

"THE RIVER FLOWED BOTH WAYS:"
THE VISION OF MARGARET LAURENCE

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ABSTRACT

The subject of this thesis is a consideration of the thematic centre of Margaret Laurence's published canon. Margaret Laurence herself has admitted to having pursued the same themes throughout her career, themes which she sees focused around interlocking concepts of "freedom" and "survival." Nor do her conclusions about these vary significantly; each of the novels defines meaningful survival as an outgrowth of a paradoxical union: of the courage to fight for life, and of the wisdom born of an acceptance of life - of circumstance, of others, of oneself. Only in this lies any possible freedom of the spirit, any affirmation.

Laurence's work is organic, then, in the sense that it all can be viewed as an outgrowth of these concerns. Perhaps even more important from an aesthetic point of view, one can trace the growth and development of these themes in both content and expression. Consequently, this thesis concerns itself with her work from a chronological perspective, beginning with the African works, and concluding with The Diviners, the novel she says will be her last.

The original African work - travelogue, short stories, and novel - is

looked at briefly in the first chapter for the purposes of identifying and documenting the existence of typical Laurence attitudes, whether in the abstract or in embryonic creative form. Some possible reasons for their only limited success are also offered.

Chapters Two and Three concentrate on the three Canadian novels written in the sixties, each with a heroine from Manawaka. Here the problems of freedom and survival become more explicitly personal in nature, as do the solutions. The first of these chapters examines the parallels in what each woman considers to be a life of imprisonment - physical, circumstantial, social, and psychological - while the second focuses on the similarities in their final, victorious responses to this situation.

Chapter Four goes on to consider not only Long Drums and Cannons and Jason's Quest, but in particular the stories in A Bird in the House as a link between the earlier novels and The Diviners. To the previous thematic concerns of The Stone Angel, A Jest of God and The Fire-Dwellers has been added a new stress on the redemptive value of one's past - ancestral and childhood. In conjunction with this, the significance of the autobiographical nature of A Bird in the House is also examined.

The final chapter deals with The Diviners. While the first section of the chapter focuses on the novel as a sophisticated variation on the original theme, the conclusion examines the aesthetic and thematic justification which supports Margaret Laurence's lamentable claim that this novel will indeed be her last.

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CHAPTER 1

A common pattern in the work of an author is the movement away from the autobiographical sphere. In this Margaret Laurence differs profoundly, for her earliest work, that set in Africa, acted as the proving ground for techniques and concerns that would lead her relentlessly back towards her own country, her own background, and, perhaps, deeper into her own personality. It is the thesis of this study that this progression was artistically sound, in that it constituted a steady development of Laurence's major strengths; The Diviners, her last work, superbly displays both her warm humanism and her multi-faceted vision. Nonetheless, the African pieces form an important jumping-off place, for even in the non-fiction, one finds Laurence already absorbed in variations of what become her basic themes: the concern for the integrity of the individual and the difficulties which arise from the inevitable restrictions of time, external circumstance and one's own nature, as well as the author's overriding conviction that, while no pat solutions exist to the human dilemma, affirmative responses to life are possible. To this extent, she suggests, life can be fought to a limited victory at least. In these works, one also finds early evidence of what will become the heart of Margaret Laurence's style: the stress on heightened awareness as a key to meaningful existence, and a consequent experimental use of the self-conscious

narrator or central character. It is in The Diviners, however, that these elements are displayed with a consummate degree of polish.

A Tree for Poverty¹ was the first of the published works (excluding the undergraduate prose and poetry in Vox²), and, given its intent - to provide the first translation and transcriptions from the Somali oral tradition - one might not expect to find much in the book which is typical in style or content of Margaret Laurence herself. However, she has imbued the small work with characteristic touches, not the least of which is the very fact of its existence; the act itself of translation is an expression of Laurence's respect for the Somalis.

It is immediately evident that Laurence's admiration is directed towards the Somalis not as an exotic human species, but as people who are facing great obstacles to survival. This admiration for their toughness of spirit is implicit in the commentaries and will form the text for much of The Prophet's Camel Bell³ as well:

'Igaal' is a humorous character, and yet there is something in his essential toughness, his way of laughing in the face of disaster, his pride and jauntiness, even in the most discouraging of circumstances, that remind one very much of the pride, courage and humour of the ordinary bush Somali.... It is this toughness and defiance that save him.

(TP 21)

In this struggle, the Somalis are aided at least in part simply by their honest response to life:

The element of cruelty is accepted in Arabic literature as it is in Somali. It is a part of life and people do not pretend it does not exist. Nor are moral judgments applied to it. Haroun Raschid gives the order that all the Bermakii will be slain, and slain they are. Life is like that. The great thing is to be clever enough to escape.

(TP 20)

Laurence's own matter-of-fact realism is consistent with an equally

subtle view of character; in discussing two contrasting types of story, she concludes that "the paradox is perhaps not a real one. The characteristics of guile and craftiness plus generosity and piety can exist here within the individual person with no lack of harmony." Consequently, the two types of story do not show a "moral confusion" for "(t)here is nothing paradoxical about them. They represent two aspects of life, that's all.... One later comes to see an underlying realism - a realism that recognizes the presence of both good and evil in the world and in the individual" (TP 24-5). Even here, then, in an early and somewhat academic work, one finds the underlying assumption that nothing is simple or easy, a conviction which will colour all of her work.

Although Margaret Laurence, writing in 1970, claimed that "I had much to learn about the validity of human differences" (TP v), it is significant that Micere Migo, a doctoral student from Kenya, in reviewing A Tree for Poverty, pinpoints Laurence's "beauty as a writer" as due precisely to this "literary and intellectual humility" which admits "I do not know...I do not understand." Quite simply, the charm of this slight book of translation arises mainly from its stamp of Margaret Laurence's subtle viewpoint. Even so, A Tree for Poverty has by definition only a limited appeal, one defined by its purpose: "to record poems which will otherwise be lost in another fifty years" (TP 3).

The Prophet's Camel Bell, the travelbook which grew out of the diaries kept during the Laurences' stay in Somaliland, while a more ambitious work, again betrays a dual focus. Ostensibly a portrayal of the Somali people and their land as Margaret Laurence found them, the book shares this conventional emphasis with a charting of the growth in consciousness of its narrator. In other words, even more than A Tree for Poverty, The Prophet's

Camel Bell derives a significant proportion of its strength less from its material per se than from the impact of the narrator's consciousness upon that material.

A statement late in the book, "As usual, it was not the technical problems that proved the most difficult, but the human ones" (PCB 231), reflects this psychological bias. And while Laurence's superb eye for detail and ear for dialect fills the book with exotica, the emphasis falls clearly upon discoveries about the universals in human behaviour: for example, communication is difficult, if not impossible - a fact which has little to do with language barriers:

Their virtue, as self-declared, was remarkable. They belonged to a nation of paragons. I was somewhat irritated at their pretence, and then amused. But finally I perceived that it was no more than I deserved. People are not oyster shells, to be pried at.

(PCB 40)

Life is also a puzzle, leaving most of its problems unresolved:

Rightly or wrongly, we chose Mohamed. Ismail left us with bad feeling all around, having first handed us a letter written by a local scribe, in which his many grievances were set down in copious detail. We did not deceive ourselves that justice had been done. But what was justice, in this situation? We did not know.

(PCB 166)

Moreover, the attempt at action often only confirms one's sensation of near impotence: "I bandaged the small wound, thinking that all a person could do was what they could, but at least in the knowledge that it was only slightly more than nothing" (PCB 63). Perhaps the most disturbing discovery concerns the hidden motives which Laurence detects in herself, the white liberal:

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,

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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.

(PCB 228)

Yet the discoveries and confirmations are not all negative: The Prophet's Camel Bell also charts a positive growth in acceptance and understanding. One is struck by the sensitivity with which Laurence invests her descriptions of the Somali herdsmen, the Italians, and even the "sahib-type English". For example:

I found the sahib-type English so detestable that I always imagined that if I ever wrote a book about Somaliland, it would give me tremendous joy to deliver a withering blast of invective in their direction. Strangely, I now find I cannot do so. What holds me back is not pity for them, although they certainly were pitiable, but rather the feeling that in thoroughly exposing much of their sores as I saw, there would be something obscene and pointless, like mutilating a corpse.

(PCB 205)

Already one finds here the compassion for the exile, whether caught between countries - "Some of (the misplaced Italians) may have gone back to Italy, to the families who are now strangers to them. And this may be the worst of all - after so many years, to find they are once again exiles, this time in their own land" (PCB 151) - or caught between eras - "Mohamed was compelled to seek the elders' blessing, but it is too late for him ever to return completely to the old tribe. And yet he will never be entirely free of his need for it. I wonder if he may have found, at last, a new tribe now?" (PCB 173).

The book also celebrates the existence of courage and perseverance in the face of great odds:

Each year it was the same. In the Jilal, the Somalis were a dying people in a dying land.... But neither the people nor the land would die, although the weakest of every species would not feel the rains of spring. There was a toughness deep in these people

like the fibre of desert cactus, the ability to eke out life, the refusal to die easily.

(PCB 143)

Perhaps even more significantly in view of her later works, Laurence celebrates the courage of the ordinary man, whose virtue, like the Somalis, lies in the simple fact of his continued survival: "Alf was not unique. He was not even unusual.... I came at last to see a kind of heroic quality about the man, something he would have denied utterly and with embarrassment. He was an ordinary bloke - he never pretended otherwise" (PCB 19).

If celebration is not always possible, acceptance often is. At the beginning of the book Laurence comments on Moslem fatalism which "gives suffering a meaning and refuses the finality of death" that, "while "I saw the necessity of this belief," "I would have shared such a faith, if it had been a matter of choice, but I could not" (PCB 32); such later one finds:

"In sha' Allah," the Somalis said. "If Allah wills, it will rain."

We, too, said the same thing now. What else was there to say? All other words had ceased to have meaning in the Jilal.

(PCB 66)

The same acceptance is extended to the behaviour of others: "In my alcove, I listened and wished he had not spoken in this way, sanctimoniously. But I recognized that the thought was foolish. He was not perfectly designed and lifeless like a cardboard cut-out figure" (PCB 74).

The closing chapters ring with the quiet assurance of modest truths such as "One should not be too quick either to love or to hate" and "You don't expect miracles - you just do what you can" (PCB 229). And, in the end, it is Margaret Laurence herself who dominates the book. As Clara Thomas comments, The Prophet's Camel Bell goes "a long way to plant and

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set in our minds a character of energy and decision, wit and strength,"⁵ the "most vividly realized character... in the book."⁶ (The voyager has upstaged the voyage. Throughout, that is, one senses the strength of the book as coming from its self-consciousness - its attempt to view the experience simultaneously from different angles; the original record of a scene is constantly monitored and challenged by later interpretation:

In my diary, I recorded that it was surprising to find the ease with which "one gains their popularity" by showing friendliness and courtesy towards them. The Somalis, I went on to say, speaking generally but referring to Abdi, were good judges of character (naturally, they must be, since they appeared to like me) and one of the chief ways in which they judged Europeans was whether or not the Europeans liked them. A later, much later, comment at the end of this paragraph bears in heavy lead pencil one word - BOSH.

(PCB 181-2)

This approach is a reflection of Laurence's basic recognition of the existence of different, even opposing, points of view on the same thing. Life is too complex to allow any easier tack. And she is insistent on the indispensability of this "viewing the whole of life through different eyes" (PCB 80); "an attempt has to be made, however imperfectly, to see the Somalis in terms of themselves and their inheritance, not ours" (PCB 228).

Yet while the attempt is a valiant one, ironically, it is Laurence herself, of course, who is revealed most truly, an inadvertent outcome which she alludes to in her introduction to the book: "in your excitement at the trip, the last thing in the world that would occur to you is that the strangest glimpses you may have of any creature in the distant lands will be those you catch of yourself" (PCB 1). Judged on its own terms, then, cum travelogue, The Prophet's Camel Ball cannot be considered an unqualified artistic success, for its focus refuses to obey its creator.

Neither fish nor fowl, travelogue nor autobiography, it is nonetheless impressive in its promise of the powerful and profound human analyses to come.

Laurence's major work of fiction written during this period, This Side Jordan,⁷ reveals, however, that she had not yet learned to recognize and capitalize upon the strengths in The Prophet's Camel Bell. Instead one finds a recasting of the work's weakness, its original naive aim: the need to structure reality in accordance with a naive liberal optimism.

The artificiality of This Side Jordan is best demonstrated by an analysis of its structure. Set in Ghana just prior to Independence, the novel follows the parallel spiritual journeys of the two major characters - Johnnie Kestoe, white, aggressively unsure of himself, upwardly mobile; and Nathaniel Amegbe, black, reticent, but also addressing himself towards the future, through much less certain than Johnnie of the wisdom of this direction. Laurence takes great pains to emphasize this parallel, even to the point of reinforcing it with an episodic structure that alternates between Johnnie and Nathaniel.

Not only the characters, but their situations are remarkably similar. Both are at critical points in their lives, due to the pregnancy of their wives and the fact that their careers seem momentarily at a standstill. Moreover each is haunted by his rejection of the past. Johnnie has run away from a homeland where a black man could out-work and out-fight a white, and where a mother could die slowly but not quietly from a botched abortion. Nathaniel too has abandoned a past ruled by fear ("sometimes (the slum-dwellers) were his fear expressed, and he wanted to shun them lest they pull him back into their river" (TSJ 45)). But the old fears are only replaced by new ones of inadequacy and impotence. Johnnie is

afraid to reveal his attraction to black girls, and afraid that he may be no more successful in his fight for dignity than was his father, the "slow-witted Irishman, a halfman with a bone disease, a limping clown" who lost his job cleaning urinals to a "man-ape Jamaican" (TSJ 5).

Nathaniel too lives in fear - of failing to meet the standards of his new world, a fear deepened by the knowledge that he secretly desires this failure:

He could remember the fear now. Overseas Cambridge School Certificate - it was like a regal title, hated and coveted. Sometimes, in the state of mind he had had then, the words took on a peculiarly evil, feminine quality - repelling him, beckoning, repelling again. He had not honestly known whether he wanted to pass or fail. He had felt the unnerving desire to fail, as though it would be a penance.

(TSJ 25)

Having turned their backs on their meagre heritages, Nathaniel and Johnnie can participate only half-heartedly in the present. Each is spiritually adrift and consequently it is not surprising that each finds himself committing an act which he knows to be acceptable within the new morality but which he rejects in some part of his deepest self; Nathaniel accepts a bribe for recommending two young men for a job, and Johnnie betrays his manager in order to climb another rung of the ladder.

The parallels between Nathaniel and Johnnie extend to the conclusions as well. Each is enabled to make a token gesture to the past, and hence liberate himself from an unwitting subservience to that past. Johnnie is able to achieve a moment of tenderness with Emerald, a young black girl from the bush who, symbolizing both the mother whose suffering he rejected and the blacks who threatened him, forgives and accepts him. The decision to name his child Mary, after his mother, is an indication that Johnnie has made peace with his roots. At the same time he discovers his business

future assured and, with it, the opportunity to expiate his earlier sins of ambition. Nathaniel too both forgives and is forgiven. His constant self-pity gives way to the ability to feel pity for Miranda, and his headmaster's new dependence on him in some way reinstates his spiritual integrity. Both men, then, address themselves to the future at the end of the novel, having suffered, but having grown. The births of the two children presumably confirm the novel's hopeful ending.

Critical reaction to This Side Jordan varied. Mary Renault, in Saturday Review, was uniformly laudatory; she praised the characterization, which she found "consistently believable,"⁸ as well as Laurence's ear for dialogue, and commented on the "warm humanity and relentlessly straight eye"⁹ which she found in evidence throughout.

The strained pattern of the novel's central parallel has not gone unnoticed, however, by the more discerning critics. Kildare Dobbs sees the plot of This Side Jordan as "too tidily mixed up,"¹⁰ and Clara Thomas refers to "a certain forcing of material within its frame."¹¹ She goes on to suggest that "(t)he final chapters, with the evidence of their good intentions and apportioning of rewards, are almost fussy in their insistence on tying all threads."¹² A related criticism is Barry Callaghan's description of the characters as "stereotypes" calculated to move within a ^{or} pattern.¹³ Margaret Laurence herself criticized This Side Jordan in "Ten Years' Sentences," an article written ten years after the novel's publication, admitting it was too pat. Even if it was "somehow retrospectively touching," she found it "out-dated and superficial," largely because "victory for the side of the angels is all but assured."¹⁴

The strengths of the novel are worth noting, however. At its best, it reveals Laurence's characteristically subtle touch in her ability to

catch a character. She can accomplish this even in a short sketch:

She would be tired all the time, for physical work was now completely alien to her. The flat would get drabber as she slowly stopped trying. The tines of the forks would be clotted with egg-yolk she somehow hadn't been able to wash off. Forgotten dabs of milk pudding would sour in little bowls on shelves. The sinks would be brown as tea. She would wear shapeless cardigans and heavy shoes, and would cry because she could not get the coal fire lighted.

(TSJ 130)

One also finds the tacit recognition of the immense complexity of life implied by the use of two central characters with differing perceptions of the same reality, and echoed by detail like Cora and Helen's competition over their need for the biggest bungalow.

I find it significant that one reviewer should confess to "uncertainty as to the mood of (the) conclusion." "Is it primarily hopeful or ironical?"¹⁵ F. W. Watt asks. In the context of her deep awareness of life's complexity, it seems possible that Margaret Laurence might well have been unconsciously ambiguous, despite her conscious intent to simplify.

The overall subtlety lacking in This Side Jordan can be found, however, in the short stories written during the same period and collected in 1963 as a book entitled The Tomorrow-Tamer and Other Stories;¹⁶ here Laurence's talent is displayed to full advantage. No facile optimism is apparent here. Instead, one finds a deep and penetrating study of aspects of the human condition.

While the stories differ widely in content, certain techniques and concerns appear and reappear throughout them: characters burdened by self-consciousness; a stress on the tragedy of alienation from one's cultural heritage; and an exploration of the meaning of freedom.

Both The Prophet's Camel Bell and This Side Jordan had touched on

the curse of self-consciousness with its inevitable accompaniment of motive-hunting. In this collection, concealed motives are the order of things. The missionary, for example, traditionally clearly-oriented, is portrayed in two of the stories as motivated by unacknowledged personal needs: Matthew's father in "The Drummer of All the World," whose arrogance promoted him to bring "Salvation to Africa" (TT 1), or Brother Lemon in "The Merchant of Heaven" who "intended to salvage those souls" (TT 74) like scrap metal.

Even more impelling revelations occur when the central character or the narrator discovers such discrepancies in his own behavior. Constance, in "A Fetish for Love," must admit to herself finally that her solicitude about Love's barrenness has selfish overtones:

Constance began to deny it. Then she remembered how she had felt at the ju-ju woman's hut, and could not reply after all. The whole business had begun with such clarity, but now she was no longer sure of her own reasons.

(TT 178)

Godman's master too finds himself motivated by increasingly subjective concerns:

However helpless, Godman would have to go.

But if Godman went, Moses would have to go back to preparing his own unappetizing meals. Either that or buy his food in some grimy chop-chop. All at once Moses saw that he was wondering not how the dwarf would manage alone, but how he himself would manage without Godman.

(TT 153)

Most striking, however, are Matthew in "The Drummer of All the World," and Violet in "The Rain Child," as one watches their spiritual awakening through the techniques of the first-person narrator. In fact, Clara Thomas in her introduction to The Tomorrow-Tamer identifies "her narrator's self-examination, a charting of consciousness and of growth" as "(c)entral to

Margaret Laurence's technique."¹⁷ Matthew, for instance, comes only slowly to realize that his outrage at Kwabena's rejection of him is only a defensive recognition of his comfortable insulation from reality:

It was only I who could afford to love the old Africa. Its enchantment had touched me, its suffering - never. Even my fright had stopped this side of pain. I had always been the dreamer who knew he could waken at will, the tourist who wanted antique quaintness to remain unchanged.

(TT 12)

Violet, the most successful character in the collection, and literary ancestor of the Laurence heroines, while more honest with herself to begin with, also must admit painfully to ulterior motives - an attraction to Dr. Quansah which disguised itself as concern for Ruth, his child.

Another recurring theme within the stories concerns the exile, geographic or spiritual, a focus first explored in The Prophet's Camel Bell. For example, Doree and Mr. Archipelago, those two delightfully fragile figures, have both been transplanted from origins unknown, although the story's light and clever ending dissipates any grief about their fate in "The Perfume Sea." Brother Lemon is another exile, but he is portrayed at least as having a home to return to. Violet's fate is therefore far unhappier than that of these three, for Laurence's greatest sympathy is reserved for those who find themselves strangers in their own country:

Sitting in my garden and looking at the sun on the prickly pear and the poinsettia, I think of that island of grey rain where I must go as a stranger, when the time comes, while others must remain as strangers here.

