

Munro's Grail Quest: The Progress of Logos

KLAUS P. STICH

Geschrieben steht: "im Anfang war das *Wort!*"
Hier stock ich schon! Wer hilft mir weiter fort?
— Goethe, *Faust* 1:56

IN A RENEWED QUEST FOR *Offenbarung* or "revelation" (1:56), after having graduated from his studies in philosophy, jurisprudence, medicine, and theology, Goethe's Faust decides to translate the New Testament from its original Greek into his native German. He opens his text at the first verse of the Gospel of John, as if drawn to the ambiguous meanings of *logos*. "It is written," he exclaims, "in the beginning was the *Word!*" but promptly reconsiders: "Here I am already hesitating! Who will help me continue?" (epigraph above; my translation). *Sinn* ("thought"), *Kraft* ("power"), and finally *That* ("deed" or "act") are his emended translations of *logos* (1:57). Goethe's queries, implicit in Faust's hesitancy, serve as a fitting prelude to Alice Munro's guarded circumspection in her acts of rendering generative *logos* into fiction. Repeatedly, her translations reveal intimations of a quest for the Grail, her subtextual symbol of the Divine light of the human spirit as interconnected with the creative imagination of the individual human being. In her quest, *logos* and "Grail" can be said to merge, with the former no longer connected simply to Christ as the light (see John 1.1-3), and the latter similarly freed from its traditional Christian luminosity (see Tennyson's "The Holy Grail").

In keeping with her mistrust of verbal narrowness and "final explanations" (Ross 87), Munro, I suggest, approaches *logos* (the creative word, thought, deed, light) as an open, Grail-like symbol rather than the revealed truth of religious convention and authority (see Adolf 11), while preferring only to touch on the motif of the Grail quest itself by way of

occasional asides. They usually come in the form of brief allusions to matters of, for instance, religion, the Middle Ages, and Arthurian legend, or in the form of charades and word games which reflect Munro's characteristic "clowning impulse" (Redekop 153). Thus they may be "'idiotic word games,'" according to a character in the recent story "Passion"; yet, adds the narrator, "people had to be fairly clever [at them], even if they thought up silly definitions" (*Runaway* 169). Above all, her authorial questing, with its etymological ties to questioning (the Latin *quaerere*), manifests itself in her recurrent attention to spells of order and light cast by letters, books, bookstores, and libraries. Munro seems both to challenge Horace's famous warning, "*Tu ne quaesieris — scire nefas — quem mihi, quem tibi finem di dederint*" (Do not inquire, we are not allowed to know, what end the gods have assigned to you and what to me), and to embrace his even more famous exhortation, "*carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero*" (Pluck the day, trusting as little as possible in tomorrow) (*Odes* 1. XI)¹ with her own directive: *carpe verbum* (seize the word). Such faith in the inventive or creative light of words requires faith in Emersonian self-trust and the necessity of free choice or *heresy*, particularly in questions of religious dogma. To point out the progress of *logos* in Munro's fiction, I will begin with concerted references to various stories, before focusing on "Carried Away" and "Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage."

As far as I have been able to ascertain, Munro refers to the Grail directly only in the game Arthur and Char Comber, her sister Et Desmond, and their acquaintance Blaikie Noble are playing in the title story of *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*: "they tried to see who could make the most words out of the name Beethoven. Arthur won. He got thirty-four. He was immensely delighted. 'You'd think you'd found the Holy Grail,' Char said" (*Something* 3). Munro dwells on the connection briefly: Arthur pretends to be Sir Galahad; Blaikie recites a couple of lines from Tennyson's poem about the knight; and Et quips, "'You should have been King Arthur ... your namesake'" (3). These allusions touch on Arthur Comber's somewhat quixotic failings as both a teacher and a husband, and on Char's loose affinities with Queen Guinevere as well as the Lady of Shalott; they also turn the playboyish Blaikie Noble into a farcical Sir Lancelot and Et, Arthur's vaguely dangerous sister-in-law, into a Morgan Le Fay figure.² Munro's apparent attraction to such Arthurian asides is, according to Magdalena Redekop, part of her wider

attraction to the emotive power of “old legends and conventions ... in order to question them” (56).

Allusions to medieval times, meanwhile, stretch from some of Munro’s earliest stories to more recent ones. The allusions are sporadic and fleeting, sometimes only a single word as in “Oh, What Avails”: “it was a medieval face” (*Friend* 205). A precedent for such a face occurs in this earlier description of a boy and girl in “Day of the Butterfly”: “They were like children in a medieval painting, they were like small figures carved of wood, for worship or magic, with faces smooth and aged, and meekly, cryptically uncommunicative” (*Dance* 101). Similarly cryptic is the fenced-in world of fox pens in “Boys and Girls”: it was “like a medieval town, with a gate that was padlocked at night” (*Dance* 114). No less unusual is the description of the Doud piano factory in “Carried Away”: it “stretched along the west side of [the] town [of Carstairs], like a medieval town wall” (*Open* 26). Munro’s more famous fictional town of Jubilee, though neither gated nor walled in, is “almost encircle[d]” (*Dance* 209) by a figurative moat in the form of the Wawanash River and has a town hall with a “gaudy ... cupola” in which “hangs a great bell, to be rung in the event of some mythical disaster” (*Dance* 196). Elsewhere, Munro, through the narrative voice of Del Jordan, describes the same cupola as “exotic” and “hiding” the now “legendary” bell; in addition, Del speaks of “towers,” one belonging to the town hall, the other to the post office (*Lives* 58). Above all, “there is no easy way to get to Jubilee from anywhere on earth” (*Dance* 196), as if it deserved to be the destination of some Romantic quest; and inside Jubilee, one is easily lost again in “the open and secret pattern of the town” that is both “a shelter and a mystery” (*Lives* 58). As a “fort in the wilderness” (58), this fictional community in southwestern Ontario readily becomes the imagined equivalent of a walled medieval town of Old World legend.

