dream about him: “I don’t dream about him. I dream about dead people. I dream all the time about my mother in law” (114). Kent’s response is significant: “ ‘I don’t dream’ ” (114).

Sonje’s connection with Delia, Cottar’s mother—a connection she maintains even now in her dreams—points to the kind of mentoring by a crone-like older woman that augurs toward spiritual fulfillment for the individual mentored. Kent has never experienced such mentoring. Delia is another of Munro’s piano-playing old women, and she was clearly an important stabilizing force in Sonje’s life after Cottar disappeared. The similarity suggested by the close spelling of “Delia” and “Delphi,” as in the Greek oracle, seems less of a stretch when we recall the earlier references to Europa and Zeus. Whatever we make of Delia’s name, her influence on Sonje has clearly been a beneficial one. Further, given his long-standing existential stasis as opposed to Sonje’s fluidity, it is not surprising that Sonje’s connection to other women, particularly Delia and Kath, threatens Kent: “When Sonje had mentioned Kath’s name earlier, he had the warm and dangerous sense of these two women still being in touch with each other” (115). Paradoxically, Kent is threatened by what he most yearns for: “being in touch.”

At this point in the narrative, a symbolically important disturbance occurs: “The disturbance was outside now—not in him but outside the window” (114). There are strong suggestions here of Romantically cast external nature as catalyst for Kent’s ensuing epiphanic experience. The catalyzing “disturbance” comes from outside the windows, where the wind had been stirring in the bushes...sunlight flashed off the oily greens” (114-15). This Romantic emphasis on external nature, however, is quite soon countered by Kent’s turning inward in ways that Charles Taylor argues Modern art and literature consistently do—in ways that Taylor, in fact, argues constitute the Modern “inward turn.” Thus, albeit fleetingly, Kent’s epiphany here microcosmically reflects yet another coming together in Munro’s fiction of aspects of the Romantic and Modern.

Kent’s epiphany also illustrates aspects of Henri Bergson’s *duration*. It begins, for example, with a focus on the fluidity and permutations of time: “Everything was in a hurry. Except when everything was desperately slow” (115). Kent’s epiphany also

demonstrates Munro's trademark move to the second person: "He waited and waited for Deborah to get to the next town. And then what? Nothing. But once in a while came a moment when everything seemed to have something to say to *you*" (emphasis mine 115). The use of the second person here subtly distances Kent from the threat of nihilism, of "nothing," but, concomitantly, it also threatens to distance him from the "something" that "everything seemed to have to say" to *him*.

The Romantic focus on nature continues with the "rocking bushes, the bleaching light," and Munro's characteristic emphasis in epiphanic moments on lighting or electrical power appears in "all in a flash, in a rush, when you couldn't concentrate" (115). Munro has noted how her characters—like Kent here—are "people living in flashes" (qtd. in Ross, *Double Life* 86-87), but what is most striking here is how the "flash" and the "rush" of Kent's epiphany disrupts his usual protective sense of order. Charles Taylor argues that epiphanies are beneficial reactions against a stifling focus on order, "against the cramping and fragmented categories of mechanism" (420) —very much like the order that Kent has consistently attempted to force onto all of his relationships, his emotions, his life. At first, Kent continues, characteristically, to resist the insights that are being visited upon him:

Just when you wanted summing up, you got a speedy, goofy view, as from a fun ride. So you picked the wrong idea, surely the wrong idea. That somebody dead might be alive and in Jakarta. (115)

A number of important considerations arise here. First, the second person "you" actually *strengthens* the dialogic nature of Kent's epiphanic experience, more closely tying him to Sonje and Delia—the ones who got the "wrong idea" about Cottar. Secondly, Kent is presented with the antithesis of his prescriptive, controlling approach to life (recall, he was formerly a pharmacist). Kent *needs* not the *resolution* of "summing up," but the "speedy, goofy" flashes that leave the mystery *unresolved*. It is death, the ultimate mystery, that Kent is now facing, and in the little time left to him, perhaps he can invert what he has just said: That someone alive, namely him, may no longer be dead.

Kent begins to move closer to this kind of opening up when, referring to Cottar and Kath, he says to Sonje, " 'They got away...Both of them,'" (115). Sonje's response seems totally non-sequitur: "This happens almost every day...almost every day this time

of year, this wind in the late afternoon.” Her seeming non-sequitur, however, carries the metaphorical reading that it is time for Kent—in what is the “late afternoon” of his life, to listen to the “wind”—to listen to *pneuma*, to spirit. The metaphor suggests that the spiritual fulfillment that Kent seeks *is* available in the “ordinary,” “every day” wind. Kent has made some spiritual progress, so it is only somewhat surprising that it is he who voices and acknowledges the individual’s place in the unimaginably immense cosmos when he corrects Sonje about young people now seeming unimportant: Sonje remarks of young people that “they could vanish off the face of the earth and it wouldn’t matter.” Kent responds, “ ‘That’s us you’re talking about. That’s us’ ” (116).

The epiphanic conclusion of “Jakarta” comes close to what Helen Hoy argues is a “vision of desolation...increasingly prominent in Munro’s later stories” (qtd. in Smythe 107), but a glimmer of hope is offered by Kent’s insights into the truth about his marriage to Kath, by a kind of posthumous confirmation of Kath, and by his reference to “home” in the final sentence of the story. Clear echoes of Wordsworth’s “Intimations of Immortality” and “trailing clouds of glory” (*The Major Romantic Poets* 189) sound in Munro’s, “his thoughts stretch out long and gauzy and lit up like vapor trails.” We are reminded, as well, that the effects of the pill Kent has recently taken may be partly responsible for his sensations, thoughts, and feelings, but they are no less significant for that.

Like so many of Munro’s epiphanic moments and/or epiphanic conclusions, the conclusion of “Jakarta” remains decidedly open ended, ambivalent, and unresolved. Kent “travels a thought that has to do with staying here, with listening to Sonje talk about Jakarta while the wind blows sand off the dunes” (116). Clearly, Kent no longer sees Sonje as having a “screw loose,” and he wishes to stay here in the spiritual energy she exudes. Kent’s thought, however, may also offer what Coral Ann Howells—borrowing a quote from Munro’s story, “Carried Away”—claims Munro’s epiphanic moments sometimes give her characters and her readers: “Radiant, vanishing consolations” (136). Moreover, Kent has developed in ways that—if he had done so earlier—might have saved his marriage to Kath. Although Kent is quite understandably reluctant to face what’s coming—death—the last sentence does intimate that he may be moving toward

the essentially spiritual perspective that presents death not as a dark abyss, but as “home”: “A thought that has to do with not having to go on, to go home” (116).

“Post and Beam”

The first sentence of “Post and Beam” from *Hateship, Friendship Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (hereafter *Hateship, Loveship*) puts us once again in the realm of death: “Lionel told them how his mother had died” (186). Unlike “Jakarta,” and so many previous Munro stories, however, this more recent work eases up on her near obsessive preoccupation with death and dying. An *imagined* death by suicide does play an important role in the spiritual quest of the story’s protagonist, Lorna, but the story presents a number of aspects other than death that motivate Lorna’s movement toward spiritual/religious fulfillment and toward an affirmation of ordinary life that—while it does not defeat death (after all, what does?)—deflates, in almost comic mode, the fear and anxiety around death and dying so persistent in Munro’s fiction.

“Post and Beam” does not carve out new terrain in Munro’s implicit spiritual vision, but the story does provide some fresh insights into themes/motifs that have been central in Munro’s stories since *Dance of the Happy Shades*. First, “Post and Beam” continues the critique of organized Christianity that dates back to stories such as “Age of Faith” or “Baptizing” in *Lives of Girls and Women*. Key characters in “Post and Beam” in various ways have rejected traditional religion and churches. For example, Brendan, a mathematician and the husband of the protagonist, Lorna, had “turned his back on the whole Irish package—his family and his church and the sentimental songs” (187). Then there is Lionel, one of Brendan’s former math students, “a raw prodigy, sixteen years old. The brightest mathematical mind Brendan has ever seen” (187). Lionel has since had “some kind of breakdown” and has turned up living only a few blocks from Lorna and Brendan. “He had given up mathematics entirely and worked in the publishing office of the Anglican Church” (187). Lionel’s commitment to Anglicanism, however, is tentative at best, more the outcome of his father having been a clergyman than any personal inclination toward the Anglican faith.

Secondly, the ongoing questioning and critique of earthly and Heavenly f/Fathers in Munro’s fiction also continues in this quite recent story. We learn, for instance, that

Lionel and his mother “used to make bets on how long his father [an Anglican priest] could go without speaking to them” (191). Of his present work with the church, Lionel wryly laments, “I labor for a pittance...and not even in the vineyards of the Lord. In the Diocese of the Archbishop”(188). His darkly humorous descriptions of his job and coworkers reveal the hypocrisy in his “Christian” workplace: “Everybody munched on secret eats and never shared” (189). Lionel goes on to negatively compare his church office/the church to the other “healing” institution he has been to:

He mentioned the hospital where he had been a patient for a while and spoke of the way it resembled the office, in regard to secret eats. Secrets generally. But the difference was that every once in a while in the hospital they came and bound you up and took you off and plugged you in, as he said, to the light socket. (189)

The comparison is apropos; the church is completely bereft of any of the “spark” that even draconian techniques of “modern” psychiatry might provide.

The story’s central character, Lorna, grew up in a traditional United Church milieu, but until her experiences in the present time-line of the story, Lorna has drifted so far from the religion of her childhood, she has come to term herself a “non-believer” (209). Lorna’s non-belief is further implied in one of the options she briefly entertains during a “bargaining” session later in the story: “Go to church. Agree to believe in God” (215). The less than subtle critique of organized religion continues in depictions of other members of Lorna’s family. Her grandmother, like Munro’s, was somewhat of a fanatic. In her front room, “a map of the holy land, worked in many shades of wool, show[ed] Biblical locations” (189). Lorna’s Aunt Beatrice, mother to Lorna’s cousin, Polly—whom I will get to momentarily—became pregnant with Polly outside of wedlock, and since this “time of her blotted-out disgrace...has had no social life involving a man” (189). A faintly dark humor continues around aspects of organized religion with the point that Polly “was so finicky, so desperate about the conduct of life that it really was easy to think of Polly’s conception as immaculate” (190). As the story unfolds, however, it becomes apparent that although Lorna has given up on the United Church, she has not abandoned all spiritual aspirations. On the contrary, it is Lorna’s struggle for what Munro

terms “a dry kernel of probity” that leads her to epiphanic, spiritual experiences later in the story.

Lorna is another Munro character who subconsciously searches for spiritual fulfillment in a relationship with a curiously Christ-like eccentric. This is not always a man-woman relationship—as we have seen, for example, in Mr. Loughheed’s and Eugene’s relationship in “Walking on Water”—but, when it is man-woman, sexual attraction, though sometimes quite muted as it is with Lorna and Lionel in “Post and Beam,” nevertheless plays a significant role. At one point, when Polly has gone out sightseeing on her own and Lionel is out of town, Lorna, on the pretext of getting a library book, lies her way into Lionel’s apartment. Her experience while in his apartment comprises a curious mixture of muted eroticism and spirituality: “She had come here not for any library book, of course, but for a moment to be inside the space where he lived, breathe his air, look out his window” (201). The monkish nature of Lionel’s room—“the bareness, the anonymity of the room” (again, very reminiscent of Eugene’s room in “Walking on Water”) are described ambiguously as “severely challenging” (201). It soon becomes clear, though, that what Lorna is seeking here more than anything is tantamount to the fruits of various Eastern meditation practices: “What she really wanted to do was not to investigate anymore”—that is, she no longer wishes to engage in Western, scientific, empirical “clue/fact finding.” What Lorna really wants is to “sit down on the floor, in the middle of the square of linoleum [note the close link between “lino” and Lionel]...not so much looking at this room as sinking into it” (201). Again shades of the Eastern mysticism found in Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey” appear in the sentence that follows. Wordsworth writes of “that serene and blessed mood/In which the affections lead us on...we are laid asleep/In body, and become a living soul” (130). Munro writes that Lorna’s desire is to “stay here for a long, long time, growing sharper and lighter, light as a needle” (201). It really is not such a stretch to see Lorna here as seeking some lightening of what Wordsworth terms “the burthen of the mystery” and of the “heavy and the weary weight/Of all this unintelligible world.”

Lorna’s husband, Brendin, is a near caricature of the emotionally disconnected, overly cerebral male mathematician—a contemporary manifestation of the Newtonian-Baconian Mathematical logician who brings his positivistic, mathematical “certainty” and

control to all aspects of his life. For example, Lorna learns some time after they have been married that Brendin's proposal to her—in her words—“had been in the nature of a miracle”:

She learned later that he had been on the lookout for a wife; he was old enough, it was time. He wanted a young girl. Not a colleague, or a student, perhaps not even the sort of girl whose parents could send her to college. Unspoiled. Intelligent, but unspoiled. A wildflower, he said in the heat of those early days, and sometimes even now. (205)

Aside from the romantic hints in the final sentence above, the approach Brendin brought to his search for a wife would have worked equally well in searching for a new car. The controlling and orderly conduct that Brendin brings to their marriage, however, is not entirely unwelcome to Lorna: “She admired his thick shoulders, his bull's neck, his laughing and commanding golden brown eyes” (205). The less than subtle “thick,” “bull's,” and “commanding” here suggest Lorna's attraction to a certain kind of control, and we also discover that

when she learned that he was a teacher of mathematics, she fell in love with what was inside his head also. She was excited by whatever knowledge a man might have that was utterly strange to her. A knowledge of auto mechanics would have worked as well. (205)

Polly's visit with Lorna and Brendin is in many respects an uneasy one, primarily because of Brendin's controlling and condescending stance: “He was not averse to visitors—look at Lionel [Lionel is now spending a good deal of time at Lorna and Brendin's home], but he wanted to do the choosing himself” (193). Notwithstanding Lorna's initial attraction to Brendin outlined above, she is certainly not as “mathematical” in her approach to relationships and life as he, and after some years of marriage, Brendin's particular kind of control and condescension has left Lorna feeling more than a little ambivalent toward him: “She would say she loved him, and mean it to a certain extent, and she wanted to be loved by him, but there was a little hum of hate running beside her love, nearly all the time” (210).

