

## Playing the Parts: The 'corps morcelé' in Alice Munro's Lives of Girls and Women

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# Playing the Parts: The ‘*corps morcelé*’ in Alice Munro’s *Lives of Girls and Women*

ANDREW LESK

IN PROBING ALICE MUNRO’S female aesthetic, Barbara Godard asserts that Munro, in *Lives of Girls and Women*, seeks “a body experienced by women as subject of their desires, not as object of men’s desires, and of the words and literary forms appropriate to this body” (43). Godard’s question, “How to write as a woman?” (43), which finds its impetus in the feminism of Nicole Brossard’s *écriture féminine*, gestures to the linguistic complexity inherent in female expression, and writing by women in particular. Despite the publication of *Lives of Girls and Women* in 1971, an era witness to a renewed and vigorous swirl of identity politics as a liberating force, the novel’s protagonist, Del Jordan, grows up in a very different time, in and after World War II, in a conservative, southern Ontario that predates subsequent (second-wave) feminism. Nevertheless, Del’s retrospective account (presumably from 1971) subtly renovates a young woman’s written coming of age into a coming to terms with a male body politic.

Of Munro’s transformative body that is the novel *Lives of Girls and Women* itself, Marjorie Garson writes that readers are teased “to construct wholes while at the same time undermining the notion of any whole of which they could be part” (416). One assumes here that Garson might also be referring to strategies that may threaten to ground women, and female experience, in a paradigm of eternal, paradoxically non-transformative margins. Now that necessary feminist readings of Munro (such as Godard’s) have shifted the methods of discourse and have led to more nuanced understandings, I find it imperative also to revisit the role of *men* in Munro’s novel.

Garson’s “wholes,” which neither deny nor eschew male influence and bodies, derive from, she says, the “insistent presence of the *corps morcelé* in *Lives of Girls and Women*” (413). Garson, rather than think-

ing that the female text is *like* a female body, offers that “the body is itself a text.” In Munro’s case, this means that “*Lives of Girls and Women* continually subverts the organicist criteria of ‘wholeness, harmony, and radiance’<sup>1</sup> even as it seems to invoke them” (417). The suggestion is that the transformation of women cannot lead to a kind of arrival, since to reach a destination might imply a discovery of (male-inspired) wholeness.

I want to extend Garson’s essay on parts and wholes to include the (obvious) fact that men are an intrinsic part of Del’s *corps morcelé*. I realize that assessing the role that men play in the text risks installing both the patriarchal forms of knowledge at the novel’s centre and the binary opposition (of male/female) that most often serves to deny female agency and/or multiplicity. Yet I believe that the (re)consideration of the male factor into the corpus of Munro criticism can strengthen our understanding of women and women’s writing, positioning her work within an integrated society of girls and women *and* boys and men.

Godard, rightly distinguishing the society of a mature Del from that of her younger self, notes that Del’s apprentice autobiography is a revisiting and revising that derives its verve from an inheritance that believed very much in biology-as-destiny. Del is surrounded by impervious and imperious men who impose all sorts of desires on their Jubilee society. Munro’s idea of this literary legacy, so clearly denoted in the chapter title “Heirs of the Living Body,” suggests a pastiche, a sometimes violent accumulation of words and blood that speaks (though not exclusively) of a woman’s formative experience. Godard’s arguments, arising from a feminist poetics of origins, bespeaks “creation by addition, creation as paradox, both identity and difference” (51).

Such attempts to compel the recognition of both the constitution and expression of women’s literary efforts as difference, somehow outside yet part of contemporary linguistic structures, depend on an economy of presuming that all men, by virtue of their male bodies, fully engaged in a patriarchal system that regulated difference. While an aesthetic especially attuned to social marginalization and paradoxical transformations will inevitably reveal the experiences of groups not heretofore given voice, in Munro’s novel such eventual voicings are nevertheless grounded in a common language governed, *pace* feminism, largely by those very (fore)fathers with whom Del associates.

