



**Journal
of the Short Story in English**
Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

55 | 2010
Special issue: The Short Stories of Alice Munro

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Electronic version

URL: <http://jsse.revues.org/1115>
ISSN: 1969-6108

Publisher

Presses universitaires d'Angers

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 décembre 2010
ISBN: 0294-0442
ISSN: 0294-04442

Electronic reference

Sabrina Francesconi, « Negotiation of Naming in Alice Munro's "Meneseteung" », *Journal of the Short Story in English* [Online], 55 | Autumn 2010, Online since 01 January 2011, connection on 01 October 2016. URL : <http://jsse.revues.org/1115>

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Sabrina Francesconi

Have you no word to say?
Munro, "Meneseteung",
Friend of My Youth (512)

Introduction

- 1 "What's in a name?" This paper starts from Juliet's suggestion that names carry numerous significations and implications. In Alice Munro's stories, names are much more than labels with the function of positioning the named item – be it a person, a place, or else on a geographical map or on a civic archive. Names are, in fact, sites of negotiation for identity, and historical and cultural issues. They are never accepted as definite products, but questioned as performative and open textual units. The exploration of the naming process in Munro's narrative is of pivotal importance to appreciate the irreducible textual and linguistic dynamics weaving short stories that have captured the attention of readers for five decades. The present paper focuses on the story "Meneseteung", first published in the authoritative pages of *The New Yorker* (1988) and then included in Munro's seventh collection of short stories *Friend of My Youth* (1990).

The naming process

- 2 Barthes (618) defines a name as "un instrument d'échange : il permet de substituer une unité nominale à une collection des traits en posant un rapport d'équivalence entre le signe et la somme". Adopting Saussure's terminology, we can rephrase this by stating that a signifier is asked to replace the signified. This process of substitution is far more complex than a neutral and univocal exchange. Considering psychic dynamics, Lacan inscribes naming within the symbolic order, according to which the linguistic act shapes

subjectivity – to be distinguished from the ego and the self – and allows access to the social world. As a matter of fact, the symbolic creates reality, that order which is named by language. According to psychoanalytic theory, not only is naming implied in maturity and in the separation from the maternal, but it also involves access to and acquisition of power. Naming testifies to the power inherent in the symbolic order.

- 3 In the narrative post-colonial female text, naming is woven through numerous textual strategies. Their observation can reveal power dynamics functioning on psychic, political and socio-cultural levels. Of crucial significance are the subject(s) and the object(s) of naming, their mutual relation and the position they occupy within the space of narration. This constructs, in fact, the point of view from which the referent is gazed upon and, subsequently, named by the narrating stance. Obviously, the carrier of the name, that is the signifier, is to be observed in the code(s), mode(s) and form(s) in which it is articulated. It can be formulated coherently with the textual nature of the surrounding text or in a different language, register, graphic solution. These choices imply discursive acts of hegemony or subversion, of coherence or disruption, of cohesion or dissemination, and raise the question of the function(s) of the naming process. Such solutions can be only rarely retraced on a formal and stylistic plan, since they often carry psychological, social and political significances, which can ultimately help deeply question the textualization of the name. Interestingly, Carscallen devoted fifty pages of his extended analysis of Munro's stories to the choice of names identifying semantic families on the basis of chromatic or emotional significances or with reference to a Biblical or Scottish legacy. Adopting an open and fluid perspective on naming, the present work is, instead, concerned with names as sites of continuous negotiation.

Alice Munro's stories

- 4 What is at stake when Alice Munro's narrator is the subject of naming? Munro's short stories are definitely the artistic expression of a woman's craft. According to various positions of the French philosophers Kristeva, Irigaray, Cixous, Wittig, mediated into the Canadian debate by Brossard, Godard, Redekop and Kamboureli, among others, gender is the privileged site that determines the very nature of writing and that needs to be placed at its very core. So, the pivotal question raised by Godard: "How to write as a woman?" (43) can be answered with the *écriture féminine*. Cixous' essay "Le rire de la méduse", both a political and aesthetic manifesto, explains this form of writing:

