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REAPPRAISALS:
CANADIAN
WRITERS

*MARGARET
LAURENCE*

Critical Reflections



Edited and with an introduction by
David Staines

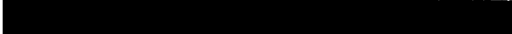
University of Ottawa Press

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REAPPRAISALS
Canadian Writers

Gerald Lynch
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Contents

Introduction

DAVID STAINES 1

The Spirit and the Letter: The Correspondence of
Margaret Laurence

JOHN LENNOX 7

Cavewomen Div(in)ing for Pearls: Margaret Laurence and
Marian Engel

CHRISTL VERDUYN 23

Reading Margaret Laurence's Life Writing: Toward a Postcolonial
Feminist Subjectivity for a White Female Critic

HELEN M. BUSS 39

Margaret Laurence and the City

W.H. NEW 59

The Figure of the Unknown Soldier: Home and War in
The Fire-Dwellers

BIRK SPROXTON 79

(W)*Rites of Passage*: The Typescript of *The Diviners* as Shadow Text

NORA FOSTER STOVEL 101

Listening: Laurence's Women

KRISTJANA GUNNARS 121

Sitting Down to Write: A Discourse of Morning

ROBERT KROETSCH 129

Margaret Laurence: The Shape of the Writer's Shadow

ARITHA VAN HERK 135

To Find Refreshment in Writing Children's Books: A Note on
Margaret Laurence's Writing for Children

JANET LUNN 145

Faith and the Vocation of the Author

LOIS WILSON 151

Margaret Laurence: A Reminiscence

JOYCE MARSHALL 163

Contributors 169

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Abbreviations

- Tree* *A Tree for Poverty: Somali Poetry and Prose*. Nairobi: Eagle Press, 1954.
- Jordan* *This Side Jordan*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1960.
- Prophet* *The Prophet's Camel Bell*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1963.
- Tomorrow* *The Tomorrow-Tamer*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1963.
- Stone* *The Stone Angel*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1964.
- Jest* *A Jest of God*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1966.
- Drums* *Long Drums and Cannons: Nigerian Dramatists and Novelists, 1952-1966*. London: Macmillan, 1968.
- Fire* *The Fire-Dwellers*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969.
- Bird* *A Bird in the House*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970.
- Diviners* *The Diviners*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974.
- Heart* *Heart of a Stranger*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976.
- Gadgetry* "Gadgetry or Growing: Form and Voice in the Novel." *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 27 (Summer 1980): 54-63.
- Dance* *Dance on the Earth*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1989.

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Introduction

DAVID STAINES

THE MAIN CONCERN OF A WRITER remains that of somehow creating the individual on the printed page, of catching the tones and accents of human speech, of setting down the conflicts of people who are as real to him as himself," Margaret Laurence wrote in *Long Drums and Cannons*. "If he does this well, and as truthfully as he can, his writing may sometimes reach out beyond any national boundary."

Though referring to the Nigerian plays and novels of the 1950s and 1960s, Laurence's comments also explain the pattern and the significance of her own fiction. In her early fiction with its African settings and in her later fiction with its Canadian settings, she creates the "individual on the printed page." The truth of her portraits, the realism of their background, and the humanity and wisdom of her vision brought her national and international acclaim. Her characters reveal, as she wrote of the Nigerian portraits, "something of ourselves to us, whoever and wherever we are."

Born on July 18, 1926, in the small Manitoba town of Neepawa, Laurence endured, at the age of four, her mother's death and, at the age of nine, her father's. Both events would colour her Canadian fiction and her autobiographical writings. After graduating in 1947 from Winnipeg's United College, a United Church arts and theology college affiliated with the University of

Manitoba, she married Jack Laurence, a civil-engineering graduate of the University of Manitoba. The two left Canada for England in 1949, and the following year they went from England to Africa, where they lived for seven years.

In 1951 Jack Laurence was appointed director of a dam-building project in the British Protectorate of Somaliland, now Somalia. After the initial stages of the project were finished in 1952, he felt reluctant to stay on when the remaining work could be done by a Somali engineer. From 1952 until 1957 he continued his engineering work in the Gold Coast, now Ghana. Shortly before the day the Gold Coast received its independence in 1957, the Laurences returned to Canada and settled in Vancouver for the next five years.

Fascinated by Somaliland's extensive oral literature, Laurence began to translate poetry and folk tales. Her work led to a volume of translations, *A Tree for Poverty: Somali Poetry and Prose* (1954). She also set two volumes of fiction in the Gold Coast: her first novel, *This Side Jordan* (1960); and a collection of short stories, *The Tomorrow-Tamer* (1963). Also published in 1963 is *The Prophet's Camel Bell*, a vivid re-creation of the confrontation between Canadians and Africans, between a gifted artist and the beliefs and culture of a foreign nation. The final dimension of her African writings is her critical study *Long Drums and Cannons: Nigerian Dramatists and Novelists, 1952-1966* (1968).

For Laurence, as she observed in *Heart of a Stranger* (1976), many contemporary African writers "re-create their people's past in novels and plays in order to recover a sense of themselves, an identity and a feeling of value from which they were separated by two or three generations of colonialism and missionizing. They have found it necessary, in other words, to come to terms with their ancestors and their gods in order to be able to accept the past and be at peace with the dead, without being stifled or threatened by that past." In the next phase of her career, Laurence would begin the arduous task of chronicling her Canadian past.

In 1962 Laurence separated from her husband, taking their two children to England, where they lived first in London before settling the following year at Elm Cottage, Penn, Buckinghamshire. In Vancouver she had written the first draft of *The Stone*

Angel, now distanced from Canada, she returned to the draft, rewrote it, and saw it published in 1964. The first of five books set in the fictional town of Manawaka, the novel announced the maturity of the talent evident throughout her African fiction.

The Stone Angel is Hagar Shipley's personal account of the last days of her life. Whereas it is set in Laurence's grandparents' generation, her second Manawaka novel, *A Jest of God* (1966), is set in her own generation and focusses on Rachel Cameron, a thirty-four-year-old spinster schoolteacher. The protagonist of the third Manawaka novel, *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969), is Rachel's thirty-nine-year-old sister, Stacey Cameron MacAindra. While writing the three Manawaka novels, Laurence was also writing the sequential short stories, which she collected under the title *A Bird in the House* (1970), and which featured Vanessa MacLeod as the Manawaka protagonist. The series culminates in *The Diviners* (1974), where Morag Gunn, the forty-seven-year-old protagonist, explores the role of the artist and the centrality of the past to the artist's understanding of her own position in the flux of time. *The Diviners* has a quality of finality that makes it a natural conclusion to the series.

For more than a decade Laurence lived at Elm Cottage, though she made frequent visits to Canada. By the late sixties, however, she had decided to return to Canada when her children completed their schooling in England. By the time of the publication of *The Diviners*, she had settled permanently in Lakefield, Ontario.

In what would prove to be the final decade of her life, Laurence continued her writing. As a release from difficulties in writing *The Fire-Dwellers* in the summer of 1967, she had turned her attention to a children's book, *Jason's Quest* (1970). In the late 1970s she wrote three more children's books, *The Olden Days Coat* (1979), *Six Darn Cows* (1979), and *The Christmas Birthday Story* (1980). And two years after the appearance of *The Diviners*, her collection of critical and autobiographical essays, *Heart of a Stranger*, was published. Laurence died on January 5, 1987.

Margaret Laurence: Critical Reflections brings together twelve distinguished scholars, critics, and writers to illuminate Laurence's achievement. Focussing on the various dimensions of her

career and corpus that interest them, they re-examine the writings to draw their conclusions.

John Lennox opens the collection with a broad overview of Margaret Laurence, the correspondent with Adele Wiseman and Al Purdy. In an essay that traces the biographical dimensions of the correspondence, he shows that Laurence, always “intense, warm, gutsy, and possessed of a good sense of humour,” reveals “the sense and spirit of the writer’s vocation—embryonic, then emergent, and finally triumphant.” In a complementary reflection Christl Verduyn explores the connections, first articulated in their correspondence, between Margaret Laurence and Marian Engel in an effort to suggest some of the conditions for women writing in Canada at mid-twentieth century.

In postcolonial countries creative writers are often prominent theoreticians in the breakdown of boundaries between the discourses of the literary and the theoretical. In her analysis of Laurence’s two book-length autobiographical works, *The Prophet’s Camel Bell* and *Dance on the Earth*, published posthumously in 1989, Helen M. Buss sees the earlier book as a construction of postcolonial subjectivity for white critics and the latter book as a complex movement of the traditional fictional narrative patterns closer to autobiographical strategies.

In “Margaret Laurence and the City,” W.H. New examines Laurence’s autobiographical and fictional writings to draw some conclusions about her sense of the city. Recognizing the paradigm that exists already in her African fiction as well as in *The Prophet’s Camel Bell*, he follows it through her Canadian writings. “As the embodiment of institutional power, the city falls away; as the embodiment of vitality, it promises a place in which to dwell. Recognition is all.” In “The Figure of the Unknown Soldier: Home and War in *The Fire-Dwellers*,” Birk Sproxtton shows that the downtown cenotaph, besmeared with pigeon droppings, stands over the unravelling of Laurence’s Vancouver novel and is a primary intertext of the Manawaka fiction. And Nora Foster Stovel explores *The Diviners* as fiction about fiction, using its typescript as a shadow text haunting the published novel.

Three creative writers and academics were invited to reflect on Laurence’s writings; their responses reiterate the centrality of

Laurence's Manawaka fiction. Kristjana Gunnars reflects on Laurence's women, examining her reactions to Rachel Cameron and *A Jest of God*. Seizing upon the opening paragraphs of *The Diviners*, Robert Kroetsch sees the novel as a major poetics of prose fiction. And Aritha van Herk returns again to *The Diviners* to reveal "a novel written by a woman with writer's cramp, her hand, laid bare, in pain, but written nevertheless, extant, standing firmly in the sunlight to cast whatever shadow will be cast."

Lest the collection draw toward its conclusion without a glance at Laurence's writing for children, Janet Lunn contributes a brief account of Laurence's children's books. Positioning them within the growing body of children's literature in Canada, she finds a strange disharmony between Laurence's adult fiction and her four children's books.

Lastly, James King's narrowly limited *Life of Margaret Laurence* appeared in 1997. Now two of Laurence's own colleagues and friends, Lois Wilson and Joyce Marshall, bring candid assessments of the writer and her legacy, Wilson focussing on her religious vision and Marshall focussing on her literary vision.

Margaret Laurence: Critical Reflections examines Laurence's achievement from the many perspectives of her writings, offering new and challenging reflections that do not exhaust the illimitable wealth of critical discussion. "Only slightly further out," as Morag Gunn notes, "the water deepened and kept its life from sight."

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The Spirit and the Letter: The Correspondence of Margaret Laurence

JOHN LENNOX

FEW PLEASURES INVOLVING WRITERS and their words can match the excitement and energy of working with exchanges of letters between gifted correspondents. This is certainly true of the approximately 450 letters in the Laurence–Wiseman correspondence and the 300 letters in the Laurence–Purdy correspondence.¹ The immediacy of voice, tone, and detail leaps off the page in the give-and-take of lively and often passionate conversation. The reader has the impression of watching life take shape as he is drawn into the language, priorities, and history of the personalities who seem to write at a thousand different stages in the course of a changing, living life. The retrospective gaze of the autobiographer or biographer is absent—their poetics of selection and patterning remain to be determined. However, the wider view of a life writ large is not so much absent from letters (in fact, some letter-writers have a very good sense of that) as off-stage, waiting in the wings while the protean dynamics of dailiness temporarily prevail.

The so-called silent third in this encounter is the person whom Adele Wiseman and Margaret Laurence referred to as the “unknown reader,” the privileged listener who hears the voices speaking. If one or more of those voices is well known, as is the case with Laurence, the focus of this paper, the reader already identifies her with the African and Manawakan works, and with

the voice of her memoir, *Dance on the Earth*. Gradually, however, he recognizes in the letters the distinct accent of the individual who is, after all, addressing another and, willy-nilly in the process, creating a narrative of a life of which the individual letters are episodes.

Clara Thomas has written about Margaret Laurence's search for an appropriate form for *Dance on the Earth* and about Laurence's delight in locating the female-centred celebration of the four women who had meant the most to her life: her mother; her stepmother, who was also her aunt; her mother-in-law; and her daughter.² I was one of many who, as I read the memoir, thought that I heard very clearly the speaking voice of Laurence. In the writing and then dictating of her memoir, Laurence made some important and conscious decisions: (1) that beyond her immediate circle of readers, her memoir would be directed to a broad readership; (2) that it would be in some ways a public document that addressed the social and political issues that were of great importance to her—peace, the environment, the position of women, and censorship; and (3) that its emphasis as memoir would be directed as much to others as to herself.

For all its highly personalized context, *Dance on the Earth* begins with Laurence's strong public voice and there is throughout her memoir the sense, for all the personal detail, that the public Laurence is the persona who is the protagonist of the memoir. In fact, the spatial metaphor of the title and its provenance as an old Shaker hymn are both suggestive of the links between life writing and drama as those affinities have been explored by Evelyn Hinz.³ Further, one might argue that "dance" and "earth," as art and dwellingplace, are central in *Dance on the Earth* to what Hinz calls the "life myth" that is explicitly or implicitly articulated in autobiography and memoir.

To an extent, the Margaret Laurence who speaks in her letters to Al Purdy and Adele Wiseman is very similar to the person we encounter in *Dance on the Earth*—intense, warm, gutsy, and possessed of a good sense of humour. There is also, as there must be, in the memoir and in the letters, a selection of what is told and how it is told. There is not, however, in the letters as there is in the memoir, a narrative shaping of a life seen retrospectively and seen

as a whole. Nevertheless, there are moments when a sense of life is consciously expressed in terms of a pattern, be it that of a prolonged adolescence and delayed adulthood, of an emergence of a newly named self, or of a metaphor, as she wrote to Al Purdy, like “cats and roses” (August 31, 1967). There are also moments in the letters when one encounters a self-consciousness that goes beyond and beneath the ephemera of ordinary, day-to-day life. And there is always the sense and spirit of the writer’s vocation—embryonic, then emergent, and finally triumphant.

The letter is the ordinary embodiment of the theme that fills Laurence’s work—communication. For a good part of her writing life, she lived outside Canada and for the early years of that expatriate period, she lived completely apart from her own culture and geography as a Canadian. Letters became not only a way of keeping in touch with family and friends, but also a means of orienting herself to a new environment. A beneficial corollary to this was the way in which the new world before her eyes posed a writer’s challenge to describe it simply and evocatively and, in so doing, to practise her writer’s craft. Some of these early descriptions were composed almost as set pieces and reflect the painterly quality of many descriptions of setting in the Manawaka cycle. Here, for example, in 1951, Laurence describes in a letter to Wiseman the view framed by the door of her and Jack Laurence’s house in Sheikh, Somaliland:

Our front door is like a picture-frame, and the picture contains the soft line of hills; the red sand of the valley and the blue-green rocks; the green flat-topped trees; a flock of tiny white sheep, grazing a few feet from the house, and tended by a brown robed Somali woman with a scarlet headscarf. The yerki (little boy) is there too, with his little switch of dried grass, rounding up the stragglers in the flock. I think it is the quiet one notices most about Sheikh. During the whole sunny day, only the odd scrap of birdsong; the strange minor-key chanting of the boys as they work; the early morning clank of water-tins as the Somali woman brings up our three donkey-loads of water each morning; the frantic chirp of the yerki, a little boy so tiny that one can hardly see how he copes with the relatively large cows he drives through the valley; and the occasional tic-tic-tic of a lizard in the walls of the house. (February 12, 1951)

In a way, as Laurence and others have pointed out, Africa made her in effectively delaying the appearance in her writing of the prairie background that was to propel her to prominence. She later reflected on how fortunate she had been that her first real challenge as a writer had been to translate and describe a land and culture totally different from her own. That exercise began in her letters.

The African focus, however, had not been her intention when she first came to Somalia. At that time, as Laurence wrote to Wiseman, she was working on a novel about a love affair between a young woman and her Ukrainian boyfriend in a small prairie town. She experienced slow progress and difficulties in the writing and eventually she abandoned this project in the face of the stunning realities and disorientations of her new life. Instead, she found her first real literary challenge close to hand in translating Somali poetry and folk tales, which were to appear in her first book, *A Tree for Poverty* (1954).

As her lifetime of letters reflects, this was a recurrent pattern in Laurence's way of working—a series of false starts, some amounting to hundreds of draft pages, followed by crises of uncertainty. Writing to Al Purdy in June 1967, Laurence described this process:

I'm still at the stage of grappling unsuccessfully with this new novel. I know all the problems and none of the solutions. It is absolutely shapeless and doesn't seem to have a natural form. I've written pages and pages of sheer nonsense. I feel like hell about it, in one way, and yet in another way I know the thing is there, if only I can manage to stumble onto a way to do it. I really ought to be feeling depressed, but in some odd fashion I feel quite the reverse, and yet I'm not doing work worth anything right now. (June 28, 1967)

There were usually alarums, momentary despair, and decisive action. The day after her letter to Purdy, she wrote almost identical letters to him and Wiseman—"I am a firebug"—in which she described how she had burned the hundreds of draft pages of *The Fire-Dwellers*. Then, in fairly short order, would follow the immensely energizing discovery or confirmation of the real story she wanted to tell, and the first stages of putting that story on paper.

In the midst of these harrowing moments of doubt—and they were truly harrowing for a person of Laurence’s intensity—letters were a godsend. They were, first of all, treasured and intimate means of communication. They could be therapeutic and even cathartic. They were also—and this, I think, should be particularly emphasized—written. If one was blocked or disheartened, one could always write letters and in the simple process of putting pen to paper, reaffirm one’s vocation even if only through complaints about inadequacy and possible failure. Letters were salutary in another fundamental way since, instead of talking something away, they became instrumental in writing it out.

The letters from the 1950s are fascinating in their charting of the artistic and personal growth of Laurence. Unlike the retrospective amplitude of *The Prophet’s Camel Bell* or *Dance on the Earth*, these letters are full of the moments of youthful enthusiasm. Five months after the Laurences’ arrival in Somaliland, Margaret was writing that her real ambition was to understand Somali stories and poems, and four months later she reported that she had written several stories set in an East African colony. In the same letter, she wrote at length about translating Somali poetry and stories:

When possible, I’ve translated exactly, but of course the process of putting it into more or less literary English lies in the choice of words . . . there are, I discover, an awful lot of synonyms in English. But the difficulties will be obvious from a few examples: in one love poem, the word “place” occurs, but in the Somali, a special word is used, which means “place” and also means “the grace of God,” implying that the place referred to was highly blessed or particularly fortunate in some way. I’ve translated that by including the second meaning . . . “a place of Allah’s kindly grace” . . . which is really what it means, altho’ only one word is used in Somali. (September 4, 1951)

The letter concluded with the inclusion of Laurence’s translation of several “belwo,” or short lyric poems. Much as it was to be the case when Purdy wrote Laurence, she used her correspondence with Wiseman to discuss and even experiment with her early translations.

The letters also reveal the early depth and strength of Laurence's commitment to her writing:

I spend most of each day at my typewriter, either writing notes on what's been happening, or things I've seen of Somali life, or things I've found out about Somali beliefs and culture; or else I am working at the Somali poems and stories... I've collected quite a few, but of course can only get them slowly and painstakingly, through English-speaking Somalis, and thus miss a good deal... also I may never even hear some of the best stories, as they naturally don't know what I want to hear, and just tell me any stories that happen to arise naturally out of what has been happening or what we've been talking about. The rest of the time I spend writing stories. I've only done four so far... it takes a lot of time... so much more than one thinks it's going. (November 9, 1951)

On the whole, the 1950s were wonderful years for Margaret Laurence. She was happy in her marriage, thankful for her children, grateful for the opportunity to travel and to live in different parts of Africa, and encouraged by the publication of *A Tree for Poverty*. Her letters also reveal her preoccupation with and her insecurity about the quality of her work. Living far removed from any real literary community and hesitant about discussing her ambitions with others, she relied considerably upon her husband's literary judgment. She described her early stories as "the only good things I've ever written in prose, except for odd passages here and there. But I mean as a whole. Jack thinks so, too. Adele, it really is the first time I've ever written anything that he thought was good, as a whole. There have been odd bits in the novel that he liked, and his criticism was always very helpful, but this time it was different" (September 4, 1951). A second uncompleted novel set in Somaliland was submitted to Jack Laurence's scrutiny.

In her writerly relationship with her husband, Laurence experienced an ambivalent combination of gratitude and malaise. In her isolation, it was Jack who was asked and did offer his opinion, advice, and suggestions. His encouragement helped her in developing confidence as a writer and played its part in preparing her for inevitable future stages that would direct her ever outward. She was grateful for his interest and listened to his criticism,

but by stages she became less and less content with her compliance. As the years passed, malaise turned gradually into restiveness and finally into rebellion when she insisted on the integrity of her own creative instincts, even at the price of her marriage. The process was inevitable and its culmination marked the watershed of Laurence's life.

Inklings of this metamorphosis became more evident as Laurence wrote and revised what was to be her first published novel, *This Side Jordan*. She and Wiseman had been writing about Wiseman's difficulties in completing *The Sacrifice*, which had been accepted by Macmillan and Viking for publication in September 1956; Wiseman had written to say that Gollancz had recently agreed to publish it in England in October. As Laurence began revising the draft of the African novel she had decided to call *This Side Jordan*, she wrote Wiseman, "I'm sorry to bore you with all this, but you're the only person I know who will understand" (July 10, 1956). Talk about writing jostled with Margaret's delighted descriptions of the Laurences' children. It also developed in terms of the emerging sense of her own creative autonomy as she described the need to get her novel off to the publishers:

I've got one more episode to do in the first draft, then a heck of a lot of fixing up (parts I've decided to change since they were first written, etc) to do before I start turning my attention to re-writing proper. In other words, the story has to be hammered into shape before I start worrying overmuch about the style. Maybe that's wrong—I don't know. I think perhaps in the past I may have fussed over writing too much, bleeding it to death in the process... The thing is, I can't talk about it to anyone except Jack, and altho' he is wonderful about it, and has an excellent critical mind, he hasn't actually done this kind of work himself. I often feel I am leading a double life—do you? It seems a kind of irony to me the thing in life which is most important to me, next to my husband and kids, is something I can never talk about, never let anyone know about, even. Too much talking about one's work can be a bad thing... But it seems sometimes strange to me that this past tour something important has happened to me, and Jack is the only one who knows about it. One feels sometimes it must show, but it doesn't. I am a mother and housewife. Full stop. Thank god, at least Jack has followed it every step of the way—it would be unbearable if there wasn't anyone. (July 23, 1956)

Her lifelong friendship with Wiseman was also marked by a measure of deference, and Laurence had early stood in admiration of Wiseman's single-minded dedication to writing her first novel and in awe when that novel was published as *The Sacrifice* to immediate and resounding kudos. Almost as if by some principle of imaginative primogeniture, Wiseman thereby became the senior writer and that was the position that she implicitly occupied from then on in their friendship. When, in later years, Laurence's own writing carried her to unprecedented prominence as the Manawaka works appeared in steady succession, she felt protective of Wiseman. The protectiveness reinforced the sense of deference that had always been part of their friendship and always would be.

Once the draft of *This Side Jordan* had been revised, as she thought, to her satisfaction, Laurence felt the stirrings of another. In early 1957, she debated between returning to her half-finished novel on Somaliland and another project that was eventually to claim her entire attention:

And someday I would like to write a novel about an old woman. Old age is something which interests me more & more . . . I picture a very old woman who knows she is dying and who despises her family's sympathy and solicitude and also pities it, because she knows they think her mind has partly gone—and they will never realize that she is moving with tremendous excitement—part fear and part eagerness—towards a great and inevitable happening, just as years before she had experienced birth. I probably sound off my rocker. It is only because you are the only person, apart from Jack, to whom I can spout these vague and half-formed ideas. (March 17, 1957)

The Laurences' return to Canada in 1957 was for Margaret in creative terms what the African experience had been in cultural terms—a shock, exacerbated by her stepmother's death from cancer, followed by growth and then, uniquely in this case, by independence. In the ensuing years, Laurence came to know the academic world as a marker for the English Department at the University of British Columbia and felt an outsider; the circumscribed world of wife and mother became more and more confining; she felt defiant and angry rather than diffident in the rejection of her stories; she felt progressively more confident

about her writing. The publication of *This Side Jordan* was a milestone and the urgency of her next project, her “old lady” novel, as she called it, was paramount.

The summer of 1962 was a turning point in Laurence’s life and a confluence of forces precipitated the crisis: *The Prophet’s Camel Bell*, her farewell to Africa, had been accepted by Macmillan; Jack Laurence had been offered a job in Pakistan; the first draft of her next novel was completed. Following their custom, Jack had read it and suggested wholesale revisions. Margaret tried unsuccessfully to do so and concluded that only she, in fact, knew best how to write it. They decided on a trial separation during which Margaret would take the children to England and try to make her career as a professional writer there, while he would go to Pakistan. She was plagued with remorse but equally determined to go ahead.

The letters of this time reflect both Laurence’s anguish and a precise sense of a watershed. First, she characterized her life to this point as a “kind of delayed adolescence, at the advanced age of 36, and it is really now or never” (August 29, 1962). Second, after nearly a year in England, she initiated another rite of passage and took a new name—Margaret instead of Peg or Peggy, as she had signed her name thus far in letters to Wiseman. She noted, “It has nothing to do with my writing—it’s something further back, at least I think so” (August 17, 1963). On a very conscious level, she was aware of the importance of these passages and gestures. Such self-consciousness in a retrospective autobiographical work is one thing. In the present, it is remarkably perceptive and, to a considerable extent, enabling—in spite of the risks, a sign of change, growth, and empowerment.

The letters from 1962 after her move to England with her children are full of personal and professional apprehension. They reflect her concern for her children’s well-being and her own sense of the enormous chance she was taking. There were also moments of elation—her publisher Alan Maclean suggested a book of short stories, which Macmillan undertook for 1963; the African service of the BBC accepted a series of folk tales for broadcast; a story appeared on CBC radio; she felt the beginnings of another novel; she joined the Committee for Nuclear Disarmament

and joined the march to Aldermaston. Capping 1963 was her move to Elm Cottage in Penn in late December.

Underpinning the see-saw alternation between stark terror and momentary elation was the emergent bedrock of courage and resolution and rueful self-acceptance. These characteristics of the mature Laurence declared themselves in language that was to become her epistolary landmark—the colloquial and the resolute together:

Anyway, the way I feel about *Hagar* [as she then styled her novel] at the moment is that if Macmillan's [*sic*] thinks it is unpublishable, I will feel disappointed, but I will still disagree with them. "Here stand I; God help me, I can do no other." I have always been very drawn to those words of Martin Luther's. Imagine what it must have taken to say that in the whole Establishment of the western world, when it is so difficult to say it even of issues on an infinitely smaller scale (however, not smaller to me). So—we will see. (January 2, 1963)

Laurence began to refer to members of her "tribe," and to use the phrase that was to become almost the signature of her new sense of self—"the hell with it [or him or her or them, as the case might be], take me or leave me, it's all the same to me—I can't change to suit everyone" (December 27, 1963). Written two days before her move to Elm Cottage, her *non serviam* was, even with all its attendant contingencies, exhilarating.

Laurence was not ready for the friendship of Al Purdy until she had passed through the crucible of her departure from Canada and her first years in England. She had lost much of her diffidence and deference; her commitment to her writing and her situation as primary parent had made her far more decisive than she had been before. Laurence was also less influenced by convention and less intimidated by her own intensity and creative obsession; she recognized and accepted them as dimensions of her vocation. Notwithstanding, she was even more in need of communication.

If Wiseman was her alter ego—sharing the same literary ambition and experiencing the kind of critical success and attention that Laurence desired and enjoyed vicariously through their

friendship—Purdy was, in a sense, her counter-ego, goading her, refusing to indulge her, and always reminding her of the accents of home. Five or ten years earlier, his attentions might well have overwhelmed her. Coming when they did, they acted as a spur. She was more than ready for the stimulation and challenges of this friendship and this is why, I think, she replied so early and volubly to Purdy.

Laurence's years in Africa had shown her how little she knew about the world and how her Canadian background appeared, at that time, limited and parochial. Africa brought cultural and creative awakening. Her return to Canada put her in contact with the Vancouver literary community and with academics at the University of British Columbia. Even though her friend Gordon Elliott introduced her to Jack McClelland, she found academic talk about books and writing to be pretentious and unconnected with her own ideas and convictions. Her Vancouver years had made her resolve that her own identity as a writer would be determined by herself alone. In both these periods of her life, being a Canadian was something to be downplayed or taken for granted. Ironically, her first Canadian novel, *The Stone Angel*, made her an expatriate once again and propelled her to England. It was there that she came home emotionally and psychologically as a Canadian and, to a considerable degree, she did so because of Purdy. Wiseman supported her as an individual and a writer; Purdy supported her as a Canadian writer. From this fact issued the great themes of her letters to Purdy: vocation (always), creation, professionalization, and patriation.

I have written elsewhere of the correspondence between Laurence and Purdy.⁴ Other aspects of their literary friendship speak to Laurence the writer and individual. As two strong-minded and forceful individuals, Laurence and Purdy became close friends because their primary form of communication was epistolary. They quickly came to know and respect their differences as much as their common ground, and this empathy is palpable in their letters, where circumstances and issues made them by degrees mostly sympathetic and sometimes edgy. Sympathy created solidarity while the edginess provided the elements of energy and variety that both found stimulating. Correspondence

also allowed them to balance nuance and candour in a way that was more difficult in person.

Their shared sense of vocation was the overriding bond between them as they recognized the Canadian accent in each other's work. Each, I suspect, recognized in the other the play of idiom, image, and rhythm that gave their work the peculiar stamp of place as central rather than incidental. Laurence's letters to Purdy reveal her as a gifted and intuitive reader of his poetry and redirect us to the poetic aspects of her own fiction. They also suggest affinities, through Purdy's work, to other poets. Laurence's references to Gerard Manley Hopkins in different letters to Purdy make the connections of rhythm and phrasing between Hopkins's "The Windhover" and Morag's description of the great blue heron intriguing. Clara Thomas has noted the affinities between Purdy's "Joe Barr" and Laurence's Christie Logan, and has written at length on the influence of Milton in *The Diviners*.⁵ One could add that the presence in Laurence's work of nineteenth-century British poets, particularly the Victorians, is a subject that is waiting to be explored.

I would also argue that the final stage of Laurence's professionalization in the world of letters was the result of her correspondence with Purdy. When she realized that he made carbon copies of his letters to her and to others, she was initially offended: "probably unjustified curiosity, but why do you put Margaret Laurence at the top of your letters to me? Do you make carbons and stash them all away? I hope to Christ that nobody keeps my letters to them—they are not for keeping" (December 11, 1967). After Purdy's blunt and confirming reply, she confessed that she too kept friends' letters. From Purdy she learned to keep copies of her own. Purdy's sense of himself as a writer of consequence was an example that Laurence was ready at this point to emulate in practice. She needed to recognize consciously that role, and Purdy was the catalyst.

Purdy was also extremely important to Laurence in other ways. The increasing popular and critical recognition that greeted the publication of her Manawaka works and the tendency to characterize Laurence as a woman of substance and principle (which she was) came close at times to idealization and contributed sub-

stantially to the process of making her a national icon. To the extent that he could—through his own iconoclastic nature and his antipathy to taking, or being taken to, high moral ground—Purdy countermanded this tendency, always urging Laurence to focus on her work, on her writing, while downplaying the importance of public expectations that followed in the wake of her fiction and that her own sense of moral obligation would later impose on her return to Canada. Purdy himself was not always consistent in his own actions. His role as editor of *The New Romans* did assume high moral ground and he recognized Laurence's importance to that project; on several other occasions he became involved in national debate over the Americanization of Canadian publishing. This, however, was the only political issue on which Purdy was prepared to act. By and large, he rejected the notion of a writer's public obligation. Laurence herself, however, seemed to understand that part of the price of her return would be the assumption of a public role and, not surprisingly, she accepted it.

Because Purdy began his friendship with Laurence when she was firmly established as the creator of the Manawaka fiction, she could address that preoccupation with amazing prescience, telling Purdy how many novels she had left to write (three) and speaking resolutely about the conclusion of the Manawaka cycle after she had finished *The Diviners*. The letters about the writing of the novels confirm her obsessive patterns as a "method" writer—constantly worrying about form, transcribing notes during the night:

Spent two damn-nearly-sleepless nights while portions of this opening part of S. III were composing themselves in full technicolour in my head. Too tired to get up and write it down; unable to shut the TV inside off for the night. Terrible. Got up and scrawled down key words, and in morning would look at them and think "what did I mean by jerusalem?" (September 3, 1971)

When she had finished the draft of *The Diviners*, Laurence wrote to Purdy:

So I feel a bit odd, and empty, as though part of my inner dwellingplace has now been removed from me. I don't know where to go now—this is why I've always said this would likely be my last

novel. I have been preparing myself mentally for this day, but now that it is here, I guess I'm not really prepared for it after all. (February 3, 1973)

She was, however, prepared in the sense that she had decided to return to Canada. While she shared with Wiseman a personal and creative past that went back to the earliest days of her marriage, Laurence and Purdy had in common a sense of physical rootedness that was closely linked to the sense of home as an actual physical place. Dennis Lee has noted that "by 1960, dug in at Roblin Lake, Purdy was finally in motion."⁶ Home and writing were symbiotically connected. Laurence took delight in homemaking, be it in Somaliland, Vancouver, Penn, or Lakefield. Her need for a home space, a "dwellingplace," was as firmly entrenched as Purdy's, and the landscapes, towns, villages, gardens, and water that appear in their work as a reflection of that need are also found in their letters' spoken and unspoken articulation of the powerful pull of home. That, I think, was at the core of their recognition of each other as kindred spirits. As Purdy writes in *Reaching for the Beaufort Sea*: "Apart from the instant in communication between two people, generally male and female, in which vistas and landscapes are opened up and limitless—there is simply nothing at all like writing what you believe to be a good poem."⁷

Margaret Laurence's letters to Adele Wiseman and Al Purdy cover five decades and reflect the stages and events of a lifetime. Marriage, adventure, children, and vocation mark the first stage. As the fulcrum, vocation precipitates, directs, and consolidates the second stage. The third stage moves beyond vocation to service, to the public role and the social causes that were to become so closely identified with Margaret Laurence after she returned to Canada in 1973. The drama of this lifetime as revealed in the letters is found in the first two stages, although her correspondence with Wiseman and Purdy continued until her death. The first two stages are totally absorbing in terms of the way they recount a narrative of discovery, process, growth, and achievement. The spirit and the letter are complementary and we have every reason to be grateful for both.

