

# Letting Go with the Mind Dionysus and Medusa in Alice Munro's "Meneseteung"

I may yet live, as I know others live,  
To wish in vain to let go with the mind—  
Of cares, at night, to sleep; but nothing tells me  
That I need learn to let go with the heart.

(from Robert Frost, "Wild Grapes")

**F**or the well-tempered reader of Alice Munro's fiction, it would be difficult to overlook her "clowning impulse" (Redekop 159) and penchant for "surprise, complicity and deception" (Heble 18) as well as her general distrust of "final explanations" (Ross *Double Lives* 87). These characteristics are part of her natural inclination toward writing stories that, despite her "masterly control of detail" (Martin 130), retain something she herself calls "rough and unfinished" (Hancock 195). Her choice of words here reflects her reluctance to relinquish her perceptions of the unfinished nature of lived life to the arbitrary authority of words, ideas and narrative constructs.<sup>1</sup> Munro prefers to keep her feet close to the ground and to have her observations of the psychological dynamics affecting heart and mind converge into stories of "open secrets," as the title of one of her later collection puts it. Inevitably, it seems to me, such stories demand not only symbolic language but also an acceptance of a symbol as "an attempt to elucidate something . . . still entirely unknown or still in the process of formation" rather than "a sign that disguises something generally known" (Jung *Two Essays* 291). Moreover, such stories are inherently receptive to the open secrets and unfinished meanings of myths, including myths of Greek gods and goddesses who actually have more than one identity and whose elusive matriarchal origins have tended to unsettle the traditional, patriarchal configurations of their myths:<sup>2</sup> "Of all the Greek gods, Dionysus is the most visible as well as the most elusive. Present in myth, art, and literature, he conceals his divine identity behind an abundance of physical manifestations

that has challenged ancient and modern sensitivities” (Henrichs 13). In comparable ways, Medusa is inextricably and confusingly bound up with Athena and other variants of the Great Goddess (Pratt *Goddesses* 33, 100).

“Menese-teung,” as I will show, is a story that thrives on intimations of Dionysus and Medusa. Their presences surface here, unexpectedly perhaps, as part of the historical transformation of a mid-nineteenth-century Ontario frontier settlement into a thriving small town on a river, whose mysterious-sounding and supposedly Indian name of Menese-teung serves as an opaque metonymy for the story’s latent mythic energy.<sup>3</sup> As Munro stated in 1974, several years before writing this story, the fictionalized Menese-teung is based on the Maitland River that runs through her hometown of Wingham, Ontario. While growing up there, she and her friends would endow its local course with “deep holes” and intriguing stories; “I am still partly convinced,” she added, “that this river . . . will provide whatever myths you want, whatever adventures” (qtd. in Ross “Fiction” 125).<sup>4</sup> Although the all-encompassing “whatever” does not preclude classical myths, there appears to be little direct textual evidence of their importance in Munro’s various stories set in her hometown region other than in occasional brief references, especially in the title story of *The Moons of Jupiter*, and “Menese-teung,” at first glance, seems no exception.

Allusions to myths and archetypes, both pagan and Christian, have not gone unnoticed but have rarely received close or sustained critical attention. Notable exceptions include I. de Papp Carrington’s exploration of Jean Anouilh’s *Eurydice* as intertext in the story “The Children Stay,” W. K. Martin and W. U. Ober’s arguments for the complementary presence of the goddess Rhea and St. Paul’s mother Eunice in “Spaceships Have Landed,” D. Duffy’s conceptualization of “a Pauline Gothic” (184) in “The Love of a Good Woman,” M. Redekop’s discussion of Arthurian legend with regard to “The Peace of Utrecht” and “Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You” (56-57, 97-101), and J. Carscallen’s *The Other Country*. Carscallen touches on classical and Arthurian myth (3, 9 and passim) before revealing a complex web of biblical mythology and typology in Munro’s fiction from the early *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968) to *Friend of My Youth* (1990).<sup>5</sup> The present examination of “Menese-teung” serves in part to underline the pre-biblical aspects of “the other country” of Munro’s fiction, of her being, as Nathaniel Hawthorne once said of himself, very much “a citizen of somewhere else” while still close to “the town-pump” (“The Custom-House” 74), turning water into wine, facts into ideas and fiction.

Munro, of course, has said of herself, "I'm not a writer who is very much concerned with ideas" (Gibson 241), and, more emphatically, "I never write from an idea, a myth or a pattern" (Hancock 223). That is why it is important to heed her comments immediately following her denial of ever writing with a myth in mind; they clearly suggest that she is generally ready to see symbolic and potentially mythic connections: "sometimes an incident or something somebody's telling, or the sight of two women crocheting tablecloths can get me all excited—as if it is tied to something far bigger than itself" (Hancock 224). If one takes crocheting, a subject which comes up in "Meneseteung," as a cliché of bourgeois decorum at the simple end of a spectrum of Munro's affinities for mythic links and influences, then one could regard the fiction of Thomas Mann as an unexpectedly complementary cliché at the far opposite end: as a student, Munro says pointedly in a 1981 interview with J. R. Struthers, "I read all of Thomas Mann" (8).

