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Oh, never dies: The Haunted Fiction of Alice Munro

By Sam Cibula

Advised by Katie Gemmill

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I. Acknowledgements

Before I begin my analysis, I feel it necessary to list the people who helped me to develop and shape my ideas into their present form.

Firstly, I would like to thank my thesis adviser, Katie Gemmill. A Romanticist by training (and a brilliant one), Professor Gemmill was kind enough to meet me in 20th century Ontario and guide my plunges into these stories. Her insight, advice, and steadfast support were invaluable to my progress on this thesis, and without her this entire work would be nothing more than a heap of disjointed scribblings.

Secondly, I would like to thank my major adviser, M. Mark. M. was the person who first introduced me to Munro—her ardent enthusiasm for Munro's stories was the catalyst for my own exploration of them. I knew that if someone as wise and empathetic as M. was passionate about these works, that I should look into them as well. I never looked back.

I would also like to thank Molly McGlennen, without whose advice this thesis would not have been possible. Professor McGlennen alerted me to Avery Gordon's book *Ghostly Matters*, which was to become the crux of this entire work. I am greatly indebted to her and to her scholarship.

Finally, I would like to thank my family, who gave me the space necessary to work on and complete this project, and, of course, Alice Munro. Even after all the time I've spent pouring over these stories, I am still floored by their delicacy, artistry, and humanity.

II. Introduction

I wish to discuss hauntings in the fiction of Alice Munro; to suggest that, for all their journalistic realism, these are essentially ghost stories—troubled by the specters of the past.

Such a suggestion, however, requires explanation. When I use the word “haunting,” I am using it according to the definition given by Avery F. Gordon in the introduction to her book *Ghostly Matters*. Gordon writes that the word “haunting” describes “those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what’s been in your blind spot comes into view” (Gordon, xvi). This description, modified slightly to apply to fiction rather than to sociology, is the guiding premise of this work. To Gordon’s definition, I would only add that the fictional hauntings I’m looking at in Munro’s fiction are specifically a revelation of that which had previously been hidden by the text; that characters in these works experience hauntings when they sense physical manifestations of the buried truths that the dominant narrative had repressed. In these stories, the accepted narratives represent, in one way or another, the apparent or visible reality. When these narratives prove to be inadequate, so too does the detectable world render itself false and deficient. Truth, then, can only be truly found in the shadowy realms of human consciousness; in the unknown and unknowable domains where dwell the unresolved mysteries of the past.

“Haunting,” Gordon says, “is not the same as being exploited, traumatized, or oppressed, although it usually involves these experiences or is produced by them” (xvi). Munro’s fiction often superficially represents the hegemonic narrative: characters will

declare their belief in or their allegiance to colonial, patriarchal, and capitalist logics. But when these same characters come into contact with haunts (*haunt* here meaning “spook” or “apparition”), their perspectives change. Settlers are forced to confront the hidden histories upon which their projects are built; the owners of capital have to reckon with the plight of their workers; systematic inequities are thrust into view. In short, narratives predicated upon the erasure of the past are forced to reckon with the long-dead, the deeply-buried, and the should-be-forgotten.

Furthermore, it should be noted that there are two types of haunts in Munro’s fiction: the public and the private. Public haunts are endemic to a place, and usually related to the sociopolitical history of that area, as in the case of the woman from the swamp in “Meneseteung,” who represents the economic and gender-based inequalities of early Canadian settlements. Private haunts, on the other hand, take up residence within a character’s mind and nourish themselves on that person’s anxieties and regrets, as in the case of Imagined Jack Agnew in “Carried Away,” who is a specter borne out of one specific character’s memory and imagination. In order to differentiate between these types of haunts, I will use two words that are usually synonymous. I will refer to public haunts as “ghosts” for etymological reasons (the word “ghost” originating from the Old English *gast* meaning “spirit”); and private haunts I will call “phantoms” because of this word’s obvious connection to “fantasy.” These categories are not mutually exclusive—some of the haunts in Munro’s fiction have both ghostly and phantasmal qualities. Such cases will be addressed in due time.

It is also necessary to note that these haunts—be they ghosts or phantoms—do not always appear in a visible, corporeal form; sometimes they are nebulous and intangible entities that can only be classified as “feelings.” Such feelings gestate in the subconscious

(whether individual or collective) and will, at times, spring forth from a character's mind and project themselves onto someone else—thereby transforming that person from an individuated human being into the very personification of the haunt itself.

The stories that I am about to look at have been analyzed before, though not (as far as I can tell) through the lens I am about to use. In her essay, “Allegories of Reading in Alice Munro’s ‘Carried Away’,” Miriam Marty Clark interprets this story through a textual lens; that is, she believes that it is fundamentally a story which, in her words, “addresses allegorically the politics of the library and the ethics of reading” (Clark, 50). This analysis sees “Carried Away” as a metaphoric story, with characters who are symbols rather than fully-fledged personages. While this is certainly an interesting and valuable approach, it delegitimizes the emotional value of the mystical elements of this story—the very elements that I will soon discuss.

Faye Hammill, in a sweeping review of several pieces of literature related to the Canadian wild, touches on “A Wilderness Station.” Hammill offers several critical evaluations of the story, each trying to discover its true objective narrative and place particular blame on one character. None of these analyses, however, touch upon my belief: that it is not a story about individuals so much as a story about larger, unseen forces that work upon those individuals in intriguing and often unpredictable ways.

In a frequently-cited article by Pam Houston entitled “A Hopeful Sign: The Making of Metonymic Meaning in Alice Munro’s ‘Meneseteung’”, the author suggests that this story is so revolutionary in its style that it requires an entirely different framework (or, to use Houston’s term, “matrix”) in order to define its storytelling technique. This she calls the “female matrix,” wherein “the journey is everything, the destination is no more important than any one of the other points along the line” (Houston, 81). This analysis

provides an instructive way of looking at how Munro creates meaning in “Meneseteung” and many of her other stories that follow a similarly circuitous narrative path. This analysis of the story’s structure, along with its hypothesis of how gender impacts this structure, is informative to my own analysis of how gender informs the supernatural elements of these stories.

The scholarly account most applicable to my hypothesis is Eleanor Cook’s article, “‘A Seeing and Unseeing in the Eye’ Canadian Literature and the Sense of Place.” This article, too, is focused more on “Meneseteung” than any of Munro’s other stories, and, like my own analysis of this work, Cook is interested in how the history of Ontario (particularly the pre-colonial and early capitalist histories) impact the story itself. Cook does not analyze this story through the lens of haunting in particular, and she does not seem very interested in the ways in which Munro links together disparate historical eras through mystical forces; but nonetheless, I am indebted to Cook’s focus on the unseen presence of First Nations people within “Meneseteung” and other stories.

With these terms thus defined and these past stories thus reviewed, I will now begin my analysis, starting with the story “Carried Away,” as published in Munro’s 1996 collection, *Selected Stories*.

