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Nancy Easterlin

**“WHO WAS IT IF IT WASN’T ME?” THE PROBLEM
OF ORIENTATION IN ALICE MUNRO’S “TRESPASSES”:
A COGNITIVE ECOLOGICAL ANALYSIS**

Contemporary evolutionary social science covers a lot of territory, and in its efforts to explain how humans have successfully held their ground, one of the few claims that enjoys consensus is this: *narrative thinking is fundamental to survival*. In the thinking-acting flow of human life, a blend of sequence, causality, and agency is indispensable. Narrativity thus evinces one sustained link between science and literature, for we think, move, and tell stories in lines. Yet once evolutionary and cognitive literary scholars recover from the heady feeling that their hard work connecting the divisions of knowledge has been validated, they may ask themselves, “What next?” How does the essential nature of narrative thinking contribute specifically to literary knowledge? Since much literary modernism is, after all, the history of attempts to write our way out of narrative’s apparent intransigence, further evidence of our psychic dependence on its structure may not be self-evidently welcome or necessarily useful.

But the *intransigence* of narrativity does not imply its *ease*, and the purpose of this essay is to demonstrate that some of our best literature dramatizes the difficult process of establishing even the apparently ubiquitous trajectory of narrative order. In her story “Trespases,” Alice Munro troubles narrative thinking at the most fundamental point of orientation, the referential origin. In the following essay, I will explain how a dynamic model of ecological cognition extends previous work in evolutionary literary criticism by enabling us to analyze cognitive challenges to narrativizing in process. My essay has three steps: first, I situate my ecological approach in the context of current evolutionary literary criticism; second, I argue that this dynamic approach explains cognition extending from real-world negotiation into literary processing; and third, I provide an analysis of Alice Munro’s challenge to the reader’s attempt to orient (and from there, proceed with narrative construal) in the beginning of “Trespases.”

One theme of “Trespases,” as of much of Munro’s longer fiction, is the difficulty of establishing authoritative narrative accounts. In “Meneseung” and “The Wilderness Station,” for example, the problem of

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reconstructing a factually accurate narrative account is bound up with the incomplete history of women on the frontier. Whereas newspaper stories of local incidents and letters by those (typically men) seeking to shepherd single women into respectable social life give one version of events, those versions by women themselves, Munro suggests, have died with them, left to the author of fiction to imagine. However, the difficulty of authentic and complete reconstructions of events in Munro's fiction is not, on the whole, a problem of history, and much less of an exuberant postmodern sensibility, but of a general conviction that life is comprised of "disconnected realities" (qtd. in Nunes 14). Even so, Munro's fiction most often suggests that a determinate set of events lies behind the text, but that the conflicting self-justifications of her characters undermine narrative certainty. Familiar motives and shortcomings—the everyday dishonesty fostered by self-interest; the inclination to suppress what is ugly and disturbing; and the failure to exhibit a systematic sense of responsibility in our dealings with others—animate the accounts of Munro's characters.

Indeed, as Munro brings conflicting interests and accounts to the fore, the desideratum of factual accuracy loses authority as the reader focuses on ethical concerns and shapes a *value-* rather than *event-based* narrative account from the discrepancies. Not surprisingly, then, Munro's preoccupation with accurate accounts is not merely thematic, but informs the structure of many of her stories, whose meandering beginnings challenge the reader's basic efforts at orientation. In "Trespasses," Munro's circuitous delineation of the ambiguity surrounding events and the evasions that sustain those ambiguities are a product of her delayed introduction of the main character (and thus the orienting consciousness), a delay that confounds the reader's ability to prioritize and evaluate incidents and information, and so to determine narrative relevance. Typically, readers approach literature under the assumption that the author will provide a speaker, a narrator, or a character to serve as a central point of reference, focusing emotional-cognitive effort in the literary environment and, in consequence, motivating and guiding reasoning processes in the direction of constructing and sustaining narrative order. This is, in some respects, a matter of convention, but as I hope to show, our readerly commitment to what narratologists call character functions, and with them many mimetic conventions, derives from evolved patterns of cognition (Phelan 28). In my view, the reader's commitment to character functions is the imaginative equivalent of a real-world self, and its absence can deprive the reader of a vantage point for seeing, cognizing, and acting. Thus, when Munro intentionally withholds her main character's identity for the first six pages

of “Trespasses,” she deprives her readers of the point of orientation (the character function) that will prompt for and facilitate narrative construction. Munro’s goal in thus disabling event- and fact-based narrativity is to fully reveal the psychologically disabling conditions of that main character’s life and the ethically troubling domain of her upbringing.

SYNTHESIZING EVOLUTIONARY AND ECOLOGICAL PSYCHOLOGY

Evolutionary approaches to literature emerged in the United States in the nineties, initially as a response to extreme postmodern constructionist claims about the nature of the self, reality, language, and representation. Since the publication of the inaugural efforts, evolutionary criticism has become a recognized field in literary studies, diversifying in methods and angles of approach, and in many cases joining forces with the closely allied area of cognitive approaches to literature. Ecological psychology, a dynamic theory of information pick up that focuses on evolved perceptual systems, provides an important theoretical link between evolutionary social science and cognitive neuroscience. An early contributor to the embodiment paradigm, ecological psychology emphasizes the situated and integrated nature of thought and action.

The term “evolutionary psychology” admits of two different uses. In the broad use, it refers to all areas of psychology and neuroscience compatible with the theory of evolution by natural selection. In its narrow use, it refers to those psychologists (including Leda Cosmides, John Tooby, Steven Pinker, Margo Wilson, Martin Daly, and David Buss) who claim that the basic architecture of the human mind was formed during the Pleistocene in the Environment of Evolutionary Adaptation (EEA). During this hypothesized major period of species evolution, domain-specific organs and modules arose in response to specific adaptive problems in the environment. Closely allied with although somewhat more narrow in focus than E. O. Wilson’s sociobiology, this so-called Santa Barbara evolutionary psychology takes a Swiss army knife or modular approach to the mind, positing that adaptations—including such things as cheater detection, mating strategies, language capacity, landscape preferences, and fear of snakes and spiders—constitute basic components of our species nature.