NOTES

1. *Selected Letters of Margaret Laurence and Adele Wiseman*, ed. John Lennox and Ruth Panofsky (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1997); and *Margaret Laurence-Al Purdy: A Friendship in Letters*, ed. John Lennox (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1993).
2. Clara Thomas, "The Accommodating I," *Recherches anglaises et nord-américaines* (RANAM) 24 (1991): 79-89. Also in *All My Sisters: Essays on the Work of Canadian Women Writers* (Ottawa: Tecumseh, 1994).
3. Evelyn J. Hinz, "Mimesis: The Dramatic Lineage of Auto/Biography," *Essays on Life Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice*, ed. Marlene Kadar (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1992), 195-212.
4. *Margaret Laurence-Al Purdy: A Friendship in Letters*, xi-xxxvii.
5. Clara Thomas, "The Unknown Margaret Laurence," *The Literary Review of Canada* 2, no. 11 (December 1993): 7-9; "Towards Freedom: The Work of Margaret Laurence and Northrop Frye," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 30 (1984-1985): 81-95. The latter is also in *All My Sisters: Essays on the Work of Canadian Women Writers*.
6. Dennis Lee, "The Poetry of Al Purdy: An Afterword," *The Collected Poems of Al Purdy*, ed. Russell Brown (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986), 373.
7. Al Purdy, *Reaching for the Beaufort Sea: An Autobiography*, ed. Alex Widen (Madeira Park, B.C.: Harbour Publishing, 1993), 281-282.

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Cavewomen Div(in)ing for Pearls: Margaret Laurence and Marian Engel

CHRISTL VERDUYN

Like most writers, I am as superstitious as a caveman
or an actor.

—MARGARET LAURENCE,
“Living Dangerously,” *Heart of a Stranger*

I had known all along in the deepest and often
hidden caves of the heart that anything can happen
anywhere.

—MARGARET LAURENCE,
“Where the World Began,” *Heart of a Stranger*

Behold! human beings living in an underground
den . . . they see only their own shadows, or the
shadows of one another, which the fire throws on
the opposite wall of the cave.

—PLATO,
The Republic, Book VII, 514–515

WITH CORRESPONDENCE between Margaret Laurence and Marian Engel as its point of departure, this essay considers Laurence’s 1974 novel *The Diviners* in conjunction with Engel’s 1978 novel *The Glassy Sea*. These works present striking parallels, and part of my purpose is to show this. Beyond a

comparative study, the essay reflects on the conditions for women writing in Canada at mid-twentieth century. These were conditions that Laurence, like Engel, knew first-hand. Autobiographical in inspiration, if not in fact, *The Diviners* and *The Glassy Sea* articulate women's experiences as writers and artists in postwar Canada.

A particularly arresting figure of this expression is Pearl Cavewoman. Created by Laurence, and close cousin to Engel's "tattooed woman,"¹ Pearl Cavewoman is the memorable embodiment of a contradictory "both/and" condition that was the difficulty and the desire of women writers of the Laurence-Engel generation. Probing the apparent contradiction between "primitive" cave(wo)man and the refined culture of pearls, *The Diviners* dissolves contradiction through its protagonist's discovery of "pearls" in the cave. This is Laurence's affirmation that knowledge can derive from unconventional sources. The following traces this evolution in three parts. The first section presents excerpts from the small but fascinating batch of letters Laurence wrote to Engel in the months leading up to the latter's death from cancer in February 1985.² Neither voluminous nor complete, the correspondence is nonetheless compelling for its depiction of Laurence's views on women writers' experiences. Three elements are retained: the introduction of Pearl Cavewoman; the heroism of Canadian women writers; and the recognition of their "primitive" cave-dweller ancestry. The second section offers a brief examination of parallels between Laurence's exploration of the woman writer's experiences in *The Diviners* and Engel's in *The Glassy Sea*. A final section proceeds from the sketch of those experiences to Laurence's portrait of the conditions for women writers of her generation—a study in cavewomen div(in)ing for pearls.

— I —

Writing to Marian Engel on "April Fools Day" (April 1) 1984, Laurence informed her friend that she had a new, electric typewriter and that she had named it Pearl Cavewoman. "I reckon that I have had, in my life, five typewriters, and all but one of them have had names," Laurence explained. "PEARL CAWEWOMAN is a version

of my own name. Margaret means 'a pearl,' and my family name, Wemyss, means 'a cavedweller,' as we were said to have been descended from the Picts, the old old people of Scotland."³

Pearl Cavewoman—a name not soon forgotten! Laurence's custom of identifying her typewriters with such imaginative names as Pearl Cavewoman is a first, intriguing revelation of her letters to Engel. The author's choice of name is at once curious and compelling. Equally striking is Laurence's sequitur that she and Engel, and other women writers of their generation in Canada, were nothing short of heroic. In her "April Fools" and other letters to Engel, Laurence extolled the courage and commitment of Canadian women writers—"those of us who have had to earn our living and bring up our kids, virtually by ourselves, with a lot of moral support from friends and colleagues." "Women writers in this country," Laurence asserted, "whether with children or not, and whether with mates or not, have been HEROIC" (April 1, 1984).

The heroism of Canadian women writers is a recurring theme in Laurence's letters to Engel. The correspondence records Laurence's conviction that the generation of Canadian women writers to which she and Engel belonged was courageous, strong, and unquestionably deserving of a place in history. On September 17, 1984, Laurence reflected: "I think Jane Austen would have loved us, but I suspect she might have been a bit in awe of us, as well she might, we who have coped with having and rearing our children, writing our books, earning our livings, and not hiding the manuscripts under the desk blotter when the vicar came to tea."⁴ Pursuing these thoughts a few months later, Laurence wrote:

Jane Austen, the more I read her and think about her, was such a subtle and strong feminist! *In them days!* But those days, apparently so far back, are not so very different from our own. Is this not always the way? I think so. Strong women did always have the difficulties that Austen presents, and people like you and I have lived through that, too. With, I may say, *success*. We pass on a whole lot of things to the children, both female and male, or so I hope and pray and know. Our generation, however, and I say this knowing I am older than you are, did have our kids and reared them without any colonial servant-type help (although I lived in Africa). Shoot, honey, we're heroic! (January 12, 1985)

Laurence's presentation of strong women is a well-known feature of her work. So, too, is her interest in history, particularly in ancestral stories. Less well known, but stated in no uncertain terms in her letters to Engel, is Laurence's later-life determination and desire to trace female ancestry, back through time, past Virginia Woolf in a room of her own, past the Scots and the Picts who appear in *The Diviners*, back to prehistoric times and peoples, to the cave dwellers. "What stuns me," Laurence confided to Engel on May 18, 1984, "looking at my own family, is how pitifully little I know about the women, even my grandmothers... and how much about the men. Lost histories... perhaps we must invent them in order to rediscover them." In the mid-1980s, Laurence was writing "odd things, not a novel, more like things about my ancestral families, especially the women. History has been written, and lines of descent traced, through the male lines. More and more I want to speak about women (always have, of course, in my fiction, but now I want to get closer to my own experience... not necessarily directly autobio[graphy], but close, I guess)." Culminating in Laurence's posthumously published memoir *Dance on the Earth* (1989), this was the author's focus when writing in the mid-1980s or, at least, in writing to Engel. In letters to her friend, and in Engel's own literary oeuvre, Laurence found the vehicle for her conviction that Canada's women writers were like courageous heroes or cavewomen, strong and brave.⁵

The Canadian dimension of this vision was no small matter. There was no fooling in Laurence's April 1, 1984, comment on an article about the "Bloomsbury folks," which had appeared in the *New York Review of Books*. It is worth quoting at some length Laurence's thoughts:

I'm a Canadian who felt, years ago, somewhat like a naive colonial girl in literary London, and came to resent and then be amused by their attitudes... much later than Bloomsbury but some of the same contempt for anything not Brit was there in my time, although the upper-class Brit by that time had all but vanished from the literary scene. It's interesting... I've read Nigel Nicolson's book on his parents, and a certain amount of the multitudinous material on the scene of those days, and of course Virginia's books, although none of Vita's, and I feel, as I always have felt, a profound sense of repulsion towards that group, not for their

sexual inclinations, heaven knows . . . I couldn't care less . . . but for their amazing snobbism and hypocrisy, their malice and sheer *nastiness* towards everyone in the world except their own little clique. Their lack of generosity, their terror at standing up for any principle, is mind-boggling. Poor Leonard Woolf must have been heroic, although I guess his reasons were mixed also. I've always . . . well, for years, anyhow . . . wondered what Virginia would have done if there had been no one to look after her and keep helping her in her periodic bouts of "madness." Maybe she would have written better . . . ? . . . you know, Virginia's writing, much of which I read long ago, never did strike a chord in my heart . . . it always seemed so cerebral, so bloodless. Which is not to say that she didn't have magnificent gifts in terms of writing . . . she did. But she never chose to write about things closest to her own heart and spirit, and obviously I am not talking here about writing in any direct autobiographical way. I think a lot of Canadian women writers . . . quite frankly . . . have been braver. The incredible snobbishness . . . the almost unbelievable ignorance in that way . . . of the Bloomsbury group . . . seems now to have been a very limiting thing in terms of their writing. I suppose it is an inability to know, really know, the *reality* of others. I read with suitable reverence, as was expected then, when I was young, Virginia Woolf's books, and wondered why I didn't connect very much with them. Later, I saw why. They were written out of an exclusive spirit, not an inclusive one, and in some sense they were self-obsessed and unkind. We are not always kind, kid, nor should [w]e be, but damn, we aren't exclusive . . . [and] "one thing we have NOT been is bloodless." (April 1, 1984)

For Laurence, Canadian women writers—uncultured colonials that their European counterparts may have considered them to be—were full-blooded and forthright, courageous and considerate. That they may have *seemed* less cerebral in no way diminished their ability "to know, really know, the *reality* of others," as Laurence affirmed. This idea is borne out by her "spiritual autobiography," *The Diviners*, and by Engel's *The Glassy Sea*. If parallels between the works were not necessarily deliberate, they do not seem merely coincidental. Rather, they emerge out of Laurence's and Engel's shared sense and experiences of what it meant, and what it took, to be a woman writing in postwar Canada.

- II -

A veritable lexicon evolves as one considers the similarities between *The Diviners* and *The Glassy Sea*. The name Margaret means pearl.⁶ It is not only Laurence's name, as well as that of her typewriter, but also the name of Engel's protagonist in *The Glassy Sea*. Marguerite Heber sports more than one name during her lifetime. As a young girl, she is called Rita, derivative short form of Marguerite, French equivalent of Margaret. During her decade as an Eglantine nun, Rita is called Sister Mary Pelagia, not "...for the Pelagia who was once called Marguerite for her pearls and Marina because she was an inevitable cognate of Aphrodite, but for Pelagius, theologian and heretic" (77-78).⁷ Later, Rita's husband, Asher Bowen, calls her Peggy, another short form for Margaret.

Morag Gunn's name is steeped in history, which Morag's stepfather, Christie Logan, teaches her. Christie recounts the story of Piper Gunn, whose wife, Morag, is "a strapping strong woman... with the courage of a falcon and the beauty of a deer and the warmth of a home and the faith of saints" (41). But the ancestral stories passed on to Morag do not supply her enough information about the women who preceded her. Indeed, she begins to write, and thus to proceed toward the wordsmith she will become, partly to flesh out that story. In *her* version of the *Tale of Piper Gunn's Woman*, Morag elaborates:

Once long ago there was a beautiful woman name of Morag, and she was Piper Gunn's wife, and they went to the new land together and Morag was never afraid of anything in this whole wide world. Never. If they came to a forest, would this Morag there be scared? Not on your christly life. She would only laugh and say, *Forests cannot hurt me because I have the power and the second sight and the good eye and the strength of conviction.* (42)

If Morag's writing arises in part from her need to tell the story of her female ancestors, it also imaginatively provides the ancestry she desires. Morag's parents die when she is five. This is her first "memorybank movie," and it features Mrs. Pearl "from the next farm... an old woman, really old old, short and with puckered-up

skin on her face" (11).⁸ Significantly and symbolically present at Morag's first encounter with death, Mrs. Pearl incorporates the archetype of the old woman, she who, in the person of *The Stone Angel's* Hagar, inaugurates Laurence's Manawaka cycle. The figure of the old woman is equally central in Engel's work, where she appears in a number of guises—from *Monodromos's* *yaya*,⁹ through *Bear's* bear,¹⁰ to *The Glassy Sea's* nuns.¹¹ Most strikingly, she is the tattooed woman situated at the heart of Engel's writing:

I am an artist, now, she thought, a true artist. My body is my canvas. I am very old, and very beautiful. I am carved like an old shaman. I am an artifact of an old culture, my body is a pictograph from prehistory, it has been used and bent and violated and broken, but I have resisted. I am Somebody... an old, wise woman, and at the same time beautiful and new. (*The Tattooed Woman* 9)

In Laurence's and Engel's work, old(er), wise(r) women appear time and again to oversee or incorporate *la venue à l'écriture*¹²—the coming to writing. For Morag, this is pursuant to her parents' death, which Mrs. Pearl reports, and to which Morag responds by "making a cave, a small shelter into which no one can see" (14). From within the confines of the cave, speech, language, and, in time, writing emerge: "Morag is talking in her head. To God. Telling Him it was all His fault and this is why she is so mad at Him. Because He is no good, is why" (14). Morag's arguments with God are echoed in young Rita Heber's challenge to the "divine." "Aside from the fact that He was the Messiah and I wasn't, I didn't see that there was much difference between me and Jesus," Rita recalls:

I failed so early to distinguish God's masculinity from my femininity [*sic*], ill-defined as it was by red cardigans and Kitty Higgins bows, that I became, in spite of my instincts which are on the whole as passive as any man could wish, a woman of my generation... the women I grew up with were not frail: they had their bunions, their miscarriages, their preferences... Old snapshots often show them as rather muscular brides... but, as the qualities the boys were taught to look for in a woman were those shared by ploughhorses (solidity, calm, lack of temperament), the externalized femininity of the fashionable world was... far from our world. (30–31)

Women's strength, in Laurence's and in Engel's artistic vision, entails a challenge both to divine hierarchy and to revered images of femininity. Against these, the authors' protagonists brandish their pens or their typewriters—their pearl(s)! Like Rita's Eglantine namesake, Pelagia, an "actress who every night processed in splendour past Bishop Nonnus's fledgling church, causing scandal among the Christians" (78),¹³ they process their pearls against the grain of stereotyped femininity and the social mores and values of their time and place.

Although Morag Gunn grows up on the Prairies, and Rita Heber in Ontario, they share a small-town upbringing and similar family traits and values. Ancestral background is an important element of both novels, with Laurence tracing Scottish heritage and Engel offering information about the Irish Macraes and McCrorys and the French Line Hebers. The Gunns and Hebers are plain, simple, good, hardworking, country people. It is partially in reaction to the "purl and plain" approach to life that Rita is attracted to pearls and roses, and Morag to the wonder of words. When Rita leaves the cloistered life and culture of roses, however, she plunges into muddy waters lying just below the calm, smooth surface of the glassy sea. Laurence's work also features divers and diviners, from *The Fire-Dwellers's* "antediluvian" "mermaid," merwoman Stacey MacAindra (9) to *The Diviners's* "fluid Morag."¹⁴ Morag, too, "stirs things up,"¹⁵ making waves—"mucking up"—being the social consequence of women's efforts toward artistic self-expression and representation in Laurence's and Engel's generation. Both *The Diviners* and *The Glassy Sea* confront the impact of society on "the lives of girls and women."¹⁶ Rita Heber discovers the extent to which women's experience is shaped by the values underlying social structures and organizations such as the church and family: "Woman's role was to take care of men and children. If one became a teacher and instructed them instead of a mother baking for them, that was acceptable" (72). Becoming an artist or a writer is not.

So think Morag's and Rita's husbands, the remarkably similar Brooke Skelton and Ash Bone.¹⁷ As their names suggest, these men are life-denying presences in the protagonists' lives. Problems surface when their wives express a desire to have children.

Neither man is at ease with the prospect of parenthood or their wives' power to reproduce, and, in Morag's case, simultaneously produce books. In both novels, marriage ends with the protagonist's pregnancy. Engel's Rita gives birth to a hydrocephalic son whom Asher rejects, while Morag's daughter by Jules Tonnerre becomes Brooke Skelton's "alibi" for divorce. Both women are marginalized by a society still uncomfortable with the reality of single mothers and women who write. Morag winds up in a cabin by a river, while Rita becomes a self-described "crazy lady by the sea" (153). It is here she writes the long letter, which is Engel's novel, accepting an invitation to reopen Eglantine House. The new House will be "a kind of hospice," a hostel or commune for women. "I want a core of women helping other women to put their lives . . . in order," she decides. "It is women I am committed to working with and I shall do that" (163). Offering community and commitment, Eglantine House is a modern-day convent, a twentieth-century "cave," or coven, a gathering of women. This is hardly the vision of exclusivity and snobbishness that Laurence glimpsed in the Bloomsbury group.

The parallels between Laurence's *The Diviners* and Engel's *The Glassy Sea* are striking and significant for their authors' representation of woman as writer and artist in postwar Canada. The portrait of the artist as an older woman seems as at odds with social "norms" as Laurence's image of a cavewoman in pearls. The picture is not all rosy, however. There are shadows in the cave.

– III –

cave, interj., beware!—L[atin], imper.[ative] of *cavere*, "to be on one's guard, take care, beware," which stand for **covere* and is cogn. with G[reek]. *Xoew* (for **xofew*), "I mark, perceive."

caveat . . . a warning.¹⁸

At a time when Canadian literati were proclaiming the advent of vertical man in a horizontal world,¹⁹ Laurence was projecting cavewomen, curved over pearls, carving angels out of stone, writing on the walls. Far from *Homo erectus* striding toward the light on the horizon, Laurence's was a more "primitive," wary, and

perhaps weary vision of women struggling to make their mark, often getting marked in the process, or (in the case of Engel's "tattooed woman") marking themselves in the effort.²⁰ Morag, "tired...exhausted [from] working every minute on the new novel... days speaking to no one" finds herself

alone in this house with Pique and this lunatic [Chas]... What if he breaks her arm? What if he strangles her?... Seldom has Morag been as frightened as she is this minute... She is fairly strong, physically, but not nearly as strong as Chas. She is thinking very quickly and she knows... something she did not know before. She is capable of killing, at least under this one circumstance... They struggle without noise or words for another second or two. Then their eyes meet. Chas' pale hazel eyes are alight with a hatred as pure as undiluted hydrochloric acid... He brings up one hand, and before she can move away, he hits her with full force across the breasts. He walks out while she is still paralyzed with pain. (268)

This disturbing scene in Laurence's portrait of Morag the writer evokes how difficult, lonely, and even dangerous life could be for women. Certainly, it was unconventional in that the writer's life still was viewed as counter to the norms for women of the time and place. "Accessories," Millie Christopherson, senior clerk at Simlow's Ladies Wear where Morag works part-time, remarks. "Good Taste is learnt" (91). This is what women were expected to learn, what Millie offers to teach Morag: lessons in "basic black with pearls," and rules that the emerging writer eventually breaks in her growing awareness of other ways of understanding the world and knowing.

Herein lies the most powerful feature of Laurence's depiction of a woman writer of her generation: the interrogation of conventional knowledge and received wisdom. Central to this project is Morag's exploration of language and *The Diviners's* valorization of contradiction. Opening under the sign of contradiction, with "the river [that] flowed both ways... this apparently impossible contradiction, made apparent and possible" (3), the novel valorizes contradiction as a means of escaping the dictates and conventions that shape human understanding and experience:

Over and above its reflection on language, *The Diviners* probes the assumptions underlying language and the ideas and concepts that become formalized as knowledge and truth by it. The exploration of questions of difference leads Laurence to consider not only the privilege of language but also the privilege of the centre and the visual in the apprehension and representation of reality. Other means to these ends are proposed and examined. Particularly intriguing is the suggested potential of a form of faith represented by the intuitive guess. (Verduyn, "Contra/dictions/s" 67)

The Diviners considers the possibilities offered by painting, music, divining, and the "intuitive guess"²¹ as ways toward understanding—hardly conventional approaches to knowledge. But as Laurence's novel suggests, contravention and contradiction are the conditions of the woman writer in Canada in the years following the Second World War, when aspiring to be an artist still challenged social expectations concerning women. *The Diviners* affirms the "contradictory" blind sight of the diviner, able to locate water no one can see. It suggests knowing an "other" way, not dazzled by the sun (son)²² like Plato's cave dwellers, led out of the dark and into the world of men to learn how to see, how to know: to know, like Plato, objective reality and not its "mere" shadow representation; to know with certainty. Laurence's woman writer "would never know" (369) in this way. "That wasn't given to her to know. In a sense, it did not matter. The necessary doing of the thing—that mattered" (369). In *The Diviners*, Laurence confirms the importance of the act of writing, despite the shortcomings of language. "Words may convey or betray, and meaning may be contradictory, but writing remains a necessary possibility"²³ for Morag, wordsmith: "She had known it all along, but not really known" (369). Writing is another way of knowing—Morag's way—as she realizes when her marriage crumbles around the completion of her first novel. "I know you know a lot about novels," she tells Brooke. "But I know something, as well. Different from reading or teaching" (213). Morag's is a different knowledge, like that of the diviner, inexplicable, "unreasonable." "I could understand it better," Brooke replies to Morag's admission that she knows only that she must leave him, "if you could just give me one reason" (227). But, as Royland remarks about A-Okay's effort to divine, it is not in reason that one learns: A-Okay could

learn if “he can just get over wanting to explain it” (369). Where Plato’s cavemen seek knowledge in an upward movement toward enlightened reason, Laurence’s cavewoman finds knowledge among the shadows, in the downward motion of the diver/diviner. This is no easy feat, Morag discovers, as she experiences “the terrors of the cave” (211), her “own darkness” (211), the “deep and terrifying night” (225). These, too, are part of Laurence’s portrait of the woman writer in *The Diviners*, and Engel’s in *The Glassy Sea*. Their vision of shared community notwithstanding,²⁴ loneliness and insecurity were common conditions for women writers of their generation. Their protagonists face the shadows, dive into darkness, swim in deep waters. Therein lies their heroism, and in time their pearls—their writing and their knowing.

Pearl Cavewoman participates in Laurence’s valorization of the unconventional and contradictory in life, her authorization of woman as artist. She incorporates the “both/and” condition women writers of Laurence’s and Engel’s generation experienced, as both mothers and writers, women and artists. Both “primitive” (cavewoman) and “refined” (pearls), Pearl Cavewoman is knowledgeable and cultured—in her own, unconventional way. Above all, she is heroic, braving the conditions of loneliness and insecurity, which are those of the shadowy cave, to be, against all odds, a woman who writes.

NOTES

1. Unnamed protagonist of the title story of Engel’s posthumously published collection *The Tattooed Woman*. As I argue in *Lifelines: Marian Engel’s Writings*, the tattooed woman embodies several key concerns of Engel’s work, including female identity and women’s artistic re-presentation.
2. Located among Engel’s papers, held in *The Marian Engel Archive* at McMaster University. The letters cited are part of the Second Accession, which I consulted in July–August 1993. The accession has since been catalogued by Dr. Kathy Garay, Division of Archives and Research Collections, Mills Memorial Library, McMaster University, who also catalogued the first instalment of papers belonging to Marian Engel. The first accession, acquired by McMaster University in 1982, is fully described in the *Library Research News* 8, no. 2 (Autumn 1984).

3. This and other letters cited are located in *The Marian Engel Archive (Second Accession)*, Box 31, File 55, Mills Memorial Library, McMaster University.
4. Laurence and Engel were exchanging notes about Jane Austen, who figured in the opening lines of the novel Engel was working on at the time of her death, "Elizabeth and the Golden City."
5. **cave** . . . O[ld] I[ndian] . . . savas-, "strength," heroism, savirah, surah, "strong." *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* 1, p. 253.
6. **Margaret** fr. L Margarita "pearl"; **Marguerite** OF [Old French] margarite "pearl." *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* 2, p. 938.
7. Engel's novel demonstrates that Rita takes after her namesake Pelagia as well.
8. The Pearls, a childless couple, later billet Jules Tonnerre when he attends school. This is one of several links between Morag and Jules.
9. Greek for grandmother, old woman.
10. The bear is said to resemble "a fat dignified old woman with his nose to the wind" (138).
11. From *nonna*—an old woman, a nun; fem. of *nonnus*—an old man, a monk.
12. Title of the feminist work, written collaboratively by Hélène Cixous, Madeleine Gagnon, and Annie Leclerc, published by UGE, 10/18, Paris, 1977.
13. "Finally (could she have been losing her figure? Were her pursuers drawing too near?) she sat herself and her splendid pearls at the feet of the Bishop and asked to be converted . . . She became a holy person, and many years later, when an ancient eremite was being laid to rest, a Desert Father of large piety, much visited by troubled young hermits whose control over their starving visions was incomplete, the body was discovered to be female, that of Pelagia, not Pelagius" (78).
14. See George Woodcock: "In her Manawaka cycle, Margaret Laurence uses the ancient doctrine of the four elements and their corresponding humours to illuminate in mythical terms the life journeys towards self-knowledge of four women of widely various types. Hagar the earth-bound in *The Stone Angel*, Stacey the fire-threatened in *The Fire-Dwellers*, the airily insubstantial Rachel in *A Jest of God*, and fluid Morag in *The Diviners*" (142).
15. Morag's husband, Brooke Skelton, on the other hand, prefers the status quo, especially in response to his wife's desire for children. "Personally," Brooke says mildly, "I like it here with just the two of us" (181).

16. From the evocative title of Alice Munro's 1971 book. Munro's work also probes the small-town socialization process of young women and the struggle toward life as an artist/writer.
17. As Rita's brother Stuart aptly renames Asher (107).
18. *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* 1, p. 254.
19. This is a reference to Laurence Ricou's 1973 study *Vertical Man, Horizontal World*.
20. "She took the blade out of her razor and washed it. She went and sat at her dressing table and turned the mirrored lights on. I am forty-two and she is twenty-one, she thought. Neatly and very lightly, she carved a little star on her forehead. Experience must show, she thought" (*The Tattooed Woman*, 5-6).
21. As practised by Dan McRaith, Jules Tonnerre, Royland, and Morag, respectively. "Morag's exploration of language, unfolding under the sign of contradiction, leads beyond scientific fact to a form of faith and perhaps ultimately to a sort of intuitive 'guess.' In *The Diviners*, where language is a central concern, and the French language a deliberate presence, the shift from the English *diviner* to the French *deviner* is potential if not intentional. This possible conceptual shift might be considered in relation to the privileged place guessing appears to enjoy in the novel... An intuitive approach is contemplated as perhaps more appropriate than conventions of knowledge and certainty" (Verduyn, "Contra/dictions/s," 66).
22. See Robert Kroestch's essay in this volume, and Helen M. Buss (1985) for more about the importance of the daughter in Laurence's work.
23. Verduyn, "Contra/dictions/s," 67.
24. Engel mooted the possibility of a commune of women helping other women in *The Glassy Sea*, and Laurence vehemently rejected the excluding snobbery of the Bloomsbury group.

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**Reading
Margaret Laurence's
Life Writing:
Toward a Postcolonial
Feminist Subjectivity
for a White Female Critic**

HELEN M. BUSS

I PROPOSE FEMINIST, POSTCOLONIAL READINGS of Margaret Laurence's two book-length autobiographical works: *The Prophet's Camel Bell*, memoirs of the year she spent in Somalia in 1951–1952, and *Dance on the Earth: A Memoir*, the book she completed shortly before her death in 1987. My purpose is to suggest how white female critics, such as myself, can begin to approach their critical tasks in ways that neither slight their own culture's supportive and positive accomplishments, nor lead them to critical positions that are ideologically acceptable in established postcolonial practice, but ultimately unproductive in bringing a literary critique to the polyphony of women's voices currently expressing their experience in the English language. My goal in performing this admittedly political act is to enter postcolonial discourse in a way that requires neither my abjection as a white woman nor the diminution of my feminism.

The Prophet's Camel Bell is based on the diaries Laurence wrote while travelling with her husband as he engineered a project to construct ground water reservoirs in the Somalian desert. Laurence narrates an incident concerning the establishment of a *jes*, a "tea-shop-cum-brothel" (141), near their camp at Balleh Gedid. Jack Laurence quickly recognizes the need to share their water and space with the *jes*, accepting that the *jes* "provides amenities of one kind and another" for the men employed at the

site (142). For Laurence, however, the task is harder because of the fact that the *jes*'s prostitute is an eight-year-old girl. Despite the fact that the Laurences are making every effort to abide by local customs, this particular local custom is not one the young Canadian writer expected.

The little girl, Asha, comes each afternoon to visit with Laurence in her camp—asking nothing from her except a comb for her unkempt hair—leaving just before sunset as the men leave work and her night's business begins. The writer and the child do not communicate, Laurence's rudimentary Somali preventing any real exchange. But each time Asha leaves she says to Laurence, "*Nabad gelyo*" (May you enter peace). Although she knows the correct response, Laurence can never bring herself to give the traditional farewell, "*nabad dino*" (the peace of faith), for she has neither the peace nor the faith to accept the girl's material conditions of existence as part of normal life. She is very aware of her position as outsider, the potential for falling into a colonial position as memsahib do-gooder. As Canadians, she and her husband take a consciously anticolonial stance, avoiding association with the British administration whenever possible: he has his commitment to bringing practical technology gauged to local needs, built and maintained by local abilities; she has her scholarly exploration of Somali culture and literature witnessed by her carefully researched poetic translations in *A Tree for Poverty*, and further illustrated by the way in which she exposes and examines her own bias and assumptions in *The Prophet's Camel Bell* in her subject position as learner in another's culture.

In most of her relationships with males in Somalia, Laurence is capable of establishing largely unexploitive terms of existence, but at such moments as the Asha meeting, in fact in all her meetings with women in Somalia, she cannot maintain her subject position as respectful learner, good researcher, comic westerner having her biases deconstructed by patient mentors. In her meeting with women she is bereft of her strategies; she confesses:

I did not know what to do. If we forbade the *jes* to stay near the camp, the crone [the old woman who manages Asha] would only move her trade elsewhere, so the child would be no better off. Here at least Asha got enough water. Possibly many Somalis felt

the same as I did about children such as Asha, but how would they feel about my meddling? I had the strong suspicion that I might easily make Asha's life worse by interfering. I could not take her away from the situation entirely, and what else would do any good?

So, whether out of wisdom or cowardice, I did nothing. The *jes* remained with us for several months. Then, in the *Jilal* drought, it vanished one day and we heard no more about it. But Asha's half-wild half-timid face with its ancient eyes will remain with me always, a reproach and a question. (142)

The "reproach" and "question" are made more devastating for Laurence in the face of her awareness of the debilitating and deforming female circumcision and infibulation surgery carried out in Somalia. She learns of the horror of this surgery through the desperate women who ask her for some pills for pain relief from the lifetime of pain, infections, painful menstruation and intercourse, complicated birthing, as well as the pain the deformity caused in walking the great distances required by their nomadic life. Laurence is bitter but helpless in her observation:

What should I do? Give them a couple of five-grain aspirin? Even if they had money to buy future pills, which they had not, the lunatic audacity of shoving a mild pill at their total situation was more than I could stomach. (64)

"I have nothing to give you. Nothing" is the reply Laurence has to make to these women. A painful moment for the young socialist from Manitoba.

Laurence did not live long enough to confront that searing moment of intersection between feminist and postcolonial ethics represented by our growing awareness in the late eighties and in the nineties that as Canada became haven for Somalian and other refugees from Africa, it also became haven to such customs as female circumcision and infibulation, a custom, as Laurence learned, which can be as fiercely advocated by senior women as well as men where the practice takes place.¹

I take the time to reconstruct Laurence's silenced frustration at the fate of women in Somalia, and to remember that the problems of the Empire have come home, because I consider it

emblematic of the discursive disjunction that occurs when feminism and postcolonialism meet. White women literary critics are also sometimes made silent and helpless by the conflicting demands of these two belief systems; we, too, might remember occasions when in our hearts we said, "I have nothing to give you. Nothing," and turned away with that same terrible sense of "reproach," with a question in our hearts and minds that never leaves us. I do not think these problems have been fully admitted by the cultural critiques involved with feminism or postcolonialism, and I propose not to seek a resolution to the issues, but to offer a reading of Laurence's life writing that works "toward" the concept of a female postcolonial position for privileged, white, female cultural workers (writers, intellectuals), like myself, that does not force us into hypocrisy effected to accommodate a seemingly unconflicted acceptance of the challenges of all the newly aroused voices of the postcolonial world.

Late in their study *The Empire Writes Back*, Helen Tiffin *et al.* devote a three-page section to the intersection of feminism and postcolonialism. While observing the several parallel interests of the two critiques, they admit that they have been largely coincidentally related. They suggest fruitful grounds for interaction, especially in the need of both critiques to "change the conditions of reading for all texts" (176). It is that need to change the conditions of reading for all texts that I would like to begin with and refer particularly to the leading postcolonial feminist critic who has made challenging statements about the place of white feminists' critiques vis-à-vis "sisterhood" with women in oppressive colonial conditions. White women need to meet these challenges with an attitude that seeks neither the hypocrisy of silence nor the humiliation of uncritical acceptance for the sake of political correctness. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, while recognizing the important joint possibilities of feminism and postcolonialism, indicts white women writers and white feminism's reading strategies (as exemplified by Gilbert and Guber in *Madwoman in the Attic*) for requiring "a self-immolating colonial subject for the glorification of the social mission of the colonizer" (1985, 251). Her illustration of this is her reading of *Jane Eyre*, in which native/Creole Bertha Mason, the dark woman from the colonies, must die a fiery death in order for Jane to realize herself as "feminist individualist heroine" (Donald-

son 29), a bourgeois, colonial, masculinist ideal that Spivak would seem to think white feminists adopt uncritically. While she implicitly indicts the author of *Jane Eyre*, her chief concern is the explicit indictment of Brontë's white feminist readers, who are blind "to the epistemic violence that effaces the colonial subject and requires her to occupy the space of the imperialists' self-consolidating Other" (1987, 209). Those accepting Spivak's accusatory reading might be tempted to apply it to Laurence's *The Prophet's Camel Bell*, to show that the white woman confronts the oppression of other women only for the purpose of the self-development of her liberal humanist essential self, thus appropriating the colonial subject's story for her own edification and reifying the other in a new kind of textual oppression.