Polly senses the tension between Lorna and Brendin; moreover, the less than genuine welcome she receives from Brendin (and, she suspects, from Lorna as well),

coupled with her usual feelings of insecurity and inferiority finally cause her to erupt in a tearful pronouncement to Lorna: “ ‘You don’t want me’ ” (204). What is most important in all of this in regard to Lorna’s later epiphanic experiences is that Lorna’s response to Polly’s distress leaves Lorna feeling profoundly guilty—and she carries this guilt with her on a trip to the Okanagan with Brendin to attend the wedding of one of his graduate students. They do not invite Polly to go along, further exacerbating Lorna’s guilt. The resulting emotional pressure, increased by another encounter with a tearful Polly, prompts Lorna—against what she thinks is her better judgment—to reveal to Polly some of her true feelings about Brendin: “ ‘Do you think I have any power? He never gives me more than a twenty-dollar bill at a time.’ ” Even more importantly, Lorna’s exchange with Polly further reveals her profoundly ambivalent feelings about Polly—Polly’s “brimming not just with her bitterness and accusation of betrayal, but her outrageous demand to be folded in, rocked, comforted” (204).

Polly wants to be touched, but Lorna “would sooner have hit her” (204). Lorna realizes, however, that it is family connection, “ordinary” family connection that gives Polly the right to make the demands she is making: “Family. Family gives Polly the right” (204). What begins to emerge here and what fully manifests in Lorna’s epiphanic experiences later is a clear example of what Charles Taylor means by the “affirmation of ordinary life...including the life of the family.” Lorna’s sense of how she should respond to Polly is shaped first and foremost by her sense of family—to use Taylor’s term—as one of the “hypergoods” in her life. It is a combination of the compassion that attends this hypergood; and, conversely, Lorna’s guilt for not having responded effectively enough to Polly’s pain before she left for the wedding; *and* that persistent Munroian anxiety about death that, together, produce Lorna’s powerful epiphanic experience on her trip home to Vancouver from the wedding in Penticton.

Significantly, at the wedding Lorna first turns to alcohol and sex to keep her darker feelings at bay: “ Lorna got rapidly drunk and was amazed at how easy it was, with alcohol, to get loose from the bondage of her spirits. Forlorn vapors lifted. She went to bed still drunk, and lecherous, to Brendin’s benefit.” (204-05). Although Lorna does not seem destined for alcoholism, Jean Edwards Shinoda Bolen’s remarks in her archetypal study *Gods in Everyman* advances some interesting points to consider. Bolen

argues that “communion with God can be a major unconscious motivation for drinking that leads to alcoholism” (273). Bolen goes on to recount the well-known relationship that Carl Jung had in the 1930s with both Bill W. and Rowland H., cofounders of Alcoholics Anonymous. Bolen quotes Jung as saying about Rowland H.’s addiction to alcohol,

“His craving for alcohol was the equivalent, on a low level, of the spiritual thirst of our being for wholeness, expressed in medieval language: the union with God...Alcohol in Latin is *Spiritus*, and you use the same word for the highest religious experience as for the most depraving poison. The helpful formula therefore is: *spiritus contra spiritum* [That is, the addicted individual must seek God or the divine in order to combat his/her addiction to alcohol—an addiction that is a misdirected search for the divine]. (273-74)

Lorna’s brief foray into *spiritus* is, of course, ineffective, but her experiences the next day certainly might be seen as some version of *spiritus contra spiritum*. On the drive home, although “the sun still shone,” Lorna feels a “faint disturbance in her mind, like a hair in her vision that could be flicked away, or could float out of sight on its own”(205-06). Once again, a Munro protagonist is prompted toward an epiphanic moment by death—even if, as is the case here, death is only imagined. Lorna is “afraid—she was half certain—that while they were away in the Okanagan Polly would have committed suicide in the kitchen of the house in North Vancouver”(206).

The intensity of Lorna’s premonition of Polly’s suicide strongly suggests that Lorna is psychologically projecting an act that she herself might be subconsciously considering. Despite the ironic portrayal of Lorna’s spiritual situation and of her unsuccessful attempts to escape through alcohol and sex, the “bondage of her spirits” runs deeper than she has realized—deep enough to prompt a projection of the ultimate act of control. Although Lorna does not seem to recognize the possibility of such projection, Munro arranges the results of Lorna’s projection such that even imagining *Polly’s* suicide produces in Lorna the kind of epiphanic breakthrough that just might have arisen from something as emotionally and spiritually intense as seriously contemplating *her own* suicide.

Further, Lorna imagines Polly taking her life in what is, significantly, the “post and beam house” that gives the story its title. A mild irony attends Lorna’s imagining Polly to have killed herself in *her* domain of the house, the kitchen—the part of the house connected with the person from whom Polly *has* received at least a modicum of support—rather than elsewhere in what is essentially Brendin’s house. A *palpable* irony arises out of the focus on the architectural support afforded by the house’s post and beam structure given the lack of support provided by the house’s primary, proud owner. Further irony emerges out of the notion that such houses were designed to blend with nature—“the idea was to fit in with the original forest” (195)—a kind of Romantic connection with nature that is a considerable distance from Brendin’s abstract, mathematical mindset and temperament.

The final pages of “Post and Beam”—from the moment of Lorna’s dark premonition on—illuminate a good deal about Lorna, Polly and Lionel, even about Brendin. As importantly, central aspects of Munro’s implicit spiritual perspective “crystallize” here, to use James Carscallen’s word, around various epiphanies/epiphanic occasions. Lorna realizes that her strong intuition that Polly has taken her life does not come from the realm of the rational, the logical, *certainly* not from the mathematical; she also realizes that her guilt is playing a central role in her premonition: “This is stupidity, this is melodrama, this is guilt. This will not have happened”(209). At the same time, though, she realizes, “But such things do happen. Some people founder, they are not helped in time. Some people are pitched into darkness” (209). The closer they come to home, the more intense Lorna’s fear and anxiety become, until, finally, in desperation and, significantly, near and on the *Lion’s Gate Bridge*—a bridge that figures strongly in a number of Munro’s other stories—Lorna decides to pray:

When they entered Stanley Park it occurred to her to pray. This was shameless—the opportune praying of a nonbeliever. The gibberish of let-it-not-happen, let-it-not-happen. *Let it not have happened.* (209)

A brief digression on the symbolic role of bridges in the epiphanic in Munro’s fiction seems appropriate and useful here. We have seen various characters, for example, Mr. Lougheed in “Walking on Water,” venture out onto bridges. Mr. Lougheed is not sure whether he has dreamed or actually experienced this time on a bridge, but what

remains important either way is that he finds the bridge a “positively unsafe structure” (90) separating him very precariously from the death represented in the water below: “In the shallow water of the river which flowed among white stones he saw a boy’s body spread out face down.” In a later story, “The Moons of Jupiter,” the narrator Janet recalls “going over the Lion’s Gate Bridge” and holding her daughter Nichola, on her knee. At the time she was awaiting the results of Nichola’s leukaemia test. Later, I will also discuss a particularly important bridge in the story bearing the title “Floating Bridge.”

A symbolic pattern begins to emerge around these bridges that applies in “Post and Beam” as well. In each of these instances, the water below the bridge is indirectly or directly associated with death and with death’s inherent mystery, and the respective narrators/protagonists are “bridging” their fear/anxiety around death—finding ways, temporarily at least, to cope with death: the corpse in Loughheed’s dream, the threat of Nichola’s death for Janet in “Moons,” or the death that Lorna imagines in “Post and Beam.” These characters are all variously reminded, however, that bridges are transitional structures for crossing; they are not intended for staying on for any length of time. Further, what all of the characters noted above are crossing toward is a renewed spiritual/religious perspective— or, at least, a continued quest *toward* such a perspective.

Martin Heidegger’s metaphorical focus on bridges applies here in quite striking ways. In his essay, “Building, Dwelling, Thinking,” Heidegger notes, first, how “bridges lead in many ways” (330). He then develops a metaphysical metaphor around bridges that resonates for all of the Munro characters involved with bridges that I am discussing here. Heidegger notes that bridges escort “the lingering and hastening ways of men to and fro, so that they may get to other banks and in the end, as mortals, to the other side” (330). Ultimately, Heidegger writes, people on these symbolic bridges are

always themselves on their way to the last bridge, are actually striving to surmount all that is common and unsound in them in order to bring themselves before the haleness of the divinities. The bridge *gathers*, as a passage that crosses, before the divinities—whether we explicitly think of, and visibly *give thanks for*, their presence, as in the figure of the saint of the bridge, or whether that divine presence is obstructed or even pushed

wholly aside. The bridge *gathers* to itself in *its own* way earth and sky, divinities and mortals. (331)

Another facet of the bridge metaphors in Munro's stories is that the structure of the respective bridges and their proximity to the water usually reflects the respective character's proximity to some kind of acceptance of death. Thus, as we shall see, Jinny in "Floating Bridge" when on the *floating* bridge is almost at one with the water, reflecting how she is essentially at peace with her own death—whenever it comes. On the other hand, Janet in "The Moons of Jupiter" or Lorna in "Post and Beam" are both found on the Lion's Gate Bridge—a considerable distance above the water, and both are some distance from an acceptance of death or a spiritual perspective that might help them move toward such an acceptance. Such a perspective is, of course, tantamount to a fulfilling spiritual perspective on *life*. Lorna feels that some kind of spiritual perspective is near at hand, but not quite within her grasp. This is reflected in her conversation with Brendan as they are crossing Lion's Gate. Brendan asks her if she can see Vancouver Island. He is driving and says, "You look, I can't." Lorna's response is both literally and metaphorically accurate: "Far away...Quite faint but it's there" (210).

Lorna's journey toward a more whole spiritual perspective is quite a protracted one. First, her dark, anti-epiphanic vision of Polly dead by suicide prompts her to enter into a bargaining process with God. Lorna recognizes the blatant hypocrisy and opportunism of such bargaining: "This was shameless—the opportune praying of a nonbeliever" (209), but her powerful fear of death—in this instance, of Polly's death—pushes these qualms aside. Significantly, at no point in Lorna's bargaining or thereafter does she specifically name who/what she is bargaining with. We do, however, learn through her bargaining what/whom is most important in Lorna's life. Her children, for example, are not up for negotiation: "Not the children. She snatched that thought away as if she was grabbing them out of a fire" (210). We also learn what/whom is *less* important in Lorna's life: "Not Brendan, for an opposite reason. She did not love him enough" (210).

This listing continues as they drive up the road to their home: "Herself? Her looks? Her health?" (210). Then it occurs to Lorna that it may not be for her to choose. This is a particularly important step in her quest, in that she realizes that she may not

have much control in these matters. Control has been a significant issue in her marriage to Brendin and in other areas of her life. Lorna is taking one of the most difficult but also most essential steps here in spiritual development: she is beginning to relinquish control: “Not up to you to set the terms. You would know them when you met them. You must promise to honor them, without knowing what they are going to be. Promise” (210). The nature and terms of Lorna’s bargain do not become entirely clear until later in the story, but it is clear at this point that Lorna’s bargain and the spiritual fulfillment she seeks are bound up intimately with family and home: “Up Capilano Road, into their own part of the city...where their life took on true weight and their actions took on consequences” (210).

What Lorna finds upon her return home is diametrically opposed to what she had so darkly anticipated. Rather than death, she finds life at its fullest. The next two pages of the story present one of the most unequivocal affirmations of ordinary life in Munro’s oeuvre. Polly and Lionel have “found” each other—romantically—and in so doing, each has literally blossomed: “Polly’s sunburn had turned to tan, or at least to a new flush, on her forehead and neck” (212). Lionel “too was tanned, enough for his forehead to have lost its pale gleam” (212). They have both also somehow entered into the family circle, which, as we have seen, is a very important circle in Lorna’s “ordinary life. Polly’s greeting voice is “the voice of a friend of the family” (211); Lionel “got up and went to uncoil the hose” (to help Brendin fill the children’s swimming pool). Lorna “would not have thought that he knew even where the hose was” (213).

Lorna watches all of this from the vantage point of an upstairs window; she has gone upstairs to unpack. Even Brendin in this scene of domestic bliss, Lorna feels, seems to “be simply happier,” perhaps, she mentally notes, because he may have “dropped for a while the burden of keeping his household in order” (213). Munro’s phrase here is strongly reminiscent of her colleague’s Margaret Laurence’s story “To Set Our House in Order,” a work wherein order in a household is directly related to a stifling sense of both social and religious protocol. Here, though, Brendin has temporarily escaped his own self-imposed rigid sense of order. Munro also drops all subtlety and indirection as the third-person narrative voice describes the scene, without irony—“A scene so *ordinary* and amazing, come about as if by magic. Everybody happy” (emphasis mine 213).

Lorna, though, is not prepared to simply accept all of this domestic bounty without analysis and speculation upon causes: “How had that happened?...It could be that...Or Brendin might...He might have seen,” and so forth, but Lorna’s intellectual analysis is slowly nudged aside by a memory and then another epiphany:

Lorna had not thought of the vision she’d had, mile after mile, of Polly lashed to the back door. She was surprised by it now as you sometimes are surprised, long after waking, by the recollection of a dream. It had a dream’s potency and shamefulness. (215)

Note, again, the striking shift to the second person “you,” which here, however, seems particularly appropriate given the strong dialogic nature of Lorna’s epiphany—her finding important aspects of herself, including her spiritual perspective, through her connections with others.

This is also a clear example of what Morris Beja would term a “retrospective epiphany;” Lorna is recalling an event that was important at the time and is just as important when recalled. The difference between when Lorna was initially involved in bargaining and the time of her recollection is that in this later moment she is much more “rational” than she was when she was quite convinced that Polly had committed suicide. Lorna now views her earlier bargaining as not only “shameless’ but as a “weak and primitive notion.” She demonstrates here, however, her essential integrity; she will honor the bargain no matter how “weak and primitive” it may have been. She remembers bargaining to do “whatever she had to do, when she recognized what it was” (215). Now, though, this seems to her a kind of “hedging...a promise that had no meaning at all” (215). So once again she explores the “various possibilities”—possibilities that range from the ludicrous—“Give up reading books,” to one that reveals Lorna’s lack of traditional religious belief: “Go to church. Agree to believe in God,” to the wryly humorous and sexually suggestive “never again haul her breasts up into a wired brassiere” (215).

Once Lorna has tired of this “sport,” however, this “irrelevance” (215), she experiences the final and most powerful epiphany in the story: “What made more sense was that the bargain she was bound to was to go on living as she had been doing” (215).