Jubilee’s “open and secret pattern” anticipates Munro’s notion of “an open secret, something not startling until you think of trying to tell it” (*Open* 186).³ In this light, her medieval references take on the makings of an open secret: they are neither particularly startling on their own nor arduous to track, but their design is difficult to discern. In fact, because there are so few of them, it is easy to overlook or disregard even the explicitly Arthurian ones altogether. Raymond H. Thompson did just that in his short 1994 survey of Arthurian legend in Canada; so did Susan Hopkirk in her 2000 paper on King Arthur in Canadian

literature. Why, one may reasonably ask, should Arthur Comber's moment as a word-game knight deserve critical attention? The scene is mildly entertaining but really too short either to evoke the tradition of Arthurian parodies and burlesques that existed in nineteenth-century England and America (see Simpson, ch. 3; Lupack, ch. 2) or to be part of the "ironical" second of Umberto Eco's "Ten Little Middle Ages" (69). Munro's introduction of Arthurian matter through Victorian poetry and Pre-Raphaelite paintings, however, is more difficult to ignore.

In "Before the Change," the picture of "Sir Galahad leading his horse" (*Love* 295), which hangs conspicuously in the dining room of an elderly country doctor, is surely a copy of George Frederick Watts's *Sir Galahad*. The painting implicitly speaks to the doctor's quest for spiritual guidance in his occasional practice of performing abortions at a time when such quasi-chivalric deeds for women in distress were still illegal. Another Pre-Raphaelite painting, most likely a copy of James Archer's *La Mort d'Arthur*, hangs in the parlour of Valerie Thoms's childhood home in the story "Queer Streak." It depicts

a king with his crown on, and three tall, queenly-looking ladies in dark dresses. The King was asleep, or dead. They were all on the shore of the sea, with a boat waiting, and there was something coming out of this picture into the room — a smooth, dark wave of unbearable sweetness and sorrow. That seemed a promise to Violet; it was connected with her future, her own life, in a way she couldn't explain or think about. (*Progress* 284-85)

The picture stays with Violet and, years later, will hold the attention of her nephew during his visits after school: "he would always look at [it] when he was memorizing poetry. The ladies reminded him in a strange way of Violet (*Progress* 325). His poetry homework, one may safely conclude, is of a complementary sort, including perhaps Tennyson's "Sir Galahad," the poem from which Blaikie Noble quotes in the above mentioned word-game scene and Tennyson's "The Passing of Arthur," to which Munro refers close to the end of the same collection (*Something* 196). Another Tennyson poem, "The Beggar Maid," is an indirect source of Munro's "The Beggar Maid," the title story of the American and British editions of *Who Do You Think You Are?*; it is also the poem that inspired Sir Edward Burne-Jones to paint *King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid*. Munro mentions neither Tennyson nor Burne-Jones by name, only the title of the painting, and she gives a description of it through

the eyes of her beggar-maid character Rose, who is looking at it “in an art book” (*Who* 79). While the Burne-Jones painting captures the “many chivalric notions” (*Who* 76) of Patrick Blatchford, who reveres Rose as his bride-to-be, it is the conclusion of Tennyson’s poem that implicitly captures Patrick’s romantic idealism: “Cophetua sware a royal oath: / ‘This beggar maid shall be my queen!’”⁴

Munro herself was an avid reader of Tennyson’s poetry during her adolescence (Ross 43-44; Thacker 67, 71), including *Idylls of the King*, the very poems which had been a major influence on the Pre-Raphaelites. In her stories, she alludes to her familiarity with Tennyson, especially through Del Jordan’s reading her “mother’s *Complete Tennyson*” (*Lives* 200) and through other characters’ recollections of his poetry from “old [school] readers” (*Something* 196). Del specifically mentions her “Grade Seven Reader” from which she remembers the image of “Arthur’s sword snatched out of the stone” (*Lives* 98). In addition to Tennyson’s Arthurian poems, Munro draws attention to one other mid-nineteenth-century chivalric text and again withholds the author’s name: Del recalls “learning ‘The Vision of Sir Launfall’” (*Lives* 116) as part of her school assignments. Although largely forgotten today, James Russell Lowell’s 1848 poem about a minor Arthurian knight, Sir Launfal (one “1” in Lowell’s title), had remained popular for well over sixty years (Lupack 13). Del mentions this poem in direct conjunction with “drawing maps of Ontario and the Great Lakes — the hardest map in the world to draw” (*Lives* 116). By implicitly connecting Sir Launfal’s search for the Grail to that region of North America, Munro seems not only to associate Jubilee with his search but also to amplify Del’s experience as a reader embarked on her own ever-widening quest: “A time came when all the books in the library in the Town Hall were not enough for me, I had to have my own. I saw that the only thing to do with my life was to write a novel” (*Lives* 203). If, as I am suggesting, Lowell’s “The Vision of Sir Launfal” influenced Del’s and, by extension, Munro’s early aspirations to be a writer, then Lowell’s preface to his poem also deserves attention: “The plot (if I may give that name to anything so slight) of the following poem is,” he states, “*my own*, and, to serve its purposes, I have enlarged the circle of competition in search of the miraculous cup [of the Holy Grail] in such a manner as *to include, not only other persons than the heroes of the Round Table, but also a period of time subsequent to the supposed date of King Arthur’s reign*” (301; emphasis added).

