

Vous commenterez ce texte en anglais et traduirez de la ligne 13 (“The Poetess...”) à la ligne 39 (“but often remember.”). Chaque exercice est à remettre sur une copie séparée.

Columbine, bloodroot,
 And wild bergamot,
 Gathering armfuls,
 Giddily we go.

OFFERINGS, the book is called. Gold lettering on a dull-blue cover. The author’s full name underneath: Almeda Joynt Roth. The local paper, the *Vidette*, referred to her as “our poetess.” There seems to be a mixture of respect and contempt, both for her calling and for her sex — or for their predictable conjuncture. In the front of the book is a photograph, with the photographer’s name in one corner, and the date: 1865. The book was published later, in 1873.

The poetess has a long face; a rather long nose; full, somber dark eyes, which seem ready to roll down her cheeks like giant tears; a lot of dark hair gathered around her face in droopy rolls and curtains. A streak of gray hair plain to see, although she is, in this picture, only twenty-five. Not a pretty girl but the sort of woman who may age well, who probably won’t get fat. She wears a tucked and braid-trimmed dark dress or jacket, with a lacy, floppy arrangement of white material — frills or a bow — filling the deep V at the neck. She also wears a hat, which might be made of velvet, in a dark color to match the dress. It’s the untrimmed, shapeless hat, something like a soft beret, that makes me see artistic intentions, or at least a shy and stubborn eccentricity, in this young woman, whose long neck and forward-inclining head indicate as well that she is tall and slender and somewhat awkward. From the waist up, she looks like a young nobleman of another century. But perhaps it was the fashion.

“In 1854,” she writes in the preface to her book, “my father brought us — my mother, my sister Catherine, my brother William, and me — to the wilds of Canada West (as it then was). My father was a harness-maker by trade, but a cultivated man who could quote by heart from the Bible, Shakespeare, and the writings of Edmund Burke. He prospered in this newly opened land and was able to set up a harness and leather-goods store, and after a year to build the comfortable house in which I live (alone) today. I was fourteen years old, the eldest of the children, when we came into this country from Kingston, a town whose handsome streets I have not seen again but often remember. My sister was eleven and my brother nine. The third summer that we lived here, my brother and sister were taken ill of a prevalent fever and died within a few days of each other. My dear mother did not regain her spirits after this blow to our family. Her health declined, and after another three years she died. I then became a housekeeper to my father and was happy to make his home for twelve years, until he died suddenly one morning at his shop.

“From my earliest years I have delighted in verse and I have occupied myself —and sometimes allayed my griefs, which have been no more, I know, than any sojourner on earth must encounter — with many floundering efforts at its composition. My fingers, indeed, were always too clumsy for crochetwork, and those dazzling productions of embroidery which one sees often today — the overflowing fruit and flower baskets, the little Dutch boys, the bonneted maidens with their watering cans — have likewise proved to be beyond my skill. So I offer instead, as the product of my leisure hours, these rude posies, these ballads, couplets, reflections.

Alice Munro (Canada, 1931 -), “Meneseung”, *Friend of My Youth*, 1990 (The story was originally published in *The New Yorker* in 1989.)