(TT 133)

In this context, the loss of one's cultural ties or traditions is conceived as profound human tragedy; it is a fate which is seen most

often in the African characters by virtue of the fact that their country is undergoing great change. It is Kwabena, nor Matthew, in "The Drummer of All the World," who has no choice but to find a new Africa. Only in "The Pure Diamond Man" is this dilemma viewed with any humour at all. Even Kofi's almost sacrificial death in "The Tomorrow-Tamer" as priest of the bridge, interpreter of the new to the old, is inadequate compensation for his people's loss of their past. Most moving of all the stories is "The Voices of Adamo" which reflects a consistently tragic view of the meeting of the past and the future; in effect, the central character chooses the death cell as preferable to a freedom without direction.

The problem of freedom is at the heart of Laurence's African vision - freedom not only in the physical or political sense, although the promise of Independence always looms behind the action,¹⁸ but freedom in the spiritual sense - a stress which she readily confirms.¹⁹ However, it is not until The Tomorrow-Tamer that one finds the focus on spiritual freedom developed to any degree of effectiveness. Interestingly, it is defined negatively, in association with the breaking of traditional ties and the simultaneous growth of a self-destructive individualism.

Few of the characters in the stories can cope with such "freedom." The destructive process of its effect can be seen most clearly, however, in the passage between childhood and adulthood. The children in "The Drummer of All the World" - Matthew, Kwabena and Afua - are characterized by their freshness, exuberance and curiosity. Adulthood achieved in the context of rootlessness and modern self-consciousness transforms Matthew into a stranger, Kwabena into a bitter patriot with humourless laughter, and Afua into a prematurely old woman with hatred in her eyes. Ruth "the

rain child" and Adamo, both orphan and killer, are equally poignant victims of progress.

Some of the characters succeed, however, in bending freedom to their own purposes, and their success in doing so is directly related by Laurence to their ability to exercise the virtues she celebrated in the earlier books: courage, acceptance, the capacity for joy. Tetteh, the happy-go-lucky con man of "The Pure Diamond Man," is propelled by pure exuberance and the refusal to be beaten. "A Gourdful of Glory" shows Mammii Ama rising above the white woman's disparagement of Ghanaian Independence simply by affirming her own independence. And Godman, no more than a parody of either god or man, faces the terror of an empty universe and survives. "I have known the worst and the worst and the worst," he says, "and yet I live." As Moses must admit, "No man...can do otherwise." (TI 159) As Barry Callaghan observes:

Mrs. Laurence, revealing the frailties that are man's nobility, has re-shaped the club-footed message of This Side Jordan and has dealt very subtly with a profound truth: the human race has managed to roll with the punches of war and drought and political battles and has gone on, has survived, sometimes as no more than a brute, but very often with a special private dignity.²⁰

It will remain for Margaret Laurence to explore this "modified pessimism" (or realism, perhaps) at more length and with greater facility in the Canadian novels. But what she accomplishes in the African work is significant in itself; the following critical comments can speak for themselves in attesting to the various facets of this already considerable achievement:

Margaret Laurence's African stories do fulfil my private artistic requirement; they tell me something I could not have conceived of by myself but which I immediately recognize to be true.²¹

(Phyllis Gotlieb)

I strongly feel that she should be better known and read than all those other North American writers on Africa that one so often hears about.²²

(Micere Mugo)

It is this occasional penetration to the very heart of things, along with a constant and brilliant use of more superficial detail that gives Margaret Laurence an unusual distinction among non-African writers on Africa.²³

(Clara Thomas)

Ultimately what is impressive about her writing is her affirmation, without any sentimentality, of the essential dignity of the human personality. In the finest sense of that word, she is a humanist.²⁴

(Henry Kreisel)

Laurence will fulfil her spiritual debt to Africa in Long Drums and Cannons (a book which belongs to a later period and which will consequently be discussed in Chapter 4); her best work, however, will result from redirecting these gifts upon another land, this time no longer as an exile.

CHAPTER 2

The publishing of The Stone Angel marked Margaret Laurence's literary return to Canada as the source for her material - a return that was nothing short of triumphant, if one is to judge from the unanimously enthusiastic tones of the reviews which greeted the novel. The greatest praise was reserved for Hagar herself; George Robertson, in Canadian Literature refers to her "extraordinary portrait,"¹ and R. W. Watt, in Fiction's review, claims that there "is a Shakespearean vigour and earthiness in the portrayal of the querulous, cigarette-smoking old woman."² Although remarkably few expressed any reservations about the ultimate aesthetic success of the novel, it did not go entirely without criticism: Dave Godfrey found himself disturbed by several elements - "the prose (which) was too warm for the woman Hagar," "the (unlikely) order of her memory," and "the pride-blindness of Hagar (which) was too extreme at times." His reservations were laid to rest, however, by "the hard beauty of the Laurence prose, by her knack of choosing the most revealing action, by her ability to open to us the exact shade of envy, fear, or need which has tormented a character's whole life."³

Henry Kreisel's review in The Canadian Forum goes one step further; he pinpoints the effectiveness of The Stone Angel as the outcome of a

quiet assurance about subject matter: "It could only have been written by one who understands the Canadian version of the Scots Presbyterian soul, the tough, uncompromising outlook which pits itself against circumstance."⁴ This observation is closely related to Margaret Laurence's own reflections in "Ten Years' Sentences"⁵ about the rationale behind this movement back to Canada and specifically to Manawaka, the small prairie town modeled on Neepawa, her own home town.

To some extent, the reasons were negative. For one, the Africa which has captivated Laurence had changed in the interim, as had she: while the books were neither "entirely hopeful" nor socially naive, they "do reflect the predominantly optimistic outlook of many Africans and many western liberals in the late 1950's and early 1960's and "bear() the unmistakable mark of someone who is young and full of faith." While "(t)his was the prevailing spirit, not only of myself but of Africa at that time(, t)hings have shifted considerably since then."⁵ Secondly, this concern for literary integrity was reinforced by the conviction that working "from the inside" is essential to good writing:

It had seemed to me, a few years before, that if anything was now going to be written about Africa, it would have to be done from the inside by Africans themselves, and this was one reason I stopped writing anything with that setting.

If Margaret Laurence had to reject an African setting as personally unsuitable to this approach, she was clearly directed towards the setting which was suitable:

once I began The Stone Angel, it wrote itself more easily than anything I have ever done. I experienced the enormous pleasure of coming home in terms of idiom. With the African characters, I had to rely upon a not-too-bad ear for human speech,

but in conceptual terms, where thoughts were concerned, I had no means of knowing whether I'd come within a mile of them or not.⁷

It was this self-assured familiarity with her Canadian material which Henry Kreisel detected.

In a profound sense, however, there was nothing facile in this redirection. Indeed, the aesthetic return home presented a paradox: on one hand it offered a haven for the exile; on the other hand it created a new challenge, a fact which Laurence had implicitly recognized as early as The Prophet's Camel Bell:

It seemed to me that my feeling of regret arose from unwisely loving a land where I must always remain a stranger. But it was also possible that my real reason for loving it was simply because I was an outsider here. One can never be a stranger in one's own land - it is precisely this fact which makes it so difficult to live there.

(PCB 226)

The choice of Canada and Manawaka was a step of courage.

Yet in retrospect, the eventual emergence of Manawaka as the focal point in her work seems inevitable. First of all, it provided Laurence with a ready-made fund of psychological and physical observations garnered during the formative period of her life. Secondly, it challenged her with the task to which she alludes so often in the African works, although always in the context of the Africans' own self-discovery: that of coming to terms with one's background, something which she calls "(t)he whole process of every human individual."⁸

The three Canadian novels - The Stone Angel, A Jest of God, and The Fire-Dwellers⁹ - are an outgrowth, then, of the period of experimentation represented by the African work. If on a superficial level they may not appear to embody the same basic foci of the earlier books, closer

examination reveals clear similarities: in the general concept of life, in the "modified pessimism" which ultimately affirms the potential dignity of the individual, and in the approach "from the inside." Moreover, the three novels can be viewed as variations of a single basic pattern or shape, a fact which suggests Laurence's confidence that she had indeed found the proper vehicle for her vision.

The novels present a highly self-conscious protagonist, be it Hagar, Rachel or Stacey, staggering under the same burden: a universe in which opportunities for meaningful choice are not at all apparent. And enslavement can take many forms, ranging from physical to social and psychological. As a result, the characters share a passionate yet often misguided search for freedom, and a clear-cut identity. Each carries as protection a sophisticated defence mechanism - a shield of ironic detachment which separates exterior from interior, actor from observer. Of course, this self-defence proves only to be a source of further isolation and despair. In the concluding sections of each of the novels, however, Laurence does provide some insight into the "motions of grace" which counterpoint this deterministic world, offering a measure of liberation. Each woman discovers that emancipation of a sort is possible, although not in the sense she had originally imagined. The author has said that Walter Swayze expressed this discovery "very accurately" in the following words: "In moments of recognition of our identity and our own responsibilities, we may be free."¹⁰

The bulk of each novel is devoted first to an exploration of the various forces which imprison. The most evident and inescapable of these forces is the physical prison of the body.

Hagar, for example, is as much amazed as infuriated by the treachery

of her aged body: "My hair, pinned on top of my head, would come undone and fall around my shoulders in a black glossiness that the boys would try to touch. It doesn't seem so very long ago" (SA 22). Her "great, swathed" hips, she views with "surprise and unfamiliarity" (SA 56). The vision that greets Hagar in the mirror is not that of age itself, but of the decay of youth's beauty:

I give a sideways glance at the mirror, and see a puffed face purpled with veins as though someone had scribbled over the skin with an indelible pencil. The skin itself is the silverish white of the creatures one fancies must live under the sea where the sun never reaches. Below the eyes the shadows bloom as though two soft black petals had been stuck there. The hair which should by rights be black is yellowed white, like damask stored too long in a damp basement.

(SA 79)

Her once dependable body has turned traitor.

What in fact enrages Hagar is the insinuation of the body's new weaknesses into her mind and will. Rendered childish rather than child-like, yet denied the mercy of unawareness, she cringes at the sound of her voice's churlish whining, realizing that "Oh, but that was not what I meant to say at all" (SA 68). She is amazed to hear herself petulant, or resorting to begging to get her way with Doris and Marvin. As if incontinence were not humiliation enough, the stone angel who would never allow herself to cry, finds herself reduced to tears at the slightest provocation:

Then, terribly, I perceive the tears, my own they must be although they have sprung so unbidden. I feel they are like the incontinent wetness of the infirm. Trickling, they taunt down my face. They are no tears of mine, in front of her. I dismiss them, blaspheme against them - let them be gone. But I have not spoken, and they are still there.

(SA 31)

Her failing memory adds insult to injury and increases the nightmare quality of her humiliating confusion.

Hagar is literally being rendered powerless by her body; unwillingly subject to the benevolence of others, she sees clearly that "Privacy is a privilege not granted to the aged and the young" (SA 6). In fact, she chooses the word "violation" (SA 74) to describe this invasion of privacy. And the self-images which emerge at moments of greatest helplessness are equally appropriate: "I am...an earthworm impaled" (SA 54) or "an overturned ladybug" (SA 191).

Throughout these trials, Hagar remains convinced that this capitulation by her body is only a superficial defeat, and that she, the "real" Hagar, exists beneath the mask of flesh, young and vibrant (i.e. powerful) still: "Yet now I feel that if I were to walk carefully up to my room, approach the mirror softly, take it by surprise, I would see there again that Hagar with the shining hair, the dark-maned colt off to the training ring, the young ladies academy in Toronto" (SA 42). Significantly, her eyes have not changed ("when I look in the mirror and beyond the changing shell that houses me, I see the eyes of Hagar Carrie, the same dark eyes as when I first began to remember and to notice myself" (SA 38)); they mirror a soul in revolt against its captivity.

Yet a profound irony emerges when we look at the past Hagar mourns, and the body she then inhabited. For it too enslaved her. If she was beautiful, she was unsure of it at the time - "Oh, I was the one, all right, tossing my black mane contemptuously, yet never certain the young men had really noticed" (SA 46). Even then she was discontent with her body ("for I was tall and sturdy and dark and would have liked to be the opposite" (SA 27)). Moreover, it was her body that bound Hagar to Bram Shipley:

As we went spinning like tumbleweed in a Viennese

waltz, disguised and hidden by the whirling crowd, quite suddenly he pulled me to him and pressed his outheld groin against my thigh. Not by accident. There was no mistaking it. No one had ever dared in this way before. Outraged, I pushed at his shoulders and he grinned. I, mortified beyond words, couldn't look at him except dartingly. But when he asked me for another dance, I danced with him.

(SA 47)

Although Hagar's "gentility" is in the main repulsed by Bram, she is drawn to him and held by him for years for, as she admits, "his banner over me was only his own skin" (SA 81). Perhaps unwilling sensualism is no less a physical enslavement than is old age.

While Hagar's is the most obvious and painful imprisonment, Rachel and Stacey too find themselves subject to the tyranny of their bodies. Rachel has never even been close to being beautiful; she has always felt ungainly and freakishly tall ("I was my full height then, and must have looked like some skinny poplar sapling" (JG 61)). No doubt she would attribute her spinsterhood to this appearance. Now, added to this injustice, is the fear of aging (a rather ironic fear when one compares her age to Hagar's). Nonetheless Rachel lives in terror of coming prematurely to resemble her mother: "How can it happen, still, this echo of my mother's voice?" (JG 4).

Believing herself unacceptable and inferior largely for these physical reasons, Rachel is terribly vulnerable to any male attentions, which she associates with a sense of self-worth. Added to this is her sensualism which, like Hagar's, is absolutely normal, but which horrifies her. Rachel is drawn to the sight of Willard's hands no less unwillingly than to the erotic reveries which she must justify to herself as "sleep-inducing:"

It is only now, concentrating on my hands, the nails nicely manicured and coated with colorless polish, that I realize something else. When Willard Siddley's spotted furry hands were on my desk, I wanted to touch

them. To see what the hairs felt like. Yet he repulses me.

(JG 9)

I didn't. I didn't. It was only to be able to sleep.
The shadow prince.

(JG 19)

"Skin" drives Rachel, then, not unlike it drove Hagar. Because she is unmarried, however, Rachel feels obliged to repress her sexuality until Nick appears. Then her body acquires a will of its own; it not only directs her decision to sleep with him, but simultaneously humiliates her with its clumsy eagerness: "Oh, Nick, I can't help this shuddering that is not desire, that's something I don't understand. I don't want to be this way. It's only my muscles, my skin, my nerves severed from myself, nothing to do with what I want to be. Forgive me" (JG 91).

Rachel's compulsive need for Nick motivates all her actions in this part of the novel, and ultimately, it is suggested, is a factor in driving him away.

Nor does Nick's departure restore Rachel to control of her fate. She must first endure the torture of the possibility of pregnancy (again, a state which occurs ultimately at the pleasure of the body: Stacey has previously completed an ill-timed and unwanted pregnancy at the beginning of The Fire-Dwellers). Then this fear-hope is replaced by an ever crueller blow - the tumour. Perhaps the tumour, an unnatural outgrowth of the body is an appropriate disease for one who, when not setting herself at odds with her body, was prone to see herself as its powerless accomplice. That the tumour turns out to be benign is simply the body's last laugh.

One might suppose that Stacey would be the most free of this sense

of physical enslavement for she, unlike Hagar, is still relatively young and, unlike Rachel, she has been reasonably attractive to men, actually having succeeded in marrying the man of her choice. But she, too, traces a major portion of her disappointments to the failings of her body. The novel begins in fact with Stacey's wishful thinking that:

Everything would be all right if only I...were beautiful. Okay, that's asking too much. Let's say if I took off ten or so pounds. Listen, Stacey, at thirty-nine, after four kids, you can't expect to look like a sylph. Maybe not, but for hips like mine there's no excuse. I wish I lived in some country where broad-beamed women were fashionable.

(FD 4)

On closer examination, one is struck by further parallels between her situation and Hagar's. Each possessed a beauty that she did not recognize or appreciate at the time ("Stacey twenty-three, almost beautiful although not knowing it then" (FD 4)). Now each smarts from the desertion of this beauty, convinced that her present appearance unfairly represents her:

What's she seeing? Housewife, mother of four, this slightly too short and too amply rumped woman with coat of yesterday, hemlines all the wrong length as Katie is always telling me, lipstick the wrong colour, and crowning comic touch, the hat. "Man, how antediluvian can you get?" Is that what she's thinking? I don't know. But I still have this sense of some monstrous injustice. I want to explain. Under this chapeau lurks a mermaid, a whore, a tigress.

(FD 12)

Like Hagar, Stacey has been taken by surprise by the encroachment of the years and their evidence upon her body: "I'm not what I may appear to be. Or if I am, it's happened imperceptibly, like eating what the kids leave on their plates and discovering ten years later the solid roll of lard now oddly living there under your own skin. I didn't used to be. Once I was different" (FD 72). The emerging womanhood of Katie does

not delight Stacie so much as it pains her, for it too symbolizes time's dominion over her life: "Katie, baby, how can you be so gorgeous? I love you for it, but it makes me feel about a thousand" (FD 69).

The affair with Luke is foremost an attempt to recapture the elusive freedom that seems to Stacey to have existed in her past. Just before Luke materializes beside her, Stacey is visualizing Diamond Lake, her symbol of that time: "That's the place I want to get away to, eh?... When I imagine it, it always looks like Diamond Lake. Like, I guess I mean, everything will be just fine when I'm eighteen again" (FD 175). Yet while her lovemaking with him does bring a temporary sense of peace and fulfilment, it soon becomes apparent to the reader that Stacey is subsequently even more enslaved by it than she has been by Mac's infrequent desire for her. "Luke. I can't not see you again. I have to" (FD 230). And at the end of the affair it is her thirty-nine year old body that Stacey finds to blame, no less for its desires than for its physical shortcomings: "Face it - he was only being kind.... 'There was this middle-aged doll, see, and' No. I won't think of it" (FD 244).

It is this sense of one's body as an alien but compelling entity which unites the three women. Each sees her body as perversely unattractive, and as such, a barrier to communication with others (while, in truth, it is her most effective means of communication). And, struggle as each woman does, she cannot get "free" of her body. One cannot materially change one's own body, and time, reflected so clearly in the body's decay, will continue its march. No easy solution is immediately apparent to them.

Nor can any of the three materially affect the cobwebbing of circumstance which enfolds her life. Although Hagar would be loath to

admit it, the very environment into which she was born has had a profound effect on her. The Scottish Presbyterian and Calvinistic values of Manawaka have not only provoked many of Hagar's rebellious actions ("we'd each married for those qualities we later found we couldn't bear, he for my manners and speech, I for his flouting of them" [SA 79]); they have also ironically and thoroughly conditioned her own values: "What could I say?... That I'd sucked my secret pleasure from his skin, but wouldn't care to walk in broad daylight on the streets of Manawaka with any child of his? (SA 100). Even as an old woman far from Manawaka Hagar is flattered to be recognized by Mrs. Jardine as a townspeople ("How stupid of me, to feel so pleased that she should think that, straightaway" [SA 272]). And she finds it a comfort at times to be able to recall Lottie Drieser when she was "Lottie No-Name." The irony of her own remark, "Fancy spending your life worrying about what other people thought" (SA 227) is lost on her. Hagar is least becoming when she is most conventional.

Rachel is a third-generation product of Manawaka's contrived sense of "gentility." More susceptible than the others to the town's velvet-gloved coercion, she finds herself an old maid at thirty-four after she has rejected her only serious suitor because he didn't meet the town's social standards:

When I first came back to Manawaka, Lennox Gates used to ask me out, and I went, but when he started asking me out twice a week, I stopped seeing him before it went any further. We didn't have enough in common, I thought, meaning I couldn't visualize myself as the wife of a farmer, a man who'd never even finished High School.

(JG 31)

On first meeting Nick and sensing his self-assurance, Rachel again finds herself hissing, "Who does he think he is? High school or not. Nestor Kazlik's son. The milkman's son" (JG 64).

Another Manawakan (or more properly, Calvinist) ideal is that of "duty," which exalts the care of a burdensome mother or a despised job: "Well, I think it's marvellous, the way you manage - I always think that anyone who's a teacher is marvellous to take on a job like that" (JG 17). The corollary to a faith in the value of duty per se is the inculcation of a distrust in pleasure, a fact which may explain the characters' ambivalent attraction-repulsion to sex. Rachel feels compelled by her guilt, as George Bowering notes, to set the scenes for her masturbation dreams as far from the town as possible¹¹ ("It has to be right away from everywhere" [JG 18]). She wistfully tells Nick that she has always envied the freer quality of his Ukrainian background:

"More free? That's a funny thing to say. How did you think we spent our time? Laying girls and doing gay Slavic dances?"

"I didn't mean that."

