Authors and Authority in *Lives of Girls and Women*

MARGARET HARRIS

The title of Alice Munro's novel *Lives of Girls and Women* is the title also of one of its chapters, which in turn picks up a phrase spoken by Del's mother

> . . . in her grave, hopeful, lecturing voice.
>
> "There is a change coming I think 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. No more lives of our own, really, than domestic animals. *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*. Tennyson wrote that. It's true. *Was* true. You will want to have children, though."
>
> That was how much she knew me.[1]

Here Mrs Jordan is quoting from *The Princess*, a poem which speculates about the old order yielding place to a new one in which among other evolutionary advances women have become less subservient. Mrs Jordan explicitly identifies with Princess Ida in the poem: for some of her contributions to newspapers "she used the nom de plume Princess Ida, taken from a character in Tennyson whom she admired" (p. 80).[2] Her appeal to *The Princess* as a tutelary text for the liberation of women is, however, rejected by her daughter

1 Alice Munro, *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p. 173. All subsequent quotations are from this edition and are included parenthetically in the text.

2 Ada's identification with Princess Ida has ironic aspects. For one thing, the realistic Princess has no success as a revolutionary, and not much as a reformer. Her scheme for a university of women fails, and the hypothesized changes in the relation of the sexes are modifications of the existing patriarchal structures rather than displacement of them. Marriage and the wise nurture of children must continue to be central to the perpetuation of the race—and, as one character emphasizes,

> This fine old world of ours is but a child
> Yet in the go-cart. Patience! Give it time.
> (Conclusion, ll. 77-8: Tennyson quotations are from *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks, London: Longmans, 1969)

Moreover Ada does not use the *nom de plume* for statements about causes akin to Princess Ida's, like education and the rights of women, but for "long decorative descriptions" derivative from the sentimental and mellifluous elements of Tennyson's work (p. 80). It might well be argued, then, that Ada's worship of Tennyson involves various kinds of misrepresentation.

for whom, partly because of the association with her mother, Tennyson offers images of oppression and constraint rather than of liberation.

Towards the end of the novel Del tests out Tennysonian attitudes:

> I was watching, I was suffering. I said into the mirror a line from Tennyson, from my mother's *Complete Tennyson* that was a present from her old teacher, Miss Rush. I said it with absolute sincerity, absolute irony. *He cometh not, she said.*
>
> From "Mariana", one of the silliest poems I had ever read. (p. 238)

Tennyson's "Mariana" offers an interpretation of the plight of the character in *Measure for Measure* immured amidst Gothic gloom and decay awaiting her lover. Del's quotation from the refrain of the dreary and rejected Mariana is reinforced by an allusion to the rituals of another of Tennyson's imprisoned women, the Lady of Shalott, who watches the world go by reflected in her mirror. When bold Sir Lancelot "flashed into the crystal/mirror" (l. 106), his allure is such that the Lady turns from her magical weaving and from the mirror, and looks out directly on the scene: but this is the death of her. Del Jordan's creative power needs testing by friction with the world outside, not isolation and reflection as required by the Lady of Shalott. Del looks at herself in the dim hall mirror, which does not shatter. She is herself an object of regard, not simply a medium for the creation of a work of art, and besides she is able to look at herself by other means than physical reflection.

Both "The Lady of Shalott" and "Mariana" present powerful images of female enclosure and vulnerability to the male. Del takes up Mariana's doleful refrain, "He cometh not", and breaks the spell. As she says the line "with absolute sincerity, with absolute irony", she detaches herself from her self-dramatizing indulgence in misery, and turns to a different text. Not a work from the literary canon, but "the city paper", and in the advertisements for jobs Del forces herself to engage with the world beyond herself and beyond Jubilee:

> Cities existed; telephone operators were wanted; the future could be furnished without love or scholarships. Now at last without fantasies or self-deception, cut off from the mistakes and confusion of the past, grave and simple, carrying a small suitcase, getting on a bus, like girls in movies leaving home, convents, lovers, I supposed I would get started on my real life.
>
> *Garnet French, Garnet French, Garnet French.*
> *Real Life.* (p. 238)

Del substitutes an image from countless movies for the Tennysonian one, not quite perceiving that to change the image does not necessarily guarantee the end of "fantasies and self-deception". The self-deprecating unsureness of "I supposed I would get started on my

real life'' generates the bravado of an attitude: the closing line supplants the keening for her lost love by the personification of her new ideal, ''*Real Life*''.