In fact, this is exactly what Terry Goldie describes Laurence (and numerous others) as doing in his study *Fear and Temptation*. Goldie is examining the "horizon of expectation" (132) or, more politically, the "concealed but omnipresent ideology controlling the text" (8). He takes up the use of the Jules character in Morag's story in *The Diviners*, using Jules's question about their relationship, "I'm the *shaman*, eh?," as the deconstructive moment that reveals the ideology of the text. He concludes: "His [Jules's] primary contribution is as incubus, with a very clear emphasis on his sexual power, but his mystical potency extends through other commodities as well, particularly orality and the prehistoric." The result of this process in white texts, says Goldie, is that "the essence of Other in the indigene becomes ethereal manifestation, an aura of indigenous presence rather than the indigene as material reality" (138). Thus occurs the commodification and reification that colonial ideology performs on the indigene. I would like to use Goldie's reading of *The Diviners* as a springboard for differentiating two kinds of reading in my effort to, as the *Empire* authors put it, "change the conditions of reading for all texts." In *Decolonizing Feminisms*, Laura Donaldson describes the difference between the kind of textual reading that is a "diving deep and surfacing" reading and what she calls, using Alice Walker's term, a "womanist" reading. She sees both the Gilbert and Guber reading of *Jane Eyre* and the Spivak reading as ones that seek a single strand; the critic engages in an act of "diving deep and surfacing . . . with the sunken hermeneutic treasure" (20). I would add that the ideological agendas of such

readers are usually well set in advance. I am not arguing against the usefulness of such readings; certainly critical readers in Canada deserved the good shake of the shoulders that books like Goldie's offered us in the late eighties. Comparative studies, however, inevitably do violence to individual works while making very sound ideological and aesthetic observations. Donaldson points out the violence done to feminism, however, when ideological critics engage in a privileging of oppressions, as both the Gilbert and Guber and the Spivak readings do in their desire to validate certain important values in their readings. It is the kind of violence that produces the energy-sapping quarrels of recent years, that keeps feminist critiques from being enabling, and that often leaves feminists caught in using postmodern deconstruction not as a means to an end, but as an end, a rather negative end in itself.

Donaldson sees the problem as one caused by some feminists' uncritical use of an Althusserian subjectivity definition by which "the classic realist text interpellates or constructs the relationship between narrative and reader so that the reading subject willingly accepts her status as the individual and noncontradictory locus of meaning" (21). This uncritical use of Althusserian subjectivity theory is what Donaldson says Spivak does in order to argue Jane Eyre's "privatization" of the self into a bourgeois uniqueness, "a woman who achieves her identity at the expense of the 'native,' not quite human, female Other" (22). She proposes that an Althusserian attitude to the reading subject and textual subjectivity is inappropriate for feminist readers "because interpellation ignores the fissures that the violent and subterranean pressures of patriarchal society open between men and women" (22). The view of subjectivity Donaldson argues for, and which I wish to advise for reading Laurence's life writing, is described by the term "suturing," borrowed from film theory. Donaldson argues that we can read texts, especially texts with first-person viewpoints, as if they were film, with a view to how various cuts are sutured together to construct our reading:

Since the cut from one shot to the next guarantees that both preceding and subsequent shots will function as absences framing the meaning of the present, it also allows the cinematic text to be read as a signifying ensemble that converts one shot into both a

signifier of the subsequent shot and the signified of the preceding one. The cut... "edits" the thoughts and associations of the reader into a similar signifying ensemble. (25)

She undertakes such a suture-aware reading of a portion of *Jane Eyre* in order to show how reading across the surface of the assemblage of points of views in the text gives an awareness of how "suture enables a resistant reading of the Brontë text by forcing the reader to live in the unsettling contradictions of Jane's subjectivity" (26). To avoid the "textual distortions that arise from an uncritical appropriation of Althusser," we need to develop a filmic eye for the "heterogeneous discourse" of books like *Jane Eyre* that "cut the chimerical threads suturing the wounds of the subject together" (27). I would describe this reading across the surface of texts, in a more literary context, as a metonymic rather than a metaphoric reading, by which one builds a reading through joining (suturing) many fragments into a whole, rather than seeking the hermeneutic unity that suppresses detail in a substitutive gesture. To illustrate how this process can work to mediate "diving deep and surfacing" readings such as Goldie's of Laurence, I picture the incident of Jules and Morag's sexual encounter in terms of the filmic cuts that frame it, particularly noting that Jules does not exactly become an "ethereal" quality, an "aura of indigenous presence." He becomes (almost immediately, within nine pages of text, maybe a dozen quick cuts of a film) the father of the child that Morag carries, the Métis child that refuses to become a reification or commodification of essence in the service of a white woman's individualization, but a real and continuing presence in her mother's life; indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, she becomes the structural and thematic pivot of *The Diviners*.² To conclude that Laurence's novel is a reification of the indigene is to confuse the writer with her main characters. Jules may like to esteem his sexual activity as shamanistic and Morag may well wish, at times, to ignore her lover's or her daughter's identities as Métis people, but Laurence's text read more fully, in its sutured variety, does not allow either of these viewpoints to go unchallenged.

Ironically, my effort to decolonize feminist reading practices from the oppressions of hasty postcolonial readings finds a connection with some basic reading strategies in postcolonial

critiques. In his article on “Creolization and the Post-Colonial Text,” Graham Huggans argues that for writers all over the English-speaking world, grappling with the problem of (in Raja Rao’s words) “conveying in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own” (27) requires a “new cross-cultural poetics which participates actively in the transformations not just of post-colonial, but of all, cultures” in a process, which Caribbean writer Edward Brathwaite coined in the word “interculturative,” an interculturative “process of creolization” (29). Huggans describes Brathwaite’s use of the symbolic framework of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* in a mimicry gesture that skews the Shakespearean characters to “a cast of ‘ambiguous products’ which conform to ‘the personality types of creole cultures’” (30). He transfers Brathwaite’s creolization technique to a reading of New Zealand writer Keri Hulme’s *the bone people*, proposing that Hulme’s ironic play with the traditional figures of Prospero, Caliban, and Ariel write back to the Empire and its culture in an ironized way. That irony, though dependent on the reader’s awareness of the British literary tradition, deconstructs colonialism and participates in a palimpsestic process of building up of postcolonial voices that speaks to the creolization of literature in English and subscribes to “a distinctively post-colonial critical discourse which neither dispenses with nor subscribes to, but problematizes and adapts, European models of literary/cultural analysis and classification” (38–39).

Those familiar with Laurence’s work know of her fascination with *The Tempest* as a central text of European culture. It begins in her earliest life writing, in which she uses O. Mannoni’s book *Prospero and Caliban: A Study of the Psychology of Colonisation* as a touchstone for exploring the relationship of colonizer to colonized. Fiona Sparrow examines Laurence’s use of this work in her book *Into Africa with Margaret Laurence*, and points out that Frantz Fanon has critiqued Mannoni’s use of Caliban, pointing out that Mannoni posits an essentialist view of the colonized, a subject who has a “natural” (Sparrow’s word) need for dependency. She finds it regrettable that Laurence accepts the Mannoni version uncritically, saying that Laurence uses it to characterize her difficult relationship with Abdi, the subject of “The Old Warrior” chapter, and concludes that such an explanation of Abdi’s place “does not

seem just to the man she had earlier described as ‘courage and pride and anger writ large’” (32).

I find Sparrow’s reading in this instance to be of the “diving deep and surfacing” kind, predicated perhaps on the assumption that Laurence, writing before the whole postcolonial awareness of our own time, must, because she uses Mannoni, subscribe to his essentialist views. Reading more broadly across the surface of the text, we can find that Laurence does not use the Mannoni material in her analysis of Abdi or any Somalian, but rather in the chapter called “The Imperialists,” in which she explores the British and Italian colonizers. The two quotations she uses from Mannoni are both concerned with the Prospero-type illusions of Europeans and she uses Monnoni’s theory to analyze the colonizer: “Whether it is Ariel or Caliban who is chosen to populate Prospero’s world, there is no basic difference, for both are equally unreal” (228). Laurence’s critique is a very interesting “creolization” of *The Tempest* in that she locates the play in terms of Prospero’s colonizer’s subjectivity. She refuses to accept Ariel and Caliban as actual representations of human beings, but rather suggests, as indeed the end of Shakespeare’s play does, that Ariel and Caliban *et al.* are Prospero’s illusionary magic. In this way Laurence suggests a postcolonial emphasis on the idea that the colonizing mind reifies the other. Shakespeare’s old man, in Laurence’s postcolonial reading of the play, is the example par excellence of the colonizing subject. She uses her literary and theoretical acumen, her ability as a reader, not only to expose the colonizer, but also to realize the colonizer in herself. She concludes her analysis of “The Imperialists” with these insights:

This was something of an irony for me, to have started out in righteous disapproval of the empire-builders, and to have been forced at last to recognize that I, too, had been of that company. For we had all been imperialists, in a sense, but the empire we unknowingly sought was that of Prester John, a mythical kingdom and a private world. (228)

Then she goes on to chart her own progress out of the colonial mindset:

Yet something of the real world did impinge upon our consciousness, and portions of the secret empire of the heart had

to be discarded, one by one. In the Haud people died of thirst, people as actual as ourselves and with as much will to live. The magic potion of a five-grain aspirin very quickly proved inadequate, and the game of healer had to be abandoned. The unreal relationship with Abdi as a faithful retainer was shattered by the reality of him as a man—a man with outlooks far different from our own, but valid for him . . . How many other things there may have been which we perceived not as they were but as we wanted them to be—this we have no means of knowing. . .

She then suggests how different the reality of Africans may be and how important it is that Europeans take their oppressive desires back into their own psyches:

To Africans, their land has never been “the Africa of the Victorian atlas,” and they will not willingly allow it to be so to us now, either. Those who cannot bring themselves to relinquish the desert islands, the separate worlds fashioned to their own pattern and inhabited by creatures of their own design, must seek them elsewhere now, for they are no longer to be found in Africa. (228–229)

I would be doing Laurence’s critical intelligence a disservice if I called this a postcolonial view ahead of its time. I would rather say that, as usual, the critical community is well behind Laurence. With the writing of *The Prophet’s Camel Bell* in the early 1960s, and with her experience in Africa and the creative writing that emerged from that experience as part of her critical judgment, one should expect an intelligence of Laurence’s calibre to be able to speak from a “postcolonial” insight, even though that word was not yet current in critical vocabularies. It is only when we approach her texts with the belief that our own historical moment is somehow ahead of her that we make such errors. She is proof of a phenomenon that Diana Bryden and Helen Tiffin observe in *Decolonizing Fictions*: “In Postcolonial countries the most prominent theoreticians have always been the creative writers, particularly where, as in the Caribbean and in Canada, they have deliberately transgressed the boundaries between the discourses of the ‘literary’ and the theoretical critical” (146).

Laurence is not a name that comes up very often in the flurry of recent texts that begin to establish the broad creolized field of interest of postcolonial theory. I would like to propose

that in *The Prophet's Camel Bell* and *Dance on the Earth* Laurence offers us an important example of a creative writer who has "transgressed the boundaries between the discourse of the 'literary' and the theoretical critical." And while the earlier text begins to construct postcolonial subjectivity for white critics, I would like to recommend the latter as a most important transgressive book of recent years. While I do not want to discourage feminist critics in Canada from honouring the contemporary work of Daphne Marlatt, who transgresses boundaries in bringing etymologized ideology to her poetry, or from praising Marlene Nourbese-Philip's language experiments in her collages of theory, essay, and poetry, or from exploring Aritha van Herk's fictocritical practice, I would offer those same critics a caution: there are many ways to have one's energies reappropriated to patriarchal purposes. One of those ways is to ignore our literary mothers and claim an unwarranted originality for the contemporary generation of writers. If feminist critics interested in the texts being written by all kinds of women in Canada are not to fall victim to the pandemic condition of Canadian literature, the belief that our communities and our literatures begin with the current generation, they had better start learning to read their mothers. In this spirit I recommend Laurence's life writing as worthy of attention.

For a critical start on this mother/daughter project, let me begin once more with Donaldson's *Decolonizing Feminisms*, in which she describes the Miranda complex of present-day feminism. Miranda is the only girl in *The Tempest*. I say girl because there are no women, certainly no mothers who have honoured places on Prospero's ideal desert island, the play that grounds the colonial (and increasingly the postcolonial) worldview. Miranda turns away from Caliban because of his sexual threat (or following Laurence's reading, the *illusion* of Caliban's sexual threat taught Miranda by her father's magic). Donaldson poses Miranda as the figure who "aligns herself with the benefits and protection offered by the colonizing father and husband" (17). She sees many present-day feminist readers as having a Miranda "complex," which "raises in a profoundly acute way the questions of sex and race and how feminists 'read,' or fail to read, their imbrication [by patriarchal reading assumptions] in theorizing women's lives" (1).

I would like to expand Donaldson's brief exploration of the Miranda complex to make it part of my own critical practice. One of the ways we can be Mirandas is to accept the traditional view that autobiographical writing is always adjunct to the major accomplishment of the writer, lacking a sufficient distance from the personal or perhaps lacking sufficient use of literary trope to be examined as literature. That is what you do if you are Miranda, the daughter of Prospero, unconsciously bound up in the values of the patriarchal tradition because you have been such a good student of the father. The other kind of Miranda is the wife of Ferdinand. In my formulation of the Miranda complex, she is the feminist critic who accepts uncritically the postmodern, deconstructionist truisms of the rebel sons of the patriarchy who pervasively assume that critical thinking and most creative writing before the contemporary moment are lost in a benighted essentialistic universe called liberal humanism, that genre blending is the answer to breaking the old moulds, and that we are the first generation to do it. This Miranda rushes around looking at the newly arrived fellows from Naples or Milan (or wherever the most recent set of male postmodern gurus are from) and writes a critical preface, uncritically aware of the ungendered nature of her assumptions (despite her feminist stances), one that basically reiterates the first Miranda's sentiment: "How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world/That has such people in't" (v.i. 184.5). When either Miranda reads women's texts, she is always subtly trying to show that these women are good because they do as well or better whatever men do in their texts.

Neither Miranda would think of theorizing her reading of a book such as Laurence's *Dance on the Earth*, since such a book lacks the currently approved postmodern markers that place a text in the category "literary." Yet *Dance on the Earth* is a book that is capable of promoting a decolonized, feminist critical practice in terms of a profound shift in "the conditions of reading for all texts." To illustrate how profound such a shift would be, let me return briefly to the Miranda of *The Tempest*. If Miranda, when watching the play within a play conjured up by her father to bless her marriage, should begin to ask questions about why the spirits of Iris, Ceres, Juno, and the Nymphs are presented to her as mere mouthpieces for pretty poetry in praise of her virginity; if she were

to ask questions about why such representatives of the all-powerful natural world could possibly be her father's servants; if she were to ask further why she herself has never come under the influence of any flesh-and-blood females, females with real stories in real worlds; and if by some miracle she began to connect the pretty female nature stereotypes of her father's play with the despised and cursed Sycorax (mother of Caliban, cursed by her own colonized son), then Miranda would become a decolonized, post-colonial, white, feminist, cultural critic. Quite a leap. Impossible perhaps.

Perhaps impossible even today. But Laurence realized in her time of dying that if we are ever to step outside the patriarchal limits in the plots and characterizations of human lives, we must do it by rediscovering our mothers, and we must find it in terms of a revolution of form. The key to how Laurence made this shift can be found if we carefully read what she says in *Dance on the Earth* about the difficulty of finding her form and content. She tells of her frustration with her writing process:

After hundreds of handwritten pages, I had got myself to the age of eighteen. I was bored. I knew what was going to happen next... I wanted to write more about my feelings about mothers and about my own life views. I finally realized that this could only be done by coming as close as I could bear to my own life, but in such a way that I could also deal with broader themes that interested me and absorbed me. (7)

Although Laurence's theorizing here may not be expressed in the explicit language of feminist theory, it is indeed an intentionally female-centred stance, and feminist in its implicit instinct that to gain a female narrative one must shift traditional fictional narrative patterns closer to autobiographical and biographical strategies. To say that you must come "as close as [your] own life" is to agree with Daphne Marlatt when she says of autobiographical strategies in writing that "women's lives have been so fictionalized that to present life as a reality is a strange thing. It's as strange as fiction. It's as new as fiction." Marlatt advises writing "directly out of your own life" (qtd. in Williamson 26). This is exactly what Laurence decided to do in her last book.

Her dissatisfaction with what she had produced using traditional writing strategies, familiar to her as a fiction writer, was so great that, according to Clara Thomas's testimony, she threw the notebooks that contained her work in the Lakefield garbage!³ This certainly speaks to the same concern with finding a form that leads away from the expression of stereotypical viewpoints, a concern that can be traced from her constant revision of her own viewpoints in *The Prophet's Camel Bell*, through her experiments with form in her novels, to this last memoir. Laurence's daughter Jocelyn, her collaborative editor, observes in her introduction to *Dance on the Earth* that her mother's formal innovation led to the foregrounding of the new content:

She conceived of a new structure, one in which she could not only incorporate the facts of her own life but also touch upon the lives of her three mothers, as she called them—her biological mother, her aunt, who became her stepmother, and her mother-in-law. This new approach allowed her momentary digressions, too, into the issues that most concerned her: nuclear disarmament, pollution and the environment, pro-choice abortion legislation. (xi)

This daughter's observation is a succinct statement of Laurence's important creative and theoretical apotheosis in her last book. She "conceived of a new structure" for her literary expression, one based on a construction of the plot of family relationships completely different from the Freudian "family romance" typical of our culture's texts: she liberated a plot that is repressed in all the plot structures of our literary tradition.

As Marianne Hirsch observes in *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, the figure of mother in relationship to daughter is "neglected by psychoanalytic theories and submerged in traditional plot structures" (3), which, if they feature women at all, feature them always in their relationships with men. She suggests that a whole new concept of human subjectivity may emerge if we explore in our creative writing and our critical practice the multiplicity of human interactions that are encompassed in "the mother/daughter plot." She suggests that "although it might be difficult to define, we might try to envision a culturally variable, mutually affirming form of interconnection between one body and

another, one person and another, existing as social, legal and psychological subjects" (197).

I claim that such a body of literature already does exist, but we must look beyond the perimeters of the novel that are Hirsch's purview, and beyond those creative discourses generally validated by the academy. We must look to women's texts that bring together a number of generic practices in an effort not only to ironize genre as in a postmodern gesture, but also to find new discourses for the positive expression of women's experience. We must look especially to memoirs. Laurence names her book "a memoir" in its subtitle. Lee Quinby, in her groundbreaking essay "The Subject of Memoirs" in *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*, sees memoirs as the form where radical change in cultural constitution of the human subject can take place: "This new form of subjectivity refuses the particular forms of selfhood, knowledge and artistry that the systems of power of the modern era . . . have made dominant" (298).

I propose that Laurence's *Dance on the Earth* belongs in this new use of the memoir form by women in postcolonial situations, texts from Australia such as Sally Morgan's *My Place* or Tanya Modjeski's *Poppy*, texts growing out of Pakistan and India such as Sara Sulari's *Meatless Days*, texts from women without a homeland such as Han Suyin's *The Crippled Tree*, and texts such as Maxine Hong Kingston's now paradigmatic *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*. An understanding of these women's experiments in the memoir form is needed to shift the conditions for our reading of these texts. The feature that especially needs attention is the way memoirs both make use of and negate accepted generic practices so that the human subject escapes the oppression of genre. Therefore, memoirs' discourse seeks a contract with the reader in which the reader is actively involved in the construction of the subjectivity of the text. The advantage of the memoir form lies in its ability to break the barriers between the public and private, to undo the truth/fiction dichotomy of literary generic classification (novels are fiction, autobiographies are fact) by a process of writing on the boundaries between fiction and autobiography. Another advantage is found in the ability of the form to make the political personal and the personal theoretical. The memoir form,

when functioning not in its traditional place as a subgenre of autobiography, but as a feminist material practice, can play an enabling role in allowing us to refuse the repression of the special features of female subjectivity that occur in generic contracts shaped for and by men. A memoir, though one of the oldest practices in English, is also what Caren Kaplan calls an “outlaw genre,” capable of producing “transnational feminist subjects” (115). Laurence’s decision to use the memoir form in this innovative way is not only her isolated decision, albeit one made by a writer who was never content with easy answers to tough problems of form, but also part of what I see as a growing feature of women’s postcolonial discursive practice.

Let two examples suffice to suggest the trend I am speaking of. In her book *Wild Mother Dancing*, Di Brandt explores the work of several Canadian women novelists and poets seeking the reintroduction of maternal narratives long suppressed in the master narratives of the Western tradition. In her final chapter she moves out of the accepted cultural production of literary women and examines the oral childbirth narratives of women of her own community, in order to illustrate the liberating possibilities of such personal cultural expression. Interestingly, an earlier chapter in Brandt’s text deals with what she calls the “amazing comeback” of the mother in Laurence’s *The Stone Angel* and *The Diviners*. For the fullest and most amazing comeback of the mother in Laurence’s work, we must look to *Dance on the Earth*, where the liberating possibilities of memoirs offer Laurence a form that shares much with the oral narratives Brandt explores. In fact, Laurence’s memoirs are oral in that, as Thomas has pointed out, some of the revisionary work on the manuscript was accomplished through using a tape recorder because Laurence was no longer strong enough to type. As Jocelyn Laurence observes, much of this book is “literally written in her voice . . . the way in which she spoke, the rhythms and idiosyncrasies of phrasing, the choices of language and emphasis, are integral not only to the book but to the actual process of writing it” (xiv).

Both the birthing stories investigated by Brandt and the more consciously crafted stories of *Dance on the Earth* share features with what Kaplan calls the “outlaw genre” of testimonies,⁴ a

literature of “resistance” that “usually takes the form of first-person narrative elicited or transcribed and edited by another person” (Kaplan 122). Whereas I would not compare Laurence’s privileged class and national position to third-world women fighting in political decolonization efforts in Latin America and other locations (nor would I compare this professional writer’s relationship to her daughter-editor to that of subject and transcriber), I would compare the advantages of the form for both kinds of women, its oral component and the interrelationship of writing, transcription, and editing as enabling processes. In both the *testimonio* and this particular orally informed memoir, the female writing act is able to bring the political and personal together as part of the same discourse in a way that constructs the individual agency of a female person in terms of her representative status as a member of an oppressed group. Who is the oppressed group represented by seemingly so unoppressed a writer as Laurence? It is my strong conviction that the oppressed group is mothers, whose stories are repressed in our culture. The memoir form can help women avoid the binary oppositions of male liberal humanist and postmodern constructions of subjectivity. The form does not bend the writer toward a heroic individuality as does classic realism, does not privilege the artist as originator as does modernism, and does not further disempower her as woman by insisting on the postmodern emphasis on the interpellated subject, governed by the indeterminacy and haphazardness of its construction.

One last example serves to illustrate that this trend is happening in critical writing by feminists as well as in creative writing (the memoir being a site where critical and creative writing blend). A group of women postcolonial critics, aware of their own places as women in situations of creolization, have written a book called *Unbecoming Daughters of the Empire* (Chew and Rutherford). In the introduction they explain that the book came from their instinctive sharing of personal experiences during an evening together after a day spent at a conference on postcolonial literature in 1990. I find it telling that these women found the sharing of their personal differences and similarities as daughters of the empire at least as important as the proper conference papers on postcolonialism. Indeed, they found it important enough to make a book, a book that is, in fact, a series of critical memoirs, very

informed, scholarly, intelligently theorized, but very carefully documented and integrated with the personal experiences of these women. As Kaplan has pointed out concerning testimonial literature, "our responsibility as critics lies in opening the categories so that the process of collaboration extends to reception" (125).

Just as the "unbecoming daughters" realized a new critical discourse through memoirs and their collaborative efforts to understand their postcolonial places as women, so we may, with careful readings of texts like *Dance on the Earth*, begin our own deconstruction of our imbrication in patriarchal discourses, decolonize ourselves, and prepare ourselves to shift "the conditions of reading for all texts." If we start with a writer like Laurence, a subjectivity close to ours because she is born of our culture, our place, our white race, perhaps we will be able to honour not only the postcolonial texts that are privileged in the sense that the writers have achieved a class and literary status as "writers" that in many ways makes them exceptions to colonial conditions, but also be able to hear the voices of the silenced women who suffer from doubled and tripled oppressions of race, gender, and class. This is a very necessary task since patriarchy, in its colonial expressions, often forces women to say to other women, as Laurence had to in Somalia, "I have nothing for you. Nothing." If, as white, feminist, literary critics we work to develop the strategies of reading I have advocated here, we will neither neglect the women writers of our own tradition because they seem old-fashioned by current literary style, nor feel helpless to read the texts of women in other colonial and postcolonial situations because of our fear of appropriation of voice. We will not have to say "I have nothing for you. Nothing," because we will have successfully shifted "the conditions of reading for all texts" as Margaret Laurence shifted the conditions of writing a woman writer's life in her memoirs.

NOTES

1. The Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women presented "Recommendations to the Government of Canada on Female Genital Mutilation" in March 1994, pointing out that although Sweden, Norway,

the United Kingdom, France, and several states in the United States have passed legislations or announced policy responses on female genital mutilation, Canada has not.

2. See my *Mother and Daughter Relationships in the Manawaka Works of Margaret Laurence*.

3. Thomas wrote of her dismay when "with the smile we always called her 'Cheshire Cat Smile,' [Laurence said] 'Yesterday I put nine black-covered scribblers, the manuscript of *Dance on the Earth* in the Lakefield garbage.'"

4. See Doris Sommers's work on *testimonios*.

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Margaret Laurence and the City

W.H. NEW

ONE OF THE ESSAYS COLLECTED in *Heart of a Stranger* opens with this carefully paced anecdote:

A small but poignant joke, of which I am bizarrely fond, concerns a gentleman who was struck by a motor vehicle at the corner of Bloor and Yonge in the city of Toronto. Dazed, bruised, and bleeding, but still conscious, he crawled to the sidewalk, where a young man was standing. "Quick!" gasped the injured man. "Call me a taxi!" The youth looked down and shrugged. "So okay," he said, "you're a taxi." (172)

Margaret Laurence uses the anecdote to comment both on "contemporary urban life" and on her own identification with the cabs and cabbies of the world, the degree to which she collects stories, as they have collected "fares," in Vancouver, Cairo, Athens, Inverness, Toronto, New York, and Winnipeg. It is a striking list—which is not so much a comment on driving practice as a reflection on differences between narrative and critical preoccupations.

Criticism has focussed almost exclusively on villages and small towns as Laurence's characteristic fictional landscapes. Africa and Manawaka figure large, as, of course, they should—insofar as these conceptual landscapes affect everything Laurence wrote. In answer to the woman who once sent her a chastising letter, saying, "You really are getting mileage out of MANAWAKA!!,"

Laurence asserted, "well, tough beans, lady, it's *my* town..." (*Heart* 182). Manawaka exists, she added, in the mind and on the page, not in geography books—and in another context, she further remarked, "Nature imagery comes easily to me whereas urban imagery does not, largely because I am a small town person, not a city person. I really don't feel at ease in cities at all" (Fabre 22). But the stories that tell of small-town Canada and village Africa are not divorced from social history. Small towns may, Laurence reflected in "Down East," "turn out to be to our culture what the possession of manuscripts in monasteries was to mediaeval Europe during the dark ages... [for] it is really only in communities such as these that the individual is known, assessed, valued, seen, and can breathe without battling for air. They may not be our past so much as our future, if we have one" (*Heart* 164). Towns and villages, that is, are not unconnected to urban settings and events, either in fiction or in life, and however "ill-at-ease" she found herself in them, cities appear repeatedly in Laurence's work. How they function in fiction, however, does not uniformly depend on how they function as centres of population density and economic influence. As far as Laurence's writing is concerned, they are variously signs of power, signs of social alternatives, the external confirmation of the difference between physical desire and spiritual grace, and embodiments of energy and imperfection, aspiration and decay.

The more than two-dozen cities Laurence mentions range from the "faraway city called Bethlehem" in *The Christmas Birthday Story* (the New Testament, paradoxically, refers to Nazareth as a *city* but Bethlehem as a *village*) to the bullet-ridden Detroit in which Joe Bass dies, as recounted in *Heart of a Stranger*. They include London (*Dance* 157; *Diviners* 293) and Lagos (*Drums* 150), Calgary (*Dance* 47) and Corinth (*Jest* 36), Rotterdam (*Prophet* 9), Rome (*Jason* 9; *Prophet* 174; *Fire* 126), Jerusalem (*Jest* 42; *Diviners* 221), and Jericho (*Jordan* 248). Winnipeg, Toronto, and Vancouver recur most often. (Other mentions include Montreal [*Jest* 146; *Tomorrow* 29; *Bird* 193; *Diviners* 248], Mexico City [*Tomorrow* 29], Chicago [*Tomorrow* 29], Cairo [*Prophet* 12], Genoa [*Tomorrow* 37], Djibouti [*Prophet* 111], Philadelphia [*Tomorrow* 52], Paris [*Prophet* 119, 174], Peterborough [*Heart* 162], Oxford [*Jordan* 38], Ottawa [*Diviners* 373], Victoria [*Dance* 109], Accra [*Jordan* 2; *Dance* 52],

Bombay [*Prophet* 10], Hong Kong [*Heart* 172], Addis Ababa [*Prophet* 113], Calcutta [*Diviners* 176], Inverness [*Diviners* 313], and Mecca [*Heart* 125; *Prophet* 31; *Tree* 37].) But cities, referred to in a more general sense, often unnamed or unspecified, can also directly establish the complex set of moral tensions that Laurence's fiction repeatedly addresses.

One of Laurence's children's works furnishes the pattern. *Six Darn Cows* tells of the Bean family and its close relationships, and of the two children, who leave the farm gate open and have to pursue the cows who get lost in the dark woods. Almost at the end of the story appear these three sentences: "Dan Bean, the kids' dad, was now home, too. He worked two days a week in town fixing TV sets to make some extra money. On the other days, he worked on the farm with everybody else" (n.p.). It would be easy to make too much of this observation, to transform it from a declaration of family responsibility into a sign of the fragility of the agrarian dream in the face of corporate-controlled passivity or the urban lifestyle. This contrast between agrarian and urban possibilities, nevertheless—or between *home* and *away*, family and money—runs throughout Laurence's work, from her early African stories to her posthumously published family memoir. Godman, in "Godman's Master," for instance, heads to the city to find work ("That is what men do—they work"), only to find out that the new and "unknown place" is "frightening" without a friend ("So many people, and the noise, and those high buildings" [*Tomorrow* 147–148]). For its part, *Dance on the Earth* alludes everywhere to cities: as places where friends live, but also as transit points, places of minimal touchdown on the way to somewhere else, ultimately the town of Lakefield, where Laurence lived during her last years: "We flew first to London," she writes of her return from Africa to Canada, "stopping over with Adele Wiseman, who was living there. Then a flight to Montreal, where we also stayed for a day with friends, and another flight to Vancouver. My childhood friend Mona met us at the Vancouver airport and a few days later took us to catch the small plane to Victoria. Aunt Ruby met us there" (113). Family and friendships constitute a support system, a way of coping with contemporary fashion and modern technology (which in 1984 she would say was "still largely male-dominated") on the way to finding "human wisdom, compassion,

common sense and conscience . . . values [that] seem to be at risk in the face of the ubiquitous machines" (229).

It is this contrast that makes the resolution to another children's book, *Jason's Quest*, so enigmatic. The title character, a mole, an ordinary young citizen of the underground city of Molanium, goes on a gallant quest to find a cure for what ails his community. Along the way he finds adventure, danger, friendship, love, and an animated cure for the city's disease (which turns out to be boredom); in the process he turns from an ordinary citizen who believes himself to be fearful and inconsequential into an ordinary citizen who is stalwart, brave, and true. As a didactic parable, this story follows conventional lines. But a further cast is given the narrative by its recurrent allusion to imperial models. Molanium is designed on a parallel with Londinium, the fortress of the Roman Empire and later the seat of the British, and it is to London, or what the moles think of as Londinium still, and refer to as "*Thither*" (4), that Jason must go for his solution. "The molefolk thought they had everything nicely settled, once and for all. But they didn't," Jason realizes, after he does battle with the new London's underground ruler, the Great Rat (190), and realizes that to survive he has had to depend on his new friends, urban animals who speak with a variety of Commonwealth accents. Although it is clear that Molanium's desire not to change is part of its current problem, the patterns of change that Jason takes back home do not fundamentally alter the city's desire for power. Molanium will change its name to Moleville, elect a mayor instead of a Venerable Leader, and subsequently acquire a railway, a museum, explorers, tourists, a mole equivalent of the Olympic Games, airmail, a nightclub, and Moles in Space, all the accoutrements of twentieth-century American civilization. Perdita, Jason's new-found love, moreover, is presented with a walkie-talkie so that she can keep in touch with her London friends on weekends. Although these changes are announced as solutions to the city's "invisible sickness" (210), they at the same time reinscribe the lineaments of Empire. Friendship might be the force that keeps the community productive and free, but the city itself—Jason's city—remains in many respects a counterforce, the medium in which decay and authority compete for people's allegiance, and sometimes get it.

That the nightclub is an emblematic sign of city life is clear from Laurence's African writings as well. Her comments on Cyprian Ekwensi's novel *People of the City* focus on a character named Sango, who "is sacked from The All Language Club, because he has been playing election music for the opposite party to the one the club's owner supports. The city begins to devour him, as it has devoured so many" (*Drums* 150). Further, Ekwensi's style, Laurence notes, catches "the tone of the city dweller's speech with its jazziness like highlife music" (*Drums* 199). The appeal of urban music in Laurence's work is in part an appeal to independence. In "The Drummer of All the World," Matthew returns to Africa after his English education to find that Africa has changed: new political slogans are in the air, a nightclub is called "Weekend in Wyoming," the mammy-lorries declare such slogans as "Authority Is Never Loved," highlife bands are called "The Majestic Atoms" and "Scorpion Ansah and His Jet Boys"—it is a world in which Matthew finds himself rootless and from which he is now estranged. Adamo, too, in "The Voices of Adamo," is torn between conventions, his dilemma epitomized when he hears "the families of frogs in the nearby lagoon" over "the clash and clatter of the city's cars and voices" (*Tomorrow* 221). Relatedly, Emmanuel, in "The Tomorrow-Tamer," tells Kofi that when he finishes with the bridge he will go "Back to the city. First I'll have a good time. Everything a man does in the city, I'll do it—hear me?' ... Kofi was amazed. 'You do not know where you will go?' 'I'll find out,' Emmanuel said easily. 'What about you, bush boy?'" (*Tomorrow* 100–101).

But such independence carries a price. For Arabetto, in *The Prophet's Camel Bell*, it seems the price is not too high; fascinated by modern films and quick, syncopated rhythms, he

was what the Somalis called *nin magala-di*, a man of the town ... [He] did not appear to miss the tribal affiliations, or to need them. He neither gave advice nor asked for it. He went his own way ... Not surprisingly, he was more politically minded than the others appeared to be ... The goal [of independence] seemed impossible to me, considering the limited number of educated leaders. To him, it seemed not only possible but inevitable, a foregone conclusion ...

