The Deadly Pestilence: Pain and Mourning in L.M. Montgomery’s Pandemic Life Writing

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Montgomery’s life writing from December 1918 to May 1919 reveals a shift from the public anxiety of war to the private pain and grief of a pandemic. The author’s focus on her personal experience with influenza demonstrates what Elaine Scarry posits is pain’s “unsharability,” while her narrative construction of grief represents a Freudian “work of mourning.”

In a retrospective journal entry dated 1 December 1918, L.M. Montgomery writes, “The war is over! Many things are over. It is ‘a far cry’ since my last entry in October. I feel as if I had lived many years in it. Huge, epoch-making world-events have jostled each other in it. And in my own little world has been upheaval and sorrow—and the shadow of death.” Montgomery kept detailed diaries throughout the First World War, documenting the Allies’ victories and defeats with remarkable dedication. Numerous entries from between 1914 and 1918 begin with an update, even if there is “no especial war news” to report. Her descriptions of significant battles are particularly notable: On 22 March 1918, for example, she writes of what would become known as the Spring Offensive, “Armageddon has begun! The Great offensive opened yesterday. They have attacked the British army. [Field Marshal Douglas] Haig reports that the enemy failed to reach their objectives but says they penetrated to the British battle positions and that severe fighting continues.” The next entry, dated the following day, begins, “Again a morning of dread, watching for the mail. The British report the situation unchanged, but the Germans claim 16,000 prisoners and 200 guns. This sounds rather badly, but the line still holds, and American experts think the offensive will fail, judged by the opening two days.”[1] These entries reflect the public nature of conflict as well as Montgomery’s personal interest in and understanding of the war effort.

Toward the end of 1918, however, Montgomery’s journal shifts focus, becoming less about “epoch-making world-events” and more about the “upheaval and sorrow” in

her own life. In October 1918, she contracted the H1N1 influenza A virus, which she would have known by the misnomer Spanish flu. Although she was one of some 500 million people to catch the disease, including dozens in her small community of Leaskdale, Ontario, she believed her case was especially serious: She claims in her journal that the local doctor “said that out of the 75 cases of flu he had I was the worst save one—and that one died!”2 Passing through “the shadow of death” left her considerably weakened in body and spirit, but she soon after travelled from Ontario to Prince Edward Island to support grieving relatives; her cousin George Campbell and his four-year-old son had died of flu, leaving behind George’s wife, seventy-year-old mother, and six remaining children. Two months later, in January 1919, she witnessed Frederica (Frede) Campbell McFarlane—George’s sister and Montgomery’s dearest friend—die of flu-related pneumonia at a college infirmary in Quebec. The journal entries and letters Montgomery composed between December 1918 and May 1919 reveal her psychological shift from the shared anxiety and excitement of the war years to the intensely personal pain and grief of a pandemic. In this paper, I will argue that Montgomery shows an early indifference to the flu, demonstrating what Elaine Scarry calls physical pain’s “unsharability,”3 while descriptions of her own illness reflect the difficulties of communicating suffering. This paper will further argue that Montgomery’s construction in her life writing of a narrative culminating in Frede’s death was initially necessary but ultimately detrimental to her “work of mourning,” a Freudian concept that Patricia Rae defines as “the project of freeing oneself emotionally from the lost beloved.”4 The author’s constant revision of the narrative of Frede’s death was both a cause and an effect of her inability to complete this work, leading to decades of psychological suffering and self-diagnoses of mental illness.

“That Mysterious Deadly Plague”: Early Encounters with Influenza

As numerous scholars have discussed, the First World War profoundly influenced Montgomery's life and work.[5] Andrea McKenzie and Jane Ledwell identify the author as "an active war worker, serving as president of the local Red Cross chapter, reciting poems at recruiting meetings, and … comforting local parishioners when their sons, brothers, and sweethearts were wounded or killed overseas."[6] Mary Beth Cavert further highlights the war work Montgomery's minister husband performed: "Ewan was the chairman of the Scott Township Patriotic Committee and President of the War Resources Committee, responsible for recruiting soldiers. … Many of the young soldiers visited or shared meals with the Macdonalds before leaving for England. In church, the families cried while Ewan said prayers for the soldiers at the front and the new recruits still at home."[7] From 1914 to mid-1918, the war dominated Montgomery's life and writing. However, as Magda Fahrni and Esyllt Jones indicate in *Epidemic Encounters: Influenza, Society, and Culture in Canada, 1918–20*, by the fall of 1918, "Canadians just emerging from the context of 'total war' found themselves plunged into one of 'total epidemic,' where everyday life was structured, to some degree, by the disease." Pandemic influenza affected almost every community in Canada, regardless of proximity to centres of contagion.[8] The small town of Leaskdale, where Montgomery lived with her family between 1911 and 1926, was no exception.

