

## THE WOMAN OUT BACK: ALICE MUNRO'S "MENESETEUNG"

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Alice Munro's short story "Meneseteung," which Clare Tomalin has described as "the finest and most intense" (quoted by Redekop, *Mothers* 216) of the stories collected in *Friend of My Youth* (1990), recounts a narrator's attempt to "see" someone in the past, and like a number of other contemporary fictions by Canadian women—for example, Carol Shields' *Small Ceremonies* (1976), Susan Swan's *The Biggest Modern Woman in the World* (1983), Jane Urquhart's *The Whirlpool* (1986) and *Changing Heaven* (1990), Katherine Govier's *Between Men* (1987) and Daphne Marlatt's *Ana Historic* (1988)—seems to present such vision as an enabling precondition for living through the present; for in all these works, it is the historian, more than the history, who comes to matter, and the narrator, for whom the historical narrative is the way into and out of history, who most commands our attention.

E.D. Blodgett has observed that the narrator in Munro's fiction "so often represents the problem of knowing" (10). In "Meneseteung" this "problem" is embodied in the figure of Almeda Joynt Roth, a genteel lady-poet of the mid-Victorian era living in Munro's fictionalized southwestern Ontario.<sup>1</sup> Interpolating between a few "facts" gleaned from the town newspaper, and extrapolating from a reading of Roth's book of poems, Munro's narrator constructs a version of the other's life which becomes an envisioning, as she imagines Almeda's thoughts and feelings one August weekend when an incident in her back yard leads her to become what the paper describes as "a familiar eccentric" (71).

"Meneseteung" is interesting as well because the author herself has told us what we should see in it. Munro has written that she consciously set out to create in Almeda a poet-figure in a small Ontario town "out at the edge of Victorian civilization," in whose poetry "you get a sense of claustrophobia and waste" ("Contributors' Notes" 322). She gave the character "just enough [talent] to give her

glimpses, stir her up" (322) and "wanted her to have choices" (323). Munro describes Almeda at the end of the story as "half mad but not, I thought, entirely unhappy" (323). Recent critical discussion of the story has taken its cues from Munro's statement of her intentions.<sup>2</sup> What I want to suggest, however, is that "Meneseteung" is a story in which what we see may be something quite other than, perhaps even contrary to, what the author commands us, and that recent critical views of Almeda have ignored the significance of the "glimpses" the character experiences during that August weekend, as well as the "choices" that she may be seen to make. In particular, I want to suggest that Almeda, as a result of her back yard experience, *chooses* eccentricity: she elects marginality, rather than having it imposed upon her by the Victorian patriarchy represented by the town paper, because she intuits in the peripheral world of the Pearl Street Swamp the centre for her life that she (or, as we shall see, the narrator *for* her) had been unconsciously seeking.<sup>3</sup> For to consider Almeda-as-eccentric as a figure of marginal-peripheral womanhood is to see her exclusively from the point of view of the patriarchal centre, a viewpoint that by the end of the story is as "dis-arranged," to use Lawrence Mathews's term for Munro's structural technique, as it is discredited.

## I

Almeda's house, as a symbol of the past, presents a conventional twentieth-century view of the nineteenth century. The Freudian intersection ("Joynt"?) where Father Roth (Wrath?) has built his house is the conjunction between the respectable and the rejected, the conscious and the unconscious, the superego and the id.<sup>4</sup> The front "faces" (55) on the respectable and patriarchally-named Dufferin Street, but the back windows "overlook" the ironically and female-named Pearl Street, the world of "the unrespectable and undeserving poor" (55). Almeda lives at this intersection carefully locking and unlocking her doors and gates only to be, like Joyce's Mary, "surprised . . . in the rere of the premises" (Joyce 376). The symbolic significance of the house's location is in its both/neither relation to the opposed worlds. Its position marks the inevitability of its inmate's need to choose, and when, at the end of section II, the narrator imagines that Almeda has refused to sleep in her father's "large front bedroom," preferring instead to sleep "at the back,"

where "she can see the sun rising, the swamp mist filling with light, the bulky, nearest trees floating against that mist and the trees behind turning transparent" (56), we are given a proleptic glimpse of Almeda's ultimate choice of redemptive female eccentricity over confining patriarchal respectability.