As Kevin N. Laland and Gillian R. Brown note in their overview of evolutionary approaches to behavior and psychology, the concept of the EEA at the core of Santa Barbara evolutionary psychology is, as Cosmides and Tooby themselves acknowledge, a “statistical composite” rather than an actual time and place. The notion of EEA adaptedness “can only be partly

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true," a point of view that is reinforced by current research in evolutionary biology which indicates that some evolutionary processes are much faster than previously realized, occurring within twenty-five generations or approximately a thousand years (Laland and Brown 181). Furthermore, while Cosmides and Tooby themselves insist that psychological adaptations do not determine behavior, their emphasis on psychological mechanisms to the exclusion of environmental circumstances in which behaviors are manifest tends to suggest a strong correlation between mechanism and behavioral outcome.

In fact, theories of domain-specific cognition like that of Santa Barbara evolutionary psychology occupy one end of a continuum, at the opposite end of which lie theories of domain-general intelligence and thus, as Laland and Brown point out, these perspectives on psychology and behavior are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, recent work on the evolution of the mind in cognitive psychology and cognitive archaeology emphasizes the other end of that continuum, stressing the need for flexibility in cognition, which is especially characteristic of the human species. As Merlin Donald argues in *The Origins of the Modern Mind: Three Stages in the Evolution of Culture and Cognition*, humans are high on intuitive knowing and low on rules. Like Santa Barbara evolutionary psychologists, Donald describes a mind whose architecture is highly differentiated and specialized; however, he insists that a major problem with some modular and unitary theories of mind is that there was not sufficient evolutionary time for some of the hypothesized modules to evolve. This is particularly the case, for example, for a complex adaptation like language, which some evolutionary psychologists, including Pinker, claim is hardwired into the brain. Much current research indicates high plasticity not only in infant but also in adult brains, such that "culture can literally reconfigure the use patterns of the brain" (Donald 14). Moreover, Donald points out that not all cognitive models revealed by data are necessarily bounded by genetic evolution. Indeed, his larger argument explains how humans enjoy an enormous expansion of cognition through the nonbiological, cultural developments of symbolic systems that enable external storage (and thus expanded memory capacity).

In a similar vein, Steven Mithen notes that a wide variety of psychologists try to account for varied and seemingly innate domain-specific intelligences while simultaneously acknowledging the fluidity and creativity of human thought (*Prehistory*). Approaching the subject as an archaeologist and thus basing his "cognitive archaeology" on the evidence provided by artifacts and living arrangements at prehistoric sites, Mithen hypoth-

esizes that humans underwent a cognitive explosion 60,000–30,000 years ago, one that enabled the transfer of knowledge between previously discrete natural history, social, and technological mental domains. For an extremely long period of human evolution, between 1.8 million to 100,000 years ago, large human brains apparently operated under distinctive constraints. For instance, the flake production of hand axes required great skill, especially given the need to adjust technique in response to diverse stone quality. Yet among the Neanderthals, technology remained extremely conservative for about a million years. There is no evidence of tools made of bone and antler, tools with several components, or artifacts designed for specific activities. By the same token, whereas large brains typically correspond to high social intelligence and social complexity, archaeological evidence suggests that the large-brained Neanderthals paradoxically lived in small groups with little or no social structure. The cultural explosion of the Middle to Upper Paleolithic, by contrast, includes body adornment, cave paintings at Lascaux and in Chauvet cave in the Ardèche, and representational figurines. According to Mithen, such artworks require the mental conception of an image, intentional communication, and attribution of meaning, blending technical, social, and natural history domains.

Like Donald and Mithen, ecological psychologists emphasize the need for cognitive and behavioral flexibility, but they take the perspective of an organism's real-time negotiation of its immediate environment. Edward Reed maintains that twentieth-century psychology has been hampered by the "two environments" assumption, dividing a scientific psychology, which focuses on the body, from a psychology of mental states, which was, in Reed's estimation, essentially unscientific until J. J. Gibson inaugurated ecological psychology in the sixties. Gibson developed ecological psychology as an alternative to the stimulus-response model that governed the study of sensation and perception, according to which the impulses along nerve fibers (sensation) constituted the basis of perception. Pointing out that the SR model only describes the process of a passive observer and that, additionally, sensation is not the raw data of perception, Gibson argued that psychologists needed to address the *ecology* of stimulation. Basing his theory on evolutionary premises, Gibson presents a theory of information pick up in *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems*, according to which higher animals have evolved adjustable sense organs and mobile extremities for the purpose of *obtaining* stimulation from the environment. Terrestrial animals orient towards gravity and the surface of support, and upright posture of the body is essential to the orienting of perceptual systems, which appear to have evolved clustered around the

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head to enable exploratory activity independent of performatory activity. According to Gibson, all perceptual systems aid locomotion and geographical orientation. The auditory system, for instance, is not simply a hearing device; it enables detection of the direction of an event and facilitates the organism's orientation to it, and thus head movement is crucially integral to it (Gibson 32–75).