Two of Lowell's innovations are of particular interest: Sir Launfal's sudden revelation that "The Grail in my castle here is found!" (313) and his realization that, far from being an elusive object, the Grail is a symbol of his acceptance of his moral responsibility to both himself and his fellow beings, his community. As a result, he translates his American vision of the Grail into social action: "The meanest serf on Sir Launfal's land / Has hall and bower at his command; / And there's no poor man in the North Countree / But is lord of the earldom as much as he" (314). Thus, Lowell, as Alan and Barbara Lupack put it, "deliberately divorces the Grail legend from ... its connections to nobility, even the admirable nobility of Arthur" and presents the Grail as emblematic of "natural charity ... within the reach of all men" (13). It is part of the Grail being an emblem of one's spiritual light that, independent from institutionalized religion, reveals the *logos* of love of self connected to affection for others through action, including the act of seeking education as prerequisite to acts of the creative imagination.

In Munro's Ontario, her own "North Countree" of largely interchangeable towns with names like Wingham, Jubilee, Hanratty, and Carstairs, self-education through books becomes indicative of an experientially and imaginatively empowering quest. This is true for many of her characters and for Munro herself, who, while growing up in Wingham or attending university or moving to Vancouver as a young married woman, "was drawn to the library" (Thacker 116). "I think I have read fairly widely," she taunts J.R. Struthers in a 1981 interview, "more widely than you'd think" (13), adding that much of her philologic questing at home and at school, town, and university libraries "made me feel that there was something in life to be got at that maybe I could get at through writing" (14). Deliberate acts of reading and writing in Munro's fiction thus want to be partly connected with the institution of the library as a kind of open castle from which a maiden knight like Del Jordan can begin her quest for the charitable *logos* of the creative word. I use the term "maiden" here in response to Lowell's reference to Sir Launfal, prior to his vision, as "the maiden knight" (306), a phrase that surely caught Munro's attention. Sir Launfal is "maiden" in the sense of being untried, inexperienced, virgin with regard to such traditional chivalric ideals as generosity, courtesy, courage, independence, and nobility (cf. Moreland 14). Similarly, Del starts out "maiden" in every sense of the word's connotations of virginal and, of course, in the

word's basic sense of "young female." There are literary precedents for the idea of female knights and the idea, however implicit, of a writer as a questing knight with a pen as her sword; thus ink-stained female knights seem hardly out of place in Jubilee, Carstairs, or Hanratty, especially not in the libraries there and elsewhere.⁵

Appropriately, the library of the college where Rose, the "Beggar Maid," was an undergraduate student is suggestive of a castle. Like all the buildings on campus, it was "built of stone" and "built to look old"; above all, its "casement windows ... might have been designed for shooting arrows through" (*Who* 74), medieval archers' rather than Indians' arrows. A complementary tower was part of the nearby faculty of arts building. The pseudo-legendary architecture of the college buildings and the library's treasure hoards of books "pleased Rose most about the place" (74), so that her move from the "legendary poverty" (5) of her hometown of West Hanratty to the perceived idylls of the college is decidedly analogous to the promotion of Sir Launfal's serfs toward receiving the key to his castle.

Rose's transformative experience through books is a variation on Del Jordan's happiness in her school library in Jubilee: "Walls of printed pages, evidence of so many created worlds — this was a comfort to me," she says. "It was the opposite with [her friend] Naomi; so many books weighed on her, making her feel oppressed and suspicious" (*Lives* 99). For Del, who, similar to Rose, grew up in an impoverished neighbourhood at the edge of town, the bookish idylls of the school library and the public one in the town hall became her opening to a romanticized vision of life in Jubilee and to the "idea" (203) of a gothic novel about some of the townspeople. For a long time, the idea served her like a secret elixir, yielding mental "pictures" that, she says, "seemed true to me, not real but true" (206) until they "lost authority" and Del "lost faith" (208) in the truthfulness of her early attraction to the creative word.

Finding religious faith had been no less strong a concern for Del; faith, that is, as a commodity linked to the traditional notion of the Grail as a Christian relic or fetish rather than an open symbol (see Adolf 11). This quest began with her "reading books about the Middle Ages" (*Lives* 80) when she was twelve, but quickly waned following her futile search for God in the United Church and the Anglican Church of Jubilee. While services in the latter "strongly delighted" by being "theatrical" (83), the Churches' doctrinal faith in the divinely created

word would amount to only unsatisfactory stories in the end, seemingly affirming Emily Dickinson's famous declaration that "'Faith' is a fine invention / When Gentlemen can see — / But *Microscopes* are prudent / In an Emergency" (# 187). Del experienced just such a faith-related and fundamental emergency with Garnet French, a reborn Baptist. "Words," she writes, "were our enemies. What we knew about each other was only going to be confused by them. This was the knowledge that is spoken of as 'only sex' or physical attraction" (183). When Garnet, in a self-indulgent effort to consecrate his sense of ownership, tried to baptize her in the Wawanash River, Del's forceful rejection of such a consecration of her female self turns into her rejection of Garnet himself. Walking out of the river and away from her would-be baptizer, she "cut through the cemetery" and, entering Jubilee, "repossessed the world" as well as "my old self" (199). She felt "wakened" (200) from a sense of near-death by baptism into an invented faith, and reawakened to her prudent examination of the inventive, microscope-like power of words, be they remembered lines from Tennyson, newspaper want ads or even the name of "*Garnet French*" (201) with its connotations of a precious stone in another language.