Given Mann's attraction to the theme of the artist as outsider in bourgeois society, and his fondness and masterly control of irony, parody and allusions to classical myth, Munro's declaration, "I read all of Thomas Mann," becomes her capricious challenge to critics neither to regionalize nor to belittle her art and to be ready for veiled affinities and connections to open up as part of those "absent and potential levels of meaning" (Heble 41) in her fiction. She underlines that challenge with jovial self-assertion at the end of the Struthers interview: "I think I have read widely . . . more widely than you'd think" and, she adds, above all "for pleasure, really for intoxication" (36). Fittingly, she experiences a very similar form of pleasure when completing a new story of her own: "I kind of enjoy doing final drafts. I'm so relieved to have the thing done. I sometimes even take a glass of wine and sip at it to celebrate as I'm writing" (Hancock 221). In both contexts, Munro is clearly not referring to literal intoxication or drunkenness but to the cheerful realization of having reached the stage when she can afford to relax her mind's need to control the reading and writing process and raise a glass to the Muse and to herself.

As a gesture of relaxation as well as celebration, sipping a little wine is hardly unusual; yet, for a literary explorer of the psyche like Alice Munro, it also suggests an acknowledgement of Dionysus (Bacchus). His symbolic affiliation with poetry and fiction in Western culture has had a long and venerable tradition, especially so since the mysteries of the Dionysian underworld are symbolically interconnected with the mysteries of the psyche (see Warner ch.1). From a Jungian perspective, awareness or experience

of Dionysus can be seen as related to the process of individuation (Jung *Psychology and Alchemy* 143; Hillman *Myth* 295), a relation already very much implicit in Euripides' Dionysian exhortation to know yourself and not to follow, let alone idealize, rigid order for the sake of security and the *status quo* (*Bacchae* 30). Dionysus, as dramatized in the *Bacchae*, demands personal adaptability and flexibility as well as tolerance of chaos. It is helpful to keep in mind here that etymologically and mythologically "chaos was once associated with creativity" (Wieland-Burston 8) and the womb of the Great Goddess (Walker *Encyclopedia* 160); psychologically, "stagnation and lifelessness" are the inevitable consequences of an individual's failure to accept chaos as "a dynamic aspect" of life (Wieland-Burston 2-3). Variations of order and chaos pervade "Meneseteung" and do so with mythic and psychological allusions to the Great Goddess and to Dionysus.

**A**lthough Dionysus is never directly mentioned in "Meneseteung," Munro's emphasis on grapes and alcohol is one of her clearest directives to consider his symbolic presence there as neither negligible nor coincidental.<sup>6</sup> As the god of wine, Dionysus is symbolically alive in grapes and the grapevine. Native or wild grapevines like the labrusca and riparia varieties, to name two of the most common, grow in such abundance across the United States and Canada that one may safely consider them part of the natural vegetation in the pioneer settlement on the Meneseteung where Almeda Joynt Roth moved with her family in 1854. In the vicinity of the bog at the end of Pearl Street, they would have been particularly prolific among the "luxuriant weeds" (55) Munro's narrator mentions. Since the Roth property backs onto that street, has a vacant lot beside it and is not at all far from the bog, it is reasonable to suggest that the grapes Almeda uses to make jelly probably came from vines growing on or close to the Roth property. Although Munro makes no explicit reference to actual grapevines here, their local presence appears assured not only by Almeda's grapes but also by the way Munro singles out such vines in "A Wilderness Station." In this story, which shares its regional pioneer setting with "Meneseteung," the shanty of Simon and Annie Herron had "wild vines" in its doorway and, after the place was deserted, it became "a mound pretty well covered with wild grape" (232, 257), a small patch in what Thomas Pinney has called the "great natural vineyard" (4) of North America.

The grapes native to this continent, however, do not lend themselves easily to the making of palatable wine. They make good jelly and may keep the

Prohibition-minded satisfied, but, excepting their importance in the hybridization of vinifera grapes, their connection to wine and Dionysus is for the mind's eye to see. Samuel de Champlain, for instance, readily saw it when he gave the name Isle of Bacchus to what later became known as Richmond Island just off Cape Elizabeth near Portland, Maine (Simpson 34). Munro, I suggest, sees it no less clearly in her veiled allusions to Dionysus; her reference to Champlain, though, does not concern grapevines but his alleged encounter with Indians at the mouth of the Meneseteung (52). I say veiled because Almeda prepares to make jelly rather than wine from her grapes and because none of the references to alcohol in the story specifies wine or, for that matter, any kind of distilled spirits like brandy and whisky. Whereas in such complementary, though historically more contemporary, stories as "Carried Away" and "Vandals," Munro readily distinguishes between fermented and distilled varieties of alcohol, in "Meneseteung" she simply uses the generic term "drink" (67).