[...] son écriture ne peut aussi que se poursuivre, sans jamais inscrire ou discerner de contours, osant ces traversées vertigineuses d'autre, éphémères et passionnés séjours en lui, elles, eux, qu'elle habite le temps de la regarder au plus près de l'inconscient, dès leur lever [...] Elle laisse parler l'autre langue à mille langues, qui ne connaît ni le mur ni la mort. A la vie, elle ne refuse rien. Sa langue ne contient pas, elle porte, elle ne retient pas, elle rend possible. (50)

- 5 *L'écriture féminine* has to inscribe its own difference, alterity, the materiality of its own corporality, the resonance of her laughing, the rhythm of her own *jouissance* within the interstices of the hegemonic discourse. Coherently, Kamboureli confirms its capacity to unveil previously hidden and silenced voices and discourses: "The language of a woman writer is at once a language of necessity that exposes the fraudulent realities about her and the language of the body" (38). Redekop goes even further. Establishing a conflict horizon between the biologic and the symbolic, she warns: "[T]he challenge is to write

from within a woman's body and without trapping that body inside the old symbols" (1992: 222). Godard retraces in Munro's aesthetic an attempt to come to terms with these plural stances: "Munro is in quest of a body experienced by women as subject of their desires not as object of men's desires and of the words and literary forms appropriate to this body" (43).

- 6 Besides that of gender, the second parameter to be considered for tracing the identity profile of the narrator is rural small-town south-western Ontario as setting. The "entangled bush", the "flat fields", the "dusty roads", the "red-brick unpainted houses" with the "bare yards" are recurring touches that Munro's readers look for when starting a new story. This location is often selected for the profound attraction and connection the writer feels: "I am intoxicated", she explains in the introduction to her collection of *Selected Stories* (xi). Kroetsch clarifies the role played by space within this narrative system: "[T]he rural or small-town setting remains the text place, the energy source" (1986: 122). Clearly, small-town Ontario is more a social community strictly embedded in the territory people live in than a mere physical site. Ross further explains that Munro's stories "are translations into the next-door language of fiction of all those documentary details, those dazzling textures and surface, of remembered experiences" (112). Attention to details has nourished a widespread critical approach to Munro's art as regionalist, which also motivated the adoption of referential precision as a parameter for interpretation (Balestra 1999). Curiously, the author has often had to face the complaints of Wingham inhabitants who have felt offended by the supposedly grotesque effect achieved through the representation of scenes and characters in a disenchanting and sarcastic style. This clearly shows the inability to capture and appreciate the aesthetic and non-referential value of narration and in particular of narration of space (Locatelli and Di Blasio 2006). The writer herself rejects in her narratives a documentary style and constantly warns her readers to avoid a documentary gaze; she endlessly clarifies that what she is describing is a literary space, suspended along the horizon of storytelling.
- 7 The same problem, as already suggested, was faced when her stories were read as pieces of an autobiographical memoir, as pages of a personal diary. This kind of reading was not only conducted by the general public but also by some critics. As Cox affirms,
- Munro first began to be widely published during the seventies, at a time when 'second wave' feminism placed special value on the notion of uncovering lives that had been suppressed or distorted by a patriarchal tradition. Personal testimony was seen as politically empowering for both readers and writers. (21)
- 8 The writer strenuously keeps claiming that narrated events are not autobiographical but personal (1996) and that they have been completely transfigured into the written page. No doubt, Munro is a writer. Her gaze is definitely that of a storyteller and storytelling is an obsessively recurring topic; the motivations and frustrations, the dynamics and challenges of artistic production are clearly visible throughout the pages.
- 9 The representation of this professional-intellectual-artistic-creative stance has been always negotiated within the short story form. For decades, Munro has been faithful to this genre, first adopted for very pragmatic motivations due to family duties and lack of time (Ross, Thacker 2005). However, her editors and agents have constantly put pressure on her to work towards a novel form. In numerous interviews, she has given the impression of justifying and apologising for her "failure". Meanwhile, she has reached the worldwide acclaimed status of master of the short story. Even though refusing theorising about her genre solution, she has progressively developed this form and blurred

traditional genre distinctions (Howells 9-11). Her stories have become increasingly longer, more entangled in plot and meaning, and more sophisticated in style. As a matter of fact, Munro's short stories delineate the privileged site for the continuous re-negotiation of narrative stances and of the naming process.

