

IDENTITY AND NARRATIVE IN MUNRO'S LIVES OF GIRLS AND WOMEN

LIBERATING FEMALE IDENTITY AND NARRATIVE FROM THE CONFINES OF
MASCULINE DISCOURSE

In

ALICE MUNRO'S LIVES OF GIRLS AND WOMEN

By

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Abstract

An examination of contemporary feminist literary theory reveals that man's traditional association with culture has created a position of privilege from which men are encouraged to write, while women have been denied access to language and, therefore, must escape imprisoning conceptions of femininity before they are able to envision themselves as creators of culture.

In Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), Del Jordan is a young woman and developing artist who struggles against objectification to achieve a sense of her own creative autonomy. Del's quest for authorial power effectively marginalizes her in Jubilee. However, she welcomes the freedom implied by this marginalization and encourages it through acts of social indiscretion and, later, through sexuality.

Del's quest for freedom through sexuality ultimately parallels her quest for a language, or narrative voice, which challenges the confines of masculine discourse. As Del matures beyond the illusions generated by fantasy and love, she realizes that her own sense of identity and her creativity are the only true sources of salvation. The creative vision that Del fosters throughout the novel acknowledges and reconciles paradoxes, and, thereby, rejects the binary schemes and imprisoning labels that patriarchy has traditionally used to limit and contain female identity.

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I dedicate this work to the memory of my father and friend, James Lenard Martin (September 16, 1920 - August 17, 1995).

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| Title Page | i |
| Descriptive Note | ii |
| Abstract | iii |
| Acknowledgements | iv |
| Table of Contents | v |
| | |
| Introduction | 1 |
| | |
| Chapter I: The Female Artist's Struggle to Assert Subjectivity | 10 |
| | |
| Chapter II: Sexuality and the Birth of Feminine Language | 32 |
| | |
| Chapter III: Reclaiming Narrative and the Challenge to Tradition | 52 |
| | |
| Conclusion | 72 |
| | |
| Bibliography | 76 |

Introduction

In a *Bildungsroman* the development of a central character, traditionally male, is followed from adolescence to maturity (Holman 55). Novels such as Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* (1860-1) and Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh* (1903) have become standard examples of this frequently autobiographical novel type. A closely related form is the *Künstlerroman*, such as James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), which examines the life of a young individual destined to be an artist (Heble 49). However, in *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), Alice Munro challenges these forms as well as the assumption of male superiority that they propagate by making Del Jordaq's development as both a woman and an artist the subject of her novel. By using a conventional form to foreground the lives of girls and women and the experiences of a young female artist, Munro, in an act of subversion, places the marginalized female voice at the center of the text. Linda Hutcheon argues that Canadian women writers, like Alice Munro, have actually redefined the novel by challenging its traditional structures and themes (226).

Munro revises the traditional *bildungsroman* in *Lives of Girls and Women* in that the protagonist is on a quest, not to find her place within patriarchal society or within a masculine literary tradition, but to establish an identity

and artistic vision which transcend patriarchal logic and which reject the confinement that conventional culture imposes on the female voice. Because Munro's work advances this revisionist archetype by placing the lives of marginalized women at the center of her novel, the themes of *Lives of Girls and Women* are best illuminated if the work is read in conjunction with feminist theory which traces patterns in the writing of women, both past and present.

Del's journey toward maturity involves a constant battle against traditional and imprisoning conceptions of femininity which govern both female sexuality and writing. Munro's portrait of a female writer's quest for freedom from cultural restraints challenges the traditional *Bildungsroman*, which typically celebrates a young male character's incorporation into the world of culture. Annis Pratt notes that the woman's novel of development is characterized by "antithetical images of freedom, on the one hand, and constriction on the other: of running around over fields and moving freely through forests versus images of suffocation, dwarfing and atrophy" (Pratt 161-2). This dualism is evident in *Lives of Girls and Women*: the natural world offers Del the freedom to explore her sexuality, while persistent images of suffocation reveal the insubstantiality of freedom in a patriarchal society. Ultimately, Del realizes that language and writing provide the only escape from social constraints that is not illusory. Del abandons the rigid definitions, hierarchies and binary schemes which characterize masculine discourse, in favour of a voice which is "open and expressive of possibilities, and void of any fixed meaning" (Heble 73).

It is through this voice, then, that Del signals her rejection of patriarchal language and modes of thought which trap and negate her female identity.

Traditionally, however, women's words have been silenced by patriarchy in an effort to secure a position of superiority and privilege for men. Jacques Lacan's theory of sexuality and language provides an example of how discourse is celebrated as a masculine privilege to which women are denied access. Lacan identifies the young child's detachment from the mother and subsequent attachment to the father as a movement to the world of language, the 'Symbolic State' (Bennett 238). According to Lacan, the female child can never truly join the world of the 'Symbolic State' because she is unable to identify completely with her father. In short, because she is not male. In Lacan's theory, then, sexual difference is the rationale for excluding women from the source of culture in their society. However, French feminists, such as Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, argue that women have developed a language of their own, which reflects their unique sexuality. Smaro Kamboureli asserts that it is against the masculine impulse to label and categorize, against the "closure of definition," that the female body speaks (Kamboureli 32). Indeed, both the body and language are explored by Del as sources of difference which free her from the gender constructions which have been traditionally employed to silence women. Mary Jacobus suggests that "it is in language -- that femininity at once discloses and discomposes itself, endlessly displacing the fixity of gender identity by the play of difference and

division which simultaneously creates and uncreates gender, identity, and meaning" (24). In other words, while patriarchy employs language to immobilize the female, through closed definitions of femininity, women reclaim language for the purpose of celebrating difference which, in turn, generates space for alternative expressions of selfhood.

In light of Lacan's theory, it is appropriate that Barbara Godard, in *Gynocritics*, identifies patriarchal discourse as the "discourse of exclusion" (2). She observes that the concepts of hierarchy and categorization, at the heart of masculine discourse, emerge from the notion of sexual difference. Robert Scholes suggests, "It is in the differentiation of the sexes that we learn our earliest and deepest lessons about sameness and difference. Sexual differentiation is the basis not only of our social systems, but of our logic as well. If there were three sexes, our computers would not have begun to think in terms of binary oppositions" (Godard, *Gynocritics* 4). However, the binary oppositions which make up this mode of logic fail women because the dichotomies are used for the valorization of the positive pole, the masculine attribute (17). In other words, in the oppositions between woman and man, nature and culture, and passivity and activity, masculinity and its attributes are celebrated through the negation of femininity. From the perspective of psycho-analytic theory, binary logic seems fundamental to masculinity, while women, in their thinking process, consider connections as well as oppositions. Some theorists believe that this perceived difference between male

and female patterns of logic occurs during the formation of the ego since, during its development, the female must develop a relationship to her mother that involves the recognition of similarity as well as of difference, whereas the young male "makes only the latter distinction in the formation of his ego" (Godard 12). Therefore, the female establishes a vision of self as both child and potential mother. This vision extends into the life of the artist since, rather than adopting a narrow vision based on oppositions, she acknowledges the paradoxical, unpredictable, and inexplicable possibilities in life, and thereby challenges the binary logic rooted in male discourse.

The development of the female artist is a difficult process since she must first struggle to develop some understanding of self that disregards the gender biases of our culture; and, secondly, she must establish a narrative voice which reflects that new-found conception of selfhood. Donna E. Smyth argues that "the assertion of subjectivity is the first aesthetic act" (32). Similarly, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar agree that "the creative "I AM" cannot be uttered if the "I" knows not what it is" (17). However, the difficulty in establishing subjectivity arises when social definitions of femininity interfere with the artist's sense of her own identity. In *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1984), Gilbert and Gubar reveal how traditional definitions of femininity often inhibit the female artist from catching a glimpse of her unique being. Once awareness is established, however, the artist must struggle to create a language, and generate a narrative, which does not compromise the vision of self that

the artist has striven to achieve. Sexuality, then, is an important aspect of the process of self-actualization since it functions, French feminists argue, as a highly reliable and relatively untainted form of self-expression or self-narrative.

Sexuality represents the moment of convergence, the point at which the self as body and the self as artistic expression converge. Joseph Gold acknowledges the benefits of such commingling when he states that it is the movement "back and forth between the poles of sensation and language" which makes the reader "conscious of a female consciousness being created" in *Lives of Girls and Women* (7). Del's sexuality is ultimately a metaphor for her growing artistic awareness. Her journey into the world of experience through the body signals her simultaneous entrance into the world of language. Barbara Godard summarizes the relationship between the body and language, between identity and narrative expression, when she comments that the female artist "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" (Godard 43). The objective of this quest is to free the female identity from confinement by creating an alternative definition of woman which celebrates her as "multiple, decentered, and undefinable" (Moi 147). By resisting definitions which limit their potential, women free themselves to explore a multitude of possible identities. Accordingly, Del fashions her artistic vision around a notion of selfhood which celebrates difference. Therefore, she refutes binary oppositions, which limit both female identity

and narrative expression, in favour of a voice which acknowledges possibilities and reconciles paradoxes.

In her development as an artist, Alice Munro, like Del, was forced to overcome the gender constructions which identify creativity as a masculine attribute. Though Munro was obsessed with writing from about the age of fourteen, she felt the need to hide and protect her interest in art. Even when she was married she would "lie and claim to be sewing sitting-room curtains rather than say she had stayed home to work on a story" (Ross 65). Indeed, she told one interviewer in 1973 that she "can't write if there is another adult in the house," and adds "it must be that I'm still embarrassed about it somehow" (Ross 67). The female writer's sense of embarrassment about writing is strongly linked, in *Lives of Girls and Women*, with a sense of shame about female sexuality. Munro's embarrassment about her own writing is a symptom of the battle that was raging within herself, between her desire to write and her desire to be a mother. Munro attempted to fulfill her traditional roles, while simultaneously pursuing, in isolation, her creative endeavors. She confesses: "I had a long training in duplicity and confidence, and I led a double life" (Ross 55). Duplicity is a source of power in *Lives of Girls and Women*, since it enables the protagonist to resist attempts by certain males to fix and define her identity. Likewise, doubleness is a defence mechanism employed by the female artist which enables her and her language to escape the trappings of binary logic.

However, though Munro has been able to pursue her art and raise a family, she feels that she has always been torn between society's definition of womanhood and her own; between the life of appearances, and the real, secret life of the artist (Ross 19). This tension is generated, in part, by our culture, which discourages women from pursuing alternative roles. In an interview with Harold Harwood, Munro comments that she received letters, after the publication of *Lives of Girls and Women*, suggesting that she "didn't deserve to be called a woman" (Miller 135). Munro believed that the novel's language and subject matter somehow violate the public's perception of how women should write. Munro found the comment interesting and wondered if "innocent" and "purifying influence" are the social definitions of "woman" against which her writing was struggling. However, Munro's success as a writer is, to some degree, owing to the fact that she paid very little attention to social censure from the beginning of her career. She comments: "All through the fifties I was living in a dormitory suburb, having babies, and writing wasn't part of the accepted thing for a girl or woman to do at that time... but it never occurred to me that I should stop" (Horwood 127). So, Munro practiced her writing secretly, her creativity was a vehicle of self-expression and freedom that she could not deny.

It is useful to examine *Lives of Girls and Women* in light of Gilbert and Gubar's study of the female writers of the nineteenth century because Munro's work is, in many ways, a reaction against a social ideology similar to that of the

Victorian era, which limited female freedom and creativity by encouraging a confining concept of femininity. Biological determinism and belief in the intellectual inferiority of women generated a position from which women found it almost impossible to express their creativity. Munro examines the implications of this legacy of repression, by examining the struggle of a developing female artist of the twentieth century who is plagued by the same imprisoning images of female passivity and selflessness which haunted her literary predecessors and gave rise to the frustrations which generated their alter-ego: the mad woman in the attic.