Most striking here is the strong suggestion of *religare*—religion—in the term “bound to.” Then, of course, what is equally important is what she has religiously bound herself to:

To accept what had happened and be clear about what would happen.
Days and years and feelings much the same, except that the children
would grow up, and there might be one or two more of them and they
would grow up, and she and Brendin would grow older and then old. (216)

Lorna’s epiphany becomes even more focused and intense: “It was not until this moment”—what Virginia Woolf would call the “moment of being,” what Munro calls the “queer, bright moment”—“that she had seen so clearly that she was counting on something happening, something that would change her life” (216)

Seldom is Munro clearer than she is here about how deepest fulfillment comes from “affirming”—to use Charles Taylor’s term—“ordinary” life. Of course, “ordinary” life will not always be attractive and exciting on the face of things, so “affirming” this life often entails *accepting* it. What Lorna is agreeing to affirm and accept here—what, in fact, she is *religiously* agreeing to/bargaining for is acceptance and affirmation of family with all of its “intimate misery” (198). This is a clear example of what Charles Taylor intends in his notion of the “affirmation and/or the sanctification of ordinary life.” And, “ordinary life” is—even with all of its unforeseen, potentially extraordinary possibilities—much more often what Lorna sees it as in this epiphanic moment: What “anybody could sensibly foresee.” This *affirmed* ordinary life will be Lorna’s spiritual, even religious anchor. This is “to be her happiness;” this is “What she had bargained for” (216). Nothing but the extraordinary “ordinary”—“Nothing secret, or strange.” In case the reader has somehow missed how Lorna’s epiphany is essentially spiritual/religious in nature, Lorna instructs herself, and, by extension the reader: “Pay attention to this, she thought. She had a dramatic notion of getting down on her knees. This is serious” (216).

Moreover, to confirm that Lorna’s spiritual epiphany has had a long lasting impact on her life, the final paragraph shifts the time frame such that we recognize that the entire story occurred “a long time ago,” when Lorna was twenty-four years old and “new to bargaining.” (216). Here we have the typically ambivalent, open-ended conclusion that we encounter so often in Munro’s fiction, and particularly around epiphanic, spiritual insights. How ironically are we to read “new to bargaining”? Does

this suggest that Lorna's life since the time the story is set has been a long string of compromises of various kinds? I don't believe so. The bargaining that goes on earlier in the story is part of the process of Lorna's framing a relationship with her sense of the Divine. Hers has clearly not been a traditional/conventional religious journey, and just as with the bargaining she did when she believed that Polly was dead, it seems likely that the bargaining since *has* involved various kinds of compromises. However, if they have been like the one involving Polly, they have been "good" compromises made out of love and concern for those close to Lorna—they will have been, in short, compromises borne out of Agape.

"Comfort"

Upon reading "Comfort," from *Hateship, Friendship*, I was put in mind of Dennis Duffey's argument that Munro's title story from *The Love of a Good Woman* could be viewed as a *poetic* of Munro's work to that point in her career—that is as, "a piece of writing about the kind of writing that the author has been engaged in over a period of time" (171). A similar argument might be made for "Comfort" from Munro's most recent collection. It is not necessary to my argument to make the case for "Comfort" as a more recent Munro poetic, but I wanted to register how this story presents aspects of Munro's implicit spiritual/religious vision that have been central from her first collection on, and that "Comfort" also presents these aspects in an uncharacteristically explicit manner. Further, "Comfort" is yet another example of a Munro story as microcosm of a very important cultural development over at least the past two centuries. At the core of "Comfort" is the centuries-old Western conflict arising out of the seeming irreconcilability of a literal reading of the Scriptures—particularly the better known of the two creation stories in *Genesis*—and the scientific evidence of millions of years of life on the planet. This is the *religious* debate at the center of "Comfort." The *spiritual* quest of our protagonist, Nina, however, goes well beyond the very narrow and very tired creationist-evolutionist argument. Because the two are inextricably linked, however, in the following discussion, I will examine both.

"Comfort" raises virtually all of the issues in Munro's fiction that I have been discussing from the outset of this thesis. For example, death and various

spiritual/religious responses to death are central; the story also presents a further critique of the patriarchal, repressive aspects of Christianity; “Comfort” also sets out, again, the crucial role of Eros in Munro’s implicit spiritual vision, as well as attendant issues about gender roles in families and institutions—educational and religious institutions in particular. The story raises—to varying degrees—all of these perennial concerns in Munro’s writing.

To get to these concerns in the story, however, we must first explore how and why Munro quite explicitly addresses contemporary manifestations of the central conflict between Western religion and science. This conflict intensely heated up in the mid-late 19th century after the 1859 publication of Darwin’s *Origin of Species*. The creationist-evolutionist debate seemed to peak with the Scopes trial in 1925 in Dayton, Tennessee, upon which was based the highly successful Broadway play cum Hollywood movie *Inherit the Wind*. The debate seemed then to fade into the cultural background. In the past decade, however, the debate has reemerged with some force with developments such as the banning in the state of Kansas of any teaching of evolutionary theory. An April, 1999, editorial in *The Edmonton Journal* pointed out that “The Kansas state school board voted to eliminate virtually all mention of evolution from the state education curriculum.” The editorial continues,

Not only will Kansas public school children no longer learn the truth about biology paleontology, geology and genetics, the board also voted to remove all scientific teaching about the origins of the cosmos; no more Big Bang, no more discussion of how the stars and the planets were formed. Not only has Charles Darwin been ousted; so have Albert Einstein, Carl Sagan and Stephen Hawking. (A14)

It would be markedly uncharacteristic of Alice Munro to adopt any categorical position in such a debate—at least not in her fiction, and, as we shall see, the creationist – evolutionist debate in “Comfort” remains secondary to Nina’s personal spiritual/religious journey. However, Munro *does* present the perimeters of this debate by associating various characters in the story with various stances in the creationist-evolutionist debate and then creating interactions between these characters that strongly hint at her own thoughts/feelings.

For example, Lewis Spiers, Nina's husband, is cast in the role of outraged and embittered scientist, valiantly guarding, what are in his mind, the "portals of truth" from what he calls "absolutists," "fascists" (133), and "crypto-Christians" (129). In short, Lewis would be guarding against exactly the kind of actions noted above that have taken place in Kansas. The creationists in "Comfort" are shrouded in mystery for the most part, a la K.K.K. According to Lewis, the creationist propagandist material he has received is part of a "master-minded campaign, some central office, supplying letters to be sent from local addresses" (132).

At one point in the story, a character named Kitty Shore is cast in the role of "defender of the faith" against Lewis. Kitty's role here is particularly significant in the web of relationships in "Comfort." She is the wife of Ed Shore, the undertaker who prepares Lewis' body. Nina has an important, but Platonic, relationship with Ed Shore later in the story. As Kitty's diminutive name suggests, she is not exactly well equipped to take on any serious philosophical/theological argument, and when the occasion arises, her attempts to do so are quite pitiful. I said earlier that Munro does not, via the third person narrative voice in "Comfort," advance a categorical position on the conflict between religion and science. However, Munro's sympathies emerge quite clearly in her connecting the fundamentalist, literalist religious position in the story with the quite vacuous Kitty Shore. Ultimately, though, Munro does not privilege the other side of the argument to any great extent either. In fact, Munro does here what she does time and again in earlier works: she eschews any position that smacks of positivistic certainty. In "Comfort," Munro presents a microcosm of the broader cultural debate between traditional, rigid, Newtonian-Cartesian science, and equally traditional, literalist, fundamentalist creationism. Then Munro reveals how both sides of this argument—ostensibly representing diametric poles in a very tired debate—collapse into the same kind of position: positivistic, narrow, and dogmatic. Later in the story, Nina's, and Munro's, deep distrust and dislike of this kind of certainty emerges very clearly when we see how at the social occasion at which Lewis and Kitty get into a bitter argument about evolution and creation, both Nina and Ed Shore exit the room, encounter each other, and commiserate, both "sick of those others, or at least sick of the argument and conviction. Tired of the never-letting-up of those striving personalities" (145).

Ultimately, “Comfort” presents—primarily through the protagonist, Nina, and Ed Shore—an approach that transcends this long-standing, essentially irresolvable debate (At one point in the story, Nina observes to herself that this is “a matter that could never be resolved” (127)). With appropriate and wise tentativeness, these characters and the third person narrative voice direct us toward intriguing perspectives that work toward breaking down the illusory separation between the physical and the transcendent. Although these perspectives are set out in “ordinary” interactions and situations in “Comfort,” they bear strong similarities to the considerably more abstractly expressed perspectives of postmodern scientists such as David Bohm (*Wholeness and the Implicate Order*), Arthur Schiller (*Science and Religion: An Interpretation of Two Communities*), and Fritjof Capra (*The Tao of Physics* and *The Turning Point*). For example, in his essay entitled “Postmodern Science and Man’s Sense of Depth and Mystery,” physicist Harold Schilling encapsulates what he sees as the postmodern move away from dogmatic, positivistic, Newtonian-Cartesian modern science:

Many scientists are finding that their studies do not “eliminate mystery” or “end in the expulsion of wonder,” and that they do reveal “degrees of depth and profundity.” And out of their explorations of nature, there is emerging a vision of the cosmos that, far from constricting, is liberating the human mind *from* many of the inhibiting presuppositions and conceptions to which it fell prey in the modern period, and freeing it *for* more imaginative and daring thinking—and is expanding man’s sensitivities and consciousness. (81)

Again, I am not suggesting that Munro is setting out a perspective in “Comfort” that even attempts to manifest the kind of paradigm shift Schiller is talking about here or elsewhere in his writings. An *affinity with* this sort of paradigm-dismantling does emerge, though, in Munro’s writing as early as her implicit critique of Ida Jordan’s positivistic, Newtonian-Cartesian stance in *Dance of the Happy Shades* and *Lives of Girls and Women*. Further, as I have noted earlier, “Comfort” advances this sort of perspective—and other perspectives central to Munro’s oeuvre—more explicitly than in any previous work. To more fully appreciate this, however, we must return to where these perspectives specifically emerge: in the text of “Comfort.”

It is clear testimony to Munro's ability to render every one of her stories uniquely interesting that she can—without seeming repetitious or formulaic—so consistently begin them with the same emphasis on death. "Comfort" is yet another story that begins with death—this time the death of retired high school science teacher, Lewis Spiers (165). Lewis takes his life while his wife, Nina, is out playing tennis. Although neither Nina nor someone reading the story for the first time would be aware of it, an early paragraph that focuses on Nina roughly corresponds to Lewis' time of death. This paragraph prefigures a number of important aspects of the story: It anticipates Lewis' death, carries strong Romantic undertones, and focuses upon nature in ways that anticipate an important conflict in the story between Romanticism and Realism. The paragraph also metaphorically emphasizes death. It does so with its focus on sundown and the demise of summer heat, as well as with its subtle hints of ancient Egyptian treatment of the dead—an aspect that takes on considerable significance in a conversation late in the story between Nina Spiers and Ed Shore:

The sun had already dropped nearly to the rim of the lake. Some trees that still held their leaves were flares of gold, but the summer warmth of the afternoon had been snatched away. The shrubs in front of Margaret's house were all bundled up in sacking like mummies. (118)

As so often happens in Munro's writing, death—in this instance, Lewis Spiers' suicide—catalyses a spiritual quest for the protagonist/narrator. His death sets off a series of events: It reactivates the bitter battle between evolution and creationism that Lewis was involved in earlier in the high school where he taught; it involves Nina in a conflict with Paul Gibbings, the school principal (Nina had quit teaching Latin at the school a number of years earlier); and, ultimately, it entangles Nina in a significant misunderstanding about Lewis' funeral arrangements. My primary interest here, however, is in how Lewis' death catalyses for Nina (interestingly, the Spanish word for "little girl") a kind of initiatory reexamination of her relationship with Lewis while he was alive and a reexamination of her relationship with Ed Shore. Most importantly, though, Lewis's death prompts Nina to recognize and then explore her own thoughts and feelings around death and afterlife—key considerations in any spiritual/religious perspective.

Lewis Spiers' near monomaniacal hatred of the creationist perspective and of those who espouse it was the cause of one of the most serious arguments of Nina and Lewis's married life. Before Nina was aware of Lewis' "deep dislike" of religion, churches, and creationism, she had joined a choral group. When Lewis found this out, "She argued that there often wasn't any other suitable place available" other than the church to practice, and that "there was little harm any religion could do nowadays" (127). Nina's comment on the impotence of contemporary religion is a particularly interesting one that, first, demonstrates her naivety, but that, secondly, reflects a widely held notion that religion is really nothing more than a rather curious but harmless activity that needn't be taken seriously. By now, it should be clear that Munro does not subscribe to such a position, although her reasons are quite different from those of her character, Lewis. He is outraged, and the result is a "great row":

A fight like this was stunning, revealing not just how much he was on the lookout for enemies, but how she too was unable to abandon argument which escalated into rage. Neither of them would back off; they held bitterly to their principles. (127)

At one point, Nina demands of Lewis, "Can't you tolerate people being different, why is this so important?" Lewis's response resonates well beyond his words or his position on this matter. When he responds, "If this isn't important, nothing is," one senses a *narrative* declaration of importance, not just about the specific argument between Lewis and Nina, or between Genesis and Darwin, but the overall importance of finding ways to reconcile matters of religious faith with matters of scientific "fact." If *this* isn't important, nothing is.

That such reconciliation is important is metaphorically anticipated and confirmed by Nina and Lewis's coming together after this bitter and uncharacteristic argument:

Their luck held, however. They came together in the late afternoon pale with contrition, shaking with love, like people who had narrowly escaped an earthquake and had been walking around in naked isolation. (127)

The language here carries subtle religious and biblical undertones with phrases such as "pale contrition" or the image of Adam and Eve expelled from the garden, "walking around in [near] naked isolation," suggesting that Nina and Lewis have transcended

entrenched religious perspectives and have reconciled on a higher spiritual plane. However, Lewis, in particular, has managed only to bracket off his disagreement with Nina, not with anyone else, reflecting how, on the broader collective level, a reconciliation of the religious and the scientific has not easily emerged.

