

# I Would Try To Make Lists

## The Catalogue in *Lives of Girls and Women*

“I would try to make lists,” says Del near the end of *Lives of Girls and Women*, and she lists some of the lists she made:

A list of all the stores and businesses going up and down the main street and who owned them, a list of family names, names on the tombstones in the Cemetery and any inscriptions underneath. A list of the titles of movies that played at the Lyceum Theatre from 1938 to 1950, roughly speaking. Names on the Cenotaph (more for the first World War than for the second). Names of the streets and the pattern they lay in. (253)

This sounds like a fairly mechanical exercise, and perhaps as a result readers who remark on Del’s list-making tend to deal with it briefly as a literal-minded, even simplistic technique. If metonymy is the trope of realism (Jakobson 78), the list is apparently the most innocently realistic, as it is the most metonymic, of figures. It speaks of things together only because they are found together, or so it seems to claim, stringing into a verbal line details that history has already arbitrarily assembled. Since Del mentions the device in the context of her own distinction between realism and romance her realization that “*Real Life*” (242) in the Sherriff household may be stranger and more interesting than gothic fantasy about the fictional Caroline—and since she suggests that her list-making project links her with her Uncle Craig, whose mind-numbing history of Wawanash county is itself little more than a list, it is not surprising that her own lists tend to be placed at the low mimetic end of the scale and regarded as an inadequate rhetorical strategy.<sup>1</sup> One of the most frequently quoted passages in *Lives of Girls and Women* is the one in which Del emphasizes the futility of her efforts:

no list could hold what I wanted, because what I wanted was every last thing, every layer of speech and thought, stroke of light on bark or walls, every smell, pot-hole, pain, crack, delusion, held still and held together—radiant, everlasting. (253)

But “*Real Life*” is itself a literary construction, as the ironizing capitals and italics suggest, and the very fact that Del’s complaint about the inefficacy of lists itself contains a list might suggest that this device is mobilized in *Lives of Girls and Women* in a highly self-conscious and by no means naively realistic way. The catalogue is after all a rhetorical figure traditionally associated less with documentary realism than with mythopoeic energy and performative aplomb. Usually traced in the history of Western literature back to Hesiod, whose lists of women establish a subgenre not irrelevant to some of the lists in *Lives*, the catalogue is characteristic both of oral poetry (like the Scandinavian Eddas mentioned in *The Progress of Love*, 421) and of high-cultural *écriture*<sup>2</sup> (the Renaissance rewrote the classical catalogues and invented the blazon, also relevant to *Lives of Girls and Women*<sup>3</sup>). The figure lends itself as well to the projects of modernism and postmodernism as to those of nineteenth-century realism: a recent search for “lists in literature” in the Wilson Catalogue turned up twenty-one items, on authors from Nero and Catullus to Dos Passos, Borges, and Cheever. A writer as sophisticated as Munro might be expected to use such a versatile figure in more interesting ways than her adolescent protagonist is initially able to do, and that she indeed does so is the contention of this essay.

█ Inevitably selective, both because it is constituted by selectivity—by a prior act of classification that defines the set of objects to be enumerated—and because it usually cannot contain the whole set, the literary list nevertheless connotes *copia* and gestures towards inclusiveness: Ovid’s catalogue of trees stands for all trees, Homer’s catalogue of ships evokes the whole of Greece. “Total enumeration by means of a comprehensive catalog” is, as a reader of Borges has recently noted, “a longstanding method for representing a total vision.” Yet “the method does not work well because...the former is sequential and encyclopedic whereas the latter is simultaneous and unified” (Thiem 107).<sup>4</sup> It is the very frustration of the urge for exhaustiveness that makes the figure useful for Munro. The quest for the whole is important in her writing (Hoy, Garson), and what eludes the grasp of words always weighs heavily on what is preserved. Uncle Craig’s history is so much deader even than Del’s lists partly because, in its igno-

rance of its own selectivity, it represses what it has forgotten. The list, in its aspiration to completeness, is well suited to suggest helplessness in the face of the mass of material it cannot reduce to order, the vast areas of experience outside the text that press in on it from all sides.<sup>5</sup>