*Hurry, hurry,
Fly like a bird—*

The others in camp were scornful of Arabetto's music, but he paid no attention to their sarcasm. He would take his gramophone to the edge of the camp and sit there, cranking it and playing this one song over and over, clapping his hands to the rhythm, humming the tune. (175-177)

For other figures, however, the city's music is a more dire temptation.

This Side Jordan demonstrates the distinction. It opens with the Fire Highlife playing "with a beat urgent as love" (1). Johnnie Kestoe, who does not like Africans, is dancing with an African woman who is mocking him, and others around them are variously angry and concerned. "Music," says the text,

was the clothing of West African highlife, but rhythm its blood and bone. . .

The dancers themselves did not analyse the highlife any more than they analysed the force that had brought them all together here, to a nightclub called "Weekend In Wyoming". . .

They were bound together, nevertheless, by the music and their need of it. . . But the ancient drums could no longer summon the people who danced here. The highlife was their music. For they, too, were modern. They, too, were new. (1-2)

The novel examines the lives of several persons caught up in the larger social dances of sex, race, and power, but particularly it focusses on two: Kestoe, trained in the "gutterstreet" (4) of his London childhood to the hierarchy constructed by prejudice and violence (the only interesting thing he finds in the Tower of London is, emblematically, a massive suit of armour), and Nathaniel Amegbe, "born far inland in the forests of Ashanti," who for six years has made "this decaying suburb of Accra. . . almost his own" (44). The novel gives support roles to the women closest to each of these men, but neither gentility nor gentleness can immediately counter the force of city highlife. Kestoe wants to control the city, and seeks an African prostitute to prove his power, even "savagely" (233); Nathaniel wants to stay true to his inland ideals, but

finds that wealth and influence, the staples of urban commerce, inevitably compromise his life.

The novel moves ahead along these intersecting and diverging lines. As the city becomes more “familiar” (86) to Johnnie, so it becomes more devastating for Nathaniel. His old uncle tells him, “You have forgotten your own land. You live in the city of strangers, and your god is the god of strangers, and strange speech is in your mouth, and you have no home” (104). This moral admonition chastises him severely, but when the words come back to him later, they have acquired another, more political resonance. Once, he thinks, there was

Only sweat and the forest, and at night songs and love. That was Eden, a long time ago . . .

—But something said—GO . . . Something said—don’t stay here . . . Something said—a man got to live until he dies, and that’s a long time, Nathaniel, a long time to wonder what he might have done if he’d tried.

—So now you’re finding out. The city of strangers is your city, and the God of conquerors is your God, and strange speech is in your mouth, and you have no home.

“Where shall I go, where shall I go,

Seeking a refuge for my soul?”

It was a song he had heard in this city that was now his city. But he could not remember the answer, or even if there were an answer. (167–168)

Nathaniel subsequently succumbs to the temptation of bribery (“I am the City, boy. Come and dance.” [195]), even though the voices of his past tell him that the dance can be dangerous, not necessarily his own, and that his ancestors had once been chained on the slaving ships and “Hauled to the deck and made to dance” (210). Johnnie, full of self-loathing, punishes him for his ambition and for seeming to be weak. Invoking the traditional African identification of place with time, Nathaniel then knows that the city “isn’t my home, this city of new ways, this tomorrow” (227), but even as he realizes his rural naïveté, “Spider Badu’s band still beat out the highlife” (228). Only with the birth of his son Joshua is

there any promise of change—a promise of a generation that will know how to make the city its own (281)—but this declaration sounds as much like Nathaniel’s wishful thinking as it does political prediction. The claim on the future is still not separate from the hold of the past.

This motif permeates Laurence’s “Canadian” texts as well. Hagar Shipley in *The Stone Angel*, like Stacey MacAindra in *The Fire-Dwellers*, always carries her past with her; both have left Manawaka for Vancouver, but not left Manawaka behind, and both try in vain to flee the city northwards, into less inhabited territory up Howe Sound, before they can come to terms with what their lives have become, and may yet be. Hagar takes Manawaka into her son Marvin’s suburban home and then into the multicultural hospital in Vancouver, where she dies. Suburbia is anathema to Hagar, but the hospital is a final test of her ability to accept life and deal with change. For, to the small-town communities who have shaped her mindset, the hospital is one of the most resonant signs of city life or city necessity—it is perceived as a force of external, institutional authority and also as the suspect hand of an interfering technology. The same is true for the characters in *A Jest of God*. Stacey in Vancouver, thinks her sister Rachel Cameron, has had all four of her children “born in hospital and in wedlock, as the saying goes” (*Jest* 168). Yet for Rachel the hospital in the city (in her case, Winnipeg) measures the past as much as it facilitates the future; it is to the Winnipeg hospital she must go for the surgical removal of her tumour—but as far as the town of Manawaka is concerned, going away for hospital treatment is tantamount to admitting to an abortion (“So that is what is being said. ‘You can imagine why she went into the city—that’s why she has to leave, now, afraid it’ll get to be known—No, it wasn’t that way at all—she didn’t go into the city for that—I heard she went into hospital there because she’d tried to do it herself and it went wrong. Who could he have been, though?’” [200]). Gossip has its own life in the “community” of the small town, its reality superseding any other, which is why Rachel herself also ultimately leaves for Vancouver, locating in the city at least “a change . . . evolution” (201), to take the place of the repetitive, sectarian service that has thwarted her, and the stasis of empty desire.

For, as with Nathaniel Amegbe, the city is imagined as the site of change for Rachel. Her summer lover Nick has been teaching elsewhere—in *the city*, Rachel ascertains: “I oughtn’t to have said *the city*,” she thinks after saying these words aloud; “As though I believed it were the only one anywhere. Why didn’t I say Winnipeg?” (62), and yet she repeats the phrase “in the city” when justifying to her mother her date with Nick. Saying the word *city* is a charm, an invocation of difference and even danger, of imagined classiness, though certainly not always of respectability. In *A Bird in the House*, Vanessa MacLeod’s classy first boyfriend, the airman Michael, for example, already has a wife, who comes from Vancouver on a surprise visit that reaffirms the power of institution over fantasy (it is one of several revelations that permit Vanessa to realize that there are greater wildernesses than those of Manawaka). When Brooke Skelton offers Morag Gunn the chance to move to Toronto, she thinks: “Would she like Toronto? Would she like Paradise? With Brooke, and away from the prairies entirely” (*Diviners* 163), only to realize much later that the fantasy city is unreal and “You have to go home again, in some way or other” (248), making it your own. Rachel Cameron dreams through the children’s rhyme of being “*queen of the golden city*” (*Jest* 1), and even though she can see past the surfaces of other people’s illusions (the inadequacy of eighty-year-old Tom Gillanders when he sings a solo of “Jerusalem the Golden” [42]), she has to live through her own illumination before she can move on. Piquette Tonnerre, too, reaches for what the Manawaka townspeople call respectability, when she says she is going to marry a blond “English fella” named Al who works “in the stockyards in the city” (*Bird* 124), and she also, with what Vanessa later realizes is “a terrifying hope” (124), lays claim to city sophistication when she tells Vanessa that she has “Been all over the place—Winnipeg, Regina, Saskatoon” (123).

But in neither case does the charm work for Piquette as it sometimes does for other Manawaka characters. Nick Kazlick’s sister Julie, for one, “took off . . . re-married and went to Montreal” (*Jest* 146), apparently without further consequence, for she disappears from the narrative with that information, until she turns up again in *The Diviners*, in North Vancouver, about to divorce Buckle Fenwick (whose story is told in *The Fire-Dwellers*), and still about to remarry and go to Montreal. Another character, Vanessa MacLeod’s

Aunt Edna in *A Bird in the House*, chooses to honeymoon in Montreal rather than in Winnipeg, having come to equate Winnipeg only with her first, unhappy, unsuccessful attempt at love, work, and breaking away. For Edna, Winnipeg is at once too far away in distance to make commuting to work from Manawaka possible, and too close in time to make the past disappear. For some in the next generation, however—or Vanessa (or for Morag Gunn in *The Diviners*)—going to university in Winnipeg is a different kind of route away; though the language they hone outside the town constitutes the medium that returns them to the voices of the past, the “Manawaka” they both create in the books they ostensibly write is a construction that frees them into the future, not one that chains them to the authoritarian rule of institutional marriage, closed family doors, and patriarchal history.

The most sustained analysis of city living in Laurence’s writings occurs in *The Fire-Dwellers*, where Stacey MacAindra is torn between different kinds of desire: for freedom, for sex, for support, for recognition, for love, for security, and for some sense of fulfilment and self-esteem. Those around her seem only to exacerbate her condition. Her four children grow away from her, and she cannot live their fears for them. Her salesman husband Mac cannot express his feelings without fearing he is losing his masculinity as he does so. One potential lover, Buckle Fennick, is self-absorbed, and wants only an audience; the other, Luke Venturi, significantly younger than she is, wants mainly to live for the moment and protest the past. Her husband’s boss Thor Thorlakson displays and pretends to exert power, but it is tissue-thin, for he fears that Stacey will recognize him for who he really is: he is Vernon Winkler from Manawaka, who has concocted the godlike identity Thor as a kind of costume, worn flamboyantly to hide what he construes as the shame of a Manawaka past. Artifice surrounds her in plastic and in pills as well as in the language of advertising and the behaviour of people. She lives on Bluejay Crescent; she drinks coffee with her neighbour and gets her hair done; she copes with the clichés of office parties. And this artifice she has come to associate with suburbia.

The suburb depicted reads something like a cross between Dunbar and the North Shore: the suburbs where Laurence lived

during her years in Vancouver. ("Dunbar" is on the southwest side of the city, next to what was then called the University Endowment Lands and is now called Pacific Spirit Park; "the North Shore" occupies the lower mountain slopes north of Burrard Inlet, across the harbour from the "Downtown" city centre.) Laurence was living in Dunbar when writing the stories of *The Tomorrow-Tamer*. I do not wish to suggest an equation between author and character here, nor between real and fictional settings, except to say that there is not so much a difference between the two Vancouver suburbs (Dunbar and the North Shore) as between suburb and city centre (Dunbar and downtown), and that *The Fire-Dwellers* makes much of a parallel contrast. In *The Diviners* (208–209), Morag Gunn dismisses the empty "Self-dramatization" of the Toronto apartment name Crestwood Towers—Laurence no doubt quietly alluding here to John Seeley's 1956 book *Crestwood Heights*, a semi-fictionalized sociological account of life in the postwar planned communities of Central Canada. (Seeley refers to both the "physical entity" and the "psychological fact" [4] of life in suburbs outside what he calls "Big City"—sociological fabrications based on Don Mills and Toronto.) A street name such as Bluejay Crescent in *The Fire-Dwellers* invites a similar reaction, except that *The Fire-Dwellers* ultimately refuses to condescend toward suburbia. Yes, the name is an illusion, an aspiration of a sort—which the novel's bird and flight images both reinforce and undercut: the *ladybird* allusion in the title is a reminder of suburban uncertainties, whatever the desire for peace. Thor Thorlakson is imaged as a "bat-winged Mephistopheles" (44); Mac is a driver in "a winged chariot" (20), unlike Buckle, who treats driving as a kind of rape (154; cf. the "wham" of urban traffic, 157); Stacey's son Duncan learns that "God loves birds" at Sunday School (70), an absolute he vaguely distrusts; Stacey herself hears the "pierce of water birds" when she first tries to escape the city (171), but she somehow also knows that escape is another kind of illusion, for she also sees that there are "gulls . . . at the city's rim" (260).

More devastatingly, at the heart of the downtown of "this city, jewel of the Pacific Northwest," Stacey recognizes that an economic underclass lives with more abrupt realities:

The pigeons are shitting all over the granite cenotaph. . . . Along the steps at the base, three old men sit in the feeble sunlight,

coughing and spitting, clenching their arms across their skinny chests, murmuring something to one another, memories, perhaps, or curses against now. . .

In the lobby of the Princess Regal Hotel, some yawning yellow-toothed fishwife, fleshwife, sagging guttily in a print dress sad with poppies, is sweeping up last night—heel-squashed cigarette butts, Kleenex blown into or bawled into, and ashes. Old men are sitting there, too, sitting in the red plastic-covered chairs, waiting for the beer parlor to open, so somebody can stand them a drink and they can accept haughtily, their scorn some kind of sop to their pride.

—What is it like, really? How would I know? . . . All I know is what I read in the papers. (6–7)

These images convince her of her distance from the city; but over the course of the novel she has to come to terms with her *connections*. Another ex-Manawaka resident, Valentine Tonnerre, now working the downtown streets, pierces one of the illusions, identifying Vernon Winkler for her; this recognition concretely reminds Stacey of Manawaka's participation in the social charade. Money and class consciousness continue to intrude onto opportunity, and to determine exclusion and exclusivity. The violence of the Vietnam War, played out in television fire daily in suburban living rooms, intensifies further the sense of disparity between experience and image, but suicide and immolation interrupt seemingly ordinary lives, and when Stacey's life, too, threatens to come apart, the difference between Dunbar and downtown looks to be not as great as suburban artifice conventionally desires. (Cf. Davidson 134: "Vancouver . . . does not function in Laurence's fiction simply as a Canadian Florida . . . [D]espite its mild climate and urban amenities, [it] has its dark underside"; and Thomas 188, who compares *The Fire-Dwellers's* Vancouver with a hellish Bosch canvas.) Yet as with all Laurence's works, the recognition of violence is never unalleviated by hope. Time provides a perspective, and *some while later* things change, at least for the central character—if she has seen enough, if she has learned to differentiate between what is wanted and what is due. In *The Fire-Dwellers*, Duncan learns how to construct acceptable distances (297); Jen, Stacey's "angel bud" (291) youngest child, learns to talk, and so,

metaphorically, both to blossom and to fly; and Stacey herself “feels the city receding as she slides into sleep” (308).

But the novel, of course, closes on a question, not on this apparent closure; “Will it return tomorrow?” the text asks in the rhetoric of uncertainty. In some ways it is an apocalyptic question, one that long preoccupied Laurence and that permeated the peace-writings of her later years. As early as *The Prophet’s Camel Bell*, she had asked this question, as in these comments in the chapter called “Place of Exile”:

Near Borama were the ruins of an ancient city, or perhaps several cities built on the same site. . .

Amoud was the name the Somalis had given it. The word means “sand,” and the name was apt, for the city had returned to the mountains and the desert. When it was alive, Amoud must have spread up the hillside, the brown-yellow houses mellow in the sunlight, among the stiff acacias and the candelabra trees. In the marketplace, the donkeys and camels would have been laden with the sacks of aromatic gums and ivory, the bundles of ostrich plumes, and would have set out for the coast, where the goods would be taken by dhow to Arabia. . .

But now, as we walked through it, Amoud had been dead a long time. . .

Looking at Amoud, and then at the nomads’ huts crouched at the bottom of the hills, I could not help thinking of the western world with its power and its glory, its sky-scrapers and its atom bombs, and wondering if these desert men would not after all survive longer than we did, and remain to seed the human race again, after our cities lay as dead as Amoud, the city of the sands. (101–103)

The prose style speaks of hypothesis and also of identification; fictions of the past and future jostle in the mind as alternatives to the experiential present, perhaps better, perhaps worse. In many ways the passage is a paradigm of the way Laurence constructed city settings throughout her writings, and of her reasons for doing so. As the embodiment of institutional power, the city falls away; as the embodiment of vitality, it promises a place in which to dwell. Recognition is all.

This distinction emphasizes yet again the principled fabric of Laurence's writing, and the relation between her fictional landscapes and her Protestant upbringing. As several commentators on American fiction have observed, the city can be (and has been) represented as a territory of knowledge to be struggled with (Williams; Caws); the embodiment of technological reach, action, and (sometimes gendered) economic independence (Bremer; Clarke; Jaye; Gelfant); an "unnatural" environment contrasted with a version of nature that is coded as female (Grace); a heavenly, static, Utopian, mythological positive space; a walled defence against the wilderness; and a real, hellish, constantly changing space of escapist guilt (Machor; Rosenthal; Pike). Other critics (Levy; Schorske; Howe) have commented on a related set of features attributed to European literary cities: industry, pleasure, vice, waste, shock, energy, chaos, violence, labyrinthine deviousness or uncertainty, and ethnic variation (that is, visible departures from a declared social uniformity); as Carl Schorske puts it, they express a felt loss of community decorousness and rural virtue, and codify an "Enlightenment dream gone wrong" (114).

Underlying these options, as Bernard Rosenthal makes clear (191), is the distinction Saint Augustine drew between the City of God and the City of Man. Augustine's *City of God* argues this distinction at length, defining two metaphoric alternatives in Christian theology by means of a series of overlapping, but not congruent, binaries:

the city of God—the city of Man

Jerusalem—Babylon

the heavenly New Jerusalem—Jerusalem in the present

the Holy Church—the Roman Empire

the saved—the damned

the promise of grace—the rule of law

citizenship in the Eternal City—worship in the cult of the theatre and the public temples (*City* 239)

everlasting good—temporality and civil authority (*City* 599)

freedom—servitude (*City* 597)

love of God—love of self (*City* 593)

the mind in control of the body—the body aroused to commit some wrongful act (*City* 605–606)

Abel—Cain (*City* 596)

agrarian idealism, represented as natural harmony—internal conflict, represented by litigation, war, battle, and the pursuit of victory that brings with it death (*City* 599)

Augustine drew his central image explicitly from the Psalms (*City* 429): “There is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God” (Psalm 46:4); “Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised in the city of our God, in the mountain of his holiness” (Psalm 48:1); “Glorious things are spoken of thee, O city of God” (Psalm 87:3).¹ The City of Man is the city of change and power, figured as the city that Cain built (Genesis 4:17) after his offering to God was rejected; the City of Man is named for Enoch and metaphorically occupied, therefore, by the children of Cain. The heavenly City of God, by contrast, is associated first with Cain’s brother Abel, and then with Seth (*City* 608), and is figured as agrarian and virtuous. In Augustine’s words:

Now Cain was the first son born to those two parents of mankind, and belonged to the city of man; the later son, Abel, belonged to the city of God . . . [I]n the individual man, to use the words of the Apostle [I Corinthians 5:46]: “it is not the spiritual element which comes first, but the animal; and afterwards comes the spiritual” . . . The same holds true of the whole human race. When those two cities started on their course through the succession of birth and death, the first to be born was a citizen of this world, and later appeared one who was a pilgrim and stranger in the world, belonging as he did to the City of God. He was predestined by grace, and chosen by grace, by grace a pilgrim below, and by grace a citizen above. (*City* 596)

Augustine goes on immediately to cite the passage from Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians (4:21–25) that identifies both the city of God and the city of Man as female; in this passage, Paul allegorically interprets Abraham’s relationship with two wives: “For this Agar is mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children. But Jerusalem which is above us is free, which is the mother of us all.” Augustine’s interpretive comment is that

we find in the earthly city a double significance: in one respect it displays its own presence, and in the other it serves by its presence to signify the Heavenly City. But the citizens of the earthly city are produced by a nature which is vitiated by sin, while the citizens of the Heavenly City are brought forth by grace, which sets nature free from sin. (*City* 598)

Accepting that “Identification of Sinai with Jerusalem/Zion is frequent in Jewish tradition” (Meeks 19), Agar thus relates to the covenant of law, Sarah to the covenant of grace.

Laurence’s work draws on this contrast—not, I suspect, with deliberate didactic intent (though the relevance of the Galatians passage to *The Stone Angel* is fairly explicit), but rather because the contrast was so familiar, because it so dominated the Christian teachings of her upbringing.² Divisions between mind and body, conflicts involving freedom and servitude, dissension with external authorities and dissatisfaction deriving from internal tensions: these are the abstract oppositions that her works often concretely represent in the split between country and city. The contrast is complicated, of course, by the numerous classical allusions that also appear in Laurence’s prose—for example, the recurrent reference to Agamemnon, king of Mycenae (*Heart* 19; *Fire* 4, 197), who sacrificed his daughter to appease the gods, and who is explicitly identified with Laurence’s grandfather Simpson in *Dance on the Earth*: “the Big House... was my grandfather’s stronghold and he ruled it like Agamemnon ruling Mycenae or Jehovah ruling the world” (63). The link between Agamemnon and Jehovah is both explicit and illuminating. For although not without qualities, Agamemnon is not heroic in Laurence’s world; Joshua is the figure who combats the walls of the city of Jericho in *This Side Jordan* (248) and the “brick battlements” that are the equivalent of the Simpson stronghold in *A Bird in the House* (173). Just as absolute power is never admirable in Laurence’s world, nor is institutional power that is granted even the illusion of unchallengeable right. But to broach the walls of the city/stronghold is to open the enclave to the possibilities of change.³ And yet it is the small town that Laurence said was the guarantee of the future. How does a reader respond to this apparent dichotomy? Is it the heavenly city or the earthly city that in Laurence’s work is being

challenged in this way—or are both being questioned, along with the binary mindset that creates the separation between them?

Luke Venturi in *The Fire-Dwellers* has written a science fiction manuscript he recounts to Stacey at one of their meetings. It is an apocalyptic tale, in which African administrators arrive in North America after a nuclear disaster, discovering a few survivors known as the greyfolk:

The educated greyfolk have developed the belief that their ancestral culture was harmonious, agrarian and ideal until the disaster, which some believe to have been an act of nature such as multitudinous volcanic eruptions and others believe to have been an outside attack by unnamed destroyers. [The Chief Administrator] Acquaaah's problem is whether to let them continue in these comforting beliefs or to tell them what really happened. In the end, they have to know, of course. Trouble is, I'm not sure what happens when they find out. (200)

For Laurence, the indeterminacy is what has to be accepted. Hence the agrarian ideal, the closed version of the heavenly city that constructs the civil city as evil, proves to be as problematic a design for living as is any urban surrender to amorality or hedonism. Toward the end of *This Side Jordan*, Nathaniel Amegbe resolves to stay in the city but to reject the despair that has threatened to destroy him, in these terms:

In my Father's house are many mansions. A certain Drummer dwells in the House of Nyankopon, in that City of Many Mansions. I know it now. It is there that he dwells, honoured, now and always. It may be that I shall never see him again. But let him dwell there in peace . . .

—I cannot have both gods and I cannot have neither. A man must belong somewhere . . .

—My God is the God of my own soul, and my own speech is in my mouth, and my home is here, here, here, my home is here at last. (274–275)

With echoes of the Gospel according to Saint John (14:2) combining with those of the American Black freedom movement, the novel commits itself to the causes of justice and independence. It also sets in motion the image of the city that Laurence's

subsequent work was both to develop and to sustain: an image of the city as a place that, however flawed, still permits over time a growing spiritual grace. The city functions, then, as both a social strategy and an ethical proposition, as an imagined map of proximate places and a working geography of moral convention.

NOTES

1. The Epistle to the Hebrews (13:14)—widely attributed to Saint Paul by the third century A.D. (though the Egyptian philosopher Origen, subsequently repudiated by the Church for treating scripture as allegory, questioned Pauline authorship at the time [*City* 455]; Augustine acknowledges that the attribution has been questioned [*City* 680])—adds: “For here [i.e., on earth] have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come.” (See also Revelation 3:12, which makes an architectural identification between person and place; “Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem.”)
2. See Dombrowski 54–58, and Hauge 126ff.
3. It may not be insignificant that it is the “daughter of the city,” in Genesis 24, who goes outside the wall to the well and who offers water to strangers. Surrounding villages on lands a city owned were also often referred to as the “daughters of the city” (McKenzie 140). Certainly it is highly significant that it is the “bird-boned, but well-endowed” snake-dancer Fan Brady in *The Diviners* (253) who offers Morag space and sustenance when she is a stranger to North Vancouver; of all Laurence’s characters, Fan Brady is the most urban, the most at home in the city, and probably the most openly secure about her sexuality; her occupation as snake-dancer, moreover, emphasizes her difference and her metaphoric distance from the early character Godman, in “Godman’s Master,” who ends up boxed in by circumstance, working as a sideshow exhibit for a troupe of “sleight-of-hand magicians” and snake-charmers (*Tomorrow* 156).

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The Figure of the Unknown Soldier: Home and War in *The Fire-Dwellers*¹

BIRK SPROXTON

IN THE FALL OF 1967, Margaret Laurence took time from the novel she was struggling with to write to Al Purdy. She describes her progress:

Thought I had discovered a sensational new narrative method the other evening—there was only one thing wrong with it; in practice, it proved to be unreadable. Thought of it in terms of the inner and outer going on simultaneously, side by side on the page—fine if you had a two-foot wide page and a reader with four eyes. (Lennox 57)

Eventually, she found a way to suggest the simultaneity of inner and outer events, and the work became *The Fire-Dwellers*, a novel that marks a change in narrative method from her earlier novels. In *The Fire-Dwellers*, she foregrounded the paragraph as a unit of composition,² and she accentuated linguistic play—the puns, portmanteau words, homophones, homonyms, rhyme, and other echoic devices usually associated with verse. The extended punning, a method of narrative doubling, carries over into her next novel. “To be or not to be,” we read in *The Diviners*, “—that sure as death is the question. The two-way battle in the mindfield, the minefield of the mind” (326). The “mindfield” portmanteau suggests the doubling and unfolding processes that make up *The Fire-Dwellers*.³ With its unusual paragraph construction, *The Fire-Dwellers*

presents itself as a novel of minding: we enter the mindfield of Stacey Cameron MacAindra, and we attend to the phonic play and interplay. We become aware of paragraph edges, of our eyes moving in toward mid-page, and then out again to another margin. Like the river in *The Diviners*, the narrative of *The Fire-Dwellers* moves both ways in time, and Laurence uses a mixed third-person and first-person narration to present Stacey MacAindra both from without and within. The text opens with a nursery rhyme, a “crazy rhyme,” says our narrator, and from there the narrative moves forward, always accompanied and enriched by recall and return.

Laurence’s mindfield pun suggests my theme: I take war to be the matrix of *The Fire-Dwellers* and a primary intertext of the Manawaka fiction. War haunts these novels, and Laurence draws much narrative power from its pervasive presence. Even as the figure of the unknown soldier refers literally (for Canadians) to distant places and events, it implicates the most intimate questions of the home place (body, gender, family, identity). The richness of the figure derives from its connections with the named and unnamed, the known and the unknown, the memorialized and the forgotten—the realm of the uncanny (*das Unheimlich*, literally, the unhomely home).⁴

The figure of the unknown soldier appears explicitly (at least) twice in the Manawaka fiction. In *The Stone Angel*, Hagar uses the expression at the time when she and her sons brood over the imminent death of Bram. In the course of an argument with John, Marvin refers to his having been seventeen at the time he went off to the First World War. Hagar overhears the squabble and realizes that she knows nothing about Marvin’s war experience. In a retrospective reflection, Hagar says how she wishes she could then have asked Marvin about the war. But she did not. “He wouldn’t have said anyway. It seemed to me then that Marvin was the unknown soldier, the one whose name you never knew” (182). In this context, the metaphor stresses silence and the paradoxes of naming and knowing, how people close to you elude your knowledge, however well you know them. In *The Diviners*, the figure appears again in a context of crisis. Morag and Brooke argue about her having revised her first novel without consulting him. Brooke makes a sarcastic remark to the effect that she should

take up teaching his honours course on the novel. Morag responds by heaving an expensive glass bowl against the fireplace. It shatters and Morag comments: "Brooke stands beside the long windows. Very very tall, absolutely straight, his face like the carved face of the unknown soldier" (213). The unknown soldier figure, now a simile, stresses the silence that speaks. The word "carved" suggests Brooke's face is inscribed with passivity and stolidity; he has taken on the granite courage of a monument, the British stiff upper lip taken to an extreme. These two examples of the figure of the unknown soldier stress moments of individual tension; in both cases, the emphasis is upon the personal, Hagar's relationship with her own past in one case, and the relationship between Brooke and Morag in the other. In the Manawaka fiction, the figure of the unknown soldier constitutes a significant presence, but in *The Fire-Dwellers* the figure assumes a dominant role in the narrative structure, character relations, and language patterns.

- I -

In *The Fire-Dwellers* the unknown soldier assumes many guises. His first appearance, early in the narrative, is as a cenotaph. The placement is significant, for the cenotaph signals an expansion of Stacey's world. It must therefore be seen in the context of the narrative opening. Before we reach the cenotaph, we are introduced to Stacey's inner and domestic life, both characterized by routine. Chapter 1 opens with the ladybird rhyme that runs through Stacey's head.

*Ladybird, ladybird,
Fly away home;
Your house is on fire,
Your children are gone. (3)*

The rhyme initiates the stream of Stacey's consciousness, which comprises the first paragraph. The second paragraph delivers in the third person a framing shot (a common filmic device) in which Stacey sees herself and her bedroom in a mirror.⁵ This paragraph establishes the movement between Stacey's inner and

outer life, between ear and eye. The rhyme and the two subsequent paragraphs, therefore, initiate the essential rhythm of the novel. We are alert to the movement of Stacey's inner narrative with the potential for the doubling and returns of rhyme, and to her movement through a world outside herself. We sense the forward movement of the story pulling against the stasis of the tableau.⁶

The story describes a journey. Stacey MacAindra sets out alone, having dropped off her youngest child at a neighbour's, on a shopping trip for downtown Vancouver. On the spur of the moment, she gets off the bus in an area unfamiliar to her. She comes upon the cenotaph and a group of old men sitting on the steps at its base, and the tableau triggers a cluster of memories that implicate Stacey in the social conflicts of her world.

The monument signals official recognition of past wars, and functions, therefore, as a marker or threshold, a function congruent with the visual foregrounding of paragraph edges. The cenotaph sets one space off from another, and this space is both physical and psychological. In approaching the cenotaph, Stacey approaches the bounds of her knowledge of the city. Her venture into this border zone prefigures her later adulterous adventure with Luke Venturi and triggers the release of feelings long forgotten or repressed. But first it stresses her exhilaration at trying something out of the ordinary. She gets off the bus near the waterfront and starts walking. She is not cracking up. It is just that she has lived in this city, jewel of the Pacific Northwest, for going on twenty years, and she does not know anything about it. Inexplicably and suddenly, she feels it is time she learned.

So begins Stacey's quest for knowledge. She then comes upon the cenotaph and the sitting men. Her response to the tableau comprises two paragraphs, the first of which foregrounds what Stacey sees and how she sees. Presented in the third person, the paragraph moves into free indirect discourse, a movement that anticipates the first-person segment to follow. The paragraph condenses a host of motifs crucial to the novel:

The pigeons are shitting all over the granite cenotaph, she is glad to see. Stacey stops and reads the inscription. *Their Names Shall Live Forevermore*. And on another side, *Does It Mean Nothing to You*. No question mark. Along the steps at the base, three old men

sit in the feeble sunlight, coughing and spitting, murmuring something to one another, memories, perhaps, or curses against now. (6)

For all the massive solidity of the granite monument, the paragraph foregrounds physical processes: shitting, seeing, reading, coughing and spitting, murmuring, cursing. These comprise both taking in, by reading and seeing, and putting out, by excreting or talking. Significantly, at this point Stacey is taking in the world around her. The paragraph also implies her visual and verbal acuity, as well as the strange mood that accompanies her moving beyond the safety of her defined world.

The subsequent first-person paragraph, preceded by the long dash to signal Stacey's thoughts, introduces syntactic anomalies that derail headlong (grammar-bound) reading.

—I guess they feel at home here. It was their war, my father's war. He spoke of it once, just once. Mother was out one evening, and Rachel was seven and asleep. He told me about a boy of eighteen—hand grenade went off near him and the blast caught the kid between the legs. My dad cried when he told it, because the kid didn't die. My dad was drunk, but then he wouldn't have spoken of it if he hadn't been. Mac never talks about his war, never has, not that he talks much about anything any more. Ian was ten this year and Duncan seven. Well, even if I'd had four girls, so what? (6)

Where the first paragraph foregrounds the cenotaph as public image, the second foregrounds the flow of Stacey's personal unspoken thoughts. The movement is from sociolect to idiolect. The sight of the men provokes Stacey's memory of her father and, more particularly, a story he once told her about war. This story in turn implicates Stacey's fears about her marriage, her children, and her own sexuality. The cenotaph tableau, considered as a narrative unit, constitutes a subtext, a seemingly minor element in the text that nonetheless "contains in a nutshell all the ingredients that make the novel work" (Riffaterre 58).

The social and historical dimensions are presented first. The cenotaph stands as the focal image of a public square, that is, as a chronotope, the "representation of a point in space designed

to suggest a point in time" (Riffaterre 126). The cenotaph fuses the private past of the old men, whom Stacey sees as ex-soldiers, with the public present monument. Wars distant in time and space are thus brought into the cycle of everyday life. Furthermore, a public square, as Bakhtin has taught us, implies a mingling of people and voices.⁷ As a memorial, the granite cenotaph speaks of endurance through time and signals public acknowledgment of heroism, patriotism, and devotion to country. The official voice of the state (official history) appears in the quotations carved in the granite, "*Their Names Shall Live Forevermore*," and "*Does It Mean Nothing to You*." An implied response to the rhetorical question materializes in the bombardment of the pigeons, which Stacey is glad to see. Their offerings alert us to the parodic and ironic quality of the tableau, and imply a contest of values summarized by two poems, John Macrae's "In Flanders Fields" and Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est."⁸

Intratextually, in terms of narrative structure, the epitaph contrasts with the nursery rhyme. The granite memorial, home to old men, plays against the home of the ladybird and her children. The cenotaph provides a home here for old men to sit and spit, and reflect on the glories of their youth. The ladybird rhyme refers to home as a place that can burn, a place children can and do flee from, a place somewhere else. The massive cenotaph implies permanence; the diminutive ladybird suggests transience. The ladybird song works by a lyrical half-rhyme, repetition, and parallel structure; the prose of the cenotaph paragraph works by a network of sound echoes. "[S]hitting" rhymes with "spitting" and the "it" syllable occurs in "granite," in the "It" of the inscription, in the monosyllable "sit." The syllable evokes the word *id* and its suggestions of undifferentiated energy. That the men sit on the "base" of the monument stresses the fundamental quality of the tableau.

Both rhyme and epitaph deliver ambiguous messages. Your children are gone, says the rhyme, but you will remember them. They are both present and absent. The word *cenotaph* means "empty tomb," another instance of presence and absence. At the phonic level, *tomb* implies a fundamental home-womb-tomb equation (a sentence for motherhood that Laurence elaborates at the

narrative level). The womb-tomb doublet echoes with another keyword.⁹ “*Doom everywhere* is the message I get” (59). The repeated sounds and letters of this word-cluster call up “boom” and “bomb.” The novel as mined field, each sentence packed with implications for the larger narrative.