III. “Carried Away” and the Haunt of Industry

Out of all of Munro’s stories that may be seen as “haunted,” there are few where the haunt itself makes its presence so viscerally known as Imagined Jack Agnew does in “Carried Away.” His appearance at the end of this text is the cumulative expression of certain themes—desire, heartbreak, exploitation—that permeate the whole of this story. In this chapter, I will argue that Imagined Jack Agnew is a spectral manifestation of all of Louisa’s lost loves, molded by her mind into a single, human form.

I call this haunt “Imagined Jack Agnew” so as to differentiate him from the real Jack Agnew—a flesh-and-blood character in the text who is fundamentally separate from the specter that appears at the story’s end. But while the haunt of this story is not the real Jack Agnew, it is undoubtedly based on him—or, at least, on the *idea* of him. The distinction between the man and the idea of the man is key: for Louisa never actually meets the real Jack Agnew. She knows him, instead, through the letters he sends her; that is to say, Louisa does not know who Jack Agnew *is*, but rather who he *wants to be*. This aspirational self that Jack fashions for himself through these letters is that of a timid but passionate man; a bashful soldier confessing his love to a hometown crush. According to Jack’s own account, he was emboldened to write to Louisa and tell her of his feelings because he didn’t think he would ever see her again and therefore had nothing to lose. Perhaps it was this very quality of Jack’s notes—the kind of all-cards-on-the-table openness that they have—that was enticing to Louisa. Here, she thought, was finally someone bold enough to sweep her off her feet; who would love her with a bold and brazen passion.

But, as Louisa comes to learn, Jack Agnew the letter-writer has little in common with Jack Agnew the man. All of his bold declarations are revealed to be empty talk when he does return from Europe and gets back together with his pre-war fiancé. Jack's correspondence with Louisa, it seems, had been little more than a game for him; and once he returns to Canada he settles into a life of stable domesticity.

But it hadn't been a game for Louisa; and the abrupt severance of their correspondence is, for her, a kind of death. When she learns of Jack's marriage, the kind man who once said that he longed to "come up and put [his] hands on [her] waist and lift [her] down...as if [they] agreed about everything" (Munro, 436) is killed in her mind with a sudden and irrevocable blow—a blow not unlike that which will actually kill Jack Agnew many years later. She had created in her mind an image of Jack as the ideal partner; and with that image thus snatched away, the space that it had occupied is left vacant—as gaping and painful as an open wound.

The humiliation of her experience and the and absurdity of her position—of having lost a husband she never had—is too much for Louisa, and she tries to wash her hands of the whole experience. But even so, she is still sometimes haunted by evidence of Jack's existence. Reminders of her lost love pop up periodically—from a note he leaves her in the library to the discovery of his hoard of unreturned books—and fortify the fledging phantom, strengthening him more and more until one day, late in Louisa's life, when she reads the name "John (Jack) Agnew" in a newspaper. By this time, the Jack Agnew who had once written to Louisa has been dead for many decades. But even though Louisa knows this, and even though she is well aware that this is a very common name, just seeing it in print effectively opens her psychological floodgates: the phantom, so long dormant, can no longer be contained. Louisa spends some time trying to evade Imagined Jack, but

eventually the inevitable occurs. The phantom gushes forth from the recesses of Louisa's mind, and it shows itself in full splendor before her unbelieving eyes.

But Louisa makes an error while talking to Imagined Jack: she assumes that he is Jack Agnew's *ghost* rather than his *phantom*. She refers to him as a "dead man," asks him about his family, and talks to him about work. This would all be well and good if she were talking to the ghost of her long-dead pen pal, but the figure before her eyes is the product of her imagination, not the spirit of Jack Agnew. This explains why Imagined Jack incorrectly states that Jack Agnew's daughter is a math teacher and that his wife never remarried. Imagined Jack is a specter borne out of Louisa's addled mind and repressed memories, not a real spirit that exists on its own and outside of her fancy.

Furthermore, it would be disingenuous to say that Jack and Imagined Jack are only separated by these biographical inconsistencies; or that Imagined Jack is based solely upon the real Jack. For Imagined Jack is not merely a recreation of Jack Agnew from beyond the grave but is, in fact, an amalgamation of all of Louisa's lost loves.

Louisa herself seems to realize this while speaking to Imagined Jack. When the phantom stands up, Louisa notices that there's something off about the specter before her eyes:

That edge of a joke, the uneasy kindness, made her think of somebody else.
Who was it? When she saw the breadth of his shoulders from behind, and
the broad flat buttocks, she knew who.

Jim Frarey (462).

Jim Frarey was a traveling salesman whom Louisa slept with many years earlier. Jim hadn't known that Louisa was a virgin, and upon seeing her blood on his bedsheets he panicked. Worried that Louisa might attach a sentimental significance to their encounter,

Jim quickly tried to squash any emotional feelings that she may have been bubbling up inside of her, saying, “I never intended for this to make a difference for you” (442). This, too, must have been a formative rejection for Louisa. While she explicitly claims that the sex hadn’t made any difference to her, internally “she felt herself whirling around in an irresistible way, as if the mattress had turned into a child’s top and was carrying her off” (442). In this moment of intense shame and vulnerability, she continues to deny her own feelings so that she will not be perceived as naïve or weak. But no matter how hard she may try to hide it, her inner tumult evidences the desperation she felt in this moment and will continue to harbor for many decades afterwards. Thus, while Louisa may have hoped that sleeping with Jim would help her move on from Jack Agnew, their rendezvous only added new DNA to the phantom still gestating in her mind; the phantom that is the very manifestation of all her unprocessed longing.

This is further exemplified by the elements of her first love, the sanatorium doctor, that also exist within the phantom. While Imagined Jack does not bear any of the doctor’s physical characteristics and does not profess any similarities to him, it is partially the memory of this doctor that provokes this story’s climactic epiphany. As Louisa talks to Imagined Jack, her voice trails off as she is consumed by ecstasy:

A giddiness seemed to be taking over, a widespread forgiveness of folly, alerting the skin of her spotty hand, her dry thick fingers that lay not far from his, on the seat of the chair between them (462).

Just at the moment where Louisa seems to be losing control, to be swept away in reverie, her euphoria channels itself into her hand. This hand, which still bears the marks of her tubercular past, reminds the reader (as it likely does Louisa) of the time she spent in a sanatorium—and, thus, of the man she met there. By seeing the marks on her hand, Louisa

is transported back to her own distant and long-forgotten past. Thus, in a single instant, Louisa recollects decades upon decades of buried memories; and in their simultaneous presentation, it is as though all of these moments are flowing together to produce a singular effect of rhapsodic compassion.