Both the attitude, and the emotional modulations which enable it, have elements in common with the situation of Stephen Dedalus at the end of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. For most of the novel, Stephen's consciousness is projected through a third person narration which imitates and examines the language appropriate to Stephen's current phase of development. As examples of Stephen's capacity for self-expression, besides dialogue we have only his villanelle, until in the closing pages of the novel Joyce for the first time hands the narrative over to Stephen, whose self-presentation in his journal entries comes to a grandiloquent climax:

> *April 26th.* Mother is putting my new secondhand clothes in order. She prays now, she says, that I may learn in my own life and away from home and friends what the heart is and what it feels. Amen. So be it. Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.[3]

The climax is succeeded by a doubt, and a petition, in which the forms of address to God the Father are modified for an appeal to the mythical Daedalus whom Stephen now acknowledges as his spiritual father and tutelary deity:

> *April 27th.* Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead.[4]

For both Stephen Dedalus, poised to leave his family, church, and country, and Del Jordan, setting her back to another province of the British imperium and launching herself into a metropolitan culture, the confidence that this time crisis has brought a lasting resolution is seen to be a necessary illusion.

Lives of Girls and Women and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* explore like phenomena. Connections between Munro's work and Joyce's have been noted for example by W. R. Martin, who discusses similarities of method and especially of intention between Munro's first volume of short stories, *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), and Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914), and, more briefly, similarities between Munro's first novel, *Lives of Girls and Women*, and *A Portrait of the Artist*, Joyce's first novel. Both novels are *Bildungsromane*, tracing out the education and formation of their protagonists; and

3 *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in *The Essential James Joyce*, ed. Harry Levin (London: Jonathan Cape, 1948), p. 367. Subsequent quotations from *A Portrait* also cite this edition.

4 *Ibid.*

since the potential of each protagonist to become a writer is so much at issue, both can be ascribed to the sub-category of *Künstlerroman*, dealing with the education of an artist. Each novel is innovatory in its account of the protagonist's coming to sexual awareness and of the place of that awareness in the whole development of Stephen Dedalus and Del Jordan.[5]

I do not see such similarities and affinities as simply coincidence of motifs from *Bildungs-* or *Künstlerroman*, let alone derivative in Munro from Joyce. It is true both that *Lives of Girls and Women* can aptly be described as "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman", and that neither Joyce nor his novel is explicitly cited in *Lives of Girls and Women* in the way that Tennyson and his poems are. There are, however, covert quotations, of which the most striking comes early on. With the special pride of one about to enter Grade Four, Del demonstrates her skill in calligraphy for Uncle Benny:

> I wrote his name and address in full: *Mr Benjamin Thomas Poole, The Flats Road, Jubilee, Wawanash County, Ontario, Canada, North America, The Western Hemisphere, The World, The Solar System, The Universe.* He read over my shoulder and said sharply, "Where is that in relation to Heaven? You haven't got far enough. Isn't Heaven outside of the Universe?"
>
> "The Universe means everything. It's all there is."
>
> "All right, you think you know so much, what is there when you get to the end of that? There has to be something there, else there wouldn't be an end, there has to be something else to make an end, doesn't there?"
>
> "There isn't," I said doubtfully.
>
> "Oh yes there is. There's Heaven."
>
> "Well what is there when you get to the end of Heaven?"
>
> "You don't ever get to the end of Heaven, because the Lord is there!" said Uncle Benny triumphantly, and took a close look at my writing, which was round, trembly, and uncertain. "Well anybody can read that without no trouble. I want you to sit here and write a letter for me." (p. 11)

Del's composition, placing Uncle Benny within ever-expanding boundaries, describes someone other than herself. She does not intrude herself as author of the text, accepting the role of ministering female, a role which reverses some traditional aspects of female subservience since she has a power, even as a girl-child, which the adult male Benny does not have, the power of the pen and the word.

