

E L I Z A B E T H A . S H I H

## Phallicism and Ambivalence in Alice Munro's "Bardon Bus"

---

**I**n a 1982 interview, Alice Munro commented on characterization in her short stories by saying: "[T]he whole mother-daughter relationship interests me a great deal. It probably obsesses me. The way fathers obsess some male writers" (Interview [Hancock] 215). Making that observation on the eve of the publication of *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982), a short-story collection whose treatment of female experience is frequently centered in mother-daughter relationships, Munro acknowledged her personal investment in one of the most fundamental psychoanalytic narratives of subjectivity—the loss of the mother and the necessary repudiation of that loss. While Munro's latest collection—*Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (2001)—deals with the "stuff of adult life: love, sex, success, failure, hope, death" (McClelland and Stewart book jacket), I find an ambitious if underappreciated discussion of the paradoxes of compulsory heterosexual and female gendering in "Bardon Bus" (*Moons*) that Munro her-

---

I wish to thank Apollonia Steele, Marlys Chevrefils, and the staff of the Alice Munro collection at the University of Calgary Library for assisting me in using the archive; the Virginia Barber Literary Agency, for granting me permission to quote from Munro's draft; and Barbara Brown, Keith Hart, and Gail Donald of the CBC Radio Archives, for allowing me to hear Peter Gzowski's five-part 1982 interview with Munro. Rowland Smith, Julian Patrick, Jane Campbell, Viviana Comensoli, Linda Hutcheon, and Naomi Morgenstern commented judiciously on earlier versions of this essay. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada funded its research.

self dates to a more “autobiographical or personal” period of fiction (Interview [Wachtel]).<sup>1</sup>

“Bardon Bus” is the first-person testimony of an unnamed female freelance writer who returns to Toronto after a research trip in Australia, during which she had a casual affair with a married man of former acquaintance. The period and setting of the affair are described in florid detail. The narrator’s subsequent obsession over her male lover, whom she calls X, is intense and compelling, implicating his friend, Dennis, and hers, Kay, in two barely intimated love triangles. The lovers’ apparently sophisticated adult sexual relationship is prefigured by the narrator’s unresolved oedipal loss, by which she and in fact all of the major characters in the story became gendered in the first place. Munro’s self-acknowledged obsession about “mothers and daughters” is evident in ambivalently epiphanic moments of the narrator’s testimony, by which the woman gradually recognizes that the source of her suffering is not her faithless lover. It lies instead in her melancholic incorporation of the absent mother in and as her own ego, a loss that has traumatically constituted the narrator’s sexuality, and that she unconsciously repeats in the heterosexual bond.<sup>2</sup> The narrator’s obsession over X is only the central conflict in a larger landscape of psychosexual crisis in “Bardon Bus.”

Following Freud, classical psychoanalysis posits a “phallic” phase in infantile development that for children of both sexes follows the oral and anal phases but precedes the oedipal one (Freud, “Infantile” 139–45). During the phallic phase, the child (not yet a subject) takes as the primary erogenous zone the phallus that Freud problematically equates to the male penis. The unconscious fantasy

---

1. I quote from a 1999 interview with Eleanor Wachtel (on the twentieth anniversary of the CBC Literary Awards), in which Munro comments that she has “always thought back” to the emotions of her past: “Now I’m writing about . . . these days as a housewife, not quite so autobiographical or personal fiction [as before].”

2. Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen and Judith Butler provide two recent accounts of gender in which mimetic identification (being like) collapses into incorporation (the state of being itself), as a central mechanism of the trauma of subject formation. The prominence of oedipal conflict in childhood development means that the birth into subjectivity is always already a *gendered* subjectivity, which leaves for both sexes, but most intensely for women, homesickness for the mother as a phallic figure. I return to this point later in the essay.

of this period is that one's mother has the phallus (be it the penis or other site of ontological power) because her adaptation to the child's needs is so close that she seems to be omnipotent. The infant's fantasy lasts until sexual difference is discovered in the oedipal period. The concept of the phallic mother then becomes the child's defense against acknowledging the mother's lack and the threat to the self of a similar castration (Jacobus 105).<sup>3</sup> Phallicism conveys a sense of self-grandiosity, dominated by the blissful experience of being the center of all existence. The fantasy usually changes in the oedipal period, so that the phallus is seen for a time to be the father's and rivalry developed with the mother for it, until, if oedipalization is not resolved, the "phallic" figure is displaced to other women in the adult life of the child (Moore and Fine 143–44). The phallic phase, as object-relations theorists and self-psychologists argue, becomes "phallicism" when that early infantile self experiences instability and unreliability in the caregiver, who thwarts the child's needs for both dependence and independence (or, in classical terms, the need to release aggression for individuation), so that the oedipal phase becomes a fragmenting and traumatizing experience. As Mary Jacobus writes, "unless [the mother] is imagined as the phallic mother, the mother is always lost, the subject forever abroad" (105).

By her autobiographical testimony in "Bardon Bus," the narrator scrutinizes female experiences of phallicism in herself and her friend Kay more intensely than she can the male ones of her lover, whom she calls X, and his friend, Dennis. But phallicism is central to the motivation of the characters' gendered behavior and to our understanding, particularly of the narrator's psychosexual identity conflict. When the narrator meditates on how she would have been an "old maid" in a previous generation, hoarding paltry trinkets as sexual fetishes, she reveals not only her capacity to fantasize about men in a "lifelong secret, lifelong dream-life" (110), but more importantly that in the fantasy she expresses feminine behavior she would have learned from her mother. When the narrator observes

---

3. This sense of the phallic mother reflects Jane Gallop's exposition of Lacan's "The Signification of the Phallus," of the ambivalence between fear and love for the mother as a woman of whom we are afraid (Gallop, *Reading Lacan* 148–49).

that she could make erotic the most mundane tasks of “polishing the stove, wiping the lamp chimneys [and] dipping water for tea from the drinking-pail” (110–11), these traditionally “female” chores are not neutral, but overdetermined with an infantile, pre-oedipal longing for plenitude with the mother.<sup>4</sup>

The narrator expresses this longing more clearly in a companion moment near the end of the story, when she recalls only a short-lived enchantment in the childhood game of dress up: at “ten or eleven years old,” she unconsciously imitated her mother by masquerading “as the bride in old curtains, or as a lady in rouge and a feathered hat” (126). The narrator notes that after “all the effort and contriving . . . there was a considerable letdown. What are you supposed to do now?” and in the present moment asserts that “there is great fear and daring and disappointment” in the “display” of gender (126). The need and vulnerability that mark the narrator’s “letdown” with her own specular reflection, and her later sense of the “fear, daring and disappointment” of gender, ontologically precede her affair with X and characterize the narcissistic wound she sustained in infancy, by losing the idealized object of her primary identification.

By describing her former lover, X, in melodramatically inflated language that betrays her psychological investment in him as a replacement for an absent, idealized mother, Munro’s narrator most obviously demonstrates phallicism. X becomes the object of the “enchantment” the narrator felt fleetingly as a child, when she “dressed up” as a “bride” or a mature “lady” before the mirror (126).<sup>5</sup> Onboard the plane, after she departs from X and so ends

---

4. By finding that the narrator’s gender identification and sexual aim betray their melancholy particularly over the phallic mother, I disagree with Magdalene Redekop’s emphasis on the story’s intense union between the “symbolic *father* and perfect lover” (157; emphasis added) and her “envision[ing] the father as a brutal lover” (158). The narrator’s undescribed father may have been destructive, but the loss of the mother is the narrator’s central psychic wound (see Clark 4, 12). While she does not address the narrator’s masochism directly, Redekop acknowledges the narrator’s desire for plenitude as “lust for her own elimination” (158).

5. Although Ildiko de Papp Carrington does not mention the prevalent connection of characters’ gendered phallicism in the story, she observes parallels in the sexual desire between the imaginary “old maids” and the narrator’s “yellow nightgown” scene with X (151).

their affair in Australia, she fantasizes that “the bulk of [him] was still beside me and when I woke I filled the space quickly with memories of his voice, looks, warmth, our scenes together” (123). Back in Toronto, the fantasy becomes embellished, so that what she believes is “love” for X includes a “movie-dream of heaven” one night, in which their “innocent athletic underwear outfits . . . changed at some point into gauzy bright white clothes and these turned out to be . . . our substances . . . our souls. Embraces took place . . . with the usual urgency, but were transformed . . . into a rare state of content” (127). The “content” she dreams of is not a waking reality, for only in fantasy can the narrator’s perceptions of X intensify despite the increasing distance between them. X becomes what Freud terms the “ideal ego,” the reflection of the grandiose self she most wants to feel, a position originally occupied by the mother, and whose loss the narrator now defends against, not only as that of a lover, but as a lover overdetermined by her own preoedipal longing for wholeness.