Godard, then, comes to wonder, “how can one write at all, if one is

a woman" (53). Yet her question is not quite a rhetorical puzzle in that women like Munro, and her fictional female authors, have managed to express themselves given the limitations with and against which they struggle. Godard's tautology is that women, because they are different, must use that very difference in order to both capture and own the difference, yet somehow also move away from it in order to belong to the larger world. This paradoxical endeavour finds an echo in Lorna Irvine's deliberations as to how "writing is the articulating of inarticulate experience" (100). Moreover, Irvine knows that the order — those regulating linguistic structures used by all writers — required by literature so that it might easily be understood means that "writing also creates disorder, suggests hidden meanings and can, as Munro's invariably does, refuse epiphany, stasis, closure" (100). Such refusal is fuelled, in part, by a female imagination that "tends to perceive change as paramount, to refuse to define the boundaries of the self" (101).

Building on Godard's aesthetic, Smaro Kamboureli argues that the "language of a woman writer is at once a language of necessity that ex-poses [sic] the fraudulent realities about her and a language of the body." This language, she argues, "must not be understood as a form of discourse that unifies feminine utterance but as a language of polyvalence" (38).<sup>2</sup> In embracing difference — that is, women capturing essences that eschew binaries — rather than the limiting nature of binary opposites (wherein women are still defined by their relationship to men), Kamboureli, along with Godard, Irvine, and Garson, provides readers with a mapping that might serve to underscore the reality of the lives of girls and women and lead to their transforming exodus from the margins. The continued use of identity politics in transgressing those very politics so that something new might arise — a poetics of writing for all sexes that does not rely on policed borders — has not, of course, erased sexual difference. But if writing on Munro is at all a barometer, the hoped-for transformations are incremental and necessary.

In one of the first critiques to assess the role of men in Del's lives, Nancy Bailey argues that while Del "accepts the masculine world thus projected as the 'real world,' Munro manipulates the different levels of perception in the book so that the reader is aware, as Del at the time is not, of the shadow side of the strong male persona" (114). This is not quite the case. Del does accept *any one* world, one way or another; strong male personas are a matter of course and are viewed as merely

parts of an oblique whole. Munro's tight narrative control enables us to see that the retrospective Del is not reflecting with unknowing eyes, and that young Del does not accept (inasmuch as she does not reject, either) the masculine world. The older men in the novel are neither mentors to Del nor are they given as examples to follow. Rather, they serve for Del as partial texts by which she might read the body politic; her observations have less to do with men as powerful or emblematic of the real world than with men as *stories* that will bolster her own artistic body, figuratively and literarily; in the end, it is *she* who will use them in making the parts of her novel, *Lives of Girls and Women*, a roughly assembled whole that bespeaks a continual play upon the liberating fields of difference.

Del's obsession with surfaces — of the town or the Sherriff family — and the often trite or misguided imaginings about these exteriors results in a termination of obsession with *appearance* and a revived enforcement of the necessity of seeing past surfaces to essences, particularly those fundamental *written* discourses that men (and sometimes, women) use and circulate in order to garner and maintain the freedom Del passively observes them to possess. Significantly Del's mother says, in the titular chapter, "There is a change coming in the lives of girls and women. Yes. But it is up to us to make it come. All women have had up till now has been their connection with men. All we have had" (192-93). But Del, in writing her textual body — the book of her life that will make her come to be — also knows that her mother's cold intellect and tendency to hyperbole are suspect and have left her relatively compromised. The advice her mother offers must always be tempered by looking closer at what she excludes. And here she implies that for girls and women to achieve change, the "connection with men" should be discarded.

In writing the *Bildungsroman*<sup>3</sup> that will become the novel at hand, Del realizes — as Munro surely must — the invariable presence of men in Del's youth. Foremost among them are Del's four uncles — Benny, Craig, Bill, and Art (who isn't called "uncle," but more on that later) — who provide her with various templates by which to consider the happenstance and arbitrary nature of men's influence and to contemplate their authority to author. (Del's father is oddly absent throughout much of the novel.) In writing the body — her own textual essence — Del constructs temporary "wholes" from the parts of men's lives that intersect hers. And it is these lives, moreover, that evince an import generally

stronger than that of any of the novel's female characters. In creating the grounding upon which Del's autobiography rests, they constitute the body by which in part — from parts — Del will fashion herself as whole and as heir.