Chapter One

The Female Artist's Struggle to Assert Subjectivity

In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar examine in great detail the "anxiety of authorship" experienced by female writers of the nineteenth century. Though such anxiety has noticeably subsided in female literature of the late twentieth century, the traditional conceptions of femininity that gave rise to this anxiety continue to inhibit the contemporary artist and her work. Gilbert and Gubar rightly suggest that female literary angst is generated, in part, by competing definitions of selfhood. They argue that "self-definition necessarily precedes self-assertion But for the female artist the essential process of self-definition is complicated by all those patriarchal definitions that intervene between herself and herself" (17). In other words, they suggest that it is difficult for the female artist to cultivate creativity within the self, when, according to societal definitions of femininity, creativity is a function of the female body, not the mind.

The discovery and development of the creative self is the dominant theme of *Lives of Girls and Women*. Barbara Godard suggests that the novel is typical of the "self-reflexive" or "self-begetting" novel in which a hero struggles to realize

an identity as novelist . . . begetting both self and body, in a continuing effort to capture the complexity of one's own reality" (49). ¶ In *Lives of Girls and Women*, Del struggles to achieve a self-definition that rejects conventional definitions of femininity and, thereby, frees her to pursue her artistic vision. Del's process of self-definition is constantly challenged by the concept of gender prevalent in her culture. * H el ene Cixous argues that the criteria for, and distinction between, masculinity and femininity are the product of patriarchal ideology. Society reinforces a binary split between these constructs by associating women with nature and passivity, and men with action and culture (Moi 104). In the novel, Del must battle a growing realization that she is unable to conform to the definition of femininity prescribed by society, though she is constantly exposed to propaganda that society uses to enforce this definition. When she hears a song on the radio, "the girl that I marry will have to be, as soft and pink as a nursery," Del recognizes that the words are "telling" her that she "would have to, have to, learn" how to be feminine (150). Del's suggestion that one learns to be feminine rejects society's long standing interpretation of femininity as a biological product of femaleness. That Del is uncharacteristically female is revealed when she confesses, "Well-groomed girls frightened me to death" (149). This revelation highlights the problem with binary oppositions which attempt to categorize women and men according to sexual difference, as well as the dislocation experienced by those who fail to fit the gender moulds that society has created.

Del is initially unable to accept her place outside the socially defined concept of "feminine" behaviour. When Del goes to the Gay-la Hall dance with Naomi, she attempts to conform to the images of femininity that society has generated. Del says, "I wore a crinoline, harsh and scratchy on the thighs, and a long-line brassière that was supposed to compress my waist but which actually pinched my midriff and left a little bulge beneath that I had to tighten my plastic belt over" (155). This description is riddled with images of pain which illustrate the suffering and confinement experienced by women who struggle under the oppressive burden of social acceptability. Her true identity, like her body, is confined by the artificiality which such conformity demands. This artificiality is reinforced by the description of Del's lipstick as "thickly painted, as an icing flower on a cake" (155). Having compromised her true identity, she has become a mere product of her society's teachings and as such she becomes an object fit for consumption by the eyes of men. That she allows her identity to be consumed and subsumed by masculine standards of femininity is suggested when Del, dancing with Clive, says "all I could think of to do was get some idea of this person he thought he was dancing with and pretend to be her-- somebody small, snappy, bright, flirtatious" (156). However, Del is ultimately unwilling and unable to exist within the confines of "femininity" as dictated by society. The confinement Del experiences gives rise to a need for escape. So, after leaving Bert's room to use the washroom, Del descends the fire escape, and walks home. Her escape becomes

a metaphor for the need to free herself from the restrictions imposed on her identity by male expectation as well as from her own temptation to fulfil those expectations in the name of social acceptance.

In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, themes of confinement and escape are seen as representations of the nineteenth-century artist's sense of her own limitations, as well as her longing for freedom from patriarchal society. In *Lives of Girls and Women*, Del's confinement within Jerry Storey's basement reflects the manner in which women are imprisoned by socially accepted notions of femininity. The confinement of her naked body within the dark cellar parallels the humiliation she experiences as a result of Mrs. Storey's assumption that Del's relationship with Jerry is sexual and her insistence on placing the responsibility for pregnancy with Del. She says, "you mustn't get into trouble . . . I don't agree that it's the boy's responsibility" (167-8). This notion of female culpability is reinforced when Del is forced to hide in the cellar, though it was Jerry who had demanded that she take her clothes off. Del's confinement becomes a metaphor for the way in which notions of female culpability for acts of sexual transgression denigrate women by inferring their immorality, while men are absolved of responsibility. Though Del longs to take on all kinds of experiences without consequence, as her mother says that men do, she soon realizes that society won't allow her to do the same. She discovers that only through "ingenuity and indirection" (Gilbert and Gubar 83) can she avoid the confinement, the

locked basements, which deny women the freedom to gain the experience necessary to achieve the knowledge essential to establish a true definition of self.

Gilbert and Gubar argue that duplicity is essential to the liberation of female identity. They suggest that duplicity implies creativity since it reveals that women have both the ability and "power to create themselves as characters" (16). Destabilizing images of femininity reject the extreme identities generated by male authors, which have denied female individuality and subjectivity. In *Lives of Girls and Women*, Munro reinforces the idea of a destabilized or unknowable female identity by offering portraits of complex characters which are deceptively flat. For example, Mary Agnes seems simple-minded and therefore limited and knowable, until the reader discovers that she approaches the mystery of death without fear or reservation. Del comments that Mary Agnes laid her hand over the eye of the dead cow "with a tender composure that was not like her" (38). It is because of this incident that Del realizes the ambiguity underlying human nature. The rigid binaries of conventional thought fail to account for such subtleties and complexities of life. They fail, also, to reconcile the image of Miss Farris "floating face down, unprotesting, in the Wawanash River" (118) with her eccentric vitality. Both Del and Naomi had felt that the phrase *Con brío* "wound her up" (109); however, Del later acknowledges Miss Farris's suicide as a defiant act which enables her to break free of the labels, mistaken perceptions and assumptions which limited her identity. Another reality that Del is forced to confront is

the "indigestible fact" (74), that the jovial and seemingly benign Uncle Bill is, in fact, the boy who tortured her mother: the boy "gifted in cruelty, so cunning, quick, fiendish, so much to be feared" (74). Also, Del realizes the danger of rigid categories that deny the complexity of human nature when she dreams that her father becomes her family's executioner. With this dream Del reveals a growing awareness of the complex dynamic that exists between good and evil, between the strange and familiar. Her dream challenges patriarchal assumptions because, as a system, binary thought offers no way to reconcile the familiar face and kind disposition of her father with the horror of his proposed actions. So, the banality of evil and other irreconcilable realities become crucial revelations in Del's quest to formulate a vision of self and art which denies polar opposites in favour of a complex model of human nature.

Any attempt to fix and define female identity perpetuates the modes of imprisonment which made it difficult for women of past generations to realize their true potential. French feminist Julia Kristeva is careful to qualify her reference to "woman" as "that which cannot be represented, what is not said, what remains above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies" (Jones 363). Woman is constantly struggling to free herself from the definitions that society has imposed upon her. Gilbert and Gubar recognize "a common, female impulse to struggle free from social and literary confinement through strategic redefinition of self" (73). That Del longs to exist beyond the confines of the norms which dictate her identity is revealed in her relationship with Uncle Benny and

her appetite for the freedom that his marginality promises. Even the news to which Uncle Benny has access reveals a world other than the one that Del experiences in mainstream society. Del devours trashy magazines with their unbelievable headlines and says, "I was bloated and giddy with revelations of evil, of its versatility and grand invention and horrific playfulness. But the nearer I got to our house the more this vision faded" (4). It is by revelling in these absurd fictions that Del experiences imaginative freedom. However, as she moves away from the margins, she is forced to confront the uninspiring reality and propriety of home. Here, the real denies the power of the unreal, and imaginative creativity is inhibited by details and by fact. Del is confused about why all the details of home, "the plain black wall" and "the pale chipped brick," make it seem doubtful that a woman would send her husband's remains to his girlfriend in South Carolina. Like phallogocentric discourse, which suffocates imagination through its insistence on naming and labelling, Del's home is stifling in that small, imposing facts prevent the imaginative freedom made possible through fiction. Del looks to the papers and the "revelations of evil" they inspire as means of escaping the confines of masculine discourse.

Del's quest for social ostracism is intimately connected with her need to free herself from socially prescribed definitions of femininity so that she can come to an understanding of her own subjectivity. As with Benny's

newspapers, Del continues to seek freedom through acts of evil such as biting Mary Agnes. Del says "When I bit Mary Agnes I thought I was biting myself off from everything. I thought I was putting myself outside . . . hate seemed to me so much to be coveted, then, like a gift of wings" (46). Del undermines her social acceptability through this asocial act, in an effort to place herself outside convention. However, she is devastated to realize that her act had not freed her, but merely rendered her a "borderline case," a badly brought up "member of the family" (48). Such a label places her on the periphery, rather than outside the family dynamic, and ultimately proves more confining than liberating.

As a young adolescent, Del discovers that the danger of ← masculine discourse is its desire to pin things down. She experiences the limitations that this type of discourse can impose on female identity, when boys use language to denigrate her. Del says that the names boys called girls were dangerous in that they "stripped away freedom to be what you wanted, reduced you to what it was they saw" (98). By degrading female sexuality, boys deny girls the possibilities inherent in sexual freedom and creativity. In contrast, the operetta provides a departure from patriarchal norms that allows the "ritualized hostility between boys and girls" to crack "in a hundred places" (111). Under the spell of Miss Farris and the Operetta, mechanistic reality and the binary oppositions of patriarchal discourse give way to imaginative possibilities. Del speaks of her immersion in this world of the imagination as a "devotion to the manufacture of what was not true" (110). However, the return to the world of

patriarchal reality and its unimaginative predictability is signaled by Mr. McKenna's uninspired maxims: *Noses to the grindstone, shoulders to the wheel, feet on the pedals* (116).

A return to the real world, inevitably implies a return to socially generated discrimination against women. "Munro parodies society's distinction between male and female identities, in the text, through a magazine article in which a psychiatrist indicates that the difference between the thinking patterns of boys and girls is readily apparent in the thoughts of a boy and girl sitting on a park bench and looking at the moon: "The boy thinks of the universe, its immensity and mystery; the girl thinks, 'I must wash my hair'" (150). This psychiatrist's limited perception of femaleness is as imprisoning and dangerous as the obscenities hurlled at Del by the boys on their bikes. Del is upset when she reads this article, but even more upset by the fact that her negative response places her in a position of agreement with her mother. She fears that through such an agreement she might somehow be associated with her mother's "virginal brusqueness" (150). Del feels that if she accepts social norms she is denied intellectual prowess, but if she rejects them she is destined to a life of loneliness and marginalization. Confronted with this either/or proposition, Del comments, "I wanted men to love me, and I wanted to think of the universe when I looked at the moon" (150). Del struggles at this moment and throughout the text to achieve a balance between her need to be herself and her need to be accepted. Here the word "and" signals Del's rejection of rigid oppositions, and simultaneously validates Del's

contradictory impulses (Hoy 105). In other words, Del's desire for both subjectivity and acceptance challenges the status quo which demands that the female artist forfeit the former to gain the latter.

