1982

Daughters of a jesting God: The religious sensibility of Margaret Laurence

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DAUGHTERS OF A JESTING GOD

THE RELIGIOUS SENSIBILITY OF MARGARET LAURENCE

By

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THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Master of Arts degree in Religion & Culture
Wilfrid Laurier University
1982

Preface

> ... the work of the imagination presents us with ... the vision of a decisive act of spiritual freedom, the vision of the recreation of man. (Frye, 1957: 94)

It is Margaret Laurence's vision of that "decisive act of spiritual freedom" with which this thesis is concerned. That vision will emerge from the fibre of her 'religious sensibility.' By the 'religious sensibility' of any person, I mean that sense of symbolic connectedness, that perception of what is at the centre of things and how we humans relate to it, that belief in radical possibility at the heart of reality that informs her way of looking, her vision of what is and what happens.

Michael Novak sees at the heart of the profane standpoint the tendency to call a spade only a spade and to break all symbolic connections with other dimensions. A religious sensibility, on the other hand, seeks those same symbolic connections and seeks a different truth about the spade, an enlarged truth. To have a religious sensibility, according to Jaroslav Havelka, is to have "ground for a vision of transformed life." (48)

Like Tom Driver, I like the word "sensibility" because it "blurs the distinction between physical and mental." (1978: 3) My interest is not so much in what Laurence thinks theologically, but in her whole stance as storyteller, her approaches and retreats, her saying and her not-saying, her story-truths.

It should not be necessary any longer to defend the

approach of a religion scholar to literature. According to David Hesla, twentieth century theologians have successfully challenged the doctrine of the autonomy of poetry. Scholars like Hopper and Scott have successfully fostered an awareness of the religious implications of literature. As a result, the typical contemporary argument is the one put forth by F. J. Streng in Understanding Religious Man:

> The religious significance of art ... is the activity of the artist and the perceiver of art through which both generate meaning and significance from the sources of their being-in-existence. (85)

I perceive that generation of meaning and significance whenever I teach a course on the spirituality of Laurence's Manawaka works. But I also see it in negative backlash against Laurence. When a piece of literature is as deeply religious as The Diviners is, it spawns the urgency of vigilante movements to sweep it from the school curriculum. No such a tempest ever occurs in rural Ontario over mere pornography. The urge to censorship has its roots in the troubling of deep waters.

I suppose it is because my own depths are moved by Laurence's work that I undertake to write about it. The shelves of criticism on Laurence are tellingly small, but a year ago I did not know what they told. Now I think I do. The scope of Laurence's writing on the human spirit is so epic and moving that writing about it is a little like tackling Tolstoy, with

whom she actually has been compared by George Woodcock. (40) There are giants in the land!

Perhaps my willingness to enter the land was the blessing of ignorance. On the other hand, it was not 'tackling' that I had at heart. Nor do I come to Laurence with a specific theoretical framework in hand. One could approach Laurence from the perspective of literary criticism, feminist theology, Christian apologetics. I have not chosen to do so. Rather, my method has been close textual analysis from the point of view of a curiosity about the religious in that text. This thesis represents an intensive exploration and celebration of the religious fibre of Laurence's Manawaka stories. No other statement is as telling of that fibre as Laurence's own:

> The dilemma of gods is that however much they may love or hate mankind, in 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: (Laurence, 1968: 45)

Margaret Laurence knows intimately the wrestling match to which she refers. Her writing is a way of deciding her own fate. She has called her work "an attempt to come to terms with [her] ancestral past, to deal with themes of survival, of freedom and growth, and to record our mythology." (Thomas, 1975: 102) It is

as though Laurence will not let the fathers and their gods go except they bless her. This Jacob mythologem is so woven through her work that we must suppose it to be a central one in her own journey.

To what extent can we discern the religious sensibility of Margaret Laurence from the stories she tells? What have the bad-conscience God of Stacey with her terrified world view, the prideful wilderness of Hagar and her redemption, the revelations of Morag and other diviners, or the psalm of faith that finally issues from the lips of Rachel to do with the religious sensibility of their composer?

There is in Laurence's case a vital and deep connection. The particular religious attitude of Rachel or Hagar or any other character is neither identifiable with, nor completely separate from, the informing religious sensibility of Margaret Laurence. Laurence herself has said that the "character is not a mask but an individual separate from the writer. At the same time, the character is one of the writer's voices and selves ..." (New: 157) Laurence's religious sensibility emerges not so much in the words or person of her characters, but in the stories she tells about them. The fact is, however, that Laurence chooses to tell her stories directly or indirectly through the consciousness of female heroines. Clara Thomas notes that even when Laurence writes in the third person she creates by the immediacy of her style the illusion of a first person narrative. (134) It is not a weakness but one of the strengths of Laur-

ence's work that the reader finds it difficult to separate the character's from the author's point of view. Laurence apparently is not attempting objectivity; she is wrestling in each case with a story which is both hers and not hers, a story which has grown with hers to be 'birthed.' The world in which she chooses to set that story is also her world. "If I came from anywhere, I came from a small prairie town of Scots Presbyterian stock." (Thomas, 1975: 98) It would be strange then to suppose that her religious sensibility is not born of her struggle with that same world, born of a deep emotional reference to its fathers and its gods.

Those few critics who have addressed the religious issue in Laurence confirm my thesis that her work is "in its deepest and broadest meaning ... the story of a profoundly religious pilgrimage" (13) which is closely related to Laurence's own journey. J. E. Read suggests that Laurence, like Morag, writes "because she is impelled to write ... as one willing to wrestle unceasingly with the human dilemma." (New: 54) My own correspondence with Margaret Laurence confirms this sense of being impelled by stories and characters which will not let her go. Laurence has an almost Old Testament sense of the forces that inform her life and her work. She would say that for all Canadians the Old Testament myths have more relevance than the classical ones do. And Sandra Djwa illustrates in detail the ways in which Laurence's belief in that relevance "permeates her own fictional world." (4)

This thesis is about the religious sensibility of Margaret Laurence as it speaks to me through the stories she tells in the Manawaka novels. And since these stories are told centrally by and about women, it is on those women and what happens to them that I shall focus. In and through and underneath their stories, the stories of their enslavements, wrestlings, and redemption as human beings, the religious sensibility of Margaret Laurence can be discerned. I believe that is so for three reasons.

The first--the one to which I have already addressed myself--is that Laurence relates to her own work as a journey of a religious nature. She writes out of what Ann Ulanov calls the "heart-ego," the kind of consciousness that "allows itself to be drawn to the contents and then circles around them." (173) The content to which Laurence is drawn is always a character. She has said that characters come into her consciousness full-blown and insist on having their stories told. Laurence experiences this event each time it happens as a sacred "calling" in the Old Testament sense. The same phenomenon emerges for her characters and is referred to finally by Morag as "the necessary doing of the thing." (Laurence, 1974: 452)

The second is that Margaret Laurence exhibits what Novak calls a religious viewpoint towards life (1971: 15): that is, she writes symbolically of the essential connectedness of all things. Hagar both hates the stone angel over her mother's grave and is seen throughout the novel as herself a stone angel. Hagar, whose deepest disgust is with what she calls "gutless"

women, dies of stomach cancer. Jules Tonnerre, who wrestles with the ancestral but falls short of the ability and freedom to write the song of himself, dies at mid-life with throat cancer. Margaret Laurence writes not just about what happens but of how it is connected to everything else. As Michael Novak points out, any action is a declaration of faith in one's place in some kind of world, and in that weak sense, all people are religious. But there are also among us those who see everything through a religious interpretation, who "take humans in their striving and freedom as a clue to the central significance of the universe." (1971: 46) Margaret Laurence is religious in both senses. Her writing is an act of faith, and through it she offers us a religious interpretation. Laurence is one of those for whom, in Eliade's (27) terms, all nature is capable of revealing itself as cosmic sacrality. A great blue heron is not just a magnificent sight "rarely seen"; it is "like an angel ... ancient-seeming ... unknowing that it was speeding not only towards individual death but probably towards the death of its kind" (Laurence, 1974: 357); and so it becomes for Morag a pivotal symbol of her connectedness with her own heritage.

And the third notable reason is that I have come to Laurence's work with a question about religion: What does Margaret Laurence see as having the power of transformation in human life? I lay no claim to objective analysis of the text. I am well aware that I read Laurence through the filter of my own questions and my own religious sensibility. The reality that I

apprehend, then, is one to which I contribute. It is to this understanding of reality that Palmer refers when he says that in reading literature "a reality is brought to stand" through a merging of horizons, an experience which he calls the 'true' hermeneutical experience. (Gunn, 1971: 246) In this thesis, I have attempted to be challenged by my reading of Laurence, to offer up my present sense of meaning, to "seek to understand the question behind the text." (250)

By this very endeavour, I put a question to the text. Denis deRougemont has said that "the aim of all true art, whether conscious or not, is to make one attentive to the meaning of the world and of life." (deRougemont: 179) To what meaning does Margaret Laurence make us attentive? How does she help us to love better "the order of Creation and ... reestablish ourselves in it?" (186) Or, as Northrop Frye put it, what is her vision of "the recreation of man?" (1971: 94)

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Introduction

> "Optimism in this world seems impossible to me. But in each novel there is some hope, and that is a different thing entirely." Margaret Laurence (New: 15)

Hagar, who died at ninety and discovered hope only three days earlier, must have wondered if she would be the exception. But precisely because she came so close to missing it, she is the most dramatic and for many the most moving witness to the presence of hope so central to Laurence's sensibility. According to Laurence, it is not hope for the promised land to which she refers, but rather hope for dignified survival in the wilderness. (21) Laurence does not refer to the a priori hope for release from bondage into that wilderness wandering.

I use this Old Testament metaphor because Laurence herself uses it not only in her commentary on her work but also in her fictional images. Hagar, for example, imagines that the stone angel on her mother's grave was gouged out by the score with "admirable accuracy [for] the needs of fledgling pharaohs in an uncouth land." (Laurence, 1964: 1) The same Hagar on her deathbed realizes that pride has been her "wilderness" and that the wilderness for her has not been any different from bondage because she has carried her chains within her. Yet if Laurence uses the metaphor, she is not writing an allegory of the exodus

story. Her Manawaka characters are not guided by the hand of God out of slavery through a desert time and into a promised land. In some sense, they remain always in Egypt or Egypt remains in them. Rachel knows this truth when she says in her statement of faith, "I will be different. I will remain the same." (Laurence, 1966: 245) Laurence has said that by the time she wrote the Manawaka works she "no longer believed so much in the promised land, even the promised land of one's own inner freedom." (New: 21)

For all that, she never discards the Old Testament. Its myths and rhythms are at the heart of her writing. Sandra Djwa, who explores the religious dimensions of Laurence's work, suggests that "a common myth-making tendency which equates Biblical desert and prairie drought, Israelite and prairie farmer, would seem to have been reinforced in Laurence's case by her experiences with the Somali tribesmen of Africa." (69) Laurence herself attributes her "strong sense of the Old Testament" to that stern quality of [her] own ancestors who were Scots Presbyterians. (31)

But Djwa sees in Laurence even a thematic parallel to the Old Testament. It is Djwa's thesis that all three Manawaka novels [then published] are concerned with "the rejection of false gods and the development of a new covenant with the self." (82) Djwa argues that the new covenant of which Margaret Laurence writes is "the spirit of God written upon man's heart" (67) as opposed to the letter of the law in the Mosaic code. To

support her argument, Djwa explores in detail the identity of Nick as a Jacob figure when he says to Rachel, "I'm not God." (Laurence, 1966: 182) The problem one encounters here, however, is in trying to make an allegorist out of Laurence. Although Nick's words are a Jacob-echo, Nick is noteworthy for his inability or refusal to wrestle his angel until it blesses him. One need not hunt for a half-Jacob. When she wants a Jacob, Laurence paints one vividly in the person of Marvin as he wrestles with the old angel, Hagar, for his blessing. But she does not place her Jacob next to her Rachel. She has no living Sarah to her Hagar. These are symbolic echoes of the myths, sometimes strangely and ironically out of place, as Hagar recognizes in her wish that John, her favourite son, could be a Jacob. Djwa also explores the use of Old Testament names such as Hagar, Bram (Abraham) and Rachel, pointing out that Laurence is particularly concerned with the myths of the Israelites. But the stories do not parallel the Israelite stories even if they contain symbolic references to them, and it is for that reason that I find Djwa's total parallelism of theme too neat and too facile.

