

Taking Possession: Alice Munro's "A Wilderness Station" and James Hogg's *Justified Sinner*

Adrian Hunter

Volume 35, Number 2, 2010

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl35_2art08

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Hunter, A. (2010). Taking Possession:: Alice Munro's "A Wilderness Station" and James Hogg's *Justified Sinner*. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 35(2), 114–128.

Taking Possession: Alice Munro's "A Wilderness Station" and James Hogg's *Justified Sinner*

ADRIAN HUNTER

"A WILDERNESS STATION" IS AMONG the stories of Alice Munro most often singled out for critical attention. Feminist readers have been drawn to Munro's multi-faceted narrative technique as a gesture of implied authorial resistance to the phallogentric Calvinist clergy dramatized within the tale (Duncan). Postcolonialists, meanwhile, have made much of the dialogue the story establishes between an aspirant secular Canadian nationalism and its Scots-Calvinist cultural inheritance (Gittings). Surprisingly, only one critic, Ildikó de Papp Carrington, has pursued at length the vivid intertextual relationship between "A Wilderness Station" and *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, the masterpiece of Munro's collateral ancestor James Hogg.¹ In a detailed comparative study, Carrington explores the many points of thematic correspondence between the texts — Calvinism, diabolism, fratricide — as well as the less obvious formal and narratological echoes Munro's text provides, such as a self-contradicting central confession and a repetitious structure that retells the same events in conflicting versions and through documents whose reliability is at issue. Carrington's thesis is that in the character of Annie Herron, Munro gives us her version of Hogg's "double-talking devil" Gil-Martin, transplanting Hogg's tale from eighteenth-century Scotland to the wilds of Canada in order to engage her ancestor "in an argument about perception and guilt" (72).

Compelling as Carrington's analysis is, it rests its case about Munro's story upon an unsatisfying account of Hogg's. For the reader familiar with *A Justified Sinner* and the critical literature surrounding it, neither the portrait of its author as a "staunch Calvinist" nor of the book itself as a "traditionally Christian parable" (85) are likely to ring true. Nor, consequently, is the contrast Carrington finds between the psychological sophistication of Munro's story on one hand and what she regards as

the generic conventionality of Hogg's "wild Gothic tale" on the other (78). The question thus arises: what, if not to interrogate its treatment of "perception and guilt," is Munro's purpose in recasting *A Justified Sinner* as she does? The answer is to be found, I suggest, in the way Munro's historical narrative endeavours to exempt its central character from the controlling impositions of narrative history; the way Annie Herron exists *in* but is not *of* the story Munro tells. Robert Wringham, as we shall see, dwells in a similar crook of indeterminacy in Hogg's novel, beyond the comprehension of his would-be narrator. It is this evasiveness, this staged aversion to any form of narrative "capture" or what Munro herself calls "summing up" (Struthers 9), that lies at the heart of her meditation upon Hogg, and is, I will argue, a key element in her mature fictional aesthetic.

Approaching Hogg's *Justified Sinner* through the intertextual relationships it inhabits is nothing new. Ever since its publication, commentators have noted, if not always welcomed, the dense network of textual association within which the story functions. In grappling with its theological aspects alone, one is carried to the Pauline epistles and Calvin's *Institutes*, to the printed testimonies of martyred Covenanters, to Robert Burns's satirical poem "Holy Willy's Prayer," and to the disquisitions of antinomian controversialists whose sectary spirit persisted, in Hogg's own day, among those sullenly agitating for reform of the Presbyterian church. At the same time, Hogg was making use of contemporary clinical writing about split personality and hallucinatory mental disturbance to give his portrait of Robert Wringham a powerful psychological authenticity (Beveridge 92); and as early reviewers were quick to remark, the story also relied on a well-known recent literary antecedent — E.T.A. Hoffmann's tale of murder and doubling, *The Devil's Elixir* (*Die Elixiere des Teufels*), a text Hogg had encountered through his friend R.P. Gillies, who translated it for *Blackwood's*.