The focus of the narrator’s testimony on X conveys the sense that her life began, has entirely revolved around, and threatens to end with him. The narrator alludes only in the most cursory way to being divorced from her first husband at the time she reconnects with X (111). Yet that divorce itself has repeated the loss of the phallic mother, for although her husband gave her a baby at age twenty-one, it clearly was not the phallus she longed for: motherhood came with her husband’s sexist expectation that she would nurse the baby “in the bushes” during a public picnic, so that years later when she recalls the marriage, she says, “[s]ex has not begun for me at all” (118). That particular assertion from the middle-aged narrator further reflects that sexuality has replaced maternity as the new mode of her phallicism. This early maternal scene of nursing her baby, which she recalls as one of lack, is also significantly the first occasion on which she spoke with X, and was “lightened” by “gratitude” for the attention he paid her. The scene presages his role as a phallic figure in their affair, twenty years later.<sup>6</sup>

---

6. Recall also the presence of children who “looked shocked and solemn” (112) in the scene onboard the excursion boat in Australia, when X first propositions the narrator. His extravagant behavior in the seduction scene, where he gets down on his knees, ironically

Just as the narrator performs a masquerade of femininity before the mirror at “ten or eleven years old,” and as an adult imagines herself as a sex-starved “old maid” ancestor, the narrator writes X into a private psychic fantasy, calling him “one of the letters of his name” less “because it suits him” than because “it seems to me expansive and secretive” and thus like a “character in an old-fashioned novel, that pretends to be true” (112). Although the letter x may in fact be secretive, signifying among other things an unknown algebraic quantity, it is the “expansive” potential of the letter as signifier that attracts the narrator: through it she can project onto X and their affair whatever qualities she desires—irrespective of his abandonment, and dismissing her own doubts in the affair, when she “had cried once, thought I was ugly, thought he was bored” (123).<sup>7</sup> The narrator’s grandiose construction of her former lover aligns her with her imaginary “old maid” ancestors, for the

---

parodies a proposal of marriage or more genuine commitment that he does not offer (“Come and live with me in my house,” not Christopher Marlowe’s “Come live with me and be my love”). The image also aligns X with a child, arrested by his own narcissistic needs, whom the narrator is reduced to mothering by reprimanding him, “Get up, behave!” (112). X has earlier played the mother to the narrator at the picnic where they meet, when his kind attentions and offer of the beer figuratively nurture the narrator: “[D]rink up. Beer’s supposed to be good for your milk, isn’t it?” (118). Throughout “Bardon Bus,” the presence of children and childlike behavior signifies the characters’ profound oedipal conflicts.

7. On the multiple significations of the letter “X,” see Heble (139), Rasporich (191), and Redekop (157–58). Although he does not discuss the ironic implications of his reading, Ajay Heble observes that “X” puts the narrator’s lover “sous rature” (under erasure), by which the narrator reads Alex Walther as at once the unreliable (abandoning) and indispensable object of her fantasy life. The signifier “X” clearly exceeds the narrator’s conscious control of it. The well-established reading of X as *ex-lover* foregrounds the identity X adopts in relation to his lovers by his serial monogamy, virtually before each affair begins. But “X” also marks the spot of a traumatic chiasmus of ambivalence between the reality of oedipal loss and the narrator’s phallic fantasy, between having and not having the mother. The chiasmus of these two psychic spaces designates what the narrator must cross over to be a “survivor” of “love”: she claims to Kay to be “getting over” X (117; “Getting Over” was a working title for earlier drafts of “Bardon Bus”), and later that she is “at a low point” that she must “get past” (126). Similarly relevant is the phrasing of Kay’s sympathetic anecdote about the daughter of Victor Hugo, who, after years of living a romantic fantasy, “can’t connect the real man any more with the person she loves, in her head. She can’t connect him at all” (117). The need for “connection” between the fragments of the narrator’s psyche in “Bardon Bus” thereby enriches one of Munro’s key words with psychoanalytic meaning. On Munro’s previous use of the term “connections,” see York.

"expansive[ness]" she finds in the signifier "X" echoes the synecdochic structure of the older women's fetishes—the "piece" of Chinese silk . . . worn by the touch of fingers in the dark," in which "a little go[es] a long way" and "a touch communicates a whole" (110).<sup>8</sup>

Through memory and dreams, two sites classically associated with the unconscious, the narrator forestalls the pain of maternal loss: she writes the character of "X" as the character in her own "old-fashioned novel" (112), dreams the elated "white" dream of the "bright . . . clothes" (127), the more tormented dream of the trip to Cuba (114), and compulsively replays her memory of sexual bliss with X. In the dream, when X proposes they go to Cuba, the narrator's ostensibly sexual desire only thinly veils her childhood desire for protection from the mother, a wish that is fulfilled when X claims "he did not want to interfere . . . but he did want to shelter me" (114). But before she awakens to feel that fulfillment "shrivel," the fantasy is disrupted when she finds herself unable to go because "it seemed I had the responsibility of a baby, asleep in a dresser drawer." By contrast to the picnic scene in which X speaks to her as she breastfeeds her baby in the bushes, in this maternal scene, her symbolic status as a mother herself precludes her from seeking with him the fulfillment of her childhood desire: her need for X as phallic mother is displaced and deferred to the baby's need for her.

That displacement continues in the yellow nightgown passage, in many ways an unrecoverable trauma of her adult womanhood and the outcome of the ten- or eleven-year-old child's memory of standing "letdown" before the mirror (126). In this passage, the narrator's postcoital turmoil seems to fulfill the "old maid" fantasies of "perfect mastery," as it reduces her to the "woman, who has almost lost consciousness, whose legs are open, arms flung out, head twisted to the side as if she has been struck down in the course of some natural disaster" and who "rouses herself. . . . slops water . . . drinks, shudders, falls back" (123–24). While this memory re-

---

8. Fetishism is one form of addictive and compulsive sexuality that manifests in adulthood the phallicism of the child. I return to it and the narrator's compulsive sexuality later.

plays in her head to the point of her “torment” (124), the narrator, by contrast, finds her other dream, of “white” clothing, “misplaced,” and finds that “misplacement is the clue in love, the heart of the problem” (128). Her term “misplacement” is a syntactic variation of psychoanalytic “displacement,” the associative or metonymic web of lack and desire for the (m)other, repeated in the heterosexual bond.<sup>9</sup> Clearly, the forms by which the narrator expresses her longing for X—dream and the autobiographical retelling of memory—are laden with phallic longing and logic.

In particular, the narrator’s disturbing memory of sex with X, by which the room was filled with “long subsiding spasms. . . . a rich broth of love, a golden twilight of love” (124), demonstrates the narrator’s version of the old maids’ stubborn virgin’s belief that “perfect mastery” in a man’s hands is possible: she unconsciously expects orgasmic bliss to repair her wounded femininity.<sup>10</sup> The term “perfect,” both symptom of and synonym for the narrator’s phallicism, recurs significantly to the narrator and X when she is most vulnerable—when they separate for her return to Canada. She recalls lying to him, “As it is, it’s been perfect,” and is surprised that he responds “Perfect” (123).<sup>11</sup> X’s phallic view of sex as the means by which they “almost finished each other off” (124) reverberates through the narrator’s psyche, so that she acknowledges in herself the old maid’s fantasy that in sex “you give yourself up, give yourself over” to a man in an “assault which is guaranteed to *finish off* everything you’ve ever been before” (111; emphasis

9. Although she does not discuss the narrator’s underlying desire for plenitude, Carrington reads her “misplacement” as “paradoxically positioning herself on both sides of her internal argument . . . between her dreams and her compulsive sexual memories . . . and her waking actions and consciously formulated beliefs” (153).

10. In a review of *The Moons of Jupiter*, Anne Collins perceptively observes that the volume of stories is all about people “still caught in the fantasy of ‘perfect mastery’” (74)—phallicisms—over their own lives.

11. Although the narrator’s fantasies of X leave her blind to psychic motivation that prompts *him* to start the affair and lie that he’s found it “perfect” (123), one can sense that he lies in that moment to be rid of her before she creates another tearful scene (“I had cried once” [123]), even if that lie feeds the narrator’s subsequent fantasy that he shares her “love” and will return to her. Compare, for instance, Munro’s later draft of the story (“Bardon Bus, Revised Version”), in which the narrator cries over X’s attractiveness to a younger woman who passes them in the street—crying that X passively appeases, without much evident interest or sympathy (3rd Accession 4.42).

added). The grandiose self that the narrator maintains by keeping X as her fantasy lover makes him her phallic principle—the other or object who inherits the power she invested in and ceded to the phallic mother. Because the narrator merely repeats with X her melancholic longing without becoming able to move beyond it, her hope to stabilize her sense of femininity by relation to him is doomed to fail; her belief that X has had “perfect mastery” over her implicitly alludes to the goal of Freud’s “pleasure principle,” whereby the child compulsively repeats the trauma of the mother’s departure in the vain effort to “master” it and so restore the illusion of self-plenitude (Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” 285).