In the "two environments" assumption that ecological psychology sought to overturn, literary scholars recognize Cartesian dualism, which sometimes correlates institutionally with the "two cultures" paradigm: one set of procedures and type of knowledge for the humanities and another for the sciences. Darwinian and cognitive literary critics seek to transcend this dichotomized view of humans through a unified understanding of mind-body processes and their relevance to the cultural artifacts our species produces. But developing and maintaining a conception of mind that stays connected to the bodily basis of cognition is, it turns out, a rather taller order than many of us initially supposed. Why is this so? We tend to hide the body and the visceral responses that are the precondition and motivation for the lowest to highest levels of consciousness. As Antonio Damasio explains, "I could describe the hiding of the body as a distraction, but I would have to add that it is a very adaptive distraction. In most circumstances, rather than concentrating resources on our inner states, it is perhaps more advantageous to concentrate one's resources on the images that describe problems out in the world or on the premises of those problems or on the options for their solution and their possible outcomes" (29). Hiding the body is apparently endemic and systematic: "One of the chief ways the body hides from our conscious awareness," claims philosopher Mark Johnson, "is a result of what Michael Polanyi (1969) called the 'from-to' character of perception. All our acts of perception are directed *to* or *at* what is experienced and *away from* the body doing the perceiving. This is what phenomenologists call the *intentionality* of the mind" (4–5). A simple evolutionary logic dictates the concentration of perception, cognition, and consciousness on external phenomena. Because the great challenges to survival come overwhelmingly from outside the individual organism, directing attention outward serves organismic fitness, as the evolution of perceptual systems and cognitive predispositions for environmental exploration attests.

"Hiding the body," which lurks even in diverse evolutionary and cognitive theories based on specifically Darwinian premises, is probably an inherent characteristic of sensate organisms, whether "hard-wired" into cognition or the nervous system or simply an upshot of the strictures of

living on the ground. What is especially useful in ecological psychology, then, is its insistent focus on the chief priority of an organism dynamically situated in a physical environment that is itself dynamic. That priority is gathering information that will enable the organism to take advantage of *affordances* (opportunities for action). Because information about predators, weather events, food, and sexual opportunities is not distributed predictably in any natural environment, even simple organisms must be capable of behavioral plasticity or flexibility, a feature of behavior that Darwin demonstrated with his earthworm experiments (Reed 17). For species with brains, and even more so for species with *big* brains, the capacity for behavioral and cognitive flexibility is vastly expanded.

Ecological psychology provides an important perspective for evolutionary literary critics because, first, it reminds us that mental processes are not merely situated in a physical body but serve that body through forms of internal action like cognition and emotion, and second, it assumes that the primary motivation and orientation of any organism is epistemic. Although higher organisms are highly motivated to pursue sexual encounters and to obtain food, the basic logic of survival indicates that perceptual survey and cognitive evaluation of the environment operates as a primary and ongoing background activity to more specific motivations. However, even though ecological psychology adds another dimension to the Darwinian argument for flexibility in behavior and cognition, it cannot serve as a substitute for the other subfields of evolutionary social science discussed here, all of which are generally compatible. One especially good reason that ecological psychology does not provide a total answer for evolutionary literary critics is that the psychologists in this field focus so exclusively on perceptual response in dynamic situations that they avoid making any inferences about mental architecture or cognition.

Fortunately, ecological psychology is neatly compatible with and serves as part of the evolutionary rationale for the recent embodiment paradigm in cognitive science. Just as Gibson asserted in 1966 that organisms are both separate from and importantly continuous with the environment, Humberto Maturana maintained in 1980 that

Living systems are units of interactions; they exist in an environment. From a purely biological point of view, they cannot be understood independently of the part of the environment with which they interact, the niche; nor can the niche be defined independently of the living system that occupies it. (qtd. in Gibbs 42)

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And just as ecological psychology claims that our fundamental orientation toward gravity greatly affects our perceptual-cognitive functioning, numerous recent studies in cognition and language indicate that people activate bodily based sources of linguistic expressions when they process language. Rather than understanding non-literal meanings of expressions as matters of convention, "people actually understand 'toss out a plan,' for instance, in terms of physically tossing something" (Gibbs 184). In like manner, "people interpret the meanings of fictive motion statements by 'replaying' the movement, reconstructing a mental enactment of movement implicit in the sentence" (190). Metaphorical expressions, in other words, not only have a biological base, but form part of a cycle of action and meaning construal between the physical body, the mind-brain, the speaker or writer, and the same features of that person's audience.

Thus, it seems, while we sit in meetings discussing a proposal for a new building or a curriculum revision or whatever else is relevant to our particular occupation, the bodies that seem so controlled and passive are intimately engaged in our cognitive processing. Likewise, the information we pick up—about the proposal, certainly, but also about the attitudes of our colleagues, the weather outside the window, the cleanliness of the conference room, and so on—has direct relevance to the social-physical environment and the feasibility or acceptability of the plan that has been "tossed out." Even if we are strongly predisposed to think, feel, and behave in certain ways—and I believe that in this assumption Santa Barbara evolutionary psychology is correct—our thought-and-action always materializes in the process of assessing the environment of which each individual is also an integral, dynamic dimension.

THE COGNITIVE ECOLOGY OF THE LITERARY ENVIRONMENT

Does literature allow us to check out from this cycle, to forget, at least for a short time, the body? Such an inference runs contrary to the studies on language and cognition Raymond Gibbs cites in *Embodiment and Cognitive Science*, just as it runs contrary to the "interpretive habit to preserve the mimetic" (Phelan 28). If we could switch temporarily to a mode of cognition divorced from bodily experience, we would not resort to so many representational dimensions in our literature, even literature in a postmodern or experimental mode. Although the evolution of consciousness has enabled humans to transcend the episodic memory of primates and to participate in long-range planning and hypothetical situations, our imaginative constructions are profoundly grounded in our species nature.

Part of that nature is a highly developed cognitive ability that enables us to detect information, construe it in ways meaningful to our existence and, circumstances allowing, act upon it.

Works of literature unfold in time, and works with a predominantly narrative orientation particularly emphasize this temporal dimension. The bodily based knowing theorized in ecological psychology and the embodiment paradigm is part of our very process of understanding the language of an imaginative text. But I want to insist on the larger claim embedded in my thesis: that, as readers, our entire orientation toward a fictive environment is generally not simply analogous but *isomorphic* to our orientation in the material world. With so much current research in psychology suggesting that we are always thinking in terms of the relative orientation and physiological responses of our bodies, it seems unlikely that the body can be short-circuited in any meaningful way.