Even when it names a complete set, the list tends to have a centrifugal momentum. Perhaps because its individual items are so loosely linked, each retains a life of its own, so that the catalogue leads not only forward and along, but out and away to other sets and contexts. A critic of Spenser has observed that while the list seems to move forward with “straightforward progress,” “the resonances within it of earlier texts subtly disperse this progress in several directions” so that “the dilating and regressive movement of [the] allusions” impede a straightforward reading (Parker 1979, 71). To use Jakobson’s metaphors, the catalogue functions on a vertical as well as a horizontal axis. While its several units are linked to each other (metonymically, “horizontally”) in the order in which they appear in the text, individual items may also point (“metaphorically”, vertically) to other units, sets, or patterns.<sup>6</sup> Munro is always ready to exploit this allusiveness. “Khartoum Street,” for example, which appears, to Del’s surprise, among the street names of Jubilee, is linked in its immediate context to the other streets she names but also belongs to the set of eastern allusions to Isis, to the Nile, to the Jordan so exhaustively investigated by James Carscallen.<sup>7</sup> Like the crossword puzzle that Addie is attempting to complete, the list moves along two axes; and like the puzzle, with its reference to Isis and its reminder of the fragmented body, it gestures towards wholes it can never contain.

Lists might be classified in terms of their inclusiveness, their basis of selection, and their sequence. How many members of the implied set are included in the list? What principle underlies their selection? What principle governs their order? When Del and her brother Owen devise an inventory of the items from Ben’s chaotic kitchen, what they include is simply what they manage to remember, and the order in which the details are arranged is apparently just the order in which they come to mind. There is a sharp distinction between lists like this, highly selective and randomly organized, and what might be called cases of spurious completion, premature or overemphatic closure. The short but closed list signals the aspiring but limited mind. Miss Farris’s “fatalistically” parochial reply to Gwen Mundy’s “How many different operettas are there?”—“Six . . . *The Pied Piper. The Gypsy Princess. The Stolen Crown. The Arabian Knight. The Kerry Dancers. The*

*Woodcutter's Daughter.*" (130)—her conviction that the six operettas in her repertoire are the only six in the history of music suggests both her appetite for culture and its frustration.<sup>8</sup> As these examples suggest, Del is not the only list-maker in her narrative: many of the other characters organize their perceptions by lists, and those they draw up often say much about their desires and anxieties and the kinds of control that they seek.

In the discussion which follows I shall argue that the act of list-making is in *Lives of Girls and Women* subjected to a quiet scrutiny and that Munro's use of the list becomes a critique of the construction of meaning and of the notion of naive mimesis. What is finally exposed is the illusion that language can ever be transparent, unproblematically referential, or divorced from desire or from the will to power.

**D**el suggests that she makes lists in order to hold onto the town in which she has grown up. Jubilee is a place rich in memories, in history, in affect, and for Del the most resonant of her lists seems simply to be the "Names of the streets and the pattern they lay in" (253). In a small town, the street grid shapes lives: Del's friendship with Naomi arises, like most childhood friendships, simply from the fact that the two girls live close to each other and walk to school together. It also shapes memories and narratives: when Addie tries to support her contention that the town is "rife with suicides" (243), she does it by proceeding in her memory systematically up and down these streets. The grid pattern is already implied, soon after Del's move to the town, in her list of the "civilized desirable things" of Jubilee—things mostly in straight lines: Sidewalks, street lights, lined-up shade trees, milkmen's and iceman's carts, birdbaths, flower-borders, verandahs with wicker chairs, from which ladies watched the street (6). Del's words are also in a straight line: the list is a simple figure, apparently, as innocent and natural as the young girl's bemused perceptions. But pay attention to "ladies," a problematic word for girls and women, which echoes in these street-grid lists. Later, looking down on the whole town from above, Del will remark on the "not very complicated pattern of streets named after battles and ladies and monarchs and pioneers" (258). A bit more complicated than it looks, though: since units in a list are implicitly exclusive, Del's wording betrays her assumption that "ladies" cannot also be "monarchs" or "pioneers." If the street names constitute a kind of synecdochal history of the town of Jubilee, it is a history always already misread and always open to new misreadings.

The street-name motif becomes the core of the most conspicuous catalogue in the novel, the passage in which Del rejoices in her

sense of the whole town around me, all the streets which were named River Street, Mason Street, John Street, Victoria Street, Huron Street, and strangely, Khartoum Street; the evening dresses gauzy and pale as crocuses in Krall's Ladies' Wear window; the Baptist Mission Band in the basement of their church, singing *There's a New Name Written Down in Glory, and its Mine, Mine, Mine!* Canaries in their cages in the Selrite Store and books in the Library and mail in the Post Office and pictures of Olivia de Havilland and Errol Flynn in pirate and lady costumes outside the Lyceum Theatre—all these things, rituals and diversions, frail and bright, woven together—Town! (70)