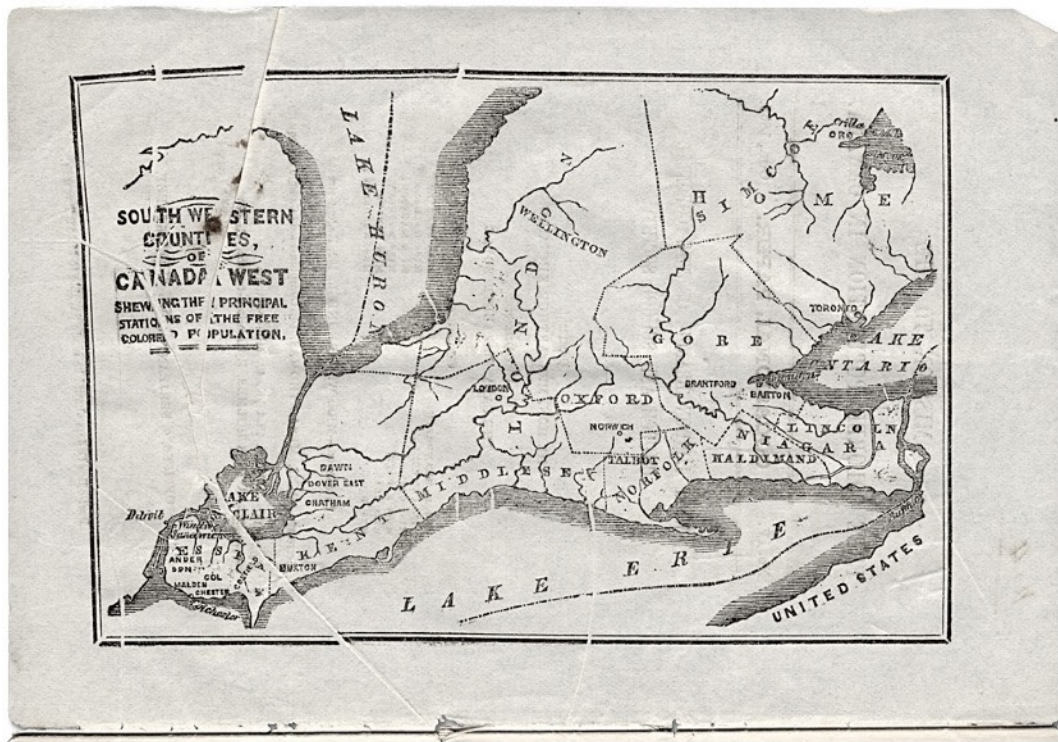


BLOODROOT



WILD BERGAMOT

PROPOSITION DE CORRIGÉ DU COMMENTAIRE DE “MENESETEUNG” PAR ALICE MUNRO



POSSIBLE INTRODUCTION

Words on a page, ink shadings on a map torn from an old pamphlet, botanical sketches gathered here and there : one needn't look very far to find evidence of a reality of some sort when trying to make sense of Alice Munro's intentions in the opening page of her short story 'Meneseteung'. 'Giddily (I) go' the reader might indeed say, echoing the "floundering efforts" of the unlikely figure of Almeda Joynt Roth, "our poetess" as the local rag patronisingly calls her. Alice Munro seems in fact to take an almost perverse delight in blurring the boundaries between genres, media, eras, communities, sexes even perhaps, in a deliberate deconstruction / reconstruction enterprise that radi-

cally reworks the traditional parameters of the short story. The epigraph is in itself a first reconsideration of the genre, as it is much more consonant with a longer work. This infra-liminal intrusion of a voice whose origin is as yet undefined for the reader sets the tone for the whole passage, insofar as it precludes a clear-cut identification of any given voice within the narrative. It is besides this very slipperiness which prevents the page from turning into an artificial and erudite pastiche à la *Possession* for instance : in A.S. Byatt's novel the modern protagonists are clearly identified and the reader is involved from the outset in their literary sleuthing back in time. Faced with such a bewildering array of options and choices, it is tempting to only see in 'Meneseteung's' incipit a post-colonial and feminist construction, as quite a few critics have done, but that would be, in a way, missing the point of a narrative which refuses to be pinned down . The last word of the passage, "reflections", shall therefore project its specular image onto our reading of Munro's text by allowing us to question first the very nature of what is reflected within it before concentrating on the dual mise-en-abyme afforded by the photograph and the preface in a sort of looking-glass set up across time and media; finally, we shall reflect on the way in which Munro's deliberate construction of a literary archetype is (or isn't) a reflection on contemporary expectations of a female writer.

COMMENTARY OUTLINE

I. *A well-stitched narrative*

1. Harness-maker / Quilt-writer

- Very much the sense of a life pieced together, of a narrative cobbled together, stitched together (- harness-maker), of a country's memory pieced together. Narrative flow through elliptical transitions.
- Elliptical transitions : the various exhibits look as if they were in a display case, set side by side but not linked.

2. The passage is composed of the following various bits & pieces (like a quilt...)

1. an epigraph
2. the description of an object (exhibit A, the book), with corroborative evidence from a fictitious newspaper (exhibit A')
3. the portrait of the poetess (exhibit B)
4. a long excerpt of the fictitious book's preface (exhibit C)

II. *Articulating Voices*

1. Narrator / Object of the narration

- Topos of fiction : the real document (cf Hawthorne with *Scarlet Letter*'s first chapter for instance).

- Chinese box structure of the passage : a narrative within the narrative

- On the extended quote from the preface:

- Quote = direct irruption of the poetess's 1st-p voice into the narrative.

2. Lost world : pioneers' Canada

- Reference to the pioneering days, the speed at which changes happened.
- Father belonged to the artisan class, he was a craftsman in the 18th c meaning of the word (shades of a conservative Blake in his cultural baggage, or avatar of Benjamin Franklin?)

Glimpses, vignettes (*The Vidette*, excerpts from poem collection)

3. The buried world

Meneseteung = Indian name. First nation consciousness deeply buried within, as is memory of dead family, raw, pulsating within narrative & possibly within narrator who may / must have been touched by the poetess (archetype of the female writer, the spinster : a lost soul from a lost world, doubly lost).

Wistfulness but not sadness : "l. 4 Giddily we go = epitome of settlement, progress...)

III. *A "Portrait of the female artist as a young woman"?*

1. The construction of one's persona

- "our poetess" : cf Yorkshire "our Jean"; implies a somewhat belittling familiarity (unlikely to say "our William" for Wordsworth for instance!)
- Description of the photograph with narrative intrusions querying the gender status of the figure pictured. (Cf. Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*)
 - Last lines of passage : query the strong emphasis on both her lack of skill with the needle and the detailed depiction of the embroidery : what does this tell the reader?