Compulsory heterosexuality in “Bardon Bus” is predicated on the characters’ incorporation of the phallic mother, and the presumption that gender is stabilized by heterosexuality; however, on the contrary, the story betrays widespread panic in gender-specific ways. X, who is in his third marriage by the time of the narrator’s meditation, takes the narrator and eventually Kay as lovers. And although his psychological motivations are largely occluded from the narrator’s testimony, his orgasmic exclamation “We almost finished each other off” and his willingness to affirm that their affair has been “perfect” evoke his reliance on women as phallic mother figures, just as he is for the narrator. X compensates for the lost mother with one woman from his female “army” until, when the illusion of plenitude she supports is spent, and when his identification with her overtakes his desire for her, he abandons her for another. In ironic contradiction to the meaning of “Alexander,” X’s full name (128), a “helper of mankind,” he uses many and ever younger women: in Dennis’s terms “having that nice young mirror to look in” (121), X reflects his gender anxiety as an aging man trying to return to the illusion of preoedipal union he had with the mother. The apparently infinite source of female lovers for X’s serial monogamy helps him to deny the threat or lack he otherwise feels as a heterosexual man, of being “not total” (Gallop, *Daughter’s Seduction* 25).

X’s friend Dennis betrays a similarly panicked masculinity, while he practices his social equivalent of X’s serial monogamy—visiting foreign countries as a tourist and exploiting the hospitality of acquaintances there. All the while, Dennis arrogantly dominates oth-

ers with fragments of knowledge he presents as authoritative. His life as an opportunistic, serial tourist, with its egomaniacal talk, allows him unconsciously to compensate for his psychic castration. X is uncommonly able to assess Dennis's character, since it mirrors his own:

Dennis always talked about the last place he'd been and the last people he'd seen, and never seemed to notice anything, but . . . would . . . be talking about us . . . to the next people he had dinner with, in the next city. . . . Dennis spent most of his life travelling, and talking about it, and . . . knew a lot of people just well enough that when he showed up he had to be asked to dinner.

(119)

A throwback to the nineteenth-century imperialism, Dennis crosses the globe to repress his own lack.

But Dennis's gender panic motivates a more overt sadism than X's to repress his sense of failing masculinity: while ostensibly criticizing his friend for his philandery, Dennis comments that X's "army" of women "marches on" (119), and so objectifies the female narrator, who not only sits before him but also made the dinner he has just consumed. Dennis equates her sexual difference as a woman not merely with being "not total" but with being "not at all" (Gallop 22), and so with a sexual inferiority or castration more intense than his own. As such, the narrator's position bolsters his own faltering ego (Gallop 22). Dennis's cruelty is more obvious when he meets the narrator months later in Toronto, for then she recognizes that "He asked me [to dinner] so he would have somebody to talk to" (120). And that "talk"—an antifeminist diatribe—is again unconsciously motivated to console himself at her expense, for he claims women's lives, unlike men's, go "only . . . in one direction" (121)—to the grave—and disingenuously pronounces her to be "lucky" to be "forced to live in the world of loss and death" (122).<sup>12</sup> Dennis's sadism demonstrates more openly than X's serial monogamy a profound masculine anxiety against identifying

12. By essentializing that "Munro even hazards a philosophic challenge through the male character, Dennis, that it is perhaps women who are most often granted" a "privileged sensitivity and understanding beyond Ego" (74), Rasporich overlooks the narrator's disempowerment and Dennis's sadism.

with women, whose “castration” both may suspect but vociferously deny in themselves. Dennis in particular demonstrates Judith Butler’s critique of the heterosexist male who since “he wouldn’t be caught dead being her” must instead “want her” sexually, as the condition of his heterosexual identity (*Psychic Life* 137).

In fact, by equating his anatomical difference from the female narrator with gender superiority, and by conveniently repressing the hazards, such as sexual impotence, that aging men face, Dennis denies the reality of both sexes’ ontological lack or castration.<sup>13</sup> He may function to prick the narcissistic bubble of the lovers’ bliss in their Queensland house by exposing the temporariness of their affair, but he’s also a “prick” who bases his theory of gender with symptomatic singularity on the “prick” (or penis). His argument that anatomy is destiny is neither “a new theory about the life of women” (121) nor an indisputable one, when psychoanalysts have long argued that the anatomical body may be no more accessible as biological artifact than the unconscious itself, always already mediated by cultural influences.<sup>14</sup> In fact, by making false concessions to the “suffering” of a sex whose experience he misappropriates, Dennis illustrates Jane Gallop’s point that even the apparent “resenters” of phallogentric logic are in fact “the most obstinate of believers” (*Daughter’s Seduction* 131). He deludes himself that his ostensible social mastery of others is phallic self-presence, even as he must move peripatetically and parasitically from one host to the next, before his illusion of plentitude can dissipate.

Yet for all this, female experiences of phallogentric logic feature

---

13. Impotence would be one great fear of a phallic narcissist like Dennis. Given the legalization of Viagra in North America in the late 1990s, it seems likely that Dennis today would harness evidence of the wide acceptance of the drug to his claim of male superiority (now that men can apparently “get it up” through old age). The manufacturers’ caveats for the drug, restated in the media (that it is not an aphrodisiac, does not work for all men, and carries side effects), seem implicitly intended for consumers with Dennis’s phallogentric logic. The variable effects of Viagra would in fact reinforce Dennis’s gender anxiety especially well, when we recall Butler’s point that gender is performative, repetitive, and therefore, by nature, a failure. Each repetition differs from the last and disrupts the ones that precede it.

14. Butler argues, for instance, that there is no easy correlation between “sex, gender presentation, sexual practice, fantasy and sexuality,” despite Dennis’s anxious insistence otherwise (Butler, “Imitation” 25).

more prominently in “Bardon Bus” than the male ones. Both Kay and the narrator are caught between the double bind of preoedipal longing for the mother and the desire to be seen by the male lover, in X’s “mind and in his eyes” (127). If Dennis mirrors X in denying his castrated state by exploiting women, then Kay similarly mirrors the narrator by exhibiting her “masochistic compliance with her own humiliation” (Carrington 153). Masochism paradoxically may be the only way in which the narrator can sense the boundaries of her fragile ego and so be assured that she still exists; so too is it with Kay. Like Alexander, who is ironically named, Kay is named “pure one,” when she is degraded and depleted by her own serial monogamy.<sup>15</sup> The narrator observes that serial pattern by finding on Kay’s bookshelf “a history of her love affairs”: “books on prison riots, autobiographies of prisoners, from the period of the parolee; this book on anatomy and others on occult phenomena, from the period of the artist; books on caves, books by Albert Speer, from the time of the wealthy German importer who taught her the word *spelunker*; books on revolution which date from the West Indian” (116).

The narrator’s awareness of such a pattern in Kay’s love life—the efforts at first “to disguise her condition, pretending to be prudent or ironic,” and “soon a tremor, a sly flutter” (116)—enables the reader to recognize along with her at the end of the story that Kay has supplanted her in X’s affections (128). What remains more disturbing, however, is the implication that compulsory heterosexuality (between Kay and X) will prelude the threat of homosocial or lesbian attachment between Kay and the narrator, when the homosocial bonding between Dennis and X evidently continues despite X’s change in partners and Dennis’s envy of him. Butler’s point that the “‘truest’ lesbian melancholic” is the “strictly straight woman” applies to the women of “Bardon Bus,” because the foreclosure of lesbianism in the oedipal phase is the very mechanism that pro-

15. The fact that Kay’s name puns with its first letter, “K,” unconsciously aligns her in the narrator’s mind with [Ale]X[ander] and so foreshadows the connection between the two at the end of “Bardon Bus.” More important to the argument that follows, however, is Kay’s function as double to the narrator’s experience of nostalgia. As the female coding of narcissism, nostalgia differs from X’s and Dennis’s narcissism, which is their defense against threatened masculinity.

duces “unlivable passion and ungrievable loss” in the symbolic for the mother (Butler, *Psychic Life* 135).

In fact, the narrator’s obsession over X is the central conflict in a larger landscape of psychosexual crisis in “Bardon Bus” in which gender is composed of what is repressed—not expressed—by oedipalized sexuality. Two parallel “love” triangles develop between, on one hand, the narrator, X, and K(ay); and, on the other, the narrator, X, and Dennis. Constituted on repressed homosexual desire (between the narrator and K[ay], between X and Dennis) and on correspondingly anxious serial heterosexual monogamy (between X and the narrator and later between X and K[ay]), both triangles perfectly allegorize Freud’s neurotic model of oedipal conflict and its limits. In fact, by observing the very blind spots of his theory, we find a way through the story’s persisting tension between the narrator’s obsession over X, X’s serial use of women, and the melancholic gender identifications of the characters.