There is, of course, one man from Louisa's past who is (superficially, at least) not present in the image of Imagined Jack. This man is Arthur Doud, the owner of the piano factory and Louisa's longtime husband. Arthur is the only man who didn't turn Louisa down, and is the father of her children. But while Imagined Jack seems, on the surface, to have nothing in common with Arthur Doud, he does recall the memory of this recently-dead business man through apophasis. When Louisa first regards Imagined Jack, all she can think about is how dissimilar he is to her former husband:

He was wearing tan slacks, a pale-yellow short-sleeved shirt, a cream-and-yellow scarf...His eyes were a light blue, slightly bloodshot and apprehensive. A good-looking man, still trim except for a little authoritative bulge over the belt, but she did not find these serviceable good looks—the careful sporty clothes, the display of ripply hair, the effective expressions—very attractive. She preferred the kind of looks Arthur had. The restraint, the dark-suited dignity that some people could call pompous, that seemed to her admirable and innocent (459-60).

Imagined Jack is dressed in bright colors while Arthur always wore black; the phantom before her has an easy, lighthearted attitude while her husband was always somber and serious. That is to say, Imagined Jack can only be compared to Arthur through an examination of how incomparable they are.

But the relationship between the phantom and Louisa's late husband is purely mimetic—it mirrors the textual conflict between Arthur and the real Jack Agnew. Jack

could be seen as the inverse of Arthur: not only did Jack Agnew work at Doud's Piano Factory under Arthur's supervision, he was also killed in a terrible accident on the factory floor while Arthur was sitting in his upstairs office. After this accident, Arthur is the one to piece together Jack's decapitated body:

He picked [Jack's head] up. He carried it delicately and securely as you might carry an awkward but valuable jug. Pressing the face out of sight, as if comforting it, against his chest. Blood seeped through his shirt and stuck the material to his skin. Warm. He felt like a wounded man (452).

This passage is interesting for many reasons. Arthur presses Jack's lifeless face against his chest, which not only shields Arthur from the horror of Jack's death but also creates an artistic tableau: two men, one alive and one dead, facing opposite directions. But even in this moment, where these two characters are set in direct opposition to one another, they become welded together; united by their difference. The blood flowing from Jack's severed head stains Arthur's shirt, covering the factory owner with the fluid that had been his worker's life force just minutes earlier. More, the sensation of the blood against his skin makes Arthur feel as though *he* were the injured one. In short, although they could not be more different, they are in this moment joined together into a single unit.

This is a visual representation of how Louisa thinks of these men: she associates them together because of their difference. She fell in love with Jack but never married him; she wasn't initially intrigued by Arthur but wound up as his wife. Jack was dishonest with her; Arthur always told her the truth. So why, then, is this phantom—this immaterial figure who so excites Louisa's passion—a representation of *Jack*? Perhaps Jack Agnew's unavailability was tantalizing to her; perhaps her desire for him remained fresh precisely because it was so long unfulfilled. Or perhaps, in addition to these things, it was

something deeper—a factor greater than each of the individual players in this drama. Perhaps Louisa held on to her love for Jack because she could relate to him on a socio-political level—something she could never do with Arthur.

This point of contrast between Jack and Arthur is mirrored in the phantom: Imagined Jack appears to Louisa as a union organizer. Thus, while Arthur represents the power and authority of the owners of capital, Imagined Jack represents the voice of dissent against that power. He is the advocate for the poor and downtrodden; the representative of the working class. And it is partly for this reason that Imagined Jack is the spectral representation of Louisa's romantic ideal—for while she may have married the factory owner, Louisa always secretly felt more comfortable with the workers. Louisa's affinity for the working class is hinted at earlier in the story. She reveals within the first few pages, for example, that both of her parents and she herself worked at Eaton's in Toronto, a sprawling department store that, Louisa says, "was our Douds" (432). Thus, Louisa establishes that she comes from the employed, rather than the employing, class. The next indication of Louisa's proletarian sympathies comes later, when Louisa is discussing the accident that killed Jack Agnew with Arthur. After Arthur extolls the virtues of his factory machines and disparages Jack for having been careless, Louisa asks, "And I suppose there are no ways of protecting people?" (449). This question—this slight pushback against the factory owner's logic—demonstrates that Louisa remembers where she came from and sees through Arthur's rhetoric.

But Louisa's ideological alliance with working people becomes abundantly clear with the appearance of Imagined Jack. When he materializes before her, Louisa speaks to this phantom easily and seems comfortable around him; she even complains to Imagined Jack about her own family. After describing her current job to him, Louisa says:

When I come home at suppertime, I am so tired I could drop and I hear the ice tinkling in [my children's] glasses and them laughing behind the hedge. Oh, Mud, they say when they see me, Oh, poor Mud, sit down here, get her a drink! They call me Mud because that was my son's name for me when he was a baby. But they are neither of them babies now (461).

Louisa is describing her plight to Imagined Jack—a figure she knows to be a product of her imagination; and the speed and candor with which she divulges this information suggests that she has long bottled up the feelings that are now springing from her lips. What Louisa is reporting is tragic: after a long day of work, she has to come home and hear her own children call her “Mud.” While they may not be using this nickname with any particular malice, it is nonetheless undeniably demeaning—particularly when coming from the mouths of those whom Louisa has raised since childhood. By using this name, Louisa's son and stepdaughter effectively make her a subaltern in her own house; a woman disrespected and abused in a space where she should have all the authority.

Louisa tells all of this to Imagined Jack, then, to reclaim her dignity. Even though Louisa is effectively the current owner of the Piano Factory, she clearly doesn't consider herself a boss, but rather a kind of perpetual crisis manager—constantly doing all she can to keep the struggling business afloat. This is to say, she essentially still sees herself as a worker; and unlike her children, who grew up in considerable social and economic privilege, the phantom union organizer before her now would, theoretically, understand both the value and the drudgery of labor. Thus, in this moment, it becomes clear that Louisa finds in Imagined Jack something of an ally; one to whom she can confide her hidden sorrows.

Louisa even tells Imagined Jack about her first impression of Arthur. Louisa says that when he first started to come into her library, she didn't like him much:

I used to look at the back of his neck and think, Ha, what if something should hit you there! None of that would make sense to you. It wouldn't make sense. And it turned out to be something else I wanted entirely. I wanted to marry him and get into a normal life (461-62).

But this claim rings hollow. If Louisa hadn't really wanted to hurt Arthur—to throw something at him and wound his pride—she likely wouldn't be dwelling on that bygone compulsion now; and she certainly wouldn't be confessing it to this product of her imagination. Clearly, Louisa is lying to herself: her true intention was never to marry Arthur or to get into a “normal life” with him. In reality, she had only settled for Arthur out of convenience and a promise of economic stability; he had never inflamed her amorous passion as Jack, Jim, and the doctor had—he had not even piqued her interest until he brought up the possibility of marriage. But, as her comfort around Imagined Jack shows, even her pursuit of social uplift had not been entirely successful. Throughout all her years of marriage and her ensuing insinuation into the town's upper crust, she never felt comfortable in her new lofty position; and the appearance of Imagined Jack shows Louisa that she always maintained a steadfast inward loyalty to the workers of the world.

