Roberta's Raspberry Bombe and Critical Indifference in Alice Munro's "Labor Day Dinner"

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Critics who have written about Alice Munro's 1982 collection *The Moons of Jupiter* have tended to read the stories as progressing towards more confident, less self-deluding female protagonists, culminating in the title story, which comes last in the book.[1] However, what often gets overlooked in this argument is the way that "The Moons of Jupiter" is itself rendered more comprehensible as a "culmination" in terms of the collection's other stories. A closer reading of "Labor Day Dinner," and particularly its main character, Roberta, reveals much about the process by which female and male characters' self-awareness goes awry in *The Moons of Jupiter*. Munro articulates Roberta's failure to comprehend her situation in terms of her relation to the semiotically charged spaces that she occupies and fails to occupy; additionally, Roberta's comprehension is itself situated in relation to the others' understanding of space, particularly her partner George's. Metonymic connections between bodies and buildings run throughout the story, and the moments when those spaces threaten to rupture form a pattern in which the failure to understand the spaces one occupies can result in a horrific threatening of self.

The ending of "Labor Day Dinner" is as surprising for a reader as it is for the main characters, Roberta and George. As they return from a lively and sociable dinner at their friend Valerie's house, they are, without any obvious foreshadowing, nearly killed by a car travelling across their path (314). The narrative, which primarily deals with the turbulent history between Roberta and George to this point, suddenly becomes "as unconnected with previous and future events as the ghost car was" (315). The incident calls the process of narrativization — the connection of "previous and future events" — itself into question, but leaves other important questions open: why narrativize at all? Why connect a series of events when they can so easily be undone?

A clue to these questions is present in the odd shift in narrative voice that immediately precedes the near collision. Throughout the story, the narrative is focalized through Roberta, George, and Roberta's elder daughter, Angela. Without warning, the narrative switches from Roberta's thoughts, which are easy to identify and identify with, to an unfamiliar, omniscient voice: "Along the second crossroad, from the west, a dark-green 1969 Dodge is travelling at between eighty and ninety miles an hour. Two young men are returning from a party to their home in Logan" (314). It is impossible for these specific details — the make and colour of the car, their point of departure and destination — to be known by Roberta, who focalizes the story before and after this moment. Thus, the sudden switch in narrative voice not only formally mirrors the unconnectedness of the event, but also draws attention to the fact that until this point the story has been focalized. By casting attention back on the previous changes in focalization, this momentary switch away from any neatly identifiable voice works to destabilize a lasting mental embodiment of (identification with) the characters by a reader: the reader cannot obviously be broken open along with the main characters, though the fear of having to witness their dismemberment becomes very real when the other car appears.[2] The horror produced by the oncoming car, then, simultaneously relies on and complicates previous identifications — previous imagined embodiments in the characters — that a reader has been invited to make.

Moreover, a close analysis of the "ghost car" also complicates any complete *disconnection* between the narrative's past and jarring present: the car literally haunts Roberta's earlier narration. When he/she suddenly appears, the unfamiliar omniscient voice describes the car as "a huge, dark flash, without lights" (315). Furthermore, we learn that the young man driving the car "sees the road by the light of the moon" (315). These descriptions of the car and its occupants link it to the "gibbous moon" that Roberta has been contemplating just previous to the narrative shift. The "gibbous moon" — a moon where "the illuminated portion exceeds a semicircle, but is less than a circle" (*OED*) — is defined, in a sense, by a dark mark just as the "ghost car" is. Although the moon and the car are by no means the same thing, they do recall each other, and thus provide an apparent bridge — albeit an alienated one — between the moment prior to and the moment of the near acci-

dent. Roberta's earlier thoughts *can* be read as foreshadowing the near accident, but only, ironically, after the event has occurred.