What is extraordinary about *A Justified Sinner*, however, is the way Hogg calls on these various intertexts to create and situate and give voice to his central character, only then to drain them of authority by drawing attention to the contradictions and over-simplifications on which their accounts of human personality and behaviour depend. Hogg's treatment of *The Devil's Elixir* is particularly telling in this respect. Despite the superficial similarities between the two texts, they are really

quite opposed in their attitude to the question of diabolical possession. While Hoffmann presents an unambiguously Satanic tale (his confessor, Medardus, is prompted to criminality after he drinks the devil's potion), Hogg leaves the question of Gil-Martin's identity, and even his existence, entirely open. Ildikó de Papp Carrington misrepresents *A Justified Sinner* when she claims that Gil-Martin features as "a separate, supernatural character" (78) whose presence is witnessed in the accounts of "impartial eyewitnesses" (79). In fact, it is the very absence of reliable witness accounts that creates much of the intrigue in Hogg's text and that marks it off decisively from the Hoffmann. As regards the killing of the preacher Blanchard, for example, we have only the perfervid, hallucinatory recollection of a self-confessed liar and fantasist (Robert Wringhim himself) to go on. Likewise, as regards the slaying of Robert's brother, George, we must depend on the unconvincing testimonies of Bell Calvert and Mrs. Logan, two women who cannot agree about what or whom they saw on the night in question, or even about how George was killed. Indeed, so thoroughly does Hogg imbue Hoffmann's simple moral tale of demonic possession with ambiguity that it becomes possible to read Gil-Martin, as Barbara Bloedé does, as a wholly psychological entity, a projection of Robert's anxiety over his legitimacy and the means by which he "dissociates himself from that part of his ego of which his conscious thoughts disapprove" (19).

That Hogg intends such uncertainty to surround the meaning and identity of Gil-Martin, and, by extension, of Robert Wringhim, is evident from the way the novel challenges the credibility of the Editor, the character whose narrative frames the justified sinner's confession and whose avowed intention is to pursue the true story of the dead man's crimes. While the novel is, of course, in part a sophisticated theological satire, ridiculing Calvinist extremism through an ironic rendition of the habits of Puritan spiritual autobiography (Levin 114-15), it is much more than the "religious parable" that Carrington wishes to claim it is (78). In fact, Hogg's novel is every bit as sceptical of the Editor's enlightened rationalism as it is of the distortions wrought by religious zealotry. The Editor's narrative may be couched in the soothing, classificatory idiom of reasoned disinterest, in striking contrast to the *Sturm und Drang* of Robert's testimony, but that should not blind us to its bias and obliquity. In the first section of the novel, Hogg has the Editor betray both contempt for the popular religious beliefs of the community to

which Robert belongs and sympathy for the “bluff masculist” (Sedgwick 103), pro-royalist Toryism of his father, the Laird of Dalcastle, and his boorish heir, George. The Editor commends the “man of science” (Hogg, *Confessions* 78) and asserts his commitment to the principles of “nature, utility, and common sense” (57), but later he uses this as justification for digging up what he presumes is Robert’s corpse and helping himself to items from the grave. The “James Hogg” character who briefly appears in the novel’s closing pages, and whose voice and values contrast starkly with the Editor’s, prefers to have nothing to do with the grave-digging scheme: “I hae mair ado than I can manage the day, foreby ganging to houk up hunder-year-auld banes,” he says (227). The Editor concludes his narrative by asserting that while once upon a time it might have been plausible to assume that Robert had been the victim of diabolical possession, the educated man has outgrown such childish superstition: “in this day, and with the present generation, it will not go down, that a man should be daily tempted by the devil, in the semblance of a fellow-creature” (232). He admits that he has failed in his attempt fully to comprehend Robert but misses entirely the reason for his continuing ignorance. “It is certainly impossible that these scenes could ever have occurred,” he writes, assuming that the modern-minded reader will share his contempt for the poor superstitious folk who would believe otherwise, and in a final, unwitting echo of the puritanical binary thinking he has ridiculed throughout his account, issues an either/or of his own devising: “we must either conceive [Robert] not only the greatest fool, but the greatest wretch, on whom was ever stamped the form of humanity; or, that he was a religious maniac” (232). Like Robert, the Editor suffers from a blind conviction in his own powers of discernment. As Hogg put it in a sermon upon “Good Breeding,” the man proudly certain of what he knows has merely failed to grasp that the world is “boundless and unfathomable”: “The ignorance of such a person makes him loquacious and opinionative, because he has never known what it was to be beyond his depth” (*Lay Sermons* 28).