That women internalize the extreme definitions of femininity that society perpetuates is evident in Del's feelings about Mrs. McQuade, one of the town prostitutes. Del says, "I thought of her as having gone right beyond human functioning into a condition of perfect depravity, at the opposite pole from sainthood but similarly isolated, unknowable" (128). However, Del ultimately resists the patriarchal dichotomies established by both the church and her mother. Though Del's mother is not religious, she supports the distinction between sin and sainthood, bad and good, by advocating different social realities for men and women. She believes that women are supposed to be cautious, while men are "able to go out and take on all kinds of experiences and shuck off what they [don't] want and come back proud" (147). By deciding that she will do the same as men, Del unconsciously achieves the union between "masculine" and "feminine" necessary for creativity to thrive (Bailey 115). Virginia Woolf, Bailey recalls, insisted that "some collaboration has to take place in the mind between the woman and the man before the art of creation can be accomplished. Some marriage of opposites has to be consummated" (Bailey 118). Del crosses traditional lines governing gender-appropriate behavior and thereby embarks on a vision of selfhood which ignores the confining binaries of patriarchal

society that render any consummation of opposites impossible.

The stifling confinement inflicted upon women, which Gilbert and Gubar perceive in literature by women of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, emerges in *Lives of Girls and Women* in a unique manifestation. The deprivation of oxygen as well as certain respiratory ailments function as a metaphor in the text for female imprisonment and the suffocation of the female identity at the hands of patriarchy. Mary Agnes, Del's cousin, is retarded as a result of a lack of oxygen in the birth canal. Del's uncle Bob is partly responsible for her condition since he held his wife's legs together on the way to the hospital because the doctor had told them she might hemorrhage. Del says, "I shied away from the implication that this was something that could happen to anyone, that I myself might have been blunted, all by lack of some namable, measurable, ordinary thing, like oxygen" (33). On one level, the holding together of the mother's legs and the child's lack of oxygen becomes a metaphor for the silencing of female creativity and the attempt to censure and confine the products of that creativity. Also, Mary Agnes has severe bronchitis, a respiratory condition which resulted when she was stripped and left naked, in the mud, by a group of boys. The objectification of the female body evidenced by this story of life-threatening exposure is used by Ada Jordan as an analogy for the degradations of sex. Another example, in which a respiratory ailment is a metaphor for the suffocating effect of certain traditional assumptions, is presented in the figure of "asthmatic Violet Toombs" who is forced to leave

town because she had sex with Dale McLaughlin. Though the narrator hints that Violet was raped by Dale, Naomi, in the voice of patriarchal logic, says that in such cases "its the girl's fault" because "A boy can't help himself" (112). Society, then, burdens and exhausts women with disgrace even when they are the victims. Female sexuality is to blame because, while men supposedly can't control themselves, women should exercise responsibility.

In addition to these examples, the drownings in the novel raise the theme of suffocation. Ajay Heble cites Del's reference to the "exhausting effort" Miss Farris makes in the preparation of the operettas to point out that the word "exhaust" suggests want of breath and says that want of breath "is the final cause of her death" (63). However, because breath has been traditionally linked with creativity and spirituality, Miss Farris's exhaustion suggests that her creativity, her notion of romance without realism, was ultimately self-destructive. Breathlessness, then, signifies a stifling of creative powers. The association of breathlessness and confinement is continued in Del's description of her near drowning. She compares her reaction to being submerged to that of a person being "buried alive" (198). However, while the women who commit suicide make an active choice to end their lives, Del makes the decision to preserve her life. Upon escaping Garnet's hold, Del leaves the water "shaking, gasping, drinking air" (198). Again the denial of oxygen reflects the suffocation of Del's identity under Garnet French and his expectations of marriage and children. Del's comment, "I felt my old self . . . beginning

to breathe again" (199) suggests that she has freed her identity from the suffocation imposed by her relationship with Garnet.

The references to breathing, in the text, draw attention to the fine line existing between creative inspiration and suffocation, between rebirth and death. In other words, if the new trend in Canadian literature involves the archetypal rebirth of the heroine, as Linda Hutcheon suggests, and if the trend in female language is a revolt against traditional forms of male discourse, Munro addresses the risk involved in the battle for a female voice. The birth canal is an excellent metaphor for the emergence of the creative woman. Just as the creative waters can give life, they can also take life away. Munro's metaphor suggests that for every woman who is reborn through creativity, another woman is defeated in her battle to negotiate the creative waters. Indeed, the female characters in the novel can be separated into two lists: survivors and non-survivors. Del refers to her aunt Moira as one of those "wrecked survivors of the female life with stories to tell" (34). In addition to a dropped womb and cysted ovaries, her aunt's legs are wrapped in rubberized bandages which are only permitted to "breathe" when she rolls down her stockings (34). Here, the deterioration and asphyxiation of the physical body are metaphors for the immobilization of female identity, which takes place when a woman submits to the rigors of marriage and child-bearing. In other words, women who take on such roles become defined by them, and are not permitted to move beyond them. Del says

"Not much could be said for marriage, really, if you were to compare her with her sisters, who could still jump up so quickly, [and] who still smelled fresh and healthy" (34). Grace's and Elspeth's movement and vitality are indicative of the freedom experienced by women who, by refusing to marry, challenge the social definition of femininity. Despite Moira's condition, however, she is a survivor. Characters like Miss Farris, on the other hand, lack the ironic detachment necessary to prevent the creative woman from succumbing to the pressures of society.

Del's survival depends on her ability to escape the imprisoning definitions of femininity which society imposes on women. In the figure of Jerry Storey, Munro reveals the consequences of conforming to socially dictated roles and behaviors. Jerry, Del says, "was what he seemed" (166). Del says that there was "something admirable, an odd, harsh grace about the way he conformed to type, accepting his role in Jubilee, his necessary and gratifying absurdity, with a fatalism, even gallantry" (166). Del, on the other hand, says that her "natural boundaries were so much more ambiguous" (166). However, despite the freedom that multiplicity and ambiguity provide, Del senses something restful about being able to conform to type. Naomi, like Jerry, has accepted her role as defined by society. She accepts a secretarial job and involves herself with a group of friends whose conversations involve typical "girl talk": "diets, skin-care routines, hair shampooing methods, clothes, [and] diaphragms" (149). However, it is ultimately Naomi's willing conformity to social norms that leads to her

confinement. Faced with pregnancy, Naomi must marry to maintain her social acceptance. For Del, marriage is a less desirable fate than living as a writer in the nineteenth century. She says "I was not going to be able to do it. No. Better Charlotte Brontë" (161). Del has a romantic vision of "a nineteenth-century sort of life, walks and studying, rectitude, courtesy, maidenhood, peacefulness" (161). However, though Del has idealized Victorian life to the point that she would rather live in the nineteenth century, Del is ultimately forced to confront the imprisoning reality of Victorian values in her relationship with Garnet French.

Earlier in the novel, Del's mother quotes from Tennyson to express her sense of the objectification of women that has predominated in both the past and present. When speaking of woman's relationship with men, Addie quotes: "'He shall hold thee, when his passion shall have spent its novel force,/A little closer than his dog, a little dearer than his horse'" (147). It is no coincidence, then, that Del envisions herself as a Tennysonian heroine when she becomes involved in a relationship with a man who tries to force her to play the role of the ideal Victorian woman: passive, docile, and above all selfless (Moi 58). Women in the nineteenth century were expected to willingly assume the role of the weak and passive feminine other to the point of physical or mental illness. Tennyson's Mariana, perhaps the most passive and pining of all his fictional women, represents the vision of femininity against which women writers of the nineteenth century were battling.

Del's identification with Mariana suggests her

vulnerability to the traditional vision of female weakness. Indeed, Lorraine York suggests that when Del looks at herself in the mirror she acknowledges that her relationship with Garnet has nearly put her into "the mould of the passive Tennysonian heroine" (York 214). Upon looking at her image in the mirror Del comments, "I was amazed to think that the person suffering was me, for it was not me at all . . . I was watching. I was suffering" (200). Here, Del sees herself as suffering subject as well as an objective observer of herself as subject. She, then, quotes a line from "Mariana": "'He cometh not,' she said" (200). By including "she said" Del makes reference to herself in the third person and thereby reinforces the duality implied by her identity as both sufferer and objective observer. By becoming narrator of her own story and maintaining ironic detachment, rather than remaining the suffering subject of a masculine narrative, Del claims her power and identity as both a woman and an artist. Barbara Godard supports this idea of duality by suggesting that the words are said both with sincerity and irony: the jilted woman is hurt and mournful, the independent self is determined to break the mould of femininity which places women in victim positions (Godard 68).

However, perhaps vulnerability is not a victim position, but a genuine and powerful manifestation of female identity. The multi-faceted female self, Bronwen Wallace argues, is the source of female strength in the novel. She suggests that while women keep in touch with their vulnerability, by recognizing in themselves the potential to be daughter as

well as mother, men deny their "weaker younger selves, which were once dominated by the woman as mother" (Wallace 56). Wallace considers the distinction between "women's ability to maintain their various selves, and men's need to deny or control them" as crucial to the development of certain themes in Munro's work (56). Because the female acknowledges both strength and weakness, her identity has a duality which rejects the confines generated by the male drive to suppress alternative expressions of masculinity. In an interview with Geoff Hancock, Munro confirms this duality within herself when she says, "I feel I am two rather different people, two very different women" (103). So, though Gilbert and Gubar argue that the female writer secretly seeks to unify herself by "coming to terms with her own fragmentation" (76), unity is not necessarily a precursor of self-definition. In fact, the fragmentation and multiplicity of the female identity render it infinite and undefinable.

¶ Munro's sensitivity to the notion of selfhood as an elusive, unknowable and, consequently, powerful entity is suggested by her reluctance to affirm the autobiographical nature of her own text. She asserts that the novel is autobiographical in "form, not in fact" (Ross 69), but goes on to reveal that "the emotional reality, the girl's feeling for her mother, for men, for life" is all somewhat autobiographical (Ross 69). Other similarities between Munro and her protagonist include the fact that Alice's mother was a teacher who shared Ada Jordan's interest in education. Similarly, like Del's father, Munro's father bred foxes for a time. Like Del, Munro was raised in a rural town, and both

share an early preoccupation with gothic romance. Del's first attempt at novel writing definitely contains gothic elements, while Munro describes her first novel as "imitation *Wuthering Heights*" (Blodgett 3). Despite these obvious connections, Munro makes a careful distinction between the "incidents" of a story and its "core" (2). E. D. Blodgett interprets this distinction by considering "Munro's awareness of her life as analogous to that of her fiction, each possessing a core, which is the fundamental matter that they share" (2). It seems, ultimately, that Munro's refusal to acknowledge more than a passing association between herself and her protagonist indicates the author's attempt to protect and ensure her own individuality. To suggest that she is Del Jordan is to surrender her identity as an object to be scrutinized and possessed by the reader, an action which violates the definition of selfhood that she struggles so valiantly to assert in the text.

It is during the mock baptism that Munro highlights the reader's awareness that the most powerful identity is one which defies both definition and possession. Prior to this initiation, Del is confronted with the limited range of options offered to women when she discovers that Naomi is pregnant and soon to be married. Del, who believes in the freedom generated by alternatives, tells Naomi that she doesn't have to get married, that she could "go to Toronto--" and give her baby up for adoption (195). Del's subsequent refusal to be baptised, then, signals her rejection of the conventional identity of wife and mother which society has forced upon Naomi and which Garnet attempts to force on her.