The development of X’s heterosexual affairs with the narrator and later with Kay is arrested on what Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen terms the “two scandals” of Freud’s Oedipus: first, that characters view their desire for their lovers as separate from their identification with each other and their same-sex friends, when post-Freudian psychoanalysis has suggested that the first emotional connections of a child with others are not oriented around an a priori genital sexual difference; and secondly, that throughout Freud’s writings on the Oedipus complex, he repressed identificatory ambivalence, when post-Freudian critique has found that the child’s primal identification with the mother is “shot through” with “hatred and violence” as well as love (Borch-Jacobsen 298).

In the first “scandal,” Freud argues that the subject’s aim or cathexis and identification only converge in the formation of the oedipal triangle, but “Bardon Bus” demonstrates the two as intersecting forces throughout the narrator’s adult life, in which the adults’ relationships repeat their preoedipal ambivalence. The phallic mother and phallogocentric logic form the basis of women’s mimetic gender identification and of the melancholic, masochistic dynamic of their sexual desire for men. If, by compulsorily repudiating the loss of the mother, X and Dennis must want to have a “girl [*sic*]” so as not to be her, the narrator and Kay demonstrate their womanliness

by not “want[ing] a girl because wanting a girl brings being a girl into question” (Butler, *Psychic Life* 137).<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, the narrator, Kay, X, and Dennis all share anxiety to be “proper” women and men, since threats to heterosexual relations with a phallicized object pathologically threaten heterosexual gender itself. The narrator and Kay only become female by achieving heterosexuality, but femaleness is always and only unstable, contingent upon their dressing up to keep a man “from freeing himself” (116), more than upon being with him. The narrator’s and Kay’s rivalry for a love object in X to stabilize their unstable gender identities is preceded by Dennis’s and X’s implicit rivalry for power over the narrator in the story’s first dinner scene. And here their unconscious goal is to shore up masculinity threatened by any sympathetic identification they feel with her.

By becoming obsessed with X, and without recognizing that she identifies with him as a substitute for the phallic mother, the narrator demonstrates the unconsciously antimimetic nature of Freud’s Oedipus complex. Freud favored the erotic aim or cathexis of sexuality above the imitative process of the infant’s identification, including its earliest, neuter preoedipal state. Unconsciously repressing both aim and the preoedipal state, he was able to find an easy symmetry between male and female heterosexual oedipal processes and to root that symmetry in genital sexuality. By contrast, the mere existence of homosexual object relations, in which identification and aim for a same-sex object are aligned, exposes Freud’s scandalous repressions (Borch-Jacobsen 302).

In a crucial admission in “The Ego and the Id” (1923), Freud concedes that aim and object identification are “no doubt indistinguishable from each other,” since the oedipus complex has its prehistory in the ambivalent incorporation of the mother. Asserting that the child’s identity with the mother therefore precedes or co-

---

16. Butler’s argument “He wouldn’t be caught dead being her: therefore he wants her” (137) borrows from Freud’s point in “Findings, Ideas, Problems” that the man must “have” the breast to be able to say, “I am not it” (299). The psychoanalyst Lionel Ovesey terms “pseudohomosexual anxiety” a neurosis that results from a patient’s strivings for power over while conceding dependency on an (often idealized) other, which can be misinterpreted by that patient as fear of being homosexual—whether accompanied by same-sex desire or not (32). I return to this concept in my conclusion.

incides with desire for her, Freud nonetheless continues to separate libidinal aim from identification in his “official” theory. This practice reflects his desire to repress the homosexual and its power to panic heterosexual identity.

The second scandal of the oedipus complex for Freud, as Borch-Jacobsen explicates, also governs the characters of “Bardon Bus”—the possibility that the subject feels incestuous or aggressive desires toward the mother, which in combination with the arbitrary, nongenital basis of heterosexuality, threaten heterosexist culture and so must be repressed (Borch-Jacobsen 299). Sexual rivalry in Munro’s story is only a displacement of the lasting influence of preoedipal ambivalence toward the mother. Therefore, the urgency of male partnership and the threat of competition “in love” take on great proportion in “Bardon Bus,” as symptoms of a fundamental anxiety of heterosexual gender identification.

In other words, it is not only the loss of the mother as identificatory object, but also the possibility that the ambivalence the characters feel for her could as likely be channeled into homosexual as into heterosexual love that motivates the two love triangles in “Bardon Bus” in the first place. If there is no anatomical or compulsory basis for genital heterosexuality, then the apparently homosocial ties in the story (the narrator with Kay, Dennis with X) could just as readily be homosexual. In fact, the lure of the homosexual aim and identification makes the narrator and Kay and also X and Dennis defensively heterosexual. For instance, when the narrator and Kay desperately seek to sustain their respective love affairs with men, that aim seems, as Freud argues, fully distinct from their feminine identification with the mother and each other: they commiserate over their similarly failing love lives (117), and Kay replaces X as the provider of “shelter” to the narrator (114). Yet the narrator not only identifies with Kay (enough to defend her manic behavior to others), but by the end of the story unconsciously wants her and becomes the initial audience for her new makeover. Certainly, when the adult, graying Kay parades in a “schoolgirl’s tunic worn without a blouse or brassiere” that makes her arms look “soft and brown” (128), the masquerade resonates with the narrator’s reversal of it, her memory of playing “grown-up” as a child, when she would “dress up as a bride in old curtains, or as a lady in rouge

and a feathered hat" (126). But Kay also titillates the narrator, who affirms that the outfit looks "kinky" (128). The intensification of the women's mutual identification by their implied desire proves all the more devastating when the narrator realizes that Kay, in accord with compulsory heterosexuality, is performing for X's benefit, not hers (128). Kay's androgynous masquerade as the prepubescent "schoolgirl" disrupts heterosexual gender identity in a way parallel to the "pretty boy," whom the narrator sees, while in the throes of her own gender masquerade, earlier in the story.

What we might term characters' drag in "Bardon Bus" not only unveils the arbitrary performativity of gender as a series of imitations and repetitions without origin, but also performs, as a gendered identification, the subject's taboo sexual aim for the mother. The male drag queen becomes "femme," and Kay regresses to a prepubescent state of dependence on the mother. Therefore, when the narrator is titillated by Kay's boyish look (observing that her tunic is worn "without blouse or brassiere," and conceding that she looks "kinky") and observes that the "pretty boy," though "not a young lady at all but a pretty boy dressed up as a lady," is still the "prettiest . . . person she has seen all day" (125–26), she experiences the paradoxical coexistence of female gendered identification and homosexual aim that Freud could not bear to avow.<sup>17</sup>

Further, the panicking of gender by ungrieved homosexual aim is also evident in the male characters of "Bardon Bus." As we have seen, X's serial monogamy is panicked by the possibility that he could be a woman and therefore desire men. And Dennis is jealous of both X's success with women and of those women's closeness to X, so that he insults both X and the narrator by claiming X has an "army" of women, "Row on row and always a new one appearing at the end of the line" (119). By his masculine aggressive-

17. The narrator finds this coexistence as hard to bear as Freud did. Her response to the "pretty boy"—"You look very nice" (126)—is remarkably similar to her response to Kay's new masquerade (128). The affirmation in both cases reflects her disowned homosexual desire. The logical sequence of the narrator's pseudohomosexual anxiety after X abandons her would be, "I am a failure in heterosexual love = I am not a woman = I am like a man (in a woman's body) = I am a lesbian" (adapted from Ovesey 44). Kay's schoolgirl (boyish) look and her willingness to offer the narrator shelter allow her to become the man and the narrator the woman in a bond that is neither fully heterosexual nor homosexual (128).

ness in this scene and in the second dinner he shares with the narrator, Dennis demonstrates that the more defensive the gender identification, the more fierce the ungrieved homosexual aim.

By contrast to the male characters in "Bardon Bus" who experience oedipalization as a threat of being "not total," or the loss of the phallus they ostensibly have, the female narrator and Kay, who experience oedipalization as the fear that they do "not [exist] at all" (Gallop, *Daughter's Seduction* 146), display a nostalgic longing to return to the mother. For men, psychic desire "can be married to a threat," Gallop writes, but for women, according to Lacan, "it can join *nostalgia* instead. If the threat is understood as the male's castration anxiety, fear of losing what he has as the mother has lost hers, then perhaps the nostalgia is the female's regret for what she does not have (any longer). Man's desire will henceforth be linked by law to a menace; but women's desire will legally cohabit with nostalgia" (Gallop 145–46; emphasis added). Therefore, while X and Dennis attempt to dominate women sexually or socially to defend against their own castration anxiety, the narrator and Kay resort to "nostalgia" as a coping mechanism. A coding for feminine oedipal desire, nostalgia is for women a heterosexually permitted neurosis toward the mother and "the feminine articulation of what it means to become a gendered subject" (Jacobus 105). Kay's and the narrator's experiences "in love" paradoxically embody their longing for a mythical phallic mother whom no child ever has yet continues to long for, fulfilling Freud's observation in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" that patients repeat repressed material in "reproductions, which . . . always have as their subject some portion of infantile sexual life—of the Oedipus complex" (288).