Literary narratives present readers with dynamic environments that typically contain representations of fundamental features of the external world, including a physical place rich in inanimate objects and living beings. Among the latter, other humans with a distinct set of social relations are often particularly salient. Yet even though the fictive world must have sufficient dimensions of real-world environments for readers to navigate within it, so to speak, it is at the same time a highly artificial environment whose aspects have been carefully selected, unlike those of actual places and spaces. In everyday experience, organisms filter out an abundance of actions and entities that have no relatively meaningful claim upon their attention. Stepping into the street, a person will attend to oncoming traffic rather than the dead worm being eaten by ants or an inexplicably brilliant flower lying in withered leaves by her feet. In the moment before she crosses the street, these objects do not strike her as important stimuli or opportunities for action if a car is barreling rapidly down the street, and she does not attend to them. But a work of fiction is an intentionally produced, cognitive artifact, and if a writer describes each of these features of the environment as a character crosses the street, readers expect those features to have some relevance to the ongoing construction of meaning in the text. (The real woman crossing the street is likewise continuously producing meaning, but her priorities and the bearing of her environment on her well-being are rather different.) In offering itself to our attention as a meaningful, humanly constructed cognitive object, a literary work leaves us unprepared to filter out extraneous elements.

How does a reader begin to orient in a textual environment? Some of this, of course, depends on what the writer offers, but characteristic fea-

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tures of our species psychology are prerequisite to our ability to process textual environments, just as they are elementary to way-finding in the real world. First among these is the sense of self. So much derided in post-modern thought, that phylogenetically evolved and ontogenetically developing sense of "me," of the core of the organism, serves, as Damasio says, as a fundamental point of reference (134–43). The real-world environment as I cross the street or buy groceries or teach class is only coherent in relation to that cognitive-physiological core, which in *homo sapiens sapiens* is a quite sophisticated entity, with a developed autobiographical dimension and purposive capacities. It is only this kind of human self, "the autobiographical self," that is a possible reader of texts, for without it animals have no awareness of temporality and cannot refer events in the present to the past or anticipate future events.

Writing and reading texts require consciousness, of course, which is itself a precondition for autobiographical selfhood and the capacity to model the self and others cognitively. Consciousness is, in Damasio's definition, "the feeling of knowing," a prelinguistic awareness of the organism's interactions with external phenomena. But how does that interaction result in such an intimation? The organism constructs "an account of what happens" as a result of its interaction with objects, and "This account is a simple narrative without words" (168). Put differently, the narrative impulse is so elementary that it not only operates unconsciously but is integral to self-identity and consciousness. Consciousness and the self, to be plain, are bound up with narrative, and as consciousness and the self have developed in their modern forms, stories, spoken and then written down, provide a central vehicle for the exploration and play of consciousness.

What this drives home is that the basis of narrative, causal and sequential thought that typically incorporates some (if not all) of the features Jerome Bruner attributes to it—actor, action, goal, scene, and agent—evolved millions of years before advanced, compositional language. Cognitive psychologists widely recognize that narrativity is a basic mode of mentation, and sociobiologist Wilson claims that its core feature, causal construal, is an epigenetic rule: a robust, built-in, cognitive predisposition (See Bruner; Lloyd; Schank; Wilson). The developmental ecological psychologists Eleanor Gibson and Anne Pick, stressing that animacy, agency, and causality develop over time for the infant, take the view that "causality is a rather sophisticated concept, founded originally on learning about control. Control is first discovered in oneself—in controlling hand movements, for example, that have the consequence of moving some object"

(194). The infant's grasp of agency and causality are bound up together, and in accordance with this view, causality may not necessarily have an innate cognitive dimension. Nevertheless, given the inevitable characteristics of species existence, narrative mentation must necessarily emerge, and emerge early, to ensure survival. Hence, whether we judge that narrativity is the product of epigenesis (the total results of organic qualities plus environment) or the result of life regularly constrained by certain environment factors, the net conclusion for our purposes is the same: narrative is fundamental to survival.

Thus far, I have suggested that autobiographical selfhood, consciousness, and narrative thought, bound up together and indispensable to real-world navigation of the environment, constitute the cognitive dynamics basic to orienting in a literary text. Likewise, the capacity for other forms of association serves narrativity but also promotes discernment of other types of relations. Missing from this description, though, are other human beings or sets of relations. There is very little literature that does not have a significant sense of human context, whether that context is dramatized within the text or not. In literary works without characters, such as lyric poems, there is sometimes a silent addressee. At other times, there is a history of human relations that serves as the context of the poet's meditations. Sometimes the poet's address to the reader or an anthropomorphized god establishes the minimal human relationship.

Writing, in short, is a comprehensively social act, no matter how attenuated social interaction becomes in the process. Indeed, language itself likely attests to the thorough-going sociality of human beings. Anthropologists Leslie Aiello and Robin Dunbar argue that language evolved not for more efficient and accurate dissemination of information but to promote social cohesion when grooming—the primary mechanism for maintaining affiliative bonds—became too time-consuming as the size of humans group increased (in Mithen, *Neanderthals* 135–36). Over the course of about six million years, humans evolved from arboreal ancestors protected and shaded by trees into a far-ranging, way-finding, knowledge-seeking species whose cognitive, emotional, and physiological make-up slowly altered as the species sought to meet its needs for food, protection, and mates. By about two million years ago, our australopithecine ancestors appear relatively well-adapted to open environments; only of moderate size and relatively visible, humans were vulnerable to bigger, faster predators and would have been unable to protect themselves without the aid of a reasonably large, close-knit social group. Precisely for this reason, extraordinary

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sociality, like exceptional plasticity in behavior and cognition, is an adaptive hallmark of our species because it promoted inclusive fitness.