It also needs to be emphasized that it is the narrator who imagines this refusal on Almeda's part. Munro's now well-known description of her understanding of a story to be "like a house" because "it encloses space and makes connections between one enclosed space and another and presents what is outside in a new way" ("What Is Real?" 224) suggests that, as a metafiction, the relations between the narrator, the character, and the author in this story are a complex series of mirrorings in which identities slide into each other, are interchangeable. The narrator in "Meneseteung" gradually merges with the character, Almeda, an other whose temporal displacement in another century is crossed out as the narrator "crosses over" to her by means of her empathetic re-visioning. In this sense, the "story" of "Meneseteung" is the narrator's "dreaming-back" to the nineteenth-century woman in order to dream her forward into her own contemporary consciousness, a consciousness which identifies the other's eccentricity as her mystery and her saving difference.<sup>5</sup>

The symbolism of place in "Meneseteung" radiates outward from Almeda Roth's house, but the house is just one of the symbols of the past in the story that the narrator is trying to recover. This recovery is achieved, with the irony and skepticism that attend all Munro's moments of recognition, as the narrator moves from the external view of Almeda Roth provided by the historical record to an internal view which comes with her imaginative merging with the character. In this process, the narrator seeks to connect the Almeda Joynt Roth whom she encounters in the local newspaper, the *Vidette*, with "Meda," who is her "dream" of another Almeda, based on the name she discovers in the book of poems. The Almeda of the *Vidette* is the eccentric spinster whose shelf-life expires 22 April, 1903, a life as closed and unknown to the townspeople as her book of poems. No less external is the initial view of the narrator, looking from the twentieth century to the nineteenth, as if through the wrong end of a telescope, and seeing a life small and alien, inviting the *Gestalt* of stereotype—yet another madwoman in the century's attic, a victim of patriarchal oppression.

The inside view of Almeda is the narrator's dream of Meda,

and the "plot" of the story is the project of freeing this imaginative ancestor from the patriarchal stereotype. Meda is not the spinster-eccentric, the failed phobic poet and madwoman suggested by Munro, but the "other" hidden within Almeda yet, paradoxically, there for all to see. The character's middle name encloses the "joy" the narrator's fantasy searches for in her dream of that other's life, and encodes the narrator's imaginative project of connecting objective, "historical" details and subjective dream. As much as Munro's story may suggest the authorially-imposed version of Almeda as half mad, it also suggests that she chooses her eccentricity, ironically, as a way of escaping the cyclopic social eye of the patriarchy and the identity it would assign her. The narrator's dream of Almeda's transformation one hot August weekend releases the character into a "floating independence" (70) that moves her beyond the world of her ominous neighbour, Jarvis Poulter, beyond the gravity of the *Vidette's* conventions, which would fill her pockets with stones to pull her to the bottom of the social stream.<sup>6</sup>

At the end of section II, the narrator has moved inside the house, beyond the realm of public knowledge of Almeda represented by the *Vidette*, to begin to see with the character's eyes. This merging continues in section III as the narrator imagines Almeda's feelings about Poulter, a widower who has prospered from developing a technique for extracting salt from underground. Poulter clearly belongs on Dufferin Street, and though he is considered "An eccentric, to a degree" (57), his eccentricity is his miserliness. Almeda's is her imagination, and the contrast between them is evident when he tells her how his wells bring up the salt from beneath the earth. She alludes to "The salt of the earth," and then imagines "a great sea" covering the land long ago (58). Poulter is not interested in this kind of speculation, but Almeda's intuition of "the ancient sea" (61) is what eventually leads her to the Pearl Street Swamp, just as it is her imagination which warns her against a future with Poulter.

Pearl Street, the narrator remarks, is "another story" (55). But that other story *is* the story that is told, the story of the other that Almeda represents for the narrator, the "Meda" submerged in Almeda, and that the swamp-woman represents in the story for Almeda herself. This mysterious woman from Pearl Street, the swamp angel who turns up at Almeda Roth's back door, leads Almeda to a breakthrough rather than a breakdown because the marginal world of Pearl Street, with its apogee of exclusion, the

swamp that "No decent woman" would dare approach (56), is not periphery but alternate centre. Because of the symbolism of place in the story, this significantly unnamed woman may be seen, to use Catherine Ross's metaphor, as an emissary from the lower world, a world Almeda has been conditioned by the world of her father to abhor (see Ross, "'At least part legend'" 114, 117-18). The significance of her anonymity is, perhaps, that the patriarchy excludes her from its privilege of recognition because of the threat she poses to it, but also that her escape from the "public record" is itself evidence of her eccentric freedom, her slipping back to the "swamp" beyond patriarchal control. For the Pearl Street Swamp is an image of a wilderness or "wild zone" which demarcates woman's potential freedom, as well as her actual exclusion, from patriarchal order.<sup>7</sup> Father Roth functions in the story as a compact symbol of Victorian patriarchy: "a harness-maker by trade, but a cultivated man who could quote by heart from the Bible, Shakespeare, and the writings of Edmund Burke" (51). As "housekeeper to [her] father," Almeda is harnessed by her sense of love and filial duty. As the voice of the Bible, Shakespeare, and Burke, he embodies the culture that, as "poetess" (51), she seeks to enter, but which already entombs her. Almeda appears to be a thoroughly submissive woman, self-deprecating, apologetic, obedient. But this is not the Meda whom the narrator goes on to imagine, and what she discovers this weekend may be understood as a knowledge against the Father, the beginning of a life of defiance which the patriarchy labels as "eccentric."