The narrator's affair with X is therefore less important for its own sake than for serving her fantasy of preoedipal unity with the phallic mother, demonstrating Kay's claim of men: "You don't want them, you want what you can get from them" (117). The narrator's oscillations between grandiosity ("hysterical eroticism") and despair (apparent "common sense") as she endures the loss of X are overdetermined by nostalgia for the lost mother. And although Kay's behavior is yet more exaggerated than the narrator's, the narrator unconsciously identifies her own nostalgia in Kay and so not only "joke[s] about" her but rationalizes that her "trust is total . . .

miseries . . . sharp" (116), and that she "survives without visible damage" (117). By remembering their fragmented egos through affairs of the past in such hyperbolic terms, the female characters in "Bardon Bus" reveal that their nostalgia is "the retrospective form of desire which Freud defines, in 'The Uncanny,' as masculine homesickness for the maternal body" (Jacobus 94).<sup>18</sup> Indeed, as Jacobus writes, "If the mother has [the phallus], then there is only masculinity after all" (104).

Throughout the story, the narrator depicts moments of phallicism by rhetorical figures of the uncanny that mark the blurring of the boundary between the characters' fantasies of omnipotence and the reality of the loss of the mother. These moments consist of the contradiction between a sense of plenitude that is *heimlich*, or familiar to the womb, and the *unheimlich*, the unfamiliar or repressed loss. Although these moments often involve X, the observations and images are of the narrator's telling. For instance, she recalls in terms of the uncanny her visits with X to the Australian town near his house, when descending from the "half-wild hill villages into the central part of town, with its muddy river" was both "remarkably *familiar* and yet not to be confused with anything we had known in the past. . . . This *familiarity* was not oppressive but delightful, and there was a slight *strangeness* to it, as if we had come by it in a way we didn't understand" (112–113; emphasis added). This descent is couched in imagery reminiscent of a regression to the mother's womb, with the lovers' return to the womblike center or "muddy river" of the nearby town (112). And here alone does the narrator explain the name of the title bus as the one that transports them on this trip and so supports their state of denial. By naming the story "Bardon Bus," Munro might seem to foreground the narrator's "system" (112) of using synecdoche to tell her story, in which the bus's name, like X's, stands for a whole: "I say to myself, 'Bardon Bus, No. 144,' and I see a whole succession of

18. By finding work in Australia, X and the narrator discover that their mother(land), Canada, lacks the phallus of knowledge. But then they immediately deny this by using "home" as the standard against which they colonize the sights before them: "we knew the insides of the shuttered, sun-blistered houses . . . we knew the streets we couldn't see" (113). To be a gendered subject is to be alienated from and homesick for the maternal womb.

scenes. . . . in detail" (112). Arguing that the Australian village, its "housewives" and "shuttered, sun-blistered houses" are familiar (113), the lovers demonstrate one such moment of denial when the situation is more invested than they realize with the loss of the mother.

Images that Freud enumerates in "The Uncanny" (1919), such as "dismembered limbs [and] a severed head," and especially those that seem capable of independent activity, further proliferate associations of oedipal castration throughout the narrator's story. When Dennis insults the narrator by commenting that X's "women aren't intact. Or not for long" (120), he compares them to the decapitated and dismembered terra-cotta soldiers in China: "Their legs and torsos and heads have to be matched up" (120). Virtually the same uncanny associations recur as the narrator compulsively and nostalgically repeats her yellow nightgown memory at X's hands, even if her reversion to a third-person voice here may represent a simultaneous disavowal of her disempowerment: "On the bed a woman . . . has almost lost consciousness, whose *legs* are open, *arms* flung out, *head* twisted to the side as if she has been struck down in the course of some natural disaster" (123; emphasis added). Even as the narrator tries to substitute orgasmic sex with X for the mother, the uncanny underlies those moments metonymically, thereby transmitting the structure of loss that characterizes Lacanian desire. By the uncanny, the narrator's nostalgic memory of sex dismembers her, even as she would re-member herself by it into a mythic phallic unity.

Uncanny images of beheading or headlessness recur elsewhere in "Bardon Bus"—for instance, by association with Sir Walter Raleigh, whose poem "on the eve of his execution" repeats in the narrator's head: "Even such is time, that takes in trust—" (122). Like Raleigh, who operated under the illusion of the power of England's phallic mother, Elizabeth the First, the narrator gains a false sense of omnipotence by being with X (himself the "ruler of an army"). Raleigh joins the metonymies of castration in "Bardon Bus" by his beheading and is historically associated with Queen Elizabeth—Munro's final pun on the term "queen." The historical "queen" join the Queensland house where the narrator and X have their affair (119), Kay's apartment at the corner of *Queen* and

Bathurst (114), and the drag “queen” or “pretty boy” in evoking scenes of impending loss or lack. The recurrence of the word is only one of several chains of metonymic play in “Bardon Bus” by which the narrator’s unconscious strategies to disavow her castrated state are ingeniously transmitted throughout the story, as through her psyche.

Exploitation by men may have characterized the narrator’s original experience of oedipalization and so predisposed her to comply with the abuse of X and Dennis in creating masochistic conditions by which she shores up her faltering identity. During the narrator’s second dinner with Dennis, she complies with his need to “have somebody to talk to” (120), while feeding her own fantasy that she may learn of X’s whereabouts or that Dennis may tell him “that I was charming” (120). For such emotional scraps, the narrator sits in silence, eats “pudding” suggestive of her childhood longing for the mother, and submits to Dennis’s yet more overt cruelty in X’s absence.<sup>19</sup> She says, “I feel him watching me” (122), and feels a gaze as brutal as the misogynistic diatribe he freely levels at her. Under the auspices of describing his “theory” of sexual difference, he says, disingenuously, “[w]omen are the lucky ones,” because they are “forced to live in the world of loss and death,” before openly charging that “The uterus dries up. The vagina dries up” (122). In both dinner scenes, the narrator is reduced to a child striving to please or submit to a cruel parental figure—not only the sadistic Dennis, but also the more insidious cruelty of X, who abandons the narrator to loneliness in Canada and to Dennis’s insults.

Masochism reflects the perverse limit at which the narrator’s search for self-coherence has become sexualized. In the two dinner scenes, as in her compulsive replaying of the “yellow nightgown” memory, the narrator unconsciously revels in her complete emotional and physical helplessness, “drowning” in memories: the process of individuation, which in early infancy had no sexual content, has long since become erotically charged, so that “sensations of pain, like other unpleasurable sensations, trench upon sexual excitation and produce a pleasurable condition” (Freud, “Instincts”

---

19. Carrington links images of sweet food in Munro to women’s sexuality and their masochistic submission to verbal and physical assault (45, 126, 174–76).

126). That pleasure is based on self-devastation: so unconfident is the narrator of the boundaries differentiating herself from the mother and male lovers after her that only the shattering of those boundaries enables her to feel their existence in the first place, and so to distinguish herself from the use of others.<sup>20</sup> Masochism marks the dynamic in which the aggression necessary for the narrator's early individuation from the mother could not safely be released in the face of the parents' own narcissism and so, according to Leo Bersani, it is turned upon the self in self-shattering behavior she is compelled to repeat as the traumatic constitution of her sexuality (Bersani 217–18).

Therefore, although the narrator achieves grandiosity from the masochistic repetition of her "hysterically" erotic fantasies of X, that self-inflation forms only one side of her complicated defense against lost plenitude in the mother. In a dialectic with grandiosity that ultimately constitutes her "profound ambivalence" toward X, the narrator displays apparent rationalism that Munro terms the "survivor's common sense" (Interview [Scobie] 12–13).<sup>21</sup> "Common sense" is evident when the narrator assesses her predicament, saying casually: "People have this problem frequently, and we know it is their own fault and they have to change their way of thinking, that's all. It is not an honorable problem" (126). Elsewhere, she is sufficiently rational to identify her "torment" (124) in her sexual fantasy of X, to align herself with imaginary "old maid" ancestors, and to observe through her erotic obsession that "the language of pornography and romance are alike[,] . . . seductive, quickly leading to despair" (123). As the process of self-narration enables her to gain some control over her unconscious fantasies of X, she sensibly observes, "There is a limit to the amount of

20. Beyond the Queen Street makeover and the "yellow nightgown," the sartorial is generally a source of masochism in the story; the narrator obsesses at the end of her affair with X that their "clothes that had shared drawers . . . tumbled together in the wash, and been pegged together . . . were all sorted and separated and would not rub together anymore" (123).

