

Mysterious Contradiction: Alice Munro's *The Moons of Jupiter*

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Abstract

This volume of Alice Munro's stories shows both familiar and new features. It deals with strange oppositions and mysterious contradiction that ask for resolution or at least recognition. The new force and resonance comes in part at least from a fuller command of allegory and symbol. *The Moons of Jupiter* as its title suggests has a tighter organization and is more like a single system.

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This volume of Alice Munro's stories shows both familiar and new features. It deals with strange oppositions and mysterious contradiction that ask for resolution or at least recognition. Also, like *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* the previous collection of apparently unlinked stories it has an integrity which, though less obvious than that in *Lives of Girls and Women* and *Who Do You Think You Are?*, is as important as it is subtle. If *something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* is a cluster of small constellations, *The Moons of Jupiter* as its title suggests has a tighter organization and is more like a single system.

One of the first thing one notices is that the stories are set in Ontario again, especially in small country towns. "Dulse" has its episodes mainly in the Maritimes, and "Bardon Bus" some as far afield as Australia, but only because characters in them, who live in Ontario, have travelled to these places. The second half of "Connection" is set in Vancouver, but here the narrator feels the powerful force exerted by Huron County over the great distance that separates it from the west coast. Martin Knelman reports that

Alice Munro "believes now" [1979] that what "propelled" her to write about "her own material" was "the distance between Vancouver and Huron Country."¹ *The Moons of Jupiter* is clearly rooted in southwestern Ontario: the Hanratty of *Who Do You Think You Are?* Reappears, and Logan and especially Dagleish are not altogether different from the Jubilee of *Lives of Girls and Women*. But there are heights and depths, even in rural Ontario; from it the imagination can reach to Jupiter and its moons.

Another general comment that might be made about *The Moons of Jupiter* is in point of style. The figures and ideas presented are less striking or sensational, the surface of words less coruscating than in *Lives of Girls and Women*, for instance. Thinking of Jane Austen again, one might remember what she half-seriously said of the "playfulness and epigrammatism of the style" of *Pride and Prejudice*: it was "too light, and bright, and sparking."² Her later novels were different, though never solemn, and greater.

But there is no sharp and distinct line in Alice Munro. In the first story in *The Moons of*

Jupiter we find some of the earlier almost outrageous exuberance and mischief: "Poverty, to Richard's family, was like bad breath or running sores, an affliction for which the afflicted must bear one part of the blame. But it was not good manners to notice" (12); this has the bite and wit that reached its apogee in *Lives of Girls and Women* but it still a marked characteristic in *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You and Who Do You Think You Are?*

Instead of being conspicuously vivacious, paradoxical, droll and divertive, Alice Munro's style had become sparer, more exact and incisive. The change is partly a natural consequence of adopting third-person narration. One of the advantages of first-person narration is the opportunity for the fireworks of personal feeling, prejudice and animus. It is appropriate for reflecting the excitement of an imaginative girl like Del, who is making discoveries, judging rashly, and then reversing her opinions. The third-person is appropriate in *Who Do Think You Are?* Still reflects some of Rose's feelings, sometimes quite directly, as in, for example, "She saw them [the Vancouvers] in her mind shaped rather like octopuses, twitching in the pan. The tumble of reason; the spark and spit of craziness" (Who,12), and some of the best stories in *The Moons of Jupiter* are narrated in the first person. There is the interesting case of "Dulse," which was in the first person when it appeared in *The New Yorker* (21 July 1980), and is now narrated in the third person, perhaps because Alice Munro felt that as narrator Lydia was having to know and reveal too much about herself without the benefits of hindsight and a greater maturity.

Sometimes in the new volume Alice Munro

attains the best of both, or several, worlds, in the manner of *Lives of Girls and Women*. In the first two stories and in "The Turkey Season" for example, there is the vigour, freshness or confusion of a young first-person narrator, but also the irony of a mature moral perspective that particular inward-turning or spiral development that Alice Munro's vision as we have seen so often generates. In "Connection" for example, as in *Who Do You Think You Are?*, the narration moves quite clearly towards a reaffirmation, though with a difference, of the attitudes and values virtually disowned when the protagonist left rural Ontario. One result of this is that there is less fizz, but more salt, in the narration.