"How, then?"

"I don't know how to express it. Not so boxed in, maybe. More outspoken. More able to speak out. More allowed to - both by your family and by yourself."
(JG 88)

While the town's taboos lack the power to keep Rachel from Nick, they can blunt the edge of her pleasure in him ("What if we were in an accident, and I were found with my hair all disarranged and my lipstick gone and my dress creased and crumpled?" [JG 93]). And her agony over the possibility of a pregnancy she desperately desires, springs directly from a fear of social considerations: "When I think of it like that, away from voices and eyes, it seems more than I could ever have hoped for in my life" (JG 158). Manawaka can literally drive one to the point of suicide.

Because she left Manawaka for good at an early age, Stacey is the most free of the town's suffocating influence, although she can see the

old values returning as she talks to Valentine Tonnerre: "She would like to go back in time, to explain that she never meant the town's invisible stabbing, but this is not possible and it was hers, too, so she cannot edge away from it" (FD 264). More significantly, her communication problems with Mac stem from a piece of Manawakan wisdom dispensed by her mother when Stacey was only a child:

Stacey Cameron, eight or nine, back from playing in the bush at the foot of the hill that led out of Manawaka. There was this gopher on the road, Mother, and somebody had shot it with a twenty-two and all its stomach and that was all out and it wasn't dead yet. "Please, dear, don't talk about it - it isn't nice." But I saw it and it was trying to breathe only it couldn't and it was. "Sh, it isn't nice." (I hurt, Mother. I'm scared.) (Sh, it isn't nice.)

(FD 163)

What's the matter with us that we can't talk? How can anyone know unless people say? How come we feel it's indecent?

(FD 167)

And the mores of the small town are only modified in those of suburbia, which simultaneously exalts the values of the family and of materialism. Stacey's rebelliousness certainly springs in part from her sense of the inadequacy of these ideals; she fears becoming a slave to an eternity of scraped knees and Tupperware parties. Nonetheless, she remains subject to her inbred sense of duty - "I can't. I can't stay away all night. It's not possible" (FD 204).

In varying degrees, then, Scottish Presbyterian Calvinism and its perverse emphasis on conventional social propriety prove to be a compelling influence on Hagar, Rachel and Stacey. One thinks of Margaret Atwood's "Rapunzel Syndrome:" she sees Canadian heroines as having "internalized the values of their culture to such an extent that they have become their own prisons."¹² As Rachel observes: "The Ukrainians knew how to be the

better grain farmers, but the Scots knew how to be almightier than anyone but God" (JG 65). Even the church itself is decorous and restrained in manner and content, not turbulent and joyful like the Tabernacle but, what is more important, guaranteed not to embarrass.

Perhaps this Presbyterian stress on propriety is responsible for an even more subtle form of bondage. Rachel and Stacey (and to a lesser degree Hagar) are unwittingly trapped by their (or more accurately, Manawaka's) images of acceptable feminine behaviour. Sexuality is suspect to begin with. Added to this is their sense of desire as being particularly shameful if housed in a less-than-perfect body. As suggested earlier, each feels almost obliged to be more attractive or, failing that, to repress all sexual desire. Moreover there is a compulsion to play the passive role in courtship and love-making: "For God's sake hold your tongue and let me love. But it's a man who's supposed to say that," (JG 145) says Rachel. While she may once summon up the nerve to phone Nick, and Stacey may find the brazenness to visit Luke, neither feels free to initiate love-making. Even in the novels' marriages, Stacey and Hagar, at least as passionate as their husbands, must wait, or at best, hint.

It is worth noting at this point that, while Margaret Laurence has concentrated her attention upon the prison of the body and of society as experienced by these three women, it is clear that she is no feminist in its current radical connotation. Nowhere in her work is there any suggestion that the spiritual or physical hardships endured by women are any greater than those experienced by men. Valerie Miner, in a recent article in Saturday Night entitled "The Matriarch of Manawaka," is far too simplistic when she states flatly that "Margaret Laurence is a vehement supporter of feminism," and refers to both Stacey and Rachel as

having suffered from "the physical putdown"¹³ (making them martyrs of The Movement, one supposes). While it is true that women in our culture are not only conditioned to appear passive but are more vulnerable to judging themselves and being judged by a physical standard of measurement, it is evident that Margaret Laurence's sympathy is equally extended as well to men, whom she finds just as trapped on the whole by life. In fact, one even finds touches of parallel male fears, such as those about appearances - Mac's concern with his hair, and Willard's with his height.

None of this is to deny Laurence's essentially feminine point of view. As she herself most sensibly says: "I write like a human being, one hopes, of course with a woman's point of view. I am a woman."¹⁴

Margaret Atwood is closer than Valerie Miner to the truth when, in another recent article (in Maclean's), she notes that Laurence approaches the subject of Women's Liberation "with gratitude but caution:"

I'm 90% in agreement with Women's Lib. But I think we have to be careful here... for instance, I don't think enough attention has been paid to the problems men have and are going to have increasingly because of the changes taking place in women. Men have to be reeducated with the minimum of damage to them. These are our husbands, our sons, our lovers... we can't live without them, and we can't go to war against them. The change must liberate them as well.¹⁵

This gentle humanism is consistent with a much earlier interview in Chatelaine (February 1971) in which Laurence suggested that:

I'm not sure men need to be attacked. Men have a lot of problems. Life is an anxious thing for a man who has a family to support, rent to pay, a job to keep.... So women must be concerned about doing a minimum of damage. The aim is not to stab to the heart.¹⁶

This humanistic (as opposed to feminist) bias is supported, in my view, by a conspicuous lack of stress on the specifically female physical concerns such as menstruation, pregnancy and menopause. When they do

figure in the novels, they are rarely if ever treated as profound events which unfairly isolate the woman further. Instead they are seen simply as an unavoidable part of the difficult and often painful human journey.

The subject of the male-female relationship introduces another area of extremely limited power: the control over other people in general. Each woman attempts in her own way to manipulate those around her, or at least to avoid being manipulated herself. Margaret Laurence sums up this tendency when she speaks of "characters who want independence for themselves but not for anyone else."¹⁷ In any case, each meets little success.

Hagar has several men in her life who will clearly brook no attempt on her part to control them. Her life at home with her father was a running conflict of wills culminating in the argument about Bram; although Hagar apparently wins ("But I went, when I was good and ready, all the same" (SA 49)), her father is able to deprive her later of the inheritance she had counted on. Moreover, the marriage itself proves to be a hollow victory. Attracted to Bram by his roughness, Hagar nevertheless expected to polish him to her liking:

What did I care? For the moment I was unencumbered. Charlotte's mother gave a small reception and I shimmered and flitted around like a newborn gnat, free, yet certain also that Father would soften and yield, when he saw how Brampton Shipley prospered, gentled, learned cravats and grammar.

(SA 50)

But not only does Bram remain stubbornly himself but in fact his behaviour becomes increasingly outrageous ("Relieved himself - that's what the Mountie called it - against the steps of Currie's Store" (SA 115)) in response to Hagar's disapproval.

Her son John is even more directly rebellious and unmalleable. As a boy he went his own way; his casual barter of the family pin, in full

knowledge of its significance to Hagar, is symbolic proof of that.

"What else didn't I know?"

He grinned. "Oh, lots of things, I guess. After you told me not to walk the trestle bridge we dreamed up another game there, I and the Tonnerre boys. The trick was to walk to the middle and see who could stay longest...."

"I didn't think you'd ever chummed around with those boys again."

"Sure," John said. "It was Lazarus Tonnerre I traded the plaid-pin to, for his knife. Probably he's got it yet, for all I know."

"Where's the knife?"

"Gone up in smoke," he said. "I sold it once, to buy cigarettes. It wasn't much of a knife."

• "Gainsay Who Dare," I said.

"What?"

"Oh - nothing."

(SA 177)

John simply refuses to allow Hagar to define his character for him. His decision to return to Manawaka to nurse Bram is another symbolic defiance of Hagar's hopes for him:

"Why go, then? There's nothing for you there."

"You never know," he said. "I might get on famously. ~~Maybe it's~~ just the place for me."

His laughter was incomprehensible to me.

(SA 167)

Although Hagar is successful in shattering the limited peace that John and Arlene find, John's ultimate declaration of independence is his suicide (for that is surely what his foolhardy trip across the bridge intended). In view of his previous words to Hagar, one might be tempted to read the act even as spite: "You've got it all wrong. I was - well, I was just about okay, after a long time - didn't you know?" (SA 237),

Even had Hagar succeeded in shaping Bram and John, her victory could only have been pyrrhic; as Laurence comments in an interview with Don

Cameron, "She [Hagar] has always tried to put the hooks on people, to influence people, to manipulate them, her husband and her sons, and she has never really allowed them to go free, so she has never been free herself...."¹³

Rachel meets with equal frustration on the rare occasions when she attempts to impose her will on others. Nick is the best example of this. If Hagar was too heavy-handed ("We were blunt as bludgeons, both of us" [SA 43]), Rachel at least is a mistress of circumvention ("Well, you might teach here, I suppose" [JG 142]). She makes every effort to influence Nick without his knowledge, but her motives are transparent, and Nick simply leaves, perhaps for reasons of his own. Whatever the cause, Rachel's desire to hold on to Nick remains unfulfilled.

Stacey too is met with resistance whenever she tries to mold or direct others. Her children stubbornly insist on being themselves, as children will, and the novel is full of petty confrontations which Stacey never satisfactorily wins:

"You said I could go tonight. You did say."

"I didn't say you could go to that one...."

"You said I could go and I'm going. I just simply am. That's all."

(FD 46)

And she can no more predict the behaviour of Buckle ("Stacey moves slowly towards him.... Then as she is about to place her hands on him, his acute rasping voice. 'Okay that's it don't touch me'" [FD 159]) than she can influence Thor to lay off Mac. As if to drive the point of her impotence home, Stacey cannot even induce Jen, her two-year-old, to begin to speak.

Ironically, the less dynamic characters in the novels are equally

unmalleable; in fact they possess a peculiar ability to manipulate through their very passivity. Marvin's stolid quietness, Mrs. Cameron's neuroses, and Mac's withdrawal are no less frustrating than was the overt independence of the others:

He was a serious and plodding little boy, and seemed to take to chores naturally. But when he'd finished them, he'd hang around the kitchen, and everywhere I'd turn, there he'd be, getting under my feet, until it got on my nerves.

(SA 112)

"Well, it's quite all right, dear. I'm only saying that if you had let me know, it would've been better that's all.... Well, never mind. I shall be quite fine here by myself.... I'll be just dandy. Don't you worry about me a speck. I'll be perfectly all right. If you'd just reach down my pills for me from the medicine cabinet. As long as they're where I can get them handily, in case anything happens. I'm sure I'll be fine. You go ahead and enjoy yourself, Rachel.

(JG 66)

"Mac?"

"I'm looking at the news, Stacey, if you don't mind."
(FD 165)

Rachel's fury at James' refusal to show her his paper gives some indication of the effectiveness of passive resistance: "Crack! What is it? What's happened? The ruler. From his nose, the thin blood river traces its course down to his mouth. I can't have. I can't have done it" (JG 52-3).

In general, then, the women share a sense that not only have they no real or satisfying effect on the lives of others, but that they themselves are often in fact the ones manipulated. Rachel may want to cry "Listen, Nick - " but she is too aware of her own powerlessness even to voice the words.

The mask image in the novels reinforces this sense. The characters lament the possibility of every truly knowing, much less influencing

another human being:

What is he thinking?... I can't tell. I can't tell at all what he's thinking. I never can, not with anyone. Always this futile guessing game.

(JG 84)

In God's name, what is Mac like, in there, wherever he lives?

(FD 126)

Tess. What's the matter with us? Or maybe you really are only talking about the outer skin? I don't know. I can't get through the sound barrier any more than I can with any of them. It is only me who wants to?

(FD 221)

The mask image (developed more fully later in A Bird in the House) is an attempt to symbolize this impasse: "Perhaps it isn't that the masks have been put on, one for each year like the circles that tell the age of a tree. Perhaps they've gradually peeled off, and what's there underneath is the face that's always been there for me, the unspeaking eyes, the mouth for whom words were too difficult. No. No. No. I can't take that" (FD 170).

To this web of external influences can be added a final strand: the larger perspective. Although the Depression and the Stock Market Crash provide a hint of such an overview in The Stone Angel, it is not fully developed until The Fire-Dwellers, where an intolerable world situation reinforces the claustrophobia of the microcosm (a state of affairs mirrored by the style of the novel which weaves newscasts in and out of the action). McLuhan's television acts as a Chorus, peppering Stacey with assorted reports and prophecies of disaster. She is particularly haunted by the Vietnamese war in its indirect threat to her children:

Ever-open eye. Bougainvillaea burgeoning, edging streets where beggars squat in dust. A man burning. His face cannot be seen. He lies still, perhaps already dead.

Flames leap and quiver from his blackened robe like excited children of hell. Voice: today another Buddhist monk set fire to himself in protest against the war in....

(FD 125)

That Stacey keeps a revolver is significant; that she eventually recognizes its futility and discards it is even more significant: "Slowly, Stacey tells him how she felt then and how she came to realize there was no use keeping the gun" (FD 306). As Hemingway recognized, war is the ultimate symbol for the massive forces which are beyond the control of the individual.

In this exploration of the bondage of Laurence's three heroines, there remains one key factor to discuss, one which is not external, but internal: the fact that insofar as the women have any freedom to act, they seem compelled to act as they do by pride. This pride may display itself in the aggressive arrogance of Hagar, it may disguise itself in the neuroses of Rachel, or it may manifest itself in the compulsive maternalism of Stacey, but it is pride nonetheless. Each has an unconscious drive for perfection, a heritage, perhaps, of the Calvinist association of success and "election," and she refuses to content herself with less from life; in this sense their attitude might even be called "hubris." And as such it is the most important of all life's imprisoning forces.

The insulating effect of pride is clearly reflected in Laurence's style. Each of the three novels employs the device of filtering reality through the eyes of its heroine, whether this is accomplished through the first or the third-person point of view. Consequently the reader is constantly confronted by an ironic discrepancy between external appearance and internal reality. William New's observation about The Stone Angel is equally applicable to A Jest of God and The Fire-Dwellers: "the novel continually juxtaposes desire and reality, expectation and event, what one wants and what one gets."¹⁹ It becomes evident that each woman has erected defensive

barriers of pride which have unfortunately proved more isolating than protective. Failures in communication must be seen, then, as at least partially self-created. Hagar, Rachel and Stacey wear the mask too.

This alienating influence of pride is easiest to document in Hagar. That she is a fighter, refusing ever to submit, yet remaining paradoxically conventional, has already been discussed. It was suggested that this two-sided arrogance was partly conditioned by the Scottish Presbyterian milieu; in an equal sense, however, it is a unique expression of Hagar herself. This fact is attested to by her father's recognition that in Hagar was reborn the fierce spirit he so admired in himself: "'You take after me,' he said, as though that made everything clear. 'You've got backbone, I'll give you that '" (SA 10).

Laurence's admiration for strength takes an interesting turn in the study of Hagar. Even as a young girl, Hagar despised weakness in herself as much as in others; believing herself superior, she refuses to cry when her father spans her ("I wouldn't let him see me cry, I was so enraged" (SA 9)). This refusal to admit hurt or weakness will follow her throughout life and become her curse. For Hagar's pride is, of course, magnificently ironic. It is when she senses her lack of power that arrogance and even conventionality surge to the forefront as face-saving devices.

This defensive reaction can be seen in her relationship with Bram, for instance. It is consistent that Hagar can never admit to Bram that she enjoys his love-making:

It was not so very long after we wed, when first I felt my blood and vitals rise to meet his. He never knew. I never let him know. I never spoke aloud, and I made certain that the trembling was all inner.... I prided myself upon keeping my pride intact, like some maidenhood.

(SA 81)

Such an admission would be tantamount to betraying her need for him, and thus hazarding the possibility of his rejection. Nor can she play the role of comforter with Bram any more than she could with her dying brother:

"Hagar - put it on and hold him for a while...."

But all I could think of was that meek woman I'd never seen, the woman Dan was said to resemble so much and from whom he'd inherited a frailty I could not help but detest, however much of me wanted to sympathize. To play at being her - it was beyond me.

"I can't, Matt." I was crying, shaken by torments he never even suspected, wanting above all else to do the thing he asked, but unable to do it, unable to bend enough.

(SA 25)

I wanted to say "There, there, it's all right," but I did not say that. My mouth said, "What is it?" But he did not answer.

(SA 85)

Refusing to acknowledge weakness and fear, she cannot share them. And, in the end, deserting Bram is easier than daily facing her inability to change him.

The same self-protective pattern emerges in Hagar's relationships with her sons. She cannot stoop to beg Marvin not to leave for the war, nor even ask him to take care of himself: "I did not want to embarrass both of us, not have him think I'd taken leave of my senses" (SA 129). She is equally silent at his return:

I wanted to ask him, then, where he had walked in those days, and what he had been forced to look upon. I wanted to tell him I'd sit quietly and listen. But I couldn't very well, not at that late date.

(SA 182)

Nor can she reveal her fears and indecision before John. Hagar must simply try to forbid him from taking risks and, in so doing, alienate him. It is to his credit, not hers, that John senses Hagar's real sense of powerlessness and forgives her:

"Mother - it hurts. Can't you make them do something for me? Make them - give me something?..."

"No," he said distinctly, "You can't, can you? Never mind. / Never mind."

He put a hand on mine, as though he were momentarily caught up in an attempt to comfort me for something that couldn't be helped.

(SA 242)

The greatest irony here is that Hagar's pride far more enslaves than protects her. It is a strength only in the small context, as for example when the aging Hagar has fallen in the forest:

I hurt all over, but the worst is that I'm helpless.

I grow enraged. I curse like Bram, summoning every blasphemy I can lay my hands on, screeching them into the quiet forest. Perhaps the anger gives me strength for I clutch at a bough, not caring if it's covered with pins and needles or not, and yank myself upright. There. I knew I could get up alone. I've done it. Proud as Napoleon or Lucifer, I stand and survey the wasteland I've conquered.

(SA 191)

Ultimately no defense against a world beyond her grasp, it defeats the one small chance she does possess for real power - love. And having feared to reveal weakness before her men, she is rendered not unwilling but unable to convey her regrets or shed the tears that are as necessary to her as to them: "But I shoved her arm away. I straightened my spine, and that was the hardest thing I've ever had to do in my entire life, to stand straight then. I wouldn't cry in front of strangers, whatever it cost me. But when at last I was home,...I found my tears had been locked too long and wouldn't come now at my bidding. The night my son died I was transformed to stone and never wept at all" (SA 243).

Hagar has found pride to be a poor weapon against the claustrophobic darkness of life: "For me, (the darkness) teemed with phantoms, soul-parasites with feathery fingers, the voices of trolls, and pale inconstant

fires like the flicker of an eye. But I never let him, or anyone, know that" (SA 205). The "black sea" that haunts her old age echoes the same image of a menacing chaos:

Outside, the sea nuzzles at the floorboards that edge the water. If I were alone, I wouldn't find the sound soothing in the slightest. I'd be drawn out and out, with each receding layer of water to its beginning, a depth as alien and chill as some far frozen planet, a night sea hoarding sly-eyed serpents, killer whales, swarming phosphorescent creatures dead to the daytime, a black sea sucking everything into itself,...

(SA 224-5)

Rachel's pride too is a defense against an alien universe, a fact confirmed by Margaret Laurence in her interview with Grace [redacted] son: "Rachel's hang-up in a sense was very similar to Hagar's, [redacted] though it was very, very concealed. Because anyone who is desperately afraid of having human weaknesses, although they feel very unself-confident, as Rachel did, is in fact suffering from spiritual pride."²⁰ Pride is a method of preserving her dignity against any eventuality, the worst of which is to be proved a fool ("Am I unbalanced? Or only laughable? That's worse, much worse" (JG 19)). Neurotically conscious of the aridity of her existence, Rachel walks her life like a tightrope, attempting to exorcise meaninglessness with the magic charm of manners and gentility. Though her students may find her "antedeluvian," Rachel can hold up her chin, knowing she is wearing fresh underwear ("It's only self-respect, really" (JG 20)).

Gambling on the value of being "sensible," Rachel, however, is constantly disappointed. She sees herself no less comic for it - an oversize old maid who lives above a funeral parlour. She flagellates herself with wounded pride, summoning up images of even worse indignities:

I honestly do not know why I feel the daft sting of imagined embarrassments. The ones that occur are more than plenty, God knows. I must not let myself think

like this. I don't know why I do. Unless to visualize something infinitely worse than anything that could possibly happen, so that whatever happens may seem not so bad in comparison.

(JG 51)

As a result, Rachel cannot allow herself the dangerous luxury of intimacy. A hint of lesbianism (i.e. grotesqueness) in Calla, for example, is too great a price to pay for Calla's friendship. As the scene with James showed, Rachel cannot allow anyone to make her look foolish.