5 "Alice Munro and James Joyce", *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 24 (1979), 125. J. R. Struthers, "Reality and Ordering: The Growth of a Young Artist in *Lives of Girls and Women*", *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 3 (Fall 1975), 32-46, draws further parallels between *Lives of Girls and Women* and *A Portrait of the Artist* without offering an account of the basis for or effect of the parallels.

Her exercise serves at once to locate the setting of the story much more exactly than has been done in the preceding pages, and to recall Stephen Dedalus' inscription on the flyleaf of his geography book:

> Stephen Dedalus
> Class of Elements
> Clongowes Wood College
> Sallins
> County Kildare
> Ireland
> Europe
> The World
> The Universe[6]

Stephen's attempt at self-definition is followed by a brief passage of cosmic speculation (what happens at the end of the universe?) analogous to Uncle Benny's interrogation of Del. The allusion is unmistakeable, and I take it to represent the way in which *Lives of Girls and Women* invokes Joyce's text. There are other kinds of allusion, most notably in the contrast between the revival meeting in *Lives of Girls and Women* (pp. 205ff.) and the retreat in *A Portrait of the Artist* (chapter iii). This comparison brings out revealing differences between the quality of Stephen Dedalus' self-absorption in his oscillation between what he experiences as the competing demands of the flesh and the spirit, and the ways in which Del Jordan's needs—for companionship, satisfaction of her sexual curiosity and reinforcement of her instinctive rejection of stereotypes of the feminine—are examined.[7] Through such analogies, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* can be seen in *Lives of Girls and Women* as an implicit reference in the explicit assertion of female difference, of woman's identity and of woman's place in a particular culture, of the peculiar capacities of woman as artist.

Del Jordan's art is that of storytelling, which in *Lives of Girls and Women* is identified primarily as a woman's activity. "I never read fiction", says Jerry Storey primly (p. 241). Aunt Elspeth and Auntie Gracie tell stories as they sit working on the veranda in the afternoons,

6 *A Portrait of the Artist*, p. 183. It may be only printing house convention which sets Stephen at the apex of a vertical list, while Del writes Uncle Benny's details laterally.

7 Such comparisons could be pursued further in particular incidents like the play in *A Portrait*, chapter ii, and the operetta in *Lives of Girls and Women*, chapter v, or particular experiences—of the theatrical in religion, for example. A comparison of the structure of each text (both are forms of discontinuous narrative) could also be interesting, particularly bearing in mind the significance of epiphany in *A Portrait*.

while Uncle Craig busies himself with his more systematic narratives of public events, "a history of Wawanash County and a family tree, going back to 1670, in Ireland" (pp. 30-1). But for all the worthy comprehensiveness of these projects, there are some questions Uncle Craig as genealogist and historian simply resists putting to his material. He wants to tabulate and record, but not to look at the texture of individual lives nor the nature of the experiences that are reported in the mass of newspaper clippings and such which he has assembled. His structures of knowledge privilege a particular kind of fact and objectivity. Del's own presentation will deny the disparaging view of women's apprehension which she encounters in a magazine:

> *For a woman, everything is personal; no idea is of any interest to her by itself, but must be translated into her own experience; in works of art she always sees her own life, or her daydreams.* (p. 178)

Eventually the aunts entrust Del with Uncle Craig's history in its black tin box ("More pages than *Gone With the Wind*!", p. 60) in the hope that one day she will finish it. Although Del's brother Owen is the boy, " 'you're the one has the knack for writing compositions' " (p. 61). It is typical of the subtle accretion of detail in this novel that in the second chapter the aunts' recognition of Del's ability to write should advance from Uncle Benny's call on her in the opening chapter. But for Del, the history "seemed so dead . . . so heavy and dull and useless . . . I took it down to the cellar and left it in a cardboard box" (p. 62). There it stays, forgotten, until years later the cellar floods, and the "big wad of soaking paper" (p. 62) that emerges is part of what Del firmly sets aside in leaving Jubilee.