“I guess they feel at home here. It was their war, my father’s war.” The sequence of nouns *home/war/father/war* signals absence: the soldiers’ absence from home, the father’s absence, the silence that such absence entails, and the subsequent silence about that absence. Stacey’s father’s story resubstantiates the abstract noun; the abstraction “war” is re-membered and given life. Ironically, his story speaks of sexual mutilation, or de-membering. “He told me about a boy of eighteen—hand grenade went off near him and the blast caught the kid between the legs.” The nouns carry the tale: *boy, hand grenade, blast, kid, legs*. This story strikes home for Stacey—she has carried it in memory since girlhood—and the tears of her father, sign of his refusal to hold a soldierly stiff upper lip, amplify its poignancy. This story of body members prompts Stacey to think of family members, beginning with her husband, Mac.

“Mac never talks about his war, never has, not that he talks much about anything any more.” The chain now runs from *silence* to *father/war/story* (castration) and then to *husband/silence*. (The rhyme *war/more* suggests both the history of Stacey and her men and the history of the twentieth century, a history that *The Fire-Dwellers* deconstructs. The rhyme echoes with “forevermore” and suggests an inscription for our time: Foreverwar.)

The silent husband sentence is followed immediately by one about sons, “Ian was ten this year and Duncan seven,” which introduces another anomaly. The sudden shift from Mac’s silence to the names and ages of the sons initiates a sequence progressively more personal: my father, my husband, my boys (flesh of my flesh). Stacey distinguishes her family members, the ones she fears to lose, from the unknown soldier. They have both names and ages. “These boys,” she seems to say, “Ian and Duncan are mine, and they are too young to be soldiers. My boys cannot go to war. They are members of my present; they don’t need to be re-membered.”

The last sentence of the paragraph makes another leap: "Well, what if I'd had four girls, so what?" This double-take typifies both the narrative and Stacey's resistance to war. War destroys children, she seems to say, girls and boys, and no mother's child should have to go to war. She would feel the same whoever the soldier was, daughter or son. This is the sentence of motherhood.

The elliptical ending of this paragraph is prefigured by the elision of the article before "hand grenade." War as catalexis. The reader supplies the elided article; it is all but there. So too the sentences I have attributed to Stacey are there. The parallel noun phrases in this paragraph—"their war," "his war"—move from outer to inner and imply a third phrase, "my war." Though this phrase is not uttered, it hovers there nonetheless. "Everyone understands," Gerard Genette asserts, "the real author of the narrative is not only [s]he who tells it, but also, and at times even more, [s]he who hears it" (262). That phrase, my war, cannot be articulated, for its utterance comprises the rest of the novel.

In these two brief paragraphs, Laurence establishes her narrator's dilemma: how to speak, how to speak of war, how to speak of her own war. She has also established the narrative sequence: their war, his war, that war, this war, my war. Throughout the unfolding of this sequence, a progressively personal unfolding for Stacey, we encounter the figure of the unknown soldier.

An example. A young man comes to Stacey's door, and he holds a pamphlet. "*Safety in Time of War*. Ragged crimson letters like rising flames." Stacey is intrigued. "I did a double take and saw the smaller letters underneath. *God's War of the Last Day*. Oh, that war" (21).

A double-take. The introduction of the names and ages of the boys may seem to be authorial intrusion, an infringement on verisimilitude.¹⁰ But the question of age links the tableau with Stacey's extramarital affair. Once Luke tells her his true age, twenty-five, Stacey, on the brink of forty, calculates that he is young enough to be her son. If war is a circle, so is incest. Luke serves as her son and her lover, and his participation in peace marches counterpoints the military parades that Stacey remembers from her youth. The peace marchers sing their theme song, "Where Have All the Flowers Gone" (277). This is a chain song, and the

sequence of linked nouns moves from flowers, to young girls, to young men, to (unnamed) soldiers, to graveyards. The song of peace therefore plays against the silence of the war memorial. Though Stacey resists foreverwar, she cannot evade the vicious circle, for the pet name she gives her younger daughter, the child who does not yet speak, is "Flower."

Another example. Stacey recalls reading of a returned soldier who nearly attacked his little sister with a karate chop when she startled him. Stacey says she laughed at the story, "Conditioned into monsterdom, like the soldier" (126). The unknown soldier indeed takes many guises. "*Ian nineteen, in love with the uniform he is wearing*" (127).

Stacey reflects on verbal battles with Mac. "—We go on this way and the needle jabs become razor strokes and the razors become hunting knives and the knives become swords and how do we stop?" (162).

Stacey imagines a getaway from a future war. She and her family arm themselves with "radish seeds," and head north for the bush, where they will grub out a living and teach their children about Shakespeare. "Only one or two snags. Neither Mac nor I could have mustered more than about two lines of Shakespeare, and neither of us would last more than twenty-four hours in the great north woods. Also, who would the kids marry? Incest was out. So I gave up on that one. It wasn't such a hot sedative" (60).

Cenotaph imagery circulates throughout the narrative. When Stacey confronts her husband's boss about a company questionnaire, a story of castration emerges. In an angry mood and stoned on double scotches, Stacey complains that the questionnaire is an infringement and an intrusion. "I mean infrusion, that's what I mean but I guess I shouldn't have brought it up" (108). Moments later, Stacey's purse falls open and two pink soaps she has lifted from the washroom fall to the floor. Thor, Mac's boss, makes a sarcastic comment to which Stacey replies by telling the assembled company a joke. The god Thor, she explains, seduces a young country girl and then feels contrite for having exploited a mere mortal. He says that he is Thor. "And she says, *Tho am I, but it wath worth it, wathn't it?*" (109). The double scotches, the two soaps, the punning joke turn the narrative back

on itself and insist that we attend to doubleness and word echoes. A few pages later, the drunken episode is repeated. Stacey replays the intrusion portmanteau; this time she adds a detail about “disarranged” hair. Then later Stacey thinks of herself as “schizophrenic” and worries that Mac will kill her. “What would happen to the kids if that happened? Oh my guts, churning around like a covey of serpents.” The unusual word prompts a double-take. “Covey? Nest? Medusa does in summer wear a nest of serpents in her hair” (114). The stoned woman becomes Medusa, the castrating stone woman who carries her nest with her (or her “severed head” [124]). She makes stiffs, this stone woman, these hairy tresses. Stones men dead. The magazine articles that Stacey reads establish guilt for the fate of the unknown soldier, whether he is in the guise of the castrated boy-man, or the stifled husband, or the son-and-lover, or the daughter. “Nine Ways the Modern Mum May Be Ruining Her Daughter” (14), “Are You Castrating Your Son?” (15), “Are You Emasculating Your Husband?” (56), “Mummy Is the Root of All Evil?” (304).

To read the novel we must read the cenotaph. As empty tomb, the cenotaph is an abyss, an ever-open maw to swallow the daughter- and sonflowers of this world. Here is Stacey on taking in the world. “Sometimes I think I’d like to hold an entire army between my legs. I think of all the men I’ll never make love with, and I regret it as though it were the approach of my own death” (19).

Ladybird, ladybird, your house is on fire. The maw-mouth is where the taste is. Stacey: “My taste isn’t anywhere. Between my legs, maybe” (139). “Better to marry than burn, St. Paul said, but he didn’t say what to do if you married *and* burned” (211). And again, “I would have liked to be a great courtesan, like that one in France who went on until she was about ninety-five” (308).

Stone imagery informs the description of Thor’s secretary, the young woman who becomes Mac’s lover. Her face “is a medieval tomb carving, elongated, drawn in subtle lines of earnestness and prayer” (108). Blanc et blank. “Her skin is extremely pale, and her features are delicate, severe, withdrawn, a girl from a medieval tomb carving” (147). That she is a “girl” suggests again the incest motif. (In one scene, Thor “takes her by the hand and leads

her over to the microphone" [147], as if she were unable to speak without his support.)

Ladybird, ladybird, fly away home. Home is where the hurt is. "(I hurt Mother. I'm scared.) (Sh, it isn't nice.) (I hurt, you hurt, he hurts—Sh.)" (168). Think of Mac's words to Stacey as they make love, his hands around her throat:

That can't hurt you not that much that's not much. Say it
doesn't hurt.
It hurts. (29)

Later Stacey thinks, "Oh Luke. I want to go home, but I can't, because this is home" (250). I'm Thor, I hurt. "I'm in forevermore..." (127).

In *The Fire-Dwellers*, unknown soldiers are tombed, flowers and lovers are doomed, love is tombed.

Imagery from the cenotaph tableau circulates through all the major episodes of the larger narrative. At that level, Stacey experiences a series of personal crises: her (failed) sexual encounter with Buckle Fennick, her affair with Luke Venturi, Mac's revelations about his war experiences, the near drowning of her son Duncan. I start with the last of these crises.

After the drowning scare, Stacey's innermost fears surface. She remembers what she was thinking while her son was being resuscitated. "Unbiddenly, then, she remembers what she was thinking out there on the sand when she did not know what to do and when Duncan's still-warm but nearly unhuman body seemed to be going beyond reach." The word "unhuman" echoes with the opening word; this experience has threatened to un-do her. The third-person sentence is followed by an italicized representation of Stacey's inner voice: "*God, if it was anything I did, take it out on me, not on him—that's too much punishment for me*" (296). Stacey's (con)current thoughts turn on the question of belief.

—Judgment. All the things I don't like to think I believe in. But at the severe moments, up they rise, the tomb birds, scaring the guts out of me with their vulture wings. Maybe it's as well to know they're there.¹¹ Maybe knowing might help to keep them at least a little in their place. Or maybe not. I used to think about

Buckle that he was as superstitious as a caveman. I didn't know then that I was, too. (296)

The tomb birds are now vultures, yet they are still connected with the excremental. They scare the guts out of her. Earlier she was glad to see pigeons shitting on the cenotaph, on the public and phallic sign of the patriarchy and its more-war mentality. Now in her pain and her relief she admits that she, too, is as primitive, as superstitious as Buckle. Laurence blurs gender with the word "caveman," a blurring that helps to explain Stacey's earlier reflections on sons and daughters. Laurence refuses gender division in matters of love and war.

Similarly, Stacey's war cannot be separated from Mac's or from her father's. As Mac and Stacey struggle with Buckle's sudden death, Laurence includes an extended flashback that completes the narrative sentence left suspended in the cenotaph scene.

Preceded by pipers, the men of the Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders marched through the streets of Manawaka on their way overseas. Stacey, fifteen, watched them go, the boymen whom she soon might have known, perhaps married one if they had stayed. Nearly all the Manawaka boys of that age joined the same regiment. *That was the war, to Stacey.* She felt at the time ashamed of her own distance and safety. (238; emphasis added)

These boymen, those she "might have known," remain unknown to her. (Luke, fifteen years her junior, is the one she has known in the biblical sense.) The past tense is significant. Laurence does not say *this is* Stacey's war, for her war is more complex now, and includes the wars of all her men. Her war, in fact, is a layering of wars, one over another, for the Second World War arrived as she was coming of age.

For his part, Mac slowly unravels the war experience that bound him to Buckle. They were in a truck in Italy, lost. They approached a bridge and Buckle refused to check it for mines. Mac climbed out and Buckle drove ahead. The bridge exploded and Mac pulled Buckle from the water and carried him to safety (a rebirth scene that anticipates the later rebirth of the boy Duncan). Also significant was the look Buckle gave Mac.

I couldn't figure it at the time. But later on I thought maybe it was just that I hadn't done him any favor. I hadn't done anything he wanted me to do. (240)

Bewildered, Stacey then speaks, haltingly—"So then you had to take him on for life? Because"—and at the same time she thinks, "Who is this guy? Why did I never know?" (240). The question of knowing and not knowing moves to the fore again: Mac has become the unknown soldier. The man she has married and lived with and loved and fought with turns out to be as unknown to her as the eighteen-year-old soldier her father spoke of. She has been as blind and unseeing as Buckle's mother. As blind and unseeing as a stone angel or a tomb carving.

And yet Mac's having spoken allows Stacey to speak. She tells Mac that she did not sleep with Buckle because "He liked it with himself but with somebody looking on" (240). She is able now to say of Buckle, "Maybe he wanted you." And Mac too is released and able to mutter, "Yeh maybe" (241). Again Laurence erases borders and binaries. Where does heterosexuality become autoeroticism become homosexuality?

No more do historical boundaries hold. Stacey's war includes both the First World War, her father's war, and the Second World War, Mac's war, as well as the wars brought into her living room by the EVER-OPEN EYE and the radio and newspapers, and the unknown young men with pamphlets knocking at her door. All these wars are hers, for she can no more escape them than she can escape her very self. As Nora Stovel points out, Stacey's ties to her father are underlined by her two mementos, "both souvenirs of the war: a flask and a revolver—firewater and firearms, appropriate for a fire-dweller" (48).

Even as the stone angel presides over events in Hagar's Manawaka, the downtown cenotaph, besmeared with pigeon droppings, stands over the unravelling of this urban narrative. The cenotaph stands as the silent counterpart to the "spoken" acknowledgments of war: peace marches, radio reports, the sounds and sights of the Ever-Open Eye. At another level, the (phallic) cenotaph stands opposed to a host of underground places and subliminal images: caves, crypts, graves, Niall Cameron's funeral parlour, "tomb silences" (25), bomb shelters, the private parts of

the body, the intimate chambers of the self. But despite these tensions and conflicts, the ending of the novel stresses orderliness. Flower learns to talk; Stacey and Mac speak with each other; their economic distresses seem to be allayed; they accept Matthew, Mac's father, into their home. In reflecting on what will happen with him, Stacey thinks of him as a shadow, haunting her so "all I want to do is speak the unspeakable" (298). But she does not, and neither does this novel. If we trust the tale and not the teller, however, and read *The Fire-Dwellers* in the context of the Manawaka fiction, then we discover another unknown soldier whose story illuminates all the others.

– II –

Unknown soldiers march through the Manawaka fiction. There is Marvin in *The Stone Angel*, and Niall Cameron in *A Jest of God* (and *The Fire-Dwellers*) who offers a cryptic response to young Rachel's excitement at hearing the pipers play "The March of the Cameron Men" in a Second World War parade. "Yes," he says, "I expect they are, Rachel. It has a fine sound, the lies the pipes tell" (*Jest* 70). Niall Cameron is positioned as a knowing soldier in both *A Jest of God* and *The Fire-Dwellers*, like Ewen MacLeod, Vanessa's father. In *A Bird in the House* the figures proliferate, extending even to a portrait of the Duke of Wellington in the MacLeod house, whom young Vanessa has mistaken for her dead grandfather. The most important figures, though, are Ewen, his brother Roderick, and from Vanessa's own generation, cousin Chris, and her first boyfriend, Michael. Vanessa knows her father only from her brief meetings with him, the letter and photo from a young French woman she finds in an old desk, overheard stories about Ewen's presence at the death of his brother Roderick at the Battle of the Somme. She knows her uncle through the stories she hears and from the photographs her Grandmother MacLeod keeps. The airman Michael, whom Vanessa first falls in love with, and the one individual with whom she can speak about war and literature, unbeknownst to her, is married.

A more compelling character is Vanessa's cousin, Chris (whose name suggests kinship with Christie Logan, probably the

most unforgettable of Laurence's returned soldiers). Vanessa's relationship with Chris forms the centre of "Horses of the Night," a story that turns on questions of knowing, latent sexuality, and madness. Chris leaves "the alien lake of home" (*Bird* 152) to join the Army, only to be discharged because of a mental breakdown to a hospital where he will live out his days. Vanessa feels compassion for the tenderness he showed her when they were younger. The toy saddle he once made for her reminds her of a line of poetry (from Ovid's *Amores*)¹² in which the speaker wishes to delay the arrival of the morning and the necessity of leaving a lover. Vanessa connects this remembered line, "*Slowly, slowly, horses of the night,*" with Chris's situation. "The night must move like this for him, slowly, all through the days and nights." Vanessa has grown to realize that some things can never be known. "I could *not know* whether the land he journeyed through was inhabited by terrors, the old monster-kings of the lake, or whether he had discovered at last a way for himself to make the necessary dream perpetual" (154; emphasis added).

A list of unknown soldiers in *The Diviners* suggests their importance to the narrative: Brooke Skelton; Morag's dead father, Colin Gunn, veteran of the First World War and buddy to Christie Logan; Christie himself, source of the tales of the Selkirk settlers and the Battle at Culloden, and the Battle at Batoche; Jules "Skinner" Tonnerre, bearer of stories about Batoche, and a veteran of Dieppe, the battle where so many Manawaka boys were killed.

Dieppe assumes special significance in the Laurence corpus, so that one reference carries the emotional weight of all the others. In Hagar's sardonic report, at Dieppe "the casualties were heavy, as the newspapers put it, making them sound like leaden [unknown] soldiers, no one's sons" (*Stone* 244). It was Dieppe that brought the war home to Vanessa MacLeod ("sister" to Stacey Cameron and to Morag Gunn in the sense that they all three are the same age). Part of Vanessa's shock lies in her realization that these (known) boymen have been rent and rendered utterly unknowable, and that she is experiencing first-hand what her parents' generation has already gone through. Her emotion is therefore overdetermined, a new layer of grief and loss laid on top of an earlier layer:

When it happened, I had remembered that my father's brother Roderick had been killed in the First World War. He, too, had been eighteen, like most of these [men killed at Dieppe]. It was then that war took on its meaning for me, a meaning that would never change. It meant only that people without choice in the matter were broken and spilled, and nothing could ever take the place of them. (*Bird* 181–182)

In *The Fire-Dwellers*, Stacey, too, was changed by Dieppe, after which “she could never again listen to the pipes playing *The March of the Cameron Men*” (238).

These allusions implicate the photographs and text of *Dance on the Earth*. In the Manawaka fiction Laurence refers to various epoch-defining events, according to her fictional needs—Hiroshima in *The Fire-Dwellers* (11, 275) and the First World War, in general, in *A Jest of God* (127). But Dieppe, as Laurence points out in *Dance on the Earth*, has special resonance.

The limitations of the perceptions one permitted oneself were abruptly shattered once and for all with Dieppe. In one sense, for me, Dieppe perpetually has happened only yesterday. It runs as a leitmotif through all my so-called Manawaka fiction and, in a way, it runs through my whole life, in my hatred of war so profound I can't find words to express my outrage at these recurring assaults upon the human flesh, mind, and spirit. (84)

Skinner Tonnerre, as a veteran of Dieppe, therefore assumes singular importance in the gallery of (unknown) soldiers. He gives a human voice and face to the statue, for, though the cenotaph signals the silence and absence of the unknown soldiers, a silence nonetheless inscribed with official history, Skinner *speaks* of Dieppe. Typically, he offers only a few laconic images. He tells Morag of a fellow Manawakan being gut-shot, and then goes on to describe the man's eyes: “Like a horse's eyes in a barn fire” (133). This image repeats one from “Horses of the Night” in which Chris relates to Vanessa a story told to him by her father (*Bird* 150–151). The repetition of the image, fire and eyes, fire and ice, echoes both with the opening lines of Skinner's “Piquette's Song” (“My sister's eyes,/Fire and snow” [379]) and with the conflagration images in *The Fire-Dwellers*. Together, these images and the story link Skinner with the other soldiers.¹³

Yet even though Skinner as a veteran belongs to the gallery, there is a crucial difference between him and the other soldiers. All of the soldiers, including Scavenger Christie Logan, live within the orbit of the cenotaph, that is to say, they are part of official history, and the cenotaphs metonymically bear tribute to them. Smelly old Christie Logan finds his place in the Manawaka cemetery beside Prin, their places marked by "Grey granite" headstones (*Diviners* 327). In the Manawaka cemetery the stone angel memorializes both the Currie family and the once-disreputable (Shitley) Shipleys. All these monuments, stained by droppings and earthy names, nonetheless speak of stature and status within the dominant community. They have mass and volume and solidity, these monuments. These people belong.

But Skinner's history and the history of the Métis people have been severely edited.¹⁴ His grandfather's participation in the battle at Batoche is erased from Morag's story about (the dead) Piquette's family. "Lachlan deletes it, saying that many people hereabouts would still consider that Old Jules back then had fought on the wrong side" (*Diviners* 130). So Old Jules, Skinner's namesake, takes up no space in the Manawaka newspaper, and when Skinner's father Lazarus dies, he, too, is denied space in Manawaka. As Skinner puts it, the town does not want "His half-breed bones spoiling their cemetery" (219). Lazarus eventually finds a home in the Métis churchyard at Galloping Mountain. There the memorial structures are simple: "No headstones there. Just wooden crosses, plain pine or whatever comes to hand, and the weather greys them" (219). How different these grey weathered crosses from the granite cenotaph in downtown Vancouver and the grey granite headstones and stone angels of Manawaka. As we are led to expect, Skinner, in his turn, takes his place in the Galloping Mountain churchyard.

At first reading, Skinner has seemed almost to erase himself, for he refuses to allow Morag to take his picture, even with their daughter Pique (281). But this refusal amounts to a refusal of the visual. Skinner positions himself outside the frame, less substantial even than a shadow and yet forcefully present. His realm is the oral, and he establishes his presence in history through song. And in giving his gift of song to Pique, he aligns himself, not with

the past (the cenotaph, official history as written so far), but with the future. So the last word in *The Diviners* is given to Piquette Gunn Tonnerre (her surname in that order, Scot and French, gun and thunder, perhaps a suggestion of future storms). The ending is pluralized. It ends once with Morag going to set down her title. But the last words are attributed to Pique—"The mountain and the valley hold my name"—and these places, "Christie's real country" (319) where Morag was born, are waiting for her. The future is marked by song and the feminine. Riel country. Thus does Laurence come to terms with her ancestral past. Her ancestors, she wrote, "are not only the Scots but also the Métis; I was born in a land which they had inhabited, shaped and invested with their ghosts" (Lennox 317).

The plural ending therefore denies the authority of the book, monological and masculine, just as it refuses the centripetal pull of official history. And the text itself is pluralized. As written text, the Album section made up of the songs of Skinner Tonnerre and Piquette Gunn Tonnerre functions as a metonym for a future attached to the land. But the Album also appeared as a phonograph record with the first edition hardcover of the novel. The phonograph record testifies to Laurence's anti-imperialism and stretches the limits of textuality again. If *The Fire-Dwellers* can be described as a photofiction, as Lorraine York suggests, then *The Diviners*, in the end, is a phonofiction. Just as the Tonnerre songs mock the colonizing drive of Sir John A., who "sits in Ottawa, / Drinking down his whiskey raw" (373), so the record denies closure to the novel.¹⁵ The centre does not hold. The novel is not a completed, self-contained unit. The phonograph album asserts that there is more to be said than any book can contain, a gesture consistent with Laurence's desire, notably in *The Fire-Dwellers* and *The Diviners*, to break down the restrictions of traditional realism.

By the same token, the figure of the unknown soldier is multiple and transtextual. In the guise of the cenotaph, the figure dominates *The Fire-Dwellers*, and he stands as a metonym for all the others: Mac and Buckle, Ewen and Roderick MacLeod, Christie Logan and Colin Gunn, who readily fall into pairs, and the solitary Brooke Skelton and Marvin Shipley. Even Stacey herself. And

in the shadow of that solid granite column looms the Métis warrior, a disturbing unheroic hero of the real country. An unknown soldier.

NOTES

1. Research for this paper was generously supported by a Special Grant from Red Deer College and a grant from the T. Glendenning Hamilton Fund at the University of Manitoba.

2. Allan Bevan gives a succinct summary of Laurence's narrative methods: "[1] Stacey's thoughts (introduced by a dash), [2] her memories (indented on the page), [3] her fantasies often in the form of SF words (in italics), [4] the news from radio or the EVER-OPEN EYE (in capital letters), [5] the narrator's comments more or less over Stacey's shoulder (in ordinary type and without dashes or italics), [6] and conversations (again without introductory marks)" (ix). The first four of these announce themselves as distinct paragraphs.

In "Gadgetry or Growing: Form and Voice in the Novel," Laurence spoke of her desire to capture on the page both "voices and pictures." "I wanted the pictures—that is, the descriptions—whether outer life or dreams or memories, to be as sharp and instantaneous as possible, and always brief, because it seemed to me that this is the way—or at least one way—life is perceived, in short sharp visual images which leap away from us even as we look at them" (88). See also Nora Stovel's discussion of narrative method in *Stacey's Choice: Margaret Laurence's "The Fire-Dwellers,"* 82–92. Lorraine York describes the novel as a "photofiction" (*The Other Side of Dailiness* 152).

3. Laurence uses the mindfield metaphor in *The Fire-Dwellers* in a crucial setting. When Stacey drives Mac to identify the remains of Buckle, she is "afraid she may say the one wrong or fuselike word which may make something explode in his head or heart..." (234). Later, Stacey discovers the two men were bound together by the explosion of a "mined" bridge (239). A mind-bridge.

4. See Freud's classic essay "The Uncanny." Certainly, *The Fire-Dwellers* incorporates uncanny elements, especially Stacey's dream of the severed head. (See my discussion of Medusa below.) Lorraine York takes the dream to be emblematic. "This nightmare vision raises the question of inner and outer sight; as Stacey in her dream asks 'How is it that she can see it? What is she seeing with? That is the question' [124]. This striking image of a woman gazing at her own bleeding head could serve as an emblem of

The Fire-Dwellers and its visual method: How does one perceive one's own torments?" (*The Other Side of Dailiness* 154–155).

5. The mirror segment also serves as a frame. Near the end of the novel, the shot is repeated. Two changes deserve mention, one an addition, the other a deletion. The addition concerns the disposition of Mac's clothes. In the opening, we have: "On another chair, Mac's dirty shirt is neatly folded" (4). In the closing frame: "On another chair, Mac's clothes are folded neatly, *a habit he acquired in the army*, as he has remarked countless times" (305; my emphasis). The addition suggests, first, the importance of Mac's army life to Stacey's private (bedroom) life, and, second, the importance of their talking with each other. The deletion is equally intriguing. In the opening, Mac is described as "Agamemnon king of men or the equivalent, at least to her," a hint of the war motif to come (4). The closing omits the Agamemnon reference, as if Mac were no longer kinglike, but domestic, clad in ordinary clothes. The reference ironically positions Stacey as Clytemnestra, murderer of Agamemnon, and echoes with Stacey's recollection of an argument with her night-class instructor. "Mrs. MacAindra, I don't think you've got quite the right slant on Clytemnestra. Why not? The king sacrificed their youngest daughter for success in war—what's the queen supposed to do, shout for joy?" (32). Though Mac has not been murdered, the ending establishes Mac as domesticated in Stacey's eyes. Lorraine York argues that the omission "suggests that Stacey's bitterness has been exorcised, that if she no longer expects Mac to be Agamemnon, perhaps she can now cease to feel herself a guilty Clytemnestra" (*Dailiness* 156). For a discussion of framing devices in the novel, see Stovel 94–95.

6. William James, who coined the phrase *stream of consciousness*, describes the *substantive* and *transitive* dimensions of the stream. He compares the varying pace of the stream's movement to the life of a bird, "an alteration of flights and perchings" (*Psychology* 160). In narrative terms, this distinction parallels the diegesis–mimesis distinction.

7. See "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel" and "Discourse in the Novel," *The Dialogic Imagination*, esp. 130–146 in the former, which concerns biography and autobiography (of which *The Fire-Dwellers* is a fictionalized variation). The image of old men reminiscing occurs also in *A Jest of God*. They sit in the lobby of Manawaka's Queen Victoria Hotel "to parse the past" (193).

8. Linda Hutcheon suggests that "intertextuality" might better be described as "interdiscursivity" or "discursive pluralizing." See *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, esp. chapters 8 and 9 (the quotations are from page 130). The discourse of war memorials is here embedded within the (fictional) discourse with all its intertextual echoes. W.H. New (personal correspon-

dence) identifies Laurence's model cenotaph as that in Vancouver's Victory Square, on which is inscribed "Their Name Liveth For Ever More / Is It Nothing to You / All Ye that Pass By."

For me, Laurence's reference to a cenotaph functions as a shorthand gesture, a quotation of the commonplace. About 100 yards from where I write, there stands a cenotaph inscribed with lines from "In Flanders Fields." Because the cenotaph is so commonplace, we tend to overlook its importance.

9. See Stovel 14ff.

10. Lorraine McMullen reminded me that during wartime mothers do count the ages of their children, calculating when they might volunteer or be conscripted for military service.

11. This phrase, "they're there," suggests the inextricable weave of sound with sense. The phrase recalls the "there, there" of a mother's consolation, as in Stacey's reflections on her role (149). The consoling phrase occurs several times in other texts: Katie uses the expression in consoling Stacey (273); in *A Jest of God* Hector consoles Rachel (152) and Rachel consoles her mother (233). Here Stacey reassures herself.

12. See Kertzer 70.

13. Skinner is connected to *The Fire-Dwellers* through his sister Valentine, who meets Stacey on a Vancouver street. Over coffee, Val reveals that Thor Thorlakson, Mac's draconian boss, is in actuality Vernon Winkler from Manawaka. Valentine is described as a "known and total stranger" to Stacey (268). Like Valentine, Skinner is at once known and unknown, and like her, too, he unmasks middle-class pretensions. As an un/know soldier, Skinner exposes and subverts the limitations of what Laurence calls "the Upper Canadian, white Protestant interpretation of our history" (*Dance* 77).

14. The phrase "edited past" appears in *The Fire-Dwellers* in a passage of free indirect discourse to suggest Stacey's awareness of Mac's inclination to "forget." "He looks at her as though they have never before met, as though she is the stranger on shipboard to whom he may possibly be able to relate his edited past" (284).

15. Part of the argument in these last two paragraphs first appeared in my review of the Laurence-Purdy letters, "Dear Margaret, Dear Al," *Border Crossings* (Fall 1993): 72. For another reading of *The Diviners*, with emphasis on the ending, see Frank Davey in *Post-National Arguments*, 23-42.

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(W)rites of Passage:
The Typescript of
The Diviners
as Shadow Text

NORA FOSTER STOVEL

W WRITES OF PASSAGE IS THE ORIGINAL TITLE that Margaret Laurence gave to the penultimate section of *The Diviners* in her typescript of the novel. Ultimately, however, she eliminated the initial letter, transforming *Writes* to *Rites*. But writing casts a long shadow over the rituals of passage in this novel, for Morag Gunn is a novelist, like Laurence. Like Laurence, she is writing her fifth and final novel. And, like Laurence, the novel she is writing is *The Diviners*.

The Diviners is full of shadows. Laurence called the novel a "spiritual autobiography" in *Dance on the Earth* (6). Morag may be a spiritual sister or shadow self, a mirror image reflecting her creator. The Scots moniker *Morag* suggests *Margaret*, and Morag even resembles Margaret in appearance, with her straight black hair and heavy glasses, suggesting a wise owl.

The Diviners is a *kunsterroman*, chronicling the development of an artist, like *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce. *The Diviners* might be titled *A Portrait of the Artist as a Middle-Aged Mother*, for mothering her babies and her books, her two types of offspring, is as important to Morag in *The Diviners* as it is to Margaret in *Dance on the Earth*, which she calls "a book about my mothers and about myself as a mother and writer" (8). Laurence calls herself a "Method writer"¹ because she identifies so closely

with her protagonists: in *The Diviners* such identification is understandable, because Morag Gunn so closely reflects Margaret Laurence.

The Diviners is metafiction, a fiction about fiction, as Ildiko de Papp Carrington makes clear.² By dramatizing Morag's reality as a writer, Laurence gives the reader insight into her own creative processes. Readers are fascinated by the artistic alchemy by which the artist transforms life into fiction, and nowhere is this metamorphosis clearer than in the metafictional *kunstlerroman*. In manuscript *The Diviners* was an even more radically metafictional text, however, but Laurence's editors persuaded her to eliminate over one hundred passages. Thus, the typescript constitutes a *shadow text*, haunting the published novel.³

The Diviners was accepted in 1973 by Laurence's three publishers: Macmillan in London, Knopf in New York, and McClelland and Stewart in Toronto. They all worked from photocopies of the same typescript, copied from Laurence's original manuscript by her daughter Jocelyn. The original draft, at nearly 700 pages, fulfilled William James's definition of the novel as a *loose baggy monster*. The second typescript was 578 pages, however, and Laurence intended to reduce it by another hundred pages.

The Canadian and English publishers agreed to allow Knopf editor Judith Jones to be the sole editor for *The Diviners*, and they relayed all suggestions for revisions to her. Laurence addressed their requests for revisions in notes⁴ headed "Alterations made in *The Diviners* on the basis of criticism from Knopf, McClelland and Stewart, and Macmillan." Caroline Hobhouse of Macmillan confined herself to what she called *nitpicks*: for example, she noted that the poem Morag's Sunday school teacher misquotes is not by G.K. Chesterton but by Hilaire Belloc. Jack McClelland's reactions were more searching: in a June 12, 1973, letter, he called the manuscript ambitious and Laurence a great writer, but expressed distaste for the "infactuality" section and for the headings "memorybank movie," "inner film," and especially "writes of passage."⁵ He approved the plan that Laurence work solely with Jones, and offered to share plant costs with Knopf.

On June 4, 1973, after meeting with Allan Maclean and Hobhouse of Macmillan in London, Jones met with Laurence at

Elm Cottage in Penn, Buckinghamshire, where Laurence wrote most of her Manawaka novels, for a six-hour session on revising *The Diviners*. Laurence called it “probably the best session of my entire life with an editor/friend.” In a June letter, in which she called it “a marvellous book,” Jones itemized 107 requests for excisions.⁶ These excisions were duly implemented by Laurence, who struck out the paragraph or page with a bold diagonal line drawn in black marker. Laurence responded with a list titled “Points of Possible Disagreement with Judith. Explanation of What I’ve Done or Not Done” to clarify her artistic intentions.

Despite some disagreements, Laurence implemented most of Jones’s requests for excisions. Jones had been Laurence’s editor for several years, and Laurence had great respect for her ability. In a June 5, 1973, letter to *Boss* Jack McClelland of *McStew*, she called Jones “one of the really great editors of this world, with whom I work in real intensity and harmony and sometimes in battle.” They disagreed once, when Laurence passionately resisted Jones’s urging to restructure the stories of *A Bird in the House* as a novel (*Dance* 198). Laurence headed her list of alterations with the note: “Approx. 100 pp. cut out.” Jones wrote to Jack McClelland on August 28, 1973: “You will see there has been some major surgery performed—all to the good, I’m convinced... And we have agreed, thank heaven, that WRITES OF PASSAGE will be RITES OF PASSAGE.”

The requests for excisions focussed on two primary areas: the metafictional framework and the embedded *kunstlerroman*. Laurence titled the opening section of the novel *River of Now and Then*, suggesting the two levels of narrative that she outlined in her preparatory notes: “Now—done in Past tense. Then—done in Present tense,” in order to convey the simultaneity of past and present. Laurence addressed these two levels in her list of alterations: “MORAG AS WRITER—both in Present and Past sequences, this has been cut a lot.”⁷

THE METAFICTIONAL FRAMEWORK

Laurence frames *The Diviners* with images of Morag, the writer, seated at her kitchen table in front of the window

overlooking the river, trying to write, in the Now of the novel. These images dominate the frame sections—the first section, *River of Now and Then*, and the final of the five sections, *The Diviners*—but they also provide a frame of reference for introducing the central sections: *Halls of Sion* begins, “Morag sat at the table in the kitchen, with a notebook in front of her and a ballpoint pen in her hand. Not writing” (137). Such images are self-reflexive, reflecting Laurence writing *The Diviners* in *The Shack* (Heart 187), her cabin on the Otonabee River.