Almeda's attraction to Jarvis Poulter is partly her need to replace the dead father. She misses the harness of female service, "misses . . . her father's appreciation, his dark, kind authority" (60). When she imagines Poulter coming to her bed, "a fit of welcome and submission overtakes her, a buried gasp" (60). The narrator imagines Almeda wanting Poulter to walk her to church on Sunday morning, but when he does offer, following the scene in the back yard, she rejects him, locks the door and posts a sign she does not want to be disturbed. For the experience has left her "trembling, as if from a great shock or danger" (68). And it has been both: the woman-beast on all fours is a sign of her own "buried gasp" of womanhood, and Poulter's banishment of this messenger back to the swamp from which she came is a sign of the danger he represents to Meda.

## II

The narrator's account of Almeda's dream-like experience in which she witnesses a violent sexual encounter involving a Pearl Street couple outside her bedroom window is the climax of "Meneseteung." Awakened by the "fracas," she goes to the window and immediately sees "Pegasus . . . straight ahead, over the swamp" (63). Below, "It's as if there were a ball of fire rolling up Pearl Street, shooting off sparks—only the fire is noise." What she hears pouring from the man's and woman's mouths are the voices of the swamp: "a rising and falling howling cry and a steady throbbing, low-pitched stream of abuse that contains all those words which Almeda associates with danger and depravity and foul smells and disgusting sights" (63).<sup>8</sup> She hears all the words she has never used in her verse, the anti-poetry buried within her polished and civilized confections, a "gagging, vomiting, grunting, pounding. Then a long, vibrating, choking sound of pain and self-abasement, self-abandonment, which could come from either or both of them" (64).<sup>9</sup> As she senses a quality of performance about the scene—"it is always partly a charade with these people" (63)—Almeda becomes a spectator at the mystery play of her own unconscious.<sup>10</sup>

She falls back to sleep but awakens into a profounder dream the next morning when another symbolic emissary appears to her: "She thinks there is a big crow sitting on her windowsill, talking in a disapproving but unsurprised way about the events of the night before. 'Wake up and move the wheelbarrow!' it says to her, scolding, and she understands that it means something else by 'wheelbarrow'—something foul and sorrowful" (64). When she goes out to inspect what appears to be a dead body against her back fence, she finds that "Spiders have draped their webs over the doorway in the night, and the hollyhocks are drooping, heavy with dew" (65). Framed by the drooping sticky flowers she sees "a bare breast let loose, brown nipple pulled long like a cow's teat, and a bare haunch and leg, the haunch showing a bruise as big as a sunflower. The unbruised skin is grayish, like a plucked, raw drumstick" (65). The latter image makes it clear that the man called Poulter will know how to deal with this invasion of the elemental, and when Almeda fetches him he "nudges the leg with the toe of his boot"; then "a startling thing happens. The body heaves itself onto all fours, the head is lifted—the hair all matted with blood and

vomit—and the woman begins to bang this head, hard and rhythmically, against Almeda Roth's picket fence. As she bangs her head, she finds her voice and lets out an openmouthed yowl, full of strength and what sounds like an anguished pleasure" (66). "'Far from dead,' says Jarvis Poulter": unimaginative patriarch that he is, he could not understand the full meaning of his words; on an unconscious level, the more imaginative Meda does. This woman is Life in all its obscene splendour. She is an other Almeda must acknowledge.<sup>11</sup> "'There's blood,' says Almeda as the woman turns her smeared face" (66). Poulter discounts it. "'You stop that, now,' he says. 'Stop it.'" He means the yowling but it is as if he is ordering her to stop the blood. When Almeda goes back into her house, she discovers that she has started to menstruate. Poulter sends the woman on her way and says to Almeda, "'There goes your dead body,'" again unconscious of the meaning of his words; for, far from being a "farcical resurrection" (Redekop, *Mothers* 224), this swamp angel points the way out of her death-in-life for Almeda, announcing the end of a cycle which is also a beginning.

In her kitchen, "The grape pulp and juice has stained the swollen cloth a dark purple" (68); Almeda's "abdomen is bloated; she is hot and dizzy" (67). "Plop, plup, into the basin beneath. She can't sit and look at such a thing" (68). It seems a parody of her own body. Earlier, the rhythmic dripping "remind[ed] her of the conversation of the crow" (65), in which she was ordered to "'Wake up and move the wheelbarrow!'" (64). Again, if we remember that all of this is the narrator's imagining, then the crow-messenger may be as much a figure of narrative desire as of the disapproving patriarchal conscience. It is the narrator who wills Almeda to leave the *camera oscura* of her repressed self, to overcome her fear and enter the body of life outside the prison of the father's house. The "wheelbarrow" is her "dead body" (as long as she remains an inmate of the father's house) waiting to be taken up and possessed by her. In what follows, Almeda becomes hypersensitive to all the patterns she sees around her, "For every one of these patterns, decorations seems charged with life, ready to move and flow and alter." She spends the day trying to "catch" this flow and altering—"to understand it, to be part of it" (69). Because she is a poet, "Soon this glowing and swelling begins to suggest words—not specific words but a flow of words somewhere, just about ready to make themselves known to her." And then she imagines the

"one very great poem that will contain everything and, oh, that will make all the other poems, the poems she has written, inconsequential, mere trial and error, mere rags" (70).