Nevertheless, her work is useful as an exploration of the many Old Testament tracings in Laurence:

> Rachel ... is also associated with the new Jerusalem and the covenant of grace ... like the Rachel of the Old and New Testaments, she weeps for

> her children because they are not. In Genesis, this is a lament by a barren wife; in the allegory of Rachel in Jeremiah it is a lament by the Israelites who have fallen away from the fruits of the spirit into the worship of false gods. ... (New: 76)

Djwa sees the golden city of the opening rhyme in A Jest of God at first as a dreamworld of Rachel's sexual fantasies, but later in the novel identified with the golden city of Jerusalem reinterpreted as the growth of the spirit within the individual. (78) Although Djwa does not support that theory with any reference to a place "later in the novel," I imagine that she is referring to Rachel's final statement of faith about where she is going. What Djwa misses and what Margaret Laurence does not miss, is that for Rachel it was precisely through the sexual that the spiritual was born. Laurence is not the dualist that Djwa seems to be. Djwa, in fact, reveals what I perceive to be her overriding bias in the following misquote:

> At the end of the novel, Rachel recognizes the irony of her condition but she also asserts that the jest of God which had given her a tumour instead of the desperately wanted child has been a 'beau geste' resulting in the birth of a new spirit, the New Testament dispensation of Christ's grace, "God's mercy on God." (78)

What Rachel says, in fact, is "God's mercy on reluctant jesters, God's grace on fools, God's pity on God." (Laurence, 1966: 246) Djwa perhaps wants too badly to prove that Laurence is Christian. She is correct in noting that Laurence

> seems to write from a two-tiered world, ostensibly with God above and man below; a world in which there is always the ironic possibility of a reversal of man's plans by God. Although those two worlds are ostensibly parallel, they nonetheless appear to meet in the human spirit. (New: 80)

But she goes on to argue that Laurence "like Jung, seems to locate God in the human soul ...." (80) Jung, of course, did not do that. Rather, he posited within the human psyche a religious function and the form of an image of God, which he was careful to say was not God. Nor does Laurence locate God within. The human soul, or at times the dynamic meeting of two human souls, does seem to be the place of encounter with God or the channel of God's grace; spirit is conjugated in flesh. But for Laurence God remains somewhat elusively in his omniscient heaven. At the end of the Manawaka work, in The Diviners, which was not published when Djwa was writing, Morag's revelation is that "the gift, or portion of grace, or whatever it was, was finally withdrawn to be given to someone else." (Laurence, 1974: 452) The omniscient God is still in control.

Clara Thomas, who has written about The Diviners, also

speaks in Old Testament-New Testament terms about the religious sensibility of Margaret Laurence. She argues that

> in The Stone Angel, the Old Testament figure of Hagar in the wilderness is brought forward to the New Testament; the resolution of her story is offered to us in New Testament terms. In A Jest of God, the Old Testament figure of Rachel mourning for her children is left finally and resolutely in the Old Testament's framework .... Rachel moves, like her biblical ancestress, through monstrous darkness. (New: 89)

But her argument fails to convince. Hagar's redemption is no more or less Christian than is Rachel's. One could make a strong case in Thomas' terms that Rachel's experience of the tumour and the "waters ... in front of [her] eyes" (Laurence, 1966: 221) was essentially a symbolic baptism, a death and rebirth; her confession of faith which concludes the book is far more Christian in its tone of acceptance than is Hagar's final invocation, "Bless me or not, Lord, just as you please, for I'll not beg." (Laurence, 1964: 274) But to continue to argue thus would be to miss the point of this thesis.

It is not my concern to label Margaret Laurence "Old Testament," "New Testament," or anything else. Such superstructures may further cloud our Judeao-Christian perceptions. Knowing the inherent limitations and traps in my inheritance, I seek what Giles Gunn calls "the abandonment of the doctrinaire

and the parochial." (1979: 21) I assume that Margaret Laurence's religious sensibility will emerge from a Judeao-Christian matrix, as did Margaret Laurence. But now what is that sensibility?

In the first place, Laurence is profoundly aware of the alienation of woman from God. Through the distorted religion of their Scots Presbyterian upbringing, her heroines have developed a disbelieving fear of a remote jester God who has dubious ears and no tongue, a trickster who assumes an ironic stance towards his people. He emerges, largely untempered, singularly masculine, straight out of the Old Testament into the upright capitalistic conscience of his people where he sits in apparently merciless judgement. He is the transcendental and remote Calvinist God. One must not presume to question such a being or expect from him any justice by earthly standards.

Within the confines of that god-image, Laurence's women emerge at first fully shackled, paralyzed in one way or another by the self-image and the view of reality that results. Their response is to be practical, to find a way of coping with or getting out of their 'Manawaka world.' Waiting or running, they are caught in what Michael Novak calls, the "profane standpoint" (1971: 28), seeing only the spade-ness of the spade and none of its other symbolic connections. The Jester God does not connect to anything that is at the core of them; he is dead, says Rachel, but still, maddeningly there, even for her. The resulting view of reality is a split one.

> This is known as a good part of town. Not like the other side of the tracks where the shacks are and where the weeds are let grow knee-high and not dutifully mown ... I never go there, and know it only from hearsay, distorted local legend. (Laurence, 1966: 13)

The Manawaka world of Laurence's heroines is a world of polarization, separation, alienation: the elect from the pagan, the Scots Presbyterians from everyone else, the townspeople from the Métis, the Church from the Tabernacle, people from their own bodies and sexuality. Of Laurence's women, only Morag grows up on the "other" side - but even she senses a split to be healed between herself as a Scot and the Tonnerre family, the savages descended from the horse-lords of the prairie.

Laurence's heroines move from this estrangement to a true sense of what Morag calls "the practicality of spirit and flesh." (Laurence, 1974: 329) In that movement, in part, is the finding of a true religion, a genuine spirituality rooted in their flesh, touching their now lives. In this process, their view of God becomes in some way redeemed. The way in which that occurs, the channel of grace, or what Eliade calls the "hierophany" (Novak, 1971: 28) varies.

> The conversion to the standpoint of the sacred occurs when one becomes aware of feelings, instincts, questions, sensitivities, too long repressed; when the neat, orderly, manageable world of conventional practi-

> cality no longer contains one's spirit; when words like 'realistic,' 'feasible,' and 'pragmatic' no longer intimidate and make one blind; when one suddenly becomes aware of one's capacity to shape one's own identity to respond to things and to people as to 'thou,' with reverence and full attention rather than with instrumentalist design, ... Above all, one's sense of what is real becomes expanded. One seems, to oneself at least, so much more acutely aware of things and people through a sort of participation - as if one were already living in them, and they in oneself. The sacred is, as Eliade said, a 'power,' a 'reality,' a common flow of 'being' to which one feels 'connected,' in which one senses one's own participation. (40)

Laurence has at the heart of her religious sensibility a knowledge of the conversion myth to which Novak refers. What she also knows is that the hierophany is not likely to be what Hagar and John long for, that "something splendid will suddenly occur" (Laurence, 1964: 33), but rather, that it is likely to occur when least looked for and from the least expected of sources. Nor does it come to those who refuse to struggle with the past, to wrestle the ancestral for its blessing.

Inevitably, Laurence's characters come to an appreciation of what Morag calls "the necessary doing of the thing." (Laurence, 1974: 452) Morag is referring to the use of gift, writing

in her case, water divining in Royland's, song-making in Jules'. For most of Laurence's characters, there is something which presents itself as a sort of destiny, a call which is rejected at the price of one's soul. For Rachel, the sexual union without birth control and the 'birthing' of whatever results presents itself as something she must do. Once she has joined the dreaded company of fools, she can move out of her paralysis. Hagar has to fight death to have her crippling pride broken before she can take that pride up in joyful service to someone else. Stacey must touch the world's evil which she so fears, before she can see herself as sister to it, and participant in it, and only then can she celebrate what is now.

The necessary doing of the thing often involves a prodigal necessity, a leaving 'home' and risking all. Ulanov writes that "for anything new to come to birth, we must first be open to shapelessness, to lack of form" (183); Laurence would seem to agree. Part of what seems necessary for Laurence's women is what Tom Driver calls a "descent into the flesh" (1967: n.p.), a growth downwards, a grounding of spirit in human reality. The struggle with sexuality is evident in all four Manawaka heroines. For Laurence, it is coexistent with and symbolic of the struggle with God. The spirit is born out of the flesh or not at all. Laurence's stories are coincident with the psycho-religious viewpoint of Ann Ulanov:

> For the feminine ego, impulses of the spirit make

> themselves known through material things ... The body symbolism associated to the feminine represents her spiritual capacity as well as her material ... The Annunciation to Mary is paradigmatic of all annunciations to the heart ego, such as the saving reality of love, of a new insight, or of any sense of a new relationship to come ... For the feminine, the spirit is always an "other," and relationship to it is always intimate and concrete, never abstract and impersonal ... Religion, then, [for the feminine] is not different from ordinary life but is rather an intensification and deepening of it. (185-7)

It is this fact of their feminine existence which Margaret Laurence's women need to and do learn; Morag calls it the "practicality of spirit and flesh."(Laurence, 1974: 329) Esther Harding calls it "seeking the spirit in the hidden meaning of concrete happenings, a searching and accepting of the despised and rejected parts of one's psyche." (Ulanov: 182)

But Laurence is a storyteller, not a psychoanalyst. Her women tangle with life in the flesh, not on the analytic level. She tells not only of their necessary action but also of a grace that seems to flow from the universe towards her characters. Hagar's blindness sees "a seasonal mercy" (Laurence, 1964: 25) only in nature; Laurence sees further.

When her heroines do their wrestling, even as old Hagar

sits and sifts her "rampant ... memory" (3), winged messengers appear, off-beat prophets who emerge often from their own peculiar wilderness. They carry with them, however unconsciously, messages and insights which are crucial to the redemption of the lives of Laurence's women.

> ... And on the high altar squats a dwarf I've never seen before ... Hector Jonas who for so long has plied his trade below while I tried to live above. Comic prophet, dwarf seer. (Laurence, 1966: 152)

Such off-beat prophets are part of Margaret Laurence's stock-in-trade as a writer and part of her religious sensibility. For her heroines, they act as surprise angels, revealers of new insights into the nature of reality, channels of grace.

Revelations in the Manawaka world do not come from on high, not any higher at least than Hector Jonas' embalming table. They come most freely from people who do not belong on several levels to the 'tribe' of Scots Presbyterians and upright citizens of Manawaka, people who are "other." They are undertakers or garbage collectors, Ukranians or Métis, prostitutes or lesbians, worshippers at the Tabernacle of the Risen and Reborn or Redeemer's Advocates. They offend that Presbyterian sense of decency and order so basic to the ancestors of Hagar, Rachel, Stacey, Morag. And, for precisely that reason, they carry messages, consciously or not, that are redemptive for those same women--messages from the lost, rejected and despised side in the

dualistic world that is their heritage.

The transformation that occurs for Laurence's women is not so much a changed circumstance as a redeemed vision of reality. Hagar is doubly blind, a stone angel for a long time. Rachel lives with the recognition that something is wrong with her way of viewing things. Stacey complains to God that whichever way she looks, it looks pretty confusing; Morag considers it one of God's ironies that we have almost always vision but no sight.