The postwar influenza pandemic killed as many as fifty million people, including fifty-five thousand Canadians, between 1918 and 1920. Most of these deaths occurred in the fall and winter months of 1918 to 1919. The pandemic had an extremely high morbidity rate, probably because of secondary infections such as pneumonia rather than an especially aggressive strain of influenza.[9] For reasons still not understood, this influenza strain seemed to target otherwise healthy adults between ages twenty and forty.[10] These statistics were unavailable to the public in 1918, not only because the pandemic was ongoing but also because wartime censors minimized early reports of deaths in Britain, France, Germany, and the United States. Nevertheless, Fahrni and Jones contend that "Canadians were well aware of the extraordinary number of deaths that were occurring south of the border and on the battlefields of Europe during the month of September [1918]." Furthermore, the

impact of the pandemic on Canadians' daily lives was impossible to ignore. Lacking national coordination, local governments took preventive measures such as "school and university closures, cancellation of church services, closures of public places of entertainment, … quarantine and placarding of infected households, and the compulsory wearing of masks in public."[11] Although Montgomery rarely mentions these measures in her journal, they undoubtedly affected her life: For example, she notes on 17 December 1918 that the Sunday school concert she was directing has been cancelled "owing to another outbreak of flu in the vicinity."[12] Apart from such passing remarks, a reader would scarcely know the author lived through a pandemic.

Montgomery's records of the pandemic are almost entirely retrospective, written weeks after she had contracted and recovered from the disease. She first mentions the flu in a December 1918 journal entry, revealing she was in Toronto at the height of the second wave in early October: "Toronto was then beginning to be panic stricken over the outbreak of the terrible 'Spanish flu.' The drug counters were besieged with frantic people seeking remedies and safeguards. I didn't think much about it—really had no fear of taking it."[13] Montgomery's initial apathy toward the flu despite witnessing a "panic stricken" Toronto reflects what Scarry calls the "unsharability" of physical pain: "To have pain is to have certainty; to hear about pain is to have doubt."[14] The resistance of bodily suffering to language distinguishes internal pain from the explicit violence of war, and the latter therefore received more of Montgomery's attention.

There is also the emotional impossibility of sympathizing with someone in physical pain, as Virginia Woolf explains in her 1930 essay *On Being Ill*: "Sympathy we cannot have. Wisest Fate says no. If her children, weighted as they already are with sorrow,

were to take on them that burden too, adding in imagination other pains to their own, … one great sigh alone would rise to Heaven, and the only attitudes for men and women would be those of horror and despair."[15] Montgomery, like most Canadians, was already exhausted by the horror and despair of the war, making it difficult to comprehend the magnitude of the pandemic that followed. A few days after visiting Toronto, however, she realized she had caught the virus while travelling: "Wednesday evening I began to sneeze and I kept that up all Thursday. … That night I took ill with flu—the deadly pestilence of which thousands have died—are dying."[16] Because she was no longer in doubt about the physical suffering caused by influenza, her perception of the pandemic transformed from something she "didn't think much about" to the public health crisis that it was.

Montgomery was bedridden for ten days, after which time she emerged from her room frail and shaken. She emphasizes the flu's lasting impact on her health in the same December journal entry, written almost three months post-recovery: "I never felt so sick or weak in my life. The first time I went downstairs I collapsed and Ewan had to carry me up. I am still taking strychnine for my heart, my nerves are bad yet … and I have not yet been able wholly to shake off the depression and languour that is the worst legacy of the plague." Reaffirming the "unsharability" of physical pain, Montgomery's description of actual influenza is much less detailed than her account of its psychological side effects. She shares only what her doctor has told her about her illness: She had "a ridiculous temperature and a heart that was almost out of business," and she "would not—probably—have lived till morning." Apart from exhaustion and perspiration, she rarely alludes to the flu's physical symptoms; the "depression and languour" that follow recovery are much easier to identify and describe.[17] Scarry explains such a distinction by arguing that psychological suffering, in contrast to physical suffering, "*does* have referential content, [and] *is* susceptible to verbal objectification."[18] She quotes Woolf, whose essay suggests that the "poverty" of language hinders its ability to depict illness: "English, which can express the thoughts of Hamlet and the tragedy of Lear, has no words for the shiver and the headache."[19] The flu's impact on Montgomery's mental health was more expressible and persistent than her physical symptoms, leading her to

privilege the disease's psychological side effects in her retrospective journal entry. However, accounts of physical pain in her journal are often indistinguishable from those of psychological suffering, as one almost always accompanied the other in her life.

Montgomery's pandemic correspondence is similarly focused on her personal experience with influenza and its effect on her mental health. In a letter dated 26 May 1919, she informs Ephraim Weber, who was living in Saskatchewan at the time, that the flu "was a terrible scourge" in Ontario. She does not elaborate, beginning instead the same narrative of illness that she tells in her journal: "I almost 'passed out' with it. My heart was so bad that one night the doctor thought he could hardly pull me through. However, I did recover after a long time, but with badly-wrecked nerves. … [I do not] expect ever again to be 'just the same' as I was before that mysterious deadly plague put its mark on me." This concise paragraph contains the only mention of the flu in what is otherwise a lengthy and comprehensive account of the eighteen months since Montgomery's last letter to Weber. In contrast, a letter dated 25 November 1917 provides analyses of the respective roles of Canada, Italy, Britain, Russia, and Jerusalem on the world stage, for "when you live and breathe and eat and drink and sleep and *pray* war, you can't ignore it even in a letter."[20] Both media censorship on reporting the extent of the pandemic during the war and physical pain's "unsharability" caused Montgomery to largely ignore the pandemic's effect on the general population.