The story Del has to tell is the story of herself in relation to other people and to her environment, and specifically of her development to the stage at which, having moved from the Flats Road into Jubilee, and then having ranged a little into Wawanash County, her sense of the expanding limits of her world readies her to make the next move into the wider world of the city, and the state. She has to work out her destiny as an artist, though she is never an artist of the kind Stephen at one point envisages, who "like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails."[8] The titles of the two novels intimate the different concepts of the artist each proposed. Joyce's title has a kind of indefiniteness—"A Portrait", perhaps of many possible ones—but emphasizes Stephen's specific claim to the generic powers of the artist as presumed in a Romantic view of art and the poet. *Lives of Girls and Women*

8 *A Portrait of the Artist*, p. 337.

makes a claim for the significance of the lives of seemingly nondescript women in a title which echoes those of such eminent compendia as Butler's *Lives of the Saints*. The plural forms of the title also suggests the extent to which any one life is in various ways implicated with others: consider the way that the chapter "Lives of Girls and Women" while principally focussed on the protagonist Del Jordan also tells of the lives of Fern, Del's mother, and Naomi. Solidarity and mutual support among women cannot necessarily be assumed, but community of situation, even if unacknowledged, and a kind of complicity of reaction—usually covert and ineffectual—to male authority are. (Consider the aunts, mocking "men's work"—p. 32—or Del and Naomi jesting about *coitus interruptus*—p. 232.) The awareness that Del gradually articulates is that human life is made up of narratives, and that the particular activity described as novel-writing is simply an intensification of what we do all the time. The issues of the relation of life and art, of fact and fiction, of literary representations to what they purport to represent, continually engage Del as she develops her narrative skills and the capacity to write herself.

At the end of *A Portrait*, Stephen with his aesthetic worked out sets off to put it into practice. (Assuming some identity between Stephen and Joyce, the book he produces is *Dubliners*.) One significant difference between *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Lives of Girls and Women* is that Alice Munro gives us the proof of Del's capacity as an artist, the book *Lives of Girls and Women* itself. The relationship of the author to her experience, and to her narrative, is peculiarly intense in this novel. The book includes a version of a familiar formula: "This novel is autobiographical in form but not in fact. My family, neighbors and friends did not serve as models—A.M." This is an artfully artless disclaimer, since some of the facts of Alice Munro's biography are repeated in Del Jordan's: Jubilee is to be identified with the town of Wingham, Ontario, where Alice Munro was born; Munro's father at one stage bred foxes for fur, her mother was a victim of Parkinson's disease (though this is not a feature of Mrs Jordan in *Lives of Girls and Women*, it is alluded to on p. 180, and in other of Munro's stories where Del and her family appear, for example in some of those in *Dance of the Happy Shades*).

Beyond these elements there is a particularly interesting affinity or transposition in the matter of names. As follows. Del's name is presumably Della or Adela, so that she is named for (or after) her mother, who is Ada or Addie (pp. 64, 73). This name comes from an Old German word, and means noble or exalted. The name Alice

is derived from the same root, via Old French, and has the same meaning.[9] These allotropic variations intensify the self-referential qualities of a novel which concerns itself with a girl growing to be a woman who tells the story of herself growing to be the woman who writes the book.

The interrelation of fact and fiction, of real life and story, forms a major subject of *Lives of Girls and Women*. It occupies the first chapter, "The Flats Road". The title has a penumbra of dullness, flatness—though of course it refers to a feature of the landscape, the river flats. And the chapter does build up a very precise historical, sociological, geographical location: the small town in relation to the larger one, Kitchener, and to the distant city, Toronto, and the yet more distant imperial powers, America and England—the latter fighting a war which in 1942 does not appear to figure prominently in Del's day-to-day life (the war is mentioned, very distantly, for example on pp. 5 and 86; we learn of the cessation of hostilities through references to the collapse of the fox fur trade—pp. 192, 194, 226).