If there is often less liveliness in the new style and the method of third-person narration, there is also abundant recompense, enough fully to justify the selection of *The Moons of Jupiter* by the editor of the *New York Times Book Review* (4 December 1983) as one of the thirteen best books of the year. Although from the beginning Alice Munro has shown a strong architectonic sense, it is in her masterly control of detail, in the way in which she shapes and orders so much intellectual substance into a whole that is charged with meanings and is coherent without seeming contrived, that the new power is mainly felt. Gerald Noonan remarks on something like this apropos of *Who Do You Think You Are?*: "Munro's sense of life as paradox is not softened by the shift in technique; paradox is presented more directly."³ Even when the material is as diverse and at first bewildering as it is in "Hard-Luck Stories" and "Bardon Bus," the details are skillfully placed and the instinct

sure. In the revision of "The Stone in the Field," instead of the father "shaking hands" with his sisters, even if "quickly," as he does in the version in Saturday Night (April 1979), there is now "no touch" at all (25). Every stroke of the brush contributes to the complexity of the whole.

The new force and resonance comes in part at least from a fuller command of allegory and symbol. We have seen allegory in, for example, the description of the Japanese garden in "Memorial" and the train's passage to its destination in "Wild Swans." But these are in a sense translations, and at the end of *Who Do You Think You Are?*, when Rose comes up against the difficulty of defining or expressing what she feels for Ralph Gillespie, she concludes that even translations are "dubious" and "dangerous" (Who, 206). The answer is implied in *The Moons of Jupiter*: the feelings, which go beyond sexual attraction, can be conveyed in poetic symbols. Only they have the capacity to convey this and other complex meanings, and they do this by virtue of their concentration and power. These symbols now sometimes emerge as titles, which indicates their new importance. Whereas before the titles tended to announce themes, such as "Mischief" and "Providence," or point to central incidents, such as "Royal Beating" and "Spelling," now one finds titles like "The Stone in the Field," "Dulse," and "*The Moons of Jupiter*," which contain meanings that defy complete definition: they name objects that are symbols. Alice Munro probably aspired to symbolism from the beginning. She has said: "Things are symbolic but ...their symbolism is infinitely complex and never completely discovered."⁴ When we come to stories such

as "Pure," "Labor Day Dinner" and "Mrs. Cross and Mrs. Kidd," we shall see that Alice Munro evolves a mode that dispenses altogether with a reflector such as Del or Rose, and use detached omniscience in the narration. It therefore relies almost wholly on the value of image, symbol and dramatic incident.

It may be significant that *The Moons of Jupiter* is the only volume since *Dance of the Happy Shades* that does not end with a reflection on the limitations of art. The closest that *The Moons of Jupiter* comes to this theme is a passage in "The Stone in the Field": the narrator can "no longer believe that people's secrets are defined and communicable, or their feelings full-blown and easy to recognize"(35). The next story is "Dulse," where the secret is communicated, but in a symbol.

In this volume it seems that Alice Munro is revolving in her mind a theme she mentioned to Carole Gerson after the publication of *Who Do You Think You Are?* And not long before the appearance of *The Moons of Jupiter*: "Whether you settle for a kind of freedom and happiness that doesn't necessarily contain erotic love, whether there is such a thing, or whether in choosing freedom you have to deliberately put that kind happiness behind you, or whether everything's possible I think it is, sometimes."⁵ The sexual bond is not devalued; it is seen as compelling, but the volume's enquiry reaches out to forms of attachment that are less substantial and rarer and in a sense therefore more mysterious and perhaps precious.

A study of the stories in their order in the

volume will disclose how it is organized. The first two stand a little apart from the rest, as is indicated under "Contents." If they do not have all the brilliance of the stories that open the earlier volumes, they deal with a theme that is central in Alice Munro and, being solid achievements in themselves, they form

an archway through which passes the road that winds but leads ultimately to the climactic story that gives its title to the volume. There we meet the most enlightened and least obsessive of all the strange varieties of love, but also death, and Jupiter, the greatest of the gods.

Works Cited:

1. Martin Knelman, "The Past, the Present, and Alice Munro," Saturday Night, November 1979, p.20.
2. Austen, Jane Austen's Letters, pp. 299-300.
3. Noonan, "The Structure of Style in Alice Munro's Fiction," p.168.
4. Munro, "The Colonel's Hash Resettled," p. 182.
5. Gerson, "Review-Interview," p.5.