Regardless of whether it is read as being foreshadowed, this moment of crossing between perspectives does cast new light on the thought Roberta has just before the narrative shift: "She'd stay on this edge if she could" (314). The "edge" to which Roberta refers is the edge of "indifference" that has allowed her to "revive" George's interest in her following the "silent fight" that has driven the story's main narrative (312, 314, 307).[3] The "edge" subtly and figuratively straddles and marks the shift between the clearly focalized, identifiable narrative voice and the omniscient, unfamiliar one: the movement from Roberta's so-called "indifference" to George, to a truly indifferent narrative voice. In a sense, the "edge of in*difference*" (emphasis added) can also be taken literally, as a switch from a coherent, relatively focused narrative, to an *undifferentiated* moment, where another narrative — that of the young men in the ghost car — intersects Roberta's with an equal and jarring force. In other words, the story itself may become indifferent to its main characters, a speculation supported by the details about the young men's "green 1969 Dodge" and the mention that they "are returning from a party to their home in Logan" (314). Roberta and George have no way of knowing these details, but they are also returning from a party, a coincidence that gives both "parties" an odd symmetry and one that makes both stories equally (un)important.

The notion of mutually haunting "ghost" narratives thus becomes important for understanding this remarkably complex story, because the gap of indifference between the trajectories of the two cars can be interpreted as a figure for the haunting gap between the multiple points of view that precede the near collision. Read in this way, the coincidences among the different points of view of Roberta, George, and Angela "haunt" each other to form a series of interacting narrative components that are not exactly disconnected, but cannot be linked in a neatly causal or linear way either. Much like the two cars, they are held spatially apart through techniques of focalization, and yet can meet (in horrific ways) at any moment. Equipped with this "haunting" understanding of the way the different points of view interact in the story, a return to the main narrative can reveal much more about the way that Munro constructs notions of self-awareness, power, and horror.

Building on the work of Linda Hutcheon, Robert McGill has employed the term "geographic metafiction" to describe the way that Munro's fiction "even as it configures space and place, examines its own ability to do so" (103). To some extent, this term is useful in describing a process taking place throughout the main text of "Labor Day Dinner." But, as with McGill's analysis, the putting into practice of the term is far more insightful than the term itself.[4] This could be said to a degree of any critical term, but the observation is particularly relevant when reading Munro. Like the opposing trajectories of the cars, the narrative of "Labor Day Dinner" gains its meaning through spatialized relationships between similar-but-different people and objects. In Munro's writing, each specific instance of a term or image, such as "party" or "the moon," is complicated and compelled by its previous and following utterances.[5] As with the irreducible differences between the gibbous moon and ghost car, for example, "Labor Day Dinner" steers readers away from conflating separate instances of apparently similar or connected images. The problem, then, in applying a term like "geographic metafiction," is that it collapses the spatial-temporal distance between instances of similar images, thereby eliminating differences in the name of utility. If Munro is making a case against unified "understanding," she is doing so by making a case against the collapse of "life" into a series of singular abstractions.[6] In other words, McGill's term is useful, but "useful" is paradoxically the style of conceptual organization that the term purports to be calling into question. Perhaps Helen Hoy puts it best when she says that Munro's images are too "unforgettable" and "indigestible" to be subsumed under a blanket term (5).

As I said, though, McGill's term is useful, if problematized, as a tool for understanding Munro's writing, and this is especially the case in reading "Labor Day Dinner." From the opening lines of the story, the configuring (and disfiguring) of space is intertwined with the progression of the narrative and its development of meaning. Before it is clear that Roberta is the focalizer, Valerie's house, with its "splendid elm trees" and "a decorative outline of lighter-colored bricks" around the windows, is represented as a welcoming, inviting space for both readers and the characters (290). The permeability and openness of Valerie's house is gestured at repeatedly, such as when George hears Angela playing "the subtle congratulations . . . of 'Eine kleine Nachtmusik'" from outside, and when Roberta overhears her younger daughter, Eva,

speaking anxiously about hating "having to leave things" (306, 307). Beyond this permeability, it is important to note that Valerie's house is represented as neutral ground during separate moments of narration focalized through George and Roberta. To an extent, the space functions unproblematically for both characters *as* a space, a surprise given George's preoccupation elsewhere with "collapses, miscalculations, [and] structural treacheries" (300).

Perhaps the unproblematic representation of Valerie's farmhouse can be partially attributed to the way that she herself represents (or rather does not represent) the space. Beyond its permeability, the farm is composed of spaces with ambiguous functions, such as the dairy house, of which Valerie muses to Roberta she "should rent it to an artist," and the "little brick-walled, brick-paved area" that she "does not like to call a patio" because "you can't have a patio on a farmhouse" (299, 298). George and Roberta, whose interpretations of their own living space are inundated with personal biases, ironically both find themselves more at home in Valerie's under-represented space, largely because it can serve whatever function that is required. Valerie's own ambiguous treatment of spaces calls attention to the processes by which others invest them with semiotic and personal meanings.