Consequences of too much drink have, according to the town's paper, the *Vidette*, "become all too common" and especially "unseemly, troublesome, and disgraceful" (68; original italics) because of women being involved in acts of public drunkenness like the scene which drew the attention of the paper as Almeda had witnessed it from her house. Yet, despite its evident words of disapproval, the *Vidette* does not speak with the voice of either Temperance advocates or Prohibitionists but with the voice of restrained bemusement:

*At the corner of Pearl and Dufferin streets last Sunday morning there was discovered, by a lady resident there, the body of a certain woman of Pearl Street, thought to be dead but only, as it turned out, dead drunk. She was roused from her heavenly—or otherwise—stupor by the firm persuasion of Mr. Poulter, a neighbour and a Civil Magistrate, who had been summoned by the lady resident.* (67-68; original italics)

The bemused tone has much to do with situational irony: Almeda, the respectable spinster lady, meeting her opposite or shadow self in the sexually and alcoholically loosened woman, and Almeda's respectable neighbor acting almost as a go-between. Moreover, the *Vidette*, as the enquiring community observer, is implicitly waiting for a story on the lady and the gentleman; their neighborly relationship was, as the narrator with her archival knowledge of the paper and the town puts it mischievously, thought to be only a step away from "spontaneous combustion, instant fornication, an attack of passion" (59).

The combination of such a sexually and alcoholically charged situation creates what one may well call Dionysian undercurrents. They would be

particularly dangerous where patriarchal order, as represented by the side of the Roth house facing onto the street named after Lord Dufferin, seemingly confronts feminine power, as projected by the street behind the Roth property which is named after the pearl, a symbol of the goddess in her role as Aphrodite or Venus. On the one hand, the name of Pearl Street combines Victorian society's tendency toward euphemism and male chauvinism: the street leads, via prostitution and alcohol abuse, into a world of shack people and ends in a wilderness bog; "even the town constable won't go down Pearl Street on a Saturday night" (56). On the other hand, of course, it also leads from the bog to Dufferin Street, venue of law, order and "considerable respectability" (55). While Pearl Street thus mediates between two geographical, social, and cultural extremes, it also both fastens and loosens the connections between a world of rational authority traditionally seen as male/masculine and a world of the imaginal, the unconscious and chaos often associated with fear of the female/feminine and no less often deemed accessible or bearable only with the help of alcohol, sex and of course the arts. From this perspective of connecting and loosening, Pearl Street is worth considering as a metonymy for Dionysus in his role as "a mediating figure between male and female" (Jameson 63) and in his general capacity as "Lusios" (Loosener) whose loosening or setting free may manifest itself as "affliction and a means of healing, . . . [as] revenge or blessing or both" (Burkert "Bacchic" 273).<sup>7</sup> As Lusios, Dionysus transcends his narrow role as the god of wine. At the same time, wine itself becomes a natural metonymy for other agents that can be said to contribute to "an expansion of physical and mental faculties—one that leads either to states of heightened self-awareness or to destructive disruptions of the personality and even to the annihilation of life" (Henrichs 15). With regard to "Meneseteung," the distilled liquor and the laudanum mentioned in it thus obtain Dionysian propensities as well.<sup>8</sup>

The Roth house, at the convergence of Pearl and Dufferin, appears to be ideally situated to invite contemplations on Dionysus. It is therefore hardly a matter of coincidence but of deliberately humorous choice for Munro to make "the manager of the liquor store" (53) its current resident at the time of the narrator's stay in town in the 1980s. Yet, with the Pearl Street bog now drained, the neighborhood implicitly cleaned up and public availability of alcoholic drink regulated by the Liquor Control Board of Ontario, the Roth house does not offer the manager the Dionysian vantage point it once gave Almeda. While in charge of the regulated business of selling alcohol and no

doubt alert to the dangers of irresponsible drinking, he is most likely neither concerned with questions about classical myth nor aware of the dramatic irony resulting from his job and the history of the house.

Almeda, of course, judging by her interest in Pegasus and by her being a formidable reader as well as a dreamer, is openly curious about mythology. The house provides her with a perfect setting for what one may call private initiations into Dionysian mysteries (see Burkert *Ancient* 10-11). Although there is no direct reference as to whether she is any more knowledgeable of the myth of Dionysus than is the liquor store manager, she is clearly receptive, consciously or not, to the experience of Dionysus' archetypal presence in the goings-on outside her house and inside her mind. As a result she has become somewhat of a maenad, not in the cultic sense of a female votary of Dionysus, but in the psychological sense of a colonial Ontario woman who nurtures strong affinities for the classical maenads' celebration of at least "temporary escape from male domination" (Jameson 61). Although Almeda escapes what for many women has been the most traditional form of such domination, marriage, she too requires the "nerve medicine" (62) which her male doctor orders mostly for women who are married. In her case, as presumably in all comparable cases of single women with needs for sedatives, the physician paradoxically also advocates marriage as, so it seems, the best nerve medicine. Still, his belief may not be completely ill-founded, to the extent that it complements the community's perceived effect of marriage on a man: "it protects him, . . . from the extremities of his own nature—from a frigid parsimony or a luxurious sloth, from squalor, and from excessive sleeping or reading, drinking, smoking, or freethinking" (57). In other words, it would protect a woman from the extremities of her own nature, which, from the perspective of patriarchal authority, would include excessive reading, freethinking and consequently also the dangers of modern-day maenadism. Almeda, as we know, disdains any shelter from books, thoughts and the imagination, and she appears responsive to the maenadic undercurrents which strengthen her sense of freedom from male domination through marriage and from the institution that controls marriage, the Church.