A letter to the Scottish writer G.B. MacMillan, composed three months before the letter to Weber, further reveals Montgomery's life writing as a form of self-construction in dealing with pain. Montgomery's letters to MacMillan are extensive but irregular, and she mentions her illness in only one, dated 26 February 1919:

> I was a very bad case—so bad that the doctor had very little hope for me one night. My heart was almost out of business. But no pneumonia developed and after ten days I crawled out of bed, collapsed, and had to be carried back to bed. I never, in all my life, was as utterly weak, nervous and depressed as that illness left me. I was three weeks before I felt anything like myself and to this day I feel the ill effects in heart and nerves.

The resemblance between Montgomery's letters to Weber and MacMillan probably results from her habit of referencing her journal while writing correspondence. While she was not aware of her letters' future publication, Paul Tiessen and Hildi Froese Tiessen argue that she "would have projected, in her correspondence … a reader not readily distinguishable from the imaginary reader of her personal journals."[21] All three documents highlight the same events of Montgomery's illness: She was so sick that the doctor thought she would die; Ewan had to carry her back to bed when she collapsed; she had never in her life felt so weak; and her heart and nerves are still affected. She quotes her journal verbatim in the letter to MacMillan, claiming her heart "was almost out of business" and, earlier, describing Torontonians "besieging the drug stores."[22] In this way, Montgomery's journal and letters constitute a narrative of pain that would, in turn, have influenced her lived experience of the pandemic. Paul John Eakin describes this practice as "living autobiographically" and argues that "autobiography is not merely something we read in a book; rather, as a discourse of identity, delivered bit by bit in the stories we tell about ourselves day in and day out, autobiography structures our living."[23] Montgomery "literally constructs herself in the journal," Emily Woster concludes.[24] Indeed, the formation of a consistent narrative was essential to the successful integration of influenza into

the author’s identity, particularly given the disease’s consequences for her mental health.

Montgomery’s assertion in her letter to MacMillan that it “was three weeks before [she] felt anything like [her]self”25 echoes a sentiment from her letter to Weber, namely, that she does “not expect ever again to be ‘just the same’ as [she] was before that mysterious deadly plague put its mark on” her.26 The author’s precarious sense of self as a result of her illness exemplifies the aspect of pain that Scarry calls its “totality”: “Pain begins by being ‘not oneself’ and ends by having eliminated all that is ‘not itself.’ At first occurring only as an appalling but limited internal fact, it eventually occupies the entire body and spills out into the realm beyond the body, takes over all that is inside and outside, [and] makes the two obscenely indistinguishable.”27 According to Scarry’s theory, the internal, private pain Montgomery experienced while sick, such as fever and heart palpitations, eventually “spilled out” into the external, public realm, manifesting as irrepressible symptoms of mental illness.

Finally, Montgomery’s letter to MacMillan reveals something that is absent from both her journal and her letter to Weber. Before recounting her period of illness, she provides a vivid description of Toronto during the pandemic’s second wave:

> The Spanish flu was raging then and scores were dying daily from it. You speak of having it and you also refer to it as “a Satanic influence.” Your phrase is inspired. It was Satanic. It has ravaged Canada like a cyclone and though the top crest of the epidemic has passed it is very prevalent still. In the last 3 months of 1918, 7000 people died of it in Ontario alone. I have not the figures for the rest of Canada but in Toronto and Montreal the graves were dug by steam shovels,—large trenches were dug and the dead bodies placed in rows in them, many of them uncoffined, as coffins could not be obtained soon enough.28

This depiction of the pandemic, more than any other in Montgomery’s journal or letters, parallels the tone and content of her war diaries. She cites statistics to illustrate Ontario’s astonishing mortality rate, although her knowledge of conditions in other provinces is limited. The shocking image of uncovered bodies laid to rest in trenches “dug by steam shovels” evokes wartime memories that were, by this time, part of Canada’s social consciousness. MacMillan’s nationality might partly account for the letter’s graphic detail, as he was probably as unaware of the situation in Canada as Montgomery was of that in Scotland. More significant, however, is the experience the two shared as convalescents. MacMillan, like Montgomery, had witnessed first-hand the disease’s “Satanic influence” and, presumably, its lingering side effects. It was therefore unnecessary for her to attempt to explain her physical or psychological suffering to him, allowing her to finally look outside herself at the pandemic’s widespread implications for Canada and the world.

“The Agony of This Loss”: Narrative Constructions of Grief

Soon after recovering from the flu, Montgomery received word from Park Corner, PEI, that her cousin George had died of complications from the same virus, leaving his family struggling. Still experiencing the side effects of her own illness, Montgomery “worried greatly over the situation, being in a condition of body and nerve eminently conducive to worry.” The prospect of George’s sister Frede returning to the family home was reassuring, but on 2 November, the author received a troubling letter from Frede that she paraphrases in her journal entry from the following month: “They were all sick at Park Corner, Aunt Annie and Ella from shock, the children from flu. Little Georgie had died and Maudie and Jim were very low. Frede was alone in that house to do all the work and wait on the sick.”29 Determined to help, Montgomery left for PEI that night and stayed for almost two weeks. Two months later, she watched Frede, who had returned to Quebec where she lived and worked, die quickly and unexpectedly from pneumonia following influenza. The overwhelming grief that followed was the culmination of months of physical and psychological suffering.