"Meneseteung"

- 10 The present paper focuses on "Meneseteung", first published in *The New Yorker* in January 1988, then included in *Friend of My Youth* and in the 1996 *Selected Stories*.¹ Subsequently, the short story has often been anthologised in collections published inside and outside of Canada.² As often happens with Munro, the *The New Yorker* text has been adapted to satisfy the editors' requests but the subsequent versions show some substantial differences, in particular regarding the story's ending. Thacker (1999: 2,3) has observed how the *Friend of My Youth* story positions the narrator in a less authoritative stance, adds touches of mystery to the protagonist and to the narrated events, and ultimately leaves the reader with more doubts and uncertainties. Notably, the narrator concludes the story admitting her own limits and thus questioning her own reliability: "I may have got it wrong" (514). Munro's readers are not surprised: they never expect conclusive solutions or resolutions of contradictions. Like her narrator, the writer herself continuously rewrites and reinvents motives and plots, as well as modes and forms of the story genre.
- 11 This elusiveness seems to contradict the apparently documentary opening of the story, where a third-person omniscient narrator-historian tries to retrace the figure of the nineteenth-century Huron county poetess Almeda Joynt Roth. She seems to turn back and give voice to "a (literary fore)mother" (Cox 70), surely not a new effort in female literature. It responds to Woolf's passionate words in *A Room of One's Own*: "a woman writing thinks back through her mothers" (26), even though often vanished by unsuccessful research, as lamented by Barrett Browning in a 1845 letter: "I look everywhere for grandmothers and see none" (230). Several Munro researchers have been strenuously trying to find out the historical source for Roth. In her cogent volume on Munro, Redekop confessed that she:
- consulted various sources and got several librarians sleuthing for me in order to prove to myself that Almeda Joynt Roth is a fiction. I still have a lingering suspicion that there must really have been such a person and I would continue to suspect this even if Alice Munro herself assured me that she made up the woman. (1992: 216)
- 12 Robert Thacker identified "historical prototypes" in Clara Mountcastle and Eloise E. Skimming (2005: 434), both from rural south-western Ontario. Munro's biographer also detected the existence of a schoolteacher named Joynt in Munro's school, when the writer was a child (*ibid.*). Curiously, only when the story was reprinted in the collection *Best American Short Stories 1989*, Munro admitted knowing the two nineteenth-century poetesses.
- 13 However, Almeda Joynt Roth is not a historical character; the traits of her fictional character are delineated along a narrative horizon. This discussion should thus address the fictional dynamics criss-crossing the story, more than overt denials and/or confessions of the writer herself. The narrative fabrication of the poetess should be questioned, as it is performed by the narrative stance.
- 14 This narrator is more visible in the opening and closing sections of the story, the *récit racontant*, set in the late 1980s; it tends to disappear in the *récit raconté*, grounded in 1879

and in the immediately following years. While different time periods are juxtaposed, the physical setting remains unaltered: rural Western Ontario. In particular, the *fil rouge* is Roth's house, where many narrated events unfold and which, the narrator writes, "is still there today; the manager of the liquor store lives in it" (495). The narrative style is far from homogeneous: factual and straightforward when describing the main character, it progressively becomes poetic and fragmented when narrating Almeda's delirium and the mental deterioration she experiences in her last years. Complexity and irreducibility not only refer to narrating voice, style, temporal setting, but also to the representation of the protagonist herself.