George Bowering notes that "Rachel seems to prefer her inside to her outside, because it is abstract and hidden from outsiders, hence untouchable for two reasons. But her desire to be opened does battle with her sense of good taste and behaviour."²¹ Although Rachel consequently drops the facade with Nick, no doubt her customary defensiveness at the beginning must have already done its damage. And though perhaps both Nick and Rachel suffer from her over-sensitive pride, Rachel is clearly its greater victim.

Pride is less evident a factor in Stacey. However, she too tends to punish herself for imagined failures, again with some indirect damage to those around her - Mac and the children ("Oh God, Stacey, why do you always have to make everything so difficult?" (FD 43)). But, as with Rachel, the brunt of pride's sting is self-directed. Frequently deserted by her common sense, Stacey accuses herself of having failed in her roles as wife and mother. She blames herself first of all for being discontent: "This is madness. I'm not trapped. I've got everything I always wanted" (FD 73). And she blames every weakness in her children, real or imagined, on herself: "I think 'How can I ever make up for what I've done to them? How can I ever answer or atone for it?'" (FD 26). Though terribly uncertain of The Art of Childraising, Stacey feels she cannot reveal this to her family: "I don't know what I should be doing. But I think if I don't tell you, it'll look bad" (FD 47). Painfully aware of these "inadequacies," Stacey begins to

abdicate control of herself through her gin and tonics.

Pride, the last defence of the three against their perfectionist disappointments, has proven to be simply another shackle. Predictably, then, while each novel employs imagery characteristic of its protagonist, the overall impression conveyed by the imagery in the three novels is that of entrapment.

Hagar, child of a pioneer, draws from natural imagery:

I cannot breathe. I am held, fixed and fluttering, like an earthworm impaled by children on the ferociously unsharp hook of a safety pin.

(SA 54)

My heart is pulsing too fast, beating like a berserk bird. I must try to calm it. I must, I must, or it will damage itself against the cage of bones. But still it lurches and flutters, in a frenzy to get out.

(SA 95)

Rachel, on the other hand, imprisoned by a later and more sophisticated Manawaka, employs imagery of enclosure and strangulation to express her psychic claustrophobia:

I can't move, that's the awful thing. I'm hemmed in, caught.

(JG 30)

Oh God. Again. I can feel myself beginning to grow dizzy, as though a leather thong has lassoed my temples.

(JG 81)

"No," she says, circling my wrist with her white sapphire-ringed hand, "don't be, dear, will you?"

(JG 101)

And Stacey, modern housewife, either flatly states her frustration -

If only I could get away, by myself, for about three weeks. Joke. Laugh now.

(FD 171)

I'm trapped.

(FD 211)

If only I could get out of here. If only I could get out.

(FD 254)

or, in the true spirit of the sixties, frames it in audio-visual echoes of the omnipresent television. In their variety, Stacey's nightmare images touch on the spectrum of ancient and modern disaster: forest fire; sea drowning; Roman invasion; religious suicide; decapitation. Perhaps the truest expression of Stacey's version of the trap, however, is her dream vision of life as a prison sequence:

The place is a prison but not totally so. It must be an island, surely, some place where people are free to walk around but nobody can get away.... Lying together on the bed of leaves, she and Mac listen to the guards' boots. The legions are marching tonight through the streets and their boot leather strikes hard against the pavements and there is nowhere to go but here.

(FD 259)

As a subtheme, it is interesting and important to note that the men in the novels share this sense: Nick, for example, speaks of the "Goddamn spider webs" (JG 141) and Mac agonizes that: "I don't know. I just don't know. I don't see how I can stay and yet I don't see how I can leave, either" (FD 253).

The overall effect of the imagery is to create an overwhelmingly pessimistic picture of life. Although Frank Resando somewhat overstates the point, his description of this vision in the novels is essentially accurate:

She is an author with a keen awareness both of the more horrifying aspects of this life and of the shells of catch-phrases, rituals, and trivial bigotries which we build to protect ourselves from them. These shells, of course, are also cages and ultimately, rather insubstantial. They are incomplete, frequented with gaps through which apparitions may suddenly appear, apparitions which, by the truth they reveal, threaten sanity.²²

As the beginning of this chapter suggested, The Stone Angel, A Jest of God, and The Fire-Dwellers are remarkably parallel in theme and shape (although not in style) insofar as each deals with the personal universe of a woman who sees herself at odds with life - restrictive social mores,

unsatisfactory personal relationships, and her own perfectionism. This pattern is simply a development of earlier Laurence concerns: her admiration for strength and compassion for weakness as well as her fascination with the intricacies of self-consciousness. In addition, the three novels reveal a continued focus on the nature of life itself, in the recognition of its immense complexity and almost impossible demands. The next chapter, however, will show how each woman nonetheless finds a reasonably parallel "solution" - one based on insights which first appeared in the African short stories.

CHAPTER 3

Chapter 2 examined the parallels in the basic frame of reference employed by The Stone Angel, A Jest of God, and The Fire-Dwellers. Each of these novels employs a highly self-conscious narrator or central character who perceives life as circumscribed and repressive. Consequently Hagar, Rachel and Stacey direct a good deal of energy to gestures of denial and rejection, defensive gestures which ultimately prove futile. None is able to bend life to her will.

The conclusion of each novel, however, points to the possibility of some degree of liberation. It would be uncharacteristic of Margaret Laurence to provide a facile answer to what is obviously a consistently complex vision of life. She therefore allows her characters only a limited affirmation. This affirmation is founded, however, on her equally strong and continuing conviction of the individual's potential strength and dignity.

The African work has suggested that one's response to a situation could be just as important as the situation itself. Somali fatalism, for instance, was shown to have made possible an otherwise unbearable life. And Godman succeeded in celebrating his horrible freak-show existence by concentrating on the basic fact that he had survived at all. These internal adjustments are realistic responses to the hard facts of life.

Part of the failure of This Side Jordan was the fact that both Johnnie Kestoe and Nathaniel Amegbe were given easy resolutions for their problems: external solutions, like a job promotion or the birth of a baby, were provided for them. As a result, one was not convinced that the optimism of the ending was justified or could be sustained in the hypothetical future. To this more literary than realistic resolution, one contrasts Mamfi Ama, who could not create free bus rides after Independence but who could at least fend off the white woman's cynicism by denying its validity for her. To a significant degree, then, life becomes what one makes it. Things which cannot be changed may profitably be accepted at least.

An implication of this approach is that a "vice" can be recast into a "virtue." The penchant for analysis and self-examination which the three women share can become less self-destructive as it becomes more purposeful. The consequent insights are nonetheless painful ones.

At their most lucid, Hagar, Rachel and Stacey recognize and admit the ultimately passive nature of their lives despite all pretense to the contrary. Hagar, the arch-manipulator, admits to a life of waiting:

I've waited like this, for things to get better or worse, many and many a time. I should be used to it. So many years I waited at the Shipley place,... I didn't even know what I was waiting for, except I felt something else must happen - this couldn't be all.

(SA 112)

It was a becalmed life we led there, a period of waiting and of marking time. But the events we waited for, unknowingly, turned out to be quite other than what I imagined they might be.

And here am I, the same Hagar, in a different establishment once more, and waiting again.

(SA 160)

In a similar vein, Rachel (who, George Bowering notes, thinks of herself as "the acted-upon, and conditioned"¹) pleads, "What could I have done

differently?" (JG 12). And Stacey's prison image effectively suggests her passive condition; it is no wonder that she cries: "Everything is receding" (FD 79).

As a related insight, the women recognize their lack of a clear self-image. Hagar, as an old woman, can point only to her furniture as representative of who she is: "If I am not somehow contained in them and in this house, something of all change caught and fixed here, eternal enough for my purposes, then I do not know where I am to be found at all" (SA 36). Rachel's self-image is even less substantial: "What a strangely pendulum life I have, fluctuating in age between extremes, hardly knowing myself whether I am too young or too old" (JG 57). She is pathetically reliant on others to define her ("Am I like that? I never knew" (JG 104)). Rachel's need for a child - "Give me my children!" (JG 148) - is partially an attempt to find her identity in the role of motherhood.

Stacey's experience has proven, however, that a satisfactory identity is not to be found in motherhood per se. It becomes too easy to confuse one's self with the roles one plays: "I can't go anywhere as myself. Only as Mac's wife or the kids' mother. And yet I'm getting now so that I actually prefer...to face the world with one of them along. Then I know who I'm supposed to be" (FD 95). Although she views the appearance of Luke as an opportunity for self-discovery free of the necessity for role-playing, as suggested earlier, Stacey's affair with him cannot be considered anything but a patent failure in those terms. The closest Stacey can come to pinpointing exactly who she is, is to dance: "I'm not a good mother. I'm not a good wife. I don't want to be. I'm Stacey Cameron and I still love to dance" (FD 134). But Stacey's dancing is only another misplaced search which leads her away from the present.

The women's frustration at their inability to pierce life's enigma is reflected in the imagery of blindness which not only dominates The Stone Angel ("doubly blind, not only stone, but unendowed with even a pretense of sight" (SA 3)), but reappears in The Fire-Dwellers - Stacey, stumbling through the jungle, carries her severed head in her arms (FD 124). Yet the women come slowly to realize that this sense of blindness is to some extent self-induced, for they are granted strong intimations that life need not be thus.

These rare moments of certainty follow a pattern in the novels. They are often associated with the sexual act; transcending moral interdictions or personal fears, intercourse is affirmed as potentially spontaneous and creative in itself. Rachel's reflection, "I don't care. I don't care about anything, except this peace, this pride, holding him" (JG 91) is characteristic. Sex is associated with a sense of momentary freedom at least: "Nothing is complicated" (JG 147) and "Thought has to return, but it hasn't the power to threaten me, not yet" (JG 104). In addition, A Jest of God also tentatively presents religious ecstasy as an alternative source of joy for some at least; religious surrender, as described in the Tabernacle hymn ("In full and glad surrender/ I give myself to Thee" (JG 34) is not unlike sexual surrender. Stacey can point to her swimming and dancing as similar high points of existence: "Every bone knowing. Dance hope, girl, dance hurt. Dance the fucking you've never yet done" (FD 135). The common element in these experiences is, significantly, their quality of active and joyful yielding - to another person, to a deity, to an alien element (water), or to music. This submission is anything but a defeat; it is self-assertion, a creative participation in life, a fusion of action and passion.

It is possible that the underlying sense of affirmation in the novels issues from these hints of life's potential beauty. What Hagar, Rachel and Stacey share is not so much a faith as a hunch that life can and should be joyous. Therefore it is not surprising that in the face of personal despair, each turns, albeit unwillingly, to a "suspect" God whom they accuse at various moments of being a brutal jester, a misguided misogynist, or at best, a benevolent but absentee landlord. Stacey, for example, posits the existence of God as a prerequisite to justice: "God, if it was anything I did, take it out on me, not on him - that's too much punishment for me" (FD 296). Rachel, when in need, addresses her thoughts to a God who resides in her head, a "(l)ast resort" who seems purposely enigmatic, if He exists at all: "If You have spoken, I am not aware of having heard. If You have a voice, it is not comprehensible to me. No omens. No burning bush, no pillar of sand by day or pillar of flame by night" (JG 171). While Hagar is particularly adamant about refusing to grovel before any God, even she has a sense of grace operating in her life: "I sigh, content.... I could even beg God's pardon this moment, for thinking ill of Him some time or other" (SA 248) and "I am left with the feeling that it was a kind of mercy I encountered him (Lees), even though this gain is mingled mysteriously with the sense of loss which I felt earlier this morning" (SA 253). In general, sensing the possibility of cosmic order, they demand its confirmation.

No religious confirmation is forthcoming, however, in the novels. Laurence herself has admitted to a vagueness about ultimate answers: "I guess I'm a religious agnostic."² Nonetheless some partial answers do emerge in the novels' structures. Granted, no deus ex machina arrives to free the heroine from her chains (external or internal); however,

each woman is at least "graced" with the understanding necessary for survival with dignity. As might be expected, the solution is largely internal. The claim that "the truth shall make you free" is relevant here as a psychological insight. One must simply accept the fact of limited freedom and abilities - physical and mental. Nothing but one's attitude to this state can be significantly altered. Yet this change in attitude alone can create a workable sense of freedom. On being challenged about his existential claim that man is essentially free to choose, Sartre is said to have replied that, even in prison, one may choose to be imprisoned. Surrender thus becomes a positive act.

Accordingly, each of the women comes to accept the impossibility of absolute freedom and, having done so, gradually gains the strength for meaningful action within this context. Each begins to search for and to find joy within the mundane, and this in itself is liberating. Margaret Laurence has explained that, "When I first began writing, the theme to me seemed to be human freedom and in a profound sense it is still human freedom. But this is linked with survival which, as you say, has to be linked with some kind of growth and I would express this in terms of an inner freedom."³

Hagar's acquisition of inner freedom has been prepared for by the spectre of her impending death, which rouses her to purposeful self-examination. As F. W. Watt observes:

But though Hagar seems more paradoxical as she grows older, from the outside more inhibited, cramped, cranky, and narrow, inwardly more aware and expressive and passionate, she is shown as breaking through the barriers of her own proud, independent nature, and making gestures of kindness and compassion to others....⁴

Although years too late, she has felt compelled to mumble her drunken apologies to John and to shed her tears for him: "I didn't really mean

it, about not bringing her here" (SA 247). She has also been mysteriously inspired to compassion for the stranger who heard her confession:

Impulsively, hardly knowing what I'm doing, I reach out and touch his wrist.

"I didn't mean to speak crossly. I - I'm sorry about your boy."

Having spoken so, I feel lightened and restored.
(SA 253)

These new impulses continue to stand her in good stead, for while Hagar still refuses to pray (i.e. beg), she is surprised to hear herself ask to hear a particular hymn which has stuck in her memory. With it comes clear understanding at last:

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.... Every good joy I might have held, in my man or any child of mine or even the plain light of morning, of walking the earth, all were forced to a standstill by some brake of proper appearances - oh, proper to whom? When did I ever speak the heart's truth?

Pride was my wilderness, and the demon that led me there was fear. I was alone, never anything else, and never free, for I carried my chains within me, and they spread out from me and shackled all I touched.

(SA 292)

Walter Swayze describes Hagar's epiphany in the following terms: "There is joy in the knowledge that she has always wanted to rejoice, (and) freedom in the knowledge that she has been misled and enslaved by pride and fear...."⁵

Armed with the painful truth, Hagar is now paradoxically free to discover the joy she had always denied herself. She feels free to display fear, and to show tenderness - not to the dead, but to the living - in other words, to take the chance of accepting imperfection in herself and others. Certainly still no angel, she nevertheless manages small

victories: moments of unselfishness with Doris and, more important, with the long-suffering Marvin:

"Doris - I didn't speak the truth. He sang for me, and it did me good."

(SA 293)

And I see I am strangely cast, and perhaps have been so from the beginning, and can only release myself by releasing him.

It's in my mind to ask his pardon, but that's not what he wants from me.

"You've not been cranky, Marvin. You've been good to me, always. A better son than John."

(SA 304)

She is now able to share her fears with Marvin, a mercy for them both; and she is free to risk looking foolish for the sake of a young girl's embarrassment.

These few "truly free" acts (SA 307) bring rewards far out of proportion to their surface appearance: "She's a holy terror," he says. Listening, I feel like it is more than I could now reasonably have expected out of life, for he has spoken with such anger and such tenderness" (SA 304-5). Nor is Hagar's new-found freedom to yield to be confused with weakness. She has surmised not only that death is not so fearsome after all ("an element so unknown you'd never suspect it at all, until - " (SA 307)), but that the water of life must still be fought for, and fought for with joy: "I wrest from her the glass..." (SA 308).

There is a parallel process of self-examination leading to self-liberation in Rachel. Her love for Nick has been the catalyst prompting her to begin asserting herself (for, unlike Hagar, Rachel has had to learn to be healthily selfish). In these new moments of strength, Rachel is able to challenge her mother's hold on her, as well as to look at herself more honestly:

I won't go then - I find the words are there already
in my throat, and yet I force them back. This newfound
ruthlessness exhilarates me. I won't turn back.

(JG 101)

No, I have no pride. None left, not now. This
realization renders me all at once calm, inexplicably,
and almost free. Have I finished with facades?

(JG 142)

Admittedly, this growth of strength is uneven. However, one area
where Rachel reveals a consistent heightening of awareness is in her
sensitivity to others. She is gradually enabled to appreciate their own
uncertainties: "I look into (Hector's) face then, and for an instant see
living there behind his eyes" (JG 128). "Suddenly I wonder if what
(Willard) is asking for, really, is condolence, and if he's asked for it
before, and if at times he's asked for various other things I never sus-
pected, admiration or reassurance or whatever it was he didn't own in
sufficient quantity" (JG 157). Her "mind-forged manacles,"⁶ to use
Bowering's phrase, are becoming unlocked. But sexual love alone is not
sufficiently liberating. It is often transient and, as suggested earlier,
it can create other dependencies. For instance, when Nick leaves, Rachel
is again desolated.

If there is a single moment of truth in A Jest of God, it occurs
during Rachel's near suicide attempt (motivated by her feeling of again
being hopelessly trapped): "It can't be borne. I can't see any way it
could be. It can't be ended, either. I don't know where to go" (JG 169).
The truth that frees her is the recognition that, despite its agony, she
nevertheless loves life: "one clear and simple thought: They will all
go on in somehow, all of them, but I will be dead as stone and it will be
too late then to change my mind" (JG 170). And once more, the very act of
facing the worst, of admitting one's enslavement by life, is liberating.
Nothing external changes, of course ("Everything is no more possible than

it was" (JG 170)), but the prayer which follows contains already the self-knowledge and self-acceptance necessary for meaningful survival:

I am not clever. I am not as clever as I hiddenly thought I was. And I am not as stupid as I dreaded I might be. Were my apologies all a kind of monstrous self-pity? How many sores did I refuse to let heal?

(JG 171)

She yields to the forces of life: "Look - it's my child, mine. And so I will have it. I will have it because I want it and because I cannot do anything else" (JG 171). This last statement is an insight into the nature of human existence: free will at best exists only in dynamic tension with determinism.

Quietly certain that "Yes, I'm going to be all right" (JG 176), Rachel is confronted with the most difficult test possible under the circumstances: the tumour. It has not been enough to bury her pride and choose to bear the child; now she must be denied even the small comfort of meeting life with this child by her side. Rachel's first reaction is despair ("Oh my God. I didn't bargain for this. Not this" (JG 180)), and she temporarily lapses, literally withdrawing from life: "Nothing must disturb me" (JG 185). Wounded pride returns to taunt her, but with less of its former sting:

I was always afraid that I might become a fool. Yet now I could almost smile with some grotesque lightheadedness at that fool of a fear, that poor fear of fools, now that I really am one.

(JG 181)

Yet out of this ultimate demonstration of life's determinism comes a renewed effort of will on Rachel's part. Her mother's heart attack acts as a reminder for her of the necessity for action. She finally relinquishes her ties to Rick and prepares to face the world alone; this decision must be seen as a conscious act of courage, in view of her reply to the doctor's comment that she was out of danger: "I laughed, I guess, and said,

"How can I be - I don't feel dead yet." (JG 184) What success she does find can be attributed, in Laurence's words, to "Rachel's beginning to learn the rules of survival."⁷

As a first step, she resumes caring for her mother at least willingly, if not joyfully (that, surely, is asking too much of the human will). Paradoxically, Rachel's assumption of that responsibility ("I'm the mother now" (JG 184)) relieves her of its worst burden:

I really wonder now why I have been so ruthlessly careful of her, as though to preserve her throughout eternity, a dried flower under glass. It isn't up to me. It never was. I can take care, but only some. I'm not responsible for keeping her alive. There is, suddenly, some enormous relief in this realization.

(JG 195)

Rachel is learning where to yield, and where to stand firmly; no longer subject to her mother's whims, she can begin to make healthy life choices for them both: "No. It's what we're going to do" (JG 191).

As in Hagar, with the growth of insight and self-acceptance comes a corresponding growth of compassion in Rachel, not only for her mother, but for Calla, for her father, and even for Nick: "He had his own demons and webs" (JG 189). Like Hagar's, Rachel's last words in the novel contain a ring of confidence - no total victory, of course, but at least endurance and insight:

Where I'm going, anything may happen. Nothing may happen. Maybe I will marry a middle-aged widower, or a longshoreman, or a cattle-hoof-trimmer, or a barrister or a thief. And have my children in time. Or maybe not. Most of the chances are against it. But not, I think, quite all. What will happen? What will happen. It may be that my children will always be temporary, never to be held. But so are everyone's.