In his extensive study of Munro, E.D. Blodgett succinctly states that "Uncle Benny is the impetus that prepares Del to see the world as textual material" (40). Indeed, the first text that we see Del preparing is for Uncle Benny. The importance of Benny, though, is not that he is not a real uncle, in the way that Craig and Bill are, but that he is seen to be kin, part of the familial body. He has, Munro writes, a "delicate, predatory face" (2), congruent with an almost rapacious and acquisitive manner. Young Del takes his zeal for things bizarre in his stride, noting that, "In all his statements, predictions, judgments, there was a concentrated passion" (2). Del writes about Benny's address to include "*The World, The Solar System, The Universe*" (12) in an imaginative flair which evokes the world that is the Flats Road. Yet though it is Benny to whom such a world extensively belongs, by virtue of gender, it is Del who writes out the parts of the world for him in order to map out, as it were, her comprehension of a totality that she, a young girl, can only remotely imagine. Of Del's conjoining of the real with the imagined, Neil Besner writes that the "two complementary impulses in Del's consciousness [are] to read texts in order to imagine worlds, and to describe the world she sees before her eyes in order to construct a coherent reality" (39). Del has read books which have, no doubt, told her about an extended world that she can only but imagine, and she places, in this imaginative act, her Uncle Benny not as its focus but as its locus. Benny is thus a beginning, but clearly not the end.

Notably, Benny instructs Del, "I want you to sit here and write a letter for me" (13). The importance of this act is that Del writes *as a man* (leaving aside the oft-noted comparison to James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus.) Not only does Del locate Benny but she becomes, through text, the person called Benny. She plays the part as she *names* him. Besner writes that Munro, like Joyce, is involved with a "process of naming [that] would seem to correspond to a process of location, a naming of place, through which a sense of self is constructed verbally and materially from its situation in ever-widening spheres" (39). Therefore, the essence of Del's writing is not that she wants to be Uncle Benny, but that her conspiracy — to pass Benny off as educated enough to

write — engages her in a tacit appropriation of male prerogative: she has her first understanding of *how it might be done*. Her literary deceit converges with Benny's literal one — he leaves out the unpleasant aspects of his existence — and both parts converge in the narrative that is Benny's proposal.

Benny's potted autobiography reveals to Del the power the pen might signify when its strokes (and here I anticipate Art Chamberlain's masturbation) are enacted by men. Del's performance hints at not only the beginning of a deep understanding of male licence but, perhaps, a desire to imagine a self constituted by what she understands to be the best attributes of adult others. The reward for Del is that Benny, upon returning from this Toronto trip, describes, reports, and remembers "everything" (28). Del notes that "It was his triumph, that he couldn't know about, to make us see" (29). It is fitting, then, that Del ends this first chapter by remembering Benny's wife, Madeleine, as "something he might have made up. We remembered her like a story" (30), a story which Del comes to have a small part in enacting *through* writing.

If, as J.R. Struthers notes, "Uncle Craig was Uncle Benny's successor as Del's mentor" (35), the significance of the mentorship is not that it is transparently teacherly, but precisely that it demonstrates for Del the ongoing exposition of gender values. None of the uncles is out to teach Del anything; she must provide her own initiative. When Craig chides Del about her inattention to detail — "I thought you knew how to read" (32) — it is because of her "inaccurate notions of time and history" (32). She has gone from reading and writing the future (with Benny) to, with Craig, recognizing the importance of the text of the past. These too are parts, various stories that, when written, will reveal pastiche, but it is an assemblage that Del must herself enact.

Despite Craig's apparent negative assessment of Del, that he "often thought me flighty and stupid," she mines his association for the notion that "there was something large and impersonal about his judgment that left me free" (33). But the quality that stands out for Del is his apparent confidence: "Masculine self-centredness made him restful to be with" (33).<sup>4</sup> When Del muses next on "the other kind of information he gave me," she evidently refers to an earlier statement, that "Uncle Craig gave out information" (32); yet it also adroitly stands in counterpoint to the information that concerns a kind of male fortitude, one that dispels the unnecessary in order to get on with the privilege of being merely oneself.