Lewis's adamant position on the beginnings of life casts him as a representative of certainty—which, as we have seen time and again is anathema for Munro in any of its forms. Lewis's rigid certainty is compounded by his capacity for personal animosity. For example, he views those students who raise questions in his class about the beginnings of life as “some little sickly saint of a girl or a smart ass of either sex trying to throw a monkey wrench into evolution” (130). The proponents of creationism in “Comfort,” however, are no less capable than Lewis of personal animosity as their arguments degenerate from “well written, neatly paragraphed, competently argued” to irrational and “wrathful”:

In time the tone changed; it grew wrathful. Agents of the Antichrist in charge of the government and the classroom. The claws of Satan stretched out toward the souls of children, who were actually forced to reiterate, on their examinations, the doctrines of damnation. (131)

It is interesting to note how the more toned-down points of the creationist argument advanced in Munro's story have altered but little from the arguments encountered by Thomas Huxley and Herbert Spencer in the late 19th century, and although it does not seem central to Munro's thematic aim in “Comfort” to do so, she nevertheless manages to prompt her readers to consider the logic and validity of some of these arguments. For example, a key argument *against* the theory of evolution is that, first, it would lead people to become atheists. There seems to be some basis for this argument:

“There is no doubt that in developed societies education has contributed to the decline of religious belief,” Edward Norman writes in *Christianity and the World Order*; and Martin Lings targets the primary cause of this. “More cases of loss of religious faith are to be traced to the theory of evolution than to anything else.” (Smith 133)

The argument has moved forward, however, in actual history and in Munro's story to a considerably less credible or logical conclusion, which, in the story, goes like this: "Then came the citing of Bible texts that predicted this present-day false teaching and its leading the way to the abandonment of all decent rules of life" (131). Of course, implicit in such an argument is that people are motivated to be "decent" primarily by *fear*—fear of divine retribution if they fail to be decent. Munro's response to such an argument gains its force from remaining implicit. Her protagonist, Nina, although nowhere near as fanatically as her husband, Lewis, nevertheless subscribes to the theory of evolution. This has clearly not resulted in her becoming a less decent person

At the heart of much of the creationist-evolutionist debate in the story—and in real life—and underneath Lewis's bitter outrage lies a profound need for *control*—the same kind of control that has driven and characterized a good deal of science since the time of Frances Bacon. Lewis Spiers represents positivistic science's demand for control over nature, but also over human emotion, as is evident in science's pronounced focus on objectivity in all scientific endeavor. Perhaps this need for control and objectivity accounts, at least in part, for the prevalence of atheism among scientists. Although it is notoriously difficult to measure "degrees" of belief, Michael Shermer reports that in a 1997 study of 1000 American scientists (once again, similar statistics for Canadian scientists are very difficult to find. Even Reginald Bibby in his recent study, *Restless Gods*, did not survey scientists specifically), 60% declared themselves atheists. Researchers that disputed this number as *low* did another study controlling for "eminence"—that is, including "greater scientists...defined as members of the National Academy of Sciences, an extremely exclusive body whose members must be voted in based on a stellar body of original research" (Shermer 73). Their research concluded that "disbelief in God rose to 69 percent among biologists, and 79 percent for physicists" (73).

This need for control manifests personally for Lewis Spiers in his fear of his own emotions and his resulting attempts to control them. For example, he is actually *relieved* when he discovers he is suffering from a terminal illness because, initially, he thought his symptoms were psychosomatic: "When he was given the true diagnosis, in the neurologist's office—what he felt first—so he told Nina was a ridiculous relief. 'I was afraid I was neurotic'" (136).

Among other functions, religious perspectives provide people a way of coping with aspects of life that are essentially beyond their rational understanding and control. It is reasonable to surmise that Lewis rejects religion because he will not acknowledge *any* lack of control. Lewis also attempts to exert control over death by taking his own life at a time that he can control. Significantly, Lewis was also deeply relieved that his brain would remain unaffected by his disease; this is certainly an understandable relief, one that anyone would feel, but the language around Lewis's relief is quite telling. He is comforted that his brain would, in computer-like fashion, be "kept busy monitoring all the outlying shut down, toting up the defaults and depletions" (122). Mostly, though, he is relieved "because of the chance it gives you to take action"—in other words, to take control (122).

Reminiscent of Lorna's attraction to Brendin's mathematical control in "Post and Beam," Nina is caught between her love of Lewis, her attraction to his love of control—scientific and other—and her own spiritual intuition. She attempts to be as controlling as Lewis, but it is not in her nature to want to exert total control over nature, other people, her emotions, or other aspects of her life. She is surprised and taken aback, however, by *how much* some of these aspects lie outside her control—particularly her emotional *and physical* responses to Lewis's death and the arrangements that follow his death. This loss of control emerges first at the Lakeshore Funeral Home, and—largely *because* of Nina's lapses of control—it is here that Nina and Ed Shore enter into an interaction that carries a good deal of the thematic significance of the balance of the story.

Nina comes to the funeral home and discovers that her husband's body has been embalmed and prepared for "some sort of visitation...some sort of service" (138). Nina attempts to make her, and Lewis's, wishes known—"I want—I want—he wanted"—but she breaks down: "She heard, or felt, her own gasps and uncontrollable stuttering" (139). It is Ed Shore who intervenes, who *touches* Nina and helps her regain at least a modicum of control: "Ed Shore held her forearm and put his other arm around her shoulders" (139).

This incident triggers for Nina memories of the earlier interaction between her and Ed Shore on the evening when Lewis and Kitty Shore were involved in what was for both Nina and Ed a devastating argument that pitted Kitty with her superficial knowledge of saints and of biblical creation against Lewis's particularly ruthless brand of

positivistic science. At one point, Nina quietly escapes out on to the porch: “Through the little pane in the back door she peers at the moonless night, the snow banks along the street, the stars. She lays her cheek against the glass” (144). Ed Shore does not realize that Nina is on the porch (they are at his house), and he too has sought refuge from the escalating conflict within:

They greeted each other with an abbreviated, sociable, slightly apologetic and disclaiming laugh, by which it seems many things are conveyed and understood. They are deserting Kitty and Lewis. Just for a little while...Kitty and Lewis won't get sick of themselves. (145)

Nina and Ed are both vulnerable; they are both quite *uncertain*, and they both yearn for comfort—the title of the story. They also are both seeking—whether they are consciously aware of it or not—Eros in its fullest sense: “The continuous operation of spiritual *energy*, desire, intellect, love, as it moves among and responds to particular objects of attention, the force of magnetism and attraction which joins us to the world” (Murdoch 496). Munro makes quite clear in their interaction that there is little coital sexual desire between Nina and Ed at this point. “Nina has never had sex with any man but Lewis. Never come near it” (145), and this is not about to change—at least not at this point with Ed Shore. However, Ed Shore does something that actually carries more power and more *comfort* than an explicit sexual overture or a coital sexual liaison could:

Ed Shore puts an arm around Nina. He kisses her—not on the mouth, not on her face, but on her throat. The place where an agitated pulse might be beating, in her throat. (145)

They go back in—“ ‘You'll get cold out here,’ he said. ‘I know. I'm going in’” (145). The spiritual power of Eros in Ed's kiss—the essentially spiritual nature of this quite “ordinary” coming together “outside the kitchen door”—stays with Nina and becomes a powerful recurring epiphanic moment:

Her memory of Ed Shore's kiss outside the kitchen door did, however, become a treasure. When Ed sang the tenor solos in the Choral Society's performance of the *Messiah* every Christmas, that moment would return to her. “Comfort Ye My People” pierced her throat with starry needles. As if

everything about her was recognized then, and honored and set alight.

(145-46)

The parallel between Ed Shore's kiss and the divine is uncharacteristically explicit here. It is his voice singing "Comfort Ye My People" from Handel's *Messiah* that is directly equated with his earlier kiss on Nina's throat. This voice, like the kiss, are, in context, expressions of Eros; both "pierced her throat with starry needles." It is this deeply romantic, spiritual/religious encounter between Nina and Ed Shore that forms the context for their coming together again in Ed Shore's funeral home where Nina is losing her fight to control her emotion.

Nina's spiritual quest has evolved into a kind of microcosm of the larger struggle that has ensued over the past four centuries in Western culture—the struggle to reconcile or in some way effect coexistence between what Richard Tarnas and others have identified as our bifurcated vision. Dudley Young conceives this bifurcation as a cultural "identity crisis" and argues that "the answer to our identity crisis and the planetary problems it has generated is to heal the rift that opened in the Western soul some 400 years ago when science and religion went their separate ways" (xvii). Nina is caught. She feels a strong loyalty to Lewis and to Lewis's obsessive attachment to a positivistic, materialistic scientific explanation for *everything*, but particularly for the emergence of life on earth. Moreover, as we have seen earlier, Nina is also *personally* inclined to a scientific view of life—just as virtually all educated, critical thinking people in Western culture have been for some time. But Nina also has an *intuitive sense of some kind of transcendence*. As Karen Armstrong tells us in *A History of God*, "However, we choose to interpret it, this human experience of transcendence has been a fact of life" as far back as historical evidence takes us (xxi). The challenge, however, as "all the major religions...would agree," is that "it is impossible to describe this transcendence in normal conceptual language" (Armstrong xxi).

Attempting to express her thoughts and feelings about Lewis's death and his funeral—or absence thereof—and other feelings that she cannot articulate causes Nina's power of language to literally break down; she runs out of breath and stutters. This time Ed Shore gets Nina out of the funeral home and takes her for a drive. The destination of their drive is significant: "Ed drove with the windows down, up into the old part of town

and onto a dead-end which had a turnaround overlooking the lake” (139). The presence of water here is symbolically important, (consider, as well, Ed *Shore*’s surname in connection with water) but so too is how “during the day people drove here to look at the view...but at night it was a place for lovers” (139). Nina apologizes to Ed: “I lost control. I only meant to say that Lewis—that we—that he—“ and, once again, Nina loses her control of language. Her stuttering references to Lewis and to herself—“that we—that he” also illustrate how she is essentially struggling here to escape *Lewis*’s control. “Because they were alone,” this time Ed Shore does not touch Nina. “He simply began to talk” (140).

Ed Shore’s advice to Nina is both practical and metaphorical—although he is almost certainly not conscious of the latter aspect. It is a commonplace that spirit is frequently characterized/compared to wind or air—the Greek *pneuma*: “ ‘Breathe,’” Ed instructs Nina. “ ‘Breathe in. Now hold it. Now out’” (140). Secondly, Ed urges Nina to “look at the horizon. That helps too” (140). As Charles Taylor and others remind us, spiritual perimeters/paradigms are often construed as horizons. At this point, Ed Shore takes from his pocket and gives to Nina Lewis’s suicide note—a note that she had frantically searched for earlier to no avail. Ed Shore had found it in Lewis’s pajama pocket, a detail that carries some significance regarding Nina’s feelings toward death and Lewis’s body: “The pajama pocket. The only place she hadn’t looked. She hadn’t touched his *body*” (emphasis mine 140). Conversely, we have seen earlier how the touch of Ed Shore’s body has been central to Nina’s comfort (again, the title of the story).

Lewis’s suicide note—entitled “The Battle of the Genesisites and the Sons of Darwin for the Soul of the Flabby Generation”—turns out to be a scathing bit of doggerel aimed at Paul Gibbings—the “peace at any cost” high school principal—and at the supporters of creationism:

*There was a Temple of Learning sat
Right on Lake Huron shore
Where many a dull-eyed dunce did come
To listen to many a Bore. (141)*

Even this short excerpt of Lewis’s note effectively conveys the overall tone and content of his “poem.” The note is long on damning criticism. It contains, as well, a kind of irony

in phrases like “*Temple of Learning*” wherein Lewis reveals, quite unwittingly I believe, how his notion of education, particularly of science, had become a kind of dogmatic religion onto itself. What the note is extremely *short* on, however—in fact, entirely bereft of—is any kind of compassion, love, or Eros as I have delineated it above and in earlier chapters. Nina is never directly mentioned, nor is any of the note directed in any personal way to her. The note reveals how completely unbalanced Lewis Spiers had become by the time of his death. Nina’s response to the note reveals more clearly and forcefully than any description of the note could Lewis’s emotional, *spiritual* condition when he wrote it:

What if she broke down and told him [Ed Shore] about the astonishment she had felt—why not say it, the chill around her heart—when she saw what Lewis had written? When she saw that that was all that he had written. (150)

Lewis Spiers had become completely mired in one side of the science vs. religion, logic/empiricism/Newtonian-Cartesianism vs. Romanticism bifurcation that Richard Tarnas, Dudley Young, Arthur Schiller, Jacques Derrida (see page 8 of this paper), and many others have drawn our attention to. Nina, mostly because of her love and devotion for Lewis, has come close to getting mired down in this bifurcation as well, but Lewis’s death, as well as the chilling note he leaves behind, go some ways to liberating Nina from this kind of entrapment.

“Comfort” concludes with another very important encounter between Nina and Ed Shore that further frees Nina from such entrapment and that catalyses an epiphanic occasion that is crucial in her spiritual/religious quest. After sorting out the confusion and errors surrounding Lewis’s body and funeral, Ed Shore has cremated Lewis. He brings the ashes to Nina’s house: “She felt a warmth through the heavy cardboard. It came not immediately but gradually, like the blood’s warmth through the skin” (148). Nina had been eating her supper, but she invites Ed in for tea. He is also awkwardly carrying flowers: “ “Those for me?”” Nina asks, but thinks to herself, “They could as easily be for the dead. Flowers for the house of the dead” (149). Echoes of James Joyce’s “The Dead” seem almost deliberate here, with Ed Shore in the role of Gabriel. Moreover, we see

again the challenge of finding conceptual language for matters spiritual. Recall how in Joyce's story Gabriel imagines himself trying to console his Aunt Kate:

The blinds would be drawn down and Aunt Kate would be sitting beside him, crying and blowing her nose and telling him how Julia had died. He would cast about in his mind for some words that might console her, and would find only lame and useless ones. (*Dubliners* 219)

Munro, however, gives us a much more dialogic and much more hopeful scenario than Joyce's. Nina and Ed Shore together (dialogically), tentatively (as befits these spiritual pilgrims in unfamiliar terrain), both feeling very vulnerable, address the ultimate mystery of death and what comes—or does not come—after death.

In his 2002 work, *Restless Gods: The Renaissance of Religion in Canada*, Reginald Bibby notes that “the question of what happens after death is raised by more than 90% of Canadians in the course of their lifetimes. Some 70% say they are currently asking the question ‘often’” (116). Bibby observes that the question of what happens to us after death

remains one of the most basic questions we ask... Perhaps what is particularly hard for us to accept is the sense that, when people die, they cross such a profound line—so here with us yesterday and so abruptly gone today, never to return to us again. (114)

There is, of course, nothing particularly new in such musings, but the true weight of these realizations does not usually fully register until they are upon us—as they are with Nina in “Comfort.”

When Ed Shore comes bearing Lewis's ashes and flowers, Nina finds herself, once again, fighting for self-control: “She was barely in control. She felt as if she could easily throw the roses on the floor, smash the vase, squash the congealed mess in her supper plate between her fingers. But why?” Nina's answer carries strong echoes of a kind of Beckett-tinged absurdity: “It was just such a crazy effort, to keep doing one thing after another. Now she would have to warm the pot, she would have to measure the tea” (149). The “ordinary” in this spiritual state becomes onerous beyond bearing. What brings Nina back from the very precipice of this dark existential abyss is a transformation

of the “ordinary.” For Nina, this transformation emerges in this instance out of what on so many previous occasions Munro’s stories have presented as the “fact(s) of death.”