At this point, as Almeda "wakes up," in a sense, to the vocation of her body, the narrator in effect imagines the Victorian Almeda Joynt Roth into the twentieth century, for the poem she imagines her wanting to write is a modern, if not even modernist, poem of encyclopedic scope, of contraries and contradictions held in equilibrium, in the meaningful but fictive order of a constellation. Grape juice, menstrual blood, words—all flow into the image of the river, the Meneseteung, which Meda sees as the symbol and subject of the poem she needs to write. Carrington considers "this equation of menstruation and artistic creation [to be] deeply ironic . . . because menstruation signals the absence of conception—the lack of new creation" (*Controlling the Uncontrollable* 215). But I think this imposes the same patriarchal construction of woman upon Munro's character that the story shows her to escape. To interpret menstruation as "the absence of conception," and thus "creation," is to subscribe to definitions of creation/presence that we are now so sensitive to as ideological instruments of patriarchal oppression, and to fail to see how Munro, in this instance, "write[s] from within a woman's body without trapping that body inside old symbols" (Redekop, *Mothers* 222). Almeda's menstrual flow can be considered a "hopeful sign" (70) because it signals a release from the false pregnancy of her hopes of marrying Poulter. Even from the patriarchal point of view, Almeda's menstruation can be taken as a sign of her continuing fertility, her potential to create future presence, rather than as a sign of past failure. Munro's story shows Almeda to triumph by escaping such definitions: her life after this weekend is a life of eccentric creativity, a self-fashioning secret to herself and beyond the prying phallic eye of the patriarchal *Vidette*. And finally, can we not see the menstrual flow imagined by the narrator as her attempted "connection" with the ancestor/character, the woman's "period," "this trickle in time, making a connection, rescuing one thing from the rubbish" (73) that she describes in the closing lines of the story?

Almeda's "unresisting surrender to her surroundings" (69) would seem madness from Jarvis Poulter's point of view, who represents the forces that would control the uncontrollable, in Carrington's terms. But is madness what *we* see? It is the narrator



who is imagining this experience and who, as Almeda becomes Meda in that imagining, feels that the surrender "is alright. It seems necessary" (69). This moment can be seen as the transformation of Almeda's loneliness into the pleasure of Meda's independence. To echo Yeats, when Almeda becomes Meda she recovers a radical innocence and learns at last that her happiness is self-delighting, self-appeasing, and self-affrighting (102). It may also be seen as the ultimate moment of identity between the narrator and the character. When she says that Almeda "cannot escape words. She may think she can, but she can't" (69), it is the *narrator's* words she cannot escape because, of course, Almeda is nothing but the narrator's words. Almeda discovers her identity as Meda, as river daughter, as the narrator completes her invention. Nor is she Munro's version of the modernist Eliot's Thames Daughter, who "can connect / Nothing with nothing" (46). Meda's is a vision of liberating connection, of hope rather than despair.

To read this moment as the beginning of madness is to opt for "another story" altogether. The narrator emphasizes that Meda "hasn't thought that crocheted roses could float away or that tombstones could hurry down the street. She doesn't mistake that for reality, and neither does she mistake anything else for reality, and that is how she knows that she is sane" (71). "No need for alarm," the narrator cautions (71), but who is she reassuring? Is she "speaking" as narrator or "thinking" as the character? The swamp ultimately kills Meda, but that is only how the *Vidette* would understand her death. She dies from pneumonia, which developed from a cold caught "from a ramble in the Pearl Street bog" (72). But why not see joy and freedom in that "ramble"—the freedom that eccentricity marks in opposition to the centre?