The poetic effect of this highly patterned and rather self-conscious bit of writing derives partly from the contrast between the street names, with their historical solidity and permanence, and a certain fragile, artificial glamour that is the basis of the town's appeal to the adolescent protagonist. In realist writing, a list of the goods displayed in shop windows may suggest the economics of a whole region, as do, for example, Hardy's list of things for sale on the main street of Casterbridge (Hardy 60) and Dickens's list of objects in a London pawnshop (Dickens 178-9). Hillis Miller points out that each of Dickens's details is linked metonymically with the person who owned it, so that the objects for sale become "trustworthy signs of the quality of life in that part of London" (Miller 126). Though the effect of Del's figure is rather different—for the "goods" that seize her imagination are dreams: dreams of glamour, dreams of pastoral *otium* (crocuses, singing birds), dreams of acceptance and belonging—her list has a similar centrifugal effect. Like Dickens's, each of its units points out and away to a larger world outside. But for Del the world is less a socioeconomic than a textual one, a world of scripts and roles, delusions and desires: letters in the post office, books in the library, the Baptist hymn, the Hollywood movie—and the history of the town itself, preserved (though elliptically, enigmatically) in the names of the streets. The suggestiveness of the passage derives from the contrast not only between permanence and evanescence but between secure referentiality and intertextual free play. The shops and movies of Jubilee, which seem to offer the adolescent choices and chances, roles and rituals, point to the future, while the street-names suggest, on the contrary, the sober, stolid weight of the past. These names apparently ground the fantasy worlds in "real" history, but it is a history largely alien to Del, not fully possessed or understood (she doesn't know what "Khartoum" is doing in a

Canadian town: her fantasies are shaped by the American-movie version of British history, by Hollywood stars in “pirate and lady costumes,” even as her town has been marked by other versions, other readings). What is history itself, the passage suggests, but a selective and unstable collection of texts, readable only in terms of the desires of the reader and of the texts that intersect with it? By lining up in a single sequence both the more remote past and a particular moment in the 1940s, the list, even as it suggests the impermanence of that moment, promises to dissolve “history” as well into a textual day-dream.

This paragraph presents a motif that will recur interestingly at other points in *Lives of Girls and Women*. The title of the Baptist hymn Del names—“*There’s a New Name Written Down in Glory . . .*”—itself describes an act of list-making. In a list of the elect, what matters is the proper name (“*Mine, Mine, Mine*”) and what is expressed is the desire for security, identity, “chosenness”—membership in an elite group. The motif of drawing up an exclusive list of the elect is repeated in a different key just a few lines later, with the reference to the “beautiful, shining girls whose names everybody knew—Margaret Bond, Dorothy Guest, Pat Mundy—and who in turn knew nobody’s names, except if they chose” (70). The list of women’s names—the catalogue of good (or beautiful) women, traditionally a celebratory device—here makes a satiric social point. By not remembering Del’s name, Margaret Bond, Dorothy Guest, and Pat Mundy have the power to render her a nonentity; but by remembering theirs and recording them in writing, Del can take a subtle kind of revenge. The proper names she records are, however, of course fictional, and thus not “proper” at all: indeed the citizens of Wingham, Ontario who see themselves in Munro’s fictions may find them quite improper. Listing people, particularly listing women by their names, is a powerful and potentially hostile gesture in *Lives of Girls and Women* and one to which I shall also want to return later in this argument.

The primary effect of the evocative description of Jubilee is, however, not exclusive but inclusive. With its deictical quality implying that nothing more needs to be said about these names, these places, with which of course you are familiar<sup>9</sup>—and with its primitive syntax, suggesting that anyone can do it, that we can all add on, the list empowers the reader and invites collaboration. Lists of the books in the Jubilee library (118), of the hymns Fern sang at the United Church (145), or of names connoting adult sophistication to an adolescent in the 50s—“Somerset Maugham. Nancy Mitford . . . Balenciaga, Schiaparelli . . .

Whiskey and soda. Gin and tonic. Cinzano, Benedictine, Grand Marnier . . .” (175)—such lists evoke a nostalgic response and construct as members of a group those who are able to share it. The fact that there seems to be no principle governing either what gets into this kind of list or in what order the units shall be arranged contributes to the illusion of artless factuality. Spontaneous, communal, apparently unstructured, such lists suggest that thought and memory can be easily turned into writing, that verbal authenticity and transparency are within everybody’s reach.