The major domestic and societal circumstances that contributed to what the narrator first speaks of as Almeda's "eccentricity" (51) were not uncommon in the mid-nineteenth century nor was her status as almost an old maid considered a social stigma then (see Pratt *Patterns* 113-14). At age seventeen, she had lost her younger brother and sister; at age twenty, her mother. For the next twelve years, until his death, she was housekeeper to

her father. She is in her late thirties when her “undoubted respectability” and “adequate comeliness” are fully accounted for in the calculations behind Jarvis Poulter’s decision to marry her. Poulter is “a decent citizen” (57) and a pillar of the *polis* as a prospering businessman whose enterprises encompass salt wells, a brickyard, a limekiln, and woodlots for firewood. Yet, whereas he is a consummate exploiter of the environment, Almeda is a romantic, keen on contemplating the mysteries of nature and human nature. Consequently, her associating Poulter’s salt wells with “the salt of the earth” and an ancient “great sea” (58) conflicts with his entrepreneurial mind. Despite their different outlooks on life, however, she likes his occasional company on her walk home from church:

she can smell his shaving soap, the barber’s oil, his pipe tobacco, the wool and linen and leather smell of his manly clothes. The correct, orderly, heavy clothes are like those she used to brush and starch and iron for her father. She misses that job—her father’s appreciation, his dark, kind authority. Jarvis Poulter’s garments, his smell, his movements all cause her skin on the side of her body next to him to tingle hopefully, and a meek shiver raises the hairs on her arms. Is this to be taken as a sign of love? (60)

As a marriageable father-substitute, Poulter “would be her husband” (60), so she imagines while daydreaming and masturbating. The conjunction of her orgasm with her picture of him “in his long underwear and his hat” (60) seems grotesquely humorous; it is also unexpectedly premonitory about the risks of Almeda’s implicit quest through her body into her mind and heart at this stage in her life when she is free for the first time to be her own self. Her vision of him is decidedly not the positive one reported by “some women poets,” namely that of “an apatriarchal ‘green world lover’ who represents a healthy heterosexual Eros” and who may appear in the guise of a Dionysus figure; instead, it is of a negative figure of a husband bound to harm his wife’s soul (Pratt *Goddesses* 7). Poulter, of course, has characteristics one might think of as Dionysian: he arrives as a stranger, and he is, one suspects, a Saturday-night binge drinker. The town of course is full of strangers, including Gypsies, most of whom are perceived as a threat to law and order; they can be loosely connected to the notion expressed in the *Bacchae* of Dionysus as the stranger who destroys the foundations of the male-dominated *polis*. Poulter, however, remains a stranger to the townspeople and the *Vidette* only in terms of his private life, especially with regard to the fate of his first wife. Yet when he decides to make Almeda his second wife, he cannot withstand the knowing stare of her eye and mind’s



eye after her experience of the Saturday night brawl behind her house and of his role in that experience.

Almeda has always had the back bedroom of the Roth house and has, as it were, often been a private member of the audience of impromptu events of "theatre" and "charade" on Pearl Street on Saturday nights. The bacchanalian performances are crude but not without touches of tragicomedy that point back to Dionysus' role as patron of Greek theatre (see Henrichs 14). On the Saturday night at the centre of "Meneseung," Almeda actually becomes a participant in the, to her, dream-like drama taking place behind her backyard fence. The dim outlines of a man and a woman engaged in a sexual brawl and their sounds of wild "self-abasement," which she confuses with "the sound of murder" (64), allow Almeda to sense her maenadic shadow in that scene. Instead of imaginal frenzy and sleeplessness, she thus experiences cathartic abandonment to sleep, with the brawl acting as an unexpected sedative as if to confirm her doctor's tacit connection between her sleep disorders and what Freud would soon call hysteria.

Almeda participates once more as a member of the Pearl Street audience when, early next morning, she checks out the seemingly dead woman by the back fence and then alerts her neighbor, potential husband and civil magistrate. A fierce-looking Poulter, "his shirt . . . half unbuttoned, his face unshaven, his hair standing up on his head," answers his door; "[h]is breath is dank, his face creased, his eyes bloodshot" (65). His startling image of dissipation and violence intensifies in Almeda's mind through his blunt handling of the partly naked body of the drunk rather than dead woman, whose "plucked-chicken haunch with its blue-black flower" points to his last name, and through his "harsh joviality" which fails to hide his sudden sexual interest in Almeda (70). In her mind, Poulter has become a Jekyll-and-Hyde character and the drunk woman's likely Saturday-night consort. By projecting herself into that woman's place, Almeda comes to reject Poulter as a husband for herself. She therefore does not accept his offer to accompany her to church this Sunday morning, as it would have amounted to a public demonstration of a forthcoming betrothal. She stays at home instead, where, coinciding with the grape juice container flowing over, her period is about to flow, and, under the influence of laudanum, her mind has started to over-flow with images for Whitmanesque songs meant to capture everything about herself, about the town's discordant past and present, and about the seeming lack of harmony "even in the stars" (70).