Nina, “at the moment when there could have been panic...had a very odd inspiration” (150). What is clearly at work here is the intuition that Henri Bergson says is essential to epiphany/*duration*. Nina’s intuitive inspiration prompts her to ask Ed Shore about the specific, *physical* process of preparing the dead. She asks him, “ ‘What is it really that you do?’ ” (150). Once Ed realizes that Nina’s question is neither morbid nor casual, he proceeds to outline the process of embalming. His explanation of what he *physically* performed on Lewis’s body and other bodies that he has worked on expands into a broader historical explanation of the treatment of the dead: “Even old Lenin, you know, they had to keep going in and re-injecting him so he wouldn’t desiccate or discolor” (151)¹¹ This explanation, in turn, leads Ed Shore to a discussion of the ancient Egyptians. Munro’s interest in how the Egyptians handled their dead shows up, directly and indirectly, in a number of her earlier stories. What is most germane here is that the Egyptians obviously did not make the kind of distinction that we in modern Western culture make between the physical body and the transcendent, or what is usually referred to as the soul. As Ed explains,

“They had the idea that your soul went on a journey, and it took three thousand years to complete, and then it came back to your body and your body ought to be in reasonably good shape. So the main concern they had was preservation, which we have not got today to anything like the same extent.” (152)

Munro’s recurring fascination with death and after life emerges here with a passage that is very reminiscent of the encounter between the narrator and Rosicrucian in “The Spanish Lady” (see Chapter Four). The Rosicrucian maintained that the soul’s journey took 144 year (185).

¹¹ I am particularly struck by the unexpected but remarkable popularity over the past two years of the HBO television program *Six Feet Under*, a production in which the central characters, David and Nathan Fisher, take over their father’s funeral home upon his untimely demise. The program is full of explicit scenes of embalming, restoration of disfigured corpses, and, of course, the entire realm of emotion that attends death and dying in our culture. I believe the program and Munro in a story such as “Comfort” tap into the increasing interest—perhaps inspired by aging baby-boomers—in the “facts” of death.

Nina's next question for Ed Shore illustrates that she is gradually moving away from Lewis's type of relentlessly categorical, emotionally objective (so he believed) scientific materialism. Lewis, of course, would not have entertained for a moment the kind of points about the dead that Ed Shore has already made. On the other hand, neither Nina nor Ed Shore is subscribing to any *literal* interpretation of what the Egyptians believed about death and the 3000 year journey of the soul. Unlike Lewis, however, they are willing to explore other metaphorical possibilities. Like so many people in modern/postmodern Western culture, Nina and Ed Shore are profoundly uncertain about what, if anything, happens after death. Nina and Ed Shore may be quite ambivalent about ancient Egyptian or other beliefs surrounding death, but—at the same time—neither is willing, or perhaps able, to subscribe to essentially nihilistic conceptions of death based solely on biological “facts.” As with Janet in “The Moons of Jupiter,” they remain open to at least the possibility that there is “no perpetual darkness after all” (231).

Nina's then asks Ed Shore a question reminiscent of the query of another Munro protagonist—Trudy in “Circle of Prayer.” Near the conclusion of that story, Trudy is working the night shift and speaking to Kelvin, a mentally handicapped client in the group home where she works: “ ‘Kelvin, do you pray?’ says Trudy. She didn't know she was going to ask him that” (373-74). In “Comfort,” Nina asks Ed Shore, “hurriedly”—indicating more than a little reticence to enter this particular terrain—“ ‘Do you believe in such a thing as souls?’” (152). In both situations Munro deftly depicts the reticence of so many in Western culture to even *formulate the questions* (root word “quest”) around spiritual/religious issues and practices. Ed Shore's response even more effectively demonstrates this reticence and the profound ambivalence that so often attends it. It is usually a *nod* of one's head that indicates “yes” or assent and a *shake* of one's head that signals the opposite. Given this usual practice, Ed Shore's response to Nina's question about the existence of souls is graphically, physically ambivalent; his verbal and his physical responses diametrically opposed: “He stood with his hands pressed down on her kitchen table.¹² He sighed and *shook* his head and said, ‘Yes’” (152).

Nina's question and Ed Shore's response encapsulate much that is thematically

¹² It is striking how often in Munro's fiction important interactions transpire around the quintessentially “ordinary” kitchen table.

important in “Comfort.” They also encapsulate key aspects of Munro’s overall implicit spiritual vision effectively enough to render—as I suggested earlier—“Comfort” a kind of “poetic” in Munro’s oeuvre. Nina is asking *her own* questions, freed of Lewis’s positivistic tyranny and, to some extent, freed of her own internalization of dogmatic scientific materialism.

The final paragraphs of “Comfort” are particularly redolent with Munro’s spiritual vision. We find Nina alone spreading Lewis’s ashes alongside a country road that runs “through boggy ground in which cattails grew...the night was quite cold and still, the moon already high in the sky” (152). Nina’s experiences—her quest—to this point have significantly deepened her spiritual perspective; her name remains Nina—Spanish for little girl—but she is no longer the quite naïve and passive “little girl” who came home to discover her husband’s dead body. Nina’s struggle for emotional control, her struggle to assert her own wishes regarding how Lewis’s death was to be commemorated, or not, and—very importantly—her exchanges with Ed Shore, especially her questions about soul, have all deepened her sense of self-awareness, her perspectives on death, her relationship to the transcendent *and* to the physical. This deepened perspective is quite evident in the concluding paragraphs of the story. For example, the Romantic imagery here, particularly the lunar imagery, suggests the ascent of the archetypal feminine as opposed to the archetypal Apollonian masculine represented by Lewis Spiers. Further, although Lewis had an “extreme dislike of ceremony of any sort” (119-20), Nina is creating here a kind of ceremony to honor him, but also to honor *her own* spiritual sense of the occasion. Again, to the extent that Nina “ties back/binds” her sense of the spiritual through such observances and ritual is the extent to which she is becoming *religious*—although certainly not traditionally religious.

Nina’s spiritual/religious activities here include both an honoring of physical nature—the moon, the “boggy ground,” even two horses nearby—and physical actions that honor the transcendent. She spreads Lewis’s ashes in the “ordinary” ditch—in a place that Lewis might have considered an example of the “deep mix of everything stirred up a little differently every day” (119). Nina is also acknowledging the bodily, this

strongly suggested by the horses, “solid black shapes beyond the cattails and the farmer’s fence...they stood brushing their big bodies against each other, watching her” (152).

The horses here are strongly reminiscent of an epiphany involving horses that Munro herself reports having had. In her biography of her mother, Sheila Munro recounts travelling to Wingham, Munro’s hometown with her mother and Gerry Fremlin. As they drove past the town hall, Fremlin pointed out to Sheila, “ ‘That’s where your mother had the epiphany.’” (Interestingly, shades of her mother’s powers of observation emerge as Sheila Munro further qualifies Fremlin’s observation with the phrase, “in that way he has of being both serious and ironic at the same time” (165)). Munro herself reports this epiphany in her introduction to the paperback edition of *Selected Stories*. She was fifteen years old at the time, and she saw “a team of horses pulling a sleigh, moving onto the town weigh-scales:

The patient horses with their nobly rounded rumps, the humped figure of the driver, the coarse fabric of the sacks. The snow conferring dignity and peace. I didn’t see it framed and removed in that way. I saw it alive and potent, and it gave me something like a blow to the chest. What does this mean, what can be discovered about it, what is the rest of the story? The man and the horses are not symbolic or picturesque, they are moving through a story which is hidden, and now, for a moment, carelessly revealed. (Munro, Sheila 166)

There are some important parallels between Munro’s epiphany as a fifteen-year-old girl and Nina’s experience as she spreads Lewis’s ashes. The presence of the horses on both occasions is the first and most obvious of these. In “Comfort,” Nina *smells* the horses, emphasizing the pronounced multi-sensory nature of her experience—the decidedly *physical* character of this spiritual occasion. Once again, we see a strong hint of D. H. Lawrence’s emphasis on what one of his female protagonists, Isabel Pervin, from his short story, “The Blind Man,” recognizes as the “hot animal life” associated with horses. In Lawrence’s story, Isabel encounters horses when she enters a dark barn in search of her blind husband, Maurice. We are told that “she was aware of the presence of the dark hind-quarters of the horses, though she could not see them...something wild stirred in her heart” (233). Both Munro and Lawrence are invoking what the latter

referred to as a spiritual “pan-force.” For Munro’s protagonist, this animal force is also intimately connected with Lewis who, despite his scientific materialism, was deeply connected to the life of nature. Through her connection to Lewis’ ashes and to the horses, Nina is connected with death; thus, the occasion deftly integrates death with the “pan force” of life.

Nina spreads Lewis’s “cooling ashes...with other tiny recalcitrant bits of the body” into places that Lewis would have been interested in and attracted to as a man of science and of nature. The ditch with its “boggy ground...cattails...milkweeds, with their pods empty” (152) represents that in which Lewis came closest to having a kind of religious faith. Again, this place presents the “ordinary” in the way Lewis conceived the “ordinary.” Early in the story, Nina catalogues all of the “specific observations” of nature that Lewis had drawn to her attention: “Bugs, grubs, snails, mosses, reeds in the ditch and shaggy manes in the grass, animal tracks, nannyberries, cranberries—a deep mix stirred up a little differently every day” (119). Further, the book Lewis had been reading most recently, for example, was a paleontology text about “the Cambrian explosion of multi-celled forms” (120); the “ordinary” was stirred up *quite* differently in those days. The spot Nina has chosen—this lowly ditch—honors this perpetual “stirring up” of the “ordinary,” including “the inauspicious beginnings of life” that were so important to Lewis. Although Lewis lacked *compassion*, there can be no doubt about his *passion* for these aspects of science and of *life*. In spreading Lewis’s ashes in this way, Nina honors this passion and offers a glimpse of the potential for reconciliation between science and religion

Munro’s metaphorical employment of water and associated water imagery also illustrates Nina’s growing acceptance of and a coming to terms with death:

Doing this was like wading and then throwing yourself into the lake for the first icy swim in June [this is very similar to what the three boys intend to do before they discover the *dead body* of D.M. Willens in “The Love of a Good Woman” (3)]. A sickening shock at first, then amazement that you were still moving, lifted up on a stream of steely devotion—calm above the surface of your *life*, surviving, though the pain of the cold continues to wash into your body. (152-53)

It is on this “ordinary” road-side, under the “ordinary” moon that Nina has this extraordinary epiphanic experience. Her epiphany does not constitute a “spiritual manifesto” of some sort; Munro’s spiritual vision remains quite steadfastly implicit. However, epiphanic occasions such as this one, and the various narratives leading up to such occasions, reveal the central and most important aspects of Munro’s implicit vision. First, this epiphanic moment that concludes “Comfort” is profoundly permeated by and invested in the “ordinary,” the physical, the quotidian. Secondly, Nina’s epiphany emerges out of intuition, and it pays homage to the physical. Finally, although Nina’s experience is ultimately ineffable—as all spiritual experiences are—Munro strives through metaphor and symbolic imagery to express what *can* be expressed about the ineffable. In this instance it involves a movement from “shock” to “amazement” to a “steely devotion” and “calm.” Once again, Munro admirably fulfills what her daughter Sheila tells us matters a great deal to her: “Her desire is to enter into the experience of other people, to gain access to realities other than her own, to pull away a curtain and reveal ‘some dazzling mystery’” (38)

“Floating Bridge”

In her introduction to the paperback edition of *Selected Stories*, Alice Munro remarks how her stories are become increasingly “disjointed and demanding and peculiar.” “Floating Bridge” from Munro’s most recent collection bears clear testament to this assessment. By Munro standards, the plot line of the story is relatively straightforward, but the “demanding peculiarity” in “Floating Bridge” arises from the quite surrealistic nature of the experiences of the protagonist, Jinny Lockyer on a hot Ontario afternoon and evening as she waits for her husband, Neal, to emerge from the home of Matt and June Bergson. He and Helen, a girl whom Neal and Jinny have just hired, have gone into the Bergsons’ house for what was supposed to be a brief visit to pick up a pair of shoes for Helen. While Neal and Helen are in the Bergsons’ house, Jinny experiences some powerful epiphanic moments that augur toward important and necessary changes for her. These changes include shifts in her relationship with her husband who exerts over her a “benevolent,” paternalistic control; a shift away from her persona of “Nice Nellie”—a moniker bestowed upon her by one of Neal’s friends and

also a persona that Jinny has inadvertently internalized, and, to some extent, even cultivated—and, most importantly, a crucial shift in Jinny’s feelings about/perspective on death.

Death and dying are particularly immediate concerns for Jinny because approximately one year prior to the present time-line of the story, she was diagnosed with a terminal form of cancer (The parallels here to Kent in “Jakarta” are striking). Further complicating the challenges Jinny faces, earlier during the day of their visit to the Bergsons, she received some entirely unexpected news from her oncologist, significantly, a man with “a priestly demeanor,” who wore a “black turtle-necked shirt under a white smock—an outfit that suggested he had just come from some ceremonial mixing and dosing” (34). He informed her that her cancer was receding: “*It looks as if we have some unexpected results here...It looks as if there has been a very significant shrinkage*” (74). Ironically, this *reprieve* from what had been a virtual death sentence proves almost more challenging for Jinny than her battle over the past year to come to terms with impending death. Quite uncharacteristically, she has not yet shared this news with anyone, nor does she in the balance of the story. It becomes clear that handling this recent development on her own—or, more specifically, without Neal’s input—is an important step for Jinny toward some much needed independence, expanded self awareness, and a deepening of her spiritual/religious perspective—especially as regards time and death. It also becomes clear that Jinny’s encounter with Ricky Bergson at the conclusion of the story—an epiphanic occasion with strong elements of Eros—plays a significant role in her coming to terms with her recent reprieve and with her other struggles as well. Thus, once again, we have a Munro protagonist who comes to a new level of self/spiritual awareness through directly confronting death; moreover, at the heart of this encounter and of her epiphanic experiences recurs the characteristically Munrovian “synergistic combination” of death and Eros.

Two key aspects of “Floating Bridge” are an emphasis on androgyny and recurring manifestations of contrasting light and darkness. Both aspects convey and reflect ambivalence, which, as we have seen, is, in a wide variety of forms, a defining characteristic of Munro’s fiction overall, and particularly of her implicit spiritual vision. Androgyny and contrasting darkness and light manifest in various characters, situations,

and images in the story, but all of these manifestations tie back to Jinny's struggle toward increased self-awareness/self-assertion, and to her essentially spiritual/religious quest toward a deeper understanding and acceptance of her own death—whenever it comes.