The basic characteristics of the way-finding mind—a self to serve as the point of orientation and reference; a propensity to infer causal relations and to make other associative connections; an environment rich in potential affordances; and a close-knit social group that provides the secure basis for way-finding activity—still serve to orient us in human life, even though the epistemic and geographical range of human life has expanded enormously with the rapid development of culture in the past 10,000 years. These cognitive features inform our mode of entry into works of imaginative literature. Because narrative literature usually centers on a problem, however, its environments typically highlight the difficulties of one dimension or another of this epistemic process. This might entail challenges to the pick up and interpretation of information about the physical environment or its cognitive equivalents, such as metaphor and symbol, or to the system of social relations within the text. In general, informational deficits or imbalances will tax the reader's effort at cognitive orientation, which in turn will inhibit the assimilation and reorganization of that information to an ongoing narrative account.

Like other literary works whose subject is the epistemic process, "Trespasses" directs the narrative impulse that initially operates below the level of consciousness toward the conscious problem of narrative construction. In the story's opening, however, Munro's delayed revelation of the story's main character in combination with conventional features of narrative presents readers with a territory devoid of its true and necessary focalizing perspective, that of the ten-year-old Lauren. Meanwhile, Munro effectively provides the narrator as an alternative (though ultimately false) other "self" with whom readers identify. Thus standing on the perimeter of the storyworld rather than entering actively into it, readers are deprived of crucial information by orientational disadvantage and immobility. Drawing on research from Darwinian psychiatry and studies of obsessive-compulsive disorder, literary scholar Michael Austin claims that the extra energy and discomfort resulting from normal anxiety motivates the generation of internal narratives and the pursuit of closure. Not only too little information but too much creates anxiety, and as Austin points out, in our pragmatic mental operations, we value *useful* rather than necessarily *true* information. Munro not only strains readers' desire for narrative closure by providing information that seems incidental (apparently useless) at the outset but forestalls readers' ability to begin sorting information and thus shaping the narrative by refusing to establish an orienting perspective

within the storyworld. In rendering problematical the truth that readers are cognitively predisposed to pursue—*initially*, a factual account of past events and their connection to the present—Munro redirects attention to the self-justifications of her characters and the implications of their stories for the submerged main character, Lauren, and her potentially focalizing perspective. The story of her life, *in fact*, is one of a faltering, or long-deferred, orientation—in other words, of an unrealized because unrecognized self.

TERRITORY, ORIENTATION, AND “TRESPASSES”

“Trespases” is one of several Munro stories in which the central character is an adolescent girl whose parents and their associates live by a lingering set of counter-cultural attitudes, which include a mild anti-establishment posture and a belief that children should be treated as adults. While the parents are deluded in their sense of superior honesty and freedom from conventional mores (they seem as repressive, viciously passive aggressive, and jealous as any of the usual human lot), these attitudes help them evade the moral and ethical consequences of their actions.

The gist of the story is this: Eileen and Harry and their daughter Lauren have recently moved to a small town where Harry has bought the town's newspaper. While unpacking, Lauren asks about the contents of a box that seems particularly light, and her father gives her the first version of some past events. Eleven years before, he and Eileen had a baby, soon after which Eileen learned that she was pregnant. After a fight, Eileen drove off with the infant and had an accident in which the baby was killed. The box contains the baby's ashes. This is just the beginning of Munro's story, however. Another woman, Delphine, who believes she is the biological mother of the first (presumably illegally adopted) baby, has tracked them down; she also assumes that the living girl Lauren (both babies were named Lauren) is her daughter and pursues a relationship with the girl. As Lauren gradually begins to suspect, based on Delphine's hints and indirect revelations, that *she* might be adopted, Harry and Eileen learn of the friendship that has emerged between the two. The result is the late-night attempt to provide the canonical narrative of the past events and the hasty, long-delayed ceremony to scatter the ashes of the baby who died a decade before.

The thirty-seven-page story is told in seventeen sections that vary in length from under a page to about six pages. It starts with a section covering the first part of the final scene, the four characters finding a site on

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a riverbank to scatter the ashes, and ends with the rest of the scene, the scattering of ashes and the beginning of the ride back into town. On one level, then, the present event of dispersing the ashes functions conventionally as a narrative frame. However, Munro develops this overt structural circularity on more subtle chronological and psychological levels, since the town is a place of childhood vacations for Harry, and since each adult character, through unacknowledged feelings of guilt, responsibility, and desire deviates from but ultimately returns to his or her version of the past events. The story thus enacts a debased version of the myth of eternal return, wherein the structural return to the oozy riverbank reflects the return of each of the adult characters to his or her muddy version of the baby's adoption and death.

In the first six pages of the story, as I will attempt to show in what follows, the pervasive self-deceptions of Eileen and Harry govern the distribution of information in the narrative. Munro orchestrates this process of deception at the level of narrative technique, employing an ostensibly reliable narrator who, beguiling readers with her intelligence and charm, surveys the narrative world and delivers a comic, apparently loosely connected, and superficial account of events. In this manner, Munro compels readers to stand quite outside the narrative world for the first five pages, in alliance with the narrator and without any hint that there will be an orienting perspective among the characters. To put this in terms of my ecological model, Munro essentially inhibits the process of information pick up by neglecting to identify Lauren as the protagonist and by simultaneously suppressing the girl's orienting (or focalizing) perspective, which in consequence only *belatedly* initiates the imaginative correlative of the autobiographical self (in other words, the readerly identification with the character). For many pages, then, Munro effectively keeps readers out of her *true* story, even while masking the central informational and perspectival deficits she has strategically employed. Virtually stalled at the perimeter because deprived of the orienting consciousness required for full entrance into and movement within the domain of the storyworld (or textual environment), the readers, like Lauren, lack the fundamental point of orientation (the self) to initiate the epistemic process of narrative construction.