When the splits in sensibility are healing and the off-beat prophets and ancestors have given their gifts, what has changed essentially about those women is their view of reality. The reality is the same, but Laurence's heroines have eyes now which see with a new attentiveness and wholeness of perspective, eyes which see paradox and the reality also of choice. This is the vision made possible by what Novak calls a "sacred standpoint," (1971: 28) an expanded and reverent sense of what is real. Hagar comes to understand the true nature of her lifelong chains and celebrates her final free acts of love; Rachel is re-born with the delivery of her tumour-child, and looks out in the end through the eyes of a prophetess-mother as she blesses even God; Stacey learns how to celebrate the present, complete with its fears and trivialities; and Morag finds peace in her new vision of the continuity of all life and gift, the limitation and limitlessness of human existence.

Northrop Frye suggests in The Educated Imagination that the

story of the loss and regaining of identity is "the framework of all literature." (21) Clara Thomas says that Laurence's work at its deepest level is about the dispossessed of Eden; and Laurence herself spoke in an interview with Donald Cameron of the "mourning of [our] disbelief" that is "Eden lost." (New: 2) The most pervasive religious theme of Laurence's Manawaka work centres on the necessary wrestling with one's angel for the blessing of the new name.

Michael Novak claims that when a religion's tie with earth is cut, it dies. (1971: 24) The religious sensibility of Margaret Laurence is rooted in the earth. Spirituality and sexuality are deeply connected. She is aware with Ulanov that

> sexuality in its symbolic dimension has a spiritual function: it is the means and signification of reunion with oneself, one's neighbour, and God as the source of one's life. (Ulanov: 14)

Hagar must embrace her dying flesh and her fear before she can rejoice. Rachel surrenders herself and her body to the experience of the "unmattering" (Laurence, 1966: 181) of who she is before she can recognize Calla's real love and the power of her own choices. Stacey must wrest a blessing on her aging flesh, must live fully in the present, before she can "dance in her head" (Laurence, 1969: 303); Morag learns the bare bones of her faith in part by living out her choice to have a child by Jules, the "other."

Yet Laurence is not a secularist; she does not suggest a reliance on human powers alone. In her work there is a sense of the deep and mysterious currents of the gods which flow through and affect all our attempts at saving ourselves by doing. Sandra Djwa's final description of Laurence's religious sensibility is that it emerges as "a kind of latter-day psychological puritanism in which salvation is redefined in terms of the discovery of the self and true grace is manifested by a new sense of life's direction." (New: 84) And Clara Thomas states that "the spirit in the ascent is the core and continuing theme of all Margaret Laurence's work." (1975: 189) Laurence's religious sensibility, however, is not so easily categorized. Her heroines end up not just with a discovery of self but a new sense of "other," and not so focused on life's direction as on life's possibility. They also have a new pragmatism shorn of much of its former false pride. Their spirituality, formerly characterized by a despairing clawing at the Jester God above, finds a new containment in their own concrete experience. The tension of the God-woman polarity is established as creative; the old polarization is healed. With a new sense of their own power in the world comes a deeper acceptance of mystery.

Chapter 1 of this thesis is a discussion of the God-woman dialogue in the Manawaka canon. In Chapter 2, I explore the deep alienations and divided sensibilities of the Manawaka world. The subject of Chapter 3 is the necessary wrestling with and owning of the ancestral gifts and wounds. Chapter 4 examines Laurence's

use of the prophetic. And Chapter 5 celebrates Laurence's sense of the redemptive.

John Fraser says that Laurence "is a mystic and a pragmatist at the same time and if that seems a contradiction, it is also a definition of Margaret Laurence." (Globe, March 25, 1981: 8) It seems not a contradiction but a paradox which is consistent with my apprehension of Laurence's religious sensibility. Her attitude is marked by both those qualities Northrop Frye calls "sense" and "vision." (1963: 151) She has a jarringly clear ability to see and to describe things as they are, "a practical habit of mind." (151) But she also possesses a magnificent vision of possibility. Frye defines the religious life as "the manifestation of vision in the world of sense." (151) That is an equally apt description of Laurence's work.

"On with it!" He says and thus
we squat on the rocks by the sea
and play--can it be true--
a game of poker.
He calls me.
I win because I hold a royal straight flush.
He wins because He holds five aces.
A wild card had been announced
but I had not heard it
being in such a state of awe
when He took out the cards and dealt.
As he plunks down His five aces
and I sit grinning at my royal flush,
He starts to laugh,
the laughter rolling like a hoop out of His mouth
and into mine,
and such laughter that He doubles right over me
laughing a Rejoice-Chorus at our two triumphs.
Then I laugh, the fishy dock laughs
the sea laughs. The Island laughs.
The Absurd laughs.

from Anne Sexton

"The Rowing Endeth"

Chapter 1

The Jokes of God

> I've often wondered why one discovers so many things too late. The jokes of God. (Laurence, 1964: 52)

Laurence's heroines have been reared on a rigid, Calvinist God--that is to say, an essentially Old Testament, patriarchal, masculine God who is sternly unreachable if alive. They no longer "believe" in this God, they say, but they still fear him and pray to him because they sense that even if out of reach, he is still in some sort of control. Further, he is a trickster who sports with the fate of his people. He may just be "playing possum." In other words, they pay him a grudging respect and talk to him "just in case." They do not love him. This is especially true for Stacey and Rachel, who are each in the grips of a bad Calvinist conscience. Hagar's pride usually refuses to acknowledge this God, yet she waits cynically for his "terrible laughter" in the fish cannery. I want to suggest that the possibilities and limitations inherent in the world for these women turn on the axis of this belief: if God is who he is, then I am who I am.

For each of Laurence's heroines, that image of God becomes redeemed, usually through the agency of an off-beat and unsuspected prophet, a fellow human who represents the "other." Then the self-concept and, in fact, the whole view of reality

changes. This chapter explores the nature of the relationship between Laurence's women and their God.

> I've never had a moment to myself that's been my trouble. Can God be One and watching? I see Him clad in immaculate radiance, a short white jacket and a smile white and creamy as zinc-oxide ointment, focussing His cosmic and comic glass eye on this and that, as the fancy takes Him. Or no--He's many-headed, and all the heads argue at once, a squabbling committee. (81)

Hagar, of all Laurence's heroines, is the most alienated from the god of her fathers. God is seen as her trickster-enemy when she acknowledges him at all. When the Reverend Troy suggests that unanswered prayer might be the result of praying for the wrong things, Hagar retorts, "Well, who's to know? If God's a crossword puzzle or a secret code, it's hardly worth the bother, it seems to me." (104) Hagar is deeply angry at such concealment; at one point she recalls the prairie thunderstorms when "the lightning would rend the sky like an angry claw at the cloak of God." (143) Hagar's choice of image is revealing. We are reminded of it in the later scene in which Hagar and Lottie are pictured by Hagar as "two fat old women, no longer haggling with one another, but only with fate, pitting [their] wits against God's." (189)

Laurence makes a symbolic connection between the cemetery

stone angel with its double blindness and Hagar with her blindness and rigidity. Hagar complains that Doris "guides [her] as though [she] were stone blind" (50) and says of herself, "I sit rigid and immovable, looking neither to right or left, like one of those plaster-of-Paris figures the dime stores sell." (81) Hagar defends her lack of vision by blaming God for his sleight of hand and hiddenness. When she discovers after her brother's death how and why he saved his money as a child, she muses, "I've often wondered why one discovers so many things too late. The jokes of God." (52) And much later in her life, when Bram is dying and she realizes how impotent he had really felt in dealing with her, she laments, "I could not speak for the salt that filled my throat, and for anger--not at anyone, at God, perhaps, for giving us eyes but almost never sight." (153)

This sense of a cruel God who sports with his people is endemic to Laurence's women. Sandra Djwa suggests that this vision may be "a fusion of the Jehovah of Canadian prairie fiction with [Laurence's] sense of the appallingly difficult existence of the Somali tribesmen" (New: 69) of whom she wrote in her African work. It may be. It may also be a reflection of Laurence's sense that these women are enslaved in the first place by the god-image, self, and community they have inherited and, therefore, obviously would feel at the mercy and whim of some remote power. Hagar, for example, overpowered for so long by her stern and loveless father, Jason Currie, so steeped in the distorted religion that upholds the status quo in the

community, makes a headlong break for some kind of freedom into a marriage that has no chance, given her inner shackles. Then, she concludes:

> I'd be the last one to maintain that marriages are made in heaven, unless, as I've sometimes thought, the idea is to see what will happen, put this or that unlikely pair together, observe how they spar. Otherwise, now why should He care who mates or parts? (Laurence, 1964: 149)

She acts as though she is a free agent on several occasions, but apparently never perceives of herself as free until just before her death. And, of course, she is not free. **Hagar** is enslaved by the God she rages at; she is enslaved by the sense of herself as impotent under the dominion of such a cruel enigma. She is caught in the pattern of defiance and reaction manifested in her marriage and her leaving of the marriage. Faced with her helplessness before the power "out there" she can do nothing but give in or run from it. And with all that Currie running through her veins, Hagar is not about to give in. But to run is not to feel one's power as in the true exercise of initiative. Hagar learns that latter kind of action only days before her death. Up to then, all her action is dependent reaction to the jester God.

Hagar becomes a "waiter" who fantasizes the impossible and lives in expectation of the worst. "I've waited like this, for things to get better or worse, many and many a time ... 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." (98) Later, though, she admits that one of the things she waited for was John's death, because she expected to lose him as a punishment for loving him too much.

Hagar expects God's cruelty and his enjoyment of it. When she and Murray Lees have shared their grief-filled stories of the death of sons, she imagines that both "sit quietly in this place ... and listen for the terrible laughter of God." (208) What she does not expect from God, or as a result, from life, is mercy. Reverend Troy assumes that she must believe in what he calls, "God's infinite mercy" but Hagar silences him by asking, "What's so merciful about Him, I'd like to know?" (106) The only mercy she perceives until just before her death is the sort of impersonal one expressed in the seasonal blooming of lilacs.

It is only as she approaches death and several things happen to melt her defiance that Hagar wonders: "What if it matters to Him after all, what happens to us?" (79) But her attempts to appeal now to a god who has been alien for so long fall short of her need. She tries to sing "Abide With Me" and finds it akin to reading knitting directions; she is encouraged and strengthened more, she discovers, by invoking Keats' Old Meg, the gipsy.

> Old Meg was brave as Margaret Queen
> And tall as Amazon;

An old red blanket cloak she wore,
A ship hat had she on;
God rest her aged bones somewhere ...
She died full long agone. (145)

It is in one sense an invocation to that strongest part of herself, that spark of divinity within, which, for Hagar, is not associated with her cruel masculine god. It is rather her inheritance from somewhere else, some forgotten place.

There is a sense, however, in which Hagar's view of God changes. If she does not encounter 'mercy in heaven,' she does experience it on earth in the midst of her dying. That 'hieropany' is the subject of another chapter. In Margaret Laurence's view, however, such redemption is not sudden, spectacular, or total. Hagar at one point wants to "beg God's pardon ... for thinking ill of Him some time or other" (221); but when she tries to frame her appeal, she alters it. "'Our Father'--no. I want no part of that. All I can think is--'Bless me or not, Lord, just as you please, for I'll not beg.'" (274)

Hagar is the self-made daughter of a "self-made man." (13) As such, she has inherited the belief that she does not "owe [her] existence to the Almighty." (13) At the same time she is angry at a God who is in control of that existence, as her father was in control and who, also like her father, "never apologizes." (255)

Yet there is in Hagar's final words to God a profound, if

subtle, shift. God is no longer to be approached as Father; Hagar disowns that dynamic. Now she addresses God as "Lord," a less personal and more numinous title and one that does not imply the defiant dependency implicit for Hagar in the Father-daughter relationship. Perhaps in wrestling with her inner stone angel, Hagar has touched her blessing already. She no longer needs to do battle and it is not in her nature to beg. She is ready to grant God his necessary mystery by calling him Lord.