Significantly, the solitary Craig lives in a house that looks like “a crossing point on the border” (31), foreshadowing Del’s being thought of, at her uncle’s funeral, as “a *borderline case*” (63). Borders both enclose and separate; they are forms of demarcation and writing. Crossing the border from child-like wonder to the more objective musings of a young girl, Del observes how death — the cow’s death, which foreshadows Craig’s — borders life and paradoxically delimits meaning while producing new values.

The dead cow bridges the appeal of these two uncles, in that Del is learning how to read surfaces. The cow is first understood as a live map by which to assess women: “Talk as if you’re buying a cow,” Mrs. Jordan admonishes her husband and Benny (11). The “cow” that Benny comes to barter through the rite, or ironic *right*, of marriage turns out to be a mad cow, Madeleine, who in the end “was like something he [Benny] might have made up. We remembered her like a story,” and so she becomes a footnote, referred to as “That madwoman!” (30). In “Heirs to the Living Body,” Madeleine is replaced by the seemingly disturbed Mary Agnes, who comes to be associated with a cow through her literal touching of the dead cow’s unseeing eye.

Del takes these partial elements and comes to learn, through Craig’s death, how to read surfaces that appear alienating — Madeleine, Mary Agnes, the dead cow — but that are suffused with possible drama. In foreshadowing Craig’s death, the dead cow — as Del later notes of her uncle’s body — still has power, “lying with a gleaming strange map on its back” (49). Recalling how Benny retraces his journey, for Del’s observant benefit, Del now traces the spots of the cow, paying attention “to its shape as I would sometimes pay attention to the shape of real continents or islands on real maps, as if the shape itself were a revelation beyond words, and I would be able to make sense of it” (49-50).

Yet the shape of death confuses her because it appears to be a fact that cannot be known, like the ends of “*The Universe*.” Her mother’s explanation of what death is does not comfort her. Only after seeing Craig dead among the lilies does Del reach a makeshift understanding of the whole but ongoing story that is her life; by themselves, Madeleine and Mary Agnes are stories that hold less significance. She intimates she wants to touch Craig, whose face might be “ready to crack when you poked a finger into it” (65), recalling Mary Agnes’s audacious move in touching the dead cow’s eye. And, like the power that resides with the



dead cow, Craig is an “indifferent conductor of forces that could flare up, in an instant, and burn through this room, all reality, leave us dark” (65). Death is not an end, but an opportunity for story-making.

Del’s aunts, despite their downplaying of Craig’s work, seem to understand their place in relation to their brother in that they paradoxically “respected men’s work beyond anything; they also laughed at it” (35). Although such derision might signal an abiding sense that the aunts understand all too well their own powerlessness and compensate for it through subversive ridicule, Del, in retrospectively writing out their story, notes how the aunts understand male prerogative. The aunts relate how one of them put on Craig’s overalls (37) as part of a charade, how one dressed up as an old man to fool Craig (38), and how Aunt Elspeth, in doing farm work, once “lifted the cream cans with a strong and easy, almost contemptuous, movement like a young man’s” (39).

Their denomination, then, was that they signalled to Del that “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” (41). Yet Del understands too that the aunts operate, ultimately, in accordance with the latitudes afforded by their gender, but no more; theirs is a restrictive grammar. In trying to grasp the rationale behind her aunts’ veneration of maintaining stalwart caution, Del states, “Like certain subtle harmonies of music or colour, the beauties of the negative were beyond me.” And as if to underscore the point, Del next asserts the beauty of *her own* negative: “Yet I was *not* ready, like my mother, to deny that they were there” (43; emphasis added).

Del plays her mother’s colours off her aunts’, and in realizing that both are socially constrained, attempts to derive from all of them the qualities that would allow her an unemasculated freedom. While she at times feels that her mother’s outspoken nature is embarrassing, Del nevertheless endeavours, unconsciously or otherwise, to obtain wisdom from her mother’s ramblings. While preparing for Craig’s funeral, she speaks of how transplanting his kidneys might save someone else’s life, concluding, “We would all be heirs of one another’s bodies, we would all be donors too” (54). Of course, Del is, as progeny, an heir of her mother’s body and, moreover, through her blood relation, Craig’s. Yet although Del does not literally obtain a male body, the part of Craig that goes on living through her is an appreciation of how the abundance

inherent in all genders might be partaken, and that certainly one might be poorer without both.