21. In a 1982 interview, Munro described the narrator's conflict between "hysterical eroticism" and "common sense," claiming that in the end, "common sense wins out" ("Visit" 12–13). But the margin of its success is negligible by the end of "Bardon Bus." Carrington describes the narrator's ambivalent feelings toward X as her predilection for "positioning herself on both sides of her internal argument" (153).

misery and disarray you will put up with, for love" (127). Yet the fact that the narrator normalizes Kay's version of her own excessive behavior as "what women do" in love, and calls the old maids' craziness "harmless," reveals that her apparent "common sense" as much as her grandiosity are distortions that defend her from the emotional "castration" of losing X. Munro therefore understates as "common sense" her narrator's defense against the despair of maternal loss that she unconsciously seeks to restore in the heterosexual bond.

In fact, the narrator's ambivalence between "hysterical eroticism" and "common sense" is itself defensive, denying the very denial of lack each represents, for she assumes that her ability to recognize her self-contradiction can resolve the profound psychic loss it conceals. For instance, instead of feeling pain, she quickly rationalizes that she finds "pleasure in taking into account, all over again, everything that is contradictory and persistent and unaccommodating about life. . . . there's something in us wanting to be reassured about all that, right alongside—and at war with—whatever there is that wants permanent vistas and a lot of fine talk" (128). Similarly, she universalizes the childhood root of her melancholy and the havoc it wreaks in her life by naming it "something in us" all (128), and "not an honorable problem" (126), that can be consciously mastered by "chang[ing] [your] way of thinking, that's all." Such comments defend against the pain at the root of her loss of the mother and X's failure to replace her.

The narrator's apparently opposite responses of "hysterical eroticism" and "common sense" therefore merely invert each other and, however anxiously repeated, cannot overcome the traumatic loss or absence in which they are rooted.<sup>22</sup> Further, these defenses prove futile before long, for she says, "I have tried vigilance and reading serious books but I can still slide deep . . . before I know where I am" (123). By the end of "Bardon Bus," the narrator concedes of her loss that "likely somebody drunk or high I can't quite

---

22. The connection between the narrator's "hysterical eroticism" and apparent "common sense" toward X demonstrates what Andrew Morrison theorizes as the "janus-face of narcissism," in which both sides are dialectical or different manifestations of the same distorted defense against the pain of the psychic loss (64–66).

get a grasp on what I see" (128) and so is vulnerable to repeating the obsession even at the end of her story.

The narrator's phallogentric sexual desire for X is equally evident in her experience of gender. In another interview, Munro identified the inspiration for "Bardon Bus" as downtown Toronto, where she spent the summer of 1981 "getting a very strange feeling from Queen Street. It was a kind of hysterical eroticism. It was something about women's clothes and the very very whorish makeup that women were wearing. And all this was sort of nightmarish" (Rasporich 23). And elsewhere, she clarified that the story is "to have a kind of feeling of hysterical eroticism. Very edgy and sad. This came to me from the feelings I get sometimes in women's dress shops. . . . about the masquerades and attempts to attract love" (Interview [Hancock] 193–94). The apparently instinctive attraction the narrator feels toward X is shown to be no more corporeally determined as a source of self-plenitude than the gender she performs. Unable to accept that X has not committed to her beyond their casual liaison, the narrator plots to win him back, "devastating him" with a campy makeover that she fantasizes will demonstrate her "late-blooming splendor" (125): a "deep-red satin blouse, a purple shawl, a dark-blue skirt. . . . a lilac lipstick, a brownish rouge" (124). The excessively bright colors of her makeover ironically contrast with those of the simpler clothes she wore in X's company, a "faded wraparound cotton skirt and T-shirt" she now disparages as "appall[ing]" for leaving her "face bare" and "legs with the lumps of veins showing" (124). The narrator deludes herself that such a superficial change will make a difference, "that a more artful getup would have made a more powerful impression, more dramatic clothes might have made me less discardable" (124–25), when X seduced and abandoned her (as others before her) regardless. Phallicism underpins the narrator's "hysterically erotic" femininity as her effort "to attract love" (Interview [Hancock] 194).

The narrator's attempt to win X back through her own phallic fantasy of female identity is evident in her clothing fetish, when she grows obsessed over a pair of vintage silver earrings: "I can't find them, I can't find anything resembling them, and they seem more and more necessary" (125). The earrings, like the old maids'

trinkets, are a fetish: according to Moore and Fine, “the woman’s—usually the mother’s—phallus” (77). In fact, the narrator’s campy new appearance aligns her more than she realizes with the “absurdity” of the “old women on Queen Street”—with the “hysterical eroticism” of “the fat woman with pink hair; the eighty-year-old with painted-on black eyebrows; . . . the buttercup woman I saw a few days ago on the streetcar . . . [dressed] in a frilly yellow dress, well above the knees, a straw hat with yellow ribbons, yellow pumps dyed-to-match on her little fat feet” (125).

As Carrington observes, the intense “yellow” coloring of the latter woman resonates not only with the narrator’s bright new clothes but more importantly with the “golden twilight” of the postcoital scene with X that she replays in her head, in which she lies “in a yellow nightgown which has not been torn but . . . pulled off her shoulders and twisted up around her waist” (123). As the narrator lies prostrate under X and his gaze, he seems to offer her both the penis and the phallus she values it to be. The “yellow nightgown” for the narrator and the elaborate costumes of the Queen Street women are also fetishes, conflating the maternity gown with sexy lingerie, and thereby “crystallizing . . . the last moment in which the woman could still be regarded as phallic” (Freud, “Fetishism” 135).<sup>23</sup> In her quintessentially female moments in the story, the narrator anxiously defends against maternal lack. By observing the “yellowness” of both her nightgown and the Queen Street “buttercup” woman, the narrator unconsciously connects her own delusional memory of sex with X with the old wom-

---

23. Fetishes proliferate metonymically throughout “Bardon Bus”: intrauterine images—such as the marsupials at the animal reserve (the “wombats curled up like blood puddings” and the “koala bears” [112])—both embody the narrator’s wish for phallic unity and imply its impossible status. The female breast is also fetishized against the loss of the mother, as the means to fuse maternity, infancy, and sexuality: the narrator nurses her baby in the bushes (116), and years later, the narrator’s breasts are exposed in the yellow nightgown scene (124); finally, in the story’s ironic ending, Kay attracts X with a schoolgirl’s tunic, worn “without a blouse or brassiere” (128). Sweet oral fetishes also recur, reminiscent of the preoedipal and its phallic illusions of plenitude, as the narrator remembers eating “licorice and chocolate ginger” with X and tries to tolerate Dennis’s company by consuming “a rich creamy pudding with pureed chestnuts at the bottom . . . and fresh raspberries on top” (121).

an's illusion that self-coherence inheres in impossibly youthful beauty.

Yet the "pretty boy" whom the narrator encounters momentarily at the climax of the story startles her with evidence that gender is fraudulently performative and not intrinsic, for he exhibits femaleness more convincingly than any other woman in the story. He wears his "black velvet dress" and matching "pumps and gloves" (125), all while concealing his anatomical maleness beneath. When he asks the narrator, "How do I look, momma" (126), he interpellates the narrator, not merely by staging the arbitrary nature of signification that comprises gender, but more importantly because, like her, he is unable to convince himself of a coherent gendered identity. Neither his vampy, hysterically erotic dress nor his penis gives him the phallus of self-plenitude. The narrator notes his anxiety when she observes that his face, though smiling, is "tense and tremulous." He is not only "brash" but also "timid" with his "boyish crackling voice." The possibility of the narrator's fantasy of phallicized sexuality is further undermined by his very act of dressing up before a "three-way mirror," a sign of the infinite regress of identity, which prompts the narrator to recall her own dissatisfying performance of gender before another mirror when she was "ten or eleven years old."<sup>24</sup>

In seeing the "pretty boy," the narrator more clearly glimpses the fallacy of the phallic logic that arrests her experience and development as a female subject: with his "black velvet dress with long sleeves and a black lace yoke; black pumps and gloves; a little black hat with a dotted veil," the narrator finds him the "most ladylike person" she has "seen all day" (125–26).<sup>25</sup> That a man appears to be so "ladylike" and so performs femaleness without any anatomical "core" of gender "beneath" foregrounds for the narrator that all gender is performative, a series of imitations and repetitions with-

24. Although she misses the deconstructive potential of the three-way mirror by arguing that "Munro reclaims the mirror image often used to condemn women to narcissism" (159), Redekop foregrounds the role of the "pretty boy" in the story.