Laurence's story seems to suggest that Hagar makes her peace with the world and with God at the same time and to the same degree. One pilgrimage conditions the other, perhaps is the other.

Rachel Cameron agrees with Vanessa McLeod that "whatever God might love in this world, it was certainly not order." (Laurence, 1970: 49) Rachel tries to tell herself that God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, then concludes, "What a laugh." (Laurence, 1966: 44) And Rachel craves order because she is terrified of confusion.

Rachel is a woman hanging on desperately to the God of her fathers and his moral order, to her sense of decency, of uprightness, of being "good." Yet she feels deserted by that very God. "I didn't say God hadn't died recently, within the last few years, but a long time ago; longer than I could remember, for I could not actually recall a time when He was alive." (49)

When A Jest of God begins, we see a woman in unconscious

mourning over the lost Eden of the ability "to speak of God with anguish or joy, or out of some need [to] pray with fierce humility as though God had to be there ..." (51) She projects that loss onto the Reverend MacElfrish and her mother, but the conclusion of the novel makes it evident that the need for that kind of faith has been Rachel's. "Make me to hear joy and gladness, that the bones which Thou has broken may rejoice." (245) The story Laurence tells in A Jest of God is the story of that religious pilgrimage from unconscious despair to conscious faith.

Rachel's issue with God is different from Hagar's. Hagar believes and is angry at what she believes. Rachel's God is dead at first. It is tempting to speculate over the father-connection in each case. Hagar's father, cruel, closed and unrelenting, was yet there to be encountered. Rachel's father hid himself in the funeral parlour until he died. Nevertheless, Rachel's encounter with God is finally more dynamic and personal than is Hagar's. Once she has had the ecstatic, and for her mortifying, experience in the tabernacle, Rachel is never the same again.

The first significant symptom of that transformation is her identification with Tom Gillanders as he 'makes a fool of himself' singing a solo in church. Instantly, she sees herself and him as helpless victims of God's control and says, "If I believed, I would have to detest God for the brutal joker He would be if he existed." (53) If she believed, Rachel would have to get angry, perhaps even rebel. It is in just this way

that Laurence's women often make unconsciously prophetic statements regarding their own redemptive process. Laurence seems to suggest that the human psyche knows what is necessary to its own salvation.

By the time Rachel speaks of God again, she is speaking also to him. Further, she knows what she wishes he were like even though she phrases that wish negatively.

> I don't know why a person pleads with God. If I believed, the last kind of Creator I could imagine would be a human type being who could be reached by tears or bribed with words. 'Say please, Rachel, it's the magic word.' Mother.
>
> Please, God, let him phone. (117)

It is when Rachel attempts to lose sight of herself in sexual love, and cannot, that the anger finally emerges. Not only does she watch herself; she senses a god who also watches. "All right God--go ahead and laugh, and I'll laugh with you, but not quite yet for awhile." (142) And in that anger she finds the power to begin to stand up to the self-destructive inner voices of her upbringing. When they tell her that getting herself "worked up for nothing" is bad for her, she asks, "Why bad? I've felt a damn sight better since I stopped considering my health." (142) In challenging the god of her fathers, she finds strength to challenge the fathers. By enfleshing that dead god, by giving him credibility, by demanding his existence, she

can wrestle with him and his deadness in her, his false faces that keep her scared, his failures on her behalf.

McLay says that the people of Manawaka "evade a real recognition of God as they do of death." (New: 186) Probably he would agree with Novak that the distortion of genuine religion attempts to defend the ordered surfaces of life, to "cover over the disruptive awesome terrors of genuine religion ... a hidden, silent God who is not a functionary of our peace of mind." (1971: 10)

Rachel is a woman who finally dares to push that distorted god-image to its empty conclusion and to face the abyss of the question which that opens up for her. The first step in that journey is to take seriously, and allow herself to detest, that worn-out vision of God that is her heritage. She goes to the tabernacle out of duty to Calla and is seized by the ecstatic; the God who loves order and propriety has let her down. He has jested with her as he jests with old Tom, who sings solos to the embarrassment of the Presbyterian congregation. Further, Calla's efforts at Christian compassion after the tabernacle incident turn into a homosexual advance. Rachel is outraged. Her circumscribed and ordered existence is breaking open; the dead God is not dead if he can play tricks--he must be dealt with.

Rachel's route is typical for Laurence's women. Laurence never isolates religious experience from the concrete and Rachel is no exception. The "necessary doing of the thing" to which Morag refers is for Rachel the opening of herself to formless-

ness and the jests of God through her sexuality. She is assisted in that process by more than one 'angel' such as Hector Jonas. By refusing to use birth control in the experience with Nick, she symbolically refuses to abort any longer the urgings and demands of her own being. It is then that she finds strength to defy her mother. And it is then and only then that she experiences the loss of self-consciousness with Nick that opens the way for self-awareness.

> Nothing is complicated. He inhabits whatever core of me there is. I can move outward to him, knowing he wants what I am, and I can receive him, whatever he is, whatever. And then this tender cruelty, always known to him but never before to me, the unmattering of what either of us is ... (Laurence, 1966: 181)

Now she knows what she wants and speaks deliberately "from faith." And, apparently pregnant as a direct result, she finds herself totally vulnerable before whatever is at the crux of the universe, whatever is there to hear her. Even her physical posture becomes one of abject vulnerability.

> I do not know what to say, or to whom. Yet I am on my knees.
>
> I am not praying--if that is what I am doing--out of belief. Only out of need. Not faith, or belief, or the feeling of deserving anything. None of that seems

to be so.

'Help me.'

Help--if You will--me. Whoever that may be. And whoever You are, or where. 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?

We seem to have fought for a long time, I and You.

I don't know what I've done. I've been demented, probably. I know what I am going to do, though.

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. (209)

Thus out of her need she prays "with fierce humility--as though God had to be there." (51) Rachel confesses for the first time both her agnosticism and her faith. She declares herself; she makes a choice for what she wants.

The fact that what she gets is not what she bargained for is, for Rachel, one of the painful lessons of reality. Before the inexplicable, encountering the unpredictability of God's gifts, she utters the appropriate "Oh my God ..." (221) Rachel's tumour is called by one Laurence critic God's "trump card ... an act of mercy" (New: 98), by another the word made flesh. (176) Rachel's whole relationship with Nick, including the birthing of

the tumour, becomes a channel of grace or revelation for Rachel precisely because she makes herself vulnerable to chaos and withstands it; she gives birth and becomes the mother. It would be trite to say that what she gives birth to does not matter, yet at one level it is true. She risks all and is brought to an "Oh my God" place in which she must accept, or go mad, the mysterious gift of what is.

Now she is both released into her mourning for the children she will not have and transformed to the mother. Her new stance towards God is equally paradoxical. She is humble, wishing to worship: "Make me to hear joy and gladness that the bones which Thou hast broken may rejoice." (Laurence, 1966: 237) And she is the prophetess who declares that in the end--"it's in other hands" and sees that the God of her fathers cannot do the impossible of stopping the life process she once wanted him to stop. (228) Beyond the God of her fathers she begins to apprehend a God far more vast and mysterious. Finally, she intones like a priestess a benediction on the universe as she now sees it: "God's mercy on reluctant jesters. God's grace on fools. God's pity on God." (246)

Laurence is always saying by her stories that the God of the fathers is there in one's veins and like Jacob's angel must be encountered and wrestled with in and through one's concrete earth-bound experience to a greater vision of a greater God. But she is also saying that one's ability to wrestle is constrained by that same inherited God-vision. How do you wrestle with a

trickster? Her answer is that you learn to listen to the diviners and revealers who exist in the least likely flesh, including your own, that you face what is for you some necessary course, and that you survive the jests by going with them until you see what it is that they too reveal. You probably cannot wrestle with God, so you wrestle with your angel. And your angel is somehow present in whatever is in your life.

Hagar defied God and refused to wrestle her angel until it took the form of Death. Rachel wrested her blessing much sooner. And Rachel's sister, Stacey, heroine of The Fire-Dwellers, begins with a more personal relationship with God than either. She carries on a running dialogue with him in her head and is neither afraid of his jests nor angry. The problem is that she's sure he's there to judge her every action, but not at all confident that he's in control of his world or even listening to her. Stacey's attitude to herself runs a close parallel.

> At the day of Judgement, God will say, 'Stacey MacAindra, what have you done in your life?' And I'll say, 'Well, let's see, Sir, I think I loved my kids.' And He'll say, 'Are you certain about that?' And I'll say, 'God, I'm not certain about anything anymore.' So He'll say, 'To hell with you, then. We're all positive thinkers up here?' Then again maybe He won't. Maybe He'll say, 'Don't worry, Stacey, I'm not at all that certain either. Sometimes I wonder if I even exist?'

> And I'd say, 'I know what you mean, Lord. I have the same trouble with myself?' (Laurence, 1969: 70)

She envies her father-in-law his sure faith, yet cannot see life his way--"gentle Jesus meek and mild and God's in his heaven all's right with the world." (65)

Stacey's God may not be in his heaven and therefore nothing is right with the world. He exists, if at all, as a bad conscience within Stacey, a prodding judge who never lets her be. She can even second-guess him. "All right God, don't tell me, let me guess. I'm a mean old bitch. I know it." (25)

Stacey is a "fire-dweller." Her confidence in any sort of immortality is gone. If God is only in her head and on her back, who is minding the store? Thus she lives primarily in mourning for the lost Eden of her youth and in terror of the apocalypse, the signs of which she sees in every headline and newscast. The paralysis that results is much like Hagar's. Stacey is afraid to speak the heart's truth to anyone and always erases herself if she does, as with Mac:

> Maybe you need to see the doctor. Do you feel sick?
>
> At heart.
>
> What?
>
> Nothing. I don't know what I'm talking about. I'm sorry ... (79)

And even with God:

> Great example to the young, you. A veritable pillar of strength, I don't think. Listen here, God, don't talk to me like that. You have no right. You try bringing up four kids. ... God, pay no attention. I'm nuts. I'm not myself. (168)

She yearns for one person to talk with, "somebody who wouldn't refuse really to look at [her]." (277) Until Luke appears, Stacey talks truthfully about her present only to God, and is ironically bitter about his non-answer. "God how can I make all this better as if it hadn't happened? No answer. No illumination from on high. As if I expected any." (17)

What she misses for a long time are the illuminations all around her. She hates Mac's evasions and persists in her own, fears losing her boys to some major disaster and misses the real and present agony Ian feels over the death of his friend; she dwells in her fear of the grotesque possibility of war while the fires all around her, such as the one that is consuming her neighbour Tess, escape her frightened vision.

The paradox of her situation is that she has internalized the remote and judging God of her ancestors but lost touch with much of the rest that grounded and sustained them. She mourns her disbelief. The only conscious part of her heritage is negative. The God of the Elect is rendered powerless to help even them in a world that is on the verge of self-destruction.

Yet he retains his threatening aspect as long as there is someone left to punish.

> Stacey how dare you complain about even one single solitary thing? Listen, God, I didn't mean it. Just don't let anything terrible happen to any of them will you? ... I wasn't meaning to complain. I never will again. I promise. (76)

Thus Stacey is caught and paralyzed by her apocalyptic fears. Fully living in the present becomes impossible for her because of her anxiety that the present might not last even with all its imperfections. "What will happen," she asks herself, "when the horsemen of the Apocalypse ride through this town?" (56) Both her wit and her perception tend to become servants of her angst. "Women may live longer but they age faster. God has a sick sense of humour if you ask me." (75) Further, her imagination frequently fans the flames.