Yet even such apparently random and casual constructions have textual antecedents. Del’s list of her adolescent enthusiasms sounds indeed vaguely familiar. In his analysis of the rhetorical operations of fashion magazines, Barthes quotes a similar text:

She likes studying and surprise parties, Pascal, Mozart, and cool jazz. She wears flat heels, collects little scarves, adores her big brother’s plain sweater and those bouffant, rustling petticoats. (Barthes 225)

It is the very heterogeneity of such lists, Barthes says, “the rapid and disordered succession of . . . semantic units (*Pascal, Mozart, cool jazz*)” upon which their effect depends, for it functions “as the sign of a profusion of tastes and consequently of a great richness of personality” (Barthes 229) and adumbrates “a dream of wholeness according to which the human being would be everything at once” (Barthes 255). His remarks are relevant to Munro, whose characters often try to define themselves by listing their tastes and habits<sup>10</sup>, sometimes specifically in response to women’s-magazine questionnaires. Evoking as it does the texts of mass culture, the very catalogue that suggests to Del her new scope and individuality conveys to the reader her limitedness and derivativeness. Even as the young writer reconstructs her world and her adolescent self, she exposes herself as constructed by the discourses that speak through her.

**D**el is greedy for life, and the catalogue is the trope of appetite. Greed, literal and metaphorical, is important in *Lives*: Del uses the word “greedy” freely to describe appetites for things other than food—sensing, for example, in the blithely insistent way her mother prepares her for her uncle’s funeral, a sinister parental appetite, “something greedy for your hurt” (47). Significantly, she describes herself in the same terms—“Voracious and misguided as Uncle Craig”—when, “greedy for Jubilee” (253), she begins to make lists, and it is not surprising that the largest single set of lists

in *Lives of Girls and Women* is that of food. Del's menus, recipes, and shopping lists recreate a time, a place, and a way of life, and are as nostalgic in their way as lists of movie titles or 1950s fashions. Particularly evocative are the lists of the dishes prepared for Craig's funeral (21 items, including "ten or twelve varieties of pickles and relishes," 52), of the dainties prepared by the aunts for Aunt Moira's visit (41), and of the hearty country dinner offered to Del at the Frenches':

stewed chicken, not too tough, and good gravy to soften it, light dumplings, potatoes ("too bad it's not time for the new!"), flat, round, floury biscuits, home-canned beans and tomatoes, several kinds of pickles, and bowls of green onions and radishes and leaf lettuce, in vinegar, a heavy molasses-flavoured cake, black-berry preserves. (225-6)

Do such catalogues celebrate a simpler, more leisurely, more bountiful society, less self-conscious about diet? Or is what looks like plenitude actually a kind of morbid coerciveness, or a displacement of other needs? The catalogue, suggesting *copia* but leaving its value open to interpretation, blurs the line between abundance and excess, gusto and compulsion. Some of the characters in *Lives* do indulge in compensatory gorging, defending themselves against death or alienation by eating or displacing the appetite for life or love into food: Uncle Bill, who eats obsessively as he is eaten by cancer, Fern Dougherty, who grows fat when Art Chamberlain deserts her, have something in common with Del when she binges after her "Voluptuous surrender" to the emotions evoked by opera. Admitting that "Greedy eating first appeased then made me gloomy, like masturbating" (184), Del makes clear the analogy between sexual desire and the consumption of food. But the text is equally suggestive, though less explicit, about food *preparation* as a displacement of female energies. Del admits, of her dinner at the Frenches', that "There's no denying I was happy in that house" (226), but the female providers of that feast also represent a threat to her, and their bounteous hospitality is an aspect of that threat.

A particular blankness tends, consistently, to mark the depiction of women as providers. The feast at Craig's funeral represents hours and hours of unpaid and probably undervalued female labour. How do we feel about the tribute which is complacently demanded of women ("Work is a good offering" the minister tells them, 53) and the prompt, even extravagant way they fulfil the demand? What is implied when Del enumerates the daily chores of Aunt Elspeth and Auntie Grace, in a list of tasks that ends with a list of food?

floor-scrubbing, cucumber hoeing, potato digging, bean and tomato picking, canning, pickling, washing, starching, sprinkling, ironing, waxing, baking . . . their laps were full of workcherries to be stoned, peas to be shelled, apples to be cored (32)

Is this a celebration of the aunt's energy and skills, or an indictment of a culture that defines real work as masculine, abstract, and cerebral, while imposing a kind of domestic slavery upon women? There is a certain rich concreteness about Elspeth's and Grace's daily round, especially in the context of Uncle Craig's interminable history-writing. Yet the very length of the list implies excess. Is their schedule a mindless immersion (drowning?) in a specifically female kind of servitude—servitude which becomes an end in itself? Is there a whiff of free indirect discourse here?—a suggestion that this is the aunts' plaintive characterization of their own work load? Their demeanour *is* somehow reproachful: Del describes their hands moving "with marvellous, almost vindictive speed" (32). Vindictive against what? Their brother's "abstract intellectual pursuits"? The fate that assigns them this endless drudgery? Lazier, less skilled women who can't perform it so efficiently? The ambiguity has led to divergent interpretations: critics see the aunts very differently, and sharply disagree about whether they are being idealized or satirized.<sup>11</sup> The catalogue, a resonant but empty figure, teases and tests the reader, who is constrained to interpret the plenitude it implies.