Consistent with the fixing of identities which takes place in masculine discourse, Del reveals that Garnet has attempted to shape her identity to suit himself. She says, "he rearranged me, took just what he needed, to suit himself" (183). However, Del confesses that she had done the same with him. Del admits that her power was gained by keeping Garnet in play, that she "meant to keep him sewed up in his golden lover's skin forever" (197). Del, consciously or unconsciously, has reproduced the same imprisoning labelling strategy which phallogocentrism uses to define women. Indeed, she admits that she "never really wanted his secrets or his violence, or himself taken out of the context of that peculiar and magical... game" (198). However, having experienced Garnet's violence, Del is forced to attempt to reconcile the image of the reverent Baptist to the reality of his violent and dominating impulse. Finally, Del's defence against masculine power is summarized in her admission that she had met Garnet's "true intent" with her "deceitful offering." Gilbert and Gubar suggest that duplicity is a key source of female authorial power since it was often necessary for the female writer of the nineteenth century to conceal subversive content behind a superficial narrative that was deemed socially acceptable. In this case, as with Del's deceit, women are forced to be duplicitous to guard their true identity from the scrutiny of society. Indeed, much of Del's deceit is the result of the conflict generated between society's demands and her need to be herself. When Garnet asks Del if she would like to have a baby she says "yes" and

then asks herself "Where would such a lie come from? It was not a lie" (196). Del is unsure of her own opinion about having a child because, having fought so hard to resist traditionally feminine roles, it is understandably difficult for her to entertain motherhood as a positive option. So, both as a mode of survival and as a product of conflicting impulses, female identity has taken on an ironic quality that defies definitions, and consequently empowers women. Indeed, Del's renewed strength and power are signaled at the end of the novel when Del senses a return to her old self, her "old devious, ironic, isolated self" (199).

Blodgett suggests that Del's "play-acting" (198), the manipulation of her own identity, is the only means by which she is able to stand apart from herself and thereby maintain self-possession. In other words, she retains control of herself as a subject of her own narrative, rather than submitting herself to the limitations of Garnet's narrative (56). Del becomes a witness of sorts, having placed her faith in herself. She is only free to exist as the protagonist of her life narrative if she is also witness and narrator of her autobiography. So, the process of self-creation demands that the self internalize a division between self as subject and self as witness (Blodgett 57). Munro herself draws attention to Del's experience of this duality within her own character. Del comments "I talked to myself about myself, saying she. She is in love. She has just come in from being with her lover. She has given herself to her lover" (192). Here, Del attempts to maintain the objectivity of a witness and narrator, though the story is that of her

own life.

The idea of an ironic or devious self supports Gilbert and Gubar's suggestion that duplicity is an indication of the ability of the female to create herself as a character, which in turn reveals the power of her creative imagination. Del, too, celebrates this ability to generate images of selfhood, when she loses herself in what she describes as "voluptuous surrender" not to any man, but to "the final importance of gesture, image, self-created self" (153). It is this idea of the self-created self that best challenges Del's imagination and allows her the freedom to envision herself in an infinite number of roles. She creates one image of herself when she begins to attend church, hoping that "people would be intrigued and touched by [her] devoutness and persistence" (80). Del's self-conscious effort to promote an image of piety is accompanied by her perception of "Jubilee as nothing but a large audience for [her]" (80). In other words, the self, for Del, is ultimately a creative act, an alterable art form with innumerable possibilities.

Munro's portrayal of Del Jordan contributes to the idea of the multiplicity of female identity. As W. R. Martin comments, within Del's character, "naïve and mature elements are neatly combined" (59). At times Del seems to be both a woman and a child, both innocent and wise. It is as if Munro acknowledges the possibilities within Del's identity before she has had the life-altering experiences which bring those possibilities to the surface. One example of Del's dualistic self is suggested when Del, referring to the story of her

mother being tortured by her brother says "Nothing really accounted for her darkened face at this point in the story, for her way of saying *tortured*. I had not yet learned to recognize the gloom that overcame her in the vicinity of sex" (65). The incident suggests that Del, the child, is confused by her mother's behaviour when she tells this particular story, but Del, the narrator, has full knowledge of the events. Another example comes at the end of the novel when Del describes her encounter with Bobby Sherriff. She describes his actions in the present tense, as if she were observing them now and then says "People's wishes, and their other offerings, were what I took then naturally" (211). Ultimately, by establishing a narrative voice in which the narrator is reminiscing about and reshaping her past, while experiencing events in the present, Munro creates a sense that Del's older and younger selves exist in harmony, not in opposition. This reconciliation of innocence and experience refutes binary schemes by illuminating the timeless, multi-faceted nature of the self.

Chapter Two

Sexuality and the Birth of Feminine Language

In *Lives of Girls and Women*, Del's discovery of her sexuality becomes an important indicator of her growing self-awareness. Indeed, Del's experience of her body marks her initiation into the world of feminine language. Smaro Kamboureli writes, "In order to be able to host its own language, to engender its own genre, the feminine body must ...feel at home with itself" (33). Del's loss of virginity, then, indicates her entrance into the world of experience, and signals the liberation of her female voice. The blood, defiling the peony border, implies rejection of the strictures of polite society which seek to domesticate and, thereby, contain female sexuality. Because Del invents a fiction to explain the presence of the blood, Kamboureli suggests that the stirring of her physical body moves Del to participate in the body of language and discourse (Samboureli 38). In other words, it is the experience of the body which compels Del to narrate. Del's awareness of her sexuality parallels a growing familiarity with the subtleties of language; so, in addition to its significance as a form of self-expression, sexuality becomes a metaphor for Del's experimentation with and quest for an appropriate form of narrative expression.

When Del is asked, early in the novel, to write for Uncle

Benny she describes her writing as "round, trembly, and uncertain" (10). The language used suggests a subtle link between sexual and artistic inexperience. At this point in the novel, Del is a virgin in both a physical and artistic sense. Munro establishes a connection between female sexuality and creativity to highlight and, then, undermine the traditional association of the female writer with sexual transgression. In Sidone Smith's *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body* (1993) she writes that by "allying [women's] speech with seductive Eve and the serpent and with the forces of cultural unruliness, gender ideologies of the early nineteenth century reaffirmed the association of the hole in women's face with the contaminations of sex" (Smith 15). Because writing has typically been defined as unfeminine, the female writer shared the same labelling as the sexual deviant. She was identified as "unnatural," "freakish," and "unredeemable" (8).

However, Gilbert and Gubar argue that there is a certain amount of freedom that the female gains through "badness." To renounce passivity and docility through "plots and stories, duplicitous schemes, wild dreams, fierce fictions, [and] mad impersonations" (42) is to subvert patriarchy and advance one's own subjectivity. Del's self-assertion through badness finally leads her to a discovery of forbidden sexuality. Despite her early inexperience, she embraces sexuality as a "social evil" that has the potential to free her from the social confines which inhibit the development of her identity as a creative woman. Likewise, Barbara Godard argues that Del's sexuality involves a crucial rejection of

the "angelic" role that society imposes on women, since her existence in the body and flesh challenges the conception of woman as ephemeral entity which ultimately denies women's subjectivity.

It is interesting to note that it is in the natural world that Del's quest for freedom through sexuality is most often undertaken. Annis Pratt argues that because female eroticism is culturally forbidden, female sexuality is often associated, in literature, with the margins of society: the natural world and asocial lovers (Pratt 173-4). Moreover, she reveals that the civilized world has traditionally assumed its superiority over nature. In the novel, Del's mother pays lip-service to this traditional perception when she says "Nature is just one thing preying on another all the way down the line. Nature is just a lot of waste and cruelty . . . Cruelty is the law of Nature" (73). However, Del's story of the tom cat devouring a bird, which is used as a metaphor for her first sexual experience, blurs the distinction between savagery and civilization. Through this metaphor, Del suggests that her sexuality has enabled her to defy the boundary established between nature and culture; however, there is also the suggestion that culture can be as cruel as nature since Garnet, who represents male culture and ideology, is portrayed in Del's story as a predatory animal.

So, though nature is often depicted as an environment from which a male hero must escape to reach civilization, it is often a place of refuge for the female hero who longs to free herself from the restrictions within her culture. Del says that the landscape inspired such "pure unbounded emotion as

[she] used to hope for . . . in connection with God" (140). The use of the word "unbounded" reinforces the idea of freedom from social constraints. However, in Mr. Chamberlain's presence the same landscape became "debased, maddeningly erotic" (140). Though Del enters nature to gain sexual knowledge that is forbidden by her culture, she realizes that the repressive forces of patriarchy are ultimately inescapable. The same delusion of freedom is experienced with Garnet. Del says, "the world I saw with Garnet was something not far from what I thought animals must see" (184). Their relationship is based on physicality that seems to elude culturally prescribed modes of thought and action. Del's escape, through sexuality, is again signalled by her journey into the natural world. She and Garnet make love "on the truck seat with the door open, and under bushes, and in the night grass" (190). However, as with Mr. Chamberlain, any freedoms that nature might yield to the female artist are denied by a masculine presence. The water at Third Bridge is converted into a symbol of ritual and cultural initiation by Garnet who uses it as a baptismal font and attempts to drown Del. Therefore, though the natural world affords Del the freedom to explore her sexuality, nature becomes a source of alienation and danger once tainted by patriarchy. Del is only truly free when "unconnected to the life of love, uncolored by love, the world resumes its own, its natural and callous importance" (199). In other words, it is in the absence of love that she is able to "repossess the world" of nature and re-experience it through

her own subjective consciousness.

In the chapter entitled "Princess Ida," Del is introduced to the story of her mother's life. Interestingly enough, her story parallels the experience of the female artist as described by Gilbert and Gubar. Del comments, "In the beginning of her story was dark captivity, suffering, then daring and defiance and escape." As noted in chapter one, Gilbert and Gubar trace themes of confinement and escape in literature by women who are literally and figuratively confined, whose creativity is restricted by patriarchy. Del says that while she was listening to her mother's story she was waiting, "as in all momentous satisfying stories" for "the burst of Glory, the Reward" (67). Del is disappointed to discover that there is no such satisfying climax to the story of her mother's life. However, it is during Del's first sexual encounter with Garnet French that the burst of glory, lacking in her mother's story, becomes evident in her own. She says "When I saw the blood the glory of the whole episode became clear to me" (189). The blood, then, is a crucial chapter in the story of Del's life. Upon losing her virginity, Del's blood records the event and thereby functions as a unique form of self-narrative, an autobiographical text written by her body. Also, Del's blood provides proof of her creativity in more than a biological sense in that it provides the inspiration for her fictional tale about a tom cat devouring a bird in the garden. Sidonie Smith, like Smaro Kamboureli, discusses the importance of female blood as a marker of female identity (3). In light of this interpretation, Del's quest to be redeemed by "the

blood" is not rooted in religion, but reflects the female artist's need to be redeemed by the creative potential within herself, by language which finds its source and inspiration in the female body.

Given the themes of identity and narrative at the heart of *Lives of Girls and Women*, it is difficult to support Rosalind Coward's argument that the novel is an example of a contemporary feminist novel which is "not unlike popular fiction" (157) and therefore, perhaps not completely satisfying as a feminist text. She argues that the novel is "confessional" in that the novel, as well as significant events of the narrative, are structured around the voice of a principal protagonist describing her life (157). Coward draws attention to the fact that the focus of the contemporary confessional novel, as well as contemporary feminist writing, is the experience of sexuality; however, she warns that accounts of sexuality are not in and of themselves feminist. She recalls Michel Foucault's suggestion that sexuality has been the object of a variety of discourses for several centuries including the "medical and education discourses of the Victorian period" which sought to control female sexuality (157). Indeed, much of Del's knowledge of sexuality is found in medical text books belonging to Naomi's mother. Once sex is demystified and neutralized by masculine discourse it becomes a source of shame and alienation, rather than a source of power for Del. When reading *Case Histories and Varieties of Intercourse*, she comments that the book made the whole business of sex seem "laborious and domesticated, somehow connected with ointments

and bandages and hospitals, and it gave me the same feeling of disgusted, ridiculous helplessness I had when it was necessary to undress at the doctor's" (139). Del's feeling of helplessness reflects the degree to which masculine discourse, in its attempt to uncover the mysteries of the female body, denies women power over, and possession of, their own bodies. Though discourses which take sexuality as their subject have changed considerably since Victorian times, Del must overcome long accepted notions of disgust and illicitness that have filtered into her consciousness via the dominant discourses of the past. ↙

Coward subtly suggests that confessional novels about women, which take sexuality as the dominant experience of women, deny women the broader range of experiences which contribute to knowledge and wisdom (158). She suggests that such novels "never escape beyond defining women entirely by their sexuality" (159). Ultimately, Coward's assessment is superficial in that it denies the strong link between identity and sexuality, and between sexuality and narrative, which Munro works so diligently to establish. Therefore, to suggest that *Lives of Girls and Women* is somehow inadequate as an expression of 'feminist consciousness' is simply untrue. As the subtleties of Munro's text reveals, the novel is in no way void of feminist significance simply because it has elements of the popular confessional novel. On the contrary, Munro uses the development of Del's sexuality as a metaphor for the vulnerability and fragility of female identity and creativity in the face of patriarchal authority. '

Because of the taboo against female sexuality, the sinister quality of Mr. Chamberlain's advances provides a temporary freedom for Del who considers sexual communication as a language which defies convention: "a flash of insanity, a dreamlike, ruthless, contemptuous breakthrough in a world of decent appearances" (135). In Del's mind, the liberty of sex becomes an appropriate replacement for the the constraints of religion. While her mother mocks the notion of being "redeemed by the blood" of Christ (89), Del glories at the sight of her own blood after her first experience of sexual intercourse. As discussed earlier, the blood becomes an important sign of Del's salvation, her escape into a reality beyond that of Jubilee: "Everything [she and Garnet] did seemed to take place out of range of other people, or ordinary consequences" (192).