> I don't want to, but I seem to believe in a day of judgement, just like all my Presbyterian forbears did, only I don't think it'll happen in the clouds or elsewhere and I don't think I'll be judged for the same things they thought they'd be. Piquette and her kids, and the snow and fire. Ian and Duncan in a burning house. (265)

She has an ominous sense that judgement happens here but

still expects it to be the future here, lurking around the corner of now. She both rejects the heart of the present and lives on the edge of panic that it will be taken away. She also dwells in the past as a "soul refuge." (Laurence, 1976: 17)

> Timberlake, sixteen years ago, had hardly any cottages. Jungles of blackberry bushes and salmonberry spruce trees darkly still in the sun, and the water so unsullied that you could see the grey-gold minnows flickering. You know something, Mac? 'What?' I like everything about you. 'That's good, honey. I like everything about you, too.' (Laurence, 1969: 37)

Stacey lives much of her life preferring what used to be or could have been and fearing what might yet come.

The Fire-Dwellers is the story of Stacey's gradual and painful spiritual awakening to the here and now with all its attendant grotesqueness and grace. Early in the novel Stacey says that it is "the ones who say goodbye before they're dead who bug [her]." (140) She is referring, of course, to her father. Prophetically, she is also referring to the father in her. One day she finally understands that the real demons are the straw men of our own making and that it is the now world in which she must live, however much she is a stranger in it. As her prophetic dream had said, "there is nowhere to go but here." (259) Ultimately, the events of that journey lead her to a statement of faith. "By God, I can, if I set my mind to

it." (289) She does not base her avowal on her former wish for some return to innocence or release into an undefined freedom or other miraculous transformation of her life. She finally realizes that "it would be nice if we were different people but we are not different people. We are ourselves and we are sure as hell not going to undergo some total transformation at this point." (289) If that statement sounds despairing, perhaps Kirkegaard was right: conscious despair is the category of faith. Ann Ulanov reminds us that deep feminine wisdom "is not idealistic in its approach to reality but always prefers what actually is to what should or might be." (191)

Stacey touches that wisdom in herself through a series of events and relationships which are explored in subsequent chapters. What is significant for this discussion is that her attitude to God is not so much changed as grasped by Stacey. It becomes conscious. She finally realizes the extent of its hold on her as death brushes Duncan.

> Judgement. All the things I don't like to think I believe in. But at the severe moments, up they rise, the tomb birds, scaring the guts out of me with their vulture wings. Maybe it's as well to know they're there. Maybe knowing might help to keep them at least a little in their place. Or maybe not. (Laurence, 1969: 296)

Stacey does not find her lost faith. Instead, she comes to that

place described by Michael Novak as the creative stance out of the experience of nothingness. She finds the strength to stand in the chaos of what is. "Given the fact that the fires will go on, inside and out, how do I wish to live?" She decides, for one thing, to give up pining for a lost past and do her dancing in her head. (303) That in itself will upset her former obsessive dialogue with the Jester God. Dancing in one's head suggests an integrity of feeling and thinking not present in her former activities of wishing, fearing, arguing. It presupposes polarity rather than polarization, creativity rather than stagnation.

One of her final statements holds more than a hint of her new sense of respectful distance from, and acceptance of, the God who may or may not be in control. She speaks, not in the style of her familiar harangue with God, but in prophetic tones, "If I could absorb the notion of nothing, of total dark, then it would have no power over me. But that grace isn't given." (307)

There is a limit, Stacey now realizes, beyond which our knowing and our certainty cannot go. Her new sense resembles Rachel's statement that in the end it is in other hands. The now, however, is in her hands. She has acted as though God were on her back constantly trying to change her but not really interested in her agony. When Luke told her to ease up on herself, she transferred the message to God. "Ease up on me God, can't you?" (222) But in the end it is Stacey, of course, who must do the easing. The angel she has had to wrestle is her own Manawaka inheritance.

Once again, Laurence is saying that it is the inherited and internalized view of God rather than God which shackles us. The threat of eternal judgement clouds our eyes to real and daily judgement all around us, judgement that issues for her heroines in dying relationships, missed opportunities for the apprehension of grace, crippling anxiety and paralyzed gifts.

The Fire-Dwellers also echoes The Stone Angel and A Jest of God by showing that it is the human who will not let the divine go. As Margaret Laurence has said, "maybe some day the gods will be free of us but not quite yet." (1968: 45) Stacey, Rachel and Hagar struggle with "deep emotional reference" to that god of their fathers, to whose image they are in various ways enslaved.

At the resolution of a similar, though much less explicit struggle, Morag pronounces on her daughter, Pique, a telling benediction, "Go with God." (Laurence, 1974: 450) This is not for Morag an empty benediction or a familiar charm; Pique, in fact, comments on its strangeness coming from her mother. Morag has come to a deep knowledge that going with God will be a necessary journey for Pique's own integrity, that she must "decide her own fate," as Laurence says, "with deep emotional reference" to that god and to her fathers. (Laurence, 1968: 45)

For much of Morag's adult life, she attempts to reject the god and the fathers. She hopes that she can leave both behind in Manawaka. Like Nick in A Jest of God, she wants to forsake her house and leave her heritage. The story of The Diviners is what Clara Thomas (New: 170) has called the "profoundly religious"

pilgrimage from Morag's denial to her eventual realization that her heritage, the town, the fathers, the god, are in her veins and that this unalterable fact of existence is part of the "mysterious presence, not only of grace, but also of design within and through all the universe and its creatures." (New: 170)

Morag's rejection of the Presbyterian God of her fathers is early and unequivocal. It happens with the death of her parents. "Morag is talking in her head. To God. Telling Him it was all His fault and this is why she is so mad at Him. Because He is no good, is why." (Laurence, 1974: 17) Her crisis is not one of belief, but of love. She begins with a not unusual Protestant split that will make its influence felt inevitably in her adult relationship to reality.

> Morag loves Jesus. And how. He is friendly and not stuck up, is why. She does not love God. God is the one who decides which people have got to die, and when. Mrs. McKee in Sunday school says God is LOVE, but this is baloney. He is mean and gets mad at people for no reason at all and Morag wouldn't trust him as far as she can spit. ...
>
> Jesus is another matter. Whatever anybody says of it, it was really God who decided Jesus had to die like that. Who put it into the head of the soldier, then, to pierce His side? ... Who indeed? Three

guesses. (77)

This theme of Jesus as victim is not peculiar to Morag among Laurence's women. Rachel was struck in the tabernacle by two large pictures of Jesus "bearded and bleeding, his heart exposed and bristling with thorns like a scarlet pincushion" (Laurence, 1966: 37) and in the Presbyterian Church by a stained glass window showing

> a pretty and clean-cut Jesus expiring gently with absolutely no inconvenience, no gore, no pain; just this nice and slightly effeminate insurance salesman who, somewhat incongruously, happens to be clad in a toga, holding his arms lanquidly up to something which might in other circumstances have been a cross. (52)

But it is Morag who tends to get identified in some way with the victim role of Jesus. When she loses the choir solo to Vanessa McLeod and wishes her ill and then some months later Vanessa's father dies, Morag is horrified that God has cast her in such a perfidious role. "God knows what you are thinking. He knows all right, all right. But is mean. Doesn't care. Or understand." (Laurence, 1974: 82) Her belief at this stage has strong echoes of Stacey's as an adult. And in Morag's young adulthood the death of so many Manawaka boys overseas adds to her conviction. "What does God care? ... God couldn't have cared less, whoever died <u>there</u>." (109) God, so far as she can see, is

in uncaring, impersonal, ruthless control. Jesus and other losers like Piquette Tonnerre and her children are his victims.

By the time Morag goes away to university and rents a room which boasts a picture of the Bleeding Heart of Jesus she cannot endure the expression of "a dog who knows it is about to be shot" so she removes the picture. (175) Morag rejects the role of the poor victim of fate; Morag is "on her way to Everywhere." (173) Symbolically, her landlady asks "Why did you take Our Lord down, Morag?" (175) And that, of course, is precisely what Morag has decided to do. She does not disbelieve; she just decides to forget, to ignore the god-problem and get on with her plans, to leave the dark Manawaka God in Manawaka where she has tried to leave everything else. It is not inconsistent with that attempt that she now decides to avoid "the walking wounded ... like the plague" (177); nor is it accidental that she also elevates a man to God's old seat of power, a man she believes to be "a prince among men," Dr. Brooke Skelton. (189)

Morag is, after all, a believer. Christie has seen to that with his provision of myths for her spirit, and his preaching of the Word over the Nuisance Grounds. But it will be a long time before her belief will come again to rest on a satisfying and worthy god. It is a long time in the novel before Morag even speaks of God. Meanwhile, Morag, intending to move directly into the promised land, goes into the wilderness to wrestle, often unconsciously, with the angel that is hers. It is entirely consistent with the religious sensibility of Margaret Laurence

that she would have the "Halls of Sion," the academic life, be part of that wilderness.

There comes a crisis point in Morag's life when she has left Brooke behind as a 'skeleton' who played god but could not enflesh the god she needed. She reconnects with her past and a lost side of herself by mating with Jules Tonnerre. In Vancouver, Morag, alone for the first time, is pregnant, broke and scared. Fittingly, she turns to acknowledge her old enemy but takes her adult stand in this confrontation. "Go ahead, God, let it rain. Let it rain forever. I won't be drowned." (296) Her fear of the Jester God is not dissolved, of course, in one confrontation. After her child is born and she leaves her untended to indulge her sexual appetite, the old panic seizes her as she checks on the baby. Then Morag comes to a new level of consciousness. "I know it doesn't work that way, God. I know it but I don't believe it. My head knows perfectly well that retribution is unreal. But my blood somehow retains it from ancient times." (328)

When, late in the novel, Morag speaks again of God, she does so from a religious stance. She has travelled a long way to a sense of the symbolic connectedness of all things and to the reality of her connectedness with her own past. She accepts mystery as a part of the divine order of things; she even allows for grace.

'Save me O God for the waters are come in unto my

soul.' Psalm 69

> It is, however, not God who finally provides a solution of sorts, but the Goldenrod Realty Co. Or perhaps fate really does travel in strange disguises ... this ad strikes Morag like the spirit of God between the eyes. (413)

Morag, who has so wanted to control life, to spare her daughter some of the pain of living, at last can accept that certain things are not possible for her to know. She lives with a new freedom for what she calls "the necessary doing of the thing," (452) expecting neither miraculous intervention nor cruel judgement from her god. What happens, she decides, is in the order of things; gifts are given and then withdrawn to be given to others and beyond that we cannot know. "Go with God," (450) she says to Pique. It is a sort of faith statement of the necessary journey.

Clara Thomas speaks of the sense of some "Miltonic Eternal Providence" in The Diviners. I think that is a valid perception. She goes on, however, to argue that Laurence perceives "all men and women, not as pawns in a cosmic battle of Good and Evil, of Darkness and Light, but more puzzling than that, as damaging and destroying one another in the grip of some Primal Darkness." The miracle, according to Thomas, is "that they are also often tragically, sometimes joyously, but always stubbornly, stumbling onward towards the Light." (New: 170) Margaret Laurence's religious sensibility is not so dichotomous as is Thomas' descrip-

tion of it. What Rachel learns, for example, is that Darkness and Light go inextricably together and may, in fact, not be distinguishable from one another. "I may sing aloud, even in the dark. I will ask myself if I am going mad, but if I do, I won't know it." (Laurence, 1966: 246)

Morag finally understands that the hurts that she and circumstances have inflicted on Pique are real. Out of them Pique has an angel to wrestle, her own journey to take. In the darkness is the light. Christie once mourned the absence of forgiveness in "this bloody world," (Laurence, 1974: 163), but he was wrong. On his deathbed he is brought to that 'place of the blessing' as Morag calls him her father. Clara Thomas rightly apprehends Laurence's sense both of "large events moving strangely beyond man's comprehending and of man moving, somehow, onward through them despite his small understanding of their purpose or meaning" (1975: 21) and of the "mysterious, but inexhaustible presence of God's grace." This apprehension alone contradicts what Thomas says elsewhere (New: 170) about 'Primal Darkness' vis a vis the Light. The Light is not vis a vis but <u>in</u> the Darkness.