2. The construction of an artistic voice out of the void

- The epigraph of the story is part of a poem by Almeda (ie fictitious text).
- The flowers are all native to Canada, but columbines also have a famous literary pedigree since they are part of the flowers Ophelia hands around in *Hamlet*, IV, 5, 174...
- The title of the story = Indian name; the local flowers (even though they are plucked) imply some sort of rootedness. The poetess's heart, the graves of her family, herself ultimately, are now part of the land; this new land can be said to have absorbed her. The experience of the Canadian writer is the compound product of all this. (And one could argue that herein lies the answer to the question asked in III, 1: the difficulty to create art in a place and time which resist artistic conventions. Almeda's poetry is quintessentially bad (show by scanning quoted lines) yet she felt compelled to produce it because she was enough of an artist to have the urge to express herself, but as the deprecatory tone of the preface suggests, she may also have been aware of her limitations, and is but one in a long line of female artists pushing in from the margins...).

POSSIBLE CONCLUSION

Munro's writing eschews the expected, the banal, the ease of a resolution, as this incipit shows. It is indeed easy for the unwitting reader to fall into the trap of verisimilitude and look for a small town (Vidette?) which could boast of numbering a "poetess" among its citizens at a time when Canada West was very much a wilderness. From Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Emily Dickinson or, closer to us, Virginia Woolf, literary history is replete with talented women writers who somehow found it hard to abide by the rules of the world as they were then expected to. Yet here Almeda Joynt Roth, a woman whose identity is as apocryphal as her name and whose poetic territory is no longer, has acquired a life of her own (she already had the room), by embodying in her made up name all the disjointed elements embedded within the story. In fact, as the title reminds us, the story is greater than the sum of all Almeda's parts, since it speaks for another, more essential component of Munro's narrative, one which is clearly reflected on the page, straight from the fictitious *Offerings*, in the guise of "the wilds of Canada". The epigraph, with its reference to the local flora, and the title, connoting the First Nations, literally and literarily root Munro's story in the glebe of a land a million miles removed from the genre paintings of the Dutch school, where survival and transience ("Giddily we go") were the shared experience of all women, Natives and settlers alike. As Margaret Atwood, Munro's fellow Canadian literary sister wrote in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, her poems of immigrant experience in the 19th century:

The moving water will not show me
my reflection.

The rocks ignore.

I am a word
in a foreign language.

It is Munro's achievement that she has found the words to be in a language of her own.

Proposition de traduction pour 'Meneseteung' d'Alice Munro

La poétesse a une longue figure / un visage allongé; un nez plutôt long; des yeux pleins, sombres et foncés à la fois, qui semblent prêts à rouler le long de ses joues tels des larmes géantes; une masse de cheveux foncés arrangés autour de son visage en rouleaux et bandeaux tombants¹. Une mèche de cheveux gris bien visible, bien que, sur cette photo, elle n'ait que vingt-cinq ans. Pas une jolie fille mais le genre de femme qui peut bien vieillir, qui ne grossira sans doute pas. Elle porte une robe ou une veste cintrée /ajustée et ornée de galon tressé, avec un fouillis de dentelle souple et blanche, des volants ou un noeud, qui emplit l'échancrure profonde/ le décolleté en V profond à la base du cou. Elle porte aussi un chapeau qui pourrait être fait de velours, dans une couleur foncée assortie à la robe. C'est ce chapeau sans fioritures / sobre, informe / sans forme, qui ressemble un peu à un béret mou, qui m'incite à déceler / discerner des intentions artistiques, ou à tout le moins une forme d'excentricité timide et têtue chez cette jeune femme dont le long cou et la tête inclinée vers l'avant indiquent également qu'elle est grande, mince et pas très à l'aise. Au dessus de la taille / Vue en buste, elle ressemble à un jeune noble d'un autre siècle. Mais peut-être était-ce la mode de l'époque.

"En 1854", écrit-elle dans la préface de son livre, "mon père nous emmena (ma mère, ma soeur Catherine, mon frère William et moi) dans les étendues sauvages du Canada occidental (comme cela s'appelait alors). Mon père était sellier-bourrelier de métier, mais c'était un homme cultivé capable de réciter par coeur des passages de la Bible, de Shakespeare et des écrits d'Edmund Burke. Il prospéra dans cette contrée ouverte depuis peu et put ouvrir un magasin d'articles de sellerie, puis au bout d'une année, construire la maison confortable dans laquelle je vis (seule) aujourd'hui. J'avais quatorze ans, j'étais l'aînée des enfants, lorsque nous arrivâmes dans ce pays en provenance de Kingston, ville dont je n'ai jamais revu les belles rues auxquelles / mais auxquelles / je pense souvent / dont j'évoque souvent le souvenir.

¹ variante: arrangés en rouleaux et bandeaux flasques autour de son visage.