Another way of putting this is that Munro's story, like Wordsworth's "Simon Lee," does not begin at the beginning of the true story, but like that poem, begins with a sense of narrative conventionality that carries with it a deceptive assurance of proper shape, which presumes the control of

emotion and anxiety that comes with closure and the containment of facts. Munro's first short section certainly promises this:

They drove out of town around midnight—Harry and Delphine in the front seat and Eileen and Lauren in the back. The sky was clear and the snow had slid off the trees but had not melted underneath them or on the rocks that jutted out beside the road. Harry stopped the car by the bridge.

“This'll do.”

“Somebody might see us stopped here,” Eileen said. “They might stop to check out what we're up to.”

He started to drive again. They turned onto the first little country road, where they all got out of the car and walked carefully down the bank, just a short way, among lacy black cedars. There was a slight crackle to the snow, though the ground underneath was soft and mucky. Lauren was still wearing her pajamas under her coat, but Eileen had made her put on her boots.

“Okay here?” Eileen said.

Harry said, “It's not very far off the road.”

“It's far enough.”

Noting that narratologists and writers have long stressed that there are always related events prior to the start of a formal narrative, Brian Richardson concludes that “there is no ready formula for ascertaining the actual beginning of the story,” and that judgments about where a narrative begins proceeds on a case-by-case basis (117). In this case, Munro offers up a balance between certainty and uncertainty that persuades readers that they will soon be on the way to constructing a reasonable sequential narrative that explains the mysterious activity of the characters in the initial scene. First, the narrator provides not only the names of the four characters but describes where they are sitting in relation to one another in the car. The fact that Lauren is wearing pajamas and that “Eileen had made her put on her boots” establishes that Lauren is a child and that Eileen is most likely her mother or guardian. Likewise, the exchange about an appropriate place to stop suggests that Harry and Eileen are partners. Although Delphine's relationship with the others is as yet undisclosed, this omission is not *initially* troublesome, because Munro has introduced her characters and sketched relationships to which readers will attribute central significance. Second, the narrator establishes a number of material

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facts, including the season, the approximate time of day, and the type of physical environment, a mucky riverbank somewhere in the countryside.

In sum, as readers survey this cognitive environment, they have the sort of basic yet incomplete information about physical place, social relations, and group effort that stimulates further exploratory activity and meaning construction. In Austin's terms, we experience (albeit indirectly) the normal anxiety that motivates the generation of narrative and the pursuit of closure. Because information is limited at this point in the readers' experience, they are not hampered by the need to categorize it as useful, true, or multivalent (for instance, information that is simultaneously literal and metaphorical, like the "soft and mucky" ground underneath the snow), even if veteran readers of Munro will be suspicious of such surface simplicity and directness. It is the readers' assumption, in short, that the information provided so far is both *useful* and *true*.

Research on embodied cognition somewhat modifies earlier theories of script-based understanding, indicating that while readers "use spatial perspectives to construct mental models of narrative texts," these models or simulations are flexible and dynamic. Some research suggests that the construction of such a model depends on adopting the perspective of a protagonist, a finding that probably has a pronounced bearing on works that foreground narrative intentions (Gibbs 201, 202–03). In section one, Munro provides readers with enough information to begin a cognitive simulation, and the level of narrative competence indicates—again deceptively—that readers can expect to elaborate on and build this simulation until it explains the mysterious opening scene. At this point in "Trespasses," most readers probably expect two things in the subsequent pages: 1) more narrative *information* at least glancingly related to the opening scene on the riverbank, and 2) some developing sense of the relationships between the characters, which sense entails, typically, developments in the relations between the reader and the characters. Instead, Munro strategically delays in both respects. Although it is certainly unlikely that *all* cognitive narrative simulations require the perspective of a protagonist, *most* probably do, because fiction is governed largely by human considerations (ethical, behavioral, psychological, and so forth), and because the protagonist provides the means of narrative construal and thus knowledge. Of course, not all literature invites or encourages readerly involvement; this is particularly the case with satire and comedy, because it is distinctly *unnatural* to identify with the subject of ridicule. By contrast, opening on a note of mystery, as Munro does, primes the readers' desire for information and evaluative mechanisms, foremost among them

an appropriate orienting perspective that will make information pick up and thus meaning and narrative construal possible.

Munro's readers hardly meander aimlessly in the beginning of the story (indeed, could not do so if they chose to), more than willing to collude with the witty and cheerful narrator. In the long run, Munro thus effects the double action of the text as the readers, unwittingly hampered by the initial deprivation of the necessary orienting perspective, belatedly come into a sobering consciousness of the grim story underneath the narrator's delightful chatter, one that mirrors Lauren's slowly emerging knowledge of her own submerged history. For the time being, however, readers are (mis)guided by the chatty and seemingly incidental nature of the narrator's discourse. For instance, in the second and third sections and in the beginning of the fourth, the narrator gives the readers a tour of the surface geography of the story, including the town and the house to which the family has relocated, and in this manner the readers circle, inevitably trespassing, without the capacity to sort clues along a proper route.