Of course, Del's mother is not a passive woman, though in telling Del that knowledge is the key to freedom, she casts knowledge as an estranging thing, despite her embracing of it as "warm and lovely" (71). Del wisely notes that "to some people, maybe to most people, knowledge was just oddity; it stuck out like warts" (72). Del, in her rebellion at accompanying her mother on her sales pitches, exudes what her mother calls "Shyness and self-consciousness," adding that these "are the luxuries I could *never* afford" (74; emphasis added). If anything, this distinction suggests a generational difference, but also highlights how Del's discernment — her sensing of "negatives" — is wrought from her awareness of how to manipulate the parts of "the living body" so that her new creature will be original, *herself*. She concludes, again with her own qualifying negative, that "I myself was not so different from my mother, but concealed it, knowing what dangers there were" (90).

Del's other danger is the inheritance that is Craig's history. She realizes that the knowledge contained in it is unresponsive to an imaginative recreation; it is the complementary but equally extreme opposite of her mother's dangerous knowing. The former is dry, factual, and passively evident, the latter an overly creative and assertive force; both repel. Thomas Tausky writes that "Del's way of dealing with this literary inheritance is to recognize the value of the box as a repository for her own writing and to banish Uncle Craig's history" (56). Yet she nevertheless uses the box to *contain* her writing, suggesting that Uncle Craig's external shell — his surface or appearance — is necessary in some oblique way. This is mirrored in the funeral scene in which Del notes that his "face was like a delicate mask of skin, varnished, and laid over the real face. . . . he was the terrible, silent, indifferent conductor of forces that could flare up, in an instant, and burn through this room, all reality, leave us dark" (65). His mask, like the box, contains a potency that yet threatens. Paradoxically, since his history is understood to be merely insipid and cannot be actualized, it, like he, is dead. Del, however, needs to retain the vestiges of his authorship in learning how to assemble parts. As Tausky discovers in his discussion of Munro's initial but later discarded paralleling of Del's efforts with her uncle's, the "history was closely associated with Del's efforts at fiction-writing" (57)

Tausky again notes that, near the end of the novel, "Del's objective

is linked, startlingly, with Uncle Craig's motives as an historian," adding that the comparison should not "be totally disregarded. If the collapse of Del's fantasy indicates the dangers of ignoring reality altogether, the mere mention of Uncle Craig's name is a powerful reminder that absorption with commonplace reality can produce its own sterility" (67). Contrary to the ordinary reality of her mother's defiant brother Bill, Del finds a history that comes to contradictory life, though this is another story that ends with an uncle's death.

Uncle Bill's arrival overshadows the episode that has, up to this point, focused on her mother. Del is surprised to find that Bill, as a grown man, is not at all like the mean boy her mother spoke of; in fact, she calls him a "fairy godfather" (94). But most of all, she revels in Bill's command of his environment. In the grocery store, he goes "up and down the aisles calling out the names of things" (93). Like a refurbished Adam whose very naming simultaneously denotes and evokes reality, Bill's largesse and larger than life personality brings together not only the pieces he needs to fashion a meal but also conveys the sense that *acting as if* will paper over any holes in the framing of a whole.

It may be that Bill's anxiety also papers over his fear of impending death (a fact later revealed), yet he intimates, in his story of the transformed butterfly, that appearances are often surprising and that it is in grasping the surprise that one might find a transformative truth about essence. Ajay Heble notes that Bill's story "provides a literal example of the way in which new life can emerge out of death, an example of the way in which the living body is continually pulled out of itself, thus allowing what is new to substitute for, take over, and ultimately leave behind what was there in the first place" (58). Bill's death is like Craig's in that they both leave a legacy of *story*.