But Jones directs Laurence to omit many of Morag’s reflections on writing, noting, “too much in here about *this* novel and its problems,” although Laurence responds, “Morag constantly relates fiction to life.” The first passage Jones cuts out is a paragraph on the opening page revealing that Morag has been suffering for two years from a painful case of writer’s block. Jones has Laurence omit several passages where Morag agonizes about being unable to write. Knowing Morag is shut out of her wellspring of creativity makes sense of her neuroses throughout the entire narrative.

Pique’s sudden overnight departure for Manawaka is the catalyst that shocks Morag out of her literary paralysis. The note comparing herself to Ophelia that Pique inserts in Morag’s typewriter provides the inspiration *and* the beginning for Morag’s novel on the first page of *The Diviners*. The shock of her daughter’s departure for her mother’s home town impels Morag to review her collection of photographs, which, in turn, provides the rationale for her retrospective narrative. Putting the photographs in order suggests putting her life in order in preparation for death—as Laurence did in writing *The Diviners*, a rich tapestry interweaving strands of her life and art.

Jones directs Laurence to omit several passages where Morag broods about mutability and mortality, contemplating the *Grim Reaper*. *The Cassandra of McConnell’s Landing*, Morag, like Stacey in *The Fire-Dwellers*, prophesies *gloom and doom*. Like Stacey, Morag contemplates her middle-aged self in the mirror, reflecting on age and death, indulging in *Pre-Mourning* (Fire 278). Jones directs, “Cut introspection re imagined death.” Laurence argues, “The Black Celt side of her is *there*, for life, but she has to come to terms (in a Jungian sense) with the *shadow* [my italics] in herself.”

Although these reflective passages are related to her creative block, because Morag writes to live and lives to write, Laurence cuts them out, despite her protests, as Jones directs.

Morag's meditations on mortality suggest *The Diviners* may be as much a *vollendungsroman*, to employ Constance Rooke's term meaning a novel of completion or winding up,⁸ as *The Stone Angel*, for Morag bids farewell to creativity and passes the creative torch to her daughter, Pique, who combines her parents' Scots and Métis heritage and their gifts of words and music in songs. Like Royland, the Old Man of the River, Morag loses her gift for divining. And like Laurence, she prophesies that *The Diviners* will be her last novel. On February 3, 1973, Laurence wrote to Al Purdy: "this is the end of a 12-year involvement with Manawaka and its inhabitants, and as the wheel comes full circle in this novel, it will be the last of those... I don't know where to go now—this is why I've always said this would likely be my last novel."⁹ Mourning becomes Morag, just as it does Margaret, and the loss of these passages damages the metafictional level.

In the metafictional framework of *The Diviners* Laurence recreates the reality of a writer, both internal and external. The externals include Morag's correspondence with agent Milward Crispin, her telephone conversations with ruthlessly honest editor Constance (who may reflect Jones), and her conversations with aspiring writers. Jones has Laurence omit this verisimilar vehicle. In the typescript, Crispin tells Morag he has sent "Piper Gunn and the Bitch Duchess" to every journal on the continent, and one editor would consider it if she cut it by two-thirds and changed the title to "The Ghostly Ranting Pipes of McBain" in Laurence's own satire on the publishing process. Morag writes critical articles for subsistence during her creative block, but Laurence states in her list of revisions, "articles cut entirely." Avoiding writing the articles involves compulsive cleaning to ward off the internal chaos, and the third passage cut from the typescript shows Morag getting out her photographs as an evasion technique. Ironically, this evasion initiates the narrative of the novel.

Morag reads herself into the *Snapshots* the way a critic reads meaning into a text, interpreting her unseen presence hidden behind the body of her dead mother, where she is "buried alive, the

first burial" (6), prophesying the final burial that Morag broods about, and also suggesting the tomb-to-womb comic life cycle that the novel celebrates. Two of the six *Snapshots* are omitted and then reinstated in the typescript. These *shadows* (15) from her past haunt Morag's present.

In a sudden compulsive action, Morag burns her photographs of these people from her past—Christie and Prin, Brooke and Ella—all except Pique's father, who was superstitious about having his picture taken. Appalled, she fears that she has destroyed her past, but realizes that she carries her past like unclaimed baggage forever circling the carousel in her skull. Similarly, Laurence herself writes, "I couldn't wait to get out of that town [Neepawa], away from the prairies. I did not know then that I would carry the land and town all my life within my skull, that they would form the mainspring and source of the writing I was to do, wherever and however far away I might live" (*Heart* 217). But Jones objects, "the burning of the photographs hard to believe." Perhaps Jones did not realize what a latter-day Hedda Gabler Laurence was, for she incinerated many a manuscript (*Gadgetry* 60). After burning her draft of *The Fire-Dwellers*, she confessed to a friend, "I am a firebug." Ironically, burning the pictures initiates Morag's narrative by providing a motive for memory. She must *re-member* her past, now that the tangible evidence has gone up in smoke. The six *Snapshots* in *River of Now and Then* take Morag to the traumatic turning point in her life, the death of her parents. Next, *The Nuisance Grounds* recreates her past. In a passage excised from the novel, Morag reflects on memory, realizing that we fabricate our past. Although Laurence omits the passage, she notes, "People fictionalize their lives, not only in 'fiction' but also in memories."

THE EMBEDDED KUNSTLERROMAN

In her *kunstlerroman*, Laurence uses three methods to dramatize Morag's creative development. First, she employs a tripartite educational model of reading, critiquing, and writing. Moreover, she includes mentors—Christie Logan, Miss Melrose, and Brooke Skelton—who teach Morag to read and write. Most

important, she embeds Morag's fictions in the narrative to illustrate her literary development. These embedded fictions form Jones's primary target. Excising Morag's fictions may be the easiest way of cutting one hundred pages from the typescript, but it may not be the best way. Granted that *The Diviners* was drowning in detail, the question is, did Laurence's editors miss her metafictional aim? Let us consider the structure of the embedded *kunstlerroman*, noting the excisions, with editor's and author's comments, to determine what is lost or gained thereby.

Morag recalls herself as a child creating characters even before she is able to read and write: "Peony. Rosa Picardy. Cowboy Joke. Blue-Sky Mother. Barnstable Father. Old Forty-Nine" (10), characters taken from songs like "'Cowboy Jack' and 'The Wreck of the Old Forty-Nine'" (10). Morag creates this "spruce-house family" to people the darkness after the death of her parents. Creativity is an antidote to death for Morag, as it was for Margaret, who also created a character named "Blue Sky" after her mother's death. Her mother kept a baby book, an "archive of love," where she records how her daughter imagined a "'funny' house" with a fictional family (*Dance* 40). Morag wonders, "*What kind of a character am I?*" (11), for she creates shadow selves in the *personae* of Peony and Rosa, *alter egos* prefiguring her novel heroines—Lilac, Mira, and Fiona. In the embedded *kunstlerroman* she answers this question, recreating her creative development.

Christie Logan is Morag's first mentor, who teaches her the power of myth. Morag, as an orphan, is a *nuisance*, and so it is logical that she is *collected* by the *Scavenger*, who tends the *Nuisance Grounds*, as Manawaka terms its garbage dump, the graveyard where the townsfolk consign their bottles of spirits and aborted babies—the refuse they refuse to acknowledge. Christie, a Celtic Christ or scapegoat figure, as Michel Fabre observes,¹⁰ is a savior or *saviour*, and Morag is one of "*Christie's salvage operations*" (15). Manawaka views Morag as *white trash*, but Christie's view is "Bad Riddance to Good Rubbish" (35). Christie and Prin provide Morag with a room of her own where she can write herself to sleep when attacked by a spell of the Hill Street blues, because Christie teaches her how to transform garbage into gold.

Christie gives Morag not just a home but a history. When Morag discovers in *The Clans and Tartans of Scotland* that “The chieftainship of Clan Gunn is undetermined at the present time, and no arms have been matriculated” (40), Christie makes her a myth in his *Tales of Piper Gunn*, the legendary figure who led the dispossessed Scottish crofters from Sutherland to the Red River Valley: “Piper Gunn, he was a great tall man, a man with the voice of drums and the heart of a child and the gall of a thousand and the strength of conviction” (41). Because Jones notes, “There are too many Piper stories here told successively,” Laurence responds, “I have cut out the bizarre and funny ones, as not having the right tone and also not being necessary.” Morag tells Christie on his deathbed, “you’ve been my father to me” (323), because he is her father in myth.

Christie gives Morag not just a history but a *herstory*, a term Laurence uses in her memoir, by creating a namesake, a matriarch or madonna figure, in Piper Gunn’s wife: “Now Piper Gunn had a woman, and a strapping strong woman she was, with the courage of a falcon and the beauty of a deer and the warmth of a home and the faith of saints, and you may know her name. Her name, it was Morag” (41). Laurence portrays Morag weaving her own fictions around her namesake in “*Morag’s Tale of Piper Gunn’s Woman*,” who has “*the power and the second sight and the good eye and the strength of conviction*” (42). Morag weaves Christie into her saga as Clowny Macpherson, an apt pseudonym for Christie, that archetypal jester or wise fool who wears a loony mask to protect his true self from scorn. In the typescript, Morag gives Clowny an axe named for Bonnie Prince Charlie, incorporating history and myth. Laurence argues, “Morag’s early story about Clowny Macpherson . . . this has to remain, because it is her way of dealing with Christie at that point, trying to make him (although she does not realize it) into a kind of acceptable figure in her mythology, the scrawny funny guy who at the same time is a great axeman and chops down the trees for making houses, at the time of Piper Gunn.” The mature Morag reflects Christie’s influence when she declares, “The myths are my reality” (319).¹¹

Christie also gives Morag her factual history by weaving stories of her father, Colin Gunn, into his tales of Piper Gunn. The

typescript shows Morag composing a story about her father as a war hero saving his mate's life in a bloody battle and being decorated with a medal for courage. Jones directs Laurence to "Cut Morag's tale of Gunner Gunn." Laurence responds, "Morag's childhood stories of Piper Gunn's wife and the chariot (influence Ossian) and Clowny Macpherson (a re-imagining of Christie) and her father Colin are, I think, necessary," yet she cuts them anyway. This story shows Morag incorporating fact and fiction; as she says subsequently, "I like the thought of history and fiction interweaving" (341).

Jules Tonnerre reinforces Christie's model of the oral tradition of folklore and myth later in his "*Tale of Rider Tonnerre*" celebrating the *Chevalier*, "Prince of the Braves," leader of the Métis or *Bois-Brûlés*, who had a rifle called *La Petite* and a magical horse named *Roi du Lac* that arose from a lake in a dream, like King Arthur's sword *Excalibur* in Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* (117–118). Jules appears to Morag as a *Shadow* on her first, secret visit to the Nuisance Grounds, for he too is a scavenger who shares Christie's gift of turning garbage into gold. Jules *saves* Morag sexually and helps make her a writer by liberating her true *voice* from "someplace beyond language" (112). But Jones directs, "Cut story. Summary good." Laurence responds, "I've cut a little, but left them pretty much as they were, with a few later references to them by Morag. The conjunction of Jules's and Christie's tales demonstrates to Morag the deficiencies of history as taught in school."

School continues Morag's training as a writer by introducing her to print culture. Morag anticipates the first day of school: "when she goes home today she will know how to read" (26). But Eva "Weakguts" Winkler, the alter ego who commits the acts that Morag fears doing, teaches Morag the importance of retention. Morag learns to contain her emotions, like her precious bodily fluids, spilling them onto the orderly lines of a scribbler. She has not learned to read: "But she has learned one thing for sure. Hang onto your shit and never let them know you are ascaered" (28).

When Morag is introduced to print culture in school, Christie's critique of the canon is concise: "What in hell is this crap? *I wandered lonely as a cloud*. This Wordsworth, now, he was a

pansy, girl, or no, maybe a daffodil? Clouds don't wander lonely, for the good christ's sake. Any man daft enough to write a line like that, he wanted his head looked at, if you ask me. Look here, I'll show you a poem, now, then" (51). And he reads her a poem about the Celtic warrior Cuchullin by the Gaelic poet Ossian from two of his favourite tomes, introducing her to the oral tradition.

Morag's attempt to follow Ossian into poetry proves abortive, for Mrs. McKee, the Sunday school teacher, is not impressed with Morag's verse version of "The Wise Men." When she reads aloud a poem by Hilaire Belloc—"He made Him small fowl out of clay,/ And blessed them till they flew away" (66)—Morag is so deflated that she burns her poem. Mrs. McKee is a failed mentor, then, although she does teach Morag that poetry is not her métier.

Morag's true mentor is Miss Melrose, her high school teacher perhaps modelled on Mildred Musgrove, who taught Laurence English at Neepawa Collegiate (*Dance* 77).¹² Miss Melrose gives Morag literary models, like Wordsworth, but more important, she encourages her to write stories. Musgrove encouraged Laurence to write and publish poems like "Pagan Point" and stories like "Goodwill Towards Men," a possible response to Kipling's chilling war story "Mary Postgate," in the *Annals of the Black and Gold*, which Laurence edited and Musgrove mimeographed.¹³ Miss Melrose helps Morag realize that writing will be her life's work: "Now it is as though a strong hand has been laid on her shoulders. Strong and friendly. But merciless" (99–100). Laurence records a similar epiphany in her memoir when she realized, "I have to be a writer" (*Dance* 74).

A writer must be a *seer*, a *see-er*. Perceiving Morag's myopia, Miss Melrose urges her to get glasses, a symbol of vision for Laurence. Although they make Morag resemble "a tall skinny owl whose only redeeming feature is a thirty-six-inch bust" (100), she can now *see*. So elated is she at being able to see leaves on trees that she composes a story that she says "will never see the light of day. 'Wild Roses'" (101). Little did Laurence know how right Morag was, for Jones asks her to omit the story and replace it with this summary: "Sentimental in places? The young teacher not marrying the guy because she couldn't bear to live on a farm—

would that really happen? Maybe all that about the wild roses is overdone?" (101). Perhaps Jones was right, for the story is sentimental and the style adolescent. But that was Laurence's point—to demonstrate Morag's crude idiom and literary immaturity. Morag's fictions dramatize her development, as does the developing idiom of Stephen Dedalus from childish lisp to sophomoric pedantry in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Laurence omits most of Morag's stories as Jones directs, merely noting, "I have left in one or two of her very early stories because I think these are necessary, and they are also very short."

Laurence reflects her own literary training in another manner by including Morag's journalism experience. Morag reports for the *Manawaka Banner*, recalling the *Neepawa Banner*, where Laurence worked before she ultimately graduated to the *Winnipeg Citizen*. Morag's experience in journalism proves abortive, however, when "a genuine news story" (128)—the death of Piquette Tonnerre and her babies in a fire—makes her realize that she cannot profit from others' pain. Although fiction, not fact, is Morag's métier, reporting influences her writing, as it has so many authors, by teaching her the importance of *infactuality*, a term she coins in the typescript of *The Diviners*. Although journalism proves not to be Morag's métier any more than poetry was, she promises Christie, "I'll—write" (140). And she does, though not to him.

Halls of Sion portrays Morag, an escape artist like the young Laurence, "swiftly into life" (141) in Winnipeg. Like Laurence, Morag is out there "dancing on the earth" (*Dance* 108) when she enters the "brave new world" (*Dance* 94) of the university, as Laurence puts it in her memoir, where she is influenced by Donne and Milton, as taught to her by Professor Brooke Skelton in a seventeenth-century course like the one that Malcolm Ross taught Laurence at United College.

Brooke is Morag's mentor who teaches her the English canon and critiques her compositions, censoring her lack of historical contextualization. But Jones directs, "Condense all these literary essays. Enough to give a sense of what attracted Brooke." Laurence responds, "the Milton and Donne bits have been cut, and the whole university scene, literature-wise, has been put into one scene which carries on the narrative and includes Brooke's

first attraction to Morag." Laurence omits this interesting footnote to Morag's literary development—both Morag's essays and her marginalia on *Paradise Lost* that prophesy problems that will plague the Skelton marriage.

Morag writes "Fields of Green and Gold" about Al McBain, a prairie farmer driven to despair during the *dirty thirties* when the "Drought and Depression were like evil deities" (*Heart* 239). When the story is published in the college magazine *Veritas*, meaning truth, with her real name, Morag is appalled: "Why did she submit it under her own name. Imagine writing *Morag Gunn* in cold blue ink" (152). Laurence recalls publishing poems in *The Manitoban* under the pseudonym Steve Lancaster and laments, "How long, how regrettably long, it took me to find my true voice as a woman writer" (*Dance* 5). Morag thinks, "*I do not know the sound of my own voice*" (210). Discovering her own voice as a woman writer is the process Laurence recreates in *The Diviners*. But Morag's, or Margaret's, voice is silenced in this story, as Jones directs, "Summarize story—its ideas rather than plot." Laurence replaces the story with a skeleton plot outline that lacks the life of the word made flesh in Morag's sentimental style. Morag's reflections on her character's resemblance to herself are suggestive, however, as she realizes, "The child *isn't* her. Can the story child really exist separately? Can it be both her and not her?" (147), reflecting the way Morag resembles Margaret. Even though the story is omitted, it proves pivotal in Morag's personal life, for it catalyzes her friendship with Ella Gerson, modelled on Adele Wiseman, and it instigates her relationship with Brooke, who finds the story "promising" (153)—so promising that he initiates a romance with her. A Pygmalion, Brooke wants to mould this girl with the "mysterious nonexistent past" (158) in his own image. Pygmalion becomes Frankenstein, however, when Morag becomes a feminist.

Morag also composes "The Mountain," a tale of an Austrian count who replicates his family's feudal system in Canada. Laurence published in *Vox*, the United College journal, a similar story, "*Tal des Walde*," in which she employs a framework that prefigures the narrative methods of *The Diviners*. It is unfortunate that she excised this fiction from the novel, for it prophesies

Morag's relationship with Brooke, a Prospero figure, who ironically judges the story "implausible" (156).

Marriage to Brooke means leaving Morag Gunn behind in Manawaka to become Mrs. Skelton in the "Vile Metropolis," as Laurence called Toronto (*Dance* 180). But marriage promotes her education, as Morag reads through Brooke's library. His condescending critiques of her creative compositions make her realize they are "trivial and superficial" (182). But she continues to write, progressing from stories to novels, as she searches for her own voice through ventriloquism via her heroines. Her outburst about Hopkins during Brooke's honours seminar demonstrates that writing provides the *rite* of passage that gives her the *right* to express her own opinions.

Brooke is a hard man to *read*, but his nightmares in Raj Mataj about *Minoo*, his Hindu *Ayah* who initiated him sexually, reveal the "demons and webs" (*Jest* 189) that help Morag to interpret his sex games. Deprived of a baby by Brooke, who wants to keep Morag as his *child*, his *Little One*, Morag gives birth to her first protagonist, Lilac Stonehouse, who abandons her brutal father and her hometown and "lights out for the city. An old story" (184)—Morag's story, in fact.

Morag writes five novels in *The Diviners*—*Spear of Innocence*, *Prospero's Child*, *Jonah*, *Shadow of Eden*, and *The Diviners* itself, plus a collection of stories titled *Presences* that parallel Laurence's own creative production. Most of Morag's embedded fictions are omitted from the novel at Jones's request, with brief summaries replacing several pages of plot. Laurence notes:

Plots of her novels have been cut entirely. Instead, I have tried to work into the central narrative some idea of what she is writing about, without breaking the narrative flow by telling plots. I've just included, in most cases, enough to (hopefully) give some idea of what her material is; how it connects and also doesn't connect with her own life; and enough comments from her, and also a few bits of reviews of her books, to give credence to the fact that she *is* a writer.

Morag's embedded novels act as mirrors to reflect her literary development and, by extension, Laurence's artistic alchemy, as she

portrays Morag transforming life into fiction. Laurence argues, "Each novel is a subtle distortion of Morag's life or expression of it, but in masked terms until the last novel (*Diviners*)." So "I think just a glimpse of each novel (character *and* theme) is necessary, plus some reference to the ways it *relates* and also *does not* relate to Morag." Laurence embeds summaries of Morag's novels in memorybank movies, while omitting the actual stories, as Jones directs. The way Morag's heroines reflect her own situation and self suggests how Morag mirrors Margaret, making *The Diviners* resemble a hall of mirrors.

In *Spear of Innocence*, Laurence portrays a writer's reality, recreating the creative process—from the "half-lunatic sense of possession" (212), through the painful process of revision, to the reviews—but Morag's marginal responses to the reviews are omitted from the manuscript. While the novel itself is excised from the text, the summary suggests that Lilac Stonehouse is Morag's shadow self, reflecting her inner reality, as well as facets of other people in a composite character, combining Fan Brady's vulnerability, Eva Winkler's abortion, and Morag's own escapist impulse.

Spear of Innocence proves to be Morag's *Open Sesame*, for she escapes from her prison in the Skeltons' Crestwood Ivory Tower, where she dramatizes herself as Rapunzel, by writing—her (*w*)rites of passage. Fictions become frictions when she realizes she is living a lie, painting on a smile for Brooke when she prefers to join Lilac in the seedy nightclub Crowe's Cave (184). A "Method writer," Morag stops writing hours before Brooke gets home so she can emerge from her fictional character, her shadow self, and get back inside her own skin—as Laurence records doing in her memoir. This first novel proves pivotal when Morag realizes she has outgrown Brooke and his condescending critiques. When she rebels, she does so in Christie's idiosyncratic idiom, his "loony oratory, salt-beefed with oaths" (209), for she has yet to find her own voice.

When *Spear of Innocence* is published, Morag is empowered to abandon Brooke, her Prospero. An Ariel figure, she is aided in her escape by Jules, a Caliban perhaps, the *shaman* who performs the *magic* (*rough magic?*) of liberating her by impregnating her, for a mother cannot remain a *child*. In the manuscript, Morag wonders

whether she did it just to get the plot for a new novel. Publishing *Spear of Innocence* under the name Gunn, not Skelton, signals to Brooke Morag's new independence. Similarly, *The Stone Angel* empowered Laurence to separate from her husband and embark on independence by travelling to England with her children Jocelyn and David in hand and *Hagar* in a handbag (the manuscript of her first Manawaka novel)—her two types of offspring: “Strange reason for breaking up a marriage: a novel. I had to go with the old lady” (*Dance* 158). The parallels between Morag's and Margaret's manuscripts and the relationship between actual and fictional authors and their protagonists suggest that the original text of *Spear of Innocence* would illuminate Laurence's creative process further, but the excised pages have been destroyed.

Morag's second novel reflects her own marriage explicitly. She describes it in a letter to Ella that replaces the fiction Jones excised from the text: “It's called *Prospero's Child*, she being the young woman who marries His Excellency, the Governor of some island in some ocean very far south, and who virtually worships him and then who has to go to the opposite extreme and reject nearly everything about him, at least for a time, in order to become her own person. It's as much the story of H.E.” (270). “H.E.” reflects Brooke Skelton, but this skeleton outline does not clarify the artistic alchemy of transforming life into fiction that could illuminate Laurence's own creative processes. Morag notes, “It's done in semi-allegorical form, and also it has certain parallels with *The Tempest*” (270)—parallels *The Diviners* shares, as Gayle Greene notes,¹⁴ although the parallels of Mira's marriage with Morag's and, by extension, with Margaret's may be even more intriguing. Laurence notes, “Morag admits parallels with Shakespeare and with her own life.” Morag reflects on the implications of these parallels in a suggestive passage of the manuscript that Jones omits.

Morag's next publication is a collection of short stories entitled *Presences*, which may reflect *A Bird in the House*, a “semi-autobiographical” (*Heart* 5) *kunstlerroman* like *The Diviners*. But *Presences* fails to illuminate Laurence's own creativity, for the only reference left in the text is the fact that Mr. Sampson, proprietor of “AGONISTES BOOKSHOP,” displays it in the window.

Morag's third novel, *Jonah*, is also excised and replaced with a skeleton summary that lacks all the life of the word made flesh in fiction. But the brief outline of Coral and her widower father, Jonah the fisherman, reflects Morag's relationship with Christie, whose tales of Piper Gunn Morag is currently repeating to Pique. *Jonah* may also recall Laurence's third novel, *A Jest of God*, which employs a verse about the tomb of Jonah, from Carl Sandburg's poem *Losers*, for its epigraph.

Rites of Passage, the penultimate part of *The Diviners*, could indeed have been titled *Writes of Passage*, for Morag lives by her pen, and her confidence grows with each new publication: "*Jonah* has been taken by a book club, *Spear of Innocence* and *Prospero's Child* are coming out in paperback, and a film option has been taken on *Spear*" (336). Morag has arrived as a writer just as clearly as Laurence, who won the Governor General's Award for *A Jest of God*, which was optioned by Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward and made into the film *Rachel, Rachel*.

Morag's fourth novel is titled *Shadow of Eden*, recalling her marginalia on Milton's *Paradise Lost*, "Exit from Eden," which was omitted from the published text. The ten-page narrative in the typescript is replaced by Morag's account in a letter to Ella that clarifies her historical sources:

Odd—the tales Christie used to tell of Piper Gunn and the Sutherlanders, and now this book deals with the same period. The novel follows them on the sea journey to Hudson Bay, through that winter at Churchill and then on the long walk to York Factory in the spring . . . The man who led them on that march, and on the trip by water to Red River, was young Archie Macdonald, but in my mind the piper who played them on will always be that giant of a man, Piper Gunn, who probably never lived in so-called real life but who lives forever. Christie knew things about inner truths that I am only just beginning to understand. (341)

Laurence notes, "A letter to Ella contains all I am going to use re the novel and all I am going to use of Infactuality, in a few pages." *Shadow of Eden* is all that is left of the part of *The Diviners* called *Infactuality* that recounts the history of the Highland Clearances that Laurence researched. Perhaps the editors were right to excise the historical material, but Morag's novel is a great loss, because

Laurence's notes reveal that *Shadow of Eden* recounts the experience of Fiona MacLeod, who emigrates with the Sutherlanders to the Red River Valley. Her husband, the piper, perishes on the voyage, and she arrives in the new land, perceived as a "Dark Eden," as a widow with an infant—a single mother like Morag and like Laurence herself at the time of writing *The Diviners*. *Shadow of Eden* reflects Christie's tales of Piper Gunn, as well as the biography of her ancestor Archie Macdonald that Laurence's friend Jean Murray Cole was researching while Laurence was researching her historical novel.¹⁵ *Shadow of Eden*, which takes Morag over three years to write, reflects *The Diviners* itself and is mirrored in "The dispossessed" (309), as Morag titles Dan McRaith's portrait of a Scots woman set against burning crofts. *The Diviners* is indeed a hall of mirrors, and *Shadow of Eden* may be the missing reflection.

Morag's last novel is not named, although the fifth and final part of *The Diviners* is titled "The Diviners." At the end of the narrative, Laurence writes, "Morag returned to the house, to write the remaining private and fictional words, and to set down her title" (370). She *sets down* her title in the dual sense of *inscribing* it and *passing* the torch to the younger generation embodied in Pique, who combines the words and music, Celtic and Métis myths, to celebrate her dual heritage in the song that concludes *The Diviners*. Like Royland, whose gift of divining is gone, Morag becomes the Prospero figure who breaks her wand and frees her spirit Ariel when she says to her daughter, "Go with God" (368), as Pique heads west, continuing the eternal cycle. Although she gives Pique the Tonnerre hunting knife that severed the thread of her father's life, she withholds the plaid pin until she is "gathered to [her] ancestors" (367).

We may assume that the title Morag sets down would be *The Diviners*.¹⁶ And we would be right, because in both her notes and manuscript, Laurence concludes with a final page inscribing the words, "THE DIVINERS, an unpublished novel by Morag Gunn," surrounded by a black border like an obituary. This separate closing page is also an opening title page, creating a Möbius strip effect, as it brings the novel back to its beginning in a cyclical motion. But Jones objected: "Cut plot—too closely related to the problems of this novel . . . same applies to title."¹⁷ So we will never

know how Morag's final fiction related to Laurence's last novel. Silence has the last word: "Look ahead into the past, and back into the future, until the silence" (370).

What, then, has been gained and lost in the editorial process? Certainly the excision of over one hundred passages achieved comparative concision and saved the novel from becoming an unwieldy monster, but at what cost? The summaries replacing Morag's stories have none of the vitality of the word made flesh in fiction; Morag's literary development in the maturation of her idiom is lost; connections between Morag's life and fiction, which might reflect parallels between Laurence's life and art, are lost. Such reflections could illuminate Laurence's artistic alchemy, clarifying the way she transformed life into art. These missing links are revealed by the typescript of the novel, however, which consequently constitutes a shadow text, haunting *The Diviners*.

NOTES

1. "Time and the Narrative Voice," *The Narrative Voice: Short Stories and Reflections by Canadian Authors*, ed. John Metcalf (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972), 127.
2. "'Tales in the Telling': *The Diviners* as Fiction About Fiction," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 9 (1977-1978): 154.
3. The annotated typescript of *The Diviners*, in box 3, files 1-3, of the Margaret Laurence Archives in the Special Collections of the Mills Memorial Library at McMaster University has been consulted with the permission of Laurence's estate and the assistance of Librarian Charlotte Stewart-Murphy, Carl Spadoni, and staff.
4. Quotations from Laurence's unpaginated preparatory notes for *The Diviners* and responses to Jones's requests for revisions, all collected in the York University Archives, are prefaced by the phrase "Laurence notes" and are included with the permission of Laurence's estate.
5. Jack McClelland's correspondence at McMaster University is quoted with the permission of Jack McClelland.
6. Judith Jones's requests for revisions to *The Diviners*, with Laurence's responses, collected in the York University Archives, are quoted with the permission of Laurence's estate. At a meeting with Nora Foster Stovel at her Knopf office in New York City in June 1998, Judith Jones remarked that Laurence, when she was revising *The Diviners*, was not very well.

7. In "Christie's Real Country. Where I Was Born': Story-Telling, Loss and Subjectivity in *The Diviners*," Paul Hjartarson concludes that "our understanding of *The Diviners* develops out of our sense of the relation between the two narrative levels, between the NOW and the THEN" (63).
8. "Hagar's Old Age: *The Stone Angel* as *Vollendungsroman*." *Crossing the River: Essays in Honour of Margaret Laurence*, ed. Kristjana Gunnars (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1988), 25.
9. John Lennox, ed., *Margaret Laurence—Al Purdy: A Friendship in Letters* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1993), 270.
10. "Words and the World: *The Diviners* as an Exploration of the Book of Life," *Canadian Literature* 93 (1982): 62.
11. In "You Have to Go Home Again: Art and Life in *The Diviners*," *World Literature Written in English* 20 (1981), J.A. Wainwright discusses Morag's investigation of "the relationship between her art and her life" (293) and "between fact and fiction in her life" (311).
12. Mildred Musgrove, at the Margaret Laurence Memorial Conference held at Brandon in 1988, affirmed in conversation that *The Diviners* reflected Laurence's experience at Neepawa Collegiate in English literature and composition and that Melrose may have been modelled on Musgrove.
13. See *Embryo Words: Margaret Laurence's Early Writings*, edited by Nora Foster Stovel (Edmonton: Juvenilia Press, 1997) and *Colors of Speech: Margaret Laurence's Early Writings*, edited by Nora Foster Stovel (Edmonton: Juvenilia Press, 2000).
14. In "Margaret Laurence's *Diviners* and Shakespeare's *Tempests*: The Uses of the Past," *Women's Revisions of Shakespeare*, ed. Marianne Novy (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1990), Gayle Greene explores "Laurence's adaptation of Shakespeare" in *The Diviners*'s "parallels with *The Tempest*," arguing that Laurence portrays Morag assuming "the powers of Prospero" (178).
15. Cole told Laurence the piper who led the Selkirk settlers was named Gunn (*Dance* 201).
16. In *River of Now and Then: Margaret Laurence's The Diviners* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1993), Susan Warwick writes: "The reader's recognition of *The Diviners* as both Morag's text and Laurence's text suggests that it may be read as both a fictionalized rendering of Morag's life and of Laurence's" (45).
17. Laurence notes, "have deleted THE DIVINERS—but 'to set down her title'—I hope this does have a double meaning—both Morag putting down the title of the book (her childhood etc. which she's been writing) and setting down in the sense of giving over her title as novelist to the kids. This really good, not despairing."

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Listening: Laurence's Women

KRISTJANA GUNNARS

DURING A CONVERSATION with Nick in *A Jest of God*, when Nick is talking about immigrants, Rachel thinks: "as though things had been easy for the people I came from, easy back into prehistory and forward for ever. What does he know about it?" (106)

Suddenly I feel stultified by this conversation. It is a Canadian conversation. Everything Margaret Laurence touches becomes/is *so Canadian*. So Canadian that, as Antonin Artaud says, "nerves tensed the whole length of my legs" (80). I wanted to run.

Before I ever knew Canada, I saw the Prairies through the eyes of Margaret Laurence. I saw through the eyes of *A Jest of God*, to be exact, sometime back in the sixties. The Prairies were a place where women stopped talking. There was "nothing left but the voluminous abysses, the immobility, the cold—," to use Artaud's words. Where women said, like Rachel, "I don't know."

I don't know. I believe Artaud was sober when he warned: "One mustn't let in too much literature" (80). One's ability to interpret reality becomes confused. How unlike the fiction of history is the fiction of Laurence. In Laurence's fictional world, the prairie is where a strange stasis occurs. A hiatus in the move toward the west. Into the west, in fact, where you continually go back in time until you get to the day before.

How unlike the *drive* we have been told about by historians. "Go West, Young Man," toward Enterprise, Saskatchewan. I think of the way in which Edward Said characterizes *America*: "the pioneering spirit, errand into the wilderness, the obliteration of another society, and the continual sense of enterprise, that enterprise is good for its own sake, especially because a Book says so. It doesn't matter that enterprise means killing people . . . it's enterprise of a particular kind, the kind associated with a new settler society. And with it goes a tremendous hostility to traditional societies" (99).

If I compare such commentary on pioneer societies and their descendants with the treatment of these in Laurence's novels, I cannot help thinking Said has no idea what he is talking about. In any case, he is not talking about the women.

"The sun needles me," says Hagar in the opening of chapter 7 of *The Stone Angel*, "and I'm awake. Why am I so stiff and sore? What's the matter with me? Then I see where I am, and that I've slept with my clothes on, and even my shoes, and only my cardigan to keep me warm. I feel compelled to get out of this stuffy place and find fresh air, and yet I'm disinclined to move" (185).