(JG 201)

Rachel can even feel compassion for the jester God: "God's pity on God" (JG 202). George Bowering suggests that Rachel has had, as St. Paul

suggests, to become a fool in order to grow wise. She is learning to share in the joke of life rather than be its butt;⁸ perhaps God is no more free than she.

Finally, Stacey's "limited victory."⁹ She is no more physically freed from the world of time and responsibility than were Hagar and Rachel. But she too can free herself from her own latent perfectionism and begin to make a tentative truce with life.

Rachel and Hagar began to understand life only when they looked squarely at death. In this context, C. M. McLay has hypothesized that "It is only in facing death that we are able to assess life and to recognize our own isolation."¹⁰ Stacey herself is also confronted with death, although not her own - Buckle's accident, Tess's attempted suicide, and Duncan's near drowning. Each of the incidents is a revelation into the inner agonies of others: Buckle's death in particular prompts Mac's confession to Stacey of his own fears of inadequacy and Stacey's subsequent recognition that "I never knew how many (suitcases) you were carrying" (FD 241). She begins to reappraise her assumption that everyone but she is purposeful and free of doubt: "Mac has to pretend he's absolutely strong, and now I see he doesn't believe a word of it and never has" (FD 285). But while they may be human and imperfect, they are not therefore helpless: "Yet he's a whole lot stronger than he thinks he is. Maybe they all are. Maybe even Duncan is. Maybe even I am" (FD 285).

It is this insight that frees Stacey of her need for Luke ("Even if you'd been older, or I'd been younger and free, it wouldn't have turned out any simpler with you than it is with Mac. I didn't see that at one time, but I see it now" (FD 278)). Until this, she has associated Luke with the perfect freedom which eluded her - "everything simpler and

clearer" (FD 205). Now Stacey, like Rachel, reaches the implicit conclusion that ultimately one must stand alone (a truth that Hagar had originally distorted to "one must always stand alone"). McLay comments that "Laurence's primary message [is] that we can never truly know another human being, never penetrate behind their facade, since words which reveal also conceal."¹¹ As an extension of this, Margaret Laurence herself flatly concedes: "One individual cannot save another."¹² If complete communion between two people is impossible, then "[t]he great thing I suppose is to understand and accept this."¹³ Yet McLay goes on to suggest that awareness of these human limitations need not preclude some sharing of strength: "We must accept others as they appear to us, reach out to them in compassion, yet be free to stand alone."¹⁴

At the end of The Fire-Dwellers, persuaded that her loneliness and claustrophobia are not unique, Stacey can face her own self-deceptions: "I was wrong to think of the trap as the four walls. It's the world. The truth is that I haven't been Stacey Cameron for one hell of a long time now" (FD 303).

As did the other two, Stacey exorcises her past only by understanding it. Looking forward now instead of back, she assumes the responsibilities proper to her: she accepts her role as wife and mother (even adopting another "child" - Matthew); she accepts the temporal limitations of her own body. In other words, Stacey recognizes her necessary part in the human continuum which casts us variously as child and parent. Such a step demands real courage:

Okay, Stacey, simmer down. The fun is over. It's been over for some time, only you didn't see it before. No - you saw it all right but you couldn't take it. You're

nearly forty. You got four kids and a mortgage.... We are ourselves and we are sure as hell not going to undergo some total transformation at this point.... I can't stand it. I cannot. I can't take it. Yes, I can, though. By God, I can, if I set my mind to it.

(FD 289)

Stacey's role crisis reintroduces the subject of feminism. Each of the novels begins with a questioning of traditional role-playing. John Moss observes that "Hagar Shipley's retrospective of her life in The Stone Angel involves a whole series of role demands, none of which she is able to meet."¹⁵ Amending "able" to "willing," one might apply the insight to Rachel and Stacey as well. All three originally resent the roles which life has handed them: Hagar refuses, for instance, to be either dependent or mellow in her old age; Rachel chafes under the maidenly task of caring for her mother; and Stacey hates to be identified as Mac's wife or the children's mother. All of these conditions and attitudes are traditionally associated with women. Yet it is interesting that each novel ends with an acceptance of these roles - indeed, even with a degree of affirmation, although not, of course, to the exclusion of the more rounded self-image which goes beyond mere role definition. But again what one finds here is Laurence's humanism rather than strict feminism. Hagar, Rachel and Stacey simply choose not to combat what is natural and to meet the responsibilities which life inevitably brings to all.

This balanced approach is characteristic of Margaret Laurence's realism. When she was accused of having Stacey "opt out" in returning to the daily round, Laurence replied:

For her the only possible kind of freedom, for the moment anyway, had to be found in relation to her husband and to the children whom she loves. It isn't just that she feels responsible for them.... (S)he does, but she loves them, and she knows you just do not suddenly get

up and go.... You don't even start your life again; you take it from where you're at. The way she survives, the only kind of freedom she finds is a kind of inner freedom, which she only partially achieves of course, by realizing and accepting the fact that at least until her children are grown up or away from the nest, there is simply no way she can get out without damaging herself and all of them more than she is prepared to.¹⁶

Part of Stacey will always resent her bondage to time ("I'll be forty next week." "So you will.... Do you mind?" "To tell you the truth, I mind like hell. But there it is." (FD 304)). But, as in the other novels, there is a suggestion of a new richness of future alternatives for she has learned faith in that future.

Lovemaking in this new context may not be abandoned and ecstatic ("Then they make love after all, but gently, as though consoling one another for everything that neither of them can help nor alter" (FD 307)), but it certainly meets Rilke's criteria for love: "Love consists of this, / that two solitudes protect, / and touch, and greet each other."

As Rachel and Hagar discovered, life gives no guarantees. Laurence says of herself: "Personally, I don't believe in security. If I tried to make things safe until the day I die, forget it."¹⁷ The best one can do is to say, like Stacey, "Temporarily, they are all more or less okay" (FD 308).

The theme of survival first seen in The Prophet's Canal Ball has been refined and qualified to "survival not just in the physical sense, but the survival of some kind of human dignity and in the end the survival of some human warmth and the ability to reach out and touch others."¹⁸ And consistently, this attitude precludes rosy optimism: "optimism in this world seems impossible to me. But in each novel there is some hope, and that is a different thing entirely."¹⁹

Perhaps it is the Zen image of the reed which best sums up Laurence's vision in these novels, an image reinforced by Clara Thomas' description of Rachel:

Rachel does not grandly go mad or tragically die like those who would break life to their wills; she bends to life, as most mortals have done, and life plays its amazing, everlasting trick once again for her, bringing hope and vitality out of defeat.²⁰

The reed, flexible enough to bend before the inevitable, endures by finding a strength in the very heart of its weakness.

Reviews of the second two novels varied, of course, as had those of The Stone Angel. As before, the most penetrating criticisms were concerned with points of style. J. J. Hall, for instance, criticized the "narrow" and "limiting" first-person point of view of A Jest of God, commenting that it prevented full realization of the secondary characters and created a "somehow claustrophobic air."²¹ One wonders, however, whether these characteristics are not in fact proof of the novel's success in creating the personality of Rachel - who is too self-absorbed to see others fully, and who does indeed perceive her situation in claustrophobic terms.

The style of The Fire-Dwellers also comes under critical fire: "her use of a technique resembling dramatic monologue crossed with stream-of-consciousness, while highly effective in The Stone Angel, borders on the tedious in The Fire-Dwellers," comments Edward A. McCourt.²² This criticism is a more valid one, and one which Laurence had obviously anticipated and tried to avoid by changes in style - verb tense, shifts from interior monologue to third-person description, even the dropping of quotation marks. The overall effect is, however, admittedly somewhat contrived.

Nonetheless, while reviewers generally remained faithful to Hagar as their favorite Laurence character, all of them had to credit Rachel and Stacey as flesh-and-blood creations. The fact that the criticism seemed often to be founded on a personal antipathy to the character's weakness - the compulsive neuroticism of Rachel or a preoccupation with "ordinary" problems in Stacey - itself implies the character's credibility to the reviewers.

An author's own reaction to his work is not always a dependable guide. But I am inclined to put stock in Laurence's comment about her new-found sense of ease in the Canadian writing when it concerns familiarity with her material:

When I finally got going at (The Fire-Dwellers) I experienced the same feeling I had with The Stone Angel, only perhaps more so, because this time it was a question of writing really in my own idiom, the ways of speech and memory of my generation, those who were born in the 20's, were children in the dusty 30's, grew up during the last war.²³

The advantage of familiarity raises another potential problem, however. At least one reviewer warned (in 1966) of the possibility that Laurence might become repetitive and stultified:

Imprisoning herself within the confines of such writing dictums as "people can only be seen one at a time" and "come to terms with your background" is there not a danger that she may become "the stone angel" of the literary world, belching out every more ingrown monologic characters while the experimentalist, the antiquarianist and the sexologist novelists pass her by, or pin her to the urine-saturated bed of literary dotage.²⁴

This criticism obviously contains a grain of truth, and it might seem to be supported by the fact that one can locate clear parallels between the three novels. On the other hand, one could never make the mistake of confusing any of the three women with one another. Indeed, at times they are opposites (or complements perhaps - Rachel, for example, painfully

learning the strength Hagar has had to temper). Each is a valid and complete creation in herself.

If Laurence places these very different women in the same deterministic framework, and shows all of them groping slowly towards the same limited liberation, it is not for lack of imagination. Rather, it is due to her conviction, a conviction which developed steadily throughout her writing career, that such is the nature of life. What she achieves here, in fact, is a degree of universality. It is this sense, I think, which is implied by her own more modest appraisal:

A strange aspect of my so-called Canadian writing is that I haven't been much aware of its being Canadian, and this seems a good thing to me, for it suggests that one has been writing out of a background so closely known that no explanatory tags are necessary. I was always conscious that the novel and stories set in Ghana were about Africa. My last three novels seem just like novels.²⁵

Margaret Laurence's later works are lateral rather than vertical developments of this quiet certainty of her themes and setting.

CHAPTER 4

The next major work Margaret Laurence published was A Bird in the House,¹ a collection of short stories which first appeared together in 1970 although the stories had been published separately as early as 1963. Nevertheless, it is important to read the book in the context of 1970, for several of the stories were written specifically for the collection, and as a whole the book reveals the presence of several new themes and stresses which were developing during this period.

In this context, Long Drums and Cannons,² the critical study of Nigerian writers published in 1968, also provides some important hints of this impending shift in emphasis which would be fully realized only in The Diviners. Although it predates The Fire-Dwellers by a year, it expresses Laurence's evolving critical stance in that it reflects her own thematic and stylistic biases.

One continuing interest is the subject of independence; in referring to a novel by Chinua Achebe, Laurence remarks:

To become independent of a colonial power, or of any intolerable social authority, however difficult to accomplish, can ultimately be done by fighting that authority, whether physically or politically. But

to achieve an inner independence - that is another thing entirely, and one which does not totally depend upon human desire or will.

(LDC 110)

Her general view of life also remains unchanged: "Essentially, however, the theses are dark ones, theses which can in no sense be said to exclude any one of us" (LDC 116).

Laurence also confirms in Long Drums and Cannons her concern for style, and her criticism, although never cruel, can be incisive:

People of the City is written in a fast-moving style which suits the subject perfectly. Parts of it are exciting, and the nightclub and street scenes are well done. The construction of the novel is weak, however, and the plot diffuse. The writing tends to be too sentimental and banal, and the characters are generally stereotyped and unconvincing, although Sango, the hero, comes across reasonably well.

(LDC 150)

The novels had already revealed her conviction that a primary attention to characterisation and plot must take precedence over any theorizing: in "Ten Years' Sentences," she comments that "I haven't ever decided beforehand on a theme for a novel.... The individual characters come first, and I have often been halfway through something before I realized what the theme was."³ In Long Drums and Cannons, she restates this sense of priorities in her critical judgment: "Nothing is simplified. Nothing is expressed in terms of definition-making theories. Everything is very delicately probed, and the reader has a sense of constant contact with the characters" (LDC 116). In general, then, literature "must be planted firmly in some soil.... Despite some current fashions to the contrary, 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" (LDC 10).

Paradoxically, the consequence of this particularized approach is the creation of significant universality. Laurence prefaces the preceding quotation with the observation that "(p)erhaps the most enduringly interesting aspect of Nigerian literature, however, as of literature everywhere, is the insight it gives not only into immediate and local dilemmas, but, through these, into the human dilemma as a whole" (LDC 10). The attainment of this level of vision calls forth her praise whenever she finds it:

Flora Nwapa excels at catching the exact tone of these women's voices. Whether they are speaking malice or love, tenderness or anger, the words are not bound by their printed form, for they can be heard. The situations and concerns which they are living in any small community, for although Flora Nwapa's women belong in an Ibo village, they convey insights which are valid anywhere.

(LDC 190)

In addition, Long Drums and Cannons reveals the re-emergence of one previous concern which had received very little stress in the last three novels - the subject of cultural continuity. Her earlier African work had, of course, focused on this problem, in fact placing it at the heart of This Side Jordan and short stories like "The Drummer of All the World," "The Voices of Adamo," and "The Rain Child." All of these pieces deal with "the conflict between the values of the old society and the new" in the manner of Wole Soyinka, the modern Nigerian dramatist: "he constantly attacks both and also constantly sees the value of both" (LDC 74). Margaret Laurence's greatest fear for Africa at that time was that it might reject its heritage in the short term, leaving itself only a barren present:

So in the end the old religion is broken, and what wisdom it possessed dies. The links with the past are now irretrievably destroyed and the identity of a people will only be regained slowly and painfully....

(LDC 116)

It is a desire to emphasize the difficult necessity of achieving this reconciliation between past and future which had absorbed her in the African work - a task which she now finds so appropriate in the hands of the Africans themselves: "John Pepper Clark seems to be trying to find some middle course between the lonely individualism of the Western world and the stultifying dependence of tribalism, some means of preserving the individual creative intelligence without totally sacrificing the isolation-breaking ties of tribe and the links with the ancestors" (LDC 85). Laurence's decision to abandon Africa as the setting for her fiction was evidently a tacit recognition that she, an outsider, could not participate in this work of reconciliation.

Often, however, the movement into the first person plural betrays Margaret Laurence's equally strong recognition that achieving an organic relationship with one's past is not a problem exclusive to the African: for example, "The past, however it fails us, cannot be got rid of so easily" (LDC 29), and:

In terms of social themes, Soyinka seeks to establish a relationship with the past which will neither stifle and dominate man nor sever him from his roots....
 [I]n the end it is men themselves who decide their own fates, not in any theoretical way, not in a state of vacuum, but with deep emotional reference to their fathers and their gods. Maybe at some point our ancestors and our gods will be free of us. But not quite yet.

(LDC 44-5)

In addition, her opening pages attest to what could be viewed as primary artistic responsibilities: "The function of the artist was to help maintain the close and necessary relationship with the ancestors and gods..." (LDC 13). And the conclusion of Long Drums and Cannons is unambiguous about the universal relevance of the topic:

Much as they are caught up in immediate happenings, however, Nigerian novelists and dramatists have constantly expressed in their work themes which are not confined to one place or one time - the individual's effort to define himself, his need to come to terms with his ancestors and his gods, his perpetual battle to free himself from the fetters of the past and the compulsions of the present.

(LDC 203)

The three Canadian novels written in the sixties, had, as suggested, given little stress to this problem. An absorption with one's background can be found, however, as an underlying theme. All of the women comb their pasts for clues to the present. Hagar, for instance, dwells in her memories, although not for any comfort they provide her; rather, she seeks to find the pattern which may release her. And, in fact, her first important gesture of liberation, the apology to John, while occurring in the present, seems to her to take place years before. Only having done this can she finally leave this period behind. The rest of the novel takes place in the present.

Although to a much less extent, Rachel, too, examines her own background; her particular focus is the father whom she never understood, the undertaker father who seemed most at home among his corpses and who there drank himself to death. Her greatest fear is that he liked what he did - accepted, even welcomed, this retreat from the world of the living and their demands. At the end of the novel, however, the reborn Rachel can accept her father's choice, although it had made him appear a "fool": "He probably did do what he wanted most, even though he might not have known it" (JG 199). She can also grant him the possibility of having wanted better: "But what came of it was something he hadn't bargained for. That's always a possibility, with anyone" (JG 199). In any case, she allows him the privilege of his own private

mystery, and in doing so wins the right to her own.

Stacey's involvement with her past to some extent resembles Hagar's in that they share the desire to find again the vital and pretty girls they had been, although Stacey's descent into her memories is not as profound as Hagar's. Stacey's Manawakan past confronts her also in the persons of Thor (who turns out to have been Vernon Winkler) and Val Tonnerre, and Stacey must admit that her illusion of having escaped the town was only that. Past shame, guilt and envy - whether her own or others' - have pursued her and demand absolution.

While this theme does figure, then, in the three novels, it tends to be implicit or understated. Moreover, the thrust of the novels is towards rebirth into the future, even in the case of the attenuated future of Hagar. The stories collected in A Bird in the House are significant therefore in that they represent Laurence's first profound exploration in the Canadian context of the depths and difficulties of one's ties with the past.

Appropriately perhaps, the stories are autobiographical, a fact which Margaret Laurence admits frankly:

I have never written anything that is directly autobiographical, except for one book of short stories, A Bird in the House, which was based on my own childhood, myself as a child, and my family.⁴

Returning to face her own background, Laurence recasts her childhood experiences imaginatively through the eyes of Vanessa MacLeod, and in the setting one might predict - Manawaka. However, by its inclusion in this autobiographical work, Manawaka, the home of Hagar, Rachel and Stacey as well, becomes more than simply the fictional counterpart of Neepawa, Margaret Laurence's own home town. It takes on added

significance as a symbol for home in general, the physical representation of one's past. The larger implications of this expanded use of Manawaka will be seen in The Diviners.

In any event, A Bird in the House traces Vanessa's adult attempt to lay to rest the primal fears of her childhood. The view of life here is what one has come to expect in Laurence although the angle of observation has been changed. Innocence, traditional property of the young, is little in evidence in the stories, although Vanessa does experience its comfortable blindness to some extent, as her remark that "(b)oth death and love 'seemed regrettably far from Manawaka" (BH 65) implies. The protective quality of this innocence is, as usual, appreciated only in its passing, as when Vanessa is distressed to find the indomitable Aunt Edna crying:

Their sadness was such a new thing, not to my actual sight but to my attention, that I felt it as bodily hurt, like skinning a knee, a sharp stinging pain. But I felt as well an obscure sense of loss. Some comfort had been taken from me, but I did not know what it was.

(BH 22)

More prevalent in the collection are two frustrations well known to children - ignorance and effective impotence. Each of the stories focuses on one particularly bad memory, remembered in the light of these feelings. "A Sound of Singing" recreates the tensions at Grandfather Connor's, and specifically his animosity towards his brother Dan, whom Vanessa loved; "To Set Our House in Order" describes the birth of her brother Roderick and her mother's near death in the process, a period filled for Vanessa with "the sound of my mother crying, and the voices of the dead children" (BH 53). The death of her beloved Grandmother Connor and the terrible momentary collapse of her grandfather's mask

of domination are the subjects of "The Mask of the Bear", while "A Bird in the House" continues the focus on death in its portrayal of the unexpected death of Vanessa's own father. "The Loons" and "Horses of the Night" both deal with true victims of life - Piquette Tonnerre and Vanessa's cousin Chris, although it is difficult to say where the greater pain resides - in her knowledge of their defeat by life, or in her remembered disappointment at her own inability to help them. Vanessa is equally unable to save her dog from the tortures of the neighbourhood "bad boy" in "The Half-Husky." Finally, "Jericho's Brick Battlements" documents the impact of a real war and the tortures of first love. All in all, a sombre spectrum.

And through it all appear the ruling emotions of frustration and bafflement. Vanessa longs for experience as a key to power:

He would stay right here. And soon, because I desperately wanted to, and because every day mercifully made me older, quite soon I would be able to reply with such a lightning burst of knowingsness that it would astound him,... Then I would not be innerly belittled for being unable to figure out what he would best like to hear. At that good and imagined time, I would not any longer be limited. I would not any longer be young.

(BH 138)

I understand then that she was not speaking to me, and that what she had to say could not be spoken to me. I felt chilled by my childhood, unable to touch her because of the freezing burden of my inexperience.

(BH 70)

Yet the frustration of ignorance is simply replaced by a new and more profound impotence - that of awareness. One discovery, for example, is that "I had not known at all that a death would be like that; not only one's own pain, but the almost unbearable knowledge of that other pain

which could not be reached nor lessened" (BH 81). Other discoveries include the realization of life's essential chaos, a suspicion which had been dawning on Vanessa for some time:

I thought of the accidents that might easily happen to a person - or, of course, might not happen, might happen to somebody else. I thought of the dead baby, my sister, who might as easily have been I. Would she, then, have been lying here in my place, the sharp grass making its small toothmarks on her brown arms, the sun warming her to the heart?