Section two focuses on the old hotel on the main street of the town, which Harry says he remembers from his summers in the area, and where he takes his family for dinner soon after they relocate. Much of this second section is taken up with an exchange between the principal characters and another family celebrating the anniversary of an elderly couple. The exchange between the two parties does a good deal to characterize Eileen, Harry, and (latently) Lauren, but the seemingly incidental quality of the scene downplays the quality of the information Munro offers. When Harry asks the couple for "the recipe for a happy marriage," for instance, the old man says, "All-eeze keep a foot on er neck," and all the adults laugh. While Harry is angling for a way to turn this into an anecdote for the newspaper, Eileen, once out of earshot, asks, "How do they manage to get that fat? I don't understand it. You'd have to eat day and night to get that fat" (199). As the old man's joke about control and conflict is deflected by the superficial preoccupations of Eileen and Harry—a choice anecdote for the newspaper, the middle-class sophisticate's shock at obesity and the canned green beans served in the summer months—Munro introduces the theme of the suppressed secrets, animosities, and violence in sexual unions. However, given the seemingly incidental nature of the scene and the lack of a focalizing perspective, laughing off the old man's comment seems forgivable, and it is only in retrospect that readers realize how much useful information has been offered in a characteristically off-hand manner. Both as a matter of tone and delayed focalization, then, readers stand mainly outside the storyworld, identifying with the narrator for the

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time being, since her perspective is the only one that has been offered thus far. Furthermore, any clues to serious themes and character traits are deflected by Munro's modulations into a comic tone, such as her adoption of free indirect style: "This was the year after Harry had quit his job on a news-magazine because he was burned out" (198). This comic touch, which encourages readers to take matters lightly, appears in the first paragraph of the section—a paragraph that is, in fact, nearly all about Harry, and thus one that keeps readers at the story's perimeter.

Importantly, readers need not only Lauren's *perspective* but also *information about* the child to construct, ultimately, the significant story in these thirty-seven pages. But in the second and third sections, the absence of her necessary focalizing perspective is complemented by a sense of her *virtual* absence from the scenes, for the narrator provides little information about her, so that, in fact, readers nearly forget that she's in them at all—which is, of course, sadly the point. In section two, aside from the sentence that places her in this scene—"He and Eileen and Lauren went there for dinner on their first Sunday night in town"—the narrator does not mention Lauren, nor does the girl participate in the conversation (198). For all intents and purposes, she becomes narratively invisible. Like the thematic continuity between the old man's remark and the repressed or dark secret at the story's center, Lauren's invisibility attests to the narrator's neglect of the protagonist, which repeats at the level of narrative technique, as I have said, the self-deceptions (and, indeed, general self-absorption) characteristic of Eileen and Harry. Because readers have such limited information, and because the narrator's wit primarily draws the reader on, Munro effects a subtle complicity in Lauren's neglect.

Likewise, readers remain stalled at the story's perimeter in the third section, which provides a succinct narrative summary of the transformation of the hotel dining room into a coffee shop by the new owner, Mr. Palagian, who hires an as-yet-unidentified woman (in fact, Delphine) to work for him. The last third of this section veers into a comic portrait of Harry as Munro indulges again in free indirect style:

He was hoping that one day Mr. Palagian would thaw out and tell the story of his life. Harry kept a file full of ideas for books and was always on the lookout for life stories. Someone like Mr. Palagian—or even that fat tough-talking waitress, he said—could be harboring a contemporary tragedy or adventure which would make a best seller.

The thing about life, Harry had told Lauren, was to live in the world with interest. To keep your eyes open and see the possibili-

ties—see the humanity—in everybody you met. To be aware. If he had anything at all to teach her it was that. *Be aware*. (201)

Though entertained by the echo of Harry's pretentious blathering in these paragraphs, readers are nonetheless sensitively directed to note the long-suffering addressee ("he said"; "Harry had told Lauren"), and also, to mark the repeated, emphatic, and final command ("*Be aware*"), quite as though the author is speaking over her characters and narrator and directly to her readers.

Four pages into the story, then, readers are apt to experience a sense of present and perhaps ultimate shapelessness—inconsequential and forgotten characters (such as Delphine), unnecessary information, dangling mystery—and no clear starting point from which to begin assembling a unified narrative. Perhaps for readers, a low-level epistemic frustration replaces full-blown anxiety, because, after all, we are not at risk for direct consequences, and because we are so far innocent regarding the truly sordid subject of the story. But sure enough, this is the transitional section. First, following on the final paragraph of section three (above), section four brings the focus gradually onto Lauren (who is, just subsequent to this, fully established as the protagonist and the orienting perspective in section five). Second, as the narrator directs the readers' attention to Lauren in the second paragraph of section four, a shift in both tone and subject matter prepares readers for the perspective they have so far been denied. Signaling Lauren's presence as implied auditor at the close of section three and commanding attention—"Be aware" (or warning the readers?: *beware*)—the narrator next gives the girl pride of place, the first sentence in section four, but then, like a busy magpie, having unearthed Lauren, immediately tosses her aside for a brighter treasure: "Lauren made her own breakfast, usually cereal with maple syrup instead of milk. Eileen took her coffee back to bed and drank it slowly. She didn't want to talk. She had to get herself in gear to face the day, working in the newspaper office" (201). But readers (who surely think Lauren is older than her ten years until nearly halfway through the story) have registered the twin signs of neglect, Lauren's repulsive repast and Eileen's sluggish maternal transmission. Importantly, although the narrative is not yet focalized within Lauren's perspective, readers, no longer tracing the town's perimeter, are peering into the inner territory of the story, the family home; in keeping with this, the nature and quantity of information available is accordingly constrained. Thus, while this paragraph, like the final paragraphs of sec-

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tion three about Harry, is still humorous, it is less so than the story in section two, because it attests to Eileen's utter self-absorption.