What do I mean by *Canadian*? By a *Canadian conversation*? By trying to characterize Laurence's fictional universe? What is it? Above all, I sense now and sensed almost immediately when I first encountered Laurence, it is *unhappy*. I have discovered that Canada is an unhappy country. No, better still, the Prairies are unhappy. Canadian women are especially unhappy. Artists, Canadian writers, Canadian books are unhappy. Is this acknowledged? The unhappy West?

Let me quote a great Canadian, Hubert Aquin. Perhaps my favourite Canadian? Aquin writes in "Form and (Dis-)content": "What can artists possibly teach me if they take it into their heads to be happy? How can they go on surprising me? I have no need of works born in the debilitating climate of acceptance. Whether they be novelists, poets or painters, artists are professionals of unhappiness. And I mean professionals, not amateurs!" (5)

How many of us have thought, on the side, without mentioning it, just as a private reflection, that Laurence's career

consisted of exploring the mineshafts of unhappiness: those cold, dark caverns, walls dripping with coal-black sweat?

To quote Aquin again: "My point is this: the greatness of a work of art is not necessarily proportional to its creator's unhappiness. That would really be too easy. Unhappiness, too, is an art. The unhappiness I am talking about, the only kind that is productive, is the sign of a deep commitment; it is a vocation and not just a matter of chance" (5). Just so, I think. A matter of commitment.

Let me go further. "The sun needles me . . . Yet I am disinclined to move," Hagar says. What is this commitment? The unhappy commitment not to move. Not to move in spite of the pain of being still: perhaps because it is painful not to move. The commitment to observe pain, such as it is. Like Baudelaire, like Balzac, like Pascal, like Aquin: their "difficulty of being" seen "to the full" (Aquin 5).

This commitment concerns what Julia Kristeva calls "An Aesthetics of Awkwardness." Here is how Kristeva wishes to distinguish *unhappy* speech from ordinary narrative: "The affected rhetoric of literature and even the common rhetoric of everyday speech always seem somewhat festive. How can one speak the truth of pain, if not by holding in check the rhetorical celebration, warping it, making it grate, strain, and limp?" (225). For this reason, Rachel says "I don't know" and Hagar says "What's the matter with me?"

Laurence's women are somewhat awkward, but because they choose to be so. In *The Fire-Dwellers*, Stacey Cameron is standing by the sink with a potato peeler in her right hand, thinking: "I recall one of my mother's bridge cronies in Manawaka, and every time she came over, she'd ask my mother to put on a record, and Mother would play the old-time one with a polka on one side and a schottische on the other, and the old dame would sit there as though under heavy sedation. Maybe she was dancing in her head" (303). Where else in the world does a woman sit "as though under heavy sedation" when she might be up dancing?

I don't know. Like Rachel. What are they waiting for, these women of Laurence? While the sun needles, the music plays, the man talks: why do they just sit there, still? Is it because, as H el ene

Cixous says in *The Newly Born Woman*, one of her *Sorties*, that “*In body/Still more: woman is body more than man is. Because he is invited to social success, to sublimation. More body hence more writing. For a long time, still, bodily, within her body she has answered the harassment, the familial conjugal venture of domestication, the repeated attempts to castrate her. Woman, who has run her tongue ten thousand times seven around her mouth before not speaking, either dies of it or knows her tongue and her mouth better than anyone*” (95).

Cixous and Clément can be much more plain spoken than this. The waiting, the being still, the not speaking are part of a *revolutionary* stance. Someday, all will out: “When ‘*The Repressed*’ of their culture and their society come back, it is an explosive return, which is *absolutely* shattering, staggering, overturning, with a force never let loose before . . . for at the end of the Age of the Phallus, women will have been either wiped out or heated to the highest, most violent, white-hot fire. Throughout their deafening dumb history, they have lived in dreams, embodied but still deadly silent, in silences, in voiceless rebellions” (95).

Exactly the way I see the Prairies. So much about Laurence’s women explains the Canadian Prairie: an earthquake waiting to happen, perhaps. A dam waiting to break. The stillness before the storm. That magical moment that takes the appearance of eternity and emanates out of itself as if endlessly. Laurence’s women are *so Canadian*.

Aquin, in his essay “The Mystic Body,” quotes Wilhelm Stekel’s *Frigidity in Woman in Relation to Her Love Life* in order to comment on Quebec as the frigid woman. But this is Stekel’s characterization: “Sexual feeling may be entirely absent. The woman may miss both the forepleasure and the orgasm . . . The women admit that they are glowing with yearnings, that they crave the orgasm, but complain that they are unable to attain it” (60). Aquin means to say that separatism acts as a stimulant. What is it that is so stimulating? Aquin’s answer: it is the “attitude of expectation” (60).

That is all. Just an attitude. May I say this about all of Canada, then, a nation that nourishes an “attitude of expectation”? Looking back at Hagar in *The Stone Angel*, there is that

moment when Mr. Troy sings the psalm: “*All people that on earth do dwell, / Sing to the Lord with joyful voice.*” (291). Suddenly she bursts out: “I would have wished it. This knowing comes upon me so forcefully, so shatteringly, and with such a bitterness as I have never felt before. I must always, always, have wanted that—simply to rejoice. How is it I never could?” (292).

That is the answer to the repetitious “I don’t know”: “I know, I know. How long have I known?” Hagar exclaims. “Or have I always known, in some far crevice of my heart, some cave too deeply buried, too concealed?” (292). That is, to quote myself, at last, Laurence’s career of exploring the mineshafts of unhappiness, those “cold, dark caverns.” Only to discover that it is possible to “rejoice,” or affirm, in *jouissance*, without moving from your spot. The obvious metaphor here is of the flower that blooms, the egg that hatches. It doesn’t matter which.

What we have here is not at all the *drive* that characterizes Said’s understanding of “settler societies” (nice term, in this context), of North Americans as forging into the wilderness—any wilderness—with a purpose. And it is possible to understand, more particularly, what Rachel means when she wonders whether Nick is unaware that it was not easy for her people either. The people not, in fact, characterized as *immigrants*. *Do you think it is easy to sit here and wait? To wait for you? Do you think it ever was?*

Oh, I don’t know. I just think it is wonderful to know, as Susan Howe says in speaking of Emily Dickinson, that “A tear is an intellectual think” (28). Let me, therefore, add to the imagery of the flower about to bloom and the egg about to hatch, this line from Emily Dickinson: “My life had stood—a loaded Gun—.” We know there is something in this concerning the American Civil War, but for my particular purposes, I like the notion of Laurence’s women, their stillness in time, their pregnant attitude, becoming so overtly political. A gun about to go off. As Cixous and Clément pointed out, those who come out of repression, do so in an “absolute,” “staggering” way, with a force never before let loose.

Did we not think Margaret Laurence was a political novelist? Did we not think politics had any place in art? In an interview with Bernard-Henri Lévy, Roland Barthes commented that “Politics is

not only speaking, it can also be listening. And maybe we're in need of a practice of political listening" (432). When asked about his politics, Barthes answered, further, that "politics is founded existentially. For example, power. It is not only that which oppresses or what is oppressive, it is also that which is stifling. Whenever I am stifled it means that power is operating somewhere" (433).

In this context, all of Laurence's fictional worlds are politically imbued. Her women protagonists are enmeshed in politics, and their attempt to speak, in fact to rejoice, is in and of itself a political act. Seen in these terms, it is easier to acknowledge that finding a voice is not easy, nor is finding a voice innocent. This is an intellectual activity, not to be underestimated. To not-speak is an act of refusal.

Perhaps, as Aquin might contend, happiness is reactionary after all? Happiness makes you talk so much, so festively, makes you so arrogant and smooth. Perhaps it is even stupid to talk too much? Is it not anti-climactic to celebrate a literature of those who refuse to speak, refuse to move? Of those who are, in a word, frigid? So why do you stay? I don't know. I suppose you know better. In Aquin's words, who ends his essay "The Text or the Surrounding Silence": "God alone is before us and around us... There is no getting out, which is why I stay. I stay and wait for the end of an endless flight" (120).

And perhaps it is appropriate to look back at the psalm Rachel is quoting at the end of *A Jest of God*, because those words bring together what I have been attempting to describe in Laurence: the one who listens in order to acquire joy, listens because of the consciousness of pain. *Make me to hear joy and gladness, that the bones which Thou hast broken may rejoice* (201).

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Sitting Down to Write: A Discourse of Morning

ROBERT KROETSCH

MARGARET LAURENCE'S *THE DIVINERS* continues to unfold itself as a major poetics of prose fiction. Certainly for her generation of Canadian writers (and I was a year her junior), possibly for generations to come, Laurence in 1974 offered a text that was at once explanatory and prophetic. What I propose to do here is to make a fairly close reading of one paragraph of that abundant text.

Anyone who has taught *The Diviners* to undergraduates and read their term papers is excruciatingly aware of the implications of that novel's famous first sentence and its first two paragraphs. Recklessly, I propose to leap over those two paragraphs in order to make a reading of the third:

Pique had gone away. She must have left during the night. She had left a note on the kitchen table, which also served as Morag's desk, and had stuck the sheet of paper into the typewriter, where Morag was certain to find it.

We persist in the conviction that the author begins from a blank sheet of paper. This assumption has held among writers and readers at least since the beginning of the Romantic period. *Tabula rasa*. *Ab ovo*. Sprung full-grown from the brow of Zeus. Making something out of nothing. The writer as creator. Virgin Mother or big bang. The very notion bestows upon the author a kind of godhead.

Morag Gunn, sitting down to her typewriter—sitting down to begin—finds she has already begun. Uncannily, the sheet of paper in her typewriter is written upon. The first page of her narrative is written. Morag is presented with characters and an action. In structuralist terms, she is confronted by—and she confronts—a double violation: an unexpected disordering of the world, an unexpected disordering of authorial control.

Morag Gunn, sitting down to begin, finds not only that she has begun. She has been begun. She has been positioned. Contrary to the assumption of authorial freedom, she has been left with almost nowhere to turn. She has been told that if Gord phones, “tell him I’ve drowned and gone floating down the river, crowned with algae and dead minnows, like Ophelia.”

To begin with, that is not where Pique has gone at all. If Morag delivers the message, she lies. If she does not deliver the message, she fails.

At first glance, then, Morag seems to be caught between lying and failing. She is in between a rock and a hard place. Life—or at least art—has got her, as Christie Logan might say, by the short hairs. Forced to act, she cannot avoid complicity. By that complicity she is empowered. By that same complicity, she is relegated.

Morag Gunn, sitting down to write, finds she has been written to. Intending to send a message, she has received one instead. She is being told what to do by someone who has up and cleared out. If writing is a god-game, then the power appears to reside with the one who is absent, not with the one who is present. But that is the way with gods. Presence announces not the writer’s sacred, but rather her profane, condition. She is in the here and now of time present, place present; she is in the world of contingency, surprise, short-sightedness. Her assignment is not simply to begin; it is to begin from the impossibility of beginning.

“Now please do not get all uptight, Ma,” Pique writes, constructing the person to whom she writes. Thanks to Pique, Morag is indeed all uptight. She’s wired. She’s a wreck. Consider, Pique says, what your writing has done to your Ma-ness. And before you

take your Ma-ness too seriously, remember that you are one of Shakespeare's myriad and perishing children.

Morag, by way of response, first off reads Pique's message as writing. She, as much as her daughter, confronts the question of agency. "Slightly derivative," Morag thinks, feebly, bravely, lovingly, of Pique's message.

To announce one's intention to write a novel is to announce one's intention to write what is already written. We are, as writers, always in the predicament of Goldilocks: "Someone has been sitting in my chair."

The chances of being original are less than slim. They don't exist. It is because they don't exist that one can be original. But that is a Kroetschian argument, not a Laurentian argument.

Morag Gunn sits down at her kitchen table to a typewriter. The kitchen table is one of the marks of her own self-construction—part of what we might call her signature—and the problem of writing what already exists is a problem in signing. Perhaps, then, the kitchen table is not only a mark of Morag Gunn's signature; it is also a mark of Margaret Laurence's signature. But let us avoid that question.

The typewriter signals a technology of writing that offers grave resistance to signatures of any sort. Some of us are old enough to remember a time when one did not write personal letters on a typewriter. To do so would have contradicted one's very intention.

The typewriter signals the Foucauldian technology by which we construct the act of writing—and by which we construct literature. The writer is part of an apparatus that produces the texts that society and culture require in order to be society and culture.

Morag Gunn counters that force—that power—with the kitchen table. With kitchen talk. The busy writer, avoiding work, works by gossiping. She gossips with herself. She brings to bear an alternate technology of production—a feminine technology, one might wish to say—that engages that typewriter in dialogue. She talks around the subject until the talking around becomes the subject.

With her positioning herself at a kitchen table that serves as a desk, she enters into a dialogue with the positioned self created by Pique. By placing her typewriter on that table become desk, Morag at once accepts a technology, and asserts her own agency within the elaborate apparatus that is going to establish her and use her as a writer. She lays claims to gender, to class, to social relationships of her own. But let us avoid those questions.

How does one begin if the page in the typewriter is already written? How does one read that page? How does one write with and against that page? Is it one's own writing that constitutes the intertextuality?

It is the very fullness of the page inserted by someone else in her typewriter that compels Morag Gunn. Tradition has created much of the fullness. But she too, by the writing of her novels, has done some of the filling. It is the fullness of that page, its overflow, not its emptiness, that enables Morag Gunn to write, even as she is threatened with a silencing.

By sticking that page "into" Morag's typewriter, Pique became the first enabler. In her own devious way, Pique is muse. "Am going west," she writes, the "I" not yet invented for that sentence. "Am going west." "Am" becomes a noun. Almost a proper name. To go west is to find "I" and to lose it in the finding. It is to turn "I" into a continuous exchange of resolving image and fading trace, of disappearance and innuendo and encompassing presence.

Pique's going forward in time carries Morag back into the genealogy of her own writing, and by that process forward too. Pique's note on the first page of the novel becomes the first page of the novel.

One is able to write one's absence, and in a way that is what Pique does. She writes a one-paragraph novel, and in the process lays claim to all the huge explanatory footnote that her mother will write as a consequence.

But there is another side to the story. The moment of loss invites silence, yes. But it also creates both the site for a speaking and a speaking out. When and where does the pained speaker erupt into words? More to the point—when does the pained body

erupt into words? Perhaps it is in the pained body that both Morag and Margaret find signature. But let us avoid that question.

Perhaps there is always another side to the story. The note that Pique sticks into the typewriter positions Morag between two discourses. Morag confronts the contingent and autobiographical moment. Yet Pique, shrewdly, to get to that moment, perhaps to control and shape it, invokes in her own writing the colonizing paradigm implicit in the notion of canonical writing. Perhaps Pique herself has internalized the paradigm. More probably, she reads her mother, that Ma from the west, as someone whose uprightness derives in part from a submission to the inhibiting paradigm that enables a daughter to conclude an abrupt message with the word "Ophelia."

Morag is caught up elaborately in pedagogy. Pedagogy becomes, obviously, an element in society's technological project. Morag's husband, as an agent of that technology, would diminish and even erase the autobiographical (at least for Morag if not for himself). He would have her embrace the discourses of truth we now associate with modernism and with empire.

Morag, in her resistance to the idea of Artist with a capital A, tries out other discourses. She quickly tells us that she is doing work, hard work, and that she is a tradesperson ("Don't knock the trade"). And yet from Royland's talk she has learned to venture beyond mere work. From the talk and silence of Christie and Prin she has learned to listen so totally that she is able to risk erasure as well as realization.

Sitting down to her kitchen table and to words, she sits down as an established and experienced writer—but also as a novice, as someone learning again and again, in a postmodern sense, not how to end, but rather how to begin.

Morag Gunn begins her novel by reading. This time she reads a message left in her typewriter, not by past generations, but by the next generation. She positions herself between—among—conflicting discourses. By that positioning she becomes a spokesperson for a Canadian poetics. It is the strategy of a preemptive cultural or political or social or economic force to have one discourse dominate. In Canada, the writer refuses the resolution into

dominancy. That resistance, that wariness of power, portrays itself in the various discourses at work, and at play, on the first page of Laurence's *The Diviners*.

We as readers, approaching the table, approaching the typewriter on the kitchen table become a desk, approaching the writer at work, discover that the writer at work is not writing at all but rather that she is reading. We as readers reading the text, first of the novel, then of the paragraph in the typewriter in the novel, discover that the first paragraph of the text could not have been the first paragraph of the text, because the first paragraph is already there on the sheet of paper in the typewriter in the text, and it was not written by the writer who is writing the novel. Or perhaps it was.

Now we know we are Canadian readers reading a Canadian text about a Canadian poetics of fictional prose. It is, it turns out, necessary, after all, to refer to the description of morning in Margaret Laurence's text. In that description we find the phrase so dear to our students, and now so reassuring to our critic—"apparently impossible contradiction."

And now we are prepared to leap again over the first and second paragraphs, and over the third and fourth paragraphs as well. I see I have said nothing about Pique's having left at night. What is the discourse of night in *The Diviners*? How does that painful discourse engage in equal and balanced and Canadian dialogue the discourse of morning? But let me avoid those questions.

Now we can begin to read the apparently impossible contradictions included in paragraph five: "Pique was eighteen. Only. Not dry behind the ears. Yes, she was, though. If only there hadn't been that other time when Pique took off, that really bad time."

Yes, it is not a difficult text to read. But no, it is though.

She is not here. We miss her. She is here.

Margaret Laurence: The Shape of the Writer's Shadow

ARITHA VAN HERK

IN REMBRANDT VAN RIJN'S FAMOUS PAINTINGS in which he depicts the "anatomy lessons" of various doctors teaching their profession, the autopsies being performed are shown as starting with a dissection of the hand or arm. Although the paintings are masterful renditions that speak to the quick (those standing) and the dead (the unfortunate cadaver) of the human body, they arouse an image that closes on the practice of reading. It is unfortunate that we tend to treat the writer's oeuvre as a version of cadaver, and the readers as the avid students clustered around to view the internal workings of the mysterious and beautiful body, which might still be in the throes of a soulful ascent. But rather than lament that process, I want to raise the more arcane question of where such dissection begins. Rembrandt paints as if the anatomy lesson begins at the arm, that extension of the body that we use so handily for our pointings and connections, our gestured intentions. The fact is, most of these anatomy lessons began not by an intricate introduction to one of the body's extremities or digital limbs, but by splitting the thorax, the main trunk, wide open. But a painter will use every possible excuse to paint a body's landscape, even a cadaver, and the "fact" of the anatomy lesson's procedure was something that Rembrandt ignored in favour of the felicity of his painting. So perhaps the critic ought to follow his example and begin, not with the oeuvre,

but with Laurence's writing hand, that simple five-fingered hand that cannot keep up with the spate of Morag's words at the end of *The Diviners*.

A painter, confronted with the body and spirit of the work of Margaret Laurence now, would know that she was only trying to paint a shadow. The shape of any writer's shadow is an uneasy eidolon, not simply determinable by that which composes the writer's cadaver: text and life, oeuvre and memory. More evocatively, the shape of a writer's shadow is the contradictory and uncontainable mystery that Laurence herself attributes to the river that flows both ways, an "apparently impossible contradiction, made apparent and possible" (*The Diviners* 3). For the shape of Laurence's shadow is a vivid enactment of the contradictory joy and terror of writing, that pliant and vanishing *process* that defies the scalpel of any pathologist critic, but that might begin at the hand.

The ancients believed that a person's shadow was one of her several souls, elusive, indefinable, both lithesome and formidable. This ghostly salamander danced around the outline of the body like a reputation more than a corporeal dependent. A woman without a shadow is dangerous; it is the shadow that proves (as in tests) the life. For Laurence, the interception of the body with illumination (the cause of all shadows) was writing, the act of writing. She called it work, a simple but complex designation, her pact with the spirits of both light and darkness.

"You working yet, Morag?" asks Royland in *The Diviners*. She says, "He got the word right now. Once he used to ask her if she was doing any writing these days. Until he learned that the only meaning the word *work* had for her was writing, which was peculiar, considering that it was more of a free gift than work, when it was going well, and the only kind of work she enjoyed doing" (80). *The Diviners* is a novel within that framing of work, engrossed in its own act of creation, occupied by writing as a central fugue in the complex and contrapuntal act of living. Of all Laurence's work, it might be considered the text that shadows Laurence the most, that seems to intercept the writer and her life, her dread and desire, her living profession and its issue.

The last thing I want to argue for *The Diviners* is autobiographical urgency. To the extent that all writers must obsess themselves with their process, every text negotiates a metafictional comment; such distractions become commonplace. I would argue rather that *The Diviners* does more than merely resurrect or gesture toward the presence of the writer in the text. In her investigation of a realm that is both shadow and semblance, Laurence guides the reader toward the kingdom of communion, where the world that we daily negotiate becomes the text of a culture and a country, a shadow but a shadow that reaches out a hand.

Early in *The Diviners*, Morag talks about the terrible duplicity of words, what they can and cannot do: “*I used to think words could do anything. Magic. Sorcery. Even miracle. But no, only occasionally*” (4). Morag Gunn lives on words, with words, through words, editing herself as we watch and read, voyeurs—or anatomy students—while she fumbles with her tools: “How could that colour be caught in words?” (4). “The river was the colour of liquid bronze this morning, the sun catching it. Could that be right? No. Who had ever seen liquid bronze? Not Morag, certainly. Probably no one could catch the river’s colour with paints, much less words. A daft profession. Wordsmith. Liar, more likely. Weaving fabrications. Yet, with typical ambiguity, convinced that fiction was more true than fact. Or that fact was in fact fiction” (21). Fact is in fact fiction. Transparent as Morag’s interpretation of her “daft profession” seems to be, this early and pointed paragraph shadows the entire novel, and the entire corpus of Laurence’s work. A wry self-deprecation, it is also a warning. Coming as it does on the heels of the early morning phone call from the aspiring writer who wants to know how to get started, meaning how to get *published*—a medical student who has not yet had an anatomy lesson—it gives notice to the entire chimerical smoke and mirrors gang of both critics and writers that a writer’s shadow is far less fetching than inspiration and its divine delights, far more demanding than getting to know someone in the publishing industry. Morag tells the woman, “I worked like hell, if you really want to know. I’ve told you. There’s no secret” (20).

In ancient times one could give one’s soul to a god by dedicating one’s shadow to him. In the course of *The Diviners* it

becomes clear that the dedicatory shadow that Morag Gunn has offered comprises both the writing that the writer is entangled with and the pedestrian work of that writing, its combined drudgery and exhilaration. That readers and critics persist in what might sometimes be comparable to such phone call interventions of Laurence and her work is a disturbing residue of the extent to which the writer as cadaver is encoded in our iconic degustations. We would rather the autopsied body, pinned to the dissecting table, than the shifting and Protean shadow of the writing act itself. Throughout *The Diviners* Laurence uses Morag Gunn to address and to deconstruct the terrible shadow cast by writing, the shadow of living with writing, writing as a living, the communion of the writing act.

The shape of the writer's shadow in *The Diviners* moves across the spectrum of what the writer's soul must negotiate. "We're not in the business of immortality," said Laurence at the great 1978 Calgary Conference on the Canadian Novel, when the list of the hundred most important Canadian novels was topped by *The Stone Angel*. "Lucky me," says Morag, early in *The Diviners*. "I've got my work to take my mind off my life. At forty-seven that's not such a terrible state of affairs. If I hadn't been a writer, I might've been a first-rate mess at this point. Don't knock the trade" (4). But the trade—an expression with an ironic reference to prostitution—is not so easy to mediate. It is dogged by the shadow of ancient alchemical doubt, a paradox that Morag and her textualization embody in both action and character. The shadows that Morag must negotiate are more than the shadows of those people and events that she invents whole or half cloth out of their existence, like her dead parents. "*They remain shadows. Two sepia shadows on an old snapshot, two barely moving shadows in my head, shadows whose few remaining words and acts I have invented. Perhaps I only want their forgiveness for having forgotten them*" (15). Invention and forgiveness are the contradictory gestures of Laurence's writing shadow, negations and yet affirmations of the process, the act giving life to spirit. Earlier we are told that Morag keeps the shadow snapshots "*not for what they show but for what is hidden in them*" (6). Just so does the writing make of absence a presence, just so is divination the central metaphor of a narrative that concerns itself with searching more than with finding. Whether it is the

writer poking through the refuse of the nuisance grounds, or trying to recuperate the unmatriculated shadow of the Gunn chief-tainship, *The Diviners* shadows the persistent conjunction of filth and beauty, its ancestry and offspring.

Further, there is present in *The Diviners* a firm sense of art's shadow, both pre- and post-figuration of life, whether that life belongs to the woman who is for a short time the wife of Brooke Skelton, the dreamed and then articulated professor-prince, or to the strangely affirming appearance of snake-dancer and stripper Fan Brady when Morag moves to Vancouver. "Morag is fascinated [with Fan]. Does fiction prophesy life? Is she looking at Lilac Stonehouse from *Spear of Innocence*? Fan Brady, though, hasn't got Lilac's naïveté. Fan is tough in spirit, wiry and wary in the soul. She is not really like Lilac at all, of course. She is almost the opposite. And yet, looking at Fan now is almost like looking at some distorted and older but still recognizable mirror-image of Lilac. There is a sense in which Fan *has* that same terrifying innocence, expressed in different ways" (254). This writerly recognition is greater than a simple equation of Laurence suggesting that life imitates art, or the cadaver equals the living body. It is, set within the construction zone of the novel being written, a warning. In looking at Laurence, are we looking at Morag Gunn from *The Diviners*? Or should we be wary of the confusion of writing act and what is written, the shadow of the one commingled with the other?

Throughout *The Diviners*, the use of italics, itself shadow print, acts as shadow text to the primary narrative. In our critical dissections, titles of novels—a declaration of fiction—are always indicated by italics. The conjunction here is not accidental. The determination of fiction within fiction, the struggle of story within story, of writer with her shadow, is articulated not only by those italics, but by the multiple interruptions of snapshots, memorybank movies, conversations with Catharine Parr Traill, and, not least, the persistent *coitus interruptus* of the male figures in the novel, who become themselves shadows of absence. Despite a penetrating awareness of patriarchy, there is no ever-present father in Laurence's work: this is a woman writing, working, alone. As Morag says to A-Okay when Jules phones to ask about Pique, "My daughter's

father . . . As I've told you, never having had an ever-present father myself, I managed to deny her one, too. Although not wittingly. I wasn't very witting in those days, I guess" (49). Again, the creative act of motherhood (the invention of Pique as much as the invention of the novel in which Pique is a character) is embedded in shadow. When Morag first becomes aware of Jules Tonnerre, it is as a "shadow" (58). Her admission that she was "not very witting in those days" is only too close to the punning declaration that she was not very *writing* in those days. Witting and writing become themselves refractive measures of the text and context of articulated experience and its desire, and those two are conjoined by the strange pool of a spreading shadow.

And wittingly writing, *The Diviners* casts a prophesying shadow of national Canada that is brilliantly inclusive, culturally, psychically, and spatially: from Manitoba to Toronto to Vancouver, to England and Scotland, and then back to Ontario; from small-town to city to rural setting; from orphan to wife to mother to writer; from aboriginal to settler in their conjunction. The shape of Laurence's shadow is the shape of this country, desperate in its desire to speak a presence, but uncertain, conflicted, and ultimately italicized, an act of the imagination and an act of faith more than a general autopsy. "Morag sat at the table in the kitchen, with a notebook in front of her and a ballpoint pen in her hand. Not writing. Looking at the river. Getting started each morning was monstrous, an almost impossible exercise of will, in which finally the will was never enough, and it had to be begun on faith" (137). "I'll write," Morag promises Christie when she leaves Manawaka; and although her letters home are sporadic, she keeps her promise. An act of faith, to write Canada in Canada, to write a woman writing, for these are all shadows of shadows, vulnerable souls that must be preserved from accident.

In her willingness to fulfil that lettered promise, "All right, I'll write," Laurence shows the way to a legacy, a position from which to invent this multiple and multiplicitous framing of experience and its failures in the pre-fab construction known as Canada. Very early, when Morag has written her first poem, and shown it to the minister's wife, Mrs. McKee, she realizes that there is no way that once shown, you can "unshow" (66) your writing. Once a

shadow is cast, it will follow its caster. At the same time, in that ubiquitously quoted moment of “Morag returned to the house, to write the remaining private and fictional words, and to set down her title” (370), there is still the shadow of Christie’s fictional “real country” (319), where Morag was born, and of which Christie says—and here is the warning we must be careful to heed—“you don’t want to believe everything them books say, for the good christ’s sake. We believe what we know” (67).

We believe what we know. Despite interventions into the mysterious body, despite our confidence that the abstract is explainable and our shadows will always follow us, we believe what we know. In such quiet profundities hides the shadow of Margaret Laurence. It is only too easy, in our reappraising fervour, our anatomy lesson, to isolate Laurence as a product of her time and place, gender and race, a mainstream moment in and of herself shadowless. But if we see her doubt and faith in their pluralities, her writing shadow prefigures a space from which to question the various repressions and subversions and dissatisfactions of the literary world that are now finding words to speak and space within which to say those words. Laurence’s literary force is not that of one who garners followers or mentors disciples. Rather, her influence can be felt as a subtle tonal inspiration, through her confirmation of the act of writing, its honest work, its willingness to grapple with the personal and the profound both. Her writing casts a moving shadow, a shadow that insists on writing as a process, an act of discovery. There are writers who create words and characters and situations that are stone, frozen and directed even before they begin to occupy their text. Laurence permits her words to reveal their own body, their own slow process of discovery and disintegration, fallible, sometimes tentative, often torn between the conundrums of fact and fiction, a dissection that begins at the quick intelligence of the hand rather than the corpus trunk. Laurence refuses to solve the puzzle of the anatomy lesson, instead offering to her readers and critics the quiet sidereal questing of the artist at work. Despite her disclaimer of immortality, Laurence’s shadow will not depart from us. Having cast it, she is probably where Plutarch claims the blessed ones are, happy forever, “in a state neither needing food nor casting shadow.”

Let me conclude with a story, apocryphal, for I was not present at this event, although I heard it from one of the main participants, Marian Engel, who deserves a reappraisal of her own. Engel was at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, and a professor, who was teaching *The Diviners* in a graduate class on Canadian literature, asked her to attend the class, for writerly input, I suppose. She did, and in the course of it was treated to the usual pull-apart of a group of, albeit young, critics, who can find a good many things wrong with even the most sacred of texts. They are, after all, witnesses to an anatomy lesson, and the cadaver is unlikely to remain whole. Marian told me the story this way.

"I sat there," she said, "and I got madder and madder. They were reading the novel carefully, but they were deliberately ignoring what had gone into the *making* of that novel. Anyway," she sighed, "I was furious, and I did something unforgivable. Actually, it was both fictional and factual. That morning, the frame of my glasses had broken. I had managed to mend the frame with glue, but I knew that it wasn't very permanent. Anyway, I sat there, listening to people who had never even written a bloody short story, tearing this book apart, and I couldn't stand it anymore. I threw my glasses against the wall, where they broke quite spectacularly, and I shouted, 'Do you have any idea how long it took just to type this novel?' I wanted to remind them how much work it is just to put that many words together, to make them into a story's shadow."

If Marian had told that story to Margaret Laurence, Laurence would have laughed and given Marian the advice that Morag Gunn figures out her first day of school, after Eva Winkler has an accident, defecates in the classroom. Morag thinks to herself, the way to survive is to "Hang onto your shit and never let them know you are ascaresd" (42). Your shit or your shadow text a complementarity within the slowly decomposing corpus, while above the body hang the inquisitive faces of the anatomists, eager vivisectionists who believe themselves apprentices of mercy.

So, there is the anatomy lesson, the writer and her oeuvre spread out against the sky like a patient etherized upon a table. But that is another story, or song, different in intent, for in the end, Laurence offers not abstractions, but her capable hand, its

knotted knuckles and tributaries of veins, for our inspection. Death sets upon all, leaves the body in a place without a shadow; the anatomists hover. In the face of such exposure, down to the very sinews and nerves of the pragmatic limb, Morag Gunn remembers Catharine Parr Traill, her practical advice. "In cases of emergency, it is folly to fold one's hands and sit down to bewail in abject terror: it is better to be up and doing" (332). *The Diviners* is the anatomy lesson of a writer wrestling with her shadow, worse than Jacob's angel, more daunting than the demons of the night, drink and loneliness, terror and the taunting of dissection. *The Diviners* is a novel written by a woman with writer's cramp, her hand, laid bare, in pain, but written nevertheless, extant, standing firmly in the sunlight to cast whatever shadow will be cast. The shape of a writer's shadow is the shape of work, endless, uneasy, engrossing work. Any evaluation of Laurence—and she has left herself willingly for our anatomy lesson—must have the courage to cast that shadow both ways, for she worked not only for herself, but for us.

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To Find Refreshment in Writing Children's Books: A Note on Margaret Laurence's Writing for Children

JANET LUNN

MARGARET LAURENCE WROTE FOUR BOOKS for children. The only thing that is interesting about them is that she wrote them at all. They might be called a footnote to her adult fiction and criticism, but they are not really even that. They are irrelevant, not only to Laurence's larger body of work, but to the larger body of literature for children in Canada. All four books, *Jason's Quest*, *Six Darn Cows*, *The Olden Days Coat*, and *The Christmas Birthday Story*, were written in the late 1960s and the 1970s when children's literature was burgeoning in Canada in the same way that literature for adults was.

Before the 1970s there had been no sizable body of literature for children in this country. There had been the splendid and enduring animal stories of Charles G.D. Roberts and Ernest Thompson Seton, Marshall Saunders's best-selling *Beautiful Joe*, and Lucy Maud Montgomery's Green Gables heroine, who was so popular that baby girls from Poland to the Orient were being named Anne or Shirley after her.

There was little else in these years (in some years as few as thirty or forty books for young people were published); in fact, there was so little and it was so mediocre that, for four years, the Canadian Library Association's book-of-the-year award, established in 1947, was not awarded. In the 1940s and 1950s there was

a growing collection of retellings of Native tales, only one of which was written by a Native Canadian (George Clutusi's *Son of Raven, Son of Deer*). Roderick Haig Brown and John F. Hayes were writing workmanlike but pedestrian historical novels. Catherine Anthony Clark alone was trying something different, writing fantasies rooted in Native mythology and the British Columbia landscape but centred on the adventures of contemporary children. Although her stories had not the depth or writing skill to make them last, they were fresh and original. Then, in 1956, Farley Mowat published *Lost in the Barrens* and, the following year, *The Dog Who Wouldn't Be*. In 1962 Jean Little published *Mine for Keeps*. In the 1960s literature for children in Canada had arrived.