I could not really comprehend these things, but I sensed their strangeness, their disarray. I felt that whatever God might love in this world, it was certainly not order.

(BH 59)

It is her father's death which painfully confirms this suspicion: "After my father died, the whole order of life was torn. Nothing was known or predictable any longer" (BH 144). Although her first reaction is "inexplicable fury" (BH 109), Vanessa must turn to powerless tears for release. "It mattered, but there was no help for it" (BH 110).

A Bird in the House is no more unrelentingly pessimistic, however, than were Laurence's other works. In the process of re-examining these painful memories, Vanessa also finds occasion for the remembrance of joy. Certain characters are celebrated for their ability not only to survive but to affirm. One such character is Uncle Dan, the financial disaster whose appearance was a disgrace, but whose "eyes hardly ever stopped laughing" (BH 26). Another is Grandmother Connor, one of those rare beings who, unlike the bulk of Laurence's characters, never had to learn gracious acceptance of life, for she embodied it:

Acceptance was at the heart of her. I don't think in her own eyes she ever lived in a state of bondage. To the rest of the family, thrashing furiously and uselessly in various snarled dilemmas, she must often have appeared to live in a state of perpetual grace, but I am certain she didn't think of it that way, either.

(BH 72)

Laurence is careful, however, not to portray Grandmother Connor as a saint. She too had her inner agonies in the marriage, although she was able to absorb these disappointments internally with more ease than the others. But while Vanessa cherishes these two people, she implies her inability to imitate them: "And I ran, ran toward the sound of the singing. But he seemed a long way off now, and I wondered if I would ever catch up to him" (EH 38).

The other source of comfort in the collection comes from the actual experience of re-examination. Vanessa the adult can free herself from the traumas she experienced as a child only by reviving the memories and holding them up to the clearer light of maturity, a psychological process which is mirrored in the style of the stories. Each presents a fusion of the two Vanessas - child and adult - in that the child's primal reaction to each situation is reinterpreted by the more detached retrospective understanding of the adult. As a result, experiences which were insupportable at the time are rendered more comprehensible by the addition of another layer of awareness and hence become bearable. It is interesting, as a side-note, that Laurence should choose to show the ironic detachment from the present which so cursed Hagar, Rachel and Stacey, converted to a beneficial and purposeful detachment from the past as one finds it in Vanessa.

Complete understanding is impossible, of course. Laurence's conviction about the chameleon nature of "truth" is present in all her work, whether it is stated directly in her admissions of the difficulty in ever truly appreciating the Somali point of view, or simply implied by the use of the first-person narrative, rampant with misunderstandings and limited awareness. While it is not until The Diviners that she

develöps this theme completely, A Bird in the House is a significant step in the thematic direction of multi-layered truth.

If a complete knowledge is still impossible despite the improved perspective of distance and experience, Vanessa nonetheless succeeds in making peace with her unhappy past. This, then, is the second positive outcome of the memory exercise. Peace comes in the form of forgiveness.

Anyone who, as a child, loved a dog, remembers the fierce loyalties such a relationship engenders. As she begins to retell the story of "The Half-Husky," it is clear that Vanessa's hatred for Harvey Shinwell has been festering since his torture of Namuk. The conclusion of the story, however, which centres around Vanessa's successful revenge, is invested with a surprising compassion. In fact, the basic structure of the story supports a parallel between the hated Harvey and beloved Namuk, who wasn't considered "safe to go free:"

Harvby Shinwell got six years. I never saw him again. I don't know where he went when he got out. Back in, I suppose.

I used to see his aunt occasionally on the street. She was considered safe to go free. Once she said hello to me. I did not reply, although I know that this was probably not fair, either.

(BH 172)

Grandmother MacLeod is another figure from the past whom Vanessa must re-examine and forgive in the light of her maturity. She dominates "To Set Our House in Order," "straight and poised" (BH 39) and, to a child, unforgivingly dictatorial. Set during her mother's near-death in childbirth, the story describes Grandmother MacLeod through young Vanessa's relentless eyes: what she finds most difficult to comprehend or accept in her grandmother is what seems to be a lack of feeling (particularly unforgivable under the circumstances): "she did not

believe in the existence of fear, or if she did, she never let on" (BH 42). As in "The Half-Husky," however, Vanessa finds compassion in retrospect through her understanding of Grandmother MacLeod's hidden need. Although her only overt concession to that need was a momentary faltering of the voice with Ewen, Grandmother MacLeod shared the others' sense of vulnerability; her protection was the facade of gentility which ironically so alienated her from the rest of the family: "your grandmother was interested in being a lady, Nessa, and for a long time it seemed to her that she was one" (BH 53). The reflective quality of the story suggests a level of understanding in the narrator which far surpasses her more abstract understanding as a child.

The most dominant figure in the collection is Grandfather Connor. Vanessa's difficulty in coming to grips with him, even as an adult, is reflected in the fact of his appearance and re-appearance throughout the stories. In fact, many of them pivot on conflicts with Grandfather Connor - whether between Vanessa or the others. It becomes clear, however, that he is the most difficult to understand precisely because he has deliberately made himself the most difficult; that is, he has constructed a mask (the mask of the bear) which effectively hides him from those around him. This is not to suggest that each member of the family did not employ his own devices of protection: as Uncle Terence quips, "Well, everybody to his own shield in this family. I guess I carry mine in my hip pocket" (BH 87). Grandfather Connor's mask is simply the most difficult for Vanessa to penetrate.

Her alienation from him is all the more hard, for Vanessa had originally adored him: "I was gazing with love and glory at my giant

grandfather as he drove his valiant chariot through all the streets of this world" (BH 178). As a twelve-year-old, Vanessa is haunted by this memory and its contrast to her current feeling for him. Grandfather Connor is consistently portrayed as bullying everyone around him, with a seeming insensitivity to their pain. Only once in Vanessa's memory, at the death of her grandmother, does the "carved face" crack to reveal his own pain: "He bent low over me, and sobbed against the cold skin of my face" (BH 80). Ironically, Vanessa's own reaction to this self-revelation of her grandfather's is to "get away, to get as far away as possible and never come back" (BH 80).

Yet, as with the others, retrospective understanding creates compassion, and, implicit in it, forgiveness. Uncle Terence has provided a key to the puzzle years before, at Grandmother Connor's death:

"I'm only saying it might have been rough for him as well, that's all. How do any of us know what he's had to carry on his shoulders? Another person's virtues could be an awful weight to tote around. We all loved her. Whoever loved him? Who in hell could? Don't you think he knew that? Maybe he even thought sometimes it was no more than was coming to him."

(BH 86)

At the time, this knowledge is inadequate to erase the outrage Vanessa feels at his day to day attempt to dominate her. She even mistakenly uses anger and aggression on him once, matching his stubbornness with hers, "as though if I sounded all my trumpets loudly enough his walls would quake and crumble" (BH 199). That, on this particular occasion, he proved to be right, was all the more reason to hate him.

Only his death lays to rest Vanessa's myth of her grandfather's invulnerability: "I was not sorry that he was dead. I was only

surprised. Perhaps I had really imagined that he was immortal" (EH 205). But all she can feel is a begrudging respect rather than a loving sorrow; "Perhaps he even was immortal, in ways which it would take me half a lifetime to comprehend" (EH 205).

Yet this respect itself is a telling successor to hatred. In it is involved Vanessa's recognition that he must be credited at least with having endured. He had endured physical hardships as "one of Manawaka's pioneers" (EH 204); more important, he had endured the spiritual agonies to which his character make-up had condemned him: the inability to show tenderness, and his consequent alienation from them all, even the little girl who had once seen him "as large and admirable as God" (EH 206).

It is this knowledge that "the mask had concealed a man" (EH 88) which begins to free the Vanessa who had confessed that "I did not feel nearly as free as I had expected to feel" (EH 203) when she left for college. Its healing effect is completed much later by another epiphany - the difficult admission that she is not unlike him.

The house had been lived in by strangers for a long time. I had not thought it would hurt me to see it in other hands, but it did. I wanted to tell them to trim their hedges, to repaint the window-frames, to pay heed to repairs. I had feared and fought the old man, yet he proclaimed himself in my veins.
(EH 207)

Only then is she truly free of him - or as free, that is, as life permits - "I looked at it only for a moment, and then I drove away" (EH 207).

Simultaneously, Margaret Laurence says she was finally able to free herself from her childhood feelings about her own grandfather, on whom Grandfather Connor was modeled:

And only after I had finished writing these short stories did I begin to realize that, although I had detested the old man at the time, I no longer detested him. I had come to some kind of terms with him, whereby I could realize that even though he had been a very hard man, he had had a very hard life and he had characteristics of strength and of pride that were admirable - and the other side of the coin was his inability to show affection. So that it was the sort of puritanical thing with the two-sided coin.

Although they do not cry for exorcism in the same sense as the characters above, other figures in the book also benefit from the healing touch of memory. They require release from the child's limited awareness and recognition in their own right. Chris, for example, had represented for the young Vanessa a magical blend of artist and outdoorsman. She observes, as time passes, however, that while she has changed and become more realistic, Chris does not seem to have; this, as well as her own loss of faith in him, puzzles and disappoints Vanessa. It is only as an adult that she can brush aside these feelings in order to see Chris himself. "All his life's choices had grown narrower and narrower. He had been forced to return to the alien lake of home, and when finally he saw a means of getting away, it could only be into a turmoil which appalled him and which he dreaded even more than he knew" (BH 152). Chris' dreams - magical at first to Vanessa, and then futile - were "brave and useless strokes of fantasy against a depression that was both the world's and his own" (BH 153). His insanity was inevitable - "the final heartbreaking extension of that way he'd always had of distancing himself from the absolute unbearability of battle" (BH 153). All Vanessa can do, however, is to release Chris from the added burden of her own disappointments - "I put the saddle away once more, gently and ruthlessly, back into the

cardboard box" (BH 154). In the larger context of the whole collection, Robert Gibbs comments that:

Like "The Loons," "Horses of the Night" is crucial to the narrator's own freedom. Within the ancestral confines and in her encounters with Piquette, she has come to know armour, outer and inner, but to understand even that fully she must extend her awareness to the unarmed, the fugitive from battle. Truth, here as throughout, is imaginative insight, which sets her free.

There is a similar process of demythologizing in Vanessa's remembrances of her father. While prior to his death, he had represented for her all that was "known" and "predictable," afterwards she sees him instead as the symbolic victim of a meaningless universe:

Momentarily I felt a sense of calm, almost of acceptance. Rest beyond the river. I knew now what that meant. It meant Nothing. It meant only silence, forever.

(BH 110)

Again, it is years later before a lessening of pain makes it possible to see her father as he was - an ordinary man, a beloved father, but much like other men. Ewen's experience of truly knowing his own father only "a long time afterwards" (BH 51) is paralleled, then, by Vanessa's own discovery of the particular symbols which render him human: a love letter and picture out of his past. The discovery makes simplistic thinking; like her assumption that war had been complete hell for him, impossible. And Vanessa finds she must grieve again, this time for a man, who also happened to be her father.

That the collection so clearly revolves around the family suggests that one might profitably read it in the light of Atwood's "three-generational pattern: rigid Grandparents, grey Parents, and Children who attempt to escape both generations."⁷ Laurence's portrayal here of her own family is obviously consistent with the basic premise: "If

in England the family is a mansion you live in, and if in America it's a skin you shed, then in Canada it's a trap in which you're caught.... The Canadian protagonist feels the need for escape, but somehow he is unable to break away."⁸ The solution one finds in Laurence's work is equally "Canadian" - "escape pure and simple was usually impossible: the solution to the Child's dilemma was often seen to involve a coming to terms with the past."⁹ Where Margaret Laurence defies the pattern is in the immensely subtle and original ways in which she employs the pattern in her work such as, for example, the suggestion that one method of coming to terms with one's ancestors is to recognize one's identity with them. Vanessa MacLeod has been successful in seeing the members of her family as individuals, apart from any generational role. Hence her liberation. As Walter Swayze comments,

In this recognition of identity, which involves a recognition of the continuation of struggle from generation to generation and the apparent insolubility of the human problems that as young people we want to do most about - in this recognition are pride, forgiveness, and apology, but above all - freedom - even if it be the freedom to continue to strive and struggle.¹⁰

A Bird in the House is an important addition to Laurence's canon, first, for its own aesthetic success. The stories are not only individually shaped around their crystal epiphanies, but the collection as a whole moves, in a roughly chronological fashion, towards the establishment of a central theme, a familiar one. Robert Gibbs, in his introduction to the book, comments that:

the chosen text ("How are the mighty fallen in the midst of battle") points to the irony of the narrative line and the understanding that comes over to Vanessa that such strength is largely external, a necessary armour for vulnerable selves. Her grandmother Connor's and her father's she comes to recognize as internal and more essentially strong.

This thematic movement is reinforced by the last story in particular, "Jericho's Brick Battlements," which spans the whole period and in addition focuses directly upon Grandfather Connor, for Vanessa's final understanding of him becomes the keystone to the entire collection.

A Bird in the House is also important, however, in that it foreshadows The Diviners. After she had finished The Fire-Dwellers, Margaret Laurence confessed that:

At the moment, I have the same feeling as I did when I knew I had finished writing about Africa. I've gone as far as I personally can go, in the area in which I've lived for the past three novels. A change of direction would appear to be indicated. I have a halfway hunch where I want to go, but I don't know how to get there or what will be there if I do. Maybe I'll strike it lucky and find the right compass, or maybe I won't.¹¹

Evidently, the short stories written during this period of transition represent attempts to locate the "right compass." They certainly do provide clues about these new stresses. One primary emphasis, of course, falls upon the necessity of reconciliation with one's past, a stance with autobiographical as well as fictional implications. Another new element concerns style, in the use of multiple viewpoints trained on one experience. There are also hints of further developments. Walter Swayze notes that the crises in A Bird in the House are "all in the past,"¹² although he implies no criticism by this. And Robert Gibbs suggests that:

The processes, the discoveries that bear doubly, on the child as she experiences and on the adult as she recreates, could exist within the nexus of a novel but would lose their singularity, their completeness.¹³

One might view The Diviners as a direct response to these stylistic challenges.

Before proceeding to an analysis of that novel, however, it is useful to look briefly at Jason's Quest,¹⁴ Margaret Laurence's only children's book, published in 1970. It is delightfully whimsical, perhaps even as a conscious counterbalance to the serious fiction (she had not intended it for publication, having written it only for the amusement of her own children). Even so, one finds in it a child's-size restatement of many Laurence themes.

One such theme deals with the nature of life, with its inherent risks and the impossibility of final solutions:

"In Molarium they were always saying Be Cautious...but it seems to me that if you're going on a quest, risks are part of it. It isn't possible to take no risks at all, I mean, or you'd never be able to go anywhere.

(JQ 60)

"...no battle is fought once and for all... You fight your battle here and now, one by one. Nothing going (sic) to get settled for all time, you know."

(JQ 190)

Another familiar theme involves truths of character - wisdom and courage - for example: Professor Kingsbury, the British Museum owl, admits that,

"I'm afraid I can't tell you how to be wise, Oliver. That you must learn for yourself.... Knowledge can be learned from books. But wisdom, now - wisdom must be learned from life itself. I've picked up a little along the way, perhaps, and I fancy that you have too, young as you are. You must just go on by yourself, and if you have an opinion which turns out to be mistaken, Oliver, don't be afraid to change your mind, will you? Be patient. When you get home, you may be surprised at what you've learned."

(JQ 155)

And Calico presents Jason with an equally profound observation: "I think you've discovered," Calico said gently, "that you can act more bravely than you may feel." (JQ 204). Still another theme confirms

Laurence's continuing concern for the individual; as Oliver the owl learns, "it seems to me there's good and bad in all tribes. It's your friends who count" (JQ 203).

Only in one respect - in Jason's solution to his quest - is there any hint of a thematic conflict with any other of the works. Jason discovers that Molarium can be saved by turning its back on the past and resolutely facing the future. The contrast to A Bird in the House is only apparent, however; it is simply the other side of the coin. While Laurence's works variously emphasize the importance of both past and future, all do so for the purpose of affirming the ultimate primacy of the present.

All in all, this little book not only succeeds in being a charming children's book, but it also sums up, in its final motto ("Take a Care, Then do and Dare" (JQ 207)), the Laurence formula for survival. The Diviners will represent one last exploration of that formula.

CHAPTER 5

The weight of Margaret Laurence's literary reputation was made fully apparent by the flurry of reviews which greeted the appearance of "The Diviners¹" in May, 1974. On the whole, critical reaction was strongly positive, with the exception of certain reviewers like Robert Fulford of the Toronto Star, May 18, 1974, who qualified his ultimate commendation of the novel on the following counts:

In terms of style and structure, this is the least impressive of all the Manawaka books. Mrs. Laurence's manner here is often overdrum, as if she herself were not sure of the material.... More important, the story sometimes sags.

A second reading, however, convinced him that the novel had "genuine achievements:" "the slow but convincing working out of several important themes and the impressive creation of Morag herself, a troubled, frightened, confused but finally tough and believable character."

Other reviewers were generally both positive and diverse in their praise. Some, like Fulford, were impressed with Laurence's talent for characterization: Phyllis Grosskurth of The Globe and Mail, May 4, 1974,

comments that "there is nothing artificial about Morag, or Christie and Prin," and noted in addition that "Margaret Laurence has an extraordinary gift - untapped until now - for describing sexual union." Dave Billington of The Gazette, May 18, 1974, also lauded the creation of Morag ("the stark and smouldering realism of the heroine") but, in direct contrast to Fulford, saved his greatest praise for the style. The Diviners' "stylistic innovations," he claimed, permitted her to weave "a blazing tartan banner, shot through with the colors of flesh and blood and pain and victory." John Richmond and Marian Engel rounded out the critical spectrum, focusing on Laurence's rich humanism as the source of the novel's success:

(L)ike other writers of import she leaves us with the undeniable impression that the "lesson" of her work or at least its rudiments have always been there, somewhere unexpressed within us.²

In one way, the only book that can save my life is one I write myself. But for those of us who can't write The Diviners, it is the life-saving book to read. Margaret Laurence's witching saves us from the terrifying feeling that our lives are meaningless. She has ~~dis~~divined the pattern and structured a tale that gives all of us meaning, and therefore joy. It is not nothing to be. We need this kind of magic badly.³

One suspects that it is these last comments which Margaret Laurence herself would value the most highly, weighing, as she does, human factors above all.

One problem which The Diviners offered the critics was the question of autobiography. It is easy to find numerous parallels between Morag Gunn, the heroine, and Laurence herself, a task undertaken by Valerie Miner:

Born in a small prairie town. Orphaned at a young age. A lonely childhood, spent writing stories. High school during the war years. Reporting for the local paper. University in Winnipeg. An unsuccessful marriage to an

academic man. A late start in a fulfilling writing career. A proud relish in her family. The Cancer Zodiac sign.... A pilgrimage to Scotland to unearth the ancestors. A residence in England. A return to Canada via Vancouver. A distaste for city life that draws her to a small town. in Ontario. A cabin. On a river.⁴

Margaret Laurence, however, who "bristles" at comparison with Morag, clearly conceives of The Diviners as imaginative fiction rather than autobiography. The point here is not to concentrate on listing the differences between Laurence and Morag, of which there are many, but to understand the reasons for her conceptual distinction.

Laurence has never attempted to make a firm distinction between "fact" and "fiction," for she has been aware in her own work of details which she had assumed were imaginary turning out to have been remembered. Morag muses that, as a writer, she is "(w)eaving fabrications. Yet, with typical ambiguity, convinced that fiction was more true than fact. Or that fact was in fact fiction" (D 21). The salient point is that even A Bird in the House, which was frankly autobiographical, had portrayed the experiences of the past edited and shaped by the self-consciousness of the narrator. In the strictest aesthetic sense, then, the collection is literary art rather than history, and one cannot assume to find in it a simple "one to one equation" between the author and Vanessa. While fundamental components of a work may be autobiographical, the formative influence of the artist renders the work as a whole imaginative. The Diviners clearly falls into this category.

The Diviners does represent a new fusion for Laurence, however, of imagination and autobiography, for in it she portrays the near-mystical relationship between author and creation. Morag discovers that, while her characters may have been inspired by experiences in her own background,

they still possess an emotional reality of their own:

This afternoon she has forgotten, because Lilac has aborted herself in a way that Morag recalls from long ago. And yet it is not Eva for whom Morag experiences pain now - it is Lilac only, at this moment....

(D 187)

Odd - if you had a friend who had just aborted herself, causing chaos all round and not only to herself, no one would be surprised if you felt upset, anxious, shaken. It is no different with fiction - more so, maybe, because Morag has felt Lilac's feelings. The blood is no less real for being invisible to the external eye.