Before contrasting Valerie's house to Roberta and George's farm with its "aluminum-frame" windows and shaggy pines, it is also worth recognizing the way that the indeterminate space does and does not recall the indeterminate narrative space articulating the near accident towards the story's end (297, 315). It seems quite likely that Valerie's house is so welcoming to both the visiting characters, and at least to this reader, simply because there is no identification to be horrifically undermined by the indeterminacy of the space. When the story opens, and a group of relatively unknown characters enter an unknown place, very little is at stake. Later, remarkably, Roberta (who has by now become the one "to whom . . . wrong has been done" by George) does experience some anxiety over Valerie's permeable house (293). As Eva complains about having to leave the farm to go to school, Roberta "braces herself" to hear what she fears most: the mention of a potential breakup with George (307). For an instant the safely uninvested space of Valerie's home becomes dangerous, and it is worth noting that Munro uses an architectural metaphor — "bracing"— to describe Roberta's fear. While Valerie's house does provide a neutral ground, its lack of limited, defined

boundaries leaves it open to being intersected by a frightening, other narrative from outside (or before).

This uneasy "bracing" is extremely interesting, though, for reasons beyond Roberta's relationship to space. Roberta's fear of Eva's unspoken thoughts recalls the near accident at the end of the story because both are unavoidable moments of horror. However, unlike the impersonally narrated scene of the near accident, the moment of Eva's near-confession (though not the confession itself) occurs through three separate points of view: George's, Angela's, and finally Roberta's. First, Angela "proceeds from the 'Turkish March' to a try at 'Eine kleine Nachtmusik'" (304). Next, George, who has been scything to Mozart's "cheerful, workaday, 'Turkish March'" receives the "subtle congratulations" of the second song (306). Finally, Roberta hears "a pause in Angela's playing," and it is at that moment that "Eva says sharply, 'Oh, I don't want to leave! I hate leaving'" (307). Although each character hears the pause, only Roberta hears Eva's comment, and her narrative section is the only one that does not mention the beginning of the next song. Thus, the first two repetitions of the pause anticipate Roberta's encounter with the same moment, but the outcome, and the fact that the music does not resume, also suggest that Roberta is in the privileged position of being the one on whom the narrative focuses. As with the switch in the story's final scene, the pause in Angela's playing uses narrative shifts to create a jarring, unsettling effect, but the outcome of these two scenes is, critically, different: while the final scene effectively leaves the narrative disoriented and alienated from any single perspective, the multiple viewpoints at the dinner draw together to emphasize a moment that is crucial to understanding Roberta's anxieties.

In the moment when Roberta "braces herself," the narrative braces her central role, but this does not lead to any sort of comfortable closure.[7] This insecurity is at least partly built into the term "brace." While in one sense the word implies the addition of strength, such as the way that the repetition of the same moment braces its importance, "bracing oneself," in the sense that Roberta uses it at that moment, also connotes a current weakness. The duality inherent in this phrase should not be underestimated in "Labor Day Dinner": the more one braces him- or herself, the more potentially painful the outcome. As in the scenes leading up to Eva's near confession, the ambiguity of "bracing" operates on two levels. Roberta knows but cannot stop what Eva may say, and the

narrative in a more general way anticipates some coming event — the pause in the music — but the outcome is unpredictable and may perhaps lead to nothing at all.

By extricating and keeping apart the duality inherent in "bracing," it becomes easier to interpret the ways that Munro uses space and architectural metaphor to produce and haunt meaning in the story. Valerie describes George's vision of a "self-sufficient, remote, productive life in the country" as "idealistic" (296). Though Roberta listens to the comment with a "basic disregard," Valerie — the destabilizer of coherent space — gestures toward the core contradiction in George's desire with her use of the word "idealistic." The myth of the self-sufficient agriculturalist[8] is, like all idealism, potentially undone by opposing and contradictory forces. Several other elements of Valerie's comment also complicate and resonate with the notion of "bracing." First, she realizes that George would "hate to hear [her] say that," a passing comment that recalls and doubles Roberta's terror of Eva's "sharp" comment. The other important feature of Valerie's comment is its past-tense narration. Like all mention of George and Roberta's farm in the story (except the final one), George's idealistic vision takes place before the chronology of the main narrative. This temporal displacement and its continuous eruption into present details effectively demonstrates, rather than "saying," the ongoing failure of their farm as a stable, "self-sufficient" space. In other words, time is constantly deconstructing coherent space. In an odd way, the temporal shifts in the narrative continuously "say" what the characters least want to hear: that they cannot avoid the horrific collapses they most fear.