The list can also be a useful way of exposing ambivalence about other kinds of *copia* associated particularly with woman. In Munro's work the female body is often constructed in terms of plenitude—plenitude that can easily seem like excess: too much pubic hair ("this vile bundle," 145), too much blood ("that little extra gush of blood, little bonus that no Kotex is going to hold," 179). No surprise, then, that its vulnerabilities should be outlined in a kind of parodic gynecological blazon. Del recognizes her Aunt Moira as a stereotypical female victim of "varicose veins, hemorrhoids, a dropped womb, cysted ovaries, inflammations, discharges, lumps and stones in various places" (40). The traditional blazon is usually visual, itemizing the parts of the female body that draw the male gaze, and evoking wholeness by means of a list of carefully selected and organized parts. This list is tactile, suggesting how the body feels to the woman herself, and foretelling dissolution as the swollen or overgrown parts turn cancerously against the whole. Yet it also has something of the blazon's scopic energy: though the adult narrator's comprehension is retrospective ("I would recognize now . . ." 40), we also get the sense of the young Del watching her aunt,

but from an exasperated or horrified male perspective.<sup>12</sup> The verbal rhythms, on the other hand, sound like an Aunt Moira's: partly because it is followed by more complaining, by "Aunt Moira's voice [spreading] out over the day, over the yard, like black oil" (41), this list too has the flavour of free indirect discourse, evoking the wearisome rhetoric of female complaint. The catalogue unfolds and displays not only the female body but the discourses that construct it, implying a mixture of sympathy, revulsion, dread, and irritation. Munro's writing teaches us to be wary of this figure, to attend to its power in defining girls and women.

I have been focusing on lists generated by the narrative voice on the list as product. But *Lives of Girls and Women* also dramatizes list-making as a process, often a collaborative ritual or game between characters. The first time we hear Del speak, she is trying to draw up, with her brother Owen, a list of the objects in Benny's kitchen:

"Two toasters, one with doors one you lay the toast on."  
 "Seat out of a car."  
 "Rolled-up mattress. An accordion." (4)

But which words are Del's? Because we aren't told which child speaks first, it is impossible to identify the protagonist's first utterance. Such ambiguity is rather striking in a *bildungsroman* concerned to establish her special relationship with language. It is more striking when we realize that Del's first *written* words also take the form of a list, and that this list, too, entangles her words helplessly with those of others. It has often been pointed out that the first thing Del writes is Ben's postal address and that the episode is an allusion to Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.<sup>13</sup> That it is also a kind of list seems to me equally interesting. Both lists are radically shaped by convention. In Del's and Owen's memory-game, there is no pattern to the order of the remembered details, but the order in which they speak is fixed: they must of course take turns. In her postal address Del begins with a convention and tries to expand it, but her expansion echoes that of a writer she has not yet read. It seems that no linguistic gesture, however elementary, can exempt the subject from the discursive games she does not even realize she has begun to play.

Both the inventory and the postal address have to do with defining and controlling an uncontrollable environment. How is chaos to be mastered:

by mimicking it or by reordering it? The order of the objects in the postal address is as rigid as that of the items in Ben's kitchen is random. Sequence implies enclosure: each subsequent unit encloses the preceding one. Del uses enclosure to attain closure, extending the sequence to include "*the Universe*" (11) and declaring "The Universe means everything. It's all there is" (11). But Ben, invoking the term "Heaven" and making clear that her statement is not a description of reality but a product of a particular discourse, reminds the reader that if the individual is inside the universe, the universe is also "inside" the mind—that space, as a mental construction, cannot be used to shore up or locate the subject which constructs it.

Del's first two linguistic acts, then, suggest both the desire to control one's environment by language and the possibility that this desire must always be thwarted. The implications of the failure may be social and moral as well as existential. Ben's kitchen is the first and most literal example of those "deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum" (253) which it will later be Del's vocation to investigate—a black vortex into which any number of objects can apparently disappear.<sup>14</sup> Del and Owen blithely confront the chaos, play at mastering it, and complacently accept their failure ("we weren't getting half, we knew it. The things we remembered could have been taken out of the house and never missed," 4). But since what goes on in Ben's house is the point of the narrative that follows, their list-making appears retrospectively as the first of several strategies for dealing with darkness, all of which prove to be sadly inadequate. It is important that the first act of memory in *Lives of Girls and Women* points also to what can't be brought to consciousness, for repression and denial will acquire sinister significance in the story that follows. ("Her mother beats her, doesn't she?" says Addie of Diane, after Madeleine has gone back to Toronto—"Why didn't I think of it myself?" 20). Del and Owen cannot be held accountable, as the adults perhaps can, for their inability to rescue Diane, but their participation in mastery games implicates them in the moral and hermeneutic failure on which the story turns. Making lists is linked from the very beginning of *Lives of Girls and Women* with that will to "control the uncontrollable" that Carrington sees as the central theme in Munro's writing, with the failure to control, and with the social and moral implications of that failure.