In the 1960s and 1970s writers, who are read today as avidly as when they were first published, were launching their first works: Joan Clark, Brian Doyle, James Houston, Dennis Lee, Kevin Major. Margaret Laurence did not seem to be aware of any of them. In *Dance on the Earth*, she wrote that her children were reading Arthur Ransome, E. Nesbit, Mary Norton, A.A. Milne, Kenneth Graham—all the best British writers. “I read those books too, and learned a great deal about the children’s books that had not been available, or even written, when I was young” (*Dance* 175). She was, of course, living in England with her children at that time, and she did not seem to have truly understood what she was reading, at least not as a writer.

Jason's Quest, published in 1970, is about a mole (Jason) in search of a cure for the strange disease afflicting his ancient city of Molanium (founded by the moles who had landed in Britain with the legions). He meets Oliver, an owl in search of wisdom, and Calico and Topaz, two cats in search of noble deeds to perform. This unusual collection of predators and prey set off together for Londinium, happily singing, “*Four for One and One for Four, / Together til the journey's o'er*” (26).

The adventure follows predictably with the usual complement of villains (Winstanley the con cat; the wicked Great Rat; and the evil Blades gang) and friends (P.C. Wattles the police cat; Mrs. Weepworthy the once-famous singer; and Perdita the beautiful young mole). In the end Jason discovers that his version of the golden fleece is the knowledge that Molanium, steeped in ancient

tradition, is suffering from boredom. In gratitude for his discovery, the citizenry offers him the ancient and exalted position of Venerable Mole. He declines, preferring the more modern, democratic title and position of mayor. His first move as mayor is to change Molanium's name to Moleville (neither of these updates will mean anything to late-twentieth-century children).

There does not seem to be an intrinsic reason for these stock characters to be moles or cats or anything but people. In fact, Laurence wrote in *Dance on the Earth*, the inspiration for Molanium came when she realized that the grounds of Elm Cottage where she lived were infested with moles (what she did, actually, was call in the exterminator). The fantasy is neither original nor particularly imaginative and, unfortunately, its tone is arch.

While the story is clearly derived from those of Beatrix Potter, Kenneth Graham, and A.A. Milne, its author does not seem to have grasped how—or why—the originals worked. Kenneth Graham's animals, even in their waistcoats and watches, behave like moles and toads and water rats. Potter's animals are every bit as faithful to nature (despite Peter Rabbit's little blue coat), and Milne, of course, was dealing with stuffed toys, though even they are more like their prototypes than Laurence's animals.

Furthermore, while the peaceable kingdom is one of the human race's dearest dreams, a story about two cats, an owl, and a mole harmoniously off on an adventure together defies the possibility of the most willing to suspend disbelief.

Clara Thomas calls *Jason's Quest* "a joyfully inventive tale about a mole and its friends, it is [in] essence a confrontation between the forces of darkness and light."¹ In her book on Canadian children's literature, *The Republic of Childhood*, Sheila Egoff says that Laurence's "widely acclaimed success as a novelist makes her one book of fantasy for children, *Jason's Quest* (1970), the most disappointing book in Canadian children's literature."² Egoff might have the last word on *Jason's Quest*. A great many booksellers, librarians, and parents devoted to a loved novelist tried to make it a success but few children took to it.

The other strength these British fantasy writers had that Laurence had not for her British-set story was that they were

writing about countryside they had known and loved all their lives. J.R.R. Tolkien's shire was Graham's shire and Potter's and Milne's. It was not Laurence's, no matter how attractive she found it.

Laurence did better in this way with *Six Darn Cows*. This story is written to a limited vocabulary for a series James Lorimer was producing in the 1970s to encourage parents and teachers to teach reading from books written in Canada with Canadian settings that described "real lives of real kids" (*Dance* 217). Laurence said that she based her story on "things I knew from the life of children on small farms" (*Dance* 217). *Six Darn Cows* is about two kids who leave a gate open, an invitation to the pastured cows to stray into the woods. Six of them do. A pleasant little tale but without much life. The book was a commission, and quite likely (and not surprisingly) the author's heart was not in the work.

The only one of Laurence's books for children that has outlived her is *The Olden Days Coat* and that may be because Atlantis Films made a charming film from it, a film that has become a CBC Canadian Christmas perennial. *The Olden Days Coat* is a time-cross story in which a ten-year-old girl named Sal goes with her mother and father to spend Christmas with her grandmother. Bored and resentful at having to be away from her friends, Sal rummages in an old trunk. She finds a Red-River coat that her grandmother wore as a child. She puts it on and is, at once, transported back in time where she meets a girl named Sarah. The two spend a happy time together during which Sal finds a little wooden box Sarah has dropped and returns it to her. Sarah, of course, is Sal's grandmother and, while the incident is wiped from both memories, grandmother and granddaughter feel a deep sense of communion when old Sarah gives young Sal the little wooden box for her Christmas present.

These two Canadian-set stories share one quality that characterizes our books for children. They are down-to-earth, no-nonsense stories. There are no flights of fancy here, no Pucks, no fairies of any kind. Even in *The Olden Days Coat*, the time shift is got past in jig time so that the real purpose of the story can be got on with. And the real purpose of Laurence's children's stories is the moral contained in them.

There is no lingering over character either. Considering that Laurence herself said, "I am concerned mainly, I think, with finding... a form through which the characters can breathe" (Gadgetry 55), this is sad.

The Christmas Birthday Book is a nativity story originally written for the Unitarian congregation of which Laurence and her children were members. In her version of the story, the mother is not a virgin impregnated by a holy spirit, there are no shepherds and no angels, and the kings show up almost by accident—the frankincense and myrrh are to be put in the baby's bath. Although this version has certainly lost the power of the myth, Laurence's is a sweet, gentle story. And there is probably no clearer statement of her belief in Christianity or her love for and faith in her fellow humans than here. Of her four books for children, this one lacks, totally, the unwitting condescension that marks the other three. As she wrote, "I retold [the story] in a way that I myself understand it and believe in it. Jesus is spoken of as a beloved child, born into a loving family, a child who grew up to be a wise teacher, and a friend to all people. That is really how I think of our Lord" (*Dance* 221).

The condescension that marks the other three books was not a conscious one. Because *The Christmas Birthday Story* received mixed notices from book reviewers, Laurence remarked: "Many reviewers didn't deign to notice it because it was a children's book" (*Dance* 220). While it is all too true about that attitude of book reviewers toward books for children, Laurence could not see at the same time what was missing in her own work.

Dr. Jessica Latshaw, an immigrant from the United States and now head of the Department of Curriculum Studies at the University of Saskatchewan, says that she began to be interested in Canadian literature when she first read Margaret Laurence. Of Laurence's children's books, however, she once remarked to me, "She seemed to have no understanding of her intended audience. Her children's books are not connected to her writing. They seem to be left-handed exercises. It seems strange that she was as protective of the realities of life in her writing for children as she was exploitive of the dynamics and ambiguities of life in her adult fiction."

Laurence is not the only writer of fine literature for adults to make the mistake of thinking she could write well for children. Alfred Knopf is reported to have said once that his most dreaded moments as a publisher were when one of his successful novelists would all but tiptoe into his office, lay a manuscript softly on his desk, and say, "I have written a little something for children."

Few writers manage to cross that line—in either direction. British writers Rumer Godden and Jane Gardam have done—and well. Canadian writer Joan Clark is good at both. Margaret Atwood's only successful children's book, *Anna's Pet*, was written with her aunt, children's writer Joyce Barkhouse. A.A. Milne badly wanted to write for adults but his efforts were never any good. Neither were Kenneth Graham's. The truth is that writing for children comes as naturally to those who are good at it as writing for adults does for those who do that. What is more, a writer writes a story for children "because a children's story is the best art-form for something you have to say."³

"From time to time Laurence found refreshment in writing children's books," Clara Thomas observes.⁴ Possibly, but I do not think Margaret Laurence was either as casual about or dismissive of writing for children as Thomas would have us believe. I think it was simply not the best art form for what she had to say, except for *The Christmas Birthday Story*, which said exactly what she wished to say—but not to children.

Probably there was too much ambiguity in Laurence for children's books. I think, too, that she did not feel enough delight in pure storytelling to give her heart to the writing of stories for children.

NOTES

1. *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 2d ed., s. v. "Laurence, Margaret."
2. *The Republic of Childhood: A Critical Guide to Canadian Children's Literature in English*, 2d ed. (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1975), 81.
3. C.S. Lewis, "On Three Ways of Writing for Children," *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 32.
4. *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 2d ed., s. v. "Laurence, Margaret."

Faith and the Vocation of the Author

LOIS WILSON

I WAS A STUDENT WITH PEGGY WEMYSS in Second Year Arts at United College from 1944 until 1947, when our small class, holding high our brand-new B.A. degrees, graduated. Although we were not close bosom pals in those days, we shared the same context of experience and openness that United College offered to the great racial, social, and political mix of students who then frequented its halls. If we had exchanged letters with each other at the time, they would have been along the lines of Stacey when she wrote home: "How are you? I am fine" (*Fire* 25).

Nevertheless, we lived in the same world: that of frigid Winnipeg winters and searing hot summers; of "Fowl Suppers" in church basements; of Batoche and the Métis; of naval uniforms and older servicemen, and the romantic possibilities they offered; of a college community that encouraged inquiring minds and soaring spirits.

We began to know each other increasingly well through the interchange and give and take of open discussion in the classrooms, as well as in the informal, but profound discussions that enlivened our time in "Tony's," the college cafeteria. She was unassuming and self-effacing, except in English class. She engaged English professors in long conversations in class, and wrote poetry and stories that were published in the college magazine *Vox*. She

was one of the first women in our class to be married, and I held her somewhat in awe for that seemingly stupendous accomplishment.

We did not see each other frequently, and there were years when we were not in touch at all. Yet whenever we did meet, we started right in again. She disappeared from my horizon for several years, and I became aware she had gone to Africa. But when our lives intersected again, it was not without significance. Upon her return I vividly remember meeting with her in the Winnipeg YWCA and discussing cross-cultural experiences as well as matters of faith, including the possible existence of the deity. We never engaged in just simple social small talk.

We met on and off again over the years. I bought her books, and on reading them, discovered they uncannily revealed my history and my generation. In the mid-seventies, when we lived in Hamilton, my husband got a phone call one day. "This is a friend out of your past. It's Margaret Laurence, and I'm here signing books and I'm bored to death. Can I come over?" My children came home immediately from wherever they had been in order to meet this famous person of whom they had only heard. We had a great catch-up visit, and not insignificant conversation. From then on, we engaged in a lively correspondence, copies of which I still have. They were all the way from a long list of Canadian fiction writers (for me to read!) and a long list of contemporary feminist theologians (for her to read!), to a wonderfully simple letter I received shortly after being elected Moderator of the United Church of Canada in 1982. It read:

Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah,
Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah.

She was involved in a great stir over the mounting of Canadian sculptor Lutkenhaus-Lackey's *Crucified Woman* in the Bloor Street United Church during Easter Week, 1979. In that sculpture, which now stands publicly on the grounds of Emmanuel College, Toronto, Margaret saw a recognition by the Christian community of the terrible agonies suffered by women as victims. She knew all about that, and wrote passionately and sensitively about it in her novels.

When my husband and I were co-ministers in Kingston, we invited Margaret to come for a weekend for a seminar on her work, but also for a dialogue sermon with me on the Sunday morning. She was not at all keen about the latter ("I'm a *WRITER* not a speaker!" she protested) but she was persuaded when I said that all she'd have to do would be to have a conversation with me, and congregational members could listen if they wished. We agreed on several areas we would talk about:

- our vocations as author and minister respectively;
- how an author deals with morals and values without becoming preachy;
- how her experience had informed her knowledge of God;
- her views on major faith themes such as justice, hope, grace, death, resurrection, and transformation.

Here are some excerpts from that occasion, taken from the transcript published in the February 1980 *United Church Observer*.

Laurence on vocation:

I think that almost all serious writers experience a sense of vocation. When young writers say, "Do you think I should be a writer?" I say if you don't have to be, then don't do it. It's something that you feel as a sense of vocation; you simply cannot imagine yourself doing anything else. And you have that deep sense of lifetime commitment to it.

Laurence on morals and values:

I think also that many writers who would not consider themselves religious people in fact have a great deal of faith even though they may not define it in Christian terminology. And I long ago realized this about myself. The act of writing itself expresses some kind of faith and some kind of hope, and the very fact that the novelist is concerned deeply with the human individual and the preciousness, the value of the individual in itself is a kind of religious faith.

Laurence on how her experience has informed her knowledge of God:

I have a feeling there has to be more recognition of the kind of female principle in God... We cannot really define the informing

spirit of the Universe because that is the mystery at the core of life. Whatever the spirit is and however we receive it into our lives, there must be a male and a female principle involved; there must be the father and the mother. I think many... feel the need to incorporate that sense of both the motherhood and the fatherhood in the Holy Spirit.

One of her favourite sayings was, "Thank you God, sir or madam." Her fictional characters have feisty and interesting conversations with God, as I'm sure Margaret had also. There is Stacey's wonderful interior conversation with God in the spirit of Jewish midrash:

Listen here, God, don't talk to me like that... *You* try bringing up four kids. Don't tell me you've brought up countless millions because I don't buy that. We've brought our own selves up and precious little help we've had from you. If you're there. Which probably you aren't, although I'm never convinced totally, one way or another. So next time you send somebody down here, get it born as a her with seven young or a him with a large family and a rotten boss, eh? Then we'll see how the inspirational bit goes. God, pay no attention. I'm nuts. I'm not myself. (*Fire* 168)

Or Vanessa MacLeod in the story "To Set Our House in Order":

I thought of the accidents that might easily happen to a person... I thought of the dead baby, my sister, who might as easily have been I... I thought of my brother, who had been born alive after all... I felt that whatever God might love in this world, it was certainly not order. (*Bird* 59).

Hagar's exchange with Mr. Troy the minister is a case in point: "Don't you believe," Mr. Troy inquires politely, earnestly, 'in God's infinite Mercy?'... I blurt a reply without thinking. 'What's so merciful about Him, I'd like to know?'" (*Stone* 120).

Laurence on justice:

Sometimes, we have to define things like justice even by the lack of it. This comes in very much in *The Diviners* where I talk about the plight of the Métis people. A great and deep injustice has been done these people. I am trying to point out that it is not something we can say is the fault of God or Fate. It is our human fault.

Laurence on hope:

All my work is informed by hope. I don't think any of it is optimistic. One would have to have a very simplistic, or very narrow, view of life to be optimistic in a world such as ours. Hope is different. Hope is something I couldn't live without. And given God's grace, somehow one feels the planet and its creatures will survive. I think of optimism as saying, "Everything's fine." Only a fool could say that everything's fine.

Laurence on grace:

I think of grace not as something deserved—because who could deserve God's grace?—but just given... many writers... do have the feeling of something given. Writers will say, "When I was writing that book there were several scenes that I looked at afterwards and I thought, I really can't write that well. Where did it come from?" And I've had that feeling too. I look on that as something given.

Indeed, her very last words to me were, "It's all grace."

Laurence on death:

It's as natural an event as birth. The two are the beginning and the end of life... My sense of what happens in that kind of transformation is something I can't define, any more than I can define God. Because it is a mystery.

We spoke, too, of resurrection as not being the resuscitation of a corpse, but about God whose power transforms despair to hope and death to life.

Margaret was critical of conforming traditional Christians, of hypocrisy, and of a number of conventional Christian rituals and observances. Many fundamentalists could not stomach her vocabulary and wondered why she found it necessary to use four-letter words in her novels. She explained that the integrity of her characters demanded it, if that is the way they talked. She herself tells that wonderful story of being at a seminar, seated behind a table with "drapery that looked rather like a bedspread with a fringe." She decides to smoke surreptitiously, and suddenly becomes aware of a burning smell and a tiny line of flames. "My God," she yelled, "I've set fire to the bloody tablecloth" (*Dance*

215). When she told me this story, she added, "But I didn't use any four-letter words!"

What prompted her to decide to acknowledge the Christian faith in which she had been reared, and which she had never abandoned, by returning to the United Church congregation in Lakefield? She told me that she just thought it was time. Not an easy decision for her. She had thoroughly embraced the central affirmation of Christian faith—the Incarnation—that God in all tenderness became one of us and dwells with us, but she had some difficulty appreciating the institutional expression of that belief. She told me that she just thought it was time. She had been eternally grateful for the support she had received from the Anglican and United churches in Lakefield when her work was attacked as pornographic. An intensely private person, she suffered agonies when her novels were criticized by those who did not grasp the profound morality or passionately ethical themes she explored.

Her return to the United Church was deliberate. The first Sunday she sat in the back pew, and found that she was welcomed and integrated into the local church. She told me later of how proud she was of that same congregation when, one Sunday, she took composer and artist Mendelsohn Joe to church with her into a context which apparently she feared would be somewhat formal and judgmental. He was dressed in a most unorthodox fashion. He was, however, welcomed on all sides. "My people came through that time," she said to me.

She phoned me in the fall of 1986 to arrange her funeral. In that last visit, we spoke of many things. She pulled out her Bible to indicate which passages she wanted to be read publicly, and I noticed that every page, every margin, contained her written commentary on the text. She knew the text inside out, and certainly pulled on that source extensively for her novels.

Take Morag's revisitation of Toronto:

The city depresses Morag further. She refuses to go downtown, certain she . . . will meet Brooke on the street . . . She walks past the roominghouse on Jarvis Street where Jules used to live . . . *Save me O God, for the waters are come in unto my soul. Psalm 69. (Diviners 337)*

Rachel, at the end of one significant phase in her life, says:

I do not know how many bones need to be broken before I can walk. And I do not know, either, how many need not have been broken at all . . . What are the words? I can't have forgotten all the words, surely, the words of the songs, the psalms. *Make me to hear joy and gladness, that the bones which Thou hast broken may rejoice.* [Psalm 51] (*Jest* 201)

Morag negotiates Christie's burial with Hector, who says:

"Maybe you should consider a short service here, first? And then just the few last words, *there.*"

The Burial of the Dead. *For I am a stranger with thee, and a sojourner, as all my fathers were.* [Psalm 39] (*Diviners* 327)

Yet I emphasize that all her biblical references, her quotations of hymns, and even the exchanges I have quoted heretofore do not constitute the religious aspect of Margaret's novels for me. I believe, however, that Margaret's faith *did* inform her worldview and therefore her vocation as an author. Let me try to say how I see that playing out.

There is an apocryphal story told of a rabbi who decided to do an audio-visual reinforcement of the biblical vision of the lion and the lamb lying down together in peace. So he rented a storefront with a large window, and put a lion and a lamb in the space for a week. At the end of the week, one of the congregants said to him in a puzzled voice, "Rabbi, how did you ever get a lion and a lamb to lie down together for a whole week?" "Oh," answered the rabbi, "I had a large supply of lambs."

So it is that splendid visions often fail. The vision of human community has, to date, largely failed. As we contemplate our world today, it presents more of a nightmare than a vision. We talk a lot about it, but as Brooke says to Morag of her fictional Lilac in *Spear of Innocence*, "[S]he talks a lot, but she can't communicate very well" (*Diviners* 202).

To speak of faith and the vocation of the author is to beg the question, What is faith? I make three assumptions about the nature of faith, and all three assumptions appear strongly in Margaret's novels.

My first assumption is that faith is about the creating and sustaining of interdependent community.

A contemporary twentieth-century theologian says that for generations past people have struggled with the question, What is the ultimate meaning of my life? Of life itself? Is there any meaning? And people today continue to struggle with that question.

But, says the theologian speaking from the context of the Christian faith and community, the question has been posed in different ways according to the historical context.

So in the early days of Christian community, the question of ultimate meaning was phrased, What happens when I die? Life and death were the presenting ways the question of ultimate meaning was posed. Christian community responded with the doctrine of resurrection.

Then, in the Middle Ages, the same question was being asked, What is the ultimate meaning of my life? but it was phrased somewhat differently: What shall I do with my guilt? The Christian community responded with the doctrine of justification by faith, or by the creation of the penitential system.

In the twentieth century, people still struggle with the question of ultimate meaning by posing queries about death and guilt. But a third layer has been added: Where can I find authentic human community that will affirm me in my particularity, my gender, my language, my culture, my race, but also bring me into life-giving and life-sustaining relationships with those very different from myself? Where can I find such human community that will recognize my interdependence with the created order and the Creator as well as with other human beings? That is the way the ultimate question is articulated in the last decade of this century—in terms of community.

Margaret Laurence's novels certainly never avoided the reality or harshness of death, nor the grappling to find its meaning. Nor did she avoid the question of guilt and forgiveness and the struggle to unearth life's ultimate meaning in that direction. However, she was a woman of her time, the twentieth century. A good case can be made for the fact that one of the central themes of all her novels was community or lack of community. In my view, she

was dealing with a question central to faith, and in that sense, her novels are profoundly informed by a religious dimension.

There is the constant refrain of alienation and strangeness that persons feel toward each other. She writes of Stacey and Mac: "he doesn't talk any more hardly at all can you imagine what it's like to live in the same house with somebody who doesn't talk or who can't or else won't and I don't know which reason it could be" (*Fire* 197).

She has Bram say to Hagar, "I sure hope it's a boy' . . . In that moment when we might have touched our hands together, Bram and I, and wished each other well, the thought uppermost in my mind was—*the nerve of him*" (*Stone* 100–101).

She writes of the difficulties her characters have in revealing themselves openly to even those intimates they trust. When Marvin says goodbye to his mother when he signs up for the army, the farewell discourse is extremely limited. Hagar thinks: "I realized I was waiting with a kind of anxious hope for what he would say, waiting for him to make himself known to me" (*Stone* 130).

And of Steven, Hagar's grandson, "What does he know of me? Not a blessed thing. I'm choked with it now, the incommunicable years, everything that happened and was spoken or not spoken. I want to tell him . . . But where would I begin?" (*Stone* 296).

The Fire-Dwellers is particularly rife with persons who do not communicate. Stacey wonders to herself whether her pregnancy was the start of Mac's isolating himself from her. "Was it then he started to go underground, living in his own caves?" (*Fire* 22). Or Stacey's lack of community with Ian, who, she feels, guards himself at every turn. And even her son Duncan: "I'm far from him, too. Far even from Duncan. How did it happen like this?" (*Fire* 119). And then there is Stacey's wonderfully poignant imaginary letter to her mother: "Please write immediately and let me know what was actually in your mind all those years because I haven't a clue . . . P.S. Did you ever dance?" (*Fire* 150).

Yet at certain points, deep intimacy and a strong sense of community, clan, connectedness is written into the novels. One comes away with a distinct sense of struggle—of alienation and sometimes of reconciliation, of being lost and sometimes being

found, of brokenness and sometimes wholeness. Although these themes are by no means confined to faith communities, they are profoundly the way the question of the ultimate meaning of life is articulated in our time.

My second assumption is that faith has to do with transformation of things as they are, both personal and societal. This always includes the subject of power and a shift in interpersonal relationships, since power represents the possibility of transformation.

This is a foundational biblical theme informing the faith community. Isaiah 40:4 uses the imagery of the non-human world to speak of the promise and hope of transformation.

Every valley shall be lifted up,
 And every mountain and hill be made low,
 The uneven ground shall become level,
 And the rough places a plain.

The playwright Judith Thompson speaks of stories that affirm transformation and tell of hope—such as the fairy tale Cinderella. That is, when you're in despair—you think you're all alone and you've been abandoned—someone will come and love and nurture you. Possibly your goodness as a person will be recognized. In other words, there is some sort of redemption possible even for people who are lost. She talks about transformation. Although she does not claim to be a religious person, she does admit to having been raised in the Catholic faith. So she links the idea of transformation, an essential human myth, with the eucharist and the body of Christ as being one way of expressing and giving hope, as are her plays another way.

Margaret Laurence's novels are another way. So there is the story of the unlovely Hagar, toward whom Doris and Marvin and Mr. Troy showed compassion, even though she does not appear to deserve it. Yet in the end, Hagar herself demonstrates compassion and love—a transformation of sorts—as she fetches the bedpan for the young girl in the hospital ward.

There is hope with Rachel as she leaves Manawaka and heads West to an unknown future. At the end of *The Fire-Dwellers*, Jen talks—a sign of transformation, promise, and hope. At the moment of the deepest despair, many of Laurence's fictional

characters gain a sense of hope that inspires them to look to the future confidently.

My third assumption about faith is that the transformation that is characteristic of it takes place only as those on the periphery and those at the centre come together and are set free of their bondages. Where the periphery is, and where the centre is, you must decide yourself. This, too, is a biblical theme: care for the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the poor. Margaret Laurence emphasizes this theme by telling the stories of those on the periphery (Lazarus; Piquette; Prin; Christie; Jules, the Métis). They continued to feel alienated right up to and including their deaths. They never were set completely free of their bondages. Nor, more importantly, were the people at the centre of Manawaka society.

Indeed, no character is completely set free, despite the constant hope that it might happen. Her novels end with question marks for the reader as the characters ponder an unknown future. So her novels are realistic in the sense that the transformation and the setting free of people from all bondages remains a hope only, not an accomplishment. She reflects the healthy tension that a person of faith lives with, between the present unsatisfactory state of things and relationships and the longed-for transformation that is promised and hoped for.

Hagar, in that famous last exchange with Mr. Troy, the minister, listens to him sing *Old One Hundredth*, which ends, "*Come ye before Him and rejoice.*" Hagar thinks to herself, "I must always, always, have wanted that—simply to rejoice. How is it I never could?" (*Stone* 292).

In our final visit, Margaret was at once grieving, jubilating, and raging. She loved life passionately. "Life is for rejoicing—for dancing," she said. With tears streaming down her face, out of a mixture of physical weakness and intense emotion, she cried out to me, "And I've danced. I've danced."

In 1985, when the dates for Passover and Easter coincided, she wrote a "Prayer for Passover and Easter." In it she combined her passion for peace, her profound feelings of kinship with the Jewish people, her care for children, and her sense of the interdependence of the human family—"one people in our only home,

earth." The original prayer, complete with the combined symbols of the cross and the Star of David, now hangs on my living room wall, the gift of her children Jocelyn and David, after her death. It expresses her hope for interdependent authentic human community, which, I have proposed, is the way people in this century express their faith and their commitment to the ultimate meaning of our short and vulnerable lives.

Margaret Laurence: A Reminiscence

JOYCE MARSHALL

MMARGARET LAURENCE GAVE US OUR PLACES. She made it seem not only possible but a fine and worthy thing for us to be what we were.

I remember saying, I think it was to Robert Weaver of the CBC, some time during the 1950s: "What we need in this country is one great writer, recognized as such and with a considerable body of work. Then writing will be an honourable profession and the rest of us can find places for ourselves around and below that writer." I was thinking of Norway, which has an even smaller population than Canada and speaks what a Norwegian poet has called "a little language that travels no farther than a single breath" and of what Ibsen did for Norwegian writers.

There were, of course, already writers in this country at that time. Mazo de la Roche had a wide international reputation. So had Morley Callaghan, a far more serious writer. There were other good writers—Sinclair Ross, Ethel Wilson, W.O. Mitchell, to mention only three—and occasional good books by so-called promising writers. I for one was becoming a bit tired of all this talk of promise when what I wanted, what I sensed that all the writers in this country wanted, was accomplishment.

And then came Margaret Laurence. Well, not exactly like that, all at once, rising like the sun or streaking like a comet into

the height of the sky and pausing there. She was already writing when I spoke to Bob—African stories, many of which I'd read in *Tamarack Review* and elsewhere. But she didn't live here with us at the time. I had no idea that she'd be the great figure it seemed to me we needed—until 1964, when *The Stone Angel* was published, and after that the other Manawaka books. And with the books came Margaret Laurence herself with all her splendid personal qualities.

I intend to praise her and I shall, though this involves risks. There's been a tendency since her death to turn her into an icon—more than that, a sort of saint. I don't want to add to this. She wasn't in the least saintly and would, I'm sure, be both startled and annoyed at being described as such. She could be at times quite difficult. She wasn't, I've always felt, a particularly happy person—at least during her last years, which is when I knew her best. In other words, she had her demons and these prevented things from being easy always—for herself and for others. Anyone who ever sat with Margaret in her house at Lakefield (a former undertaking establishment, as she'd been delighted to discover) while the liquor flowed—in Margaret's house one poured one's own drinks and if one was a poor drinker, as I am, one didn't return to the bottle at the end of the dining room as often as she did—one couldn't help but see that she was tormented by many doubts, about her life and herself. At every one such session that I shared with her she found a different source of unhappiness—distress and guilt about the failure of her marriage, concern about her children. Even after she'd returned to the United Church, becoming what she called “a sort of Christian”—she was always trying to convince me that I was also a Christian of this sort, though I denied it—this seemed to add to her unhappiness rather than provide any sort of serenity or spiritual peace. She fretted because she couldn't forgive Ken Campbell for his attacks on her books as the Lord's Prayer told her that she should; I remember one depressing evening when I tried (unsuccessfully) to persuade her that one needn't, in fact couldn't, forgive everything and everyone.

This wasn't all of her, of course, and it's perhaps not fair to put too much weight on words that slipped out of her while she was drinking—at a time, it must be emphasized, when she'd con-

vinced herself after the completion of *The Diviners* that she'd never write another novel and so lacked the release that writing provides. She was large in every sense of that word—large in person, large in sympathies, spacious I've always felt, with something essentially innocent about her, an almost childlike openness (which was one of the things that made her a writer). And she was generous, in an easy, seemingly casual or even offhand way that enabled people to accept her generosity without too much difficulty. She approved of writing as an end in itself. She liked and admired writers as a species. She liked to help them. There is no other way to put it; it was as simple as that.

I could go on for a long time about various acts of generosity and still touch on only a small part of what she did for the writers of this country—"the tribe," as she called us—writing reviews of books she believed had been neglected, answering reviews she considered unfair, using her name and status to get those reviews and letters published, advising and helping in large and small ways. Without fuss, certainly without any hint of saintliness, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

It was suggested at some point that the literary community exploited Margaret's generosity. I don't think that this was so. I knew her quite well for a number of years and it always seemed to me that her generosity was quite spontaneous. And there was always a measure of give and take. She had more to give than we did, it's true, but we did what we could. And when trouble came we were there. When she was asked during her last illness what she wanted from the literary community, she replied, "Letters." And the letters came.

What did eat into her time were the requests from would-be (or sometime) writers and from schoolchildren. She told me once that her heart sank to her boots when she opened a letter and read "I am a grade ten student." But she answered all such letters faithfully. I remember asking her whether any of these kids ever thanked her for her time and trouble. She thought for a while and then said, "No."

This is a small part of what she did for us as a person. Even more important in my opinion is what her accomplishment as a writer did for us as writers.

I have to make another foray into the past at this point and try to describe what I felt as a young and youngish person trying to be a writer in Canada. It seemed to me that I was living and attempting to learn to write in a country that in the literary sense didn't really exist. I used to think of it as taking the first cautious steps in a field of untrodden snow. Or using blocks of this snow to build something, I wasn't quite sure what. (Not all the time, of course, but a good part of the time.) For not only was my country unknown to the world at large, it was unknown to those of us who were trying to write about it. We used to spend a lot of time trying to give Canada an identity so we could analyze that identity.

For one thing, it didn't have any interesting problems. Younger people may find this belief, which many of us shared, incredible, but I can remember many deep and worried discussions in which the principal concern was finding Canadian problems that were interesting enough to be worth writing. We hadn't been invaded during the recent war. We didn't even have a dramatic and bloody revolution to look back on.

And yet our writing had to be Canadian. I used to waste far too much time wondering—when I should have been writing—whether what I was writing was Canadian enough, even while fearing that if it were, no one outside the country would understand or even want to read it. And if I wrote regionally, which seemed to me the only way I could write—for this is a big country to grab hold of—no one in any of the other regions would be interested. “I guess that means we're stuck with the human heart,” I remember saying at the end of one of these discussions and, believe it or not, that seemed a pretty poor thing to be stuck with.

Then *The Stone Angel* was published and here was Margaret Laurence writing about a tiny bit of a community in Manitoba without the least self-consciousness—or apparent doubt.

I've always thought that she was lucky to have lived outside the country during her apprenticeship—in Africa and in England—and so missed these distracting and debilitating worries and discussions. Even far away as she was, she may have shared the worries. In fact, she probably did. But she had—and this was part of the luck—other places and societies to break herself in on. So that when the time came, she could write regionally, if you want to

put it that way, and use major themes, not neglecting the ways and by-ways of the human heart, as if it were perfectly natural that these should be combined—and be taken seriously, not only in this country but all over the world. Because she was doing it supremely well. That was the thing.

As for the books themselves—I'm referring to the Canadian books, the four Manawaka novels and *A Bird in the House*, the collection of linked short stories that is also set in Manawaka—I have to be personal again and try to give some sense of what they mean to me as a person and as a writer.

The sense of place I've already mentioned—place so firmly and clearly established that, sharp though the details that establish it are, it becomes not merely itself, a small town in Manitoba, but a metaphor for everything that inhibits and impedes us, in life and in ourselves.

There is also her interesting treatment of time and levels of consciousness—word-plays, time shifts, symbolism, contrast—a different tunnelling process in every book.

But most significant to me as a writer, who happens to be a woman, is her use in all of her books of strong central female characters, all flawed to some extent, or at least incomplete, at odds with themselves, but none of them ever fully reconciled to their own insufficiencies or those of the world around them. Though they may be involved with men who baffle and outrage them, they are never in any sense victims of these men—certainly not the sort of passive sad-sister victims that abound in so many of the books by women about women. Margaret wasn't interested, it would seem, in people who don't put up some kind of fight. Or at least she wasn't interested in writing about them. And though the women in her books may win only partial victories, or no victory at all, they remain unconquered.

Along with this portrayal of strong women characters went her honest and explicit treatment of female sexuality, the sexuality of—what shall we call them—normal women? Ordinary women? Women, in other words, who are neither kinky nor whores—an aspect of human behaviour that hadn't been much

treated by Canadian writers until then. Nor, I'd venture to say, has it been treated so ably by anyone else since then.

She suffered for that honesty, I'm sad to say, and I'm equally sad to say that the attacks on her books—particularly the attacks on *The Diviners* in Peterborough and its environs—darkened her last years. She was herself so honest, so clear in her intentions, that she couldn't laugh the attacks off, as some might do, as the limited views of limited and not very important people. Nor could she say, as others might say, "Well, this is good publicity, it will increase sales." She didn't want the sale of her books to be increased by such means. The very notion appalled her. She knew that there was no indecency or pornography in her writing but this didn't prevent her being deeply hurt that she should be accused of this—and by the people among whom she lived.

She fought the attacks, though such fighting went against the grain with her. And she had support in her fight—from her fellow writers and from readers. I remember someone saying to me—I wish I could remember who this was—"Attacking Margaret Laurence is like attacking the human race." And so we all felt.

The books survived the attacks as they will survive all similar attacks that may be brought against them. And Margaret herself survives—the great writer we were waiting for with a body of first-class work. And we can all find places for ourselves in the tribe of which she was for so long—and still is, in my opinion—personally and artistically the leader.

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