(D 188)

At times, in fact, life may imitate art:

Morag is fascinated. Does fiction prophesy life? Is she looking at Lilac Stonehouse from Spear of Innocence? Fan Brady, though, hasn't got Lilac's naiveté. Fan is tough in the spirit, wiry and wary in the soul....
 (L)ooking at Fan now is almost like looking at some distorted and older but still recognizable mirror-image of Lilac.

(D 254)

Ultimately, however, source is irrelevant.

She had been working through the day, the words not having to be dredged up out of the caves of the mind, but rushing out in a spate so that her hand could not keep up with them. Odd feeling. Someone else dictating the words. Untrue, of course, but that was how it felt, the characters speaking. Where was the character, and who? Never mind. Not Morag's concern. Possession or self-hypnosis - it made no difference. Just let it keep coming.

(D 330)

Just as Morag realizes that she is and is not her characters, Laurence suggests that she is and is not Morag. While the vital insight may have been implicit in the earlier works, it is clarified only in The Diviners.

There is another aesthetic reason as well for Margaret Laurence's increasing reliance upon autobiographical material. Her continued focus on Manawaka and particulars of her own life derives from her conviction

of the universality of art, paradoxically; as the criticism in Long Drums and Cannons revealed, Laurence views the attainment of universality as a natural consequence of the successful capturing of the particular and the individual - whether through idiomatic speech, thought rhythms, or precise physical detail. The steady progression that Margaret Atwood notes is thus consistent with this faith in the value of familiar material:

When she began to write and publish, Margaret Laurence chose a setting relatively remote from her own identity and origins, the Africa of The Prophet's Camel Bell and This Side Jordan. With The Stone Angel she moved to her locale, the Canadian Prairies, and each of her successive heroines - Rachel, Stacey, Vanessa - was a step closer, in age, experience and interests, to something that might be identified by the careless as herself.⁵

In this regard, Laurence's explanation for making Morag a writer is simple: "At first I had her as a painter, but what the hell do I know about painting?"⁶ And the continued use of Manawaka is just as naturally implied by this approach, as noted by Edward A. McCourt in 1970:

But her roots are in Manawaka. One suspects that no matter how far she may wander into other places of earth Margaret Laurence will, like Hagar Shipley, return again and again in spirit if not in flesh to the commonplaces of her home town, finding in them - as she has already done more than once - substance for the creation of a universally significant work of art.⁷

Working from this principle of "write what you know," Margaret Laurence had already, by 1971, explored aspects both of herself and of Manawaka to a considerable depth. Yet the article "Where the World Began," published by McLean's in December of 1972 revealed her conviction of its continued importance of her work: "Because that settlement and that land were my first and for many years my only real knowledge of this planet, in some profound way they remain my world, my way of viewing. My eyes were formed there."⁸ The essay, which is almost in the nature of an apology, stresses the fact that "the seeds both of man's freedom and of

his captivity are found everywhere, even in the microcosm of a prairie town" and that, in "raging against our injustices, our stupidities," she did so "as family."⁹

The most revealing section of the article, however, confirms the implication that Laurence was not satisfied that she had explored all of Manawaka's facets. She had indeed confined herself to the Scots-Presbyterian middle class of her own background, although exploring not only her own generation in Rachel, Stacey and Vanessa, but that of her grandparents in Hagar. The town's dark underside was conspicuous, however, in its absence. Confessing in the article that "(e)verything is to be found in a town like mine. Belsen, writ small but with the same ink,"¹⁰ Laurence then sketches some representatives of this hidden side of Manawaka. It is no more difficult to see in the rough portrait of the "wild old Methuselah figure" who lived "deranged, in a shack in the valley" an early model for Christie than it is to see a Morag Gunn in "those few older girls from what was charmingly called 'the wrong side of the tracks' Tough in talk and tougher in muscle, they were said to be whores already."¹¹

The Diviners, while drawing on the same setting as the other novels, and embodying aspects of Laurence herself in Morag, represents, in other words, a noticeably different approach to this material. Margaret Atwood calls it:

a huge, risky, ambitious book, the kind writers produce at a summing-up period in their careers, if they ever make it that far. It pulls together themes, fragments of plots and characters from her previous books, but it approaches them from a new angle.¹²

This time the portrayal of Manawaka takes place from a "worm's-eye-view."¹³

Part of the impulse to change angles in this way must have arisen from Laurence's ambiguous feelings about the universal tribal instinct:

What one has come to see, in the last decade, is that tribalism is an inheritance of us all. Tribalism is not such a bad thing, if seen as the bond which an individual feels with his roots, his ancestors, his background. It may or may not be stultifying in a personal sense, but that is a problem each of us has to solve or not solve. Where tribalism becomes, to my mind, frighteningly dangerous is where the tribe... seen as "the people," the human beings, and the others, the un-tribe, are seen as sub-human. This is not Africa's problem alone; it is everyone's.¹⁴

The tribe of which Hagar, Rachel, Stacey and Vanessa were a part has chosen to isolate Morag Gunn simply by virtue of where she lives.

Laurence takes pains to emphasize the social differences which originally separate Morag from Manawaka's genteel population - a slum home, "downright" guardians, and her own assumed attitude of toughness. Ironically, however, what very quickly emerges, despite these external and superficial differences, is her kinship with Laurence's other splendid women. Morag Gunn may have come from the wrong side of the tracks, but because she too is a sensitive human being, she must trace the same painful spiritual journey. In that sense, Laurence's structuring of the novel remains essentially the same.

Like Hagar's, Morag's self-exploration, while triggered by events in the present (primarily the disappearance of her teen-age daughter Pique), is directed towards the past in the search of clues to this present failure. But while the past is again chronological in its presentation, this time it is framed in a variety of modes - snapshots, "memorybank movies," "innerfilms," and tales, all of which are examined in what John Moss calls "the first person reflective, each episode being recollected, structured, evaluated subjectively before the narrator proceeds to the next."¹⁵ In addition, The Diviners is divided into five sections, which parallel the five key stages in Morag's spiritual liberation.

The first section, a very short one, embodies the essence of the novel's technique not only in its title, "River of Now and Then," but in its opening paragraph:

The river flowed both ways. The current moved from north to south, but the wind usually came from the south, rippling the bronze-green water in the opposite direction. This apparently impossible contradiction, made apparent and possible, still fascinated Morag, even after the years of river-watching.

(D 3)

Both foreshadow Morag's journey backward as well as forward on the river of time, the former prompted initially by curiosity as to what Pique might find in Manawaka should she go there, but sustained by Morag's own need to search for "anything there which would have meaning for her" (D 5).

From the beginning, however, Morag, like the other Laurence heroines, is cursed by the elusiveness of truth; gazing at her "totems," the snapshots which capture and mirror the past, Morag must admit that "[s]he was not certain whether the people in the snapshots were legends she had once dreamed only, or were as real as anyone she now knew" (D 6). The act of remembering the mother who died when she was five breaks off with "All this is crazy, of course, and quite untrue. Or maybe true and maybe not. I am remembering myself composing this interpretation at Christie and Prim's house" (D 7). Morag must conclude that she keeps the snapshots "not for what they show but for what is hidden in them" (D 6). Whether the memories are "totally invented" (D 9) or not is irrelevant in the face of the still unresolved emotions they evoke.

These emotions centre on the sudden death of Morag's parents when she was five. Even now, at forty-seven, she must ask herself, "Why should it grieve me now? Why do I want them back?" (D 9). The answer, she discovers, lies at least partially in the nature of their deaths: the nature of the

illness (infantile paralysis) was kept secret from Morag until they had died: even then she was not allowed to see them:

Morag does not imagine that they have gone to some real good place. She knows they are dead. She knows what dead means. She has seen dead gophers, run over by cars or shot, their guts redly squashed out on the road.

"I want to see them! I have to!"

(D 13)

Ironically, the very process of remembering brings some relief in allowing Morag to grieve at least: "Now I am crying, for God's sake, and I don't even know how much of that memory really happened and how much of it I embroidered later on" (D 15). Yet she still feels the need to understand her parents more fully, to remember them perhaps as full human beings. "They remain shadows," however (D 15). "Perhaps I only want their forgiveness for having forgotten them."

The first section ends on this note of failure, but it sets the motif for the remainder of the novel, which will follow Morag's search in the river of Then and Now for the keys to the secrets which she knows are "inside me, flowing unknown in my blood and moving unrecognized in my skull" (D 15). The need to remember and to understand, a relatively gradual process in the earlier heroines, products of secure homes, becomes a driving force in Morag Gunn, the disinherited.

The following sections trace a double path, weaving Morag's plumbing of her memory in and out of her current crisis with Pique (although for reasons of simplicity the events will be discussed here in chronological order). It is significant that the basic stylistic distinction between past and present is the use of the present tense for the flashbacks, suggesting, perhaps, their more immediate reality for Morag at this time. What she slowly comes to realize through them is that many of her actions in life had been motivated by an attempt to compensate for this early sense

of less, this sense of having been cut off from her roots.

The second section, "The Nuisance Grounds," recounts the influence of this feeling upon the part of her childhood spent with her guardians, Christie and Prin. The fact that she feels no particular tie to them is aggravated by the snobbery she encounters at school. Eva Winkler's unfortunate accident on the first day of school quickly convinces Morag to "Hang onto your shit and never let them know you are ascares" (D 28). Much of the power of this section of the novel comes from Laurence's vivid recreation of a child's sense of shame, a topic she had only touched on before. Everything in Morag's environment humiliates her, although mainly because of appearance to outsiders - Christie's relish in his role as the town scavenger; his boisterous ranting; Prin's obesity and general carelessness about her dress; their home itself. The title of the section, "The Nuisance Grounds" (a euphemism for the Town Dump), itself epitomizes the concern for appearance which pervades this period.

Only one thing at all fulfils Morag's need for roots at the time - Christie's "tales." In his tale of her "ancestors," Piper Gunn and his wife Morag ("a strapping strong woman she was, with the courage of a falcon and the beauty of a deer and the warwth of a home and the faith of saints" (D 41)), Morag finds all the elements missing from her life in Manwaka - heroism, love, beauty. She manages to keep this romantic, vulnerable side concealed, however. The rest of the section documents the toughness which Morag develops to protect her until she can escape Manwaka to fulfil this "real" heritage. "Morag doesn't care a fuck. They can't hurt her. She'll hurt them first" (D 50). Aggressive coarseness is simply another variation of the facade erected by Hagar, Rachel, Stacey, and Vanessa as a shield from a hurtful world.

"The Nuisance Grounds" also introduces Jules, one of the shadowy Métis Tonnerres who have hovered in the background of the Canadian works. The Tonnerres' more detailed inclusion here is further evidence of Laurence's intention of expanding her view of Manawaka. In this context, it is helpful to consider the traditional concept of the Indian as it is found in Canadian literature. Margaret Atwood, for example, observes that, "In Canadian literature the place of low man on the totem pole within the society is reserved for the Indian."¹⁶ As such, "(t)he Indians are, finally, a yardstick of suffering against which the whites can measure their own and find it lacking: whatever their own miseries, the Indians can do them one better."¹⁷ Thus, as John Moss says, the Indian can be seen to embody "our collective guilt which we continue to generate through our treatment of them."¹⁸

Both Atwood and Moss suggest, however, that the figure of the Indian has also a "metaphorical potential" as a reconciling force: Atwood recognizes the Indians as "not just victims. They are also a potential source of magic, of a knowledge about the natural-supernatural world which the white man renounced when he became 'civilized,'"¹⁹ and Moss points to the function of inter-racial union as "an image of romantic integration - of races, of spirit and the physical world."²⁰ Consequently,

This use of the Indian - as a mediator between the whites and a Nature which is life-giving rather than death-dealing - is paralleled by attempts to find in Indian legends mythological material which would function for Canadian writers such as the Greek myths and the Bible long functioned for Europeans. The Indians and Eskimos are seen as our true "ancestors," so it is their legends we should turn to for source material for stories and poems.²¹

All of these factors can be found in Laurence's treatment of Jules Tonnerre and his family in The Diviners. At first, however, Morag's own

stinging sense of inferiority prevents her from viewing Jules in anything but the negative light; he even offers her the rare opportunity to feel superior: "He comes from nowhere. He isn't anybody" (D 57). Morag's suspicion that Jules is "[l]ike her" (D 56) soon allows her to begin to forge a tentative link with him nonetheless, in the course of which she discovers that he, too, dwells in the illusion of a more glorious past: "Long time before my granddad, there's one Tomerre they call Chevalier, and no man can ride like him and he is one helluva shot" (D 60).

Morag's desire for respectability effectively scotches any spiritual kinship with Jules for the time being, however, just as it deafens her to Christie's natural wisdom. She prefers his war tale of her father's heroism to any "ranting" such as "By their garbage shall ye know them" (D 32). And when adolescence convinces her that external toughness makes her unattractive in the town's eyes, she tries to disguise the inner desperation under a new facade of dress-shop gentility. This too fails to provide much comfort:

Morag envies Julie's preekiness. Ever since she herself decided to drop her tough act, she has been not too certain what to aim for. To act really ladylike would be too old for her, and also kind of phoney. She has therefore gone back to not speaking much, like when she was quite a little kid and scared. She's scared again, now, but she doesn't know what she's scared of.

(D 95)

Throughout adolescence, it is Morag's dream of escape into some undefined security which dictates all her actions except the writing. Only here is she completely vulnerable - even to praise and encouragement:

[S]he is crying her eyes out. For what? She is not sad. She has known for some time what she has to do, but never given the knowledge to any other person or thought that any person might suspect. Now it is as though a strong hand has been laid on her shoulders. Strong and friendly. But merciless.

(D 99)

The two needs - to escape and to write - merge as Morag finally makes plans to leave Manawaka for university. In a stance reminiscent of Hagar, she has learned to allow nothing to challenge her conviction of isolation or the display of strength it has inspired:

"You learn hard, with that stiff neck of yours,"
Lachlan says. "There's no shame in not knowing something.
You're not alone."

"That's where you're wrong," Morag says.

(D 127)

The war, Eva's abortion, and Piquette Tonnerre's death only convince Morag of the vital necessity for this strength. She even feels herself to have outgrown her need for Christie's tales, "having found in them great contradictions with Jules' Métis versions of the same events. In any case, "[p]robably it does not matter" (D 117).

The closing pages of this section show Morag resolutely preparing to turn her back on Manawaka and everything associated with it, including Jules, whom she has come to care for in a completely non-idealized way. The difficulty she experiences in leaving him is an indication of the profound ties which she will eventually have to recognize: "Morag does not think about him for very long. She will not. Will not. She has to think about getting ready to leave. Soon. Very soon now" (D 134).

Like the other heroines and Margaret Laurence herself, Morag must leave Manawaka in order to find it.

The reason that Winnipeg and university do not prove liberating enough for her ("Away is here. Not far enough away" (D 144)) is inadvertently revealed in a conversation with Ella, the new friend: "I want to be glamorous and adored and get married and have kids. I still try to kid myself that I don't want that. But I do. I want all that. As well. All I want is everything" (D 147). It is not until years later, however, that

Morag understands that in these "Halls of Sion," as this period is entitled, she had imprisoned herself by her search for The Prince. He appears in the person of Brooke Skelton - mature, academically established and with an "aristocratic handsomeness" to free her from her "mysterious nonexistent past" (D 158). "'It's as though you were starting life now, newly.' Morag's feelings exactly" (D 158). Their happiness is complete, if temporary:

Words haunt her, but she will become unhaunted now, forevermore.

(D 164)

She wants, then, to tell him, to praise him. To let him know. But there isn't any need, because he knows. They lie very still and close together, still joined, not speaking. Both shaken by the mystery they have known.

(D 170)

Nowadays, when they make love, they almost always come at the same time, and often sleep the night in each other's arms, still joined. Sometimes in the morning he is still inside her, and they separate slowly, reluctantly, but their inheritance of one another never really ceases and never will.

(D 179)

Brooke cannot, however, supply the identity Morag has sought for so long, and gradually their "Paradise" ("Toronto...With Brooke, and away from the prairies entirely" (D 163)) flounders on his own sense of inadequacy. While Morag looks to him to supply the beginning of roots and continuity ("to have Brooke's children - that is what she now sees is necessary in the deepest part of her being" (D 164)) and assumes that "[h]e is enormously strong within himself" (D 179), Brooke drops hints as to his own even greater dependence on her:

"Well, all right. There is something you can do, then. Keep on being happy and cheerful - it's a kind of leaven. It's what I need from you."

I will never let him see the Black Celt in me, Morag, shortly before marriage. It seemed an easy thing to undertake, then.

(D 186)

Despite her growing awareness, eight years of evasions, pretence and frustration precede any real honesty on Morag's part about her inability to accept Brooke's conditions of love. Only then does she face facts:

She perceives at once ~~the~~ ~~fact~~. He cannot ever say to her finally, once ~~and~~ ~~for~~ ~~all~~, that he cannot bear for her to bear a child. He ~~will~~ never say that. But he cannot agree to a child, either. She is, she now sees, forcing him into a corner and has been doing so for some years. A corner out of which the exit will be violence, not physical, but violence all the same, to ~~her~~ and to himself.

(D 201)

Those halls of Sion. The Prince is ever in them. What had Morag expected, those years ago, marrying Brooke? Those selfsame halls?

(D 207)

She finally must admit that his facade of assurance had simply disguised a raw need ironically even greater than hers: Brooke himself can confess it only indirectly: "it taught me at an early age that life is tough and one has to be pretty tough, as well, to stand up to it. I learned to run my life my way, to keep a firm control over things so that the external forces would batter at the gates as little as possible" (D 187).

Even these realizations are insufficient to provoke Morag to reassert her old independence, however. While she begins to wear her hair the way she prefers and, over the next few years, continues work on her first novel despite Brooke's evident displeasure, she stops short of outright rebellion or separation -- whether through loyalty or fear -- preferring instead to try the healing power of honesty:

"Brooke -- I remember. And I'm sorry. I think I lied to you, without meaning to, right from the first."

"You didn't lie, love. You couldn't. Not you. You were without guile. That was the reason I loved you."

"Brooke, I haven't been without guile since I was four years old. I didn't think you'd care about me if I let you know, that's all. I mean, let you know about my own darkness, that comes on sometimes."

(D 211)

Honesty too proves inadequate: "Then they make love, and it is fine, except that at one time it seemed an unworded conversation and connection and now it seems something else. An attempt at mutual reassurance, against all odds" (D 214).

Perhaps in a compensatory sense, Morag's writing becomes a source of strength for her; for the first time in Laurence's work, one sees a woman who has discovered a means of creative self-expression:

Morag realizes, with some surprise, that she is able to defend her own work. Also, it is a relief to be able to discuss it, no holds barred, with no personal emotional connotations in the argument. Only when the process is completed does she see that it has been like exercising muscles never before used, stiff and painful at first, and then later, filled with the knowledge that this part of herself really is there.

(D 212)

Yet this sense of independence through art simply masks the personal dilemma ultimately. "She knows now that she does not want to stay with Brooke. Leaving him, however, remains unthinkable" (D 215). It takes a chance meeting with Jules, and Brooke's childish cruelty to him to precipitate their inevitable break. Morag and Jules' subsequent love-making that same day reveals her final resolve, however, about the break's permanence: "'Easy,' Jules says, 'Magic. You were doing magic, to get away'" (D 223). In addition, their joining in being done "for other reasons, some debt or answer to the past, some severing of inner chains which have kept her bound and separated from part of herself" (D 222). It does not, however, impose any new chains; neither, during their brief time together, makes any effort to consolidate the union. Morag, like her literary predecessors, has learned the hard lesson of villing self-

reliance. When, at the end of this section, Morag again sets off in search of the future (this time to Vancouver, like Rachel and Stacey), she does so now with an independence born of strength rather than fear, and with the knowledge of having renewed at least one of her bonds to the past. That the novel continues beyond this spiritual plateau where the earlier novels ended suggests its widened scope.

The title of Book IV, "Rites of Passage," reflects its stress on Morag's further growth towards a realm of spiritual assurance which is new in Laurence. This process is a long one, stretching over almost a generation and over three locations - Vancouver, the British Isles, and McConnell's Landing. Through all of it, however, evidence of increasing strength appears.

The period in Vancouver, which sees the birth of Pique (after Piquette, Jules' dead sister), is marked by a steady growth in Morag's commitment to her writing and an equally strong commitment to standing alone: "Look Fan - just don't tell me what to do for my own good, eh? Not ever. Okay?" (D 255) Even her subconscious mind confirms the wisdom of her decision to leave Brooke:

Dreaming? Nightmaring? She has in sleep been back with Brooke, in the Tower. They have been making love, as it used to be, everything drawn into this centre, their bed, their merging selves. Then, just before their moment, she has realized that she has only fantasized the child, her daughter, who is really in the realm and unreality of the unborn. She cannot bear this knowledge. She draws away, tearingly, from him, leaving him bewildered and angry, and herself alone.