On the one hand, Del's renewed faith in the possibilities of words informs her "greedy" (210) desire to give an account of all the facts about Jubilee. On the other hand, it opens her questing mind's eye to the process of *logos* through surprises and, in Emerson's phrase, "facts not yet passed under the fire of thought" ("Fate" 379), facts such as Jubilee's "deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum" (210) or the impromptu dance pose which one of the town's eccentrics takes on just for her: "it seemed," she writes, "to have a concise meaning, a stylized meaning — to be a letter, or a whole word, in an alphabet I did not know" (211). For Del to concoct meaningful words from such an unknown alphabet would require "the fire of thought" and a magic pen analogous to the sword Excalibur, which the Lady of the Lake gave to King Arthur. It is the kind of pen Munro's character Almeda Roth vainly believed she had found while sounding "the river of her mind" for the all-encompassing poem of her life, a poem that exists only metonymically in the name of the Meneseteung river which flows past her home town (*Friend* 70). It is also the kind of pen which might have allowed Violet Thoms, in the story "A Queer Streak," to translate her primordial, grunt-like "'annhh'" (*Progress* 332, 345) from being the sound of "a helpless and distracted,

dull and stubborn old woman with a memory or imagination out of control" (*Progress* 333) into a narrative of her life. Unlike Almeda, who had actually published a volume of verse, Violet had been a manager with the telephone company, a manager of the spoken word for whom verbal creativity had come to mean imitating people's speech (321, 327). Through the microscope of Munro's art, of course, one may read Almeda's "Meneseung" and Violet's "annhh" as metonymies of their implicit quests for the Grail as "the symbol of wholeness" (Jung and von Franz 399), the light guiding the process of individuation. Individuation (in its Jungian sense) is always open to words, ideas, and confusing directives, continually necessitating new vantage points. Del, for instance, says she "carried" the original idea of her novel about Jubilee "everywhere with me" (*Lives* 203), while at the same time thriving on books to escape from the town and letting the idea of a university education "carry me away from Jubilee" (207) altogether.

Set against the historical backdrop of World War One and the Spanish Flu epidemic, forces that amplify the fundamental precariousness of the process of individuation, Munro's story "Carried Away" has a young woman confront personal limitations as a result of her being carried away by works of fiction and private letters. Love of reading led Louisa to her first job as a sales clerk for books; novels sustained her during a four-year stay in a tuberculosis sanatorium and contributed to her platonic love affair with one of her physicians; and letters allowed the romance to survive for a while after his departure. With reading and writing as an oddly unsettling foundation, Louisa becomes a commercial traveller in millinery and lingerie, promising women ostensibly firmer foundations than books. The death of the public librarian in the town of Carstairs during Louisa's sales stop there prompts her to translate her familiarity with books into becoming the new librarian. In the ever-present flashes of Munro's irony, one may see Louisa as another kind of female knight, one whose name fittingly derives from a medieval Germanic compounding of the words "fame" and knightly "warrior" (see "Louis" and "Louisa," Hanks 211). As the chatelaine of Carstairs's castle of books, she becomes a guide to the quest for wholeness through reading. The library's founding patron, A[rthur] V. Doud, "*A Believer in Progress, Culture, and Education*" (*Open* 30), had implicitly envisioned such a quest, and his social-mindedness as the patron of the library and founder of the town's organ factory is not unlike Sir Launfal's "natural charity."

Louisa is twenty-four and “glad of a fresh start” (*Open* 58) in Carstairs in 1916. She is a believer “in the swift decision, the uniqueness of her fate” (58) and her charm has been part of her fate. “Wouldn’t you rather have a nice-looking woman [as librarian] . . . than a crabby old affair like [the previous one]?” Arthur, A.V. Doud’s son and current patron of the library, asks himself because of his unexpected attraction to the new librarian (39). Similarly, Jack Agnew, a complete stranger to Louisa, writes to her from a military hospital in England: “I think of you up on a stool at the Library reaching to put a book away and I come up and put my hands on your waist and lift you down, and you turning around inside my arms as if we agreed about everything” (10). After his return to Carstairs, Jack chooses to take out books only clandestinely and manages to evade Louisa because of his wartime engagement to a semiliterate girl — “Not a Library user” (17), not a quester.

Jack Agnew’s urge to escape his own working-class limitations in Carstairs through library books complements Louisa’s fondness of vicarious reading. Even though she has come to brush love aside as “all hocus-pocus, a deception” (8), her impulsive replies to Jack’s letters cause her to be carried away once again by the “prospect” (8) of love. Yet his letters prove to be a charade, cavalier words only. A newspaper announcement of her phantom lover’s marriage consolidates Louisa’s sense of the stain not only of love but also of the written word and the imagination: “It was at this time that she entirely gave up on reading. The covers of books looked like coffins to her, either shabby or ornate, and what was inside them might as well have been dust” (17). Not willing to be dry-as-dust herself, Louisa, with now “bobbed” (38) hair, indulges in the social liberties of the post-war years until, at thirty-one, she seizes another “fresh start”: well-tempered marriage to Arthur Doud and “a normal life” (54). His “restraint” and “dark-suited dignity” (51), which she admired, as she did his big house “built in three tiers like a wedding cake” (53), his first name, and his medieval-looking factory which provided employment, respectability, and stability for Carstairs are all factors that reflect qualities that might effectively control the kind of “wandering fires” (Tennyson, “Holy” l. 887) that had carried away King Arthur’s best knights on their quests for the Grail and, in corresponding ways, had complicated Louisa’s quest for fulfilment through marriage. She is neither a Guinevere nor a nun like Sir Percivale’s sister but, as her name suggests, a loyal female knight who helps her husband

keep the factory running and who remains telepathically “very close to him” (53) after his death, always asking his advice on problems with the business. It is the total absence of spiritual or religious concerns in her questions that eventually comes to puzzle her. Yet her very puzzlement keeps alive a connection, however dim, to the light of the Grail.