It is *this* Hogg to whom Munro responds in “A Wilderness Station,” I suggest: the Hogg of the *Lay Sermons*, the artist of “uncertainty and contradiction,” as Karl Miller calls him in an article pairing the two writers (22); the Hogg for whom anyone *not* in a state of respectfully mystified amazement at the intricacies of personhood and the world simply is not seeing all that there is to see. In an interview conducted

in 1995, Munro spoke of how she wanted the stories in *Open Secrets* “to be open. I wanted to challenge what people want to know. Or expect to know. Or anticipate knowing. And as profoundly, what I think I know” (Howells 120). Throughout her mature work Munro pursues this “openness” in narratives beset, like Hogg’s, by crises of misunderstanding and incomprehension and pervaded by a sense of chronic irresolution. As I have argued elsewhere, this development in Munro’s writing reflects her search for a narrative technique capable of representing without taking possession of its subject (Hunter). In those stories that deal with Canada’s colonial history, in particular, Munro routinely opens lines of enquiry into the past — mostly the eccentric, liminal, unwritten pasts of women’s lives — only to then resile from the very act of narrative appropriation that such an enquiry entails. Thus, “A Friend of My Youth,” for example, ends with the narrator doubting the legitimacy and authority of her own narrative. The narrator of “Menese-teung,” similarly, having worked to recover from historical oblivion the forgotten life of Almeda Roth, is forced to concede that her account is rife with contradiction and that she may have got her subject entirely wrong. The highly interrogative, inferential nature of such texts marks a reluctance to “write out” the experience of others, since to do so — to presume to speak on behalf of the silenced — would be to take possession of them all over again, inflicting upon them the same dynamic of subjection that erased their stories in the first place (this is the test that feminism often fails in Munro’s work, I would suggest). In “A Wilderness Station,” Munro renders Annie Herron ultimately inaccessible, composing her of narrative statements that are, in the course of the story, devalued, qualified, or even cancelled out. In much the same way that Hogg’s carefully orchestrated narrative places Robert Wringhim out of reach of those who, like the Editor, would take possession of him, so Munro works backward from assumed knowledge toward contradiction and uncertainty, surrounding Annie with would-be narrators, all of whose textual accounts she finally eludes. “A Wilderness Station,” that is to say, does not so much restage the religious drama of *A Justified Sinner* as offer an exposition in imitative form of the moral and artistic values that convolve within it.

Of the various documents that make up Munro’s story, all relate to the death in North Huron of an early settler, Simon Herron, in the winter of 1852-3. We are privy to letters sent between the Reverend

Walter McBain, a Free Presbyterian minister in North Huron, and Mr. James Mullen, clerk of the peace in the town of Walley, along with letters from Annie Herron, the wife of the dead man, and a memoir by his brother, George, published in 1907. The story concludes with one more letter, sent many years later, in 1959, by Miss Christena Mullen, granddaughter of James Mullen, to a historian by the name of Leopold Henry, who is researching the life of politician Treece Herron, George Herron's grandson.

According to Simon's brother, George, whose published memoir is the first account of the accident we read, Simon was killed by the falling branch of a tree as the brothers worked in the bush at the far end of their property. George relates how he dragged the body through the snow to the shanty he shared with Simon and Annie, and how, because a winter storm had left them isolated from their neighbours, he and Annie had to bury the corpse with their own hands. Accounts of what happened next are related through correspondence between the Reverend McBain and James Mullen. According to the minister, following Simon's death, Annie acted strangely, wandering around the town in a dishevelled state and showing a powerful aversion to George. Leaving North Huron, she walked to the town of Walley where she presented herself to Mullen and confessed to having murdered Simon by throwing a rock at his head when they were out in the forest together. This is the first of Annie's confessions to conflict with George's account of how Simon died. But then, under examination by James Mullen, Annie changes the details of her story to say that she had not in fact thrown the rock which killed Simon but had smashed it down on him instead with her own hands. Because of this and other apparent inconsistencies in her account, Mullen, echoing Hogg's Editor's opinion of Robert Wringhim, concludes that Annie must be either "lying, or self-deluded" (*Open Secrets* 201). A third confession by Annie is then presented to the reader, this time in the form of a letter to Sadie Johnstone, Annie's friend from the orphanage home. In this letter, Annie gives yet another version of Simon's death in which she claims that he was killed by an axe blow to the head, dealt by his brother George, and that they buried his body in order to cover up the crime. Annie explains her earlier confession that she had killed Simon as something she said in order to get herself committed to the Walley gaol, where she believed she would be safe from George.