But Imagined Jack is only the first haunt in this story who represents the struggle of the working class. Towards the end of her reverie, Louisa sees something strange:

Across the graveled yard came a group of oddly dressed folk. They moved all together, a clump of black. The women did not show their hair—they had black shawls or bonnets covering their heads. The men wore broad hats and black braces. The children were dressed just like their elders, even to the bonnets and hats...“The Tolpuddle Martyrs,” [Imagined Jack] said, in a faintly joking, resigned, and compassionate voice (462).

The Tolpuddle Martyrs were a real group of six men who were charged with taking a secret oath and expelled from England. This much is reported faithfully in “Carried Away,” but the story otherwise plays fast and loose with the details of the Martyrs’ plight. They were not shipped to Canada as punishment but to Australia; and despite what the story claims, they were well-known in their lifetimes (Castelow, “The Tolpuddle Martyrs”). Therefore, these ghostly Tolpuddle Martyrs do not exactly represent their true-to-life historical namesakes, but rather something more symbolic: they are a collective metonym for all oppressed workers of past centuries.

There is, however, one crucial similarity between the historical Tolpuddle Martyrs and those described in this story: in neither case were the Martyrs actually martyred. Louisa recognizes this and thinks to herself that this label is “laying it on somewhat” (Munro, 457). But because the Tolpuddle Martyrs of this story represent all historical injustices done to workers at the hands of the powerful, this title is not altogether inaccurate. While the Tolpuddle Martyrs themselves may not have been killed, other workers were—workers, for example, like Jack Agnew. It is, therefore, not a stretch to say that these spectral Martyrs evoke the *ghost* of Jack, reminding Louisa of the man she knew who was martyred by the unforgiving hand of industry. Therefore, when Imagined Jack stands and goes to talk with the Martyrs, Louisa is witnessing a collision of the personal and the political; the meeting of her version of Jack Agnew and a group that metaphorically represents Jack as he is remembered in the public zeitgeist.

This clash is, perhaps, too much for Louisa’s brain to process—the illusion melts away soon after Imagined Jack stands up, and the Tolpuddle Martyrs are transformed before her eyes into a group of travelling Mennonites. But in the exact moment where her reverie fades from view, so too does Louisa seem to fade into full-fledged senility. In

Louisa's final line of spoken dialogue in the story, she asks one of the Mennonite women, "What place is this?" (463). Louisa does not know where she is and, it is implied, has lost her grasp on reality. It is as though Louisa's conversation with Imagined Jack purged the last traces of lucidity from her mind; that this talk with a phantom used up all the emotional clarity she had left. And now that Imagined Jack is gone, Louisa is left unmoored—floating aimlessly about the world with nothing left to anchor her down.

Louisa spends most of her adult life running from the phantoms of her past, trying as best as she can to evade the haunts that constantly pursue her. But when Imagined Jack appears before her, Louisa realizes that she can no longer hide from that which she has repressed; and for the first time in the story, she drops her façade of quiet respectability and gives herself up the raw and unkempt world of free-flowing emotion. After a lifetime of lying to others and deceiving herself, Imagined Jack allows Louisa to unload her pent-up feelings and achieve an overdue catharsis brought on by the full disclosure of the truth.

IV. Will and Fate in “A Wilderness Station”

Unlike Imagined Jack Agnew in “Carried Away,” the haunt that looms over “A Wilderness Station” is not borne from a lifetime’s worth of repressed memories, but it is rather an incorporeal specter that emanates from a character’s remains. Thus, while the specter of this story is harder to spot than it was in “Carried Away,” it is a *haunt* in a more traditional sense: it is the spirit of a dead man, stubbornly clinging to Earth so that it might continue to influence human life. And the still-living characters, at the mercy of this haunt, have to bend the trajectories of their lives according to its will. In this chapter, I will argue that Annie and George Herron are both haunted by the specter of their dead brother; and while they are both troubled by the same supernatural source, they interpret and internalize these hauntings in wildly different ways.

“A Wilderness Station” seems, at first, to be a fairly conventional story about a haunted woman. Annie Herron, a nineteen-year-old widow, leaves her home in Carstairs and walks to the County Gaol in Walley to confess to the murder of her husband—a murder that she could not possibly have committed. Walter McBain, the minister in Carstairs, and James Mullen, the Justice of the Peace in Walley, write back and forth to each other about Annie’s condition; and in one of the letters, McBain proposes his theory about why she claimed responsibility for her husband’s death:

It may well be that so early in the marriage her submission to her husband was not complete...His death occurring before any of this was put right, she would feel a natural and harrowing remorse, and this must have taken hold of her mind so strongly that she made herself out to be actually responsible for his death (Munro, 507).

This would be an easy and straightforward explanation for Annie's puzzling behavior: that the death was accidental, but she was so haunted by it that she decided to confess to murder in order to relieve herself of her inner demons. Even later, when a medical doctor posits that Annie confessed in order to get attention, McBain's explanation remains the most plausible theory as to why she did what she did. This theory even seems, at first, to have some textual basis. For example, when McBain writes of how Annie lived after her husband died, he says that she "seemed to develop an aversion to anyone who would help her" (503). This stubborn rejection of any kind of assistance is exactly how Annie's late husband, Simon, had approached similar offers. Simon had avoided the aid of others whenever possible, preferring to do everything by himself no matter how difficult his work was. Annie's adoption of this individualist mindset, then, seems to be a sign that she is in some way possessed by Simon's ghost, and is acting according to his, rather than to her own, will. Thus, if McBain's theory is true, then Annie's "natural and harrowing remorse" did not spring from her own conscience, but from the volition of a supernatural force against which her mortal body was unable to fight.

But, as is revealed later in the story, this is in fact not why Annie turned herself in; and this hypothesis of McBain's turns out to be projection rather than sound psychological analysis. McBain assumes that Annie confessed in order to cleanse herself of her non-existent sins—of the specter of some strange guilt that is hounding her—because that is how *he* would have handled the situation. He believes that the only way to endure God's terrible will is to suffer through it. After retelling the story of Simon Herron's death (or, at least, the story as he knows it), McBain says, "The Lord is strict in his mercies and we are bound to receive his blows as signs of his care and goodness for so they will prove to be" (503). Therefore, although McBain does not understand why Annie should

feel guilty about something she didn't do, he is able to justify her statement as an expression of a Protestant ethos: Annie feels guilty, so Annie feels that she must pay. This, McBain thinks, is the only way that Annie will be able to exorcise her husband's phantom from her mind and think herself right in the eyes of God.

This makes sense to McBain because he lives his life with the sole purpose of pleasing the Lord. McBain says that he came to Carstairs in the first place because he "was directed by [God] to go to preach wherever was most need of a minister" (503). And McBain stays in Carstairs even though there is neither a church nor seemingly any effort to build one. McBain is forced to lodge at the local inn because he has no home; and these poor conditions, combined with the punishing winter weather, eventually prove so damaging to McBain's health that he takes ill and dies. McBain's untimely death could have been prevented had he left Carstairs and gone to a more developed part of Ontario—James Mullen even recommends that he should do so, saying, "your Church would not consider it a defection were you to choose to serve it longer by removing to a more comfortable place" (509). But McBain does not serve his Church, he serves God; and because he believes he was sent to Carstairs by a divine hand, and that even the most unpleasant situations are expressions of God's will, he stays on. Reverend McBain lives his life exclusively to be a vehicle for the Lord. While he may define madness as a state in which one is trapped and "the Devil has blocked off every escape" (507), his own neurosis is rooted in his unwavering fidelity to the will of the Almighty.