The relationship between the two houses is further articulated through a series of contrasts. As mentioned, the "decorative outline of lighter-coloured bricks" around Valerie's window contrasts with the sturdier but much uglier "aluminum-frame windows" of George and Roberta's farmhouse (290, 297). While Valerie's house has been allowed to retain its original, aging exterior, George has undertaken what Roberta calls "essential and laborious repairs" (297). The irony, of course, is that as George attempts to maintain and brace the "shell of the house" (298), he panics constantly about "structural treacheries," which manifest exactly in the places where Valerie has allowed her house to take on character with age (300).

Contrasts such as this one pervade the story, but, perhaps surprisingly at first, they are often focalized through Roberta. Although George does consciously ponder the deck and barn briefly, his thoughts, when apparent, are primarily occupied with issues of labour: "the day's jobs" and the "cat as freeloader" (300, 302). It is through Roberta's perspective that we learn how "George has figured out the order" of renovations, while "she has no general picture of it" (297-98). This difference between the characters' internal thoughts does not necessarily suggest that George is not preoccupied with maintaining space (his actions certainly suggest that he is), but it more importantly situates Roberta as constantly anxious and aware of her relationship to the space of the farm.

The content of her conversation with Valerie reveals a crucial hint as to why architectural details feature so prominently in Roberta's thoughts. At one point, she confesses that with her ex-husband Andrew she was consistently "setting things up to find the failure in him" (305). She goes on to speculate that perhaps George "has to set up failures" (305). With this in mind, it is important to note that elsewhere Roberta imagines that George is "steadily manufacturing and wordlessly pouring" hatred toward her (292). Architecturally based descriptions of experience are far too numerous to list, but they share one important link: the association of architecture with mental and physical productions and collapses, or the metonymic linkage of buildings with bodies.

Although the architectural anxiety over bodily space is primarily articulated through the viewpoint of Roberta, several of George's thoughts confirm that he is thoroughly implicated in this aspect of her mental production. As George scythes Valerie's yard, he recalls the way that his preoccupation with fixing his barn "had seeped into his dreams, which were full of collapses, miscalculations [and] structural treacheries" (300). Later, in a thought that appears to be nearly unconscious, George wonders at the way Roberta has become so susceptible to "such touchiness, tearfulness, weariness, such a *threat of collapse*" (306; emphasis added). The repetition of the word "collapse" links Roberta and, through a series of displacements further traced out below, her aging body, to George's barn. Roberta's preoccupation with space can thus be seen to float somewhere between George's internal thoughts and her own speculations on his actions. Early on, her sense of self exists in the gap created by his "murderous silence" (292).

Roberta's aging body is linked to the space of the barn through another key element, one which is indeed the keystone of this whole argument (and the story): labour. The problem with Ildikó De Papp Carrington's reading of "Labor Day Dinner" is that she assumes that "by combining the points of view of three characters, Munro introduces a new technique to criticize her protagonist" (155), when in fact, this technique could be read as complicating criticism itself. The issue of labour in the story complicates matters enormously, because "labour" as it is articulated though George's point of view has a somewhat dunderheaded and parodic aspect to it. Even George recognizes his potential to become "a comic dad, a fulminator, a bungler" as he ponders the "cat as freeloader" (302). This parodic potential in reading George's character can again be witnessed through Roberta's eyes earlier in the story, when she talks about his perception of a dress as "not only a woman's intention of doing no serious work but her persistent wish to be admired and courted" (292). I will not speculate on the serious work that goes into being admired here, but it is worth noting that George can be seen to take his own labour so seriously that it becomes absurd, at least from the comfortable vantage of being a reader outside the story. Adding this parodic potential to a reading would not only complicate the claim that Munro is criticizing Roberta but may simultaneously demonstrate the opposite.