In the narrator's dream of Meda, the night-world night-town of Pearl Street and its obscene but fecund life-forms flood the erstwhile ark, the safely fenced and locked house of her father. When Poulter, after shooing the Pearl Street drunk from Almeda's garden, says to her, "'There goes your dead body'" (67), he unknowingly points her in the direction of her freedom, just as the faint, ironic echo of the communion words suggests how that freedom will be achieved. The rough beast Poulter rouses in her yard slouches off to the Pearl Street world Almeda has always looked at from her back windows. In the next few hours, Almeda comes to recognize her repressed connection to that world. It is a

breakthrough rather than a breakdown. Poulter's name suggests his fairy tale-like identity as keeper and killer, and, as Almeda becomes Meda, she seems to recognize this, realizing that the poem she must try to imagine, the "one very great poem that will contain everything," must contain "the obscene racket on Pearl Street and the polished toe of Jarvis Poulter's boot and the plucked-chicken haunch with its blue-black flower" (70). The latter image recalls the drunken woman in her yard whom Jarvis drove away. Were Almeda to marry this man she would end strung up by the feet, plucked and bloodless, in a marriage of convention, and this is what she turns away from, choosing instead the dreaded "swamp" of her imagination and independence and the mask of eccentricity.<sup>12</sup>

### III

In "Meneseteung" Munro's representation of the past as a variety of texts—poetic, journalistic, photographic—waiting to be read and re-written by the present facilitates the dissolution of the narrator into the character, which is the most important feature of the story's form; it also sanctions the convergence of the external reader with the narrator in a way that evokes the interpretation of Meda's breakdown as a liberation and triumph, contrary to the authorially imposed interpretation of the episode as signifying madness and failure.

The photo of Almeda described in section I (50-1) represents a distant, silent past that looks out at the present, like Eurydice, waiting to be recovered.<sup>13</sup> This Orphic disinterring of the dead woman continues as the narrator reads/quotes/writes Almeda's Preface to her book of poems. The story exemplifies the pun in the subtitle of Neuman and Kambourelis's *A Mazing Space: Writing Canadian Women Writing*. The narrator's dream of Meda Roth corrects the *Vidette* version of Almeda Roth's life. When Almeda writes in her Preface that "I have occupied myself" with the effort of writing poetry, the phrase connotes more than the Victorian obsession with the immorality of idleness and the necessity of keeping busy. There is the sense that her writing has been an attempt to fill in an "unoccupied" space, a blankness in her sense of self. This returns as well upon the frame story, the narrator's "writing" as a filling in of an emptiness, a gap she wants to connect. Her remarks at the end of the first section about the forgotten knowledge of poetry, the mystery of masculine and feminine rhymes, link the character

and the activity, a forgotten woman and a forgotten art, as a composite "mystery"—in the sense of an enigma (*mysterium*) and of a craft (*misterium*)—the character's identity and the narrator's activity.

But while Almeda's poetry in the story would seem to be crucial to the narrator's act of recovery of the symbolic foremother, I am not sure that it functions in a "positive" way. In my understanding of her fictive career/chronology, Almeda's only book is published in 1873, the year after her father's death. While this might suggest we interpret the poetry as an expression of her newfound independence, the "facts" would suggest that the poems were all written while Almeda was daughter/housekeeper to the patriarch. The narrator wonders (facetiously, for she is adopting the tone and viewpoint of the *Vidette*), "Perhaps it was the proud, bookish father encouraging her" (59); and in her Preface to the book, Almeda herself describes her writing as if it were a supplement/compensation for her inadequacies as a housekeeper (51-2); the book's title, *Offerings*, further implies a dispossessing humility. Also, I do not get the sense from the narrative that the poetry continues after the weekend in 1879 when the experiences that alter Almeda occur, and perhaps this silence is another ironic mark of her triumphant escape: she refuses to be the patriarchally approved "poetess," approved so long as she sings from within the gilded cage of the Victorian construction of the feminine. Moreover, it seems that "Meneseteung," the "one very great poem that will contain everything" (70), remains unwritten as a Victorian poem—until, of course, the narrator presents its prose substitute, a late twentieth-century short story, an act which in itself confirms the paradoxical recovery/over-writing of the Victorian foremother by "the writing daughter."

What the narrator presents as Almeda's frame of mind during her breakthrough experience is very much her own in the closing lines of the story. "Meneseteung" ends as it begins with the narrator trying to see her subject in a text. She discovers the gravestone with "Meda" inscribed on it. The whole story has been the reciprocal staring of subjective narrator at narrative subject, and the uncovering of the inscription corroborates the truth of the narrator's belief in Almeda Roth's secret identity:

I thought that there wasn't anybody alive in the world but me who would know this, who would make the connection. And I would be the last person to do so. But perhaps

this isn't so. People are curious. . . . You see them going around with notebooks, scraping the dirt off gravestones, reading micro-film, just in the hope of seeing this trickle in time, making a connection, rescuing one thing from the rubbish. (73)

These lines are the original ending of the story, as it appeared in *The New Yorker*, and in them the narrator describes herself and her project. She has wanted to make a connection with this figure in the past. When she quotes from Almeda's poem, "*Come over, come over, let Meda come over*" (52), we can hear what Karen Smythe describes as the "'double voice' of fictive-elegy" (*Figuring Grief* 8): the character imagines her dead family calling to her to join them, but the line also speaks the twentieth-century narrator's wish to bring the dead past into the living present. Like Marlatt's narrator in *Ana Historic*, Munro's has set out to rescue a woman from the rubbish of history because that is where woman has been put. Like Laurence's Morag Gunn in *The Diviners*, she knows that the rejected is the motherlode of women's stories.