But McBain's projection is not, in fact, accurate in this case. Annie is not racked by guilt about her husband's death, and she does not confess out of some desire to repent for her past failings as a wife. This is revealed in a letter that Annie writes to her old friend Sadie Johnstone in which she details her own account of the day Simon died. According

to the letter, after Annie discovers the axe cut in the back of Simon's head, she takes care of the practical matters concerning the cleaning and disposal of his body. Then, with Simon securely buried, she sets about comforting his brother George:

I pray to God every night and my prayers are answered. I know what God wants as well as any preacher knows and I know that he does not want a good lad like you to be hanged...Say you are sorry and mean it well and God will forgive you. I will say the same thing, I am sorry too because when I saw he was dead I did not wish, not one minute, for him to be alive (512).

This passage makes a good point of contrast with the theology espoused by McBain. Annie views God as a benevolent provider rather than an omnipotent punisher; and she uses Christian logic in order to justify, rather than berate, her husband's killer. But this is not to say that Annie received the news of Simon's death with great sorrow, and that she only forgave George out of a Christlike belief in mercy: she forgives him because she, too, wanted Simon dead. And because she believes in God's inherent goodness, she believes that Simon's killing was, in effect, an expression of divine justice. Therefore, Annie is not haunted by Simon's phantom—his death does not rack her with guilt. And, as is revealed later, she turns herself into the Walley County Gaol not out of a desire to repent, but simply because it is a warm place to stay for the winter.

But this is not to say that Annie is not haunted by Simon's death. She came to the Walley Gaol seeking nothing more than shelter, but she left her hut in Carstairs because that shanty was haunted by his *ghost*. Towards the beginning of the story, George Herron writes of why he did not move his brother's body to the local graveyard, saying, "it is a foolish and useless thing in my opinion to cart a man's bones from one place to another when it is only bones and his soul has gone to judgement" (502). But as Annie finds out,

Simon's soul has perhaps not presented himself before St. Peter—perhaps he still stalks the small hut that he used to call home.

Shortly after Simon's death and burial, George effectively moves to a neighboring farm and insinuates himself into that family. Annie, on the other hand, stays in the shanty. But while she is now the sole resident of this small country shack, she soon finds it uncomfortable because she starts to have troubling dreams:

I dreamed nearly every night that one or the other of them came and chased me with the axe. It was [Simon] or it was George, one or the other. Or sometimes not the axe, it was a big rock lifted in both hands and one of them waiting with it behind the door. Dreams are sent to warn us (514).

These dreams are manifestations of her haunting. She is not troubled by the way in which Simon died, but by the way he lived. She still lives with the memory of his chronic and brutal abuse, and because his bones are buried by the hut, his ghost still haunts about its walls, and seems to have particular power at night. It is at night, particularly the night after Simon dies, that his spirit invades George. When he wakes the day after the killing, does not show Annie the kindness due to someone who nursed him through a difficult night. He is, instead, curt and cruel with her. In response to a simple question, George looks at Annie “for the first time in a bad way. It was the same bad way his brother used to look” (513). In exchange for her kindness, Annie receives only the same maltreatment she had endured from Simon. Seemingly, the abusive qualities that had made Simon so difficult to live with have now leapt into George; and for this reason, as quoted above, Annie is equally afraid of George as she was of his brother. She recognizes that Simon's abusive qualities have transcended his body—that they still linger by the hut. Thus, she

determines, as long as she remains in Carstairs, she will not be free of the forces so hounding her.

It is also worth noting Annie's role in this mystical tale. Her dream hauntings, as well as her statement that "dreams are sent to warn us," position her as something of a soothsayer. She can see through the veil of reality and into the shadowy and fantastical realm of the subconscious. This mythic role is reinforced by the implications of Annie's most prominent physical attribute: her lazy eye. This wayward eye is mentioned three times in the story. The second time it is merely brought up as a way of identifying Annie; but the first and final time that Annie's eye is mentioned, it is in reference to how it impacts her sight. At the beginning of the story, Margaret Cresswell, the matron of the orphanage where Annie spent her childhood, speaks of Annie's lazy eye but emphatically insists that "it does not interfere with her vision" (499). This statement is, however, challenged by the final allusion to Annie's eye. When Christena Mullen, granddaughter of Justice James Mullen, describes Annie in her letter, she says that she "had one eye that slid off to the side and gave her the air of taking in more information than the ordinary person" (516). This suggests that perhaps Annie's wayward eye enhances rather than limits her vision; and that, like a blind witch in an old folk tale, Annie's seeming impairment actually gives her access to levels of sight that are invisible to those with two well-functioning eyes. It therefore makes sense that Annie would see these visions in her dreams: because of her eye, Annie can see Simon's ghost even though everyone else cannot.

But while Simon's ghost represents the perils of the past, and Annie can see how those perils morph into portents for the future, George is caught in the world between. It is not entirely accurate to say that George lives in the present; rather, he exists in a state

of suspended animation—a liminal space outside of the rigid constraints of temporality: the realm of grief. This is made clear in Annie's long letter to Sadie Johnstone, when she is describing George's behavior after coming home with Simon's body. According to Annie, George was basically nonverbal when he came home and all through the successive night. Clearly, *he* is the one haunted by his brother's phantom: it is George, not Annie, who initially reacts to Simon's death in the manner theorized by Reverend McBain. And Annie, in an attempt to rouse her brother-in-law from his silence, not only makes an aforementioned appeal to her own feelings about her late husband, but she also tries to tell him his future with the hope that her clairvoyance will prove calming. Annie takes the Bible from its shelf and says to George:

Now. I am going to do what we all used to do in the home when we wanted to know what would happen to us or what we should do in our life. We would open the Bible any place and poke our finger at a page and then open our eyes and read the verse where our finger was and that would tell you what you needed to know (512).

Annie finds three verses for George with this method, and she interprets them all as she believes they will pertain to George's future. The first, Annie says, foretells that George is meant to grow old and gray; the second that he will have a son; and the third that he should not face judgement for the murder of his brother. But as it turns out, these words of scriptural consolation were not expressed to Annie through the random process of finger-pointing that she had described; rather, she had deliberately looked away from the verses indicated by her finger and found passages on her own. This is to say, if Annie's finger was in fact guided by a divine hand, her eye shifted elsewhere, and she decided to create a new fate for George—one borne of her own volition. Annie is essentially crafting

George's future for him in this moment, casting away the destiny that may have been prescribed for him in favor of one she thinks to be more just. And, as is revealed in the final section of this story, all of these predictions will come true: according to Christena Mullen's account, George *does* grow old and gray, not only has a son but a great many children, and lives his long and prosperous life in complete freedom. Thus, in this battle of competing forces (namely, the spectral power of his brother's phantom and the vehemence of his sister-in-law's soothsaying), Annie claimed victory. Though this may not have been its immediate effect, Annie's prognosis eventually helped George slough off the haunting memory of his dead brother, and with that help he was able to move on from this episode and forge a successful life for himself.