As indicated, the key to this way of reading the text rests in the relationship between labour and the barn (and, according to the substituting logic of George's view, Roberta). We learn that George wishes to turn the barn into a studio, and furthermore that Roberta "meant to keep busy illustrating books" (299, 297). But while these are in theory their professions, the only actually exchangeable labour in the story is George's scything, and Roberta's raspberry bombe, the dessert she brings to Valerie's. Although at one point there is a glimpse of George's "wooden doughnut" sculptures (299), they are quickly withdrawn from view, and Roberta finds that when it comes to her illustrating she has no time and "nowhere to work" (297). The narrative foregrounding of seemingly endless, traditional farm labour ironically serves to undermine George's non-traditional vision of the barn as a studio, largely because farm labour itself is undervalued by such a vision.

Going further, the initial "threat of collapse" that haunts George (and through his projections, Roberta), occurs at the site of George's

ideal labour, suggesting that he fears not (only?) a collapse of the barn and Roberta, but of his own artistic production. At a point where Roberta focalizes the narrative, she notes that presently "all George's work is in the front of the house, in the old parlor" (299). Fearing the collapse of his ideal, remote artistic space, the barn, George anti-socially isolates himself in the supposedly social space of the parlour, in turn putting "a sheet tacked up over the window" (299). His "idealistic" desire to be "self-sufficient, remote, and productive" may come at the expense of his seriousness, making him into the very "bungler" he wishes to avoid becoming. Upon a close reading, for instance, George is repeatedly associated with a "chicken" — in all senses of the word — as he sits on his patio to "eat his *eggs* there and *brood* about the day's jobs" (300; emphasis added). In a sense, Munro uses George's point of view not (only) to "criticize her protagonist," Roberta, but to ironize the fragile space from which George criticizes. In terms of the reading I have been forwarding, much of George's horrific (and in this case humorous) fear of collapsing space results from his self-deluding desire to be independent, to be shelled-off from the world, to be forever infantile.

In fact, the image of George-as-chicken has further implications when considered in combination with his anxieties over productive and reproductive spaces. His obsession with enclosure — in addition to blocking the parlour, he builds an "eight-foot-high wire fence around the garden" (302) — and his association with chickens haunts Angela's recollection of Roberta as a young mother, whose pregnant stomach is described as an egg (304). Although Angela's thought is not connected directly with George, one of its haunting implications is that his "labour" to enclose space into an egg-like shell (recall George's attempts to reconstruct the "shell of the house"), functions as an anxious projection onto the house and perhaps, metonymically speaking, Roberta's body. His nasty comment about Roberta's "flabby" armpits reflects a deep anxiety about the unstoppable progression of life — from childbirth, to nourishment, to aging, and death (292).

However, while it can be asserted that Munro's construction of George serves as a critique of masculinity at least paralleling Carrington's reading of Roberta, it is also crucial to note that, as with other details, George's association with egg-like enclosure is haunted through multiple points of view. While George is the one who recalls brooding over his eggs, Roberta recalls his effort to reconstruct the "shell of the house,"

and, of course, Angela evokes the more explicit connection of eggs to pregnancy. Because of these multiple, haunting viewpoints, it is difficult to pinpoint some clear causal source of the anxiety, and even to pin down whether George is chicken-esque. Are George's anxieties about his artistic labour being projected onto Roberta, or are her own anxieties about aging and artistic collapse causing George's? Does Angela's own fertile age produce her memory of the egg-like belly of Roberta or is she merely attuned to George's brooding? These questions are fundamentally unanswerable, and they are unanswerable for the same reason that the near collision at the story's end does not allow for a single dominant narrative: their relationship is spatially articulated, consistently held apart but for brief moments of horrific intersection. Oddly, the indeterminacy of viewpoint itself may offhandedly valorize one point of view, Valerie's. Her comfort with ambiguous, changing space ultimately enables the other characters to temporarily drop many of their anxieties over labour, or lack thereof.

If the trajectories of the cars at the story's end are read as ghost narratives generated by the irreducible spatial gap between them, a crucial element from the story serves as a counterpoint to the image. Roberta's raspberry bombe may be read as temporarily and constructively closing many of the gaps among labour, productivity, and the characters' haunting narratives in general. Semiotically speaking, this makes sense; an item of social and physical nourishment counterbalances one of death and disconnection. Several details bear out this reading. In the story, descriptions of the bombe gradually come to suggest that the delectable dessert allows Roberta to at least temporarily see matters of architecture, aging, and the body in a similar way to Valerie. Through a pattern of seepage, or leakage, the bombe allows Roberta to reach a temporarily liberating, if temporally fraught, state of indifference.