“Floating Bridge” also demonstrates—perhaps more clearly than any other Munro story—the influence of Henri Bergson's concept of *duration*. Given the striking parallels between the fluid merging of past and present that Bergson's term *duration* refers to and Jinny's powerful epiphanic moments in the story, it seems more than coincidental that the setting of most of the story—the farm/acreage where Jinny experiences *duration*—is owned by people named Bergson. Further, the “master of time” in the story, Ricky Bergson, adroitly leads Jinny into a setting and into an experience wherein time shifts and alters in a manner very much in keeping with the *duration* conceived by Ricky's namesake, Henri Bergson. The epiphanic moments of *duration* that Jinny experiences are entirely new, initiatory experiences for her, fulfilling Ricky Bergson's somewhat arrogant, cocky promise to her: “‘ I'm going to show you something like I bet you never seen before’ ” (80). It is also difficult to overlook the subtle sexual suggestiveness of Ricky's promise—a promise that nudges both Jinny and the reader into the realm of Eros.

As the foregoing paragraph anticipates, a number of characters in “Floating Bridge” are involved in Jinny's movement toward increased self/spiritual awareness, and to fully appreciate this movement it is useful to trace their respective roles and influence in Jinny's quest. Most prominent among these characters is, of course, Jinny's husband, Neal Lockyer, a central patriarchal—perhaps, more accurately, paternalistic—force in Jinny's life. Even Neal's name suggests his dualistic temperament and behavior. “Neal” suggests the figurative “kneeling” of his quite devoted work with young offenders—the blissful, *imitatio Christi* side of his personality—while Lockyer suggests his “benevolent,” paternalistic control, his figurative “locking in” of some of his charges, and, more importantly, of his wife. Neal, sixteen years older than Jinny, is very much a paternal figure for his forty-two year old wife. Further, although he does not fly airplanes, Neal still bears comparison to other Christ-like/flying boy partners/lovers we have encountered in Munro stories such as “How I Met My Husband,” “White Dump,” or “Circle of Prayer.”

Although Neal's work with young offenders (he calls them "yo-yos") reflects his quasi-Christ like qualities, as with most of the other Christ/flying boy figures in earlier Munro stories, Neal also has a quite pronounced dark side of which he seems quite oblivious. It is more difficult to pin down Neal's darker qualities than it is with some of the earlier characters partly because of the "silly bliss" he exudes: "No matter how strictly he spoke, Neal was smiling. On his face was an expression of conscious, but helpless, silliness. Signs of an invasion of bliss. Neal's whole being was invaded, he was brimming with silly bliss" (65). This is, however, the same Neal who leaves his cancer-stricken wife outside the Bergson household on a very hot afternoon, virtually for hours, while he, we can only surmise, eats chili, drinks beer, visits with the Bergsons and, apparently at one point, has June Bergson read his fortune. These shortcomings noted, had Jinny *not* had this time outside the Bergson's house (and, it should be noted, Jinny *chose* to remain outside), she would not have experienced some very important epiphanic moments in her sojourn with Ricky Bergson.

Matt and June Bergson are an interesting, peculiar couple, and their run-down, chaotic home is literally and symbolically important in Jinny's initiatory afternoon and evening. A strong interplay between light and darkness and between order and chaos characterizes much of "Floating Bridge," and these motifs emerge early in the story in the condition of the Bergsons' yard: "The trailer and its garden looked proper and tidy, while the rest of the property was littered with things that might have a purpose or might just be left around to rust or rot" (67). A similar duality and ambivalence characterizes the Bergsons themselves. On one hand, they are clearly hospitable and compassionate people, but on the other, there are aspects of the Bergson's—particularly Matt Bergson—that are far from attractive or congenial: "He wore a purple T-shirt that was wet with sweat, clinging to his chest and stomach. He was fat enough to have breasts and you could see his navel pushing out like a pregnant woman's. It rode on his belly like a giant pincushion" (67).

Matt Bergson's hermaphroditic, near-inverse Earth Mother aspect has a powerful effect on Jinny. As soon as Neal and Helen go into the house with the Bergsons, Jinny takes a small bite of an apple she has brought with her, "more or less to see if she could taste and swallow and hold it in her stomach. She needed something to counteract the

thought of chili [June Bergson offered Jinny chili], and Matt's prodigious navel" (70). Matt Bergson is also strongly reminiscent of grotesque characters that people Flannery O'Connor's stories, and at least some of his impact upon Jinny, and the reader, emerges from the archetypal and /or mythic characteristics that such O'Connoresque characters often exude. Nora Robson argues, "Munro, like O'Connor, reinforces religious significance by introducing a large number of sick and deformed characters into the pages of her fiction" (82). At the same time, however, Matt Bergson may also be seen as a kind of parody of the mythic patriarchy. From this angle, Jinny's encounter with him on her quest toward greater self/spiritual awareness can be seen as similar to the parodies of the "female gothic" quests that Barbara Godard discerns in earlier Munro stories such as "Heirs of the Living Body." Godard asserts the female quest in such parodies becomes "interior travel through corridors and tunnels in castles or monasteries [or cornfields]." Such journeys, continues Godard, stand as "the answer of women writers to the journeys through foreign countries of picaresque heroes" (51).

Furthermore, although Matt Bergson seems anything but a man of mythic proportions—parodied or otherwise—there are some suggestive and important connections between him and the Greek god Cronos. Munro goes to considerable lengths to emphasize how Matt Bergson's girth and "prodigious navel" make him look pregnant, thus recalling how Cronos swallowed all of his children except for the wily Zeus, who was saved from this fate by his mother Rhea, and Uranus's wife, Gaia. They wrapped a stone in swaddling clothes and fed it to the unsuspecting Cronos, who believed he was swallowing yet one more of his offspring. Further, the Roman version of Cronos is Saturn, the god of corn and harvest. In "Floating Bridge," Jinny goes into the Bergson's *corn* field to lie down; she then does "the easiest thing you could do in a cornfield;" she gets lost (72). She becomes quite frantic, her heart "pounding just like any heart that had years and years of life ahead of it" (73). It is Matt Bergson as Cronus-like god of the cornfield who, of course without realizing or intending it, rescues Jinny by yelling at his dogs. She moves toward the direction of the noise and emerges from the cornfield.

Cronos is also connected with time, giving us the word "chronology." In "Floating Bridge," the links between Matt Bergson and Cronos/chronology further reinforce the connection with Henri Bergson noted earlier. Thus, the decidedly unlikely

character of Matt Bergson yields a possible conjunction of classical mythology—Cronos, significantly another father/sky god in the same vein as Jupiter in Munro’s “Moons of Jupiter;” a link to the Romantic connotations of the fertile/fecund in his role of the god of corn/the harvest; and a relatively modern emphasis on Henri Bergson’s *duration*. Recall, it is during Matt Bergson’s telling of a lewd joke to Jinny that she experiences a strong intrusion of the past into the present. All of the foregoing points make clear another important point regarding all of the characters involved in Jinny’s initiatory afternoon/evening: Aside from Neal’s quite oblique Christ-like qualities, none of them represents conventional Christianity.

I wish to stress that these mythological connections to Matt Bergson remain much more suggestive than clearly delineated, but their very vagueness reflects the vague and multi-leveled nature of Jinny’s initiatory movement in the story. The Matt Bergson-Cronos connection, for example, *suggests* the presence of a well-established Munro theme: the daughter’s ambivalent relationship to father (usually combined with some aspect of Heavenly Father or Sky Father). Jinny’s actual father is never mentioned in the story, but both Neal, sixteen years older than Jinny, and Matt Bergson, clearly represent paternal figures for Jinny. A central aspect of Jinny’s initiatory movement in the story involves her development of the traits, usually associated with the masculine, of assertiveness and of further autonomy and independence from the paternal, especially as represented by Neal. As for Matt Bergson, in inverted and oblique fashion, his gender-reversal and his symbolic associations with Zeus’s escape from the devouring father in the myth of Cronos both contiguously anticipate Jinny’s movement toward more assertiveness, autonomy, and independence. Jinny’s staying outside while Neal goes into the house is a small step toward such independence; her somewhat eccentric venture into the cornfield symbolically constitutes another step. However, as we shall see, Jinny’s culminating encounter with Ricky Bergson constitutes her largest stride toward independence and an attendant increase in her self/spiritual awareness.

June Bergson and Helen together constitute one of the clearest manifestations of the light-darkness motif in “Floating Bridge,” a motif that hits its apex in Jinny’s later experiences with Ricky Bergson on the floating bridge in what he calls the “Borneo Swamp.” Descriptions of June Bergson emphasize her stoutness, but even more her

connection with light, perhaps even enlightenment: “The woman was fat too, though not as fat as her husband. She wore a mumu with Aztec suns on it and her hair was streaked with gold. She moved across the gravel with a composed and hospitable air” (68). June’s connection with ancient Aztec sun-worship, the streaking of her hair all suggest spiritual enlightenment. We learn later through her son, Ricky, that she is also an accomplished fortune-teller: “June’s probably telling fortunes in there anyway. She can read hands” (78). The similarities between June and Ricky Bergson include physical traits—both, for example, have hair that has “gold streaks *over dark*” (emphasis mine 76)—more importantly, though, they also share transpersonal abilities. In her reading of fortunes, June provides glimpses into people’s futures—glimpses into time. In a similar vein, Ricky is so attuned to time that he has no need for a watch. Ricky also emphasizes his connection to his mother, as opposed to his stepfather—“June’s my mom but Matt’s not my dad”—further reinforcing the strong links between the two (78).

A number of mythological qualities about June suggest the earth goddess, Gaia, or—another earth goddess incarnation more in keeping with “Floating Bridge”—Rhea, wife of Cronos. June’s maternal propensities for caring for others almost overwhelm Jinny. For example, June insists—“laughing as if the idea of their [more specifically, Jinny’s] not coming in was a scandalous joke” (68)—that Jinny “come in out of this heat...help clean up that chili...you better drink something” and so forth. She mothers her own biological children, and clearly has mothered and continues to mother numerous foster children, like Helen. As well as June’s direct interaction with Jinny, she also has a strong, albeit indirect, influence upon Jinny through her offspring, Ricky. Symbolizing as her name suggests, the revivifying light associated with the month of June, June Bergson symbolizes in the story the overall power of light over darkness and life over death that Jinny must tap into.

Countering the strong emphasis on light associated with June Bergson, Helen (we never learn her last name) is distinctly associated with darkness. She has been hired to nurse Jinny in what has been anticipated as a time of increasing darkness for her—a darkness unto death. Helen has been associated with a terrible degree of darkness in her own life, coming as Neal points out, from “an unbelievable situation” (58):

...an absolutely barbaric family. Things had gone on that you could not imagine going on in this day and age. An isolated farm, a dead mother and a mentally deficient daughter and a tyrannical, deranged incestuous old father, and the two girl children. Helen the older one, who had run away at the age of fourteen after beating up on the old man...The old man and his daughter—that is, their mother and father—were both placed in a Psychiatric Hospital. (59)

Again, passages such as this make clear why some critics have compared aspects of Munro's work to that of 20th century Southern Gothic writers such as Flannery O'Connor. Nora Robson's argument that Munro, to infuse "religious significance" into some of her stories, emulates Flannery O'Connor in her introduction of "sick and deformed characters" (82) allows that Munro also gives us more contemporary characters rendered emotionally/psychically "deformed" by the kind of childhood that Helen, for example, has obviously suffered through. Helen's "deformity," her background, her abrasive personality, her role as a kind of foil to June Bergson's light and, as importantly, to Neal's "conscious, but helpless, silliness," *as well as* a counterbalance to Jinny's "nice Nelliness" together constitute a powerful dark force entering Jinny's life. Although, as Robson further points out, "Munro's protagonists [Jinny in this instance] usually observe illness deformity, and idiocy from the sidelines" (82), Jinny is at one point very nearly literally touched by Helen's near demonic influence:

It seemed to Jinny that she could feel the blaze of Helen's cheek, which was so close to hers. And she could hear the girl's breathing, hoarse and thick with excitement...Helen's presence was like that of a domestic cat that should never be brought along in any vehicle, being too high-strung to have sense, too apt to spring between the seats. (65)

In this description, Helen is particularly reminiscent of a character, Mary Grace—her name palpably ironic—in Flannery O'Connor's story "Revelation." In O'Connor's story, Mary Grace, through the violent act of throwing a psychology text ironically entitled *Human Development* at the protagonist, Ruby Turpin, triggers for Ruby a spiritual/religious revelation (thus the story's title)—a much-needed reconfiguring of her naïve, bigoted self-righteousness. Helen in Munro's story obviously does not participate

in anything near as dramatic nor is Jinny as unpleasantly negative or spiritually blind as O'Connor's Ruby Turpin, but the comparison holds to the extent that Munro, like O'Connor—a writer Munro admires considerably—advances the notion that encounters with the darker, shadow side of life, often represented by characters such as Helen, may paradoxically contribute to a deepening and broadening of the protagonist's/narrator's spiritual/religious perspective.

To encapsulate before exploring the latter stages of "Floating Bridge": The story presents a quite typical Munro female protagonist—middle-aged, intelligent, and perceptive. Jinny, however, is uncharacteristically inclined toward being a "Nice Nellie," a quite unusual character trait for Munro's female protagonists. On the other hand, Jinny's marriage is quite typically Munroian in that she is married to a seemingly benign but nonetheless quite ruthlessly manipulative man. Jinny's marriage produces in her mixed feelings—love and dependency countered by resentment and anger over various aspects of her husband's control. She has also been struggling for a year in very immediate ways with death. Jinny's overall situation is one that would prompt many to seek some form of spiritual comfort and guidance, but thus far Jinny does not seem to have seriously considered even conventional religious avenues. As so often happens with similar Munro protagonists, however, circumstances nudge and prod Jinny until she is prepared for some type of spiritual epiphany.

Like so many other events in "Floating Bridge," Jinny and Neal's visit to the Bergson's is unplanned, one might almost say fateful. Jinny is coming from her appointment with a "priest-like" oncologist—an agent of death who seems to have granted her a quite challenging reprieve from death in that Jinny feels that this new lease on life has robbed her of "a certain low-grade freedom" (75). As she grapples with being cast back into the world of the living, Jinny finds herself descending into a postmodern version of Dante's hell: "They went past a wrecking yard, with the car bodies only partly hidden by a sagging tin fence...past the gates to a gravel pit that was a great cavity" (66). Guided by the psychically/emotionally endarkened Helen who exerts "an innocent and—to Jinny—a disagreeable power" (60), Jinny is taken into the surrealistic world of the Bergsons, a setting peopled with characters at once grotesque and mythological—a world wherein time shifts and alters in a kind of Bergsonian-inflected dream-time. Then, in

keeping with the archetypal framework of the spiritual pilgrim's quest, Jinny is left alone—"benignly" abandoned virtually for hours.