Del introduces herself as part of an activity in which she is not individualized: "We spent days along the Wawanash River . . ." (p. 1). That activity—catching young frogs for bait—is out of the ordinary not to say bizarre, but recounted in a thoroughly matter-of-fact way. The child's capacity to absorb the extraordinary as part of the ordinary and everyday is very much in evidence, through her receptivity and fastidiousness in reporting. Del is not named until well into the second segment (p. 43), and indeed it is not clear until then that she is female although her approximate age has been established in the course of the first episode. The prose gives the perceptions of the ten-year-old without pretending to be a version of a ten-year-old's speech (as in the modified ventriloquial tactics of free indirect speech adopted by Joyce).

There is no insistence on the narrative persona's distance from her younger self. Awareness of what Del is to become does not suffuse the narrative of her progress, nor is there explicit commentary on her development and growth. There are occasional unobtrusive glances forward, for example in Del's remarks about her mother ("Later on she was to find she did not belong in Jubilee either . . . As yet I followed her without embarrassment, enjoying the commotion."—

9 Moreover, Ada and Ida are phonetically similar, though having different derivations (Ida is from the Greek, "happy"). The significance of proper names in *Lives of Girls and Women* is discussed, though not exhaustively, by James Carscallen, "Alice Munro", *Profiles in Canadian Literature*, 24 (1980), 76.

p. 8, or "She was a fuller, fairer woman than she later became"—p. 10). At the end of the second episode, there is allusion forward to "The last spring I was in Jubilee, when I was studying for my final exams" (p. 62). It is not until "Baptizing" that the narrative chronology reaches this time, which sees also Del's affair with Garnet French and her decision, when she breaks it off, "to get started on my real life" (p. 238). "Epilogue: The Photographer" casts back a little to present an account of her first sustained grappling with ways of telling the story of Jubilee, and then brings the narrative forward to her epiphany in conversation with Bobby Sherriff, that "People's lives, in Jubilee as elsewhere, were dull, simple, amazing, and unfathomable—deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum" (p. 249). That epiphany empowers the narrating Del in the last page of the novel explicitly to invest her narrative with the pressure of the ambition she has achieved, "to write things down" (p. 249). It must also condition her struggle against Garnet French's effort to baptise her preparatory to marrying and impregnating her. Her sexual adventure with him has been exciting but limiting because purely physical: "the world I saw with Garnet was something not far from what I thought animals must see, the world without names" (p. 218). The epiphany also articulates a significant aspect, not previously acknowledged, of the experience recounted in the opening sequence of the novel.

For what the ten-year-old Del has to tell about life along the Flats Road is thoroughly sensational, centring on the story of Madeleine the mail-order bride who runs away, with accompanying ghoulish reading, and anecdotes, and a cast of minor characters which includes two idiots and some bootleggers. The story of Sandy Stevenson's marriage, derided by Del's mother as "all coincidence, imagination, self-suggestion" (p. 10), generates a number of sexist wisecracks by Del's father, time-worn variations on the notion that a wife should be chosen in the way that any other animal is picked out for the service of man. In fact, Uncle Benny's forced marriage to Madeleine inverts that male assumption, for Benny is neatly snared when he arrives to inspect her; and Madeleine's story is never told: how she came to have a child, where she goes. Instead she becomes matter for stories along the Flats Road, her anger and destructive wildness neutralized in the telling. A celebration of the power of narrative, the reality of being made up, concludes the episode.

Del in this chapter has the child's absolute confidence of knowing the limits of and procedures within her world. But she is fascinated by glimpses of other worlds—of the evil and sensation headlined in Uncle Benny's paper, so unlike the reports in other newspapers, and

so inconsistent with Del's own experience. Her awareness is framed as a question:

> Why was it that the plain back wall of home, the pale chipped brick, the cement platform outside the kitchen door, washtubs hanging on nails, the pump, the lilac bush with brown-spotted leaves, should make it seem so doubtful that a woman would really send her husband's torso, wrapped in Christmas paper, by mail to his girl friend in South Carolina? (p. 5)

At the end of the novel, she both understands her question better, and is able in some sense to answer it, finding the occasion for and the substance of stories in her own experience.