The raspberry bombe is introduced early in the story, significantly just after the first description of Valerie's home. We learn that the dessert is "made from raspberries picked on their own farm," but this statement is quickly changed to "George's farm" (290). This timid retraction is the first indicator of a focalizing voice in the story, and in a single word places Roberta in a tenuous relationship with both her living space and the labour that has gone into making the dessert. The narrator goes on to state that Roberta is "eager to get [the bombe] into the freezer" (290).

Like the buildings and bodies later, the dessert is at least at first associated with a threat of collapse and the desire to curtail its progression.

Through a series of metonymic linkages, the bombe's leakiness becomes almost immediately associated with Roberta's fragile emotional state. Beyond the tears that leak from her eyes throughout the story, Roberta recalls how, on the ride to Valerie's, she imagined "screaming and opening the door and throwing herself on the gravel," in response to the "murderous silence" in the cab of the truck (292). To defeat her anxieties, Roberta "tries to break the silence herself, making little clucks of worry as she tightens the towels over the bombe" (292). Two features of these details are worth noting. First, the shift in tense — Munro's, not mine — suggests a pattern that I have already mentioned: the past breaking uncontrollably into the present. In addition to these shifts, Roberta responds to her "hysterical image" — a word with fairly obvious and negative linkage to motherhood — by clucking and tightening the bombe's wrapper. In a sense, she tries to appease George by mimicking the same chicken-esque reversal of collapse that he may be enacting elsewhere.

However, the bombe itself as Roberta's labourious creation is simultaneously undoing the efforts George has made to make the farm self-sufficient. The raspberries that were "picked," regardless of the passive voice used to describe the process, were most likely picked by Roberta, from her and George's garden, in direct subversion of the "eight-foot high wire fence." Regardless of George's attempts to control space, Roberta's labour not only pulls things out of the garden, but beyond the confines of the farm. The bombe she carries, if we are indifferent to the anxiety that it provokes in her, represents a transgression, one that literally "breaks the silence" of the narrative, and one that in a more important way figuratively enables Roberta to break the "murderous silence" between her and George by putting her into a social environment. The pun on bomb — an explosive device — cannot be overlooked, given its transgressive semiotic function: it breaks down silence and spaces alike.

While the leakiness of the bombe and its leaking further in the narrative are both sources of anxiety for Roberta at first, they come to represent the possibility of emotional healing as Roberta and George enter Valerie's house.[9] On the textual and literal edge of Valerie's house — the front hallway — her daughter Ruth does something that bridges

many of the tensions that I have been articulating: she "embraces the bombe" (294). As it enters into the comfortably ambiguous space of Valerie's house, the bombe is not "braced" as it is on the way there. It is "embraced," a gesture that connotes acceptance into a community, and, hence, the bracing effects of other points of view. Roberta finds reprieve, temporarily, from the anxiety her labour causes her.

However, as mentioned, Valerie's house does not remain a flawlessly comforting space. Though on Labour Day — a break from labour — Roberta gets a much needed rest from her claustrophobic relationship with George, she brings the past with her, remarking to Valerie that she feels "something black that rises" (305). This remark occurs in the middle of the sequence of narrative breaks that precedes Eva's "sharp" comment, and may also be read as anticipating the terrifying "dark flash" at the story's end. Although when Roberta makes the remark, the "something black that rises" appears to gesture indirectly at George and his anxiety over collapse, it may also relate indirectly to the "dark glasses" that she wears to hide her "weeping in spurts" (291). The fact that they conceal the signs of her inner emotional turmoil would seem to suggest a connection among the various dark items in the story, including perhaps the gibbous moon itself.