Addie, whose compulsion to control is one of her most marked characteristics and whose inability to accept the irrational may be linked to the abuse she herself suffered as a child, is a great list-maker. Her simple faith

that saving knowledge is to be won through the accumulation of facts is expressed both in her cross-word puzzles and in her encyclopedia project. Although she bitterly resents her own mother's missionary enthusiasm and the exploitation of children in its service, she peddles encyclopedias as ardently as her mother had distributed bibles and demonstrates their efficacy by using *her* daughter to rhyme off lists of facts. This is a performance, like those of the ancient bards who recited epic catalogues, and it is one that Del initially enjoys in what she suggests is a childish way, finding it "an irresistible test . . . like trying to hop a block on one foot" (66). But she soon tires of it, for it displaces what she really does find fascinating in the encyclopedia, romantic historical stories of violent death. The encyclopedia, as Del experiences it, offers narrative and list-making as two alternative ways of dealing with mortality. Del's preference for narrative can be read as the mark of her creative spirit, and as representing a progression from the mechanical to the organic, from the factual to the imaginative. But her own facile distinction between list and story may not be the text's final position. List-making might be an even more fundamental human need, and a more honest and tragic one, foregrounding, even as it dramatizes the desire to conserve, how little can be saved.

Death and cataloguing are repeatedly associated in *Lives of Girls and Women*. Del listing the names on tombstones is not so different from her mother, who finds her reassurance in breaking the human body down into a list of chemicals or organs. A somewhat different defense is constructed by the "two old men" (53) at Uncle Craig's funeral, collaborating on a list of Jubilee residents whose bodies, one particularly cold winter, couldn't be buried until spring thaw:

"By that time must have been three-four of them waiting. Let see. There'd be Jimmy Poole"

"Him all right. There'd be Mrs. Fraleigh, senior"

"Hold on there, she died before the freeze, she'd be all right." (53)

"All right" because into the ground promptly? The phrase, with its connotation of organizational efficiency, is ironic, and poignantly suggests what motivates this memory-game: the men's attempt to come to terms with their own mortality—with how quickly they are destined to join Jimmy Poole and Mrs. Fraleigh—and make it, somehow, "all right." Uncle Craig had included among his own files "lists of those present at funerals" (31).

Del's account of this conversation at *his* funeral is a meta-list, not only a record of "those present" but also an account of list-making and a list of other dead. Del once again outdoes her uncle even as she recognizes the source of the obsession that links all of them in rituals designed to deal with darkness.

**L**isting the dead can do them no harm. Listing the living is more problematical. Making lists of people's names is always a loaded gesture in *Lives of Girls and Women*. Del makes or records several of these lists the "beautiful shining girls," the members of the Anglican church, the members of the Baptist Young People's society, the names of persons requesting songs to be played by the Jubilee radio station. These are all acts of social classification and can have powerful consequences. Del understands quite clearly how such categories function in social and institutional life. She senses the class basis of membership in the groups she describes; she is perfectly aware that the teachers run the school smoothly by classifying students as more or less "reliable" (and more or less socially prominent and influential) and selecting them accordingly for honorific tasks and prerequisites. Her very awareness makes this kind of list-making somewhat sinister when she and her friends begin to do it.

Jerry Storey, fascinated as he is by the idea of intellectual control, is a natural list-maker, and Del is not unwilling to collaborate with him. In their ruthless characterization of the groups of people who come to the revival meeting from the surrounding towns and villages, Del and Jerry at once epitomize and parody the motive behind such list-making. When Jerry lists the sexual perversions they are supposed to practise—"Fathers sleep with daughters. Grandfathers sleep with granddaughters. Brothers sleep with sisters." (210)—his Polonian exhaustiveness accidentally (or self-parodically) generates one ("Mothers sleep with fathers," 210) which, because it is not taboo, abruptly deconstructs the sequence and exposes the malice that lies behind it. It is ironical that this exercise in social classification is interrupted by Del's first encounter with Garnet French, who, precisely because he cuts across their smug categories, is able to disempower her.

Garnet too is a list-maker. His "list of girls' names, each one with an X after it" is the climactic catalogue in *Lives of Girls and Women*. Garnet's "legend of good women," which he completes with Del's name and concludes with a phallic flourish, links his will to power with a desire for closure:

When he finished the name he did a border of stars around it and drew a line underneath. "I think I've come to the end," he said.