In "The Flats Road", the most moving experience for Del derives not from Madeleine herself, nor from her violent behaviour, whether experienced first hand, as in the drama of the stove lifter, or reported as in the outrage of her hurling a box of Kotex at Charlie Buckle in his store, or deduced, as in the beating of Diane. Rather it is Benny's account of going to Toronto to seek Madeleine which excites Del to a moment of epiphany:

> So lying alongside our world was Uncle Benny's world like a troubling distorted reflection, the same but never at all the same. In that world people could go down in quicksand, be vanquished by ghosts or terrible ordinary cities; luck and wickedness were gigantic and unpredictable; nothing was deserved, anything might happen; defeats were met with crazy satisfaction. It was his triumph, that he couldn't know about, to make us see. (p. 26)

For Del there is meaning in Benny's experience of the bewildering, bemusing, disorienting city which Benny himself cannot articulate, and Del's reading of Benny's experience is in some respects akin to the reader's reading of Del's narrative.

The re-casting of experience, seeing things differently after a lapse of time, putting them in different ways, is explicitly a subject of Del's attention in the last section of the novel, "Epilogue: The Photographer". This chapter constitutes an epilogue in that Del is distanced temporally and physically from the events of which she has been telling. *The Photographer* is a character in a novel Del has been composing in the last little while, a character who personifies the question of the relation of life to art. His pictures can transform their subjects, make revelations: they have a supernatural or at least praeternatural power. Del's characterization of *The Photographer* brings into focus the question of where her narrative of herself has tended. The chapter poses the question of the kind of story Jubilee engenders and resolves Del's dilemmas about ways to answer the question.

The chapter opens in an indefinite past: " 'This town is rife with suicides,' was one of the things my mother would say . . ." (p. 239).

Part of the subject of this paragraph is the tension in the relationship of Del and her mother. More is involved here than the normal dynamics of rejection of the parent and the home. The dynamic of Del's immediate family is celebrated at the end of "The Flats Road", and its deterioration thereafter is casually and consistently traced. Del's father fades out, apparently content in the male enclave on the farm with Owen and Uncle Benny (pp. 226-7), but he has never been as important in Del's scheme of things as her mother. The complex relationship of mother and daughter shifts, from highs such as Ada's rescue of Del at Uncle Craig's funeral (p. 56), through Del's mingled embarrassment and protectiveness (e.g. p. 63), and her resistance to her mother's advice, tinged by Tennyson as it is (pp. 173-4), to Addie's disappointment at Del's academic failure (p. 237). The relation with the mother is of particular significance for the woman artist.[10] Female creativity has traditionally been imaged in terms of procreation, of physical fertility. The rationalization is that women displace their artistic drives in bearing and nurturing children. Part of Del's assertion to counter her mother's authority is that she does not intend to have children, and her break from Garnet is triggered by his question, " 'Would you like to have a baby?' " (p. 233). I take it that what is involved for Del is a reservation of her creative energies and not merely an indication of perversity nor a case history reflection of her own family circumstances. For the male, and especially the male artist, separation from the mother is facilitated by the availability of dual images of woman as Madonna, a spiritualized ideal on the one hand, and Magdalen, a degrading physical distraction on the other. The female, especially the female artist, has to cast up quite different accounts in reconciling her productive and reproductive capacities.