Del's imaginative passion places her as firmly outside the ethos of Jubilee as her sexuality and, consequently, her creative efforts are associated with an indulgence in forbidden sexuality. The language of sexuality is used to express her creative passion when she indicates that her "secret pleasure" is the "poetic flow of words, archaic expressions" (130). However, though Del learns to indulge in this secret pleasure, the shame associated with creativity seems to equal the shame experienced by the sexual female. Del attempts to "shroud and contain" (120) her body as a child, just as she keeps her creativity a secret, her poem and parts of her novel contained within Uncle Craig's strongbox. The relationship between sexual shame and literary silence is indicated by Smaro Kamboureli who argues

that discourse, as it relates to the woman writer is "not just language put into action, but the body emerging from its disappearance, its invisibility" (34). As long as the female body is stigmatized as an "absence," women will be called upon to justify their presence, their claim to voice and identity.

Del's early disgust with the physical body and its vulnerability is essential to a discussion of sexuality as related to issues of identity and narrative. She is horrified by the humiliation she feels when she thinks of Mary Agnes stripped by her male assailants and left naked in the mud, her body exposed to the elements. Del believes that "to be made of flesh was humiliation" (48). She describes the shame that she experiences after biting Mary Agnes's arm as physical, "as if not the naked body but all the organs inside it--stomach, heart, lungs, liver--were laid bare and helpless. The nearest thing to this that I had ever known before was the feeling I got when I was tickled beyond endurance--horrible, voluptuous feeling of exposure, of impotence, of self-betrayal" (48). Here, as in death, the body betrays the self because it is vulnerable. It is this sense of betrayal, the body against the self, that causes Del to react so strongly to the sight of the dead cow. She says "I wanted to poke it, trample it, pee on it, anything to punish it, to show what contempt I had for its being dead" (38). Del's fear that the body betrays the self extends, also, to her understanding of sexuality. Del's mother uses the story of Mary Agnes' humiliation at the hands of the boys as an analogy for the "degradations of sex" (36). Del wants

to express her sexuality, but fears that sex will make her vulnerable and that this vulnerability will compromise her strength and her identity.

Though Del initially abhors the vulnerability of the flesh, she realizes that living like her mother, a "prisoner of various notions of gentility, of pruderies [and] inhibitions" would be more abhorrent (64). As Del approaches the mystery of sex she realizes that there is a certain freedom and comfort in allowing oneself to be vulnerable. She says, "Sex seemed to me all surrender--not the woman's to the man but the person's to the body, an act of pure faith, freedom in humility" (181). Love and sexuality, then, enable Del to submit to the body and, thereby, free the mind. Del's first foray into love provides her with a wealth of fantasies which permit her mind to escape beyond the reality of the classroom to the theatrics of the operetta. Del's confession that she is in love with the Pied Piper hints that her infatuation is not with Frank Wales, but with the fantasies that love and illusion provide. Del and Naomi even develop a new discourse to communicate their emerging feelings of sexuality. The acronym F. A stands for "Fatal Attraction." There is also a language of the body, consisting of "raised eyebrows [and] fingers fluttered on the chest" (112). There were also a series of mouthed words including: "Pang oh, Pang," "Fury, Double Fury," and "Rapture" (112). Though the words and expressions seem rather immature, the first inclining of love has inspired a new and alternative discourse. That Del experiences love as something beyond

reality is suggested in that she makes a distinction between "real dreams" and the fantastical imaginings she has about Frank Wales. She relates that in her daydreams, "in the beautiful, dark, depopulated town Frank would surround [her], either with real, implausible, but cool and tender, singing, or . . . simply with the unheard music of his presence" (113). Here, love and sexuality are poetic, not real. The code of romance, however, only provides a temporary escape from the real world. The reader discovers that Frank Wales is not the Pied Piper of the operetta, but a delivery boy for Jubilee Dry Cleaners and that Miss Farris has committed suicide.

Del's early difficulty in establishing herself as a sexual being reveals the absence of an appropriate sexual identity for the adolescent female. She fantasizes, influenced by the fairy tale tradition, about "a flawed and dark and lonely horseback rider" (115). However, she also fantasizes about herself as a prostitute. Here, the extremes of vulnerable maiden and debased prostitute reveal the degree to which Del has internalized the limited options which society offers to the sexual woman. However, Munro challenges sexuality which denies women power, by advocating sex between two consenting adults as a marriage of opposites that can be fulfilling, and conducive to the creative process. Del speaks of her intimate moments with Garnet as a series of gifts: "I had to review, could not let go of, those great gifts I had received, gorgeous bonuses--lips on the wrists, the inside of the elbow, the shoulder . . ." (181). Aside from physical pleasure, these moments are gifts because they enlighten Del

by generating "implications [and] discoveries" (181) which stimulate her imagination.

The union of man and woman made possible through sexual intimacy becomes a metaphor for the marriage of opposites which binary schemes preclude. In contrast, then, male masturbation is a powerful representation of phallogentric logic in that it celebrates the power of the male at the exclusion of the female other. For example, Del comments in the context of Mr. Chamberlain's performance: "It did not seem to have anything to do with me" (141). This observation reaches the heart of the female artist's dilemma about masculine discourse. A woman alienated from society by means of its phallogentric dogma is also alienated from her own creative potential because the culture and the literary tradition do not have anything to do with her. The detachment of the female artist from the masculine mode of discourse is suggested in that Del is completely unaroused by Mr. Chamberlain's theatrics, which she describes as an artistic performance: "The face he thrust out at [her], from his crouch, was blind and wobbling like a mask on a stick" (141). Here, male art and its alienation of the female other is the cause of Del's lack of inspiration. The incident is also used to reveal masculine discourse as "a discourse of self-pride" (Kamboureli 36). After his performance, Mr. Chamberlain, in a tone of arrogant self-satisfaction, says to Del "Quite a sight, eh" (142). However, his subtle request for respectful acknowledgement is denied. Throughout the incident, Del's commentary downplays the magnitude of the event, thereby undercutting the awe and mystery typically

afforded to the phallus, the symbol of male privilege. If the penis and pen are, as Gilbert and Gubar suggest, socially recognized symbols of power and authority, Del dismisses masculine privilege in her observation that Mr. Chamberlain's penis "looked blunt and stupid, compared, say to fingers and toes with their intelligent expressiveness" (141). Through this sexually charged incident, Munro challenges the assumption of male superiority, and illustrates the exclusion of women from the pleasures of creativity.

As she continues to mature, Del realizes that sexual communication, like that she experiences with Garnet French, is not untainted by patriarchy and, therefore, threatens to impose the same limitations on her identity as socially scripted behaviour. It is after Mr. Chamberlain labels her "a bad girl" (136) that Del realizes that her new found sexual freedom is an illusion, that her experiences with Mr. Chamberlain have failed to elevate her beyond the categories and labels imposed on her by society. Her encounters with Mr. Chamberlain are more restrictive than liberating because they are completely dependent upon her silence. She says, "he had known I would not cry out when he flattened my breast, he had known I would not mention it to my mother" (137). Moreover, even in Del's most fulfilling sexual relationship, sex ultimately validates, rather than rejects, convention as well as conventional forms of narrative: Del confesses that she and Garnet "had come out on another level --more solid, less miraculous, where cause and effect must be acknowledged, and love begins to flow in a deliberate

pattern" (191). In this instance, Del discovers that sex is not the liberating flash of insanity that she envisioned it would be, but rather something as unimaginative and predictable as a linear narrative.

Jerry Storey is another male character who reveals the limitations imposed by conventional society. Del describes the workings of Jerry's mind as: "a circus tent full of dim apparatus on which, when I was not there, he performed stunts which were spectacular and boring" (163). Del is equally unimpressed by his methodical description of the war: "he bombarded me with unbeatable atrocities, annihilating statistics. All without a flicker of protest, but with controlled excitement, a curious insistent relish" (164).⁴ It is not surprising, then, that Del's sexual experiences with Jerry are characterized by the same monotony and apathy that characterize both his mind and his narrative. Del is unable to experience sexual freedom through Jerry because, in his perfect conformity to social type, Jerry embodies prescribed roles and categories. Jerry represents conventional logic and rationality. In fact, he represents the cold meticulous knowledge that Del finds in the sex manuals over which she and Naomi laugh. This association is reinforced when Del lies naked under Jerry's gaze and submits to what amounts to a physical examination. Del asks "Has I got all the appurtances on in the right places does yo' think?" and Jerry responds by saying "Ah jes' has to git out my lil ole manual an' check up on that" (169-70). Partly because the characters speak in dialect from the comic strip Pogo, the entire scene is void of eroticism. Jerry's scientific

curiosity reminds the reader of medical texts and the vulnerability of the female body when placed under the scrutiny of the male gaze.

Del believes that her "natural boundaries were so much more ambiguous" (166) than Jerry's, an ambiguity that she also perceives in Garnet French. Initially, Garnet French seemed to embody all the possibilities that her creative vision advocates. She says, "His face contained for me all possibilities of fierceness and sweetness, pride and submissiveness, violence, self-containment" (178). Here, Garnet seems to embody Del's vision of reconcilable opposites. Through Garnet, Del ventures into a world "without names," the world of sensual experience devoid of language. She moves, according to Ajay Heble, to an "unfettered instinctual level of discourse--a level of discourse suspended from a world in which words name, describe, and appropriate things" (67). Del, then, develops an appreciation for the importance of the body as a vehicle of pure sensual experience and expresses surprise at the notion that such intimate communication could be described as "only sex" (183). However, Del realizes that even sexuality is not exempt from the imprisoning and violent consequences of masculine discourse, since the same ideology informing linguistic communication also informs sexual communication. The silencing of the female voice within the confines of masculine ideology is reflected in the restraint Del experiences during her first sexual experience with Garnet French. She is pinned against the wall as he presses the buckle of her dress belt painfully into her stomach.

Furthermore her ankles are restrained by the pants "tangling [her] feet" (188). Here the confinement of her physical body is a metaphor for the restrictions imposed on both female sexuality and creativity. That Del realizes the violence of the scene is revealed when she tells her mother that the blood in the garden has been caused by a large cat tearing a bird apart. Del, then, reclaims the power inherent in language by using metaphor to communicate the implications of the violence she has experienced. Her use of this figure of speech reveals that she envisions male dominance as predatory and, ultimately, destructive to women.