The name of the Meneseung is her title for the poem because the river,

with “its deep holes and rapids and blissful pools under the summer trees and its grinding blocks of ice thrown up at the end of winter and its desolating spring floods,” becomes symbolic of “the river of her mind” (70). The confluence of menstrual blood, blood-colored grape juice and streams of consciousness is held together, so it appears, in an implicit pun on both her last name and the “mens” in menstruation, a play on Latin *mensis* (month) and *mens* (consciousness, mind);<sup>9</sup> the latter pun amplifies both Houston’s point about the almost homonymic tie between the name Meneseteung and the word menstruation (85) and Carrington’s observation of the deliberate irony in Munro’s “equation of menstruation and artistic creation” (*Controlling* 215). Indeed, Almeda will never write that poem. Under the influence of daydreams, insomnia and, it seems, growing dependence on laudanum,<sup>10</sup> she will spin it out only in her imagination as a sort of Ariadne’s thread that, judging by her obituary in the *Vidette*, allows her to withdraw into her private world: “It is a sad misfortune that in [her] later years the mind of this fine person had become somewhat clouded and her behaviour, in consequence, somewhat rash and unusual. Her attention to decorum and to the care and adornment of her person had suffered, to the degree that she had become, . . . a familiar eccentric, or even, sadly, a figure of fun” (71). Her poem in progress leads her into the unknown reaches of her psyche and death, both fittingly symbolized here by her ventures beyond the end of Pearl Street as mentioned in the obituary: “She caught a cold, having become thoroughly wet from a ramble in the Pearl Street bog. . . . The cold developed into pneumonia, and she died” (72).

Her ramble in the bog is, I suggest, the culmination of her personal experience, however unwitting, of Dionysian mysteries. Dionysus’ prominent place in Greek dramatic poetry and catharsis, “his contradictory and paradoxical guises” (Henrichs 41), the profoundly religious nature of his “myths about a double birth, death and rebirth, and a journey to the underworld” (Cole 279), as well as his conventional association with intoxication and madness all touch on Almeda’s life. The first hint thereof occurs in Almeda’s poem at the beginning of “Meneseteung”:

*Columbine, bloodroot,  
And wild bergamot  
Gathering armfuls,  
Giddily we go. (50; original italics)*

“We” seems to refer to Almeda and her siblings; yet one of their parents might have been with them, since the flowers are likely being gathered both for a

bouquet and for their well-known medicinal qualities. The gatherers' giddiness expresses their childlike *insouciance* and joy, complementing especially the columbine whose name derives from *columba* (dove). The dove, however, is a traditional symbol not only of peace (see Gen. 8.11) and of the Holy Spirit (see Matt. 3.16) but also of the Goddess (Walker, *Dict* 399). Thus, even Almeda's very early verse reflects those ironic tensions in her life which will transmute her childlike giddiness into unsettling Dionysian giddiness, so-to-speak, in connection with her having to deal with the deaths in her family, Pearl Street, sleeplessness, Jarvis Poulter, the effects of laudanum, the grand poem in and of her mind, and fundamental problems of religious belief.

"Every poetic mind," says Emerson, "is a pagan" rather than a follower of organized, doctrinal religion (348). Naturally, the *Vidette's* obituary prefers to speak of Almeda's "unfailing religious faith" and "faithful end" (71-72), thereby ostensibly affirming her as a conventional Christian despite her eccentric, if not pagan, edges. Yet, while the popular mind would understand faith to be Christian, the *Vidette's* wording allows for any other faiths or beliefs; and, in a tangential way, the narrator's reference to "the popular, untrue belief" (52) concerning Champlain's association with the Meneseteung adds a further edge of ambiguity to the *Vidette's* praise of Almeda as a Christian. Church, it seems, came to mean social respectability and decorum to her. Judging by the fact that some of the poetry in *Offerings* is "comically intentioned doggerel about what people are thinking about as they listen to the sermon in church" (52), Almeda, though most certainly not as sophisticated a poet as Emily Dickinson, would have found some comfort in the subversively comic poem Dickinson wrote in 1860 "Faith' is a fine invention / When Gentlemen can see— / But *Microscopes* are prudent / In an Emergency" (# 185; original italics).

For Almeda, Jarvis Poulter would have been among Dickinson's "Gentlemen." Under the microscope of her imagination, he causes her to think of "tombstones" in connection with Sunday churchgoers. Her own laughter at her association of conventional church service with death makes her play with the initial metaphor: "Tombstones are marching down the street on their little booted feet" (69). This line of doggerel is not at all trifling, for it signals the beginning of Almeda's loosening herself from the, to her, spiritually stifling, money-driven world of Dufferin Street and organized smalltown religion. It also marks her descent into the Dionysian underworld of her mind symbolized by the Meneseteung and the swamp and by her becoming a public "figure of fun" very similar to an older townswoman from years gone by, "a drunk nicknamed Queen Aggie" (54).