The key to connecting the dark glasses with the "something dark" and the "dark flash" is the image of the leaky raspberry bombe. As everyone at Valerie's ingests the raspberry bombe, draws the food into dark, invisible spaces (Nicholson), any description of this erasure is notably absent. Instead, the fruits of Roberta's culinary labour are substituted with a sudden "indifference" toward her anxiety, and while "the main thing is to be indifferent to George . . . [,] her indifference flows past him; it's generous, it touches everybody" (312). In a sense, the internalization (embodiment) of her leaky dessert, metonym for her leaky body, allows her to embrace and erase it — along with the need for the protective darkness provided by her glasses. Her indifference suggests that she has come to see herself, briefly, much like Valerie's house: open, indifferent, sociable. Put differently, the symbolic entry into a community — the eating of the bombe — replaces the "murderous silence" between George's haunting internal thoughts and Roberta's own. The labour that goes into creating and maintaining the bombe implodes with its consumption, allowing a brief but liberating connec-

tion of Roberta's life with the eventual end to all labour: death. In the revelation of that dark flash, what else could possibly matter?

On the drive home, George points out the "gibbous moon" as a peace offering, which is strangely symbolic given that it is marked by a darkness (314). The "offering," while ameliorative of the immediate situation, may suggest a kind of incompletion or incomprehensibility, which makes sense given Roberta's recognition that she cannot indefinitely ride along the edge of indifference upon which she momentarily sits. Something dark remains. At least in terms of shape the moon might also look a bit like an imperfect circle, like the dessert, which is now just a haunting memory. In this regard George's silent apology mirrors Roberta's own initial "peace offering," a symmetrical detail that further suggests that, if Roberta is indeed going through a process of criticism and redemption by Munro, George is not exempt from a similar process.

To return to where we began, with a critical difference, this is the same moon that is seen by the people in the car speeding from the other direction, but they see the moon with a haunting indifference to the details of George's and Roberta's lives. To them, the moon is just something a bit dark that rises at night. The narrative indifference towards the story's conclusion may seem analogous to Roberta's indifference, but if one identifies with the main characters, especially Eva and Angela who ride in the open back of the truck, then how can indifference be maintained in the face of their impending deaths? Although it is infinitely tempting to make a connection between Roberta's tenuous indifference toward her aging body and the narrative's indifference toward death, there is a critical difference between these two things. The haunting gap between an indifference toward the uncontrollability of one's own life and the fear of loved ones' deaths is not one to be symmetrically bridged, or transcendentally figured out, but rather driven along like a finely crafted "edge." Eva's final questions — "Are you guys dead? . . . Aren't we home?" — are ultimately open questions, because for both Roberta and George, depending on your point of view, either answer is correct.

More than anything, the story's strange conclusion, and the apparent similarity between its images and earlier ones offers the reader an option: a choice between reading back into the story or leaving the images accidental and unconnected. It is just this kind of reading back

that I have been suggesting is necessary to a proper understanding of "The Moons of Jupiter" and other stories in the collection. Roberta's process of partial liberation can be read as foreshadowing, defining, even haunting the more complete success that Janet has as she draws her father into conversation near the end of "Moons." In the conversation they have just prior to the story's end, as he is about to go into surgery, Katherine Mayberry argues that they collaborate on articulating a space — the solar system, and particularly Jupiter's moons (331-32). As Mayberry says of this scene, "truth and form are constellational" (6); in "Moons" Janet recognizes how "the forms of love might be maintained with a condemned person but with the love in fact measured and disciplined, because you have to survive" (228).

Questions loom large over such a revelation: can it, for instance, be read in relation to Roberta's indifference? Do we need to read these "independent" short stories as somehow relational or mutually haunting? Janet recognizes that to draw too close to another is to risk losing yourself, and this is why she uses a mediating image — the external, artistic image of the moons — to "measure and discipline" her heightened emotions. In other words, she and her father (and she and her daughter) ride along an "edge," much like a moon rides along a parent planet's gravitational edge; this can be read in contrast to Roberta's persistently threatening collapse. In "The Moons of Jupiter," the moons are not gibbous, marked by something dark; they are complete and held in a disciplined, relational, and perspectival tension. By having Janet consciously introduce these "third party," collaborative images, Munro here offers an argument about the function of art and perspective. Indeed the collection's stories themselves can be read like moons, each held in disciplined tension with all the others.