When Neal and Helen go into the Bergson's house, however, Jinny's first response is profound relief: "The van was parked under a row of willow trees. These trees were big and old, but their leaves were thin and gave a wavering shade. But to be alone was a great relief" (69). A subtle Romantic sense of the Edenic emerges as Jinny gets an apple out of a bag at her feet. This is the same apple mentioned earlier that serves as a kind of antidote for Jinny to June Bergson's nauseating offer of chili and to Matt Bergson's "prodigious navel" (70). The Romantic inflection continues for a while, culminating in Jinny's move into the nearby cornfield: "The cornfield was the place she wanted to get to" (71).

The cornfield takes on considerable symbolic weight here, from a revivifying life-force to shadow qualities reminiscent of those in the cornfields in the concluding paragraphs of "Labor Day Dinner." Jinny's attraction to the cornfield is both pragmatic and symbolic; she is, though, more *consciously* aware of the former: "The corn was higher than her head now, maybe higher than Neal's head—she wanted to get into the shade of it" (71). Jinny is seeking relief from the sweltering afternoon heat, but—albeit less consciously—she is also seeking relief from Neal's particular brand of control. The corn in the field may just be "higher than Neal." As she moves further into the field, Jinny removes her hat so that the corn leaves, their "arms like streamers of oil cloth," will not knock it off. However, this ostensibly ordinary move of removing her hat is not a trivial one for Jinny in that, as a result of her chemotherapy, she has lost most of her hair. While alone, being hatless and hairless is quite incidental, but we learn later that Jinny loses her hat when she becomes disoriented and panicky in the cornfield, and remains quite obliviously hatless through her later encounter with Ricky Bergson.

Having no hat—no covering—suggests a new found openness, independence, and confidence for Jinny—the first glimpse of a shift away from her "Nice Nelly" persona. The pronounced motif of alternating light and darkness that develops in "Floating Bridge" reflects Jinny's internal struggle to more fully realize the darker, counter-posing side of this "Nice Nellie" persona—what I have earlier referred to as "Kali-energy." Jinny herself has cultivated her "Nice Nellie" persona to some extent, but it has also been

thrust upon her by some of Neal's supposedly "psychologically honest" friends (71-72). Their assessments of Jinny while playing "one of those serious psychological games...that were supposed to make a person more honest and resilient" (71) ranged from Addie Norton's "Nice Nellie" to "kinder things," such as "'Flower Child' or 'Madonna of the Springs'" (72), but all of these assessments infuriate Jinny: "She was outraged at having to sit there and listen to people's opinions of her. Everyone was wrong. She was not timid or acquiescent or natural or pure" (72). Jinny's concern with what she sees as these highly inaccurate opinions is exacerbated by her fear that these false assessments will be all others will remember of her after she dies: "When you died, of course, these wrong opinions were all there was left" (72). Thus, again, Jinny's emerging unselfconsciously hatless from the cornfield constitutes an important step away from distorted assessments of her. After all, a "'Flower child' or 'Madonna of the springs'" is seldom bald.

Jinny's cornfield experience is significant in a number of respects, although her response to her time therein is mixed. The cornfield presents images of a powerful fecundity and fertility that reflect Jinny's rebirth—her return to the world of the living. For example, Jinny notes that each corn stalk "had its cob, like a baby shroud" and that "there was a strong, almost sickening smell of vegetable growth, of green starch and hot sap" (71). Part of what is being born in Jinny during her time in the fecund, revivifying cornfield is a recognition of her long-standing anger—definitely not a "Nice Nelly" trait:

What she thought she'd do, once she got in there, was lie down. Lie down in the shade of these large coarse leaves and not come out till she heard Neal calling. Perhaps not even then. But the rows were too close together to permit that, and she was too busy thinking about something to take the trouble. She was too angry. (71)

Jinny experiences a time-delayed anger toward Neal's friend's condescending assessments of her as "Nice Nellie." Jinny's anger about these assessments affords her greater balance and depth, more connection to her darker, non-"Madonna" qualities — replete with the darkness of Kali-like anger. As noted earlier, Jinny then proceeds to get lost in the cornfield, after which, with the symbolically significant assistance of Matt

Bergson, she emerges. However, Jinny comes out of the cornfield changed in some important ways and more prepared to effect other changes in her life.

As we have seen with nearly all Munro protagonists discussed in the foregoing pages, coming to terms with death is key to their various spiritual quests. This does not, of course, mean arriving at some sort of tidy religious perspective on death and what comes after death. Rather, Munro's protagonists frequently get no further than recognizing—often in epiphanic moments—that what Del Jordan calls the “fact of death” will not be denied; it must be given its full weight in the existential equation. Jinny in “Floating Bridge” has been pushed more forcefully than most into such a realization by a diagnosis of terminal cancer. Jinny has been directly dealing with her own mortality for months, but it is not until she learns that her cancer may be going into remission—that she is being granted a reprieve from death—that she begins to fully realize how she has come to regard death. This reprieve is, at first, “too much” (75). What her oncologist tells Jinny

made her have to go back and start this year all over again. It removed a certain low-grade freedom. A dull, protecting membrane [not unlike the “baby shroud” on the corn cobs] that she had not even known was there had been pulled away and left her raw. (75)

Jinny's experience in the cornfield involves a pull into external nature and the earth's “body,” but it also initiates movement for “Nice Nelly” Jinny into an awareness of *her own* body. Her body is no longer suffering a death sentence and it is demanding attention. This “call of the body” gradually but quite relentlessly becomes a pull toward the sexual, toward Eros, a pull that culminates in Jinny's experience with Ricky Bergson. After she emerges from the cornfield, endures Matt Bergson's off-color jokes about pussy and pussy willows—certainly sexual in their own right—Jinny discovers that she has to urinate. This natural, physical urge—this “call of nature” corresponds significantly with sundown and a move into darkness that extends even to Jinny's urine: “A dark stream trickled away from her through the gravel. The sun was down now, evening was coming on. A clear sky, the clouds had vanished” (75). It is striking that, despite the descending darkness, a certain clarity prevails. Munro's imagery here draws attention again to the central motif of light/darkness in “Floating Bridge,” and this dark/light

imagery is concomitant with the arrival of Ricky Bergson: “It was a boy, or young man, riding a bicycle” (75).

This passage is curiously reminiscent of encounters between Yvette Saywell, the virgin, and Joe Boswell, the gipsy, in D. H. Lawrence’s novella *The Virgin and the Gipsy*. Jinny, of course, is no virgin, and Ricky Bergson is not literally a gipsy. However, Jinny is metaphorically virginal in a number of respects and Ricky exudes a kind of haughty male sexuality very reminiscent of Lawrence’s gipsy; he is “slim and graceful and cocky” (Munro 76). Upon first meeting Ricky Bergson, Jinny is reminded of earlier mildly sexual encounters with Neal’s young offenders, and this situation presents her an opportunity to explore further the “pan-force” that Ricky embodies—and that he triggers in her. We learn that Jinny is certainly capable of—and has, at times, been inclined to—flirting with the “yo-yos” that Neal works with: “Jinny had flirted with them occasionally, in a way that she could never be blamed for. Just a gentle tone, a way of making them aware of her soft skirts and her scent of apple soap [again, that Edenic apple]” (77).

Jinny and Ricky quickly discover a significant mutual trait: Jinny informs Ricky, “I don’t wear a watch”; he responds that he doesn’t either, and, furthermore, that he never needs to because he has an intuitive sense of time that is seldom more than a few minutes off: “Like, I always just seemed to know what time it was anyway. Within a couple minutes. Five minutes the most” (77). This focus on time, coupled with the name Bergson, comes precariously close to symbolic heavy-handedness, *very* uncharacteristic of Munro. It seems, though, that she is risking such heavy-handedness to ensure that the Henri Bergson allusion is clear. The allusion *is* important if we are to recognize in the story, first, Bergson’s concept of *duration*, a moment of suspended time, often epiphanic, wherein the past, present, and future merge, and secondly and very importantly, if we are also to recognize that which Bergson strongly insisted upon: the connection between time, the epiphanic, and the spiritual. In *Creative Consciousness*—regarded by many as Bergson’s most important work, he addresses this connection, in ways that reveal why he is considered a particularly romantic philosopher:

Hence, throughout the whole philosophy of Ideas there is a certain conception of duration, as also a relation of time to eternity. He who

installs himself in becoming sees in duration the very life of things [strong hints of Wordsworth], the fundamental reality...Eternity no longer hovers over time, as an abstraction; it underlies time, as a reality. (317-18)

Jinny Lockyer's experiences in the cornfield and later on the floating bridge with Ricky Bergson partake of the kind of atemporality Henri Bergson describes above. The entire afternoon passes almost instantly, yet a great deal occurs for Jinny. Further, in keeping with Bergson's focus on individual, personal history, Jinny during this strange, surreal afternoon/evening comes face to face with key aspects of *her* personal history, and, as we shall see shortly, these encounters carry significant spiritual import.

Bringing Bergson's points above to Jinny's experiences in "Floating Bridge" reveals a number of important parallels. Again, for Jinny, "ordinary time" seems to pass almost instantaneously. Further, she is constantly returning to and immersing herself in important past experiences, to the extent that—as when she was earlier actually speaking to her absent oncologist—the past and present become nearly indistinguishable for her. Obviously, memory is key to these forays into the past, and, as we have seen, memory holds a crucial place in Bergson's theory of *duration*: "The very basis of our conscious existence is memory, that is to say, the prolongation of the past into the present, or, in a word, *duration*, acting and irreversible" (*Creative Consciousness* 17). Darcy Kitchin deftly encapsulates how Bergson then equates memory with spirit: "Duration is made identical with memory, which is spirit; and spirit, the psychic force or activity at the very basis of our conscious existence, is the prolongation of the past into the present" (Kitchin 126).

Munro's consistent emphasis on open-endedness, inconclusiveness, and uncertainty finds some intriguing parallels in Bergson's sense of the divine. In Bergson's view, the divine is never static. He compares it rather to a "center from which worlds shoot out like rockets in a fireworks display—provided, however, that I do not present this center as a *thing*, but as a continuity of shooting out" (*Creative Consciousness* 248). Finally, Bergson's view of God is certainly not conventionally Christian: "God thus defined, has nothing of the already made; He is unceasing life, action, freedom" (*Creative Consciousness* 248).

Ricky Bergson embodies this sort of “unceasing life, action, freedom,” even, for instance, in his freedom from conventional ways of perceiving and keeping time. He offers Jinny a ride home—an offer she immediately accepts in a very uncharacteristic show of autonomy; she makes no effort to let Neal know she is leaving (nor, incidentally, does Ricky), and she seems entirely prepared to go riding off into the darkness with this near total stranger. It is important to note that from the outset Ricky Bergson is associated with *both* darkness and light—right down to his attire—and also associated with service: “The bright white shirt and black pants were waiter’s clothes. And he had a waiter’s air of patience and alertness” (76).

As we have seen from the outset of “Floating Bridge,” Munro plays literally and symbolically with vacillating darkness and light, and this emphasis becomes even more pronounced in Jinny’s night-time encounter with Ricky Bergson: “They were going west now, towards the brightest part of the sky...[Ricky] had not yet turned the car lights on” (78). He explains to Jinny that if he were to turn the lights on “then the sky would go dark and everything would go dark and you wouldn’t be able to see where you were” (79). Paradoxically, Jinny has to remain in the darkness for a while in order to keep track of the light—in order to discover “where she is.” Significantly, unlike the controlling Neal, Ricky consistently checks with Jinny to ensure she approves of the moves he is making: “That okay with you? ‘Yes,’ said Jinny” (79). Jinny is aware that this is a foreign, completely uncharacteristic, and potentially dangerous sojourn for her, but Jinny’s earlier experiences in the cornfield, her assertion with Neal, and then with both June and Matt Bergson, seem to have afforded her a new sense of courage and independence. She recognizes that this courage and independence are what she has been lacking in her “old, normal life”: “If this was happening back in her old, normal life, it was possible that she might now begin to be frightened. If she was back in her old, normal life, she would not be here at all” (80).

Unlike Jinny, Ricky Bergson is fully aware of where they are and where they are headed, and Jinny entrusts herself to him. Ricky stops the vehicle, and following his instructions, Jinny gets out and walks down the road ahead of him: “The sky seemed to be lighter ahead and there was a different sound—something like mild and rhythmical conversation” (81). What Jinny hears is water; they are walking out onto a floating

bridge. Earlier, I drew attention to Munro's employment of richly ambivalent water symbolism. We see a further expansion of this in "Floating Bridge" wherein Munro uses water to symbolically convey the fluidity of time. This, too, is in keeping with Henri Bergson's equating time and psychic experience with water/fluidity. For example, he points to our illusion that our experiences are separate, autonomous units, rather than undifferentiated, unceasing flow:

Our attention fixes on them because they interest us more, but each of them is borne by the fluid mass of our whole psychical existence. Each is only the best illuminated point of a moving zone which comprises all that we feel or think or will—all, in short, that we are at any given moment. It is this entire zone which in reality makes up our state. Now, states thus defined cannot be regarded as distinct elements. They continue each other in an endless flow. (*Creative Consciousness* 3)

Jinny finds herself out on a bridge with Ricky Bergson, but this is, very importantly, a *floating* bridge. This setting and situation present a number of metaphorical and symbolic possibilities, but key among these in my reading of Jinny's spiritual development is that the bridge is as close as it could conceivably be to being at one with the water it crosses. Again, the water it crosses symbolizes life *and* death, reminding us that Jinny is situated at the very juncture of life and death. Jinny has broken free of the control of her husband Neal, simply by being here with Ricky. She steps even further into a much needed autonomy in what becomes a mildly sexual encounter with the young man who has guided her into this surrealistic place of light and darkness, bridge and water. Objectively, Jinny is not taking tremendous risks here, but, for her, what she has entered into and continues to pursue is quite radical.

Jinny's sense of being almost *in* the water and the vacillating light and darkness, coupled with Ricky's sexual and romantic gestures, produce for her a powerful epiphanic experience. A number of the story's symbolic and thematic aspects converge upon this epiphanic occasion, central among them the shifts between light and darkness: "the sky seemed to be lighter ahead," but "'the water's very dark'" (81). Neither Jinny nor the reader is allowed to lose sight of her ongoing struggle with cancer and death *or* with her recent reprieve—her new lease on life. Jinny's vacillating focus between life and death is

reflected by the water and by the vacillation between light and darkness *caused* by Ricky's turning the headlights off and on. All of these converging effects and forces are held—in a manner of speaking—in a Bergsonian sort of time vessel wherein time loses its conventional compartments of past, present, and future. Again, this situation invites Henri Bergson's perspective that the various "states" that are presented here—physical, emotional, sensory "cannot be regarded as distinct elements. They continue each other in an endless flow."