(D 260)

This is not to suggest, of course, that being alone comes easily to Morag, the child deprived of parents, the self-styled exile. Yet her present need is more physical than psychological, and while this need too can expose her vulnerability to others, like the experience with Chas

the sadist, it does not seriously threaten her ultimate independence:

There would certainly be no alternative. Morag detests the whole idea of having a living creature torn out of her body. But there is no way she is going to bear a child to a man she despises. She imagines it growing in her flesh, totally unknowing, a human which cannot be permitted its life under any circumstances.

(D 269)

Although abortion proves unnecessary, Morag further resolves to protect herself more fully in the future: "It may not be fair - in fact, it seems damned unfair to me - but I'll never again have sex with a man whose child I couldn't bear to bear, if the worst came to the absolute worst" (D 270). The decision is "not morality. Just practicality of spirit and flesh" (D 270), as well as a re-affirmation of independence.

Excerpts from a letter to Ella late in this period confirm Morag's self-confidence:

That incredibly moving statement - "What strength I have mine's own, which is most faint - " If only he can hang onto that knowledge that would be true strength. And the recognition that his real enemy is despair within, and that he stands in need of grace, like everyone else - Shakespeare did know just about everything.... Don't worry - I'm a survivor, just as you are.

(D 270-1)

It is further confirmed by Jules' visit six years after Morag had left Brooke. Although there is an evident and deep affection between them, Morag no more tries to invade Jules' areas of privacy than she allows him to invade hers: "Listen, Jules, just don't tell me what to do, eh? It's the one thing I can't stand. I can't go back. I cannot go back" (D 280).

Perhaps indirectly, however, in his urging Morag to return home, Jules bolsters her assurance that the "right moment" (D 284) to explore her heritage has finally arrived. Throughout the stay in Vancouver, this impulse has periodically manifested itself, although never in this

immediate sense:

I'd like at some point to go to Scotland, to Sutherland, where my people come from. What do I hope to learn there? Don't ask me. But it haunts me, I guess, and maybe I'll have to go. Not possible yet.

(D 271)

Her decision to take action suggests Morag's inner readiness for more truth.

The insight does present itself, but not in the anticipated form, for England, and subsequently Scotland, cannot supply what Morag seeks. In Dan McRaith, the Scottish artist, she finds a possibility of the external reassurance she still craves from time to time, particularly when Pique falls ill; certainly the immediate directness of their relationship bodes well:

The only alternative is the game, the pretense that nothing matters, the desperation that says the moment is all and there does not need to be any other moment to plan for. Morag has played this game, from time to time. But not now. Not any more.

(D 305)

But while she is prepared to sacrifice even her own writing time to him, Morag slowly discovers that Dan, like Brooks, has no strength to share with her, a fact she should have guessed from his painting - "the timid angry eyes of humans. Some of the human eyes seem distanced, distorted - no, not distorted: the flesh mirrors the spirit's pain, a greater pain than the flesh even if burned could feel" (D 309). Morag's discovery is not, of course, a new one in Laurence. Dan is tied not only to his home town but to the wife who supplies the needs he doesn't even admit to:

And yet McRaith does not, at the deepest level, want a woman who will stand up to him.... McRaith is not held to Crombruech just because of the place. He is held here by Bridie, whom he has known all his life as she has known him. That is the way it is.

(D 318)

Ironically, what he in turn (again, like Brooke) has recognized in Morag is strength: in his portrait "(o)nly her black hair can be seen, and her eyes, clearly and unmistakably the eyes of Morag, angry and frightened, frighteningly strong" (D 310). Basically, the experience simply confirms Morag's earlier conviction of the necessity of ultimate independence.

Nor does the "pilgrimage" to the home of her Scottish ancestors produce either of the outcomes Morag had anticipated:

Why, then, has she for so long hesitated?

She is afraid that she will be disappointed, that there will not, after all, be any revelations. She is afraid that she will feel nothing and that nothing will be explained to her. Or else she is afraid that she will feel too much, and that too much will be explained in those rocks and ruined crofts, or whatever is there, now, these days.

(D 302)

The actual trip to Sutherland, in fact, proves unnecessary. The revelation which frees Morag of its necessity is surprising but momentous:

"It has to do with Christie. The myths are my reality. Something like that. And also, I don't need to go there because I know now what it was I had to learn here."

"What is that?"

"It's a deep land here, all right," Morag says. "But it's not mine, except a long long way back. I always thought it was the land of my ancestors, but it is not."

"What is, then?"

"Christie's real country. Where I was born."

(D 319)

This discovery that her true roots were Manawakan had already been foreshadowed by Morag's use of Christie and Lazarus Tomnerre as the heroes of her own "tales" for Pique. She further affirms its validity by the belated fulfilment of her obligations to the dying Christie: "Christie - I used to fight a lot with you, Christie, but you've been my father to me." Her reward is simple - "Well - I'm blessed," Christie Logan says" (D 323).

Alienated no longer by her own sense of exile, Morag can give Christie a "true burial" with his beloved pipes; "released into mourning" (D 329) she can now leave Manawaka rather than run from it. This act too separates Morag from Laurence's other heroines; she is the first to make her peace so fully not only with herself but with Manawaka.

Book IV ends on two further notes of confidence in the present: the purchase of a permanent home, the cabin at McConnell's Landing, and even the acceptance of a new role:

The thing that will take some getting used to, in the reviews of Shadow of Eden, is that so many of them refer to Morag Gurn as an established and older writer. At forty-four - an older writer? She has thought of herself as a beginning writer for so long that it has come as a shock to realize she no longer fits into this category. There are now a large number of writers young enough to be her children, and some of them are very good. Yes, older writer is the right phrase. Takes some mental adjustment, though. Meditation. Assimilation.

(D 343)

In addition, while another visit from Jules focuses mainly on Pique, child of the two cultures, and his songs (which are his legacy to her just as Morag's tales are), Morag too claims a legacy - in the plaid pin and her adoption of the MacDonald motto:

My Hope Is Constant In These. It sounds like a voice from the past. Whose voice, though? It does not matter. What matters is that the voice is there, and that she has heard these words which have been given to her. And will not deny what has been given. Gainsay Who Dare.

(D 353)

By finally accepting "what is given," Morag finds a permanent source of the heritage she has sought. Like the others, she bends to the inevitable.

The sequence of events running through Books I and IV which comprise the present crisis with Pique reveals, however, a momentary weakening of this hard-earned maturity. The Morag who had replied to Fan's warning when Pique was a baby that "She'll grow up and leave without a backward

glance" with "Fine...I wouldn't want her to do anything else when the time comes" (D 259) seems to be belied by the Morag whose concern at Pique's departure completely unnerves her.

In fact, everything in Morag's surroundings depresses her at the moment. The earnest young Smith family, the New Pioneers, drives her to indulge in a series of interior dialogues in which she tries humourously (but unsuccessfully) to justify her failures in this regard to an imaginary Catherine Parr Traill. Royland, the neighbour who has the ability to divine walls, also threatens her self-confidence; in him it is the unwavering faith in his own ability which she admires: "Why not take it on faith, for herself, as he did? Sometimes she could. But not always" (D 22). In particular, however, Pique's absence frightens Morag. It is not simply her physical departure ("Don't mistake me, Royland. I don't want her living here any more. She can't. She mustn't. She's got to be on her own." (D 80)), but their psychological rift which alarms her ("Pique's face turned away, her hair spread across the white free-drift of hospital linen, saying I despise you." (D 81)). This rift is as much generational as personal; Stacey's frustration with Katie has come to a head in Morag's alienation from Pique:

"You know something, Royland? We think there is one planet called Earth, but there are thousands, even millions, like a snake shedding its skin every so often, but with all the old skins bunched around it still. You live inside the creature for quite a while, so it comes as a shock to find you're living now in one of the husked-off skins, and sometimes you can touch and know about the creature as it is now and sometimes you can't."

(D 139)

In her despair, Morag relentlessly probes the past for clues to these failures. The first four books are dominated by these memory scenes, each

chapter simply acknowledging the present before slipping back into the past. And while the return of Pique is doubtless responsible for laying some of Morag's fears to rest, it is ultimately her own retrospective journey, of course, which restores her by allowing her to reaffirm former insights. The honesty which Morag learned so painfully with Brooke permits her to admit the sexual jealousy she feels towards Pique and her boyfriend, not only to herself, but to them. And although she is increasingly able to understand Pique and her contemporaries, seeing in many of their actions repetitions of her own past, her experience with Jules has also convinced her of the necessity of release, of being allowed the freedom to make one's own mistakes: "Pique Tonnerre Gunn, or Pique Gunn Tonnerre, who must walk her own roads, whenever those might be" (D 291).

Nor has Morag stopped learning. The sighting of the heron, imminent victim of progress, brings the awareness that, while she may not have succeeded in creating a safe haven from the twentieth century at McConnell's Landing, she had never truly intended to: "That evening, Morag began to see that here and now was not, after all, an island. Her quest for islands had ended some time ago, and her need to make pilgrimages had led her back here" (D 293). Ultimately, her self-examination results in having to give herself credit and bring an end to psychic self-flagellation:

I'm going to stop feeling guilty that I'll never be as hardworking or knowledgeable or all-round terrific as you were.... (I) In any way I've worked damn hard, and I haven't folded up like a paper fan, either. I'll never till those blasted fields, but this place is some kind of garden, nonetheless, even though it may be only a wildflower garden. It's needed, and not only by me. I'm about to quit worrying about not being

either an old or new pioneer. So farewell,
sweet saint....

(D 332)

Like the conclusion of The Stone Angel, Book V takes place entirely in the present, for the past has fulfilled its function. That these few closing pages of the novel are focused to a large extent upon Pique is appropriate, for her independent maturity represents both the culmination of Morag's generation and the beginning of its death. In this passing of the torch, The Diviners is more clearly oriented towards the future than were the earlier novels. This motif is confirmed by the death of Jules and the passing on of Lazarus' knife, Jules' "totem," to Pique, Morag is also finally able here to release Pique in more than the former tentative, abstract sense:

"Pique, I hope -"

What? That Pique wasn't taking on more than she could cope with? That she wasn't making an error of judgement in going at all? Nonsense. Who could ever enter anything with a guarantee? Let her go. This time, it had to be possible and was.

"I hope everything goes well for you, Pique."

(D 359)

Her reward (and Jules'), and the symbolic high point of the novel, comes in Pique's song of "the mountain and the valley," which proclaims her dual heritage, denying and blaming neither. Valerie Miner sees the mature Pique as an absolution of the "communal sense of Scots guilt" for the death of Piquette; while Morag and Jules' relationship had "mitigate(d) the alienation of the two peoples," Pique herself, their daughter, "represents a resolution of conscience, a new generation."²² And while the equally wide rift between the generations can never be closed in such a way, Morag finds that it too can be bridged at least by love and loyalty.

Freed of her generational responsibilities by Pique's departure this time, Morag returns to her work, to encounter one final interruption. Royland, the diviner, has lost his gift, but only to see it passed on to A-Okay Smith, the new generation, if A-Okay can accept it:

The inheritors. Was this, finally and at last, what Morag had always sensed she had to learn from the old man? She had known it all along, but not really known. The gift, or portion of grace, or whatever it was, was finally withdrawn, to be given to someone else.

(D 369)

It is this understanding which enables Morag to accept the terms of her own gift - even the possibility of its eventual passing:

Morag's magic tricks were of a different order. She would never know whether they actually worked or not, or to what extent. That wasn't given to her to know. In a sense, it did not matter. The necessary doing of the thing - that mattered.

(D 369)

This section, like the novel, is named "The Diviners;" in its use of the plural, the title implies Morag's success, like Royland's, in having divined that precious element, truth. The last page returns to the primary image of the river "flowing both ways." Life's dynamic merging of past, present, future is brilliantly captured in the image's reversal of traditional directions: "Look ahead into the past, and back into the future, until the silence" (D 370). Morag divines, too, that time ultimately allows no more than glimpses into its depths: "How far could anyone see into the river? Not far.... Only slightly further out, the water deepened and kept its life from sight" (D 370). Able to accept this, Morag returns to the house, to find her work finished.

The parallels between The Diviners and Margaret Laurence's other Canadian works are implicit throughout. While she is no carbon copy of

any of the earlier heroines, Morag does share the basic shape of their experiences: the repressive Manzanaran background and the need to reconcile herself to life in general and to this background in particular. Each of the women learns to face life with courage, compassion and acceptance, and to build a future without denying her past. Of the five, however, Morag is obviously the most successful in making a positive affirmation, as Valerie Miner notes:

Morag goes further than Hagar, Rachel, Stacey or Vanessa in resolving the tension between pride and love, between the duty of the past and the instincts of the present.

.....
 Morag also comes closer to a strong personal identity than the other Manzanara women. She finds satisfaction in her work as well as confidence in her relationships with her daughter and with men.²³

Consistent with this new breadth of vision in Laurence, The Diviners is almost overwhelming in length and scope. This is not to say that it possesses the immediate presence of a novel like The Stone Angel. It is easy to spot The Diviners' weaknesses, all of which have to do with a sense of contrivance. The chronological presentation of memory material is even more obtrusive than in the earlier novels, as a result of a variety of introductory titles (Memorybank Movies, Innerfilms, etc.). Language proves another problem - that Morag's adult literary prose must still retain traces of her rough childhood speech gives rise occasionally to incongruous combinations: for example, "I've paid through the nose. As they say. Also one might add, through the head, heart and cunt" (D 11). And one is often struck by the artificiality of the periodic references to, and cameo appearances of, characters from the other Canadian novels: the Camerons, the MacLeods, Thor Thorlakson (alias Vernon Winkler), Buckle Fernick, and, most

implausible of all, John Shipley and the reappearance of Hagar's lost plaid pin.

Ultimately, however, the novel works and works magnificently. Re-reading causes the flaws to pale in the face of The Diviners' clear achievements. If the stylistic innovations in verb tense and time shifts seem clumsy initially, they quickly establish a rhythm which carries the novel forward on all planes. Similarly, while the language occasionally jars, the vast bulk of it rings truly. Most effective in terms of style is Laurence's further refinement of what Moss calls her "first person reflective." Spanning more than a generation, the novel captures the fine reflecting mirror of Morag's mind as it searches among its images for the elusive truth. As in A Bird in the House, every experience is subjected to a double scrutiny - immediate interpretation and subsequent re-examination from a later perspective. It is this distancing, in fact, which facilitates Morag's understanding that Pique must and will re-enact the same drama (a motif reinforced, for example, by their parallel snapshots of an earnest but enigmatic child sitting on the steps - (D 6 and 258)). The whole concept of layered understanding - memories of memories, interpretations of interpretations - is handled superbly in the novel. While absolute truth remains an impossibility, the novel ends with Morag's acceptance of the limited revelation life accords.

In addition, the overall thematic impact of The Diviners is considerable. As suggested, one finds in it a recapitulation of every important Laurence concern: the dignity of the individual and his capacity for survival; the immense complexity of life; the universal search for liberation combined with an acceptance of oneself

and others; the tragedy of exile and the necessity of coming to terms with one's background. Here one experiences no sense of contrivance: the themes are subtly interwoven into a tight and rich blend, one which is aptly described by Billington's analogy of the tartan.

The novel's crowning achievements are two. First is the creation of Morag and Christie; these two fine rebels deserve to take their places beside Hagar Shipley as truly memorable characters. Second only to them are the songs - deceptively simple but powerful art.

The whole direction of The Diviners, however, leads one to form a sad conclusion paradoxically related to the novel's note of affirmation.

Laurence has admitted in a private interview that:

I become, I'm afraid, embattled very easily over my titles. They are not ever chosen accidentally or lightly. I think a title should, if possible, be like a line of poetry - capable of saying a great deal with hardly any words at all. The title of a novel should, in my view, express the whole novel, its themes and even something of its outcome.²⁴

The fact that, of the Canadian works, only this last novel has a title with positive connotations, is thus surely significant. Miner's interview with Laurence refers to her "gradual resolution and growing hopefulness for the Manawaka women," culminating in The Diviners which "goes beyond the piquant vulnerability of the others' dilemmas to a plateau of inner strength when Morag decides to follow her own instincts about love and work."²⁵ But what Morag divines is that she can no more understand her magic gift for writing than she can consciously sustain it. This realization is coupled with her final ability to give Pique and her generation its independence. That Morag does not, of course, abdicate her own future is symbolized in her refusal to give the plaid pin to Pique until she is "through with it" and "gathered to (her)

ancestors" (D 367). Nonetheless, the closing lines of the novel, while ambiguous, do imply an ending of sorts, both fitting and acceptable: "Morag returned to the house, to write the remaining private and fictional words, and to set down her title" (D 370).

The limited autobiographical overtones of Laurence's works have already been discussed. The ending of The Diviners, however, acquires additional implications when related to pronouncements Laurence has made over the past few years. In an interview in 1972, she indicated something of her heroines' recognition of the necessity of accepting their parts in the human continuum which casts us variously as child, parent, grandparent, in a prediction about her own future: "So I don't feel that I'm going to go on writing novels all my life...because pretty soon I will have said what I have to say for my generation."²⁶ The foundation for such an intent can be found even earlier, in "Ten Years' Sentences":

I've listened to the speech of three generations - my grandparents, my parents and my own, and maybe I've even heard what some of it means. I can listen with great interest to the speech of a generation younger than mine, but I can't hear it accurately enough to set down and I have no desire to try. That is specifically their business, not mine, and while envying them meanly, I also wish them god-speed.²⁷

The publishing of The Diviners brought another, more definite statement, a statement such like one might expect from Morag Dan, the diviner:

What next? Does she have another book planned? "No," she says, quite positively. "I don't think I'll ever write another novel. It's not because I don't want to. I just have this knowledge. It's sort of a Celtic second sight - I always have had it in my books - and I just don't think I will."²⁸

The sense one has, then, in The Diviners of a drawing together of themes and characters might very well be Margaret Laurence's farewell to them. It seems difficult to believe that such a talented artist

'could voluntarily stop working in what ought to be the prime of her writing life. Only the strongly affirmative and assured tone of The Diviners coupled with the experience of Laurence's artistic honesty compels one to reluctant belief. Surely we readers must trust, as she does, the intuitive wisdom which has so steadily led Margaret Laurence to such heights, and which now seems to counsel a different path.

FOOTNOTESChapter 1.

¹ Margaret Laurence, A Tree for Poverty: Somali Poetry and Prose (1954; rpt. McMaster University Library Press, 1970). Subsequent references to this edition will be made by the abbreviation TP and page number only.

² Jean Margaret Wemyss (Margaret Laurence), "Calliope" (short story), Vox, 18, No. 3 (Graduation 1945); and "Bread hath he, but a man is weak in exile" and "Song of the Race of Ulysses" (poetry), Vox, 20, No. 2 (March 1947), p. 20-1.

³ Margaret Laurence, The Prophet's Camel Bell (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1963). Subsequent references to this edition will be made by the abbreviation PCE and page number only.

⁴ Micere (Githane) Mugo, "Somali Literature in Translation," Journal of Canadian Fiction, 1, No.2 (Spring 1972) p. 86.

⁵ Clara Thomas, Margaret Laurence (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969) p. 18.

⁶ Ibid., p. 20.

⁷ Margaret Laurence, This Side Jordan (London: MacMillan & Co., 1960). Subsequent references to this edition will be made by abbreviation TSJ and page number only.

⁸ Mary Renault, "On Understanding Africa," Saturday Review, 43 (10 December 1960), p. 24.

⁹ Ibid., p. 23.

¹⁰ Kildare Dobbs, "Outside Africa," Canadian Literature, No.8 (Spring 1961), p. 63.

- 11 Thomas, Margaret Laurence, p. 29.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Barry Callaghan, "The Writings of Margaret Laurence," Tamarack Review, 36 (Summer 1965), p. 46.
- 14 Margaret Laurence, "Ten Years' Sentences," The Sixties ed. George Woodcock (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Publications Centre, 1969), p. 12.
- 15 F. W. Watt, "Fiction," University of Toronto Quarterly, 34 (July 1965), p. 407.
- 16 Margaret Laurence, The Tomorrow-Tamer and Other Stories (1963: rpt. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970). Subsequent references to this edition will be made by the abbreviation TT and page number only.
- 17 Clara Thomas, Introd. to The Tomorrow-Tamer.
- 18 Henry Kreisel notes that "the setting of Mrs. Laurence's tales is primarily Ghana, but by implication all of emergent Africa. Freedom, therefore, both as an abstract concept and as something very tangible and immediate, preoccupies all her characters." "The African Stories of Margaret Laurence," The Canadian Forum, 41 (April 1961), p. 9.
- 19 Margaret Laurence, quoted by Clara Thomas, "A Conversation about Literature: an interview with Margaret Laurence and Irving Layton," Journal of Canadian Fiction, 1, No.1 (Winter 1972), p. 67.
- 20 Callaghan, p. 47.
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