The three uncles sharply contrast with the last one, Art Chamberlain, whose familial status is denoted through the sexual (mis)adventure that revives the stereotype of the secretly abusive family member. Mrs. Jordan's sisterly relationship with Fern is compounded by Fern's relationship with Art, a man with whom they "did everything ... just the same as if they were married" (160). Art, whose art resides in his voicing of news stories of which he was not author, represents for Del the irresponsible man in whose cavalier attitudes she finds intrigue. In discussing the war with Mr. Jordan, Mr. Chamberlain sees "a conglomeration of stories, leading nowhere in particular. He made his stories to be laughed

at” (164). These stories are far more interesting than the factual radio stories that resemble Craig’s dry history.

Del’s retelling of her sexual encounter with Art is oddly unemotional. It may be that Del is really the cool character she has her reader believe she is, whose intellectual detachment renders her a superior observer of the world around her. This deeply personal story confounds her — “I did not know what to do with it” (190) — and so it seems that if an incident cannot be adequately named, in the way Bill names things in the supermarket, the resonance can be understood as puzzling but safely fictive. Or it may be that the retrospective Del has excised aspects of the story that might make her appear vulnerable. Or it may be her attempt to disempower what men have mistakenly imbued with phallic power, that is, the penis.

Nowhere in Del’s account do we sense that, despite her telling us that she was afraid, she was ever afraid or disturbed. If it is *wholly* the mature Del’s perception after the fact that is responsible for making sense of the encounter, it is that she has turned this episode into something resembling an allegorical encounter with language and theatre. As Heble notes, “Already apparent in the fact that Del does not name the penis, that ‘it’ remains a pronoun with a clear yet absent antecedent, is a suggestion that reality has somehow been appropriated, a suggestion — to use the terms traditionally used in the analysis of metaphor — that an absent or abandoned tenor has been replaced by a series of successive vehicles” (66). When Art Chamberlain fondles Del’s breast, she finds it an “impertinent violation, so perfectly sure of itself, so authoritative, clean of sentiment” (177). As is Del’s recounting of it. When confronted by “it” — the penis — Del says, “It did not seem to have anything to do with me” (185).

The notion of a reality appropriated and put in service of story and theatre continues when Mr. Chamberlain masturbates. Del finds that

the whole performance, surrounded by calm flowering branches, seemed imposed, fantastically and predictably exaggerated, like an Indian dance. I had read about the body being in extremities of pleasure, possessed, but these expressions did not seem equal to the terrible, benighted effort, deliberate frenzy, of what was going on here. (186)

In the same way that Del may have read about the universe and its extremities and determined that a textual rendering of the imagination

gave her account of it order, her reversion here to Indian dances and readings about pleased bodies gives her appropriate metaphors by which to order the account itself. Of course, she states that her readings haven't prepared her for this; yet that this is *now* a written account gives her ample breadth in (re)recording the experience. Whether or not her story disturbed her, Del finds now that it is simply grist for the mill. She eschews the books on sex that "always compared it to something else, never told about it by itself" (192). She has now found a way to tell it by itself: by robbing the violation of its propensity to pervert and distort, Del throws away the possibility of psychological damage and instead *creates*.

Before she moves on to tell stories about Jerry Storey, Garnet French, and the Sherriffs, Del virtually ends the novel. Her insistence is that her mother's advice cannot serve her well: "I would have had to resist anything she told me with such earnestness, such stubborn hopefulness" (193). Del has learned that by playing parts — being observant and trying on roles — she achieves a level of understanding about how experience and the embracing of difference shape the literary body, one concomitant with the living body, male and female. When she notes that "men were supposed to be able to go out and take on all kinds of experiences and shuck off what they didn't want and come back proud," Del fashions her own part: "Without even thinking about it, I had decided to do the same" (193). The result is not an eschewing of the role men have played in her life but, rather, an assumption of that very role, one that will allow her to take, as it were, the lead.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Garson quotes from James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 211.

<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere, Kamboureli argues for erasing sexual binaries that oppose. Neither masculine nor feminine, the gender of what Kamboureli calls "the neuter," "ought to signify difference not opposition" (32).

<sup>3</sup> For an explanation of the function of the *Bildungsroman*, see Struthers.

<sup>4</sup> The seduction of such restfulness is undermined when it is later associated with Jerry Storey (218), whose straightforward, unembellished manner Del eventually rejects.

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