But in the moment, while George is sitting by the hearth as his brother's dead body lies behind him on the floor, he does not know that this will be the case. Instead, through all of Annie's prophesizing, George does not say a word; and he only moves his body to dig the makeshift grave in which Simon will be unceremoniously shoved. His silence and apathy are borne out of his own uncertainty. Annie's words of wisdom flow into one of George's ears: but Simon's phantom hovers about the other, condemning him in harsh whispers. He cannot fully believe one of these voices because of the power of the other. So, like a child overhearing an argument between feuding parents, George remains silent and still—openly embracing neither the charge of guilt thrust upon him by his brother's body nor the words of redemption offered by Annie. And, like a child, George needs Annie's help in getting up and going to bed. She warms his body with heated flat-irons and gives him tea to warm his bones. Trying to get him to fall asleep, Annie says she “talked to him in a different way quite soft and clear and told him to go to sleep and when he woke up his mind would be clear and all his horrors would be wiped away” (513).

George does indeed wake up with an easier conscience, though not for the reason Annie had anticipated. It seems as though, over the course of the night, George absorbed part of his brother's spirit; and, through this absorption, compartmentalized the trauma of his brother's death. He is neither racked by guilt nor entirely calm; rather he indifferently accepts the truth of his brother's death and shows a kind of selective amnesia about Annie's efforts at consoling him the previous evening. For example, when he asks for the Bible so that they may read a psalm at Simon's burial-plot, George is surprised to see it resting by the fire and not on the shelf—even though it was taken from the shelf for his own benefit. George is not acting like himself because, on some level, he is *not* himself: he has taken on the spirit of his brother.

But when we see George again at the end of the story, it seems as though time has diluted the force of Simon's phantom. In the letter he wrote to the *Carstairs Argus* in 1907, George chooses self-preservation over the truth. In this account of how he and Simon came to Carstairs and how his brother died—published some fifty years after these events actually took place—George does not actually report what truly happened, but rather a retells what Annie told him to say on that hazy night when they buried his brother. According to this letter, Simon was killed by a random errant tree branch and not the deliberate swing of an axe. Whether George is so hopelessly under the spell of his own denial that he actually believes this version of events or is simply keeping up the lie in order to protect himself is unclear; but no matter his intent, with this letter George has converted his long-held private fib into the official public story of how Simon died. With his one opportunity to etch this event into posterity, George chose (deliberately or not) to misreport it—forever making the master narrative a problematic one and ensuring that the true past will remain obscure to historians forevermore.

As is revealed in Christena Mullen's letter, George Herron grew up to be the patriarch of a prosperous and well-known family while Annie spent decades on the Walley Gaol before becoming the Mullen family's live-in seamstress, known for her uncouth appearance and seemingly supernatural powers of perception. But it is only Annie who had the courage to admit to herself the truth of what happened that distant winter night when Simon was killed while George always hid behind the accepted story. In other words, truth in "A Wilderness Station" rests with the off-kilter, the mystical, and the bizarre woman more than it ever could with the masculine and easily-palatable version of events that had been published as fact in the town newspaper.

"A Wilderness Station" is an epistolary story, made up completely out of different letters in which various characters narrate their own versions of the truth. But no matter who is believed and who isn't, the ghost of Simon Herron haunts without prejudice or mercy. While Annie may be the only one who can consciously (or subconsciously) perceive the ghost, George is equally—if not more—affected by it; and his life, as well as hers, are irrevocably and forevermore altered by the power of this haunt.

V. The Spirit of the Earth in “Meneseteung”

If the previous two stories here analyzed are about deceased characters manifesting themselves as specters to haunt the living, “Meneseteung” is about how nature—the rivers, the swamps, the trees—can be similarly paranormal. Nature’s hauntings are less individualized: its targets are not specific people, but rather the society at large—or, more specifically, that society’s erasure of the violence and brutality that erected it. In this chapter, I will argue that this natural haunting force discloses itself to this story’s protagonist, Almeda Roth, in many different forms; and its press upon her is so great that she eventually loses all contact with reality.

The first mention of the landscape in this story occurs in the opening section. The unnamed narrator summarizes a book of poetry written by Almeda, and in doing so describes several poems that she supposedly wrote about the natural history of the place in which she lives. Listing off the most significant poems in Almeda’s collection, the narrator notes three poems of particular significance:

“Champlain at the Mouth of the Meneseteung”: This poem celebrates the popular, untrue belief that the explorer sailed down the eastern shore of Lake Huron and landed at the mouth of the major river.

“The Passing of the Old Forest”: A list of all the trees—their names, appearance, and uses—that were cut down in the original forest, with a general description of the bears, wolves, eagles, deer, waterfowl.

“A Garden Medley”: Perhaps planned as a companion to the forest poem. Catalogue of plants brought from European countries, with bits of history and legend attached, and final Canadianness resulting from this mixture (Munro, 394).

This first poem shows that Almeda is intoxicated by narratives of conquest; that she finds great beauty in the mythos of the European Explorer. Whether or not Almeda erroneously believes that this story of Champlain is historical fact, she thinks it a subject worthy of artistic treatment—of valorization. In contrast, the second poem here celebrates that which is pre-Columbian and native to the land: that which once flourished but has since been upset by the stronger force of European settlement. The themes of these first two poems, which appear to be in direct ideological conflict, are then synthesized in the final poem. While the narrator speculates that “A Garden Medley” was meant to be compared with its immediate predecessor, the fascination with European plants calls to mind her celebration of Champlain’s apocryphal discovery of the region. The plants she lists in these poems are, therefore, metonymic: just as Almeda’s poetic garden is made up of a blend of the indigenous and the foreign, so too is Canada. And it is precisely this mixture—this combination of the native and the European on which the American continent is built—that will haunt Almeda throughout the rest of this story.

For example, Almeda experiences something of a haunting when speaking to Jarvis Poulter, a local entrepreneur in the salt trade. When Jarvis explains how he goes about extracting salt from its underground beds, Almeda asks if that means “that there was once a great sea?” (398). While this is just a moment of reverie—of speculating about the geological history of the area—it shows that Almeda is constantly thinking about the past, and how the past thrusts its head into the present. Later on, in the same section, Almeda recalls this moment—albeit through the lens of gender rather than history. While considering the differences between men and women, Almeda thinks:

Men...[are] deprived in some way, incurious. No doubt that is necessary, so that they will do what they have to do. Would she herself, knowing that there

was salt in the earth, discover how to get it out and sell it? Not likely. She would be thinking about the ancient sea. That kind of speculation is what Jarvis Poulter has, quite properly, no time for (400).