Comparable figures in other stories by Munro include Violet Thoms in “A Queer Streak” and, above all, Bea Doud in “Vandals.” Violet, who would take medicinal whisky with the start of her mid-life years, had always felt drawn to bogs and thickets. Bea actually lived for a while by the Lesser Dismal, a swamp named after the Dismal Swamp in North Carolina. “Vandals” begins with Bea composing a meandering letter, a personal narrative really with parallels to Almeda’s poem of her mind, and which she concludes in a pointedly Dionysian way: “I am rather happy sitting here with my bottle of red wine” (308). Her wine parallels Almeda’s laudanum and, in a quirky way, it also connects with her grapes to which the narrator redirects the reader’s attention at the end of “Meneseteung”: “I don’t know if [Almeda] ever made grape jelly” (73). Given the story’s Dionysian allusions, this conclusion seems deliberately open-ended as if to entertain the possibility of grape cordial or even wine as alternatives to jelly or no jelly. Indeed, Almeda might have found herself agreeing with Louisa, the central character in “Carried Away” who would take a glass of wine with lunch “for [her] health” (1). Above all, the thought of wine may well have been on the mind of the narrator of “Meneseteung” when referring to others who “are curious” about Almeda and “will be driven to find things out, even trivial things” (73). The grapes in “Meneseteung,” however, are hardly trivial; they come with strong Dionysian connections which, in turn, complement the connections between Almeda and Medusa.

**A**nalogous to Medusa’s infamous Gorgon stare, Almeda’s mind’s eye, on that epiphanic Sunday morning mentioned above, turns Poulter and the other churchgoers into gravestones.<sup>11</sup> It is reasonable to conclude that Almeda’s poet-self is indeed reasserting itself here in more than Dionysian allusions, since, as Annis Pratt has shown, “Medusa is an important archetype of feminine creativity, especially when the creativity is thwarted” (*Goddesses* 40). In other words, although Almeda has published only one book of poems and senses that the respected citizens of her town, as represented by the churchgoers, do not take her seriously as a poet, she nevertheless cherishes her aspirations to write. As her tombstone metaphor and her ensuing laughter suggest, poetry allows her to feel free from the patriarchal colonial town’s conventional constraints. Under the circumstances, Almeda’s laughter wants to be heard in concordance with Hélène Cixous’s essay “The Laugh of Medusa” in which Cixous appeals to women to free themselves from “biblico-capitalist society” (257) and men’s need to

associate any woman with the Gorgon mask of Medusa: "They need to be afraid of us. Look at the trembling Perseuses moving backward toward us, clad in apotropes. What lovely backs! Not another minute to lose. Let's get out of here" (255). For Cixous, getting out means: "To write. An act which will not only 'realize' the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal" (250). Cixous's literal and figurative emphasis on women's need "[to] write through their bodies" (256) provides a link between the myths of Dionysus and Medusa in the scenes of Almeda's masturbation (see Cixous 246) and of the grape juice flowing over in synchronicity with her menstruation.

Her liberating metaphor of the walking tombstones came to her in response to Poulter's tacit proposal of a marital union that is painfully prescribed through both the *Vidette's* gossip and the way he dealt with the drunk woman on Pearl Street. It is as if marriage to him would have been a classic example of what Cixous calls the "persecution" of women through "the familial-conjugal enterprise of domestication" (257). From Cixous's perspective, Poulter resembles a colonial Ontario variant of Perseus, ready to dominate Almeda and thereby to violate if not destroy her need and will to write. Indeed, Almeda's rejection of Poulter connects him to not only Perseus but also Poseidon who raped Medusa when she was "an especially beautiful priestess in the temple of Athena"; whereupon Athena, mistaking the rape for a love affair, "turned her into an ugly Gorgon" (Pratt *Goddesses* 15). The notion of Medusa as a victim of sex and punishment touches Almeda, figuratively speaking. On a primarily physical level, she faces the threat of Poulter's power over her body; one might even vaguely associate him with Poseidon, when Almeda links his salt wells to an ancient sea. In addition, there are the (presumably male) youths who are said to have driven Almeda into the bog, precipitating her death from pneumonia. On a mainly social level, her assertion of her Medusa-related creative self pits Almeda also against the power of Athena, the patriarchally approved goddess, whose symbolic guardianship of civic norms is being threatened in Almeda's community. This frontier town by the river is the kind of place where it is particularly difficult to keep "dynamic emotionalities, rages, possessions, moist hysterics, depressions, and wild nature outside the *polis*" (Hillman *Facing* 30, 29): for the respectable townspeople, the preceding quotation might aptly describe Almeda ("moist hysterics"), her poetic vision of her town ("dynamic emo-

tionalties”) and the *Meneseteung* (“wild nature”); for the reader, it underlines the subtextual presence of Medusa myth in Munro’s story.