The journal entries and letters Montgomery wrote around the time of Frede’s death reveal the extensive editing that many scholars have examined.30 Vanessa Brown and Benjamin Lefebvre, for example, suggest that Montgomery’s “gifts as a natural storyteller might have impeded her commitment to writing a ‘faithful record’ of her life.”31 The author’s decision to transcribe her journal into uniform volumes, destroying the original, raises further questions about the factual reliability of her life writing. Although she promises to copy the journal “exactly as it is written,”32 Lefebvre notes that “scholars find it hard to believe that she did so without making any alterations based on her growing awareness of its cultural value.”33 Montgomery completed her transcription in April 1922, meaning as many as three years may have passed before the notes she took in Park Corner appeared in their final edited form.

The journal entries recounting Montgomery's 1918 trip to Park Corner indicate she used the literary technique of foreshadowing to retrospectively imbue Frede's death with a sense of inevitability. Despite the tragic circumstances, her visit appears relatively uneventful, even pleasant. Soon after arriving, she remarks, "It is eight years since I was on the Island in November and I am enjoying it. Even its dourness and gloom have a charm." In the four entries made during her stay, she alludes only once to the flu, noting that she "work[s] all day cleaning and disinfecting the house." Still, the pandemic seems to lessen the excitement of war news: Montgomery and Frede speak of the armistice on 11 November "without any exultation," and the author perceives that her friend is "dull and a little depressed." Montgomery's entries from this time almost exclusively concern Frede, in whom she finds "both emotional and intellectual companionship." Each night, the cousins "shut [them]selves up in the cosy sitting room[,] devour snacks, and talk and laugh at [their] pleasure." Following a day of childhood nostalgia, Montgomery reflects, "We were strangely, perfectly, weirdly happy. It will be a jolt to wake up tomorrow morning and find ourselves middle-aged women with husbands and endless responsibilities!" Finally, after returning to Leaskdale, the author writes forebodingly, "I am not easy about Frede. Her heart is not acting right. It has never been strong since the typhoid."[34] Montgomery's insistent focus on Frede and her declining health presages the revelation of her death two months later.

The "extensive use of narrative techniques such as character description, scene setting, flashbacks, and foreshadowing" that Janice Fiamengo notes throughout Montgomery's journal[35] also appears in the account of her visit to Park Corner, demonstrating the integral role revision played in her processing of Frede's death. The act of recording trauma narratives has long been a mechanism for coping with grief; as Brené Brown suggests, "Language shows us that naming an experience

doesn’t give the experience more power, it gives *us* the power of understanding and meaning.”[36] However, Cathy Caruth explains the difficulty of translating psychological suffering into articulate life writing:

> The transformation of the trauma into a narrative memory that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated, to be integrated into one’s own, and others’, knowledge of the past, may lose both the precision and the force that characterizes traumatic recall. … The capacity to remember is also the capacity to elide or distort. … Yet beyond the loss of precision there is another, more profound, disappearance: the loss, precisely, of the event’s essential incomprehensibility, the force of its *affront to understanding*.[37]

The evidence of revision in Montgomery’s journal entries from Park Corner suggests that the construction of a coherent narrative was essential to her understanding of Frede’s death. To believe a friend was tragically fated to die young is surely less painful than to count her one among millions lost to a global health crisis. In other words, Montgomery’s grief may have influenced the editorial decisions she made while transcribing her journal, causing her to foreground the last weeks of Frede’s life.

Indeed, one of the editorial decisions Montgomery made was the plotting of Frede's death, which appears to have been on the author's mind since the beginning of their friendship. Frede's case of influenza was her third encounter with a life-threatening illness. When she contracted typhoid fever in 1915, Montgomery "tried to face the thought of a world without" her: "I could not do it. With clenched hands I strode up and down the room wrestling with my agony. *Frede dying!* Frede, my more than sister, the woman who was nearest and dearest to me in the world! My mind refused to accept the decree."[38] In 1919, at Frede's side while she lay dying from flu, Montgomery begged her friend to remember a compact they had made long ago: "When, in the course of years, few or many, one of us died that one was to come back and appear to the survivor *if* it were possible to cross the gulf."[39] Jacques Derrida attributes this kind of proleptic mourning to two friends' shared knowledge of each other's mortality, insisting that "there is no friendship without this knowledge of finitude."[40] Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas refer to Derrida's theory as "the law of friendship—and thus of mourning," and they summarize his argument by explaining that "any friendship will have been structured from the very beginning by the possibility that one of the two would see the other die, and so, surviving, would be left to bury, to commemorate, and to mourn."[41] Montgomery understood and dreaded this possibility, as her frequent allusions to Frede's death, even years before its occurrence, demonstrate. Nevertheless, the structuring of Frede's near-death experiences in Montgomery's journal implies the author may have taken some creative liberties; for instance, despite there being "very little chance of [Frede's] recovery" from typhoid, she supposedly began to improve as soon as she saw Montgomery's face.[42] Montgomery's proleptic mourning for Frede was strong enough to warrant narrative construction in the author's journal, although when this construction took place is impossible to determine. Regardless, similar evidence of plotting exists in Montgomery's writing from around the time of Frede's actual death in January 1919.