Del's challenges to her mother's versions of things, whether of Jubilee or of Tennyson, constitute more than a generalized resistance to parental authority. Del is to make her own versions, and hence her obsession with facts, with their enumeration and classification, and with their interpretation. It is perhaps significant that the particular

10 For further consideration of this phenomenon, see for example Susan Gubar, "The Birth of the Artist as Heroine: (Re)production, the *Künstlerroman* Tradition, and the Fiction of Katherine Mansfield", in *The Representation of Women in Fiction: Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1981*; ed. Carolyn G. Heilbrun and Margaret R. Higonnet (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983) and Grace Stewart, *A New Mythos: The Novel of the Artist as Heroine, 1877-1977* (St. Albans, Vt.: Eden Press, 1979).

challenge discussed at the beginning of "Epilogue: The Photographer" concerns suicide, since it is self-extinction that Del has successfully fought off in the previous chapter along with Garnet French's attempt to baptise her in the river. (In the previous chapter, but the break with Garnet succeeds the main incident of "Epilogue: The Photographer". The shuttle of chronology is deft and purposeful.) Suicides by drowning particularly attract Del's attention. She assembles such data as she can about Miss Farris, worrying at there having been more to the teacher than became apparent during the production of the operetta; and similarly figures that Marion Sherriff's photograph does not give all the evidence needed to understand either her life or her death. Del tacitly rejects the inevitable Jubilee interpretation of Marion Sherriff's suicide—" 'Pregnant, naturally,' Fern Dogherty used to say" (p. 240)—in favour of making her own version of it. She embarks on active composition, no longer satisfied by the tales of others, or by casual reconstitution.

> A time came when all the books in the library in the Town Hall were not enough for me, I had to have my own. I saw that the only thing to do with my life was to write a novel. I picked on the Sherriff family to write it about . . . (p. 240)

Del describes her creative activity, recounting the transpositions and modifications of Real Life knowledge into her menacing Gothic melodrama, wryly admitting that considerations of plausibility still intrude in such matters as there being enough water left in the Wawanash River, given the climate of *The Photographer*, for Marion/Caroline to drown herself in a seemly posture. The truth of her "black fable" (p. 244) dominates literal fidelity to what is held to be real:

> it seemed true to me, not real but true, as if I had discovered, not made up, such people and such a story, as if that town was lying close behind the one I walked through every day. (p. 244)

But in an encounter with one of the Sherriffs, the mad brother Bobby, Del is forced to adjust this perception of the relation between the real and the true:

> And what happened, I asked himself, to Marion? Not to Caroline. *What happened to Marion?* What happened to Bobby Sherriff when he had to stop baking cakes and go back to the asylum? Such questions persist, in spite of novels. It is a shock, when you have dealt so cunningly, powerfully, with reality, to come back and find it still there. (p. 247)

The real-life Bobby Sherriff turns out to be as strange as Del's fiction about his family. He speaks of cars, university, human nutrition, and

as Del tries to sort out her responses, her gaze focusses on the *Herald-Advocate* building.

> That back wall had no windows to it; it had certain stains, chipped bricks, a long crack running down diagonally, starting a bit before the middle and ending up at the bottom corner next to the Chainway store.
>
> At ten o'clock the banks would open, the Canadian Bank of Commerce and the Dominion Bank across the street. At twelve-thirty, a bus would go through the town, southbound from Owen Sound to London. If anybody wanted to get on it there would be a flag out in front of Haines' Restaurant. (pp. 248-9)

This wall recalls ''the plain back wall of home'' (p. 5) along the Falls Road, on to which in the first episode has been projected Del's sense of the implausibility of the events described in Uncle Benny's paper. But now her horizons are wider, and her sense of the daily routine of Jubilee includes, proleptically, the means of leaving it. The progression of her perceptions refines and reverses the earlier amorphous conjectures, for she is able to articulate her awareness of the coincidence of the amazing and the mundane.

And, as she tells it, she comes into possession of her ambition:

> It did not occur to me then that one day I would be so greedy for Jubilee. Voracious and misguided as Uncle Craig out at Jenkin's Bend, writing his history, I would want to write things down. (p. 249)

Lives of Girls and Women is her writing down of things. The paradox that her book contains is that the avowed ambition is to still things, immortalize them—

> 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. (p. 249)

—while the story she tells is of movement, restlessness, change in the recital of her own life among other lives of girls and women.