*Friend of My Youth* is full of stories about connecting. The title story establishes the pattern as its narrator obliquely approaches a post-humous rapprochement with her mother by imagining the life of someone in her mother's past, eventually moulding this character into a kind of oracular dream-figure who silently speaks words of ironic revelation to her:

I would have wanted to tell her that I knew, I knew her story, though we had never met. I imagine myself trying to tell her. (This is a dream now, I understand it as a dream.) I imagine her listening. . . . But she shakes her head. She smiles at me, and in her smile there is a degree of mockery, a faint, self-assured malice. Weariness, as well. She is not surprised that I am telling her this, but she is weary of it, of me and my idea of her, my information, my notion that I can know anything about her. (25-6)

In Munro's fiction, the irony of revelation is not so much that nothing is revealed but that revelation does not bring salvation. In "Friend of My Youth" the vision that does not salve is the narrator's recognition that "Of course it's my mother I'm thinking of" (26) when she dreams the other, and thus her mother comes forward to affirm her own impenetrable otherness against her daughter's self-serving designs.

The version of "Meneseteung" in the collection ends with a similar unravelment. But instead of the ironic deflation's taking the wind out of the narrator's sail, it is the reader who is left drifting in indeterminacy. The narrator thinks of others who might seek, like her, to connect past and present:

And they may get it wrong, after all. I may have got it wrong. I don't know if she ever took laudanum. Many ladies did. I don't know if she ever made grape jelly. (73)<sup>14</sup>

This "un-writes" all that has come before it.<sup>15</sup> The episode with the laudanum and grape jelly is the central episode in the story in which Almeda finally connects with the world that has attracted and repulsed her all her life. But the admission is important not so much as metafictional signal as an expression that the patriarchal right/wrong, true/false views of history are not operative here. Woman's story in "Meneseteung" dares to be read by the patriarchal reader as "hysterical," but in that daring it successfully achieves its own hearing, re-writing the dismissive "our poetess" of the opening paragraph into a reclamation of a necessary ancestor. Munro herself may read the episode as the beginning of Almeda's disconnection with reality, but I feel that this goes against the spirit of the story and what is presented. Why should we not imagine Almeda, like the dream-Flora of "Friend of My Youth," listening but smiling in mockery and weariness at her author's idea of her and "her notion that [she] can know anything about her"?<sup>16</sup> This is not to suggest that my critical reading of the story is "truer" or "more insightful" than the writer's own understanding of her work, only that Munro's house of fiction is so complex a fabrication that there is no one view of it—critic's or author's—that sees, or seizes, it all.

We cannot discuss Almeda Roth the way we discuss other fictional characters. She does not have the fictive existence of characters whose stories are told in the third person. The form of this story—the movement in the relation of narrator to character, from differentiation to identity to what might be called internalized differentiation—forces us to be aware of the activity of fictive construction, in particular, as a process of "consolation." In her discussion of fictive-elegy, Smythe shows how "self-consciousness functions as a trope of consolation" (*Figuring Grief* 7). The narrator's confession to invention at the end of "Meneseteung" is part of a pattern in *Friend of My Youth* in which narrators or characters fan-

tasize about another character's life or behaviour but admit that they will never know for sure if they understand the other character. The autobiographical (re)turn of the narrator at the end of "Meneseteung" reminds us that the story has been "about" her, as "the writing daughter" (Redekop, *Mothers* 209), as much as about Almeda, the absent foremother. The shifts from first- to third- and back to first-person narration, as well as the quotations from Almeda's poetry, configure the "double voice" of elegy, "the voice of the absent as well as the voice of the survivor . . . figured in the performed and performative text" (Smythe, *Figuring Grief* 8). The past is used in "Meneseteung" in ways that serve a feminist recovery of a lost history as well as a metafictional exploration of how narrative, like Penelope's tapestry, is as much what is unwoven as what is woven. Like the other women's works that use the nineteenth century mentioned at the beginning of this essay, Munro's "Meneseteung" also shows that these are one and the same project. Imagining/unravelling the other's past is an invention/weaving of the present, a present that is now, and then, connected and continuous with the mystery of woman coming to possess her own presence. In this sense, Munro's inventive recollection of the past exemplifies the moral imagination which Benjamin urges in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History": "The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again"; and "every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably" (681). The centre of Munro's story is the apocalyptic flash of that "ball of fire rolling up Pearl Street, shooting off sparks," apocalyptic for Almeda as well as for Munro's narrator; for from the image cast by that moment a complex recognition begins to arrange itself, and it is in that patterned reflection that Munro articulates some of her deepest "concerns."