While this observation is, ostensibly, about the relationship between men and women, there is another, secret distinction couched within: the gulf in thinking between the haunted and the un-haunted. Jarvis Poulter is not, and cannot allow himself to be, troubled by the past. His life as a settler and businessman is dependent upon bending the landscape to his will; extracting natural resources from the earth and selling them for his own personal gain. His enterprise does not only require historical erasure, it *is* historical erasure itself. Almeda, on the other hand, sees the world around her not as a newly-tapped well from which she can draw forth riches, but as a kind of interconnected web of memories. To her, the past still lingers in the air here, leaving traces of itself everywhere to be found by those who know how to look.

But even so, Almeda's conception of history is not without its colonial biases. While Almeda does acknowledge the pre-colonial history of Ontario, she does so in the way an art critic might acknowledge the existence of the canvas. It is beautiful to her in the same way a lily-white *tabula rasa* might be beautiful: for its austere purity. It was a clean world, untouched and uncorrupted by the dark Satanic mills that came with settlers and industry. This is made clear when the narrator ruminates on the differences between Almeda's poetic landscapes and those which exist in reality:

The countryside that she has written about in her poems actually takes diligence and determination to see...The meandering creeks have been straightened, turned into ditches with high, muddy banks...The trees have all been cleared back to the woodlots. And the woodlots are all second growth (400).

In her poems, Almeda sketches a version of her home terrain that has not existed in a long time—that is, if it ever actually existed at all. Almost impossibly Edenic, Almeda’s vistas certainly predate European colonialism; but more than that, they imply a passive pre-colonial history, where the people (if there were people) lived in perfect and unobtrusive harmony with the land. The only time Almeda does acknowledge the existence of First Nations people is when she thinks, in passing, about “naked Indians” (407)—that is to say, she sees indigenous people are an unindividualized horde, nonexistent except as seen through the colonial gaze. Thus, one could say that Almeda embraces and is creatively inspired by the *phantom* of the past, but willfully ignores its *ghost*; history, as it exists in her own fantasy, is a subject she is all too willing to explore in her poetry, but many of the actual truths of the past—from the true lives of pre-Columbian indigenous people to the real stories of how Canada was settled—are conspicuously absent from her works.

But while Almeda may think this way, the narrator alerts the reader almost immediately of the worlds that she ignores: the communities that exist within Almeda’s geographical area but are detached from and ignored by her neighbors. While describing Almeda’s town, the narrator mentions her immediate neighbors but then goes further:

Workmen’s houses are adjacent to hers. Small but decent row houses—that is all right. Things deteriorate toward the end of the block, and the next, last one becomes dismal. Nobody but the poorest people, the unrespectable and undeserving poor, would live there at the edge of a boghole (drained since then), called the Pearl Street Swamp. Bushy and luxuriant weeds grow there, makeshift shacks have been put up, there are piles of refuse and debris and runty children, slops are flung from doorways (396).

This overview of Almeda’s town, presenting it as a kind of gradient that begins with the well-to-do homes at the beginning of the street and ends with the rundown dwelling-

places of the abject poor, serves as a kind of microcosm of the entire capitalist social structure. While First Nations people are again not present, those living near the Pearl Street Swamp—“the unrespectable and undeserving poor”—do occupy the role of those so rejected by the upper classes that they are almost seen as subhuman. The narrator notes that Almeda has never approached the swamp, even going on to say that “No decent woman ever would” (396). So contemptible are the poor who live in the swamp that to even walk near it would be corrupting and unseemly.

But while Almeda is unwilling to approach the swamp, it is undeniably fascinating to her, and she endows it with a certain mystical power. After describing the people who live near the Pearl Street Swamp, the narrator describes its aspect:

That same swamp, lying to the east of Almeda Roth’s house, presents a fine sight at dawn...From her window 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 (396).

This description makes the swamp seem almost ethereal, a place of wonder and mystique not governed by terrestrial laws of gravity. But the strangeness of its appearance to Almeda here parallels her estrangement from it. That is to say, this swamp seems otherworldly to Almeda in the same way that the world of its residents—the world of the poor and downtrodden—is completely separate from her own. And this alien place, along with the people in it, will haunt her for the rest of this story.

No matter how completely Almeda tries to distance herself from the happenings of the Pearl Street Swamp, however, she cannot evade them forever. Later in the story, Almeda is woken up by a loud fight emanating from these shunned quarters—a fight she at first believes to be “angry implements chopping and jabbing and boring within her

head” (401). The noise of this fight is what brought her from the realm of her subconscious into her waking life, adding to its mystical and almost surreal significance to her. The fight in the swamp slowly evolves into a fight between one man and one woman. The woman, unnamed throughout the story, flees the swamp as the man runs after her. He chases her up Pearl Street and all the way to Almeda’s back fence, and it is here where they finish their scuffle. The man goes home but the woman remains—unmoving and unresponsive—by the side of Almeda’s house. It is as though this woman is a metonymic representation of the entire Pearl Street Swamp: scared, abused, unprotected from the forces bearing down upon her. She has sprung forth from the swamp and pressed her body against Almeda’s fence; and while Almeda had spent her life trying to ignore these swamp-dwellers—those who make up the lowest rung on her town’s social hierarchy—she is now forced to confront one. The ghost of the land—the specter of nature—has come to haunt her; and it may tell a very different story than the phantom that Almeda has so valorized.

And indeed, the presence of this woman at her back gate works on Almeda in much the same way a ghost might trouble the protagonist of a Gothic story. When Almeda first realizes that this woman is near her house, she feels as though she must come downstairs and talk with her. But, racked by a certain inexplicable fear, she remains in her room and falls asleep without doing anything about the figure that lurks at her gate. Then, the next morning, Almeda is visited by an apparition straight out of Edgar Allan Poe:

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. Then she is awake and there is no such bird (402).

The crow's use of the word "wheelbarrow," of course, calls to mind an episode described earlier by the narrator. While describing the goings-on of Almeda's town, the narrator relates a story about a local woman named Queen Aggie. Local delinquents "get her into a wheelbarrow and trundle her all over town, then dump her into a ditch to sober her up" (395). By referring to the woman from the Pearl Street Swamp as a "wheelbarrow," the crow (and, by extension, Almeda's mind) is connecting Queen Aggie—a pitiful figure who had been mistreated by local youth—to this unnamed woman, already deemed in the text to be a member of the "unrespectable and undeserving poor." Whether or not this particular connection resonates with Almeda is unclear, but something about the crow's words produces an effect within her, and she gets up to check on the woman at her gate. At first, thinking the woman is dead, Almeda rushes to Jarvis Poulter's house, hoping that he may know what should be done with the body. But when Jarvis Poulter comes and rouses the woman from her stupor, Almeda is troubled by something else entirely:

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 wowl, full of strength and what sounds like an anguished pleasure (404).