He snapped his knife shut. . . . (225)

Although Del emphasizes Garnet's unease with language, he is one of only three characters in the novel actually described in the act of writing.<sup>15</sup> And he writes with a *knife*.

This list, too, is collaborative. The scene is staged before an avid female audience: Del herself, the two little sisters, giggling "rapturously" at the thrilling idea of "'Garnet's girl friends!'" (224), and Mrs. French, indulgently satirical, whose comments form an invidious counterpoint to her son's characterizations:

"Doris McIvor! Her father owned a sawmill, up past Blue River. If I had've married her, I would've been rich."

"If that's any way to get rich!" said his mother, who had followed as far as the screen door.

"Eulie Fatherstone. She was a Roman Catholic, worked in the coffee shop of the Brunswick Hotel."

"Married her you would have been poor," said his mother significantly. "You know what the Pope tells them to do!"

"You did okay without the Pope yourself, Momma—Margaret Fraleigh. Red hair."

"You can't trust their kind of a temper."

"She didn't have no more of a temper than a baby chick. Thora Willoughby. Sold the tickets at the Lyceum Theatre. She's in Brantford now."

The dialogue is a double list, Garnet's words expanding on each proper name, his mother's bringing the focus back to him and his welfare. Although it is set up as a kind of dispute, the two speakers are not really at odds, for Mrs. French, emphasizing the risks of permanent commitment to a woman, is reinforcing her son's somewhat predatory sexuality. Her closing question, wilfully naive, underlines the ethos of sexual conquest which motivates Garnet's writing:

"What is the X for, son? That when you stopped going out with them?"

"No, ma'am it's not."

"Well what is it *for*?"

"Military secret!"

The text has already had something to say about "military secrets" and about male delight in war, conquest and violence.<sup>16</sup> The French household is in fact rather matriarchal—all the fully characterized people in it are female—but this is a matriarchy complicit with phallic aggression (Garnet

and his mother are in their way as “husband-and-wifely” [202] as Jerry and his.) Though it is apparently staged as a tribute to Del, Garnet’s performance is ominous enough, and clearly enough connected with the events that follow it to foreground the will to power that lies behind the list-making.

The phallic suggestions of this particular scene are clear, but Munro is as willing to attribute the urge for mastery to girls and women as to men and boys. It is, after all, Del and Naomi who fabricate the only purely fictitious list in the book when they maliciously insert the names of “the two reigning queens of our class” into the list of the “bad brainless girls” (157) on the door of the Ladies’ Toilet in the Town Hall. This too is an act of sexual aggression, though the writers are themselves female. And it overturns, definitively, the notion of the list as an innocent mimetic figure. It is precisely because their victims would *not* be found there—“because they could never be imagined entering the Town Hall toilets” (157)—that their names are worth adding to the list.

*Lives of Girls and Women* is a consistently subtle, self-reflexive text, one that meditates critically on the least of its own rhetorical gestures. Never a transcription, always a construction, the simplest list betrays a will to power which, while it is perhaps an inevitable aspect of self-development and self-expression, is nevertheless quietly exposed in Munro’s writing.

Thomas Tausky, in his discussion of the various draft versions of the final episode in *Lives of Girls and Women*, argues that the insufficiency of list-making is even clearer in the drafts than in the final text. He points out that six of the seven drafts follow the “radiant, everlasting” passage with variations on the same theme: “No lists, or tricks either, are going to manage that,” for example, or “What tricks could manage that?” This despairing or disparaging reference to authorial “tricks,” he observes, “recalls the exact wording” of a passage from an essay of Munro’s on the pains of composition, a passage which Tausky quotes as an epigraph to his article:

Even as I most feverishly, desperately practise it. . . I am a little afraid that the work with words may turn out to be a questionable trick, an evasion (and never more so than when it is most dazzling, apt and striking) an unavoidable lie.  
(Tausky 52)

It seems to me, however, that the two statements, when juxtaposed, imply something rather different than Tausky suggests about list-making. By making “lists” parallel to “tricks” and applying the term “trick” to the very act of writing itself (“the work with words”), Munro, far from emphasizing the

distinction between apparently mechanical strategies like list-making and more “dazzling, apt and striking” techniques, would seem in fact to be collapsing it. While I agree that the ending of *Lives* does not come out just on the side of realism and that Alice Munro writes “in ways that make us all deeply aware of the abyss that divides the world we imagine from the worlds in which we exist” (Tausky 76), I would argue that the catalogue in Munro is not presented as a realistic device: rather, it is one of those ways by which she makes us aware of the abyss.