The dramatic climax of Frede's death narrative occurs while Montgomery travelled to Boston to appear in court against her former publisher, L.C. Page. At this time, Frede was teaching at Macdonald College near Montreal and supervising the

Women's Institutes in Quebec.[43] Montgomery's journal entry from 19 January concludes, "I had a letter from Frede Friday night … urging me to stop off on my way back for a day or so. I must try to arrange it and have wired her to that effect." The following entry, dated 7 February at Leaskdale, begins with a startling revelation:

> On Saturday, January 25th, at seven o'clock in the morning Frederica Campbell MacFarlane [*sic*] died of flu-pneumonia in the infirmary of Macdonald College at St. Anne de Bellevue, Quebec. There, it is written! And I feel a strange relief. I have so dreaded the writing of it. Oh, my God, can it be true? It is unbelievable—impossible! It is too hideous to be true! It is true! And my heart is broken! Oh, how can I go on living?[44]

Montgomery then elaborates on the circumstances surrounding Frede's death. Shortly before leaving Boston, the author received word that her cousin had had influenza and was now seriously ill with pneumonia. Montgomery rushed to the college and was at Frede's side when she died two days later.

Montgomery's depiction of her last conversation with Frede is as poetic as it is devastating: "Again I bent over her. 'Frede,' I said earnestly, 'you won't forget your promise to come and see me, will you?' 'No,' she said. 'You'll be sure to come, won't you?' I insisted. 'Certainly,' she said, clearly and loudly. It was her last word."[45] The picture of Frede's death that Montgomery paints in her journal is one that considers

the reading pleasure of future readers, including that of the author herself. Montgomery periodically revisited old entries both as *aides-mémoire* and as reference material for retrospective life writing, such as her letters to Weber and MacMillan. Her use of adverbs such as “earnestly,” “clearly,” and “loudly” imbue the conversation with the sense of gravity it warrants. Referencing Montgomery’s journal descriptions of George Bernard Shaw’s *Saint Joan* (1923), Lesley D. Clement argues that the author “move[s] beyond self-fashioning to self-dramatization.” Clement notes that almost five years after Frede’s death, Montgomery attended a production of *Saint Joan* and concluded that “Shaw’s play is a ripe and wonderful thing; but I don’t think his Joan is the real Joan either. That Joan is still an enigma.” However, something about Shaw’s heroine reminded Montgomery of Frede and compelled her to reread her friend’s letters in the following days. Clement suggests the connection between Joan and Frede is in their infinite potential for interpretation: “Since she is an enigma, Joan’s story, like Frede’s—and Montgomery’s—can be told and retold—romantically, lyrically, satirically, farcically, comedically, tragically—and never be totally consumed.”46 More than mere constructions, Montgomery’s dramatizations of Frede’s life allow her to tell and retell her friend’s story with the depth of emotion it deserves. Whether “certainly” was truly Frede’s last word is irrelevant; it matters only insofar as it contributes to the narrative of her death and thus facilitates Montgomery’s grieving process.

In Montgomery’s letter to MacMillan from the following month, she attempts to express the magnitude of her grief: “I feel as if half my life has been torn away. … All the bereavements I have ever had, all put together, could not equal the agony of this loss.”47 Three months later, in her letter to Weber, she writes, “I feel as if half my life has been torn away and that I must go halt and maimed for the rest of my days.”48 She uses physical pain descriptors such as “torn,” “agony,” and “halt and maimed” to represent her psychological suffering. Unable to convey the extent of her loss, she employs what Scarry calls the “elemental ‘as-if’ of the person in pain.” 49 Montgomery came to rely on figurative language to describe her grief. She uses similar phrasing in the journal entry announcing Frede’s death: “How *can* I go on living when half my life has been wrenched away, leaving me torn and bleeding in

heart and soul and mind?”[50] This entry and Montgomery’s letter to MacMillan are dated within three weeks of each other, as if the author recovered from the shock of Frede’s death and immediately began constructing the narrative of her loss. In this way, letter-writing, along with journalling, seems to have contributed to the process of revision that enabled her work of mourning.