The case for Almeda’s connections to Medusa can be said to begin as early as the second paragraph of the story where the narrator responds to a photograph of the poet at age twenty-five. It is a picture of a seemingly eccentric, noble and forelorn woman with “a lot of dark hair gathered around her face in droopy rolls and curtains” (50). Almeda’s expression of being out of place in a pioneer settlement complements her receptive attitude toward the Muse, while the “droopy rolls” suggest Medusa’s snake hair, with the snakes here partly behind “curtains” as if to veil the mythic affinities. The latter remain similarly half-hidden whenever they make themselves felt again, not only in the tombstone metaphor but also in the short form of Almeda’s name, Meda, which is a near-homonym of Medusa, and in Almeda’s conspicuous attraction to the constellation Pegasus. Since no other constellations or stars are mentioned, her attraction is not that of someone trying to orient herself in the fall night sky by means of the Great Square of Pegasus (see Motz and Nathanson 317). Almeda, it would appear, is pondering the ancient notion that riding Pegasus leads to bardic, god-like empowerment. This notion goes back not only to Pegasus’ association with the Muses on Mount Helicon where his hoof struck open a spring of creatively inspiring waters but also to his mythic birth from Medusa’s blood. While Medusa’s name reveals her symbolic representation of “the principle of *medha*, the Indo-European root word for female wisdom,” her “magic blood that could create and destroy life” evokes ancient beliefs in the magic powers of menstrual blood (Walker *Encyclopedia* 780, 629, 635). Particularly enticing here is the fact that such beliefs would yield occult and metaphoric ties between the elixir-like propensities of menstrual or moon blood and Dionysian red wine (Walker *Encyclopedia* 636, 637).

Although Medusa and Dionysus do not appear to be mentioned together in mythology through either blood or wine symbolism, they complement each other in “*Meneseteung*” in their archetypal representation of the both creative and deconstructive potential of the imagination. Almeda’s conflicts, whether between mind and imagination or self and community, appear to settle into a web of Dionysian and Medusan threads of meaning. The result is comic for the town according to the gossipy *Vidette*, whose name appropriately suggests empty bits or nothings; for Almeda herself, it is redemptive. She has accepted the risk of letting go with the mind without letting go with the heart or soul in her quest for the Muse which appears so close in her

private Heliconian waters of the Pearl Street swamp and the Meneseteung and, through them, in her memory and imagination.

There is something decidedly quixotic about this quest by a poet whose ties to an archetypal river correspond to a similar association in the case of Del Jordan in Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women* (see Carscallen 534). The biblical Jordan can be seen "as a death-and-rebirth river like the Greeks' famous Styx . . . [which] was imagined as a river of Goddess blood, emanating from the Earth's womb" (Walker *Dictionary* 350). Del Jordan's stories, as it were, give new birth to her hometown; even her first name affirms the birth metaphor, if one considers it a short form of Delphina, a cognate of Delphi ("womb") which, before it became sacred to Apollo, had been a site sacred to the Earth Mother (Walker *Encyclopedia* 218).<sup>12</sup> In Almeda's situation, such maternal symbolism comes together in the oddly orgiastic contiguity of overflowing grapejuice, the start of her period, her "look[ing] deep, deep into the river of her mind and into the tablecloth" in which she perceives her mother's "crocheted roses floating" (70), and her extraordinary pseudo-pregnancy with the poem she calls "Meneseteung."

What deserves special attention at this point is the theme of mother-daughter relationships which is so pervasive in Munro's writing (see Redekop). Almeda's period, in conjunction with her evidently hypnotic sensitivities and loss of ordinary consciousness, causes her to connect with her mother, seemingly trying to redeem her by unthreading the symbolic roses from the constraints of conventional artifice or social decorum. At the same time, Almeda also appears to identify with her mother, whose insanity and early death are largely attributable to her evidently high emotional sensitivity that would have made her suffer inordinately from the death of two of her children and that would have been strained all along by life in a pioneer community where, not surprisingly, her husband had quickly prospered as a *harness* maker. Almeda's mother, however, does not project Medusa's petrifying side which, as Karen Elias-Button has argued, controls "the entanglements mothers and daughters encounter so often" (184); instead she seems to point toward Medusa's positive powers that open "the way-in to the world not only of poetry but of a creative activity whose sources are fierce and powerful" (205). The sources of Almeda's poem-in-progress lie in her rambles, whether physical, imaginal or reminiscing, and they inevitably include her mother's efforts to create beauty in the house. Something practical like the mother's crocheting yarn, however, cannot

help the daughter now to order her heightened encounter with the complementary archetypal powers of Dionysus and Medusa. That experience appears to unravel her attempts to harness lived life in poetry, to unravel the threads of her poetic aspirations as she is venturing beyond the comforts of the simple rhymes she was once able to gather as *Offerings*.