Laurence's heroines have all been raised on the belief in the same paradoxical blend of the Old with the New Testament God. They all in some way find it untenable and alienating. The acceptance that comes through the "knowing" of the paradox, Laurence's stories imply, is different from belief. And the knowing comes only through concrete and painful experience.

Central to the religious sensibility of Margaret Laurence is the knowledge that belief must be grounded in flesh. "Is it necessary to feel pain in our own flesh before we really know? More and more I think that it probably is ..." (Laurence, 1976: 203) That kind of knowing changes the relationship of Margaret Laurence's women to their God. And it changes them. It changes the way they see and the way they walk.

THE CIVIL WAR

I am torn in two
but I will conquer myself.
I will dig up the pride.
I will take scissors
and cut out the beggar.
I will take a crowbar
and pry out the broken
pieces of God in me.
Just like a jigsaw puzzle,
I will put Him together again
with the patience of a chess player.

How many pieces?

It feels like thousands,
God dressed up like a whore
in a slime of green algae.
God dressed up like an old man
staggering out of His shoes.
God dressed up like a child,
all naked,
even without skin,
soft as an avocado when you peel it.
And others, others, others.

But I will conquer them all
and build a whole nation of God
in me -- but united,
build a new soul,
dress it with skin
and then put on my shirt
and sing an anthem,
a song of myself.

Anne Sexton

Chapter 2

Peonies and Cowslips

In summer the cemetery was rich and thick as syrup with the funeral-parlor perfume of the planted peonies, dark crimson and wallpaper pink, the pompous blossoms hanging leadenly, too heavy for their light stems, bowed down with the weight of themselves and the weight of the rain, infested with upstart ants that sauntered through the plush petals as though to the manner born.

... But sometimes through the ~~hot~~ rush of disrespectful wind that shook the scrub oak and the coarse couchgrass encroaching upon the dutifully cared-for habitations of the dead, the scent of the cowslips would rise momentarily. ... for a second or two a person walking there could catch the faint, musky, dust-tinged smell of things that grew untended and had grown always, before the portly peonies and the angels with rigid wings, when the prairie bluffs were walked through only by Cree with enigmatic faces and greasy hair. (Laurence, 1964: 2-3)

Hagar's graphic description is symbolic of an issue close

to the heart of the religious perception of Margaret Laurence, the issue of divided sensibilities, or dichotomized existence. The false pride so central to the Manawaka mentality, which creates rigid division between the elect and the pagan, the spiritual and the sexual, the respectable and the shameful, is a focus of Laurence's Canadian work. It is as close as she comes to an image of sin, though she does not use that word. What she does instead, as storyteller rather than theologian, is to present this split as a deep wound in the psyches of her heroines, a wound that both creates intolerable pain and leads to its own healing as it issues in a fascination and encounter with the 'other.'

Of the five main women in the Manawaka canon, Hagar is most rigid and paralyzed by the inner polarizations of her heritage. But we see Vanessa as a child two generations later, expressing something of the same attitude.

> The Tonnerres were French halfbreeds.... They were, as my Grandmother MacLeod would have put it, neither flesh, fowl, nor good salt herring. (Laurence, 1970: 96)

Some people belong, and some do not. Some attitudes are good; others are bad. Some parts of ourselves, like courage, are worthy; other parts, like our feelings, are to be suppressed. "Grandmother MacLeod did not flinch, or tremble, or indicate

that she felt anything at all." (46) Religious observance is to be "decent and moderate"; at the Tabernacle of the Risen and Reborn, people just made "a public spectacle of themselves." (83) Ecstacy has no place in celebrations of the spirit among the Elect.

In Vanessa's family, her parents' generation is predictably less rigid about these divisions than her grandparents'. Vanessa's father takes the ill Piquette Tonnerre to the family cottage on vacation; Aunt Edna dares to enjoy both raucous music and cigarettes. But even Vanessa's mother and Edna are shocked by their brother Terence's clear view of their parents' marriage. "I think he honestly believed that about her being some kind of angel ... Can you feature going to bed with an angel, honey? It doesn't bear thinking about." (Laurence, 1964: 72)

Hagar is of the same generation of 'angels' as Vanessa's Grandmother Connor. Very early, when her father beats her for speaking of the bugs in his store's raisins, she learns not to "speak the heart's truth," and to stifle both her laughter and her tears. (8) By the time she is ninety and has fallen on the floor, she no longer knows the sound of her own voice or the taste of her own tears.

> Can this torn voice be mine? A series of yelps, like an injured dog.
>
> 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. (26-27)

The child Hagar is groomed for the one-sided life of a lady, schooled in the sort of prudery that she and her friends exhibit at the dump. "We tiptoed, fastidiously holding the edges of our garments, like dainty-nosed Czarinas finding themselves in sudden astonishing proximity to beggars with weeping sores." (22) And it is evident even in childhood that the wilder or more life-loving parts of her personality are feeling cheated as she imagines Highlanders to be so fortunate in their eternal dance.

Hagar longs for a passionate life. In her later memories she imagines that once she had that life. But, in fact, Hagar cannot handle real passion. Even her anger is rigid. When she makes her break with her father, she goes completely in the other direction to Bram and then rejects him, betraying the deep split in herself. She behaves like a rigid pendulum, swinging always a reactionary distance from whatever she touches. At ninety, she realizes what the problem has been.

> I knew my mind, no doubt, but the mind changed every minute, one instant feeling pleased with what I knew and who I was and where I lived, the next instant consigning the brick house to perdition and seeing the plain board town and the shack dwellings beyond our pale as though they'd been the beckoning illustrations

> in the book of Slavic fairy tales given me by an aunt ... (39)

She is attracted to passion in her imagination and rejects it in her daily reality.

> When Marvin came to say goodbye, it only struck me then how young he was ... I didn't know what to say to him. I wanted to beg him to look after himself ... I wanted all at once to hold him tightly, plead with him, versus all reason and reality, not to go. But I did not want to embarrass both of us, nor have him think I'd taken leave of my senses. (114)

There is the dichotomy. Sensible, sane mothers do not plead or cling passionately.

Perhaps the most tragic example of Hagar's inner division and its effects is in her relationship with Bram, of whom she says tellingly, "He was a big-built man and he carried himself so well. I could have been proud, going to town or church with him, if only he'd never open his mouth." (60)

Bram is aware of the problem, of course, but feels powerless to do anything but go his own way. He perceives Hagar's revulsion for the earthy and physical and her admiration for what he calls "bloody paper horses." (73)

Ironically, it is not that Hagar cannot relate to Bram but that she is embarrassed to discover a part of herself that does.

In fact she does feel sexually aroused once she recovers from her initial shock, but her pride refuses to allow her any vulnerability and she hides her trembling like a shameful treasure. Of course, nothing in her Presbyterian upbringing prepared her to relate sexuality to love. Eventually, she realizes the tragedy. She had imagined love as being delicate in its touch, its odours, its results. Love, she had hoped, was a mystical experience of protection and inspiration.

> His banner over me was love.
>
> ...
>
> His banner over me was only his own skin, and now I no longer know why it should have shamed me. People thought of things differently in those days. Perhaps some people didn't. I wouldn't know. I never spoke of it to anyone. (70)

It is out of Hagar's inability to heal the split and accept that 'other' in herself that she rejects one of her own sons and helps to kill the other. Marvin, whom she decides very early is more Bram's than hers, gets none of her mothering and finally has to wrestle her for a blessing on her deathbed. Hagar knows she rejects Marvin because of his resemblance to Bram. In later years, she asks,

> 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? (88)

Even as an adult who cares for Hagar in her old age, Marvin represents the unacceptable, the not-proud. "High day or holiday or Judgement Day--no difference to Marvin. He would have put his elbows on the table if he'd been an apostle at the Last Supper." (29) Such behaviour remains unbearable to Hagar who once refused to take eggs on the train because of what others would think.

But this son is all she's got; John is dead, largely because of her own inability to accept what she calls "his manhood." In despair over John's openly expressed sexuality with Arlene and his apparent identification with Bram, Hagar seizes control of the situation. John must do better than this. Ironically, her accomplice is Lottie, Arlene's mother, whose own mother was one of that famed pair of Manawaka lovers "irresponsible as goats or gods, who'd lain in a ditch or barn" (23) and at least the intended mistress of Hagar's father. Together Lottie and Hagar arrange to send Arlene away to prevent an early marriage. John's response is to get drunk, and he and Arlene are both killed that night by a train. Of that night Hagar says, "The night my son died, I was transformed to stone and never wept at all." (216) The division of Hagar from her feeling life is complete.

On that earlier night when Hagar, trapped by her own pride under an afghan, had been forced to listen to John and Arlene's

lovemaking in the next room, she confessed:

> It seemed incredible that such a spate of unapologetic life should flourish in this mean and crabbed world. His final cry was inarticulate, the voice of the whirlwind.
>
> ...
>
> Dazed, I was carried away strangely, but only for an instant. (185)

John has always been incredible to her. He knows what it takes Hagar another half century to discover; he says of his dead father, at his grave, "They're only different sides of the same coin, anyway, he and the Curries. They might as well be together there." (163)

Hagar is not "carried away" again into such knowing until she is ninety years of age. By then, she is a rigid stone angel of a woman who trails in her wake a history of alienated relationships, from her father and brothers, through her husband and sons, into the present with Marvin and Doris. Further, she is by now clearly divided from herself. She is decidedly not, her own woman. She is alienated from her deepest self. "How is it my mouth speaks by itself, the words flowing from somewhere, some half-hidden hurt?" (59) Finally, it is revealed to Hagar that the pride she has guarded so rigidly has been her wilderness, that the dichotomies she has lived by have consistently destroyed her ability to love, that all her passion and rejoic-

ing have drained through the resulting chasm and left her alone, alienated, and brittle.

In the end, the descent into her own flesh forced on her by her dying, and the intervention of grace through certain unlikely prophets of the "other," accomplish in Hagar a measure of redemptive healing of some of her inner split. When Hagar's eyes are opened to a more whole vision, she is finally moved to connect rather than detach. A nurse tells her not to speak of death and Hagar thinks,

> But I want to take hold of her arm, force her attention, 'Listen. You must listen. It's important. It's--quite an event.' (252)

As Thomas puts it, "the buoyancy and the gratification come not from any victory of one side over the other, but from the realization that when old chains and old arrogancies have been broken, the spirit takes wings." (New: 3)

What breaks the "old chains and old arrogancies" is precisely the coming together of the two sides, the mating of the 'people' and the 'un-tribe,' the reunion of the peonies with the cowslips in the inner life. And Laurence always accomplishes that in and through the concrete outer experience of her heroines.

When we first encounter Rachel Cameron, she walks literally and figuratively only on the "good part of town."

> Not like the other side of the tracks, where the

> shacks are and where the weeds are let grow knee-high and not dutifully mown ... I never go there and know it only from hearsay, distorted local legend. (Laurence, 1966: 13)

On Rachel's side of town all is proper, seemly, and upright. But even she sees that with an ironic eye. Rachel, a generation removed from Hagar, is aware, sometimes painfully, of her own divided sensibilities and those of her culture.

> It is only now ... 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.
>
> I didn't. I won't. I didn't feel that way. I'm only imagining things again. (10)

The "other," for Rachel, is lurking just under a sometimes transparent cover, and she lives in terror that it will emerge. She wants to but can no longer believe her mother's discounting of her nightmares by saying, "There's nothing there." (39) Her own imagination tells her that there is, even as her conscience defends against it. She feels for James "an exasperated tenderness" and admonishes herself that she "ought not to feel that way." (4) She tells herself to be sensible and go to sleep, then indulges in wonderfully exotic masturbatory fantasies; and she immediately pleads, "I didn't. I didn't. It was only to be

able to sleep. The shadow prince. Am I unbalanced? Or only laughable." (22)

Rachel's suffering of the chasm is in a sense more acute than Hagar's because more conscious. For Hagar, the rejected "other" is more repressed; it causes her to act, but she is not aware of how or when until at ninety she sifts memories. Rachel, on the other hand, walks barefoot on a spiked fence, inwardly screaming her pain, but terrified of falling off and yet unable to regain the security of her mother's enclosure. Further, she sees the undesirability of enclosure.