The second paragraph of section four moves subtly away from the focus on Harry and Eileen and toward Lauren as it describes the location of the house (the edge of town) and, in some detail, Lauren's solitary autumn afternoons, carrying refuse to Harry's nascent compost heap. In this manner, the new sense of focus on the isolated child and, with it, the shift to a setting (creepily foreshadowing the final scene on the riverbank) prepare readers for the next paragraph, which initiates Lauren's perspective:

Her life was a lot different now from the way it had been just a few weeks ago, when she and Harry and Eileen were driving to one of the lakes to swim in the hot afternoons. Then later in the evenings, she and Harry had gone on adventure walks around the town, while Eileen sanded and painted and wall-papered the house, claiming she could do that faster and better on her own. All that she had wanted Harry to do then was to get all his boxes of papers and his filing cabinet and desk into a ratty little room in the basement, out of her way. Lauren had helped him. (202)

With this paragraph, Munro modulates the narrative voice, so that the teller, having guided readers into the house and physical territory of this story, identifies her protagonist and focuses within Lauren's perspective, simultaneously relinquishing her tour-guide function in the service of a higher goal. Exactly how much readers gather of the surprising fund of information available through this subtly sudden act of orientation cannot be precisely claimed, but it is surely at this point that a perspective, a fictionally perceiving self, is finally available from which to survey the quality and kinds of information provided and actively to begin construing a narrative of value.

Following on the previous paragraph's portrait of the solitary Lauren traipsing toward the compost heap in the autumnal afternoon, the first independent clause of this paragraph strikes a note of conscious awareness and melancholy, prepared by the previous paragraph but nevertheless at odds with the sense of the characters (remember: mainly Harry and Eileen) thus far. In so doing, it establishes a theme of role reversal between Lauren and her parents that readers finally clearly register, as they navigate, along with Lauren, between her mother and her father and the primarily human information that governs her life: Harry's childishness ("she and Harry had gone on adventure walks around the town"); the thinly

veiled tensions between the parents (Eileen's vicious renovations while Harry and Lauren adventure; Harry's place in the basement). "Her life was a lot different now from the way it was just a few weeks ago": the clause seems deeper than it is, precisely because the story's narrative technique no longer mimics Harry and Eileen's self-deception, focusing readers on a vulnerable character who, so unlike her parents, is sensible to loneliness, transition, and loss.

In theorizing how our human ecological cognition operates within narrative, I have said four salient features of our evolved psychology have high importance: a fictional "self" that serves to orient; a capacity for association, but especially causal (and hence narrative) construal; an environment rich in information (potential affordances); and a social group. In "Trespasses," once Munro initiates Lauren's focal perspective, the problem of informational evaluation that besets readers in the first three sections is solved, because *orientation* and *territory* are mutually related phenomena. This goes back to and, I believe, reinforces Phelan's point about our readerly commitment to character functions. Put simply, we can learn from characters in a way that we cannot learn from narrators, because characters are (for the most part) limited in ways that we are as living humans. Narrative omniscience may well be a fiction, but many narrators, like Munro's here, are physically and otherwise unconstrained, so they are fairly useless as epistemic guides for readers.

In the relationship of Lauren's just-focalized perspective to just-defined territory, the disposition of information in the environment is, in the subsequent scene, sudden and relentless in its informational relevance. Down in the basement, Lauren lifts the peculiar box.

"Now," he said. "Now, Lauren. I could make up some kind of lie to tell you, but I am going to tell you the truth. Because I believe that children should be told the truth. At least by the time they're your age, they should be. But in this case it has to be secret. Okay?"

Lauren said, "Okay." Something made her wish, already, that he wouldn't do this. (203)

Once readers have been offered the self via whom they will construe the narrative, they follow closely but also depart from the character in judgments and narrative shaping. In Munro's text, the process begins at this juncture, when Lauren's innocent question brings down upon her the gruesome story of the first baby's death. Lauren cannot use this information; in ecological terms, it is not, for her, an affordance, an opportunity

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for action. By contrast, it is extraordinarily useful to readers, who feel no compunction about, for instance, judging Harry for his parental irresponsibility and deviousness, and for building that judgment into the story.

Were I to conduct a complete analysis of readers' narrative construal of the story, I would elucidate further this relationship to Lauren, who cannot herself take information, like readers, and shape it into a story. She is simply stuck with it, and with the increased load of anxiety that comes from too much slightly conflicting information of a kind particularly inassimilable for a child. Munro brilliantly builds on informational ambiguity and anxiety through the progress of the Lauren-Delphine relationship in sections eight through eleven, which confuse not just facts but familial-social relationships, thus developing the complexity of the information that Lauren and the readers must process.

Toward the end of the story, protagonist and readers share an exhaustion with the closely related versions of events and with the insistence that each version be told. In the last hashing-out of the story of the dead baby, Eileen reveals that she and Harry had been arguing about an abortion just before the accident. Against Harry's objections, Eileen insists that Lauren can now handle this truth:

"Yes, but it's true," Eileen said. "Lauren can take it, she knows it wasn't like it was *her*."

Lauren spoke up, surprising herself.

"It was me," she said. "Who was it if it wasn't me?" (232)

To the best of the readers' knowledge, Lauren's statement is factually correct, since Harry has provided documentation to prove to Delphine that Lauren is his and Eileen's biological child. While Munro may manipulate, for a time, our hyper-narrativizing tendency in the story, and while the fact that Eileen was pregnant with Lauren does matter to the girl, on some level, no facts seem to matter at all any more, at least not to this reader. For what seems overwhelmingly clear is that all accounts provided by the adults are continuous and relentless acts of self-assertion that isolate Lauren from her peers and now confuse her sense of family and origin.

"You are a kid that is not short of information," Delphine tells Lauren, just as she's about to give her more that Lauren would do well without (220). As my overview of ecological cognition has suggested, for all human beings, the social efficacy of our environment is a *precondition* to our ability to orient and wayfind within the physical terrain. This is especially so for children, whose social lives and beings are governed by their

families, which typically manage the flow of information to the children. In “Trespasses,” Harry and Eileen perform no such function, instead overloading their child with burdensome information, a child, furthermore, whose selfhood they have not even bothered to acknowledge. For readers, the ethical and the aesthetic meet up as soon as they realize Munro’s initial technique of disorientation mimics the ecological fragility of self, perspective, and life story for Lauren. I hope that the ecological ground of my discussion has deepened my readers’ sense of the relationship between Munro’s technique and the human meaning of her story.¹

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NOTE

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