“*I am not very religious*” (5), she had written Jack Agnew when she was twenty-five, implying that she was more of a free-thinker than a doctrinal believer. Her subsequent renunciation of books and the liberal art of reading, however, seems to have foreclosed interpretive ventures into the inner life in favour of deliberate management of her outer life. Now, in her mid-sixties, in a hallucinatory state moments after a visit to a heart specialist in London, Ontario, and just prior to her death, she tells Jack, who appears to her in London seemingly resurrected after his decapitation in an industrial accident at the Doud factory some forty years earlier, “You would think as you get older your mind would fill up with what they call the spiritual side of things, but mine just seems to get more and more practical, trying to get something settled” (53-54). Her subconscious mind apparently connects her lack of spirituality to her former phantom lover, who now assures her, “Love never dies” (54). It is a dubious assurance, given their strange correspondence years ago. “Love dies all the time,” she thinks to herself; “it might as well be dead” (54). Her mind’s distance from the unsettling possibilities of love as well as spirituality and the imagination has clearly widened since her disillusionment as a lover of words and books. Jack Agnew’s apostrophe to love, however, has little to do with some “amorous flare-up of the cells, of old intentions” (55); it comes as “a pronouncement,” which he delivers with “lifted ... head” after first asking Louisa if she remembered his father, and then responding to her “Oh, yes” with “Well. Sometimes I think he had the right idea” (54).

Given the otherworldly nature of this encounter between Louisa and Jack, the state of her *heart*, and his apparent resurrection, his references to *love*, *father*, and *right idea* become cryptic allusions to Jesus Christ, God, and life after death. There is even a direct suggestion to regard Jack as a Christ figure since his last name Agnew derives from the French *agneau*, “lamb” (Reaney 3). While his present ministry as a labour union spokesman provides an ironic connection to Louisa’s insolvency problems with Doud’s, solutions to her problems go beyond conventional labour disputes. In the context of Arthurian impression

points in the story, her vision of Jack connects with the role of King Arthur as a Christ-figure in the King's parting words to Sir Bedivere in Tennyson's "The Passing of Arthur": "The old order changeth, yielding place to new, / And God fulfills himself in many ways, / Lest one good custom should corrupt the world. / Comfort thyself; what comfort is in me?" (l. 408-11)

King Arthur's passing allows for an allusive reading of the final scene of "Carried Away" as "The Passing of Louisa." There is of course no mention of "a dusky barge" ("Arthur" l. 361) with the "stately forms" (l. 364) of three queens on deck, "Black-stoled, black-hooded, like a dream" (l. 365), to receive Louisa. Still, while waiting for a bus to take her home, she finds herself in the company of similar stately forms: "oddly dressed folk" who look like "*a clump of black*," women with "*black shawls or bonnets*," men with "broad hats and black braces" and "the children were dressed just like their elders" (*Open* 55; emphasis added). Death comes to Louisa in the dream-like company of Old Order Mennonites. In other words, Jack Agnew's "Love never dies," King Arthur's "Comfort thyself," and doctrinal Christianity have somehow come together to evoke the Christian notion of love, life, light, or *logos* as part of the presence of the Divine within each questing (questioning, aspiring) human being in accordance with several of Jesus's sayings in the Gospel of Thomas. Of particular relevance here is the following saying: "Let one who seeks not stop until one finds. When one finds, one will be disturbed. When one is disturbed, one will be amazed, and will reign over all" ("Saying" 24; see also Pagels 49-56).

The story "Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage" complements "Carried Away" with its own Carstairs-like setting in the early 1960s and with the quest of its female protagonist, Johanna Parry, for fresh starts, order and fulfilment. Johanna's implicit connectedness to the Biblical phrase "In the beginning was the Word" (John 1.1), and to Jesus's declaration "the kingdom is inside you and outside you" (Thomas, "Saying" 3), culminates in "accidental clarity," to use the concluding phrase from Munro's "Differently" (*Friend* 243).

Johanna Parry has been as ready as Louisa for "the unforeseen intervention, the uniqueness of her fate" ("Carried," *Open* 58), ready to *parry* life's blows. Arriving in Ontario from a Glasgow orphanage "on a Plan" (*Hateship* 27), she soon seized her opportunities for personal advancement. After twelve years as the maid and companion of genteel Mrs.

Willets, a grandmotherly benefactress, she became housekeeper for a widowed and retired insurance broker in the small town Munro does not specifically name. Mr. McCauley embodies the façade of gentility and old order: “Every working day — and sometimes, forgetfully, on holidays and Sundays — he got dressed in one of his three-piece suits and his light overcoat or his heavy overcoat, and walked ... uptown to the office he still maintained” (12). Selling or, rather, providing insurance has made him a wealthy man, while ostensibly protecting the townspeople against the insurable aspects of fate in their orderly lives. He is another small-town King Arthur figure, and, appropriately, “His funeral was the last one held in the Anglican church” (52). Yet, by withholding his first name, Munro seems to emphasize the venerable roots of his last name: *Auley* derives from *Olaf* which in old Norse means “descendant of the ancients or gods” (Reaney 225). This derivation reflects the old gentleman’s public image as “a kind landlord inspecting his property or a preacher happy to observe his flock” (13), a likely allusion to the medieval Saint Olaf, King of Norway.