As is common in Munro's mature stories, all the first-person testimonies in "A Wilderness Station" function as encoded statements of self-validation: the narrative advances but through the intricate circuitry of personality and self-fashioning. Our first encounter with Simon's death, for example, comes in George's memoir of 1907. Now firmly a member (through marriage) of North Huron's pre-eminent family, the Treeces, George is able to look back from his elevated position in the community and see his manifest destiny providentially inscribed in the events of his earlier life, including the death of his brother. Here is his account of the accident:

Early in April my brother and I went out to chop down some trees in the bush at the farthest corner of our property. While Simon was away to get married, I had done some chopping in the other direction towards Treeces', but Simon wanted to get all our boundaries cut clear around and not to go on chopping where I had been. The day started out mild and there was still a lot of soft snow in the bush. We were chopping down a tree where Simon wanted, and in some way, I cannot say how, a branch of it came crashing down where we didn't expect. We just heard the little branches cracking where it fell and looked up to see it and it hit Simon on the head and killed him instantly. (195)

In the story George tells, Simon is depicted as headstrong and arrogant and his death as the outcome of a stubborn refusal to accept assistance from the Treeces. Earlier, George relates how his brother was "not of a mind to borrow or depend on anybody," and describes in detail how Simon's scheme to build a fire in the middle of the room in their shanty, rather than in "the ordinary way in the end of the house" (193), almost caused the dwelling to burn to the ground. What validates George's version of events, then, is nothing less than his own subsequent life story. As he constructs it, his inclination was toward a more co-operative relationship with their neighbours, and by following that path, he survived and flourished. Simon's death, in other words, is not accidental but meaningful, and it is George's life that makes it so.

In its technique of covert self-construction, George's memoir establishes the model for the other male narrators, McBain and Mullen, who both seek to define Annie through an exemplification of their own values. The world views they espouse may be quite different from one another — McBain's, Calvinism and Mullen's, secular rationalism —

but what emerges is the identical nature of their desire to find a way of rendering Annie susceptible to what, in Munro's words, they "anticipate knowing" (Howells 120). What may appear to be a dialogue between two alternative sets of values, the secular and the religious, turns out in "A Wilderness Station," as it does in *A Justified Sinner*, to be nothing of the sort. Just as Hogg's Editor ends up resembling his Calvinist subject, so Mullen and McBain, for all their differences, are located in a conspiracy of like-mindedness and homosocial combination. Each makes his reading of Annie, emboldened rather than cautioned by the presence of the other. Thus, McBain's admission that he struggles to talk to women, whose "stubbornness is of another kind than a man's" (198), is matched by Mullen's reflection that he is "in perplexity" about Annie (202); women are, they seem to agree, both predictable and strange.

Mullen's approach to the problem of Annie is to deploy the disciplinary apparatuses of medicine and the law. The account Annie gives of herself upon arriving at Walley, that she killed Simon by smashing a rock on his head, he dismisses as untrue because evidentially implausible. "No rock that this girl could pick up," he avers, "combined with the force that she could summon to throw it, would serve to kill a man" (201), and to confirm the fact, he has her expose the muscles in her arms. He concludes that she must either be "lying, or self-deluded," and engages a doctor to test her sanity. Yet, at the very moment he makes his judgement, based on the evidence, that Annie's confession is false, he dismisses evidence that points the other way, and so makes a mockery of his own empirical methods. The lock of blood-stiffened hair she presents as proof of her crime, he disregards while simultaneously asserting that the lack of a blood-stained murder weapon undermines her story (201). In the same way, he dismisses her claim to have been "a huskier woman" (201) at the time of the killing, holding to his belief that she lacked the necessary strength to kill Simon in the way she says she did. Later, however, he concedes that her "health seems sturdy" (204) and that she has grown in stature from the "scarecrow" (204) who first arrived in Walley. On the question of her sanity, likewise, science is quickly abandoned in favour of speculation, as the doctor sets out his "belief" that reading of "ghosts or demons or of love escapades with Lords and Dukes and suchlike" may be to blame for Annie's delusion, even though he can wrest from her no account of what reading, if any, she has done (205). Like Hogg's Editor, Mullen blindly contradicts the

principles of utility and reasoned disinterest upon which science and the law he espouses depend, and he ends his final letter to McBain in bafflement, back where he began, looking to Annie's confession to resolve the question "whether or not she is a conscious liar" (206).