Despite her victimization at the hands of Mr. Chamberlain and Garnet French, Del's sexual awakening has generated new levels of knowledge and experience which affect even the manner in which she perceives language. She says "The very word pleasure had changed for me; I used to think it a mild sort of word, indicating a rather low-key self-indulgence; now it seemed explosive, the two vowels in the first syllable spurting up like fireworks, ending on the plateau of the last syllable, its dreamy purr" (181). Del's new understanding of the word pleasure is informed by her body's anticipation of the height of sexual intimacy. It is this link between the body and language which is the focus of French feminists's notion of writing the body. Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray argue that there is a close connection between the way a woman experiences her body and the manner in which she writes and interprets language. Such critics argue that *jouissance*, or female pleasure, emerging from a

uniquely feminine libidinal energy is the source of the differences in female writing (Jones 362). From this perspective, Del's sexuality becomes more than an expression of self, it becomes a pre-requisite to the development of a uniquely feminine discourse. An example of writing the body is suggested in Hélène Cixous' celebration of the ability of the female writer to "perceive and represent [objects] in a nurturing rather than dominating way" (Jones 365). Cixous suggests that the "typically feminine gesture, not culturally but libidinally, [is] to produce in order to bring about life [and] pleasure, not in order to accumulate" (365). However, Jones raises an important concern about French feminists' perceptions of the body. She argues that a woman's concept of her own sexuality cannot develop independent of the patriarchal forces which dictate standards of femininity. Del Jordan, in her bid to master details and collect facts in the fashion of her Uncle Craig, refutes Cixous' idea that the female urge is to bring to life, rather than to dominate, in matters of sexuality and language. Though Kristeva argues that "the bodily drives that survive cultural pressures toward sublimation" surface in the form of liberating discourse, Jones suggests that the body cannot be a pure source of female discourse because a female's perception of her own body is strongly influenced by patriarchal ideology.

The influence of patriarchy in Del's self-perception is readily apparent in *Lives of Girls and Women*. Del frequently renders herself the object of her own gaze by peering into mirrors and making evaluations of her physical appearance. She says "I liked looking at the reproduction of Cezanne's

"Bathers" in the art supplement of the encyclopedia, then at myself naked in the glass. But the insides of my thighs quivered; cottage cheese in a transparent sack" (153). Del's experience of herself as a sexual being is tainted. She has internalized the role of her masculine oppressors by viewing herself as an object to be scrutinized, rather than as a subject. Del's objectification of her own body is also revealed when she imagines herself as a prostitute, surrendering her body and submitting herself to the desires of a stranger. In one instance, Del dresses in one of her mother's gowns and stares at herself in the mirror and thinks of "girls in Florence, girls in Rome, girls [her] age that a man could buy" (127). By envisioning herself as such a girl, Del creates herself as an object of male sexual fantasy. Del is forced to envision herself as a victim and sexual deviant because no alternative, empowering sexual identity exists for women within the socially constructed definition of womanhood.

Irigaray believes that the potentially diffuse nature of female sexuality is strongly linked to written language. She argues that the geography of female sexual pleasure "is much more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is imagined" (Jones 364). This complexity, she suggests, is the foundation of feminine language. Irigaray argues that women celebrate, in their use of language, the experience of their sexual bodies. In other words, binary logic represents an inadequate form of female discourse because its narrow rigidity and confinement deny the complex geography of female sexual pleasure. Cixous,

likewise, indicates that female language, like female sexuality "does not contain, it carries; it does not hold back it makes possible" (Jones 366). Jones, however, challenges Cixous' suggestion that the drives of the female body are "just like the desire to write: a desire to live self from within, a desire for the swollen belly, for language, for blood" (Jones 366). Here Cixous takes for granted the female desire for motherhood, a typical attribute of femininity inscribed by patriarchy. In *Lives of Girls and Women*, Munro challenges this assumption when Del's mother says "you will want to have children" and Del's thought is that she, in fact, does not want children. Ultimately, Munro proves that Del's failure to connect with nature on this most primal level does not affect her desire to pursue other forms of creative expression. *Lives of Girls and Women*, then, challenges the determinism established by phallogentrism, and perpetuated to some degree by the French feminists of the 1970's. Munro illustrates that to perpetuate the myth of a single female identity is to confine women to traditional expectations and deny them the potential to experience the "multiplicity" that feminism argues is at the heart of femininity. This notion of multiplicity is reinforced at the end of the last chapter in *Lives of Girls and Women* as Del examines the want ads and realizes that there are possibilities for women who choose not to marry and have children: "Cities existed; telephone operators were wanted; the future could be furnished without love or scholarships" (200).

The French feminists argue that "the immediacy with which the body, the id, *jouissance*, are supposedly experienced promises a clarity of perception and vitality that can bring down mountains of phallogocentric delusion" (366). Del, however, is only able to dispel her delusions of love, and realize the possibilities which exist beyond love, when the power inherent to both her body and identity are threatened by Garnet in the attempted baptism. Though Garnet ultimately stifles Del's freedom, it was through Garnet and her sexual experiences with him that Del has her first liberating exposure to the "world without names" (184). In both the theory and the literature there is an overwhelming suggestion that sexuality is the key to female freedom and creativity. That the end of Munro's novel marks the beginning of Del's novel suggests a cyclical, non-linear narrative form, which reflects the female cycle of creativity in both its bodily and literary sense. In this way, perhaps, Munro can be said to be writing the body into her text. However, Jones summarizes the difficulty accompanying notions of writing the body in her question: "Is it possible, assuming an unmediated and *jouissant* sense of one's body, to move from that state of unconscious excitation directly to a written female text" (Jones 372). Though Jones is rightly skeptical, it seems that women who defy taboos against female sexuality are more likely to embrace the subversive or unconventional approach to writing that French feminists argue is rooted in female sexual pleasure.

Chapter Three

Reclaiming Narrative and the Challenge to Tradition

As E. D. Blodgett observes, the narrator's continual object of research "is to find herself as an expression of a certain mode of telling" (54). The silence imposed on female writers of the past has denied them the freedom to express their identity through a narrative voice. The link between the sexual body and narrative expression is expressed in the idea that "fiction is the exploration of the linguistic body traversed by the solid body of the writer in an effort to free woman's body from the male fantasies which have dispossessed her" (Brossard in Godard 43). Therefore, Del's ability to write and her development of a narrative strategy are both directly associated with her growing conception of her self.

The urge to possess and objectify the female subject is a characteristic of masculine discourse against which female language speaks. Hélène Cixous defines feminine language as that which "ceaselessly subverts patriarchal binary schemes where logocentrism colludes with phallogentrism in an effort to oppress and silence women" (Moi 105). The female identity, then, subverts patriarchy through its multiplicity, while writing by the female artist constantly undermines the oppositions which contribute to the cultural assumption of male superiority. Therefore, just as Del's discovery of self

is accomplished by assimilating and rejecting alternative definitions of femininity offered by society, so her development of a narrative voice is achieved by encountering differing forms of masculine and feminine narrative and incorporating various aspects of each into her unique narrative style. This blend of masculine and feminine forms is itself a testament to the rejection of the categories which attempt to dictate appropriate behavior and privileges for both sexes.

The myth of masculine privilege, governing male ownership of property and claim to the pen, is challenged at the beginning of the novel when Uncle Benny orders Del, "get off of my riverbank" and Del insists, "It was not his" (1). Likewise, when Benny spots the rainbow and reveals its significance, he acts as if he was "the bearer" of God's promise that there was not going to be another flood. Uncle Benny is presented as a rather harmless figure, yet there are hints that the myth of the masculine right to possess objects and knowledge has violent implications for women. The animals that he has captured and caged, and the frogs which he puts on his hook reveal the consequence of masculine discourse in its ability to fix and immobilize the female subject. That Benny's house is said to "swallow light" indicates the absence of imaginative vision characteristic of both his junk collection and the impulse to name which his collection generates. Del realizes the futility of naming when she says that the objects they are able to name amount to "just a few things revealed and identifiable on top of such a wealth of wreckage" (3). In other words, the items

have no real significance in the context of Benny's collection. Indeed, Benny's collection of useless junk is a monument to the "monotonous, meticulously remembering" narrative voice he adopts in his description of his trip to Toronto. In his recollection of the journey, the weight of remembered facts becomes as cumbersome as naming the objects that comprise Benny's junk heap. However, despite the monotony of his narrative there is an intrigue associated with Benny's world that causes Del to comment that it "was his triumph, that he couldn't know about, to make us see" (22). Benny enhances Del's understanding of her world by providing a "distorted reflection" that was "the same but never at all the same" (Blodgett 40). In other words, Benny represents Del's exposure to the world lurking beneath the world of appearances: the world of the imagination, but also the world of masculine privilege and its violent consequences.

Because Benny seems unaware of the triumph Del attributes to him, his power appears limited and his character is deceptively innocuous. However, Benny's masculine privilege places him in the authoritative position of a reliable narrator. When Ada asks if Madeleine has abused Diane, Benny responds "Well ye-uh. Ye-uh she--" (17). His inarticulate affirmation is never challenged by Ada or Del. The reader, though equally reluctant to question male authority, is forced to reconsider Benny's innocence in light of his suspicious behaviour. When Ada says that, had she known of the abuse, she would have reported Madeleine for her crime, "Uncle Benny looked up startled" (17). Also, "Uncle Benny

did not look happy or relieved" when Ada assures him that once the police are involved they will be able to locate his wife. Del suggests that perhaps Benny's anxiety is associated with his fear of the alien places legal action will take him; however, she concludes that ultimately it "was impossible to tell" (18) why he reacted the way he did. After the threat of police involvement, Benny ceases to discuss Madeleine. Only later, when he decides to go to Toronto and find Diane, does he tell "stories . . . of what Madeleine had done" (19). The instances of abuse described in Benny's "stories" are necessarily suspect because the use of the word "story" blurs the distinction between fact and fiction. However, like other gossip about Madeleine, Benny's stories are not challenged by the Jordan family or the inhabitants of Jubilee and, therefore, Madeleine's silence renders her a victim of the presumed infallibility of masculine discourse. Though she is remembered "like a story" (23), her story is not told in her own voice. It is a fiction generated by masculine society which leads to the immobilization of her identity under the label of "madwoman" (23).

The danger of associating masculine narratives with truth is evident in that the narrative that the town develops in relation to Madeleine denies her the autonomy to express her true identity and, consequently, neither the citizens of Jubilee nor the reader of *Lives of Girls and Women* ever really know her. Del realizes the extent to which Madeleine is trapped and shaped by the town's stories when she

acknowledges that there was no "possibility, from the first moment she saw me, of anything but rage. That or silence seemed to be the only choices she had" (15). Del's awareness of the limited identity afforded to Madeleine mirrors Munro's awareness of the limitations imposed on women, in both literature and life, by patriarchal binary thought. Madeleine, in fact, can be seen as Munro's response to the stereotypical madwoman, or monster, in literature. The stereotype of the madwoman is not rejected but reclaimed in fiction by female authors as a means of enabling them to "come to terms with their own uniquely female feelings of fragmentation, their own keen sense of the discrepancies between what they are and what they are supposed to be" (Moi 60). Munro is acutely aware of the complexities of human nature and consequently rejects the masculine paradigm, which insists on a separation of opposites, by attempting to realize, through Del Jordan, a vision of reality in which the conventional and marginal aspects of the female identity are merged. Munro's vision of the world as a place in which the strange and familiar are inextricably linked extends itself, necessarily, to a vision of the female artist as a complex whole, containing paradoxical elements, rather than a composite of irreconcilable fragments. In Munro's vision Madeleine and Del, insanity and sanity, are not opposites, but rather two unique aspects of the female artist's psyche. Indeed, as Bronwen Wallace suggests, "the juxtaposition of different types of women, of parts and counterparts is a constant theme [in the novel] . . . The movement is always toward holding all of them in tension, celebrating their

separate realities" (Wallace 63). All of the characterizations of the female identity within the text: Madeleine, Agnes, Miss Farris, Naomi, and Del, serve to highlight the innumerable possibilities contained within the self.