The state of Mr. McCauley’s private affairs, meanwhile, has become bewildering to him: “The house was full of a feeling of callous desertion, of deceit. He and his wife had surely been kind parents, driven to the wall by [their daughter] Marcelle. When she had eloped with an airman, they had hoped that she would be all right, at last. They had been generous to the two of them as to the most proper young couple. But it all fell apart” (21). Intemperate, licentious living and an unwanted pregnancy had made Marcelle marry Ken Boudreau and move out west. Years later and terminally ill, she returns to her old home with her child, Sabitha, leaving her father saddled with the care of his pubescent granddaughter and with Ken’s appeals for financial support “owed him, because of the wounds inflicted on him, the shame suffered, on account of Marcelle” (19). Because of that “shame,” one might see the courtship and marriage of Marcelle and Ken as a parody of the courtly love tradition of medieval Provence. Her name is not only suggestively French but also of enigmatic denotation, while his is short for Kenneth or the “courtly one,” an apt appellation for this kind of modern knight returned victoriously from war and excelling in chivalric “loyalty” (47, 48) to male and female friends, including Marcelle “during a period of bad behavior (hers, at a time when his own hadn’t started)” (48).

Dutiful loyalty has also been a characteristic of Johanna until her

prospect of marriage to Ken in Saskatchewan. Her “loveship,” however, is founded on richly quixotic beginnings: phony love letters from him, concocted by Sabitha’s friend Edith. The girls had seized the opportunity to open an unusually thick letter by Sabitha to her father; the envelope happened to include a note from Johanna, thanking him for his praise of her to his daughter after his recent visit. Edith concludes intuitively, “She’s in love with him” (29), and begins her game of writing Johanna love letters from Ken. Her mischief has unexpected consequences: Johanna’s sudden resignation as respected housekeeper and prompt departure by train to join Ken. Her “desertion” (21), as Mr. McCauley sees it, is Johanna’s opportune reaction to what Tennyson’s Percivale calls “a fervent flame of human love” (“Holy” l. 74). Percivale is, of course, referring to his lovelorn sister, whose inopportune fervour made her become a nun; still, a connection to Johanna, however loose and backwards, suggests itself: to the station agent in town, she looks like a “plainclothes nun” (5); and the new “brown wool dress” she buys for her venture at a store fittingly called *Milady’s* is “plain as you could get, except for a narrow gold belt” (8), affirming the likely look of such a nun.

The other image of a nun as a sister of charity or nurse, however, readily fits Johanna’s housekeeping experience with elderly people, and so does the derivation of “nun” from the Late Latin *nonna* or “child’s nurse” (*Webster’s*). Unlike Percivale’s sister, Johanna is thus fairly protected from “being rudely blunted” (Tennyson, “Holy” l. 75) in her amorous quest. When she meets up with Ken, he is sick with bronchitis and a high fever, wasting away in a small dilapidated hotel he owns at the edge of Gdynia, a prairie town “on its last legs” (*Hateship* 50). After she brings down his fever, she finds him to be “like a delicate, stricken boy” (45) seemingly waiting for her maternal “care and management” (52). With a “brisk sense of expansion and responsibility” (51) that grows into “busy love” (52), Johanna adds the role of wife to her management of Ken. Until her arrival, he had been nostalgically holding on to the vaguely chivalric “idea that life should be a more heroic enterprise than it ever seemed to be nowadays” (48), a conspicuously male idea withering for him under the influence of too much drink, too many cigarettes, love affairs, and a hopeless mirage of his hotel as “a drinking establishment and a restaurant” (48) in a prairie wasteland. Johanna transmutes his personal chapter in the *Fall of Man* into a regenerative enterprise of a

decidedly traditional sort: their married life together in the quasi-Edenic world of “mild winters, the smell of the evergreen forests and the ripe apples” (51) in the Okanagan Valley.

Unlike Adam and Eve in the legendary Garden of Eden, neither Ken nor Johanna is troubled by the mythic fruit. While he is managing orchards, she becomes the mother of a son they call Omar. At the time of their marriage in the early 1960s, it was an unusual name to choose in Canada; however, the name is mentioned in Genesis (36.11), where its meaning is “eloquent” (*Scofield*). Thus, the name “Omar” is a quixotically fitting comment on the Boudreaus’ circumstances, from Edith’s game with Johanna’s written words to Ken, to his thinking of her as his “heaven-sent” (49) saviour, and to her giving birth to “eloquence” personified. Because of Johanna’s own name, one should expect as much: “Johanna,” an un-English variant of Joanne, is the female form of “Johannes” (*Webster’s*), the medieval Latin name of the evangelist John. The opening of the Gospel of John by itself (“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”), through its connection to the first words in the Book of Genesis (“In the beginning”),⁶ provides a provocative context for both Johanna’s life in her new-found Eden and Munro’s way of mentioning Edith’s knowledge of the unexpected consequences of her letter-writing charade: “*Word* [of Ken and Johanna’s marriage] had got back [earlier on]. The only *news* was Omar” (52; emphasis added). This news had its origin in the word “love” in Edith’s inventive mind; the word changed to “marriage” and then to “motherhood” by way of Omar, the *good news* of Johanna. By extension, one may now translate the name “Omar” as “the eloquent word” with an added allusion to Jesus in the Good News (Gospel) of John — “And the Word became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth” (*NRSV*, 1.14). My linking Munro’s Omar to John’s Jesus respects Munro’s touching on Biblical allusions from unorthodox or chosen (i.e., heretical) angles.⁷ She appears to make use of John in creative ways comparable to her using an Arthurian text by Tennyson or another writer. Her allusions to the Bible, here and elsewhere, are in keeping with her attraction to mythology in its traditional sense of “imaginative philosophical or religious truth” (Richardson 7),⁸ as if she were adapting William Morris’s advice in regard to an Arthurian source book: “Read it through ... then shut the book and write it out as a new story for yourself” (qtd. in Cochrane 94). Similar to Morris, who

reworked his sources conscientiously “to explore universal psychological truths” (Cochrane 94), Munro questions and explores received truths. In the process, she keeps her Dickinsonian word microscope focused on the command of *carpe verbum* (seize the word).