On the other hand, familial and sexual relationships are by no means the same thing: in this regard Mayberry's alleged "success" of Janet and her father is haunted by the very different nature of sexual relationships. Unlike Roberta, with her "leaky" body so inextricable from her living space, Janet is consistently able to maintain a distance in various ways from those moments that would threaten her sense of self. However, Janet is dealing with different relationships. She buys herself "daring" new clothes when her daughter Nichola may be dying as a child (228), and considers how, if she saw her now (after a long period of estrangement), she "might just sit and watch" (232), but she is dealing with

parents and children, not a partner. Perhaps the mediation of emotion enables Munro to create a first-person writer in the collection's final story — an experience much closer to her own than something like "Labor Day Dinner" — and yet one is left wondering about the inbuilt relational distances between the relationships described in "Moons." These stories haunt each other, just as the two cars do in "Labor Day Dinner."

Regardless of whether Munro is making an argument about different types of relationship or all relationships in general, the process of exploring subject positions that unfolds throughout *Moons* complicates any simple claims about the "success" of its characters. One could argue that it is only through a process of negative elimination that Munro can arrive at a satisfactory mode of coping with the "various knowns and unknowns and horrible immensities" of life in "Moons" (230), but one could also argue that she never reaches it because there are some distances that are simply unbridgeable. It is this ambiguity — the haunting difference between coincidence and teleology, randomness and foreshadowing — within which this paper has been working. The same can be said of *The Moons of Jupiter.*

Notes

[1] A particularly illustrative example of this claim is Katherine J. Mayberry's "Narrative Strategies of Liberation in Alice Munro," where Mayberry argues that "narratives most likely to serve Munro's characters are the ones that come closest to a true version of the experience they would render, that are driven not by a desire to create an effect, to dominate, or to deceive (oneself or others), but simply, and at the same time almost impossibly, to recuperate experience faithfully, to constitute, through language, the truth of experience before it is utterly transformed by the mediations of memory, succeeding experience, and the narratives of others" (2). Mayberry's article concludes with the claim that "'The Moons of Jupiter,' is the most encouraging in its offering of a narrative colloquy between another middle-aged divorced woman (Janet) and a withholding, judgmental man" (5).

[2] Ildikó De Papp Carrington has commented on the way that Munro's writing contains surfaces that "split open to reveal uncontrollable forces, both within and without" (4, 155-58).

[3] This "silent fight" results from the withholding attitude of George, who is similar to the figure Mayberry identifies elsewhere in Munro's work as the "withholding, judgmental male" (5).

[4] Judith Miller has argued that Munro's stories both recall and complicate detective fiction: "There are not really even clues, just bits and pieces of information that appear here and there, floating through the telling of the story, many of them unspoken, coded,

implied, resonating through silences" (43). Though Miller's analysis is somewhat brief, her description of the process of reading Munro is excellent.

[5] I owe this insight in part to Judith Butler's theory of speech acts (1-41).

[6] Munro has commented that she has a fascination "with what you might call the surface of life" (Gibson 241). This is worth noting, because her fascination is with the metonymic "surface," what Ajay Heble calls "textuality," rather than simply the abstract, despatializing term "life" (7).

[7] I gain my understanding of narrative "closure" partly from Simone Vauthier's discussion of Todorov in *Reverberations* (114-31): "with the narratives of substitutions, which vertically pile up a series of variations, encoding of the end depends much more on the reader's activity" (116). Additionally, the "vertical" piling of variations of meaning is analogous to Ajay Heble's discussion of the "paradigmatic" elements of Munro's writing, with which she "disrupts the traditional discourse of realism in order to show us that we cannot take everything we read for granted" (5-9).

[8] S. Leigh Matthews discusses the way that "women's prairie memoirs function as a folkloric interrogation of cultural metanarratives that have become the norm in representations of western settlement" (17). Although Matthews discusses these largely culinary interrogations of metanarratives in relation to early twentieth-century settlement, the representation of George as "self-sufficient" suggests that he subscribes to, and may be undermined by, similar agricultural myths.

[9] Interestingly, Katherine Mayberry has argued in opposition to Carrington that "the communal re-composition of experience" actually "frees the notions of truth and understanding from their association with control and dominance" (2, 7). While I agree in principle with the thrust of Mayberry's claims, Munro's attempts to undermine ironically all points of view may again complicate the picture. By ironizing George's authority, they may also partially undermine the strength of the "liberation" of Roberta's revelation of indifference (in that she is merely liberated from a bungler).

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