> Her life is very restricted now. It always was, though. It's never been any different. Just this house and her dwindling circle of friends ... She and Dad had given up conversing long ago, by the time I was born. (19)

Rachel also sees the restriction of her own development symbolized by her bedroom furniture.

> This bedroom is the same I've always had. I should change the furniture. How girlish it is, how old-fashioned. ... She'd say it was a waste, to throw out perfectly good furniture. (19)

Rachel is imprisoned by what "she'd say" and imagines that "she" is only her mother. Gradually though, she begins to understand how internalized that attitude and the inner polariza-

tion it enforces have become. "Nestor Kazlik's son. The milkman's son. It can't be myself thinking like that--I don't believe that way at all. It's as though I've thought in mother's voice." (79)

But if Rachel rejects her mother's voice, she also fears the voice of the "other," that unknown and rejected dimension her mother has stood against. That fear is brought into sharp focus by the person and religion of Calla Mackie, of whom Rachel says, "nothing less lilylike could be imagined." (11) In the first place, Calla is a threat to Rachel because she is "brash" (11) and has the appearance of a "wind-dishevelled owl." (32) She is an affront to Rachel's sense of decency and order and verges on that willingness to be thought laughable which is so alien to Rachel. In short, she is an embarrassment to Rachel who then feels ashamed of being embarrassed.

What is worse, Calla worships at the Tabernacle where, to Rachel's mortification, "they sing hymns like jazz, and people rise to testify" and "make fools of themselves ... publicly." (11) And as if that were not enough, Calla informs Rachel that the latest phenomenon at the Tabernacle is the gift of tongues. For Rachel, it is inconceivable that people would speak aloud unconsciously. In Rachel's life, the strange, unknown, uncontrollable, are not given voice; not, that is, until she goes dutifully to the Tabernacle with Calla and finds herself lost in ecstatic utterance. It is impossible to know how Laurence intends this incident. People who argue over whether Rachel

"really" speaks in tongues are missing the point. Something foreign to Rachel, something out of her Presbyterian control that horrifies and breaks her, escapes out of her as she strives to "make [her]self narrower" in the pew (39) than the "thin streak of a person" (38) she already was. The cloaked skeletons of her childhood dreams refuse imprisonment any longer and break down the doors of conscious suppression. The God of confusion speaks, and the voice is "the voice of Rachel." (45)

Immediately afterwards, in Calla's apartment where Rachel is taken to recover, Calla makes her loving homosexual advance. Rachel feels enraged, justified and relieved in swift succession and "can begin running." (47) But not for long. Once touched and acknowledged, Laurence's story suggests, the "other" belongs. When Rachel agrees with her mother that Tom Gillanders' singing in church is disgraceful, she remembers her own "foolish" experience at the tabernacle and says, "And yet, with some part of myself, I am inexplicably angry at this agreement." (54) Some part of herself will not be denied so easily. Some part of herself begins to see the joke in her mother's whole notion of disgrace. When Mrs. Cameron is demoralized on behalf of Mrs. Stewart whose daughter has had, not just one child, but twins out of wedlock, Rachel tells the reader: "I have to resist some powerful undercurrent of laughter. Twins. Twice as reprehensible as one." (72) Rachel hears the irony. But she also hears her mother's grateful point that her worry over any indiscretion on Rachel's part is over.

It is true to Laurence's religious sensibility that life next confronts Rachel with an opportunity to heal further her inner dichotomies. It is in this sense that Laurence apprehends the undercurrent of grace in the darkness of existence. The agent who follows quickly on the Tabernacle incident is Nick Kazlik, old school acquaintance and potential lover. The "other" for Rachel is her unacknowledged and embarrassed sexuality. Here, too, she is only one generation removed from Hagar. Rachel, unlike Hagar, consciously desires physical love, but what she discovers again is an inability at abandon, a fixation on what is "right" and acceptable, and a fear of being a fool.

George Bowering attributes the eventual change in Rachel's consciousness to "her getting in touch with her body." (New: 169)

> It is only after she allows herself to be touched, and after she then inaugurates the touching, that she takes some open-eyed control of her own life, and even over that of her mother. (164)

Bowering misses the full implication of the incident. Laurence never separates a change in consciousness from concrete experience and often uses explicitly sexual experience as a kind of crucible for such change. The mind-body split is certainly one of Rachel's wounds, and the body is "other" for her. Further, Nick is from the "other" side of town "Half the town is Scots descent, and the other half is Ukrainian. Oil, as they say, and water ..." (Laurence, 1966: 81) But more foreign still

to Rachel is the spirit of surrender, willingness to risk, faith in the dead God, openness to the ultimate Other. And it is through the sexual relationship with Nick that she gradually moves with courage to that openness.

She begins in the position of detachment and denial expressed by her statement: "It's only my muscles, my skin, my nerves severed from myself, nothing to do with what I want to do." (113) As she struggles with her frigidity, she develops her own new relationship to "truth." Allowing Nick to believe that she has experienced orgasm, she says: "This is not true, but it is true in every way that is important to me now." (128) She wonders, "Does one have to choose between two realities?" (164) The rigid walls that Rachel has kept erect between truth and falsehood, right and wrong, peonies and cowslips, are crumbling. The inner splits are mending. She finally arrives at that sexual experience with Nick which she describes as "the unmattering of who either of us is." (187)

But it is not sexual experience alone that gets her there. The Tabernacle incident with Calla and the visit with Hector Jonas in her father's old funeral parlour play equally notable roles which are explored more fully elsewhere. It is these two people really who help Rachel to bring "saints and angels" down to earth and let rise the "Hallelujahs" within. The healing of yet another split, perhaps the most basic one.

And finally out of her new levels of courage and wholeness, Rachel elects to risk everything to have a child. She does not

have the child, but she does become spiritually "the mother." She is no longer grown woman and child, but Rachel the mother, with her life in her own hands. And her view of that life is no longer carved in stone or etched, black on white. She says in a final litany of celebration:

> Where I am going, anything may happen. Nothing may happen ...
>
> I will be different, I will remain the same. (245)

She is willing now to entertain more than one reality.

The struggle to redeem inner alienation is in some ways easier for Rachel than it is for her sister Stacey. Rachel is surrounded by the small town society that created the rift; the rift is more obvious because clearly embodied in the culture around her. Stacey's own inner splits tend to be obscured by the completely splintered nature of the larger urban and world culture to which her consciousness reacts. Stacey's spiritual dilemma is more complex, harder to grasp, and less dramatic in its process because of her milieu. But it is no less crucial or profound for all that.

The same Manawaka attitude that taught Stacey that the Métis Tonnerre family was, in Laurence's terms, "sub-human and that evil was external," now causes her to fear a grotesque and dramatic end to the world while ignoring the destruction in her own attitudes. The evil, she believes, is expressed "out there" in the news flashes of foreign wars, in Buckle Fennick's super-

stition, in her own aging and uncooperative flesh, in Thor Thorlakson's commercial methods. She also believes that the "good" exists out there, in Tess Folger's appearance, in Stacey's own youth, somewhere "in unknown houses [where there are] people who live without lies, and who touch each other" (Laurence, 1969: 90), or as far as one can go north. Even in her sardonic self-analysis, Stacey splits reality away from herself, projects behind and ahead. "I am either suffering from delayed adolescence or premature menopausal symptoms, most likely both." (87)

What Stacey is suffering from is separation from present, real existence which is also the source of comfort and healing; but it takes a transformation in her vision to understand that, even though at some level she senses the real problem in her conversation with Mac:

> I feel very strange sometimes.
>
> What do you mean strange?
>
> Like as though everything is receding.
>
> Receding?
>
> As though I'm out of touch with everything. Everybody, I mean. And vice versa. If you see what I mean.
>
> Maybe you need to see a doctor. Do you feel sick?
>
> At heart. (79)

To be sick at heart is to feel divided, split off from what is. Stacey feels alienated from present world reality and knows

it. "I am a stranger in the now world." (301) This is not a division that gets healed in The Fire-Dwellers. Stacey remains alienated from modern culture. But she is also alienated from herself and her personal life. "What's left of me? Where have I gone? ... How to stop telling lies? How to get out? This is madness. I'm not trapped. I've got everything I always wanted." (73) At least a part of what Stacey needs to accept is that having what she always wanted is not necessarily desirable. There were conditions attached, added implications to the bargain, that her narrow wishful vision failed to foresee. Morag comes to the same realization as her marriage fails. "She had got what she wanted. Not, however, what she'd bargained for." (Laurence, 1974: 265)

It is not, however, just her outer reality from which Stacey feels divided. She senses too that some inner reality is being denied. "These lies will be the death of me sooner than later, if they haven't already been. What goes on inside isn't ever the same as what goes on outside. It's a disease I've picked up somewhere." (Laurence, 1969: 33) It is a Scots Presbyterian Manawakan disease, though not exclusively. It is a disease of divided sensibilities, taboos against inner reality, the same disease that caused Vanessa's Grandmother MacLeod not to flinch or tremble with even her deepest pain or Hagar not to reach out passionately with her greatest love. And it is the disease Stacey recognizes and rebels against as she argues: "Why should I think it unbalanced to want to mourn? Why shouldn't I

wail like the widows of Ashur if I feel like it? I have cause." (37)

The loss of connection with and hunger for the denied and alienated is manifested in Stacey's on-going diatribe at God, but also in her frequent fantasies, which are rich with erotic and mystical imagery. One such fantasy occurs in the supermarket.

> The long aisles of the temple. Side chapels with the silver-flash of chrome where the dead fish lie among the icy strawberries. The mounds of offerings, yellow planets of grapefruit, jungles of lettuce, tentacles of green onions, Arctic effluvia flavored raspberry and orange, a thousand bear-faced mouse-legended space-crafted plastic-gifted strangely transformed sproutings of oat and wheat fields. Music hymning from invisible choirs. (74)

And the hunger shows its degree also in Stacey's rampant memory of her sensual youth, especially as she attempts to return to that youth in a dance.

> Slowly, she begins to dance. Then faster and faster.
>
> Stacey Cameron in her yellow dress with pleats all around the full skirt. Knowing by instinct how to move, loving the boy's closeness, whoever he was. Stacey twirling out onto the floor, flung by the hand that would catch her when she came

> jazzily flying back. Tommy Dorsey Boogie. Stacey spinning like light, whirling laughter across a polished floor. Every muscle knowing what to do by itself. Every bone knowing. Dance hope, girl, dance hurt. Dance the fucking you've never yet done.

"Dancing hope and dancing hurt," bizarre though this scene will seem to some, is what puts Stacey's healing ahead of Hagar's at a younger age. What she eventually learns is how to "dance what happens to come along" and to dance in her head, to internalize the celebrative relationship to the Other without being "stoned." (135)

Life confronts Stacey with evil close up where she can touch it, see its reflection in her, and turn it over to see its other side. At the same time it provides her with a healing sexual relationship with Luke which serves as a blessing that leads her to a friendlier acceptance of her aging flesh, and as a touchstone which grounds her fantasies of youth and escape.