The spiritual implications of Jinny's experience here are clear. Bergson defines memory as spirit because from his metaphysical perspective, memory is the avenue by which we access atemporal *duration*, and a commonly agreed upon characteristic of the spiritual is its atemporality. Although Karen Smythe makes no mention of Henri Bergson in her study of Alice Munro and Mavis Gallant, she makes a point that reinforces the connections I am making here between Bergson's theories and "Floating Bridge." Smythe argues that the kind of "queer bright moments" that Jinny experiences in the story are "epiphanically eternal, atemporal" moments (142). Usually, Bergson notes, "we think with only a small part of our past," but in moments of *duration*, such as the one Jinny is experiencing, "it is with our entire past, including the original bent of our soul, that we desire, will and act" (*Creative Consciousness* 5).

Imagination is also crucial in quests toward the spiritual, and amid all of the stimulation that is bombarding Jinny on the floating bridge in the "Borneo Swamp," she continues quietly to imagine:

The slight movement of the bridge made her imagine that all the trees and the reed beds were set on saucers of earth and the road was a floating ribbon of earth and underneath it all was water. And the water seemed so still, but it could not really be still because if you tried to keep your eye on one reflected star, you saw how it winked and changed shape and slid from sight. Then it was back again—but maybe not the same one. (82)

We note again Munro's shift to the second person in epiphanic moments, but more important to this occasion is Munro's metaphoric depiction of trying to "keep your eye" on "one reflected star," and realizing that the reflection—like the overall reality we experience—is ever changing; we thus recognize that the flow never stops and never

ends. Thus, Jinny's imaginative flight here provides her a cosmic view that embraces the earth, the water, and the stars; and it is a view or vision that conveys the constant change and flux of the cosmos, of life and of consciousness.

Munro, however, will not remain in such explicitly cosmic, transcendental realms for very long. She invariably grounds such flights fairly quickly in the "ordinary," the physical and, quite often, in the sexual. In "Floating Bridge," the movement toward the sexual is relatively oblique, but there nonetheless: "It was not until this moment that Jinny realized she didn't have her hat" (82). That is, it is not until this moment that Jinny recognizes and feels self-conscious about her exposure—her nakedness. This discovery shifts Jinny's earlier quite negative perceptions of Matt Bergson's navel: "When she had been scared of seeing the mound of Matt's navel with the purple shirt plastered over it, he had not minded looking at her bleak knob" (82). There is a suggestion here of Pauline's aversion overcome—one more aspect of Jinny's perception of others and self broadened and deepened.

Jinny's strange and powerful afternoon and evening culminate in an equally strange and powerful epiphany—a moment that combines *duration* and Eros. Ricky "slipped his arms around her as if there was no question at all about what he was doing and he could take all the time he wanted to do it" (82). Ricky kisses Jinny—"He kissed her mouth"—triggering an experience of *duration*. All considerations of past and future merge into the flow of the present moment:

It seemed to her that this was the first time ever that she had participated in a kiss that was an event in itself. The whole story, all by itself. A tender prologue, an efficient pressure, a wholehearted probing and receiving, a lingering thanks, and a drawing away satisfied. (82)

The "whole story" suggests that Jinny's entire life narrative flows into the moment of this kiss, and this coming together of Jinny and Ricky presents a particular kind of Eros. The parallel to D.H. Lawrence's *The Virgin and the Gipsy* continues here in that at the conclusion of Lawrence's novella, although Yvette Saywell and the Gipsy undress and climb into bed together to prevent hypothermia (significantly, they have narrowly escaped a flood—water), they do not have intercourse; exhausted and in shock, they fall asleep. Jinny, too, is naked in the sense of being bald and hatless. Like

Lawrence's characters, Jinny and Ricky do not have intercourse either—the possibility actually seems quite remote—but there is an erotic power in their kiss that, for Jinny, renders having sex almost irrelevant. This is a kiss that actually alters time. For Jinny, a bonding occurs that transcends time in a way that only spiritual experiences can.

The final two paragraphs of “Floating Bridge” draw together numerous threads of the foregoing narrative. Jinny is “back in time,” but definitely altered. Her movement toward greater independence from Neal is strongly hinted at in her assessment of him as “back on dry land”—as opposed to being in the fluid realm where she has just been kissed. She sees Neal as “giddy and doubtful...Rocking on the edge of his future” (3). Jinny implies much here about her newfound autonomy from Neal in that with complete equanimity she identifies “*his* future” (emphasis mine 83), not “*the*” or “*their*” future. This is followed by the near dismissive “No matter.”

Munro concludes “Floating Bridge” with one final epiphany—one that suggests much more than it actually says: “What she felt was a lighthearted sort of compassion, almost like laughter. A swish of tender hilarity, getting the better of all her sores and hollows, for the time given” (83). There is in these two epiphanic final sentences much that is central to Munro's implicit spiritual vision. Jinny feels a “lighthearted sort of compassion, almost like laughter” that is connected to her body, her sexuality, her pain—“all her sores and hollows.” There is also the continued sense of the fluid in “a swish of tender hilarity,” and this sense of the fluid movement of time might also account for the story's final three words, “the time given.” With these words, the narrative flows back to the beginning of the story and Jinny's recollection of her first attempt to leave Neal—an attempt wherein she lost her resolve and which thereafter became a source of belittling humor. Afterwards, Jinny had asked Neal if he would finally have come looking for her if he found her missing. His reply—“Of course. Given time”—is somewhat humorous, but more an example of Neal's condescending, “benevolent” control. The inversion of the final words of the story—“the time given”—suggests an inversion of Jinny's position vis a vis Neal—an increased autonomy. This paragraph is markedly open-ended, inconclusive, in process, but it paradoxically conveys a sense of wholeness. Here, as in much of Jinny's experiences over the course of the afternoon and evening, we find a sense of what W.R. Martin accurately claims we encounter often in Munro's work: a

sense that if life is to be fulfilling, “the touchable and the profane must at some point meet the mysterious and the divine” (141).

Conclusion

The foregoing study of religious and spiritual aspects in the writing of Alice Munro emerged for me out of a question I have grappled with for some time: In a culture that has over the past two centuries embarked on an unprecedented abandonment of its collective religious framework, what has become of the sacred, the divine—broadly speaking, the spiritual? Have they disappeared? Or, to use William Closson James’s term, have they “relocated”? My exploration of spiritual/religious aspects in Alice Munro’s fiction has gone some distance to answering this question for me, and providing an overview of that answer seems an appropriate and effective way of concluding my exploration.

The 20th Century and the early years of the 21st have presented some profound challenges in the realm of religion/spirituality. The foregoing chapters have demonstrated not only the complexity of these challenges as they manifest in the microcosm of Alice Munro’s fiction, but also the complexity of these challenges as they manifest in the broader culture. However, this much may be stated quite simply: First, traditional, denominational Christianity has significantly declined. Secondly, virtually every domain of communication—from written fiction to Hollywood movies, to popular music, to television series such as *Angels in America* and *Six Feet Under*—has demonstrated an increased interest in matters that may generally be described as religious/spiritual. In short, what Jacques Derrida terms “the return of the religious” (“Faith” 5) is a real phenomenon.

Thus, despite the decline in the past century and a half of participation in traditional, denominational religion, we in Western culture do not yet seem inclined to consign entirely the sacred, the divine, spirituality/religion to the proverbial dustbins of history. Although we—like so many of Munro’s protagonists/narrators and presumably Munro herself—recognize serious deficiencies in traditional religious paradigms, we are not prepared to do without some kind of avenue to the spiritual realm. Further,

modern/postmodern technological consumerism has, it seems, actually increased our need for such avenues. For example, Gianni Vattimo argues that the “return of the religious” may “in the majority of cases be traced back to a rejection of modernization as destructive of the authentic roots of existence” (80-81).

The “return of the religious” thus acknowledged, however, nothing in my examination of Alice Munro’s fiction or of the literary-cultural milieu out of which it emerges has sufficiently convinced me that literature—Alice Munro’s or anyone else’s—can ever *replace* traditional religion. The most straightforward reason for this is that no work or works of literature can ever be subscribed to collectively enough to constitute what we have usually described as religion. Tolkien cults may spring up, replete with arcane runic messages and myths, or millions may read *Conversations with God* and all of its sequels, but no one would seriously contend that such phenomena, despite their religious characteristics, constitute bona fide religion. In his essay on *Northrop Frye’s Late Notebooks*, Terry Eagleton makes a number of perceptive points germane to this discussion. Eagleton writes, for instance, “Literature as religion is doomed to failure. For one thing, the cultivation of the former involves too few people to be a plausible substitute for the latter” (9).

However, I believe the foregoing chapters have sufficiently demonstrated that although literature cannot replace religious faith or creed, genuine engagement or participation with some literature can provide avenues to certain kinds of religious/spiritual *experience*. Again, Eagleton captures this aspect when he writes that art or literature “can restore an aura of mystery to a bleakly disenchanted world” (9). He goes on to make a somewhat more specific and demanding claim for literature/art: “It is art which will now answer the ultimate moral question: What finally do we live by?” Eagleton continues with a point that resonates convincingly with Alice Munro’s epiphanic fiction:

And though the answer may come only in sporadic flashes known as epiphanies, heard between two waves, in the ominous echo of an Indian cave, in the moment in the rose garden or in a sudden shout in the street, it can scarcely be claimed by the more conventionally religious that the Almighty’s own utterances are either less infrequent or less enigmatic. (9)

I am entirely prepared to extend Derrida's claim to Munro's writing, if only on the basis of how, on a number of occasions when reading Munro, particularly epiphanic passages in her work, I have personally experienced what Coral Anne Howells claims Munro's art can provide: "unaccommodated moments of grace and insight which far exceed anything her characters or her readers might anticipate" (136).

Typically, of course, Munro herself makes no claims for her work as offering any kind of religious/spiritual insight or guidance. Karen Smythe accurately notes, "Munro does not advocate a modernist's religion of art" (127). On the contrary, Munro "uses the 'unavoidable collision...of religion and life,' of fiction and fact, to question the consoling ability and ethics of an ordering faith, be it religious or aesthetic" (Smythe 127). There are also others who firmly resist any spiritual claims for Munro's writing. For example, in *Reading In Alice Munro's Archives*, JoAnn McCaig asserts,

Ours is a secular culture in which religious or spiritual solutions to human dilemmas are seen, at best, as empty proselytizing and, at worst, as insidious mind control, and certainly, in Munro's work, spiritual questions remain unanswerable. Characters who embrace religion, whether traditional or fundamentalist or New Age, are generally seen as victims, as misguided. (129)

First, although Munro *is* consistently hard on characters who simplistically or arrogantly embrace traditional, fundamentalist or New Age religions, she bestows credibility and dignity upon those such as the religiously struggling Enid in "The Love of a Good Woman" or Flora Grieves, the long-suffering Cameronian in "Friend of My Youth"—characters who genuinely engage in the struggle to find religious insights. Consider Munro's early character, Del Jordan, and her forays into various denominations in "Age of Faith," and it becomes immediately apparent that Munro's approach to religion is consistently nuanced and multileveled. Secondly, McCaig does not seem to recognize that resisting pat answers for "spiritual questions" is not tantamount to leaving the question behind. I agree that Munro is seldom spiritually explicit, and she never proselytizes. As I have argued from the outset, the spiritual/religious vision in Munro's writing is primarily *implicit*, and it is through its implicit nature that Munro's vision gains its remarkable force.

Munro's spiritual/religious vision achieves its implicit force through the manner in which Munro affirms the "ordinary" experiences of her "ordinary" characters, and the manner in which she prepares the way for her readers to participate in this affirmation. This participation *may* involve a kind of "tying back," *religare*, of the ineffable nature of these "ordinary" experiences of "ordinary" characters. Although transcendence is certainly never guaranteed for the reader in such participatory moments, it is possible. It is this remarkable ability to create this sort of participatory experience for her readers, coupled with her brilliantly subtle realism and her profoundly human recognition of and approach toward the mystery at the heart of "ordinary" experience, that fulfill Tim Struther's claim that Munro is "a genuinely religious writer" ("Alice Munro" 294). I will try to ground all of this abstraction by returning to a specific example from Munro's work.

In "Circle of Prayer," Trudy, a spirited but beaten down "ordinary" single mother, is working the evening shift at the local group home for handicapped adults, and she "unaccountably" recalls moments from the honeymoon of her now broken marriage. She remembers how "she stood outside her own body, which ached then from the pleasures of love," and heard "the clattering, faltering, persistent piano music" produced by her lonely mother-in-law in her, by then, mostly deserted resort hotel. Trudy's recollection triggers a "retroactive epiphany"—an epiphanic moment which, like so many in Munro's oeuvre, is interrogative in nature. The question posed on this occasion is the essentially metaphysical, "religious" question, "Is that all?"

Such moments in Munro's writing, in themselves, merit the description "religious" and/or "spiritual." However, what makes Munro's writing "genuinely religious" is the kind of response that follows—the kind of moment we encounter time and again in Munro's work. Recall that, earlier, Trudy and her daughter Robin had argued in ways that every parent and sixteen year old on the planet will immediately recognize and understand. Later at work, Trudy receives an entirely "ordinary" call from Robin asking for a ride home. As readers we enter into the "ordinary" and yet powerful exchange that follows:

The phone rings right beside her head.

"Are you still there?" Robin says. You're not gone."

“I’m still here.” (273)

On its own, this brief exchange would not, of course, withstand the interpretive weight I am about to place upon it. It does not, however, stand on its own. In the narrative preceding this exchange, Munro has brought us into Trudy’s relationship with her ex-husband, Dan; with her “circle of prayer” friend, Janet; with the patients she works with in the group home; and—most importantly—with her daughter, Robin. We have already participated in the typically Munrovian multileveled interaction among all of these characters; thus, the telephone conversation between Trudy and Robin is invested with a profundity that far exceeds its few, seemingly “ordinary” words. In fact, in this cumulative brief exchange there resides more implicit love, compassion, forgiveness, empathy, agape than in, say, the entire length of Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*. There is in Robin’s request and Trudy’s response what one of Alice Munro’s mentors, Ethel Wilson, would have deemed “a beautiful action.” It has an “operative grace” and is “divine and human in posture and intention” (Wilson 114).

The preceding chapters have examined many such moments in Munro’s writing, and, I believe, have effectively demonstrated that her writing has much to contribute to the ongoing, very human quest to understand ourselves and each other as “ordinary” spiritual beings.

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