Though she has never again foregrounded the device the way Del does in *Lives of Girls and Women*, Munro has never stopped using it. In *Friend of My Youth*, in particular, she comes back to the catalogue in a very self-conscious way. Like Del, though they do not draw attention to it, the protagonists of two of these stories are list-makers. In “Meneseteung,” two of Almeda Roth’s poems are catalogues: her “The Passing of the Old Forest” is “a list of trees, their names” (*Friend* 52) and its companion piece features “catalogues of plants brought from European countries” (*Friend* 53). In “Hold Me Fast, Don’t Let Me Pass,” Hazel, whose name is the name of a tree, makes a list of the trees in the Scottish countryside (*Friend* 74). These rather pointed references, in two stories in the same collection, to a traditional *topos*, the Ovidian catalogue of trees—a motif intriguingly reworked at the end of “Vandals” (*Open Secrets* 294)—suggests that Munro, in thinking about lists, has always had classical exemplars in mind.<sup>17</sup> The catalogue in her writing is no artless mode of documentary realism. Rather, it raises in almost paradigmatic form some of the problematic issues of language itself, which can not get so simple that it does not have a history, can not get so innocent that it does not have designs, can not find a shape which can make itself whole.

## NOTES

- 1 Those who see Del’s list-making as an inadequate kind of realism include Blodgett (38-9, 58-9), Besner (111), Fowler (196-7), and Tausky (65-7).
- 2 Braden insists on its essential literariness: “If we are reading a catalogue, it is a self-conscious catalogue, concerned with the sources and implications of the allure of its iconic entries” (26).
- 3 For women’s perspectives on the blazon see Cropper, Vickers, and Parker (1989).

- 4 Thiem quotes Borges on the problem of “setting down a *limited* catalogue of *endless* things” (*Aleph* 264, cited by Thiem 115).
- 5 As Blodgett observes, “lists are . . . useful only as cues to discovering something as yet unseen” (39).
- 6 Redekop, discussing the “Macaroni pepperoni Botticelli beans” list, refers to “the double signing of each item that makes us do a double take” (12).
- 7 See also Rasporich, 46-7, 108-9, on the Egyptian imagery in *Lives of Girls and Woman*.
- 8 Miss Farris’s titles might be compared with those of the six operettas cyclically performed by Wingham Public School students in the 1940s: see Ross 35.
- 9 It has been suggested that learned catalogues in literary epics must have worked in the same way, that contemporary readers must have been “able to identify their members at once and through the names associate with them everything that they evoke” (Hunter 59 on Milton; see also O’Connell 245 on Spenser). Redekop writes of “the pleasures of recognition” (3) experienced by a reader of Munro.
- 10 For example, the narrator in “Miles City, Montana” makes lists of her husband’s good and bad features in an attempt “to get my feelings about Andrew to come together into a serviceable and dependable feeling” (*Progress* 123); “Jesse and Meribeth” exchange lists of their favourite things (*Progress* 222); Averill in “Goodness and Mercy” notices ship passengers “establishing themselves” by cataloguing their tastes and habits (*Friend* 161).
- 11 Rasporich reads the description of the funeral feast as making a feminist point at the expense of the aunts, who “despite the pretense of being in control . . . through preparation of enormous quantities of food . . . have in no sense contained death” (45-6); but Godard argues that the hands preparing food “triumph over those on the typewriter” (54-5).
- 12 Cf. the frankly misogynistic catalogue of gynecological maladies in Denys Arcand’s *The Decline of the American Empire* (1986), collaboratively assembled by three male characters: “fibromas, vaginitis, asalpangitis,” “chlamidia and spirochetes,” “herpes and chancer sores.”
- 13 Martin, Baum, and Struthers emphasize the parallels between Joyce and Munro, Godard, and Harris the differences.
- 14 The list of junk in Ben’s kitchen is a variation on the disgorging-closet topos of situation comedy. (An earlier literary example is the list of things tumbling out of Mrs. Jellyby’s closet in *Bleak House*, discussed by Miller 125). In Munro’s female gothic version, the bad housekeeper is a man not a woman, the closet keeps its secrets, and domestic disorder acquires a different kind of sinister meaning.
- 15 The others are Del herself and Art Chamberlain, who, like Garnet, writes Del into a text of his own (“*Del is a bad girl!*” 164).
- 16 Redekop, noting the phrase “military secret,” compares the catalogue of names to a list of war dead (184).
- 17 Carscallen also sees this traditional catalogue in the protagonist’s “long disquisition on different kinds of trees—what they look like, what they are good for, how they should be handled” in Munro’s uncollected story “Wood” (*Other House* 15-6).

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