- 15 The reader is informed that Roth lives alone in Ontario, in the house she has inherited from her parents, who have both died long before. She has also lost her young brother and sister when they were young. Like her father, she has an intense passion for poetry, which she has cultivated throughout her life. Her only book of poems is entitled *Offerings* and appeared in 1873, with an autobiographical "Preface". Excerpts from that volume provide epigraphs for each of the short story's six sections. Curiously, one of the quoted poems carries the title "Champlain at the Mouth of the Meneseteung". The name of the Meneseteung river is significant in this story and will be here addressed in its various implications.
- 16 First, Meneseteung is the title of the short story. Bök argues that, supposedly, "titles entitle books to be appropriated by author(itie)s for the purpose of expressing an apparently stable position within discourse". Quite the contrary, Munro's title destabilises and disrupts fixed and monosemic notions of authoriality and textuality. In fact, the title of the short story is mirrored in the title of the poem: the prose narrator gives space to the poetess' voice and the twentieth-century short story offers hospitality to the nineteenth-century verses. This hospitality is marked by the refracted title, at the same time visible as a paratext of the frame text and in the supposedly quoted poems. The story enacts, according to Wall (76), a *mise en abyme* of a second text, which at the same time constructs and deconstructs the first text, showing its composed and irreducible nature (*ibid.*). In Munro, unlinear and hybrid textuality is not only a stylistic solution but an epistemic mode, engendering a never-ending deferral of meaning. Through title reduplication, Munro makes the reader suspect canonical and definite textual borders and look for alternative and fluid modes of reconfiguring text genre and narrative stance.
- 17 Like Almeda Roth cannot be retraced in history books, the Meneseteung river does not appear on Ontario maps. One can only find that name associated to the bridge that crosses the Maitland River. This leads us to an (apparently) philological level of analysis. After consulting local travel magazines and travel books, Redekop gives some information on the origins and meanings of the word "Meneseteung" (1999: 21). One source she mentions states that it is the Chippewa term for the Maitland River. It could mean: "laughing water", referring to the sound of the water running over the rocks in the river. Another document quotes the Ojibway word "menesetung", meaning "healing water". Being fascinated by layers of memories and layers of stories, Munro's attention has been captured by these layers of signs. In this case, she recovers the ancient, hidden name of the river, a politically highly significant practice.
- 18 The retracing of Indian place names recognises the historical importance of and gives political dignity to the First Nations. Still today, maps of Canada are scattered with duplicated UK place names, testifying to what Bourdieu (239) defines as a symbolic act of imposition which legitimates symbolic violence. When inhabited centres were founded,

they were given British names to mark the arrival, the power, and the control of the settlers. In most cases, anglophone names were even attributed to pre-existing centres, or natural sites like lakes, rivers, mountains, obliterating their original names in the attempt to erase the indigenous history, culture and identity. The visible legacy of this imperialist policy can be seen through the eyes of the narrator of "Princess Ida", one of the stories of Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women*: "River Street, Mason Street, John Street, Victoria Street, Huron Street, and strangely, Khartoum Street" (59). Contemporary Canadian policies of place naming increasingly make use of non-mainstream linguistic codes and unveil pre-existing First Nations' terms.

- 19 Clearly, the Meneseteung river and name inhabit more the textual than the geographical ground. It is in her stories that names are negotiated and the naming process performed. It is not surprising that Munro keeps for herself space for intervention in the recovery of the Meneseteung name: she changes the spelling, adding an -e before the -u. Interestingly, in other stories she also calls the same river Wawanash River, using another Indian name. Noteworthy, Canadian writers have been adopting fictitious Indian place names for decades: a famous example is the imaginary Manitoba region of Manawaka Margaret Lawrence chose as the setting for her cycle going from *The Stone Angel* (1968) to *The Diviners* (1974) (Palusci 69). The adoption of fictitious place names deprived of a codified and recognisable referential anchorage abolishes the traditional implications of hegemony and control of the naming process itself.
- 20 The translation from life to narration not only occurs through the adoption of fictitious place names. As already mentioned, an intense emotional connection exists between the Maitland river and Munro's stories, explained in an often quoted magazine article:
- I am still partly convinced that this river – not even the whole river but this stretch of it – will provide whatever myths you want, whatever adventures. I name the plants, I name the fish, and every name seems to me triumphant, every leaf and quick fish remarkably valuable. (1974: 33)
- 21 The river is far beyond offering only a source of artistic inspiration: it fulfils a mythopoietic function. It does not impose already written stories but leaves space for the you-reader to want them, to tell them, to write them down. At a certain point, the narrator seems to feel the necessity to clarify the use of the name Meneseteung in the story, in what seems a meta-narrative and meta-linguistic explanation:
- The name of the poem is the name of the river. No, in fact it is the river, the Meneseteung, that is the poem –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. (511)
- 22 The reader is only informed of the mutual, inextricable bond between landscape and textscape. The name of the poem finds its origin in this verbal-ontological juxtaposition poem-river/river-poem. The old verses of the poem, containing the archetypal name "Meneseteung", flow throughout the short story as the Maitland River flows throughout Huron County. Not only does the visual shape of the river iconically recall a poem, but the metaphoric image of the (river) flux will obsessively recur throughout the story pages. In fact, all the intense experiences the protagonist undergoes – physical, psychological, artistic – will be represented as a flux.
- 23 After positioning the equivalence, Munro adopts the river as a metaphor for the self, asked to delineate the fluid space of consciousness. Almeda has taken her nerve medicine and is now experiencing an "unresisting surrender to her surrounding" (510). In the