25. Redekop identifies but does not engage the "blackness" of his "masquerade" as "a place where the woman can identify her oblivion" and ambivalently "step back from it" (160).

out origin. “Ladylikeness,” in Butler’s argument, can only ever be approximated, not expressed, because such imitations are interrupted and deferred, each repetition differing from the last and from those of other subjects of the same sex.<sup>26</sup> The revelation applies to all the performers of gender in “Bardon Bus”: to the “pretty boy” in black, as well as to the narrator with her “deep-red satin blouse . . . purple shawl . . . dark-blue skirt” (124); to Kay, whose disguises vary from “an old woman, with a gray wig and a tattered fur coat” (116) to the schoolgirl (128); and to the “Queen Street women” with “pink hair” or “painted-on black eyebrows” (125). The “pretty boy” exposes the *différance* of gender for the narrator—the argument Butler makes by citing Aretha Franklin, “You make me feel like a natural woman”: Naturalness is only achieved by “a kind of metaphorical substitution,” she writes (“Imitation” 27), so that feeling *like* a woman is not the same as being one and instead merely perpetuates the illusion of a coherent feminine identity. Drag, in Esther Newton’s words, “is not an imitation or a copy of some prior and true gender. . . . [but] enacts the very structure of impersonation by which *any gender* is assumed” (qtd. in Butler, “Imitation” 21).<sup>27</sup>

The fact that the best actor of femininity in “Bardon Bus” is a man allows the “pretty boy” momentarily to unveil the narrator’s phallic logic of gender, her assumption that the signifiers of gender and especially male power are rooted in an authentic or original inwardness or anatomy, instead of in arbitrary and repeated imitations.<sup>28</sup> In him, the narrator sees that gender is enacted in action,

26. This of course is Derrida’s point with “*différance*,” based in part on Saussure’s argument that in language (and therefore in the realm of symbolic identity), there “are concepts defined not positively, in terms of their content, but negatively by contrast with other items in the same system” (115).

27. A more contemporary example that affirms the currency of Derrida’s point and Butler’s application of it to gender is Shania Twain’s hit song, “Man! I Feel Like a Woman” (1999), which she performed by invitation at a recent Grammy Awards ceremony while dressed in a campy short skirt and tall leather boots. The song and similarly “hysterically erotic” photos of Twain have since become her logo as a Revlon poster girl.

28. The drag queen’s “boyish crackling voice” (126), however, is part of what gives away his act. Terry Eagleton observes that the “best actor” of subjectivity could also be considered the “worst,” if one argues that s/he imitates fraudulently what appears to be a true or coherent female self (469–471).

speech, and gesture, by a “ritualized repetition of conventions” that are not originally unconscious but consciously repeated in childhood to produce “retroactively the illusion” of “an inner gender core,” or a feminine “disposition” (Butler, *Psychic Life* 144). The narrator associates this momentary glimpse of truth with her childhood performance “as a bride in old curtains, or as a lady in rouge and a feathered hat” (126). By exposing the arbitrary performativity of gender, writes Adam Phillips in his response to Butler, the “pretty boy” displays that the “ego is always dressing up for somewhere to go,” because “[i]nsofar as being is being like, there can be no place for true selves or core gender identities” (Butler, *Psychic Life* 151–52). The “pretty boy,” then, even more than the Queen Street women, subverts the assumption of self-possession in gender and so may be “edgy and sad,” and not only titillating, for the narrator (Interview [Hancock] 193–94).

But the narrator’s encounter with him/her is ambivalent, for as much as the “pretty boy” destabilizes conventional notions of gender, his/her unveiling of its fraudulence awakens the narrator to her entitlement to power as a woman. For a moment, the image of the “pretty boy” seems to reverse the acute imbalance of power in the narrator’s relationship with X: in contrast to the degrading repetition of the yellow nightgown scene, in which the narrator becomes the object of her own “male” gaze, the boy’s “tense and tremulous” efforts to be “ladylike,” and his interaction with the narrator, position her as the “male” viewer of his archly female masquerade and so disrupt her critical self-objectification. Furthermore, the boy’s anxiety, like the narrator’s, draws to her attention that he too, like her, seems to have lost sight of the impossible phallus/fallacy of coherent femininity, even as he strives to embody it. In Butler’s term, drag “allegorizes” oedipal and “heterosexual melancholy” (*Psychic Life* 145), the truth that heterosexual gender is acquired by denying the ontological “castration” of the phallic mother, and by simultaneously repudiating that loss to foreclose the homosexual desire that results from it (Adam Phillips; in Butler 152).

Given the intensity of her phallicism from and ambivalence toward the mother, it would be falsely optimistic to assert that the narrator’s glimpse of the drag queen near the end of “Bardon Bus”

resolves her appalling predicament. The unveiling of the maternal phallus can only ever be fleeting in a heterosexist culture whose (especially female) melancholy toward the mother is a founding moment. The “pretty boy” nonetheless offers the narrator a glimpse of self-understanding that is valuable, however temporary, for exposing the phallogocentric fallacy of heterosexual gender identity. After months of replaying as desire for X a self-concept that is based on looking into the glass of gender darkly, the narrator glimpses in the “pretty boy,” face to face, the truth that gender is performative, imitative, and predicated on a maternal loss she long ago repudiated. That glimpse is necessarily brief, for, as Marjorie Garber asserts, “the scandal of transvestism [is] that transvestism tells the truth about gender. Which is why . . . we cannot”—or not for long—“look it in the face” (250–51).

Finally, if we are to derive for the narrator anything as radically reevaluating and hopeful as what Dennis terms a “new theory about the life of women” (122), his sexist definition of femininity as “natural renunciation and . . . deprivation” and the narrator’s and Kay’s vulnerability to X are not it. By foregrounding the narrator’s narcissistic defenses against the unveiling of her phallic fantasy life, and the oedipal coding of her nostalgia, I have argued instead that the birth into subjectivity is always already gendered subjectivity, and that its progress through oedipalization leaves both sexes, but women most intensely, homesick for the phallic mother. Such a reading provides one interpretation for Munro’s claim that “the whole mother-daughter relationship interests me a great deal. . . . probably obsesses me,” which Julia Kristeva formulates: “That every subject poses him/herself in relation to the phallus has been understood. But that the phallus is the mother: it is said, but here we are all *arrêtés*” (204).

The characters in “Bardon Bus” repeat, through heterosexual object relations, melancholia over the loss of the mother and the illusion of plenitude they felt with her in infancy. The mythic concept of such a maternal bond is at the heart of compulsory heterosexuality and its gender codes. Part of the power of the narrator’s obsession over X stems from the fact that the affair, however adulterous on his part, conforms to those compulsory gender roles and therefore makes socially respectable what is rooted in taboo preoedipal

longing. When the alternative to compulsory heterosexuality is to feel that early maternal loss, the lure of the phallus becomes understandable: the “wish for the Phallus is great,” because “[n]o matter how oppressive its reign, it’s much more comforting than no one in command” (Gallop, *Daughter’s Seduction* 130–31).

The emotionally charged nature of “Bardon Bus” has given it power to “go for the jugular” in readers, critics, and perhaps even Munro herself. Although letters of appreciation for the story fill her archive at the University of Calgary, “Bardon Bus” has elicited more affect than understanding, which may have contributed to Munro’s own ambivalence toward the story. For instance, after hearing Munro read the story’s opening passage during a radio interview in 1982, the young Canadian journalist Peter Gzowski commented, puritanically, “You just read a dirty passage!” (Interview [Gzowski]). Munro’s editor at Knopf, Ann Close, reported to Munro that Douglas Gibson at McClelland and Stewart did not like the story but never explained (or perhaps could explain) why (Close 1).<sup>29</sup> Munro’s own defensiveness about her narrator’s predicament was evident in an interview with Stephen Scobie, when she euphemized the despair the narrator and Kay feel as “common sense” (“Visit” 12–13). She similarly understated the nature of the narrator’s melancholia to Gzowski by describing it as a historical more than a psychological problem: “The narrator is living a modern woman’s life of free choice and various experience. . . . she’s having this kind of intense response to experience, but she’s living now in a context where you’re expected to take things more lightly, so in a way there’s no place, there’s no room, to feel what she’s feeling” (20 Oct. 1982). And further demonstrating her reticence toward “Bardon Bus,” in the year that *The Moons of Jupiter* was published, Munro dismissed it to Beverly Rasporich as one of the “florid” stories in a volume that was already “sort of past” (22).

The gender anxiety that plagues the characters of “Bardon Bus,” and which I earlier referred to as a “pseudohomosexual” conflict, is the legacy of feelings of inadequacy and lack of confidence that are the underside of the subject’s belief in a phallic mother figure.

---

29. Fellow writers, media personalities, and general readers have written to Munro to remark upon the psychological power of “Bardon Bus.”