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Redekop suggests the example of Isabella Crawford (*Mothers* 228).

<sup>2</sup> Carrington sees Almeda as a figure of "wasted artistic potentiality" who

"slowly drowns in the river of her mind" (*Controlling the Uncontrollable* 215); in her review of *Friend of My Youth*, Carrington also concludes that "Almeda not only lacks real creativity, but also slowly slides into insanity" ("Rubble or Remedy?" 162). Redekop also discusses Almeda as a figure of ironic success/failure, a "grotesque" who "finds her voice by losing it" (*Mothers* 217, 228), though the failure is qualified by her thesis of the "mock mother."

<sup>3</sup> Atwood also seems unconvinced by Munro's reading of her story. She listens to Munro when she writes that Almeda "disintegrates in the harsh and multiple presence of the vivid life that surrounds her and that finally proves too huge and real for her," but then adds, "Or does it? Does she disintegrate or integrate? Does crossing the borders of convention lead toward insanity or sanity?" (xxii).

<sup>4</sup> Rasporich, p.138, identifies a similar opposition in the symbolism of place in Munro's *Dance of the Happy Shades*.

<sup>5</sup> Munro's position in this triangle might be "plotted" in terms of the parallels between author/story and narrator/character relations. Consider the plot of the story in relation to Redekop's thesis that "The writing daughter's conscious failure to understand or represent the mother remains . . . at the heart of Munro's aesthetic" (*Mothers* 209), which would see the narrator/character relationship as a version of "writing daughter"/re-written and (ironically) recovered mother. Also consider the story in relation to "the poetics of elegy" discussed by Smythe, which would see the narrator as a figure for the author as "mourner" and the process of the narrative as a complex "mourning," "wherein grief is figured and survival is 'voiced'" (*Figuring Grief* 8).

<sup>6</sup> According to the *OED*, "vidette" is an incorrect spelling of "vedette" common in the first half of the nineteenth century. "Vedette" is a military term for "A mounted sentry placed in advance of the outposts of an army to observe the movements of the enemy." Derived, ultimately, from the Latin verb "to see," the name of the paper sustains the important motifs of seeing and watching that run through the story, but develops them in a sinister sense of patriarchal watching or spying upon a female "enemy." Observation implies discipline.

<sup>7</sup> See Showalter, "Criticism in the Wilderness," pp. 261-4, for a discussion of this spatial metaphor. Howells discusses wilderness as a ground for female liberation in Canadian writing in *Private and Fictional Worlds*, pp. 11-18; see also Heather Murray, "Women in the Wilderness."

<sup>8</sup> Carrington discusses Munro's construction of such moments, which the author describes as "big bustings-out," as moments in which "a subterranean force suddenly splitting the earth and bursting forth in an uncontrolled and destructive fury is a metaphor for the violently 'boiling life' that resists repression" (*Controlling the Uncontrollable* 34-5).

<sup>9</sup> Redekop responds to the violence in this scene in terms of Almeda's behaviour as "an unwilling voyeur," a moral discomfort she suggests is "duplicated in the writer and the reader" ("Enchanted Space" 210). My reading of the episode, however, follows Rasporich's view that, beginning with *Who Do You Think You Are?*, "the voice of female protest is still active" in Munro's writing, but "There is

... a new sense of mature resolve in the interpretation of these situations, of evaluating being placed in some abeyance. . . ." (59). Munro's language mysteriously links the bruise "big as a sunflower" (65) on the woman's thigh with the sunrise coming out of the swamp and the process of Almeda's awakening.

<sup>10</sup> Carrington discusses the recurring motif of voyeurism in Munro's fiction (*Controlling the Uncontrollable* 8). Also, Carscallen's discussion of Munro's rooms as cameras—"something penetrates a closed chamber in the same way that light enters a camera" (129)—is suggestive here. If we consider Almeda's room as the camera of the I, punned in Carscallen's "camera of the eye" (129), then the voyeuristic moment is the exposure of the unexposed self to "the flash of picture-taking" (Carscallen 129), the "ball of fire rolling up Pearl Street." As a result of this exposure, Almeda is transformed. "The result of this mysterious entry is mysterious in turn, for it is an image, and an image both is and is not what generated it. An image reproduces but also reverses . . ." (Carscallen 129). Following the logic of these metaphors, Almeda becomes the "negative" of what she has seen, even as she represents it. It is not until the negative is "developed" that it becomes a "positive" image or "print." The developing process is the narrator's narration; for what must always be emphasized is that all of this is the *narrator's imagining* of the character's experience. Thus the narrator's process of narration is her developing of the "negative" Almeda into the "positive" Meda, at which point, it could be said, the narrator as camera reveals herself as narrator as projector, which she has been all along; for the scene outside Almeda's window is a projection, in ironically negative terms, of what the narrator imagines to be repressed within the character.