poetess' delirium, the Meneseteung occupies a suspended place in her mind: "Almeda looks deep, deep into the river of her mind and into the tablecloth, and she sees the crocheted roses floating. They don't look much like real flowers" (511). Munro goes even further and paints a kaleidoscopic narrative image refracting infinite connections. The process of introspection is first described as "looking deep into" the two-fold self of the Almeda River. Then, the self being gazed upon is reduplicated into the knitted tablecloth, which undergoes a metamorphosis. It becomes water over which crocheted roses can float, while some grape juice Almeda was preparing overflows the container (511). At this point she is overwhelmed by the intensity and unavoidability of poetic inspiration:

[she] cannot escape words. She may think she can, but she can't. Soon this glowing and swelling begins to suggest words – not specific words but a flow of words somewhere, just about ready to make known to her. Poems, even. Yes, again, poems. (510)

- 24 If the writing of a poem substantiates a river's flow, it is understandable that: "the flow of Meda's words starts with her menstrual flow" (Redekop 1992: 222). River, river-self, watered tablecloth, grape juice, words, poems, menstrual blood. Not only does Munro break a cultural taboo and write of menstruation, but as a seamstress she crochets the abject on the narrative texture-tablecloth, and makes it the very origin of writing. On this knitted tablecloth, she makes the real and the symbolic converge.
- 25 However, the image of the flux is not the only bond between the Meneseteung River and the poet Almeda. It is in the naming process that they can be approached. Redekop observes that: "In the name 'Meneseteung' there is the sound of *menace* as well as the sound of *tongue* and this conjunction directs us to Munro's reflections on the dangers surrounding the woman who finds her tongue" (1992: 227). Again, this process of giving voice can be plurally retraced. Meda expresses her kinship with the almost murdered woman found on the street, the narrator of the story gives voice to the literary foremother Almeda Roth, and the writer Alice Munro gives voice to her own mother, Anne Clarke Laidlaw, who was not able to write her story and, due to the symptoms of Parkinson's disease, could not communicate properly. Not casually, *Friend of my Youth* is dedicated "To the Memory of My Mother". The short story text subtly weaves all these "refracted and related women, a sisterhood encompassing the invisible author, the narrator, Almeda/Meda" (Cox 75). Almeda, Alice, Anne, but also Clare, Eloise, and an almost dead woman.
- 26 It is not surprising that, after dwelling on the river name, the narrator devotes her curiosity to the name of the poetess: we have a nameless female narrator looking for a name in order to retrace the poetess' life. She is not interested in the official name one finds at the beginning of the story, Almeda Joynt Roth, or the normal one used throughout the pages, Almeda Roth. Her attention is captured by a humble nickname appearing in a verse of the poem "Children at Their Games": Meda. A *fil rouge* unfolds along the storyline in search of significations, connecting the signifiers "Almeda Joynt Roth", "Almeda Roth", and "Meda". At the beginning of the story, the narrative voice slows down the rhythm of narration, opens a parenthesis and formulates a hypothesis: "Perhaps Almeda was called Meda in the family, or perhaps she shortened her name to fit the poem" (494). No other traces appear to clarify the doubt. Then, at the end of the story, she reaches the graveyard and finds the nickname engraved on the stone: "That was all the name there was –Meda. So it was true that she was called by that name in the family. Not just in the poem. Or perhaps she chose her name from the poem, to be written on her

stone" (514). The name "Meda" is likely to have been used in family relations and to sign her poems. Translating Lacanian positions, Kroetsch thus clarifies the relation between writers and naming: "Writers conceive of themselves profoundly as *namers*. They name in order to *give* focus and definition. They name to *create* boundaries. They name to *establish* identity" (116). Almeda had then chosen and used the name Meda to trace and to mark her own identity, both intimate and intellectual, as a woman and as a poetess. The two seem strictly connected, even mutually interchangeable. The portrait of virtue seems completed.