The evil that Stacey has feared in apocalyptic imagery of fire and judgement, reveals itself instead in that model of perfection, her neighbour, Tess. Tess turns out to be sadistic with Jen and the goldfish, and then suicidal. Stacey confronts her illusions about the locus of both perfection and danger to her children. She even sees her own danger to them. Her dichotomous view of reality, and especially of good and evil, is

challenged. As Murray Lees in The Stone Angel said of his wife, "She thought it would come from so far away. The Almighty voice and the rain of locusts and blood. The moon turned dark and the stars gone wild. And all the time it was close by." (Laurence, 1964: 208)

Perhaps she imagines that view to be restored again when Buckle Fennick, whom she has long resented and been attracted to, turns out to be not only suicidal but perverted sexually and willing to use her to hurt Mac. Here, Stacey decides, is a clear cut case of evil. But after Buckle's death when she goes to check on his blind and grotesque mother, she recognizes her own "phony politeness" and reflects:

> She may not have been much, but she didn't abort him all that time ago, ... She had him and brought him up. She did that. ... he never turned her out, whatever else he may have said or done. (Laurence, 1969: 262)

And Stacey, as Laurence would say, is "released into her mourning," her "requiem for a truck driver." (262)

Immediately she encounters one of the rejected others from her Manawaka past, Valentine Tonnerre. Stacey recalls that the Tonnerres had lived "in ramshackledom, belonging nowhere." (264) 'Tonnerre,' she now knows, means "thunder," and as the conversation ensues, it is indeed Val who brings the thunderous news that Thor, god of thunder, Thorlakson, whom Stacey has seen as

the epitome of power and evil in her life, is really the face-lifted, pathetic and beaten Vernon Winkler of her childhood. Here is Laurence at her ironic and symbolic best. Reunion with the other, rejected side brings healing and perspective and turns one around. Stacey has imagined that even Val's presence is a reproach to her for "the sins of her fathers" and some sort of omen of the judging fire to come on her family, as it came to Piquette Tonnerre and her children in their shack. Instead, Val teaches her of her own ignorance, pride, and fear of the wrong things. Stacey sees now that both she and Mac have been "scared by a strawman." (266) And so Stacey comes out of hiding as her vision improves; symbolically, she takes her drink out from its "cave concealment in the blue Mixmaster bowl" (281) and asks Matthew to move in so that she can replace his glaucomic eyes.

Perhaps the most ironic touch that helps to heal Stacey's inner conflict is that it is not finally fire, but water that threatens her child. And with the near-drowning of Duncan, she sees her own dispensability, for it is Ian who seeks the necessary help to save Duncan's life. Further, she sees that Mac does love Duncan and Ian, but speaks a different language than she does. There is not just one way of loving any more than there is one way of hating. One is not good and the other evil; one is not oil and the other water. She is not going to get neat conclusions or firm answers. And so she decides to live now in the midst of "the trivialities" (307), choosing them, in fact,

as her focus. Even the trivialities, she sees, have at least two sides.

> Like today when I took the prescription into the drugstore to get more of the wonder pills. I hate getting them. I always think the pharmacist is looking at me and thinking 'Who in hell would want to make love with that old cow?' On the other hand, they're a kind of proof that somebody still does. (308)

What Stacey has achieved at one level is the sort of "practicality of spirit and flesh" (Laurence, 1974: 329) which Morag eventually names, and which is a theme running throughout the Manawaka stories. The Diviners, however, explores the problem of divided sensibilities more explicitly and, with its epic sweep, more fully than any of the others.

Morag, for all Christie's teaching about the "muck" in every man's soul, is as influenced by Manawakan dichotomies as is anyone. Her childhood fantasy playmates express one of the splits perfectly.

> Peony, not unnaturally, had curly blonde hair, the opposite of mine, and sweet little rosebud lips like those on the unreachable dolls in Eaton's catalogue. Rosa Picardy, my alter ego, I suppose, was somewhat sturdier. She did brave deeds, slew dragons, and/or polar bears and was Cowboy Joke's mate.... (13)

Morag, born into the upright Scots Presbyterian side of Manawaka, is orphaned early and raised by the town garbage collector on Hill Street which is "dedicated to flops, washouts, and general no-goods ..." (28) It does not take her long to both resent and become sarcastic about the obvious divisions in the culture.

> In Christ there is no East or West,
> In Him no North or South--
> Oh yeh? Like fun there isn't. (109)

Morag experiences the East and West "in the flesh" often as a child.

> At the other side of the store are Mrs. McVitie and Mrs. Cameron.... Now they are looking at her. Maybe they don't know she can hear what they're saying? ...
>
> "Poor child, don't they ever have her hair cut?" Mrs. McVitie.
>
> "And those gangling dresses, always away below the knee." Mrs. Cameron.
>
> Morag takes the bag, pays, and turns. Her hair feels dirty. But it isn't dirty--Prin washed it only a day ago. The two ladies are wearing flowery chiffon dresses. Hats, with real artificial flowers. (43)

The pain and shame out of that experience burns its message

into Morag's consciousness. Further, even as a child, she sees who her fellow victims are.

> The Tonnerres ... are called 'those breeds'. ... They are mysterious. People in Manawaka talk about them but don't talk 'to' them. ... They are dirty and unmentionable. (69)

It is not long before her innate sympathy for and fascination with the Métis begins. But it takes years of labour and pain before the inner wounds inflicted by those rejections begin to heal.

Christie may say, "Let them look down on the likes of Christie Logan. Let them. I say unto you, Morag, girl, I open my shirt to the cold winds of their voices and to the ice of their everlasting eyes." (47) But his words seem for a long time only pathetic defenses to Morag. The winds of their voices and the ice of their eyes have a certain freezing effect on her, and she sets her sights on escape. She will become Peony; she will shed the skin of her Manawaka existence by willing herself to leave even those parts, like Christie and Jules, who have loved her.

She will go to college and never come back. Jules tells her she wants it "so bad [he] can just about smell it on [her]. (165) Lachlan MacLachlan, editor of the Manawaka Banner, warns Morag about her own disdain for people, but she cannot yet look at that. Schooled to the heart in division and polarization, Morag decides to divide one part of her life from the other.

Laurence's story suggests that whatever has wounded us becomes our wounding tool, our way of coping. For the time being she answers her childhood question, "Can they be beautiful and filthy?" (40) with a resounding "No." Morag will choose the beautiful by divorcing herself from the filth. She chooses to ignore her fascination with and sexual feeling for Jules because, as a Tonnerre, he represents that part of Manawaka which is most "other" for Peony. The whole of her Manawaka history now becomes rejected "other" for Morag. That with which she seeks to associate lives out there, over the rainbow, in the metropolis of Winnipeg.

Rather quickly, Morag discovers that Winnipeg is "not far enough away"; Winnipeg too has its "walking wounded" which she "avoids like the plague" (177) and a boarding house which is disturbingly similar to the one she has left behind.

Soon, however, her decision to dare "the world of the elect" (178) brings her into relationship with two people. First, she meets Ella Gerson who, together with her mother, provides a touchstone of wholeness. Mrs. Gerson knows how to hold seemingly disparate things, like God and Marx, together. It is in her that Morag senses what Margaret Laurence calls true survival, the combination of strength with "the ability to reach out her arms and hold people both literally and figuratively." (186) Morag reflects, prophetically, that because she herself has the former ability, she will also need the latter. And, again, one of Laurence's characters knows the direction of her

own redemptive journey. In the Gerson's house, Morag is touched by a warmth which opens her wounds; on the only mother-shoulder she has ever found she weeps the anguish of her splitness.

Life for Morag is also fraught with a growing sexual tension which for her is confused with a need to be validated by male interest. Morag has none of Hagar's sexual prudery, but all of her spiritual snobbishness. Jules was interested in her, and she in him, but Jules was an unmentionable.

Now life, according to Laurence's pen, presents her with what she wants. She falls in love with a "prince among men" and he with her. Brooke Skelton, professor of English, possesser of an interesting past, a keen intellect, and sexual prowess too, utterly captivates Morag. She decides to become whoever and whatever will be pleasing to him. Morag erases her history, she believes, and becomes a clean slate, Brooke's child. Morag marries Brooke with only faint premonitions about his refusal to discuss a family and his need to see her as an innocent. But even as she enthuses about the move with him to Toronto, her voice begins to croak and she thinks:

> Frog in the throat? What a gruesome expression. Who could ever have thought that one up? Ugh. Those clammy clambering teeny saurian legs in your gullet, for God's sake? Worse, more hideous than crab-claws but why think of that now for heaven's sake, crabs another word for VD or is it lice? She doesn't know

> enough. Why think of any of that with the cleanest best man ever to walk God's earth? But why did he say Women always wonder if there will be enough room in themselves, etcetera, and then said Not much experience with virgins. Well, no one would expect or want him to be a virgin at thirty-four and what a disaster it would've been if he had been. Crab is also Cancer the zodiac sign, Morag's sign, and they always say lucky in career but not so hot luck in love, although oriented towards children and family. ... Words words words. Words haunt her, but she will become unhaunted now, forevermore. (201-2)

The voice that Laurence calls "innertalk" is never permanently silenced. The rejected wisdom in the psyche, that which makes connections and heals our enforced dichotomies, that which might be called a religious function, is not dead even when deliberately buried.

For Morag, the effect of that inner voice issues in her need to write and refuses, finally, to allow her denial. She has already recognized her tendency to make confining boxes for herself. As she writes, she begins to feel the confines of the Skelton box. At Prin's deathbed, she recognizes that she hates the disparity between the external shell she has polished to please Brooke and the real self within. She sees Christie as he sits in diminished silence. And then she wishes for the lost

wildness, which would not, she reflects, embarrass her now.

It is, of course, her own lost wildness for which she longs. As Morag listens to the funeral hymn, "Jerusalem the Golden," she perceives the illusion of the prince in the halls of Sion to which she has dedicated her life and, at the same moment, she experiences her own inner division.

> And now here, in this place, the woman who brought Morag up is lying dead, and Morag's mind, her attention, has left Prin. 'Help me, God; I'm frightened of myself.' (253)

The division of our sensibilities is a spiritual problem which, once recognized, brings us figuratively and appropriately, to our knees before the god.

The rest of The Diviners tells the story of healing. Significantly, Morag escapes from "the merely beautiful" by mating with Jules Tonnerre, one of the rejected sides of her past and herself. Jules calls it "doing magic." (273) Sexuality for Laurence, is often the crucible for spiritual transformation. Ulanov writes:

> The spirit is born out of the flesh and always remains incorporated in matter.
>
> The female by nature is unable to cast off materiality because its spiritual exercises are conjugated in the flesh, (184)

and,

> Sexuality in its symbolic meaning deals with one's awareness of and motion towards, union with an "other," be it a person, one's soul, another modality of consciousness, or another dimension of being. (292)

Certainly for Morag what Ulanov says is valid.

Morag goes on through other concrete experiences to discover what is for her a "practicality of spirit and flesh" (Laurence, 1974: 329) and a redemption of her history and her myths until she comes to a place of new vision in which she is no longer afraid of herself; she can now reply to Pique's anxious blessing, "You'll be okay?", with, "I <u>am</u> okay." And, adds Laurence, "in a profound sense, this was true." (450)

Laurence expresses a craving for incarnation at the heart of things, an urging towards 'reunion' of body and spirit, secular and sacred, peonies and cowslips. She does not, of course, make such a theological statement. But her stories depict people for whom suffering is defined by these inner alienations and healing is brought about by reunion with the "other" of the division.

It would be difficult to assess responsibility for the polarizations in the Manawaka culture. The Christian heritage of the body-mind split, intensified by the Calvinist doctrine of the Elect, shares responsiblitiy with the "garrison mentality" of the Canadian imagination described by Northrop Frye in his

conclusion to A Literary History of Canada. (1965: 289) Add to those influences the provincialism typical of small towns, the "sterility and life-denying quality of the prairie" discussed by Laurence Ricou (120), and the attitude of "tribalism" described by Margaret Laurence herself. Laurence, however, as storyteller, is concerned with, not so much the sources as the effects of, the inner dichotomies. Of those effects, she writes:

> 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 stullifying 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, whatever it is, the Hausea, the Ibo, the Scots Presbyterians ... the in-group--is 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. (New: 20)

Tribalism, of course, is an outer political form of an inner reality. Inner and outer divisions reflect one another, and Margaret Laurence's stories concern themselves with both the inner and outer dangers and shackles that result. But in her Manawaka work, Laurence focuses on the inner and spiritual as

the locus of wound and healing. She tells stories