McBain is stuck with same question of Annie's "madness" (203), only he subjects it to theological rather than scientific scrutiny. Taking as his model the autobiographical and exhortatory writings of the Scots preacher Thomas Boston, McBain depicts himself as a pilgrim surrounded on all sides by a physical and moral wilderness and by a churchless people more inclined to the "swilling of spirits and foulest insolence" (204) than to the worship of God. His writing follows the conventions of Puritan spiritual autobiography, in which, as Linda Anderson describes, the confessor seeks to impose "divine . . . order on the secular" by sublimating the world's wilderness to "a higher realm of meaning" (22-23). The incoherence and inconsistency of Annie's testimony — her "madness," as the preacher would have it — McBain interprets as a stage in her spiritual journey: she is suffering from "remorse" at the fact that while her husband was alive, "her submission to [him] was not complete" (*Open Secrets* 203). As he tells Mullen, "[Simon's] 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" (203).

Munro dispels the force of McBain's narrative by exposing the arbitrariness of its conventions and, in Annie's letter to Sadie Johnstone, parodying it. In so doing, she draws attention to a paradox in Puritan autobiographical writing, whereby a highly conventionalized language and narrative organization is employed to represent the supposed uniqueness and singularity of the individual life. As Linda Anderson explains, having "substituted individual experience for the institutional and legal authority of the Established Church," the only available verification of the significance of that experience for the believer was the extent to which it "conformed to an already established pattern" (32). Puritan spiritual writing is, therefore, uneasily caught between the singular and the plural, the self and the other: the nonconformist life story is, paradoxically, marked out by its conformity. In *A Justified Sinner*, Hogg exploits this same paradox by saddling Robert Wringhim with an inauthentic, rote language of self-expression and having his testimony

follow precisely the model of Puritan autobiography (Levin 115). But this testimony is ultimately a parody in Hogg's text, since the religious function of the confession "to bring people back into the church" works in Robert's case to identify him as an "outcast" (114). In "A Wilderness Station," Annie's "confession" similarly parodies Puritan textual self-construction. In a scene that refers back to McBain's supplications to "the Divinity" (*Open Secrets* 203), and, beyond, to the Augustinian confessional tradition, Annie describes how, following Simon's death, she turned to scripture for guidance:

I am religious too, I pray to God every night and my prayers are answered. I know what God wants as well as any preacher knows. . . .

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. To make double sure of it just say when you close your eyes, God guide my finger. (211)

Ildikó de Papp Carrington argues that Annie's scriptural abuse is further evidence of her affinity with Hogg's "double-talking devil" Gil-Martin (82-83), but the more resonant, ironic echoes are intertextual — the famous "*Tolle, lege*" conversion scene in the *Confessions* where Augustine, having opened his Bible randomly at Romans 13:13-14, finds that "the light of confidence flooded into [his] heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled" (Augustine 152-53) — and intratextual to McBain's self-representations, which are similarly structured around religious allusion. Taking up McBain's depiction of the "wilderness," Annie figures herself as a pilgrim, and the lack of harm that befalls her as she sleeps outside as a sign of her election:

It got warm in a hurry and the flies and mosquitoes came but they hardly bothered me. I would see their bites but not feel them, which was another sign that in the outside I was protected. . . . I ate berries both red and black and God protected me from any badness in them. (214)

In broad terms, Annie's letter of confession reveals the constructed nature of the autobiographical self, the fact that representation, whether of the self or others, is always conducted through an already existent

language and set of discursive conventions. More specifically, the parodic, polysemous form of her confession and its function in the story accords with the distinction Diane Elam observes between male autobiographical writing, which tends to posit a subject that sees itself as complete and unified, and female autobiography, which can “be understood as a strategic necessity at a particular time, rather than an end in itself” (65). Annie’s playful and contradictory confessional letter can be viewed in these terms not as the unravelling of a self-present subjectivity, but as a strategy of self-preservation — preserving her self from male authority and law through a rhetorical dispersal of identity. To that extent, and in the context of Munro’s mature aesthetic, the letter is the place in the text where issues of gender and narrative form intersect.