- 27 *Perhaps. I may have got it wrong.* Perhaps, the name Meda could and should be further explored in more subtle implicatures. To the reader, the name Meda vividly evokes that of Medea, the murderess of her own two children to revenge her rejected love for Jason. Apparently, the mild story protagonist is very far from the sinister mythological character. However, the narrator wants the reader to enter Roth's house not from respectable Dufferin street that decent citizens take to go to church but from the back entrance, from dissolute Pearl Street where indecent individuals scream, fight, beat women almost to death. *Pearl Street*. It is the back side of the house that Almeda prefers for sleeping. In that place, the unmarried, childless woman often has disturbing dreams after taking bromides and a nerve medicine for her sleeplessness. In the last period of her life, she undergoes mental degradation and adopts "a rash and unusual behaviour", thus becoming "a figure of fun" (512). She is committed to poetry. She dies of pneumonia, a disease she developed from a cold she caught in Pearl Street, perhaps being pushed into a bog. The source of these details is again the *Vidette* – some excerpts appear throughout the story, and the emphasis is on the level of moral indecency Roth has achieved after an entire life of "attention to decorum" (*ibid.*). Meneset(e)ung, Menace, Med(e)a. Again Munro questions, deconstructs and subverts what Derrida would term the *monolanguage*, the code of power, hegemony and singularity, as he puts it, "de l'homohégémonie" (55, 56).
- 28 The narrator wants readers to see what lies hidden beyond the thin layer of linoleum – to use one of Munro's recurring domestic metaphors. She wants them to go beyond covers of respectability, and look for the perhaps menacing *unheimlich*. Not in order to have reasons for condemnation, but in order to appreciate a more vivid and vibrant, less opaque and aseptic character. It is a never-ending search for irreducibility: far from finding and fixing a conclusive identity for Almeda, all she achieves is the questioning, deconstructing, deferring of names and naming. Locatelli rejects naming procedures when used to passively project, reduplicate and confirm the self within a wider ideological, transcendental project of a "metaphysics of presence" (13). Conversely, she argues that: "Naming and name-appropriation are not demonstrable parts of the same identity, but of a procedural construction of an ongoing identity, made possible by irreducible deferment" (*ibid.*). As a matter of fact, signifiers are always arbitrary and refer to the signified in a provisional, fluid and often illusory way. Thus, within the naming process, the act of signification is defined as differential, precisely as acquiring meaning through never-ending deferral. The naming process originates from a performative, hermeneutical procedure that positions, recognises and enhances alterity as otherness. That otherness which cannot be grasped. This implies avoiding Manichean models of perception and representation and subsequent celebratory or condemning approaches, as clearly embodied by the *Vidette*. Munro's characters and names then acquire meaning within the textual borders of the short story, the privileged space where they can escape

crystallisation and experience continuous appropriations, re-writing, dislocations, deferrals.

29 A name is a name is a name.

Acknowledgments

30 I would like to thank Héliane Ventura for inviting me to participate in this volume on Munro, the anonymous revisors for their comments and suggestions, Carla Locatelli and Oriana Palusci for content revision and Michelle van Kampen for language revision.

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NOTES

1. Quotations from "Meneseteung" are from the 1996 Penguin edition of the *Selected Stories*. Page numbers will be put in brackets in the text.

2. See *The Oxford Book of Modern Women's Stories*, P. Craig, ed., Oxford UP, 1994, in *Scribner Anthology of Contemporary Short Fiction*, L. Williford and M. Martone, eds, Scribner, 1999, in *The Best American Short Stories of the Century*, J. Updike and K. Kenison, eds, Houghton Mifflin, 2000, and *Fiction 1000: An Anthology of Short Stories* (9th edition), J. Pickering, ed., Prentice Hall College Div., 2000.

ABSTRACTS

Cet article propose une analyse des négociations onomastiques dans la nouvelle intitulée "Meneseteung", tirée de *Friend of My Youth* en s'appuyant sur les résonances multiples de deux noms en particulier, Meneseteung, le nom d'une rivière, et Almeda, le nom de la protagoniste du récit. Le premier est analysé à travers la superposition de ses implications textuelles, prosodiques, philologiques et politiques alors que le second est envisagé sous l'angle de la dichotomie. En multipliant les stratégies polysémiques, la nouvelle échappe à la cristallisation du sens figé et s'inscrit dans la fluidité d'un mouvement continu de réappropriations suggérées et de dislocations possibles.

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