Crucial to Del's development as both a woman and an artist is the realization that difference is the key to multiplicity, and that the ordinary is, paradoxically, extraordinary. Early on, Del makes a firm distinction between Uncle Craig's "accumulation of the most ordinary facts" (27) and true art. She believed that "the only duty of a writer is to produce a masterpiece" and, therefore, she considers Uncle Craig's work to be as unimaginative and lifeless as his deceased body. Del fears that his work, the embodiment of "history's rational, factual discourse" (Heble 52), might "deaden" her things and so she removes his narrative from its strong box and replaces the void with her own poems and a portion of a novel. Her inability to allow fact and fiction to occupy the same space illustrates her assumption that the two represent opposite realities: history, on the one hand, celebrating "the presence of linearity and sameness" (Kamboureli 31) and fiction exploring difference and non-linearity on the other. However, Del's inquiry into her uncle's death reveals a "cold appetite for details" (39) that is synonymous with Uncle Craig's own narrative strategy. Del uses Craig's model of masculine discourse to pin death down and isolate it behind a wall of "particular facts and circumstances" (39), in the same manner that patriarchy employs language to disempower women.

One model of female narrative exists in aunts Elspeth and Grace. In a wonderful weaving image, Del says, "My mother went along straight lines, Aunt Elspeth and Auntie Grace wove in and out around her, retreating and disappearing and coming back, slippery and soft-voiced and indestructible" (31). The reference to their slipperiness suggests the duplicity that Gilbert and Gubar argue is such an important part of female writing. Del continues her description of her aunts and their uniquely feminine language:

There was a whole new language to learn in their house. Conversations there had many levels, nothing could be stated directly, every joke might be a thrust turned inside out. My mother's disapproval was open and unmistakable, like heavy weather; theirs came like tiny razor cuts, bewilderingly, in the middle of kindness (31).

It is clear, by this example, that female narrative is often duplicitous in its attempt to conceal its true intention behind a socially acceptable facade. However, Aunts Elspeth and Grace are so successful in their bid to be elusive that they succeed in alienating themselves from the rest of the town. Del comments that their house became "like a tiny sealed-off country, with its own ornate customs and elegantly, ridiculously complicated language" (50). Within this confinement of their own creation, the women fail to thrive and their narrative expression loses its vitality: "They told their same stories, they played their same jokes, which now seemed dried out, brittle with use" (50). Del also suggests that "their two selves were seen to be something constructed with terrible care; the older they got the more

frail and admirable and inhuman this construction appeared" (50). Selfhood, like narrative, loses meaning if created in isolation. The self is a construction, but when that construction ceases to evolve it ceases to involve creativity. Aunts Elspeth and Grace have abdicated their creative powers by falling prey to that "sense of obligation" many women feel to keep their "outlines intact" (50). In other words, it is because women fail to challenge the perimeters of the socially generated constructions of womanhood that they are unable to explore alternative and non-traditional identities.

Having lived their lives faithful to society's appointed roles as nurturers and admirers of men, Elspeth and Grace attempt to impose a similar type of confinement on Del when they give her Uncle Craig's manuscript to finish and tell her to "copy his way" (52). His work is contained within a strong box, which Del quickly empties and fills with her own creative efforts. Gilbert and Gubar reveal that "mirrors, paintings, statues, locked cabinets, drawers, trunks, strong boxes, and other domestic furnishings appear and reappear in female novels and poems throughout the nineteenth century and on into the twentieth to signify the woman writer's sense that . . . her life has been 'shaven and fitted to a frame'" (85). In this case it is Del's literary style that her aunts attempt to fit within Craig's frame. Del's rejection of, and lack of respect for, his work is a rejection of the traditional mode of historical writing. However, that she places her own work in the space that had been occupied by

his documents suggests that perhaps Del is looking for some traditional, structural frame to validate her work. Despite this hypothesis, Del recognizes the importance of creating her own space, rather than attempting to fill that of her male literary predecessors.

Though Del seems unaware of it at times, her mother is one of the most powerful literary influences in her life. Though Ada adheres to the narrative code of knowledge, as represented by her encyclopedias, she teaches Del "the way stories are told" (Blodgett 44). Unlike Uncle Craig's detached account of local history, Ada Jordan's stories are Del's first introduction to autobiography, or self-narrative. Del listens attentively to the story of her mother's life and comments that "scenes from the past were liable to pop up anytime, like lantern slides, against the cluttered fabric of the present" (62). She speaks of her mother and Fern Doherty by saying that "their talk was a river that never dried up" (59). This metaphor, linking female speech with a river, is significant considering the number of drownings that take place in the Wawanash river. As discussed earlier, the river functions as a symbol of female creativity as with the river of blood that Del images as the birth canal. In those cases in which the river becomes a source of death, the overwhelming burden of female creativity is glimpsed. Creativity is more a curse than a blessing for women such as Miss Farris. Marion, too, takes her place in the list of women who drown themselves in the Wawanash river. The marginality which ensues when one fails to conform to the norms of behaviour prescribed by society is often too much

for women to bear. Therefore, the source of their potential strength, their creativity, is ultimately the cause of their defeat. Mrs. Rush's death in childbirth becomes a kind of metaphor for this idea of death induced by the burden of marginality which accompanies female creativity. However, for some women the river of creativity is a source of strength and ultimate power. James Carscallen writes that in the New Testament "the rite of baptism recapitulates the Israelites' crossing of the Jordan" (379). Del's emergence from the river, upon struggling free from Garnet and his attempt to baptize if not drown her, therefore, suggests a deeper baptism, a purification of self. Crossing the Jordan in this sense means coming to terms with, and gaining salvation through, her own subjectivity. She does not need to be taken to the river to be saved because, as her name suggests, the saving river resides within her. In the figure of Del Jordan, then, Munro advocates self-sufficiency, and the power of female identity to redeem itself, rather than depending on patriarchal institutions, such as religion, to impart salvation.

Female characters, like Miss Farris and Marion Sherriff, who fail to find this source of salvation within themselves inevitably resort to self-destruction. However, their suicides are not presented, by Munro, as defeat, but rather "acts" equal in importance and expressiveness to the stories told by other women in the text. Del speaks of Miss Farris as having been "imprisoned" in the time of the operetta and says that she is amazed that "she had broken out to commit this act. If it was an act" (118). Miss Farris' suicide,

then, can be interpreted as an act of defiance against the perceptions which fixed and imprisoned her identity and generated the misconception that she, like her house, was "charming, whimsical" and had "no secrets" (106-7). Del suggests, then, that Miss Farris' suicide offers her escape from the misconceptions of the past. Suicide frees her identity by reclaiming the mystery and secrecy which prevent masculine discourse from reducing the female to an art object. Similarly, Del's story about Marion Sherriff emerges as a product of her "act and her secrecy" (208). Again, suicide and secrecy protect the mystery of female identity and offer a defense mechanism against the masculine need to demystify and, subsequently, disempower the female other. Ultimately, Del's discussion of Caroline, her fictional portrayal of Marion, as a "sacrifice" is more prophetic than initially thought since it is the mystery behind her identity, her death, that nurtures the life of Del's imagination and inspires her fiction.

It is interesting to note that Alice Munro was never completely satisfied with the section of *Lives of Girls and Women* entitled "The Photographer." Though Munro is uncomfortable with how the conclusion to her novel evolved, she believes that the novel is somehow incomplete without this enigmatic epilogue. Munro summarizes the problem in an interview with Graeme Gibson: "It doesn't express what I wanted it to . . . I was trying to deal with something fairly complex there" (W. R. Martin 74). Indeed, the richness of the passage, and the complexity of its themes, make the

section difficult to decipher. However, I would argue that the section is necessarily enigmatic, in that it reflects the unfixable quality of language and meaning which Munro teaches, and Del learns, is so crucial to feminine identity and writing. Gilbert and Gubar argue that the female voice is necessarily duplicitous because it hides a socially unacceptable agenda. They suggest that artists of both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries produce "works whose surface designs conceal or obscure deeper, less accessible levels of meaning" (Moi 59). Such literary duplicity enables women writers to achieve literary authority "by simultaneously conforming to and subverting patriarchal literary standards" (59). So, perhaps the enigmatic quality of the epilogue is a function of the author's unique narrative expression of selfhood.

In this final chapter, Marion Sherriff, or Caroline as the protagonist invents her, becomes Del's mad double. Del uses this mad double in the same fashion as her literary predecessors: she functions as an "asocial surrogate for her docile self" (Gilbert and Gubar xi). Gilbert and Gubar argue that writers of the nineteenth century almost "obsessively create characters who enact their own, covert authorial anger. . . they project what seems to be the energy of their own despair into passionate, even melodramatic characters who act out the subversive impulses every woman inevitably feels when she contemplates the 'deep rooted' evils of patriarchy" (77). In other words, Caroline is the projection of Del's anger concerning the confinement of women in the patriarchal world. Del rewrites the angel/monster dichotomy by

generating a character too powerful for any definition of femininity to contain. Del says, "She came ready-made into my mind, taunting and secretive, blotting out altogether that pudgy Marion, the tennis player. Was she a witch? Was she a nymphomaniac? Nothing so simple!" (204). The complexity of the character Del develops challenges the simple and restrictive idea of womanhood propagated by society. Del's character ultimately defies masculine logic and binary oppositions in that she is both angel and monster, victim and victimizer:

Her generosity mocked [men], *her bittersweet flesh, the color of peeled almonds*, burned men down quickly and left a taste of death. She was a sacrifice, spread for sex on moldy uncomfortable tombstones, pushed against the cruel bark of trees, her frail body squashed into the mud and hen dirt of barnyards, supporting the killing weight of men, but it was she, more than they, who survived (204).

This portrait of the fictional Caroline is a particularly good example of how women writers, such as Del, are both "identifying with and revising the self-definitions patriarchal culture has imposed on them" (Gilbert and Gubar 79). Here, Caroline is both a seductress and a victim of male sexual desire. She is degraded by her submission, yet, ironically, the men are the true victims. This ironic vision of female survival mirrors Del's own experience as an artist. Under the weight of a literary tradition, in which male discourse reigns, she is able to give voice to her creative impulse. She revises patriarchal definitions, in her characterization of Caroline, through paradoxes which

celebrate contradictions, rather than insisting on the irreconcilable nature of binary oppositions. However, Del realizes that because the life of her character does not conform to masculine logic, self-destruction is the only socially acceptable fate. As Godard says, "within the enclosures of patriarchal society, there can be no satisfactory ending to women's stories" (60).

Caroline's lover, the photographer, functions as a representation of male authorship in its predisposition to fix and immobilize women. Here Munro suggests that the male author, like the photographer, kills female subjectivity by transforming it into an art object. In male discourse, as in a photographer's picture, the female subject is transfixed forever, unable to experience her identity beyond the limited representation of femininity that society has approved. The pictures taken by the photographer, then, are a metaphorical representation of how the subject suffers under the confinement imposed by masculine textuality: "People saw that in his pictures they had aged twenty or thirty years. Middle-aged people saw in their own features the terrible, growing, inescapable likeness of their dead parents" (205). That Del has, in part, adopted the destructive tendencies of masculine narrative is suggested when she says that in her fictional transformation of Jubilee "it became an older, darker, more decaying town . . . People in it were very thin, like Caroline, or fat as bubbles" (205). The deterioration of the town links Del with the photographer since her subject also loses its vitality. Ultimately, one recognizes a struggle in Del's writing between a masculine desire for

mastery, which manifests itself in her preoccupation with facts, and a desire to generate possibilities. In other words, her inability to resist male forms of discourse can be seen as the unfortunate result of patriarchal ideology which dictates that writing is a male activity, or it can be viewed as the most positive step in Del's desire to reject the split between masculine and feminine in an effort to break down the binary oppositions which dictate how she must act as a woman, but more importantly, how she should act as writer.