However, as I suggested earlier, Munro’s work is intolerant of *all* gestures of possessive narration, not just those that circulate within a specifically gendered politics. What aligns “A Wilderness Station” with stories such as “A Friend of My Youth,” “Meneseung,” and “Carried Away” is that a narrative which appears to be motivated by the desire to recover the lost or neglected female subject from a male-authored historical obscurity then itself resiles from narrating that putatively “recovered” subject. For it is not that McBain and Mullen get Annie wrong only for someone else, Munro, to get her right. Emulating her famous ancestor, Munro refuses to take possession of her subject, refuses to “finish” the job of writing Annie. To do this, to bring Annie to order, would be to inflict on her the kind of tyranny of accountability that George, McBain, Mullen, and the doctor crave. Instead, in the concluding section to the story, she introduces another narrator, Christena Mullen, granddaughter of James Mullen, whose account both conspires with Annie’s contrariness and makes its own gesture of resistance to the expediences of male historical narrativization.

To the reader familiar with Munro’s mature work, it will come as no surprise that the conclusion to “A Wilderness Station” is placed in the hands of a character who fails or refuses to settle the questions the narrative has raised; such is the nature of Munro’s interrogative storytelling aesthetic. As she puts it herself, her aim is “to let each story stand without bothering to do the summing up” (Struthers 9). Unaware of Annie’s infamous history, Christena Mullen does not recognize the

wider significance of what she observes. Nor does she attempt to translate the suppositional paradoxes of Annie's talk into foursquare certainties. Annie's variously fantastic and often contradictory recollections are accommodated intact in Christena's account:

There were lots of old people going around then with ideas in their heads that didn't add up — though I suppose Old Annie had more than most. I recall her telling me another time that a girl in the Home had a baby out of a big boil that burst on her stomach, and it was the size of a rat and had no life in it, but they put it in the oven and it puffed up to the right size and baked to a good color and started to kick its legs. (Ask an old woman to reminisce and you get the whole ragbag, is what you must be thinking by now.) (225)

The "old woman" here may be Annie or Christena, or both, since Christena repeatedly makes reference to her own digressive and anecdotal style as a symptom of her advancing age. Christena depicts Annie without the kind of evaluative enlargement that Mullen and McBain are impelled to make, and that Leopold Henry, the academic historian who has solicited her memoir, will doubtless offer in respect of Treece Herron, the famous politician whose biography he is writing. Meanwhile, the encounter that takes place between Annie and George, on the porch of the Herron house, is elided altogether in Christena's telling.

In narrative terms, Christena's functional impercipient is the means by which Annie's eccentricity and narrative unaccountability are preserved. It is a creative deficit, one might say, and it provides a structural contrast to the possessive forms of narration perpetrated by others in the story. Indeed, "A Wilderness Station" is replete with characters presuming to speak for, about, or on behalf of others: George, McBain, Mullen, the doctor, and Leopold Henry, as we have seen; but also the matron of the home, who responds to Simon's letter enquiring after a wife and who supplies the first account of Annie; and Treece Herron, who ventriloquizes throughout the final section: "The woman of the house came out and asked him — Treece Herron — to ask us if we had eaten. You would think she or we did not speak English" (221). Christena, by contrast, gives full voice to Annie's contrariness, reporting it in direct speech or, as here, in a mode of unevaluative indirection:

About being married herself, she sometimes said she had been and sometimes not. She said a man had come to the Home and had all the girls paraded in front of him and said, "I'll take the one with the coal-black hair." That being Old Annie, but she refused to go with him, even though he was rich and came in a carriage. Rather like Cinderella but with a different ending. Then she said a bear killed her husband, in the woods, and my grandfather had killed the bear, and wrapped her in its skin and taken her home from the Gaol. (217-18)

Christena's unwillingness to displace Annie from the centre of her narrative, whether by condensation, paraphrase, or disambiguation, renders her memoir insusceptible to the professional historian gathering materials for his life of a great man. She apologizes for digressing but refuses to revise what she has written to meet the demands of the assignment: "Now I'm back and have read this over, astounded at the rambling but too lazy to start again" (221). Tellingly, many of Christena's digressions concern acts of *transgression* by Annie and herself against the (male-authored) social and familial norms that would contain them both. Annie repeatedly tests the tolerance of her employers, for example, turning the third floor of the house into her "domain" (216) and protesting at Christena's sister's choice of husband by sabotaging the bridal dress (217). Christena, meanwhile, stresses her own spirited disobedience and independence, resisting her parents' attempt to curtail her interest in Annie, and later, the men who would presume to feminize her. She proudly manipulates her Stanley Steamer under the gaze of male eyes, and is pleased to put Treece Herron right when he asks if the car is her father's (223).