Although Lionel Ovesey is quick to observe that pseudohomosexual conflict does not preclude the existence of true lesbian or gay desire, it *can* precipitate psychosis, which is demonstrated in the narrator's description, late in the story, of her mental state—one so overdetermined that "a poem or rhyme that I didn't even know I knew. . . . has some relation to what is going on in my life. And that may not be what seems to be going on" (122). This florid state suggests in fact a kind of mania, counterposed in the narrator by its depressive opposite, earlier in the story, when the narrator claims to be "at a low point," unable "to deal with all that assails [her]. . . . unless [she] exist[s] in X's mind and in his eyes" (126). I want to hypothesize, then, that Munro's narrator (if not the author herself) displays a bipolar psyche, and that the story's cycling between "hysterical eroticism" and "common sense" marks the psyche's manic and depressive phases respectively.

Munro's evident distaste for "Bardon Bus" upon its publication may reflect a retroactive defensiveness toward its reception by certain insensitive readers, all the more wounding if we at least consider that the story *may* reflect her own experience as a wounded daughter or lover. In a 1991 interview, Munro commented that by the time she was "eleven or twelve," her mother had contracted Parkinson's disease, so that the already "complex relationship" of mother and daughter "was made much more so by the fact that my mother was ill" ("Interview" [Wachtel] 49–50).

The author's later dislike for "Bardon Bus" may well be rooted in more personal pain and loss than the "strange feeling" she attributed to the women on Queen Street, in the summer of 1981. Certainly the unnamed status of the narrator invites, though it cannot define, identification with Munro herself. It may be the author's own romantic life that inspired the story, rather than the "lives of friends who are always either falling in love or recovering from a love affair and then going on to the next one [with] no time or energy for anything else" (Munro, "Great Dames" 38). Munro's assessment that by 1982 the story was already "sort of past" (Rasporich 22) evokes a sentiment similar to that which artist-survivors have shared in conversation with me, as they look back at the notes they have compulsively kept during phases of creative mania. At any rate, Munro's reticence toward "Bardon Bus" seems to have

prompted her to exclude it from the 1996 edition of her *Selected Stories*, despite the laboriously revised nature of the original story.<sup>30</sup>

By rereading “Bardon Bus,” a story that Munro seems to have wanted to forget earlier than readers have, I am not proposing a nostalgic return of our own to her writing of the 1980s. But in light of recent accolades for the more distant, less structured nature of Munro’s later work (Byatt), I hope to have demonstrated that we find an intensely complex vision of female (in fact, gendered) subjectivity at mid-career. The narrator’s delight in “Bardon Bus” in all that is “contradictory and persistent and unaccommodating” in her life (128), although a means to defend against her pain, also makes a survival strategy out of her storytelling process. And although by the story’s end this process seems doomed to another defeat, it is nonetheless remarkable for its simultaneous, if often unconscious, subversion of the female romance plot.

*University of Toronto*

## W O R K S C I T E D

- Bersani, Leo. “Is the Rectum a Grave?” *October* 43 (1988): 197–222.
- Borch-Jacobsen, Mikkel. “The Oedipus Problem in Freud and Lacan.” *Disseminating Lacan*. Ed. David Pettigrew and François Raffoul. Albany: State U of NY P, 1996. 295–314.
- Butler, Judith. “Imitation and Gender Insubordination.” *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*. Ed. Diana Fuss. New York: Routledge, 1991. 13–31.
- . *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997.
- Byatt, A. S. “Munro: The Stuff of Life.” Rev. of *The Love of a Good Woman*, by Alice Munro. *Globe and Mail* [Toronto] 26 Sept. 1998: D1.

---

30. Even for as relentless a reviser as Munro, the working papers of “Bardon Bus” are extensive and particularly labor-intensive. A less successful second version of the story exists, which depicts the ending differently, changes Kay’s name and life, refers to another lover the narrator takes and to the violence of the photographic images of the narrator’s affair with X—details that serve to intensify the traumatic quality of the narrative, as it circles back upon itself (2nd Accession: 38.8.3.1–2). Munro acknowledged to Peter Gzowski that she relies on editors to help her choose the final version of a story, since she often lives too closely with the drafts to make the decision: interestingly, it is the handwriting of Virginia Barber, Munro’s agent, that records which draft of “Bardon Bus” Munro sent to the press (4.41–4.42, 18 March 1982).

- Carrington, Ildikó de Papp. *Controlling the Uncontrollable: The Fiction of Alice Munro*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois UP, 1989.
- Clark, Hilary. "Living with the Dead: Narrative and Memory in Woolf's A Sketch of the Past' and Marlatt's *How to Hug a Stone*." *Signature: A Journal of Theory and Canadian Literature* 4 (1990): 1–12.
- Close, Ann. Letter to Alice Munro. 2nd Accession. ts. 38.1.3. The Alice Munro Papers. U of Calgary Library, Calgary.
- Collins, Anne. "The Fantasy of Perfect Mastery." Rev. of *The Moons of Jupiter*, by Alice Munro. *Maclean's* 18 Oct. 1982: 74–75.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Différance." *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982. 1–28.
- Eagleton, Terry. "Brecht and Rhetoric." *Contemporary Literary Criticism: Literary and Cultural Studies*. 1986. Ed. Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer. New York: Longman, 1994. 468–71.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Beyond the Pleasure Principle." 1920. *On Metapsychology* 269–338.
- . "The Ego and the Id." 1923. *On Metapsychology* 350–408.
- . "Fetishism." 1927. *Standard Edition* 21: 152–57.
- . "Findings, Ideas, Problems." 1941. *Standard Edition* 23: 299–300.
- . "The Infantile Genital Organization." 1923. *Standard Edition* 19: 141–45.
- . "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes." 1915. *Standard Edition* 14: 117–40.
- . "Mourning and Melancholia." 1915. *On Metapsychology* 245–68.
- . *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*. Trans. and ed. James Strachey. London: Penguin, 1981.
- . "The Psychopathology of Everyday Life." 1901. *Standard Edition* 6: 1–279.
- . *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*. Trans. and ed. James Strachey. London: Hogarth, 1955.
- . "The Uncanny." 1919. *Standard Edition* 17: 219–56.
- Gallop, Jane. *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1982.
- . *Reading Lacan*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1985.
- Garber, Marjorie. *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Gzowski, Peter. Interview with Alice Munro. *Morningside* CBC Radio 18–22 Oct. 1982.
- Heble, Ajay. *The Tumble of Reason: Alice Munro's Discourse of Absence*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1994.
- Jacobus, Mary. "'The Third Stroke': Reading Woolf with Freud." *Grafts: Feminist Cultural Criticism*. Ed. Susan Sheridan. London: Verso, 1988. 93–110.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Polylogue*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1977. 173–222.
- Moore, Burness E., and Bernard Fine, eds. *Psychoanalytic Terms and Concepts*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1990.

- Morrison, Andrew, ed. *Shame: The Underside of Narcissism*. Hillside, NJ: Analytic P, 1988.
- Munro, Alice. "Bardon Bus." *The Moons of Jupiter*. Toronto: Penguin, 1982. 110–28.
- . "Bardon Bus. Revised Version." 2nd Accession. ts. 38.8.3.1–2. The Alice Munro Papers. U of Calgary Library, Calgary.
- . "Bardon Bus. Revised Version." 3rd Accession. ts. 4.41–4.42. The Alice Munro Papers. U of Calgary Library, Calgary.
- . "Great Dames." Interview with Barbara Frum. *Maclean's* Apr. 1973: 32–38.
- . *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2001.
- . "An Interview with Alice Munro." With Eleanor Wachtel. *Brick* 40 (1991): 48–53.
- . Interview with Peter Gzowski. *Morningside* CBC Radio 18–22 Oct. 1982.
- . Interview with Geoff Hancock. *Canadian Writers at Work*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1987. 187–224.
- . Interview with Eleanor Wachtel. *Writers and Company*. CBC Radio. 14 Feb. 1999.
- . "A Visit with Alice Munro." Interview with Stephen Scobie. *Monday Magazine* [Victoria, BC] 19–25 Nov. 1982: 12–13.
- Ovesey, Lionel. *Homosexuality and Pseudohomosexuality*. New York: Science, 1969.
- Raleigh, Walter. "The Author's Epitaph, Made by Himself." *Sixteenth Century English Poetry*. Ed. Norman McClure. New York: Harper, 1954. 321–22.
- Rasporich, Beverly J. *Dance of the Sexes: Art and Gender in the Fiction of Alice Munro*. Edmonton: U of Alberta P, 1990.
- Redekop, Magdalene. *Mothers and Other Clowns: The Stories of Alice Munro*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Saussure, Ferdinand de. *Course in General Linguistics*. 1972. Ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye. Trans. Roy Harris. London: Duckworth, 1983. 112–16.
- York, Lorraine. "'Gulfs' and 'Connections': The Fiction of Alice Munro." *Essays in Canadian Writing* 35 (1987): 135–46.