I use the Latin phrase in analogy to *carpe diem*, the title usually given to Horace’s famous ode, which Edith is busy translating (*Hateship* 52, 53). While plumbing the poem’s first line, “*Tu ne quaesieris, scire nefas, quem mihi, quem tibi*” (*Odes* 1.11; *Hateship* 52), Edith understandably digresses into questions about “the whole twist of consequences,” the endings of the beginning of her charade with words in letters: “where, on the list of things she planned to achieve in her life, was there any mention of her being responsible for *the existence on earth of a person named Omar?*” (53; emphasis added). Whereupon she writes out her translation of the first line (the only one provided in Latin) and, “with a chill of satisfaction” (53), the co-ordinate second, which fittingly concludes Munro’s story: “You must not ask, it is forbidden for us to know ... what fate has in store for me, or for you —” (53).

While Edith’s translation of Horace is the end of her homework for the moment, his words are deceptively final. He is, after all, a poet of “many masks” and renowned for “his elusiveness” (Radice 30). On the one hand, one may stress the seductive side of his *carpe diem* directive, his invitation to enjoy wine and sex. Accordingly, the Loeb Classical Library edition of Horace’s odes translates “*carpe diem*” as “pluck the day” (45) and opts for “*Gather ye rosebuds*” as the appropriate English title for the poem. On the other hand, the Penguin edition leaves room for the text’s existential questions by choosing “seize each day” for “*carpe diem*” and “*Tu ne quaesieris*” as the title. Since the poem itself is ostensibly in the form of advice to Leuconoe, “a girl eager to tell the future” (Rudd 337), Horace’s words unexpectedly encourage Edith to accept the forged letters as a seized literary opportunity to foretell Johanna’s future and, at the same time, not to constrict her own future with “the list of things she planned to achieve in her life” (*Hateship* 53). Edith’s situation here harks back to Del Jordan’s words about the “deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum” in the lives of people “in Jubilee as elsewhere” (*Lives* 210), caves of the heart, mind, and spirit that undermine Del’s “hope of accuracy” regarding the “lists” she wants to make for an inventory of everything in and about Jubilee, the place and its people (210). Del learns to accept the limitations of lists and words, to seize

the moment before seizing the day, to be open-minded about fateful accidents, questions, and new words “in an alphabet [she] did not know” (211). Edith, however, is still only at the beginning of her quest for her “real self” (*Hateship* 53). Like Del at the end-of-school stage of her life, “she expected [that self] would take over once she got out of this town and away from all the people who thought they knew her” (53).⁹

Her attitude, of course, goes against Horace’s advice not to expect or quest (question, query) in matters of individuation. Yet, similar to Munro, Horace is no stranger to paradox, irony, and charades. His commandment-like “*Tu ne quaesieris*” is asking to be questioned; so is the *carpe diem* command or motif itself. The latter effects changes to the lives of Edith, Johanna, Del, and many others among Munro’s characters, and it dominates the lives of quite a few for whom “seize the day” remains tantamount to a perpetual quest for *logos* as physical pleasure. Marcelle Boudreau is a good example, as is Bea in “Vandals” (*Open*). Yet *logos* as the creative word of enlightened imagination enters their lives as well: Bea writes an introspective letter (albeit under the influence of too much wine), and Marcelle comes up with at least one extraordinary word, “Sabitha,” her daughter’s name.¹⁰ Munro’s attraction to such conflicting ideas of *logos* may reveal itself clearly, as in Del Jordan’s break-up with Garnet French mentioned above, or quixotically as in the story of Edith and Johanna, where the name “Omar” serves as the eloquent word connecting Jesus in the Gospels of John and Thomas, and, by way of Horace’s *carpe diem* theme, the *Rubáiyát* of Omar Khayyám.¹¹

The affiliation of *logos* and Grail persists in Munro’s Word, even when her story words appear to be verbal jests or mere tricks with names.¹² Indeed, her choice of the (at first glance) quirky but trivial link of Arthur Comber’s winning a word game to finding the Grail has proven to be what Robertson Davies liked to call “the tricky bits in my books” (Sifton 24). As her choice of the name “Johanna” suggests, Munro is an adept at the paradoxically both old and always new game of *carpe verbum*. One may well see her as a religious (spiritual) writer whose creative imagination has an almost Faustian edge when it comes to translating *logos* and questioning imposed patriarchal order and orthodoxy. The Gnostic Gospel of Thomas can thus speak more directly to Munro’s Christian unorthodoxy concerning *logos* (word, life, light, Grail) than the Gospel of John: “There is light within an enlightened person, and it shines on the whole world” (Thomas, “Saying” 24). With the Gospel of Thomas

and Munro's Biblical and Arthurian allusions in mind, intimations of the Grail in her fiction want to be seized, whether they manifest themselves through translation homework "at the kitchen table" (*Hateship* 52) or in the illumination of a "kitchen that had filled up with the day's blast of light" (*Love* 325) on a winter morning as a young woman is seeking light in her life through a long but unreturned letter to her fiancé — a teacher of philosophy to theology students — who jilted her perfidiously for not having ended her pregnancy with an abortion. That lit-up kitchen in "Before the Change" is, not so incidentally, next to the room in which hangs the aforementioned picture of Sir Galahad (*Love* 295), implicitly linking the letter writer's private verbal quest to the quest for the Grail. Here as elsewhere in her fiction, Munro's apparent reluctance to mention the word "Grail" itself may reflect an intuition that to do so would mean the loss of the Grail's creative light.¹³ Yet there should be little doubt now about her non-doctrinal faith in the transmuting power of *logos* in conjunction with her inquiries into women's quests for the Grail. Munro herself, in a 1987 interview, states, "The questing male is familiar but the female is not" (Hancock 214).