<sup>11</sup> Redekop remarks that the body of the woman "is like the text in a staged hermeneutic act" (*Mothers* 224).

<sup>12</sup> I disagree with Lorna Irvine's application of the patriarchal-Frygian view of the frontier as female and circumferential here (72-3). For me, Meda's voluntary eccentricity is a romantic rejection of community, a centrifugal movement to the freedom of the periphery where she can escape, to use Showalter's terms, the "feminine" and discover the "female" ("A Literature of Their Own" 13).

<sup>13</sup> This sense of the Orphic recovery of the dead relates to the prevalence of the elegiac in Munro's fiction, particularly the recurrent mourning for the lost mother. Redekop writes that "The daughter's failure to understand or represent the mother has been at the heart of Munro's work since 'The Peace of Utrecht'" and notes that *Friend of My Youth* is "dedicated by Munro to the memory of her mother" ("Enchanted Space" 208). For the autobiographical substratum in "Meneseteung," see note 16 below. For discussions of the theme of the lost mother in Munro, see Rasporich, p. 173; Godard, p. 51; and, most recently, Smythe. For a discussion of Munro and photography, see York. The use of photograph as "portrait" may also be considered in relation to Meltzer's discussion of the metafictional function of the latter in fiction.

<sup>14</sup> Munro's addition of this second ending to the story seems to go against her published views about her endings. She is on record as being dissatisfied with the explicit nature of the endings in her early work: "There's an awful lot of very, very important words in each last little paragraph. . . . It must have been a prevalent fashion. . . . And now, I would go back, if I could rewrite most of those stories,



and I would chop out a lot of these words and final sentences. And I would just let each story stand without bothering to do the summing up, because that's really what it amounts to" (Struthers 9). But in the version of "Meneseteung" in *Friend of My Youth* she has done precisely the opposite of this. She has added an ironic "summing up" paragraph rather than deleting one.

<sup>15</sup> Mathews, p. 185, discusses Munro's use of epilogues to destabilize the order her narrative structures seem to construct.

<sup>16</sup> "Meneseteung" can be read as a reprise of the autobiographical "Friend of My Youth" in the form of a more abstracted metafictional memoir. "Friend of My Youth," which begins the collection, immediately raises issues of voice and genre: is it memoir, confession, story? (See Osachoff for a discussion of this pluralism in Munro's fiction.) "Meneseteung," while on the surface apparently another of Munro's "recurrent characterizations of childish and decorous Victorian women who, subordinated by an older, patriarchal order, betray sublimated and strangled discontent" (Rasporich 33), is not without its autobiographical connections. Almeda takes over her mother's role in caring for her father, just as Munro herself assumed her mother domestic chores when she became ill (Rasporich 8). Almeda's mother took three years to die and "lost her reason . . . a year before she died" (59), and Munro's mother suffered the slow deterioration of Parkinson's Disease. The dreamwork of the story complicates the autobiographical connections, however, when we hear "Ada" in Almeda (even more so in Meda), for the character of Ada Jordan in *Lives of Girls and Women* is considered a fictional reflection of Munro's mother (Blodgett 3). Almeda as Munro's mother is also suggested by her attraction to Jarvis Poulter; Munro's father became a "poulter" when he turned to turkey farming (Blodgett 3).

This reading of "Meneseteung" as a family romance is also suggested by Almeda's house. As symbol it is a reflection of the character's interior life (see Rasporich, pp. 143-4, for discussion of this symbolism in Munro's earlier fiction) and there is obvious symbolism in the connections between Almeda's body (menstrual flow) and the house as a symbol of her physical and mental condition (the "plop, plup" of the grape juice and her imagining of the river-poem); in this, the story illustrates recent feminist discussions of the symmetry of body/text in Munro's writing as a form of *l'écriture féminine* (see in particular, Godard and Kamboureli; see also Car-scallen's suggestion of the body as "the house of a sleeping mother" (129). But Almeda's house also recalls descriptions of Munro's childhood home. Almeda's back windows look out over Pearl Street toward the swamp; Munro's farmhouse looked out toward the Maitland River (the Meneseteung of the story). Pearl Street is the slum area of the unnamed town that fascinates and repulses Almeda; Munro grew up in Lower Town, west of Wingham, "a rural slum," "a community of outcasts," as she describes it (Ross, "A Double Life" 17). "Today," the narrator says, Almeda's house is owned by the "manager of the liquor store" (53), a telling juxtaposition of the centuries; and today, an equally striking contrast must touch Munro when she sees the back yard of her homestead full of wrecked cars (Ross, "A Double Life" 17). Finally, when Rasporich discusses how "wrecked vehicles, in particular the wrecked car, is also a metaphor of the ruined female body" in Munro's fiction (155), it is possible to see how the autobiographical feeds the symbolic in this story.

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