“No Thrill or Pleasure”: Neurasthenia, Mourning, and Melancholia

After Frede’s death, Montgomery began exhibiting symptoms of what would now be considered depression. These symptoms become part of her pain narrative as she attempts to define and communicate her feelings in writing. In her February 1919 letter to MacMillan, for example, she confides that the “first unbearable agony has passed and now life just seems gray and bleak … I look forward to the spring with no thrill or pleasure.”[51] As Jean Mitchell has discussed, Montgomery experienced such periods of despair for years before Frede’s death, blaming her suffering on neurasthenia, “the signature illness of the Victorian and early Edwardian eras.”[52] At the beginning of the twentieth century, neurasthenia referred to symptoms of nervous exhaustion, including anxiety, insomnia, fatigue, and migraines.[53] Montgomery’s bout of influenza exacerbated these symptoms: She writes in her journal in December 1918, “for a month after I got up I would cry if a door slammed or if I couldn’t find a hairpin when I was doing my hair!”[54] Later, she tells Weber, “up to Xmas I thought I was doomed to be a neurasthenic for the rest of my earthly existence.”[55] Fiamengo speculates that Montgomery “did not call her suffering *melancholia*, the nineteenth-century term for depression, probably to avoid the associations with mental disease attached to the term.”[56] Mitchell similarly suggests that a “diagnosis of neurasthenia could or would have reassured Montgomery that her nervous suffering was not due to mental illness but rather

signalled a depletion of her nervous energy."[57] Montgomery, an avid reader of texts on psychology and medicine, avoided the stigma of melancholia by diagnosing herself with neurasthenia; however, by the end of the nineteenth century, many North American psychiatrists regarded neurasthenia and melancholia as essentially synonymous.[58] Moreover, the symptoms of depression that Montgomery records after Frede's death meet many of the supposed criteria for melancholia, particularly as Freud reconceptualized the condition after the First World War.

Montgomery's journal entries and letters from the months following Frede's death illustrate the distinction between Freud's perceptions of mourning and melancholia: "In mourning, the world has become poor and empty, in melancholia it is the ego that has become so."[59] It is not merely that Montgomery lost a dear friend, but that she lost a part of herself. The author's repeated references to Frede as "half her life" denote something of a platonic marriage between the women: As Montgomery tells Weber, "I know only that I am left desolate, bereft of the comrade and soul-mate of many years."[60] In Freud's terms, Montgomery's cathexis to her abstracted love-object, Frede, prevents her from "freeing [her]self emotionally from the lost beloved."[61] Instead, she loses her sense of self. Responding to Freud, Judith Butler delineates the repercussions of losing someone to whom one has such strong emotional ties: "It is not as if an 'I' exists independently over here and then simply loses a 'you' over there, especially if the attachment to 'you' is part of what composes who 'I' am. If I lose you, under these conditions, then I not only mourn the loss, but I become inscrutable to myself. Who 'am' I, without you?"[62] Montgomery could not relinquish Frede because to do so would have meant relinquishing a part of herself; thus, as Freud theorizes, "it is by taking flight into the ego that love escapes abolition."[63] While the author's love for her "soul-mate" remained, so too did her unbearable grief.

Another symptom of Freudian melancholia that Montgomery exhibits in her life writing is “an insistent talkativeness, taking satisfaction in self-exposure.”64 She reveals her grief most explicitly in her journal, thirty pages of which are devoted to Frede’s life and death, complete with photographs, obituary clippings, and a copy of Frede’s college diploma. The journal entry begins as a detailed explanation of the days preceding Frede’s death but becomes something of a eulogy, highlighting the events of Frede’s life that Montgomery deemed most important. According to Butler, obituaries and eulogies function “as the instrument[s] by which grievability is publicly distributed.” They are the “means by which a life becomes, or fails to become, a publicly grievable life, … the means by which a life becomes noteworthy.” 65 Given Montgomery’s stated intention to publish her journal,66 Frede’s eulogy reads as an act of recognition, a public declaration that her life was noteworthy and is worth grieving. However, the eulogy is also a constructed narrative that likely underwent several rounds of revisions before appearing in its current form. Montgomery’s journal contains, as Lefebvre notes, “her version of how she wished to be remembered,”67 but it also contains her version of how she wished Frede to be remembered. Further, as I have argued, it contains her version of how she wished to remember Frede.

The life writing Montgomery produced after Frede’s death inhabits a lonely, liminal space: not quite private, not quite public. It has what Scarry identifies as “all the solitude of absolute privacy with none of its safety, all the self-exposure of the utterly public with none of its possibility for camaraderie or shared experience.”68 For contrast, reflecting on news of the Spring Offensive in 1918, Montgomery declares, “I am thankful that I learned it when I did and bore my share in the world’s great pain. … I would feel shame if I had spent that day in painless ignorance or dreaming calmly. It was better to share the pain of my fellow beings.”69 Montgomery derived comfort and a sense of duty from knowing that people everywhere shared her anxiety about the conflict. Conversely, her grief for Frede was not the collective mourning of the war but the secret anguish of a great personal loss. Countless people lost loved ones to the pandemic, yet Montgomery felt alone in her grief, revealing what Fiamengo calls “an egotistical insistence on

her greater pain, refusing to believe that others could have experienced equivalent losses."[70] As with her illness from influenza, Montgomery believed her suffering exceeded anything she or anyone else had experienced.