This animalistic behavior only further exemplifies the extent of this woman's suffering. Not only is she the victim of the cruelty of others, but she is also cruel to herself. This act of sadomasochistic brutality is never explained in the text, but one can only assume that this woman lives in a state of such constant violence—perpetrated both by other people and by the society in which she lives—that she has begun to internalize its logic and believes that she deserves to suffer. It is a stark, tragic sight, and it affects Almeda deeply.

So pained is she by haunting memory of this scene, combined with a bout of menstrual cramps, that she decides not to go to church, to rebuff Jarvis Poulter's advances, and to retreat within herself.

Almeda shuts herself inside of her house and, struggling with both physical and mental discomfort, she decides to take the laudanum drops that her doctor had prescribed for her. But Almeda is not freed from her hypersensitivity while under the influence of this opioid; if anything, these drops make her even more aware of the complexities of time and space. Almeda no longer only senses impressions of time outside of time—of realities that exist beyond that which is immediately visible—but she seems to actually see them. While sitting at her dining room table and listening to her neighbors make their way to church, she has a vision:

An image comes to her of tombstones—it makes her laugh. Tombstones are marching down the street on their little booted feet, their long bodies inclined forward, their expressions preoccupied and severe. The church bells are ringing (406).

The laudanum has opened up a portal in vision, showing her the terrible, inevitable fate of all her neighbors who are now going about their quotidian lives. But the drug has lifted Almeda's mood to such a degree that she can find this image amusing, and she delights in, rather than recoils from, such a haunting image. Such a reaction shows that, while she still cannot ignore the ghosts of the land (the truths behind the convenient lies that polite society tells itself), she is no longer trying to flee from them.

Furthermore, while the opioid opens a passage for her to view the mortality of her peers, it also strengthens her connection to history: specifically, the history of the land.

Still sitting at her table, Almeda comes up with an idea for a new poem; a poem that will link together the present and the past:

She has to think of so many things at once—Champlain and the naked Indians and the salt deep in the earth, but as well as the salt the money, the money-making intent brewing forever in heads like Jarvis Poulter’s...All this can be borne only if it is channelled into a poem, and the word *channelled* is appropriate, because of the name of the poem will be—it is—
“The Meneseteung” (406-7).

This poem, as she is formulating it in her mind, would be the full expression of Almeda’s conception of the world. The world she can see with her eyes (nature and her personal life) will be blended seamlessly with the world that exists always in her mind’s eye (the world of the past), producing through their juncture a work of incredible power and beauty.

But in this moment, the land is not only a source of creative inspiration for Almeda. She is, in fact, so in tune with its power that the river seems to reproduce itself within her body. When she comes to, having formulated her idea for a long poem she “goes out to the privy again and discovers that she is bleeding, her flow has started” (407). Just as the Meneseteung flows, so too does her menstrual blood. Thus, Almeda’s transformation is complete: she has given up her attempts at integrating into her society and has become, like the eponymous river, a conduit—not for water, but for the ghosts of the past.

In the final section of this story, it is revealed that almost everything that has been related thus far is only the product of the narrator’s imagination. Our storyteller has only hypothesized what Almeda was like and how she responded to outside stimuli. The narrator, then, is haunted by the specter of this long-dead poet; this woman of whom little record exists outside of a photo, her poetry, and a few entries in a small-town newspaper.

But while it is unclear how much of the Almeda Roth here described might correspond to the real Almeda Roth, this story rings true because its version of Almeda—like the entire American continent—is unconsciously haunted by the repressed and unwritten history of the land in which she lives.

VI. Coda

While each of these stories features, in some way, an instance of haunting, each haunt is vastly different from the others. Imagined Jack Agnew from “Carried Away” is nothing like the nebulous Nature-Haunt of “Meneseteung,” and neither one is at all similar to Simon Herron’s ghost in “A Wilderness Station.” It is a testament to Munro’s literary imagination that her specters can be so amorphous; that she does not confine herself to a single method of portraying forces from the great beyond.

But because actual specters—figures like Imagined Jack Agnew, who represent the dead in a corporeal form—appear so infrequently in Munro’s work, and because her stories are almost always about believable people going about their everyday lives, it is tempting to dismiss the notion that these are haunted works. In spite of the evidence I’ve presented here, no amount of academic scholarship can change the actual texts; no close reading, no matter how thorough, can actually transubstantiate these stories into something that they are not.

Munro’s works, however, do not reward uncreative readings. It is certainly possible to read any one of her stories and see nothing more than quotidian narratives of life as it is lived. One could easily turn over the final page of “A Wilderness Station” and think it to be a disjointed tale about two amoral people who covered up a murder; one could finish “Meneseteung” and see nothing more than the story of an eccentric woman’s descent into madness and addiction. These things are possible. But to read these stories in this way would be to rob them of their complexity: of the questions they raise and of their fascinating strangeness. In order to draw from these stories their complete meanings—the fullness of their beauty and the vastness of their intellectual breadth—one cannot shun the possibility (and, often, probability) of their whimsy.

It is this whimsy, I think, that allows Munro to come to such profound insights in so few pages. Upon awarding her the 2013 Nobel Prize in Literature, the Swedish Academy said that her stories “often accommodate the entire epic complexity of a novel in just a few short pages” (“Alice Munro—Facts,” NobelPrize.org). Quoted in the *New Yorker*, author Julian Barnes repeats this sentiment and remarks, “I have sometimes tried to work out how she does it but never succeeded” (“Writers on Munro,” *The New Yorker*). While I cannot claim to have fully resolved this puzzle—some mysteries of how great art is produced cannot be solved or explained except by the artist—I believe that this effect is produced, at least partly, by her willingness to dive into the mystical. For example, Munro could have written a full chapter unwinding, point by point, the nature of Louisa’s sense of loss in “Carried Away.” She could have spent twenty pages dissecting how she was affected by Jack Agnew’s death or Jim Frarey’s rejection. But by creating Imagined Jack, Munro effectively bypasses the need to do this; through the appearance and behavior of this single phantom, a reader understands the breadth of her grief just as well as they would had it been broken down in a rational, scientific way by a more verbose writer. Mysticism is Munro’s shortcut, but she uses it so subtly that to an untrained eye these stories look like inexplicable miracles.

Her use of the spiritual allows not only for greater narrative complexity than is typically expected from a short story, but greater political and historical complexity as well. The specters that haunt her texts are often representatives of distant times and forgotten people, showing the perpetuity of the past; the ever-presentness of the dead. It is as though Munro is looking down at her stories from the fourth dimension, seeing her characters not as living or dead but as consciousnesses either contained by human bodies or floating nebulously in the ether. Each one of Munro’s stories, then, is nothing

more than an invitation; a generous appeal to her readers to come and see the world from her point of view. The reading public is immeasurably better-off because she decided, many decades ago, to pick up a pen.

Alice Munro's stories should be read for as long as the English language exists and for some time after. The empathy, candor, and sublimity of her stories are singular and transcendent. In short, her works are reminders of the value and importance of great literature; and in a world so deeply mired in the pits of hatred, bigotry, and mistrust, they are not just great—they are necessary.

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