“A woman is never far from ‘mother;’” states Cixous (251), never far from the body and word of female creativity; thus, with regard to being mother and Muse, Medusa is no longer terrifying but “beautiful” and, above all, “laughing” (255). Medusa’s laugh resonates in Almeda’s laughing at her metaphor of the tombstones and the implicit fear of Medusa in patriarchal mythology. In the end, Medusa’s laugh also touches the narrator’s discovery of the Roth family’s graves: a quasi-phallic “upright” (73) stone with only the family name on it and four readily visible “flat stones in the ground” inscribed “Papa,” “Mama,” “William” and “Catherine,” respectively (72); a fifth flat stone, after being cleared from grass and earth, reads “Meda” (73). The individual markers’ being embedded in Mother Earth is only too obvious,<sup>13</sup> yet the narrator dramatizes this fact with her physical clearing of Almeda’s stone: “There it was with the others, staring at the sky” (73). This statement, I suggest, guides the reader’s eyes away from the down-to-earthness of the grave site to face the archetypal presences of Medusa as a representative of the ancient mother goddess and of Dionysus in the over-world of myth.<sup>14</sup> For Alice Munro, as the first reader of the story, the narrator’s attention to Almeda’s shorter name implies that the unadorned inscription “Meda” also became an occasion to commemorate her own mother in the interconnectedness of Meda, *mehda* and Medusa. Indeed, *Friend of My Youth*, the collection which includes “Meneseteung,” is dedicated “To the memory of my mother.” From Cixous’ perspective, moreover, Munro and her narrator see their own writerly selves reflected in “Meda” as well. Perhaps May Sarton’s lines from her poem “The Muse as Medusa” (160) capture the fictive, mythic and autobiographical layers of meaning coming together at this point:

I saw you once, Medusa; we were alone.  
I looked you straight in the cold eye, cold.  
I was not punished, was not turned to stone—  
How to believe the legends I am told?  
...  
I turn your face around! It is my face.

Intimations of Medusa in “Meneseteung” are not as overt as those of Dionysus until, at story’s end, it would be difficult not to



include them among Munro's "open secrets." Dionysian undercurrents, meanwhile, seem assured early on in the conspicuous references to the liquor store manager and to the drunken brawl on Pearl Street. One may of course question any enduring implication of Dionysian myth here, since wine and spirits flow temperately and sometimes intemperately in quite a few of Munro's stories as part of the regionalist aspects of her fiction. "The habit of getting drunk," as she told Geoff Hancock (204), was widespread in southwestern Ontario when she was growing up there. Yet, at least with regard to "Meneseung," the alcohol motif also makes it difficult for a designing writer like Munro not to play with its Dionysian potential, especially since allusions to Dionysus neither reduce nor simplify the complexity of "Meneseung;" and the same is true for allusions to Medusa. The implicit presence of such archetypal figures directs the reader, it seems to me, toward so-called pagan mythology that by its very nature intensifies the paradoxical "unfinishedness" of Munro's fiction.

## NOTES

- 1 Critics from Helen Hoy, in a 1980 essay, to Coral Ann Howells, in her 1998 monograph, have variously drawn attention to the veiled complexities of Munro's fiction.
- 2 Barbara Walker's *Dictionary* and *Encyclopedia* provide thorough and wide-ranging information on the matriarchal and patriarchal history of myths and archetypal symbols.
- 3 For a detailed discussion of "metonymic meaning" in this story, see Pam Houston.
- 4 Catherine Sheldrich Ross refers to legend and myth in Munro's fiction but does so only in a generic and general way ("Fiction").
- 5 I use the term mythology in its traditional meaning of "imaginative philosophical or religious truth" (Richardson 7). Carscallen prefers to speak of typology rather than myth in his biblical readings of Munro (128).
- 6 The very notion of coincidence seems out of place, given Munro's wide reading and her familiarity with Arthur Koestler's *The Roots of Coincidence* (see Munro, "Differently" 231) which explores acausal correlations and "unthinkable parallels" (Koestler 110). Concerning Almeda's grapes, Coral Ann Howells touches on their "connotations of the Bacchantes" (112) and does not develop the Dionysian subtext of "Meneseung."
- 7 Barbara Heller discusses the theme of "loose" women with regard to several stories in *Friends of My Youth*, including "Meneseung"; but, similar to Howells, she does so without the subtext of Dionysian myth.
- 8 The process of distilling alcohol goes back to about 700 CE and was discovered by Arab alchemists; the process arrived in Europe in the early 12th century but did not become popular until early in the 16th century. The fermentation of beer and wine, meanwhile, goes back to ancient historic times.
- 9 *Roth* is an older German spelling of *rot* ("red"); as an old Germanic name, it can also be found in the British Isles. A critic may well see red in response to my wordplay with

*mensis* and *mens*, yet the word “think” appears three times on p. 70 and is therefore conspicuous in the passage under discussion; my reading complements Kathleen Wall’s observation that, in “Meneseteung,” Munro confronts “a near taboo against the representation of menstruation in literature” (84).

- 10 Alethea Hayter’s study of the use of laudanum and other drugs by nineteenth-century writers provides an historical context for Almeda’s use of “nerve tonic.” For information on hypnagogic phenomena pertinent to Almeda, see Andreas Mavromatis, especially 225-28 and 267-82.
- 11 The symbolic stone into which the mythic Medusa could turn someone was “a funerary statue” (Walker, *Enc* 629).
- 12 For other allusions in Del’s name, see James Carscallen (48).
- 13 The stone bearing the name Meda complements Annis Pratt’s thesis of the prominence in Canadian poetry of “a Medusalike stone divinity who has shed her classical identity and attributes to take on those of the Canadian landscape” (*Goddesses* 95).
- 14 Magdalene Redekop sees an allusion to Alma Mater in Almeda’s name but concludes that “the maternal function is obscured” in the abbreviated name (223).

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