And it is in the purposely slight account Christena gives of Treece Herron that her memoir's (and the story's) alternative scheme of values comes most clearly into view. She first refers to him as a "man-nerly young man" (221), thereafter as "the divinity student," and notes the deliberate way in which he crafts an impression for her: "He said he liked living in Toronto. I got the feeling he wanted me to understand that divinity students were not all such sticks as I supposed or led such a stringent existence" (222). Later he writes to her, but not to follow through on a crush, as she supposed he might, but to inform her

about Mission Schools (225). Interspersed among these recollections of Treece's mannerliness and urbanity is the story Christena is really writing — of “pleasure” and “novelty” and “experience” and “flirting” and “natural behaviour” (224) — and, in the case of Annie, of “gloating”:

I asked Old Annie if Mr. Herron could understand her when she talked to him, and she said, “Enough.” I asked if she was glad about seeing him again and she said yes. “And glad for him to get to see me,” she said, not without some gloating that probably referred to her dress and the vehicle. (225)

Like McBain and Mullen, George understands “enough,” which is just as much as Annie allows him to understand; nor does he “see” her except as she allows herself to be seen. Christena's memoir is, in that sense, perfectly attuned to its subject — a sounding-out and witnessing — and so as far as the historian would have it, quite beside the point.

In another context, Dominic LaCapra writes of how history must recognise that “the past has its own voices that must be respected, especially when they resist or qualify the interpretations we would like to place upon them” (32). Both Hogg and Munro write historical fictions that attempt to accommodate within their narrative praxis the inevitability of resistance to, and qualification of, the stories they tell — stories that refuse to take possession of their subjects. For Hogg, this was a matter of finding a fictional form that would tolerate “mystery” in the midst of the Enlightenment rage for “explanation” (*Lay Sermons* 110); for Munro, it is about refusing to do the “summing up,” with all that such a refusal might entail in the lives of girls and women.

NOTE

¹ Munro's great-great-great-great grandfather was Robert Laidlaw, Hogg's uncle.

WORKS CITED

- Anderson, Linda. *Autobiography*. London: Routledge, 2001.
 Augustine. *Confessions*. Trans. Henry Chadwick. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992.
 Beveridge, Allan. “James Hogg and Abnormal Psychology: Some Background Notes.” *Studies in Hogg and His World* 2 (1991): 91-94.

- Bloedé, Barbara. "The Confessions of a Justified Sinner: The Paranoiac Nucleus." *Papers Given at the First Conference of the James Hogg Society*. Ed. Gillian Hughes. Stirling: James Hogg Soc., 1983. 15-28.
- Carrington, Ildikó de Papp. "Double-Talking Devils: Alice Munro's 'A Wilderness Station.'" *Essays on Canadian Writing* 58 (1996): 71-92.
- Duncan, Isla J. "'It seems so much the truth it is the truth': Persuasive Testimony in Alice Munro's 'A Wilderness Station.'" *Studies in Canadian Literature* 28.2 (2003): 98-110.
- Elam, Diane. *Feminism and Deconstruction: Ms en Abyme*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Gittings, Christopher E. "Constructing a Scots-Canadian Ground: Family History and Cultural Translation in Alice Munro." *Studies in Short Fiction* 34.1 (1997): 27-37.
- Hogg, James. *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. Ed. Adrian Hunter. Peterborough: Broadview, 2001.
- . *A Series of Lay Sermons on Good Principles and Good Breeding*. Ed. Gillian Hughes with Douglas S. Mack. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1997.
- Howells, Coral Ann. *Alice Munro*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1998.
- Hunter, Adrian. "Story into History: Alice Munro's Minor Literature." *English* 53 (2004): 219-38.
- LaCapra, Dominic. *Rethinking Intellectual History: Text, Contexts, Language*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1983.
- Levin, Susan M. *The Romantic Art of Confession: De Quincey, Musset, Sand, Lamb, Hogg, Fremy, Soulie, Janin*. Columbia: Camden, 1998.
- Miller, Karl. "The Passion of Alice Laidlaw." *Changing English* 14.1 (April 2007): 17-22.
- Munro, Alice. *Friend of My Youth*. London: Chatto, 1990.
- . *Open Secrets*. London: Chatto, 1994.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosovsky. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia, 1985.
- Struthers, J.R. (Tim). "The Real Material: An Interview with Alice Munro." *Probable Fictions: Alice Munro's Narrative Acts*. Ed. Louis K. MacKendrick. Toronto: ECW, 1983. 5-36.