Periodically, Montgomery's private suffering penetrates her carefully crafted narrative of Frede's life. Partway through the eulogy, she draws a line beneath what she has written, then continues, "I take up my pen again, after a wild outbreak of tears. I must go on with this—must get it over. If I 'write it out' perhaps I will be better able to endure my pain."[71] The practice of "writing out" pain is common in Montgomery's journal and fiction.[72] As early as 1898, the author states that she has "always found that the writing out of a pain makes it at least bearable."[73] Referencing Scarry's model of language as the "unmaking of trauma," James Dawes argues that "to bring physical or psychic damage into language is to lift it out of the body or mind into the world, where it can be repaired or, at the very least, distanced. To transform pain into language is to exert control over it, to undo pain's original theft of our autonomy."[74] Montgomery exerted control over her pain by transforming it into language, but this transformation did not distance her from her suffering. Instead, it brought her closer to the object of her grief: At the end of the eulogy, she concludes, "It has been dreadful to write all this out. On every page I have had to stop and cry my heart out. And yet there has been a strange sad comfort in it—as if it brought me nearer to Frede to write thus of her—as if death and the grave were cheated for a little while."[75] In writing, if nowhere else, Montgomery felt near Frede despite the "gulf of separation" between them.[76] Exposing her grief in her journal and letters was integral to her work of mourning, but it did not emotionally free her from Frede.

Montgomery never explicitly mentions the pandemic in Frede's eulogy, choosing instead to focus on her friend's individual narrative. Nevertheless, minor details indicate the presence of a deadly and infectious disease. The author describes herself entering the sickroom "shrouded in mask and coverall" and notes that Frede's bedroom has been "disinfected and aired" after her death. Going through Frede's belongings, Montgomery finds a will and realizes her friend "had written it in October when the first flu panic had fallen on Macdonald [College]"; unlike Montgomery, Frede evidently recognized the severity of the flu even before catching it, maybe because she had faced death twice before. Finally, reflecting on their final moments together, Montgomery writes that "tears were pouring down [her] face under that stifling mask" while she tried to make one last joke with her best friend. 77 Even here, at the moment of Frede's death, Montgomery sets a dramatic scene worthy of the woman she knew and loved more than anyone else.

"A Totally New World": Conclusion

As McKenzie and Ledwell suggest, Frede "became Montgomery's war casualty; her grief at her cousin's loss would haunt her for the rest of her life."78 In a journal entry from 1939, three years before her own death, Montgomery reflects, "Frede has been dead for twenty years—and in all those years the pain of her loss has grown bearable but it has never ceased."79 The sense of closeness Montgomery derived from writing Frede's eulogy was temporary, as she admits in her 1919 letter to Weber: "Other friends say to me 'I feel that Frede is near me.' I who loved her best and was best loved by her, have no such feeling. The grave *hath* its sting, death *has* its victory—not perhaps over those who go, but for those and over those who remain."80 Journal entries from the end of Montgomery's life suggest she never completed her work of mourning, although Rae rightfully questions whether such a

project “is *possible* and, beyond that, whether it is ethically and politically *desirable* .”[81]

Indeed, in later publications, Freud himself “retreats from the position that the mental health of the mourner depends on severing all ties with the lost beloved.”[82] Six years after the publication of “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917), Freud’s four-year-old grandson Heinerle died, prompting the author to write in a letter, “I don’t think I have ever experienced such grief. … Fundamentally everything has lost its meaning for me.” Three years later, he asks in an addendum to *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (1926), “When does separation from an object produce anxiety, when does it produce mourning, and when does it produce, it may be, only pain?”[83] As Kathleen Woodward observes, Freud cannot answer this question, but in asking it, he introduces a theorization of “a pain which is irreducible, which is not assuaged by the process of mourning and the protocols of grief.”[84] This is the pain Montgomery felt with Frede’s death.

Montgomery concludes Frede’s eulogy by reflecting on the changes the war and pandemic have wrought on her sense of self: “I have lived one life in those seemingly far-off years before the war. Now there is another to be lived, in a totally new world where I think I shall never feel quite at home. I shall always feel as if I belonged ‘back there’—back there with Frede and laughter and years of peace.”[85] It is tempting to wish Montgomery had been able to complete her work of mourning, but to do so would be, as Rae suggests, ethically and politically undesirable. What Margaret E. Turner calls Montgomery’s continuous “re-living/re-reading/re-writing”[86] of Frede’s narrative kept her alive in the author’s mind, and the products of this process—Montgomery’s published journal and letters—keep her alive in ours.

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Banner Image: Frede Campbell posed beside tree in lane, ca.1890s. Park Corner, PEI. Digital image courtesy of Archival and Special Collections, University of Guelph. L.M. Montgomery Collection, XZ1 MS A097024. https://images.ourontario.ca/uoguelph/26172/data?n=81

- 1 Montgomery, *CJ* 4 (1 Dec. 1918): 68; (16 Mar. 1918): 10; 22 Mar. 1918): 10; (23 Mar. 1918): 10.
- 2 Montgomery, *CJ* 4 (1 Dec. 1918): 69.
- 3 Scarry, *Body* 4.
- 4 Rae, Introduction 16.
- 5 See, for examples, Edwards and Litster, “End of Canadian Innocence”; Epperly, *Fragrance of Sweet-Grass*; Lefebvre, “‘That Abominable War!’”; and McKenzie, “Women at War.”
- 6 McKenzie and Ledwell, Introduction 6.
- 7 Cavert, “‘To the Memory’” 43.
- 8 Fahrni and Jones, Introduction 12, 4.
- 9 Fahrni and Jones 4.
- 10 Humphries, *Last Plague* 4.
- 11 Fahrni and Jones 4, 6.
- 12 Montgomery, *CJ* 4 (17 Dec. 1918): 78.
- 13 Montgomery, *CJ* 4 (1 Dec. 1918): 68.
- 14 Scarry 4, 13.
- 15 Woolf, *On Being* 9.
- 16 Montgomery, *CJ* 4 (1 Dec. 1918): 68.
- 17 Montgomery, *CJ* 4 (1 Dec. 1918): 68–69.