The intense relationship between the photographer and Caroline, then, represents the battle between realism and fiction, which takes place in the mind and art of the novel's protagonist. In light of this interpretation, the story of these tragic lovers is an anxiety dream reflecting the fear of what might become of female creativity under the lens of the photographer, under the influence of masculine narratives and discourse. In other words, Del fears that courting realism will stifle her creative efforts and suffocate her subject. This fear is realized when Del is unable to imaginatively plot Caroline's suicide because of certain "niggling considerations of fact" (206). Though Del longs to initiate the collaboration in her mind, that Woolf feels is necessary between "the woman and the man before the art of creation can be accomplished" (Bailey 118), there is an understandable anxiety that the female writer experiences when confronted with the threat of patriarchal dominance. Submitting to such a union is threatening because it implies vulnerability and disempowerment for the writer, but also for the subject. If the female writer is to incorporate elements

of masculine discourse into feminine narrative then she risks objectifying her subject in the same manner in which male texts deny the vitality and energy of female subjectivity. The photographic aspect of Del's work, as revealed in her portrait of Jubilee, and in her hunger for details, reflects the masculine urge to name and classify. However, while Blodgett labels the photographic instinct the "dark core" of Munro's work, both realism and fiction are needed if any artist is to be faithful to a creative vision which seeks to reconcile binary oppositions, including the accepted distinction between fantasy and reality. Munro's success as a writer is dependent, in part, upon her ability to employ "photographic or documentary realism," while simultaneously presenting the reader with "a world that no document can bear witness to" (Blodgett 6, 11). Like Munro, then, Del is able to generate lists, like her Uncle Craig, which document life in Jubilee, but her creative vision allows her to capture the mystery and unlikely reality behind the reality of everyday life.

Linda Lamont-Stewart observes that the "texture of reality in the fiction of Alice Munro includes the unexpected, the irrational, the grotesque. Absurdity and horror are never far below the deceptively calm surface of everyday life" (Miller 114). In the patriarchal scheme of binary opposites fact and fiction, real and unreal are in constant tension. Munro, however, challenges the concept of "real life," by revealing how the improbability and absurdity, which often accompany events in the real world, reveal the fictional quality of life. Del is constantly plagued by the

distinction between fact and fantasy. Though Del is able to accept Uncle Benny as an eccentric who inhabits a reality "the same, but never at all the same" (22) as that experienced by her family, Del is ultimately unable to conceptualize Madeleine's connection to the real world. By remembering her "like a story" (23), Del and her family relegate Madeleine to a fictional realm and, by labelling her as such, refuse to acknowledge the mysteriousness she embodies as an element of everyday experience. As Del matures, she becomes more aware of the socially generated split between fact and fiction. That Del ultimately rejects the validity of such a split is suggested when she comments, ironically, that the unlikely amount of tragedy, as well as the nature of the tragedies, experienced by the Sherriff family "doomed them to fiction" (203). In other words, though the Sherriffs are real people, suicide and madness are such indigestible realities that, as with Madeleine, society cannot accept them as inhabitants of the real world.

Even the protagonist attempts to abandon reality, and the world of experience, when she begins her first novel. Del confesses that she didn't bother much with the Sherriffs once she had "transformed them for fictional purposes" (206). The use of the word "transform" is interesting considering the two key instances of transformation that Ajay Heble identifies in the text. First, there is Mrs. Jordan's reference to the transformation of the deceased Uncle Craig into flowers; and, secondly, Uncle Bill's reference to the hatching of the cocoon and emergence of the butterfly that

Ada's family witnessed on Easter morning. In light of these examples, the transformation of the Sherriffs into fiction suggests the power of the imagination to generate life and possibilities and to elevate the real to an alternative and transcendent reality through creation. However, the metaphor also suggests that transformation cannot occur unless there is something to transform. In other words, facts and details are the cocoon which nourish the fiction. Therefore, it is understandable that Del loses interest in "the novel in [her] mind" (203) because fiction fails when it loses touch with reality. In other words, Del has engaged language in her mind, only to lose touch with the body and the world of experience. It is Del's encounter with Bobby that forces her to realize that, though facts and details seem non-essential, they initiate the transformation of life into fiction. It is through Bobby Sherriff that Del recognizes that life contains "the many-leveled, unfixable intricacy and openness of a text" (Heble 43). All of these examples of transformation suggest, on an even deeper level, that each individual has the potential for transformation within his/her self, thereby reminding the reader of the infinite possibilities existing within masculine and feminine identities.

The writing of fiction, then, offers the writer a certain distance from the inexplicable reality she experiences. However, Del believes that it is her responsibility to graduate beyond fantasy and "like girls in movies leaving home, convents, loves" get started on her "real life" (201). Blodgett rightly notes the irony of this passage, since the reference to girls in the movies suggests that Del has not

yet, nor will she ever surpass the world of her imaginings (37). Indeed, she is to discover that the world generated by her imagination is more real than the world of dates and events recorded by Uncle Craig. Del goes on to define her novel as "not real, but true," because her writing, though fictional, is the truest expression of herself that she can create in a narrative form. However, Del acknowledges the limitations of her creative power when she says "no list could hold what I wanted, for what I wanted was every last thing, every layer of speech and thought, stroke of light on bark or walls, every smell, pothole, pain, crack, delusion, held still and held together--radiant, everlasting" (210). The terms "radiant" and "everlasting" suggest that such a suspension of objects and abstracts would almost constitute a religious epiphany. This wish, then, represents Del's vision in its purest form: the tangible and intangible, objects and experiences, sharing space in art. However, Del recognizes that her impulse to name and list is "misguided" and will not, without the assistance of the creative imagination, allow her vision to be realized.

Del's vision of the innumerable possibilities inherent in the self is ultimately validated by Bobby Sherriff, who after engaging Del in a relatively boring conversation "rose on his toes like a dancer, like a plump ballerina" (211). This act enacts a reconciliation of two seemingly irreconcilable states of being: sanity and insanity. Also, Godard notes, this encounter confirms the gap existing between Del's imagined mad brother and Bobby Sherriff. The protagonist, as a result of this encounter, realizes that the gap between

fact and fiction must be reconciled to reflect the maturity of her artistic vision (Godard 53). Also, that Del says "yes" rather than "thank-you," implies her affirmation of this liberating language, without the "humility and submissiveness of the stereotyped female" (Godard 70). At this moment, Del's vision finds expression: the ordinary and the absurd, the explicable and the inexplicable, are united and a new liberating discourse which defies the binary oppositions of patriarchal ideology comes into being.

Conclusion

Rae McCarthy Macdonald views Del's quest in *Lives of Girls and Women* as a ceaseless effort to negotiate between the world of survivors and a land of misfits and suggests that her attempt to keep a foot in both worlds necessarily compromises her character (210). However, in the figure of Del, Munro accurately presents the struggle for self-definition that is so often experienced by women writers. The female writer tries desperately to negotiate a position for herself both within and outside her society. She has been conditioned to be selfless, yet longs for independence and subjectivity. Ultimately, Del's association with misfits and survivors, victims and victimizers, reflects her own duality. Such a contradiction, then, does not imply compromise but progression, as Blake suggests in "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" (Mahoney 45). W. R. Martin, acknowledges the power of contradictions in Munro's novel in an article entitled "The Strange and Familiar in Alice Munro." He argues that the oppositions in the novel "produce ironies and paradoxes, but also moments of vision in which the oppositions are reconciled" (226). Ultimately, Del develops a vision of self, as well as an artistic vision, which challenges imprisoning definitions of femininity and reconciles the seemingly irreconcilable realities of fact and fiction. Del's comment that "People's lives, in Jubilee as elsewhere, were dull, simple, amazing and unfathomable-deep

caves paved with kitchen linoleum" (210) is a paradox which illuminates the complexity of the human identity. This personal and artistic epiphany denies patriarchal logic which destroys difference in its effort to define and order the world. Therefore, her revelation rejects distinct categories and fixed identities in favour of a notion of the self as "multiple, decentred, undefinable" and, consequently, more powerful (Moi 147).

The role of the literary woman, Gilbert and Gubar suggest, is "to shatter that mirror that has so long reflected what every woman was supposed to be" (76). In the novel *Lives of Girls and Women*, Munro successfully distorts traditional images of femininity by producing a heroine whose revolt against conventional labels is becoming more and more representative in new Canadian women's fiction. In accordance with this new, subversive archetype, the female protagonist embarks on a "voyage of self-discovery, in which, slamming the door firmly on the social forces, clichés, and conventions that would enclose her and limit her power, [she] sets off on a process of . . . rebirth" (Godard, *Gynocritics* 10). In Munro's novel, the moment of rebirth is signaled when Del emerges from the river without submitting to Garnet's intended baptism. Tainted by the influence of patriarchy, the rejuvenating water of creativity threatens death, while simultaneously offering hope of personal salvation. The drownings throughout the novel pay homage to those women who suffocate under the burden of the restrictions placed on their identity by patriarchal society. Indeed, the "weight of patriarchal tradition educates woman

into Nothingness" (Godard, *Gynocritics* 15). Woman, according to this definition becomes the "non-I" over which man, in his role as maker of language and culture, exercises control.

Indeed, the female's status as inferior "other" explains why the writing of women follows Raymond Williams's model of the literature of an evolving nation. In his model, there is initially "an imitation of the dominant literary pattern," then an "assimilation and internalization, before moving to an emergent position of open revolt" (Godard, *Gynocritics* 14). The latter, however, is not possible without abandoning tradition, going to the roots of language, and revitalizing "archaic forms" in an effort to recreate language. In the case of Del Jordan's quest for a uniquely female narrative voice, she too experiences the stages of imitation, internalization, and revolt. Her use of imitation is perhaps most evident in the impulse to name and list, a mode of narration she inherits from both Uncle Benny and Uncle Craig. Indeed, when Del gives a tiresome account of the food at Uncle Craig's funeral, the reader is reminded of Craig's list of dead facts, as well as the monotonous and meticulous description of Toronto provided by Uncle Benny. Del comments, "Everywhere I looked I saw food. A cold roast of pork, fat roast chickens, looking varnished, crusted scalloped potatoes, tomato aspic, potato salad, cucumber and beet salad, a rosy ham, muffins, baking powder biscuits, round bread, nut break, banana loaf. . ." (44). The lack of inspiration in the passage suggests the lack of creativity in narratives obsessed with listing details in an attempt to

control or possess a limited reality.

The proof that Del has internalized the narrative mode of her male literary predecessors is revealed as she becomes more confident about her relationship with language. Del speaks of "fixing verbs, dates, wars, phyla in [her] mind" (172) and says that once the facts were mastered they seemed "lovely, chaste, and obedient" (172). Del's desire for mastery over facts and language reveals the degree to which she has internalized the masculine preoccupation with immobilizing the subject of discourse, the same impulse which inhibits the freedom of women when they are objectified by patriarchal discourse.

Ultimately, as Del's confidence grows, she learns that she must overcome the male model of authorial prowess in order to achieve an open expression of herself through both sexuality and narrative. The final break with convention, then, begins with her interpretation of Bobby Sherriff's parting gesture. Gifted with artistic vision, she recognizes his action as an embodiment of the raw materials for an entirely new mode of communication: "a letter, or a whole word, in an alphabet" (211) that Del is just beginning to understand. It is this archaic form, this body language, which speaks to the protagonist's unique vision of possibilities.

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