Translating *Logos* turned out to be the major thought hurdle for Goethe's questing and always steadfastly aspiring Faust, until, with his physical death, the overarching meaning of *logos* reveals itself as, I suggest, "*Das Ewig-Weibliche*" (*Faust* 2:337), "the Eternal Feminine," and thereby amplifies the power of *logos* as creative consciousness or the imagination — the feminine (not female) ur-symbol of the Grail (cf. "luminous Epinoia," Apocryphon 116, 118, and Pagels 164-65). Munro's apparent attraction to the Grail quest reflects her Faustian understanding of the creative meaning of *logos* and its consequences for "the questing female" in a still largely patriarchal world.

NOTES

¹ Later in the essay, I will discuss Munro's use of this ode in "Hateship."

² Coral Ann Howells speaks of Arthurian "echoes" (26) in this story, which she calls "not quite an Arthurian romance and not quite a Gothic tale" (28).

³ Cf. these Gospel verses by Matthew, Mark, and Thomas: "for there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed" (Matt. 10.26); "there is nothing hid which shall not be manifested" (Mark 4.22); "Know what is within *your* sight, and what is hidden from *you* will become clear to *you*. For there is nothing hidden that will not be revealed" (Thomas, "Saying" 5; emphasis added). The Gnostic Gospel of Thomas, as I will argue later, may be

one of Munro's subtexts; yet, at this point in my essay, it would be premature to introduce any traditional or untraditional sayings of Jesus.

⁴ Howells also suggests the link between the Tennyson poem and the Burne-Jones painting in her discussion of the painting's "sexual politics" (60, 61).

⁵ I adapted the phrase "ink-stained female knights" from Hawthorne's image of women writers as "ink-stained Amazons" ("Mrs. Hutchinson" 15). It was the nineteenth-century American poet J. Dunbar Hylton who, according to Arthur and Barbara Tapa Lupack, introduced women as Arthurian knights (8-9). Of particular interest for Munro's fiction is the American novelist Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *The Story of Avis* (1877) for its vision of affinities between Avis, a female artist, and Lancelot and between Avis's daughter Wait and Lancelot's son Galahad (Lupack 30, Kessler 251).

⁶ Elaine Pagels emphasizes the Genesis connections (66): the obvious literal one, "In the beginning" (Gen. 1.1), and the allusive one through the interchangeability of "there was light" (Gen. 1.3) and John's "the Word" as "the light of all people" (*NRSV*, John 1.4).

⁷ Despite the lack of biographical evidence, I would be surprised to learn of Munro's unawareness of or disinterest in these unorthodox Gospel texts: *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, which includes the Gospel of Thomas, was published in 1978 (rev. 3rd edition 1988, rpt. in pb. 1990); Marvin W. Meyer's edition of The Gospel of John in his *The Secret Teachings of Jesus*, a collection of four of the Nag Hammadi texts, was published in 1984 (rpt. in pb. 1986). At this time, though, my taking the Gospel of Thomas as a likely subtext of especially "Carried Away" (1991) and "Hateship" (2001) is necessarily speculative.

⁸ James Carscallen emphasizes typology rather than myth in his responses to Munro's Biblical allusions (128).

⁹ Appropriately, the name "Edith" refers to someone striving toward prosperity (Hanks).

¹⁰ Munro likes to control the names of her characters (Hancock 213), and I like to heed that fact. The meaning of the name "Sabitha" remains a mystery to me; it seems to have Asian (especially Hindu) and Semitic origins according to the name's occurrence on websites. Perhaps Munro chose the name as an ironic allusion to the arrival of a sense of "Sabbath" (day of rest) in Ken and Marcelle's pleasure-driven existence. Ken's last name, Boudreau, also remains onomastically puzzling; it is a relatively common name but with no clear origin given in the French and Franco-Canadian dictionaries I consulted.

¹¹ The *Rubáiyát*, as the following sample verse makes clear, complements Horace's *carpe diem* ode:

Ah, fill the Cup: — what boots it to repeat
How Time is slipping underneath our Feet:
Unborn TO-MORROW, and dead YESTERDAY,
Why fret about them if TODAY be sweet! (Khayyám 27)

¹² Interestingly, the Latin collective noun *logi* means "words" in the sense of jest or nonsense. Given Munro's trickery with words, letters, and Biblical allusions, it seems reasonable to see the "aspirin" (44) Johanna administers to Ken upon finding him sick with a fever as the *Alpha* and the birth of their son "Omar" as the *Omega* of their odd courtship.

¹³ Willa Cather, one of Munro's favourite writers (Thacker, "Munro's"), was similarly reluctant to constrain the Grail by naming it (*World & Parish* 622; Stich). In "Carried Away," Louisa used to be fond of Willa Cather (*Open* 4).

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