- 18 Scarry 11 (emphasis in original).
- 19 Woolf 9.
- 20 Montgomery, *After Green Gables* 72–73, 67 (emphasis in original).
- 21 Tiessen and Tiessen, “Epistolary” 222.
- 22 Montgomery, *My Dear* 94.
- 23 Eakin, *Living* 4.
- 24 Woster, “Old Years” 161.
- 25 Montgomery, *My Dear* 94.
- 26 Montgomery, *After Green Gables* 73.
- 27 Scarry 54–55.
- 28 Montgomery, *My Dear* 93–94.
- 29 Montgomery, *CJ* 4 (1 Dec. 1918): 70.
- 30 See, for examples, Gammel, “Life Writing”; Steffler, “‘Being a Christian’”; Thompson, “Shadow”; and Turner, “‘I Mean to Try.’”
- 31 Brown and Lefebvre, “Archival” 376.
- 32 Montgomery, *CJ* 4 (2 Sept. 1919): 179.
- 33 Brown and Lefebvre 375–76.
- 34 Montgomery, *CJ* 4 (10 Nov. 1918): 72; (9 Nov. 1918): 71; (11 Nov. 1918): 73; (12 Nov. 1918): 76; (9 Nov. 1918): 72; (10 Nov. 1918): 72; (12 Nov. 1918): 76.
- 35 Fiamengo, “‘… The Refuge’” 180.
- 36 Brown, *Atlas* xxi (emphasis in original).
- 37 Caruth, “Recapturing” 151, 153–54 (emphasis in original).
- 38 Montgomery, *CJ* 3 (11 Apr. 1915): 183 (emphasis in original).
- 39 Montgomery, *CJ* 4 (7 Feb. 1919): 102 (emphasis in original).
- 40 Derrida, *Memoires* 29.
- 41 Brault and Naas, Introduction 1.
- 42 Montgomery, *CJ* 3 (11 Apr. 1915): 183–84.
- 43 Rubio, *Lucy Maud* 206–07.
- 44 Montgomery, *CJ* 4 (19 Jan. 1919): 92; (7 Feb. 1919): 93.
- 45 Montgomery, *CJ* 4 (7 Feb. 1919): 102.
- 46 Clement, “Toronto’s Cultural Scene” 257–58; the quotation from Montgomery is *CJ* 5 (10 Oct. 1924): 288.
- 47 Montgomery, *My Dear* 95–96.
- 48 Montgomery, *After Green Gables* 76.
- 49 Scarry 15.
- 50 Montgomery, *CJ* 4 (7 Feb. 1919): 103 (emphasis in original).
- 51 Montgomery, *My Dear* 96.

- 52 Mitchell, “L.M. Montgomery’s Neurasthenia” 112.
- 53 Misbach and Stam, “Medicalizing” 54.
- 54 Montgomery, *CJ* 4 (1 Dec. 1918): 69.
- 55 Montgomery, *After Green Gables* 72–73.
- 56 Fiamengo 174–75.
- 57 Mitchell 119.
- 58 Misbach and Stam 54.
- 59 Freud, “Mourning” 203, 206.
- 60 Montgomery, *After Green Gables* 76.
- 61 Rae 16.
- 62 Butler, “Violence” 22.
- 63 Freud 216.
- 64 Freud 207.
- 65 Butler 34.
- 66 Montgomery, *CJ* 5 (16 Apr. 1922): 25.
- 67 Brown and Lefebvre 376.
- 68 Scarry 53.
- 69 Montgomery, *CJ* 4 (31 Mar. 1918): 12.
- 70 Fiamengo 182.
- 71 Montgomery, *CJ* 4 (7 Feb. 1919): 98.
- 72 As discussed by Fiamengo and also Fishbane, “‘My Pen.’”
- 73 Montgomery, *CJ* 1 (8 Apr. 1898): 389.
- 74 Dawes, “Human” 48.
- 75 Montgomery, *CJ* 4 (7 Feb. 1919): 121–22.
- 76 Montgomery, *After Green Gables* 76.
- 77 Montgomery, *CJ* 4 (7 Feb. 1919): 97, 109, 110, 101.
- 78 McKenzie and Ledwell 8.
- 79 Montgomery, *SJ* 5 (15 June 1939): 341.
- 80 Montgomery, *My Dear* 96 (emphasis in original).
- 81 Rae 16 (emphasis in original).
- 82 Rae 16.
- 83 Freud qtd. in Woodward, “Late Theory” 87–88.
- 84 Woodward 88–89.
- 85 Montgomery, *CJ* 4 (7 Feb. 1919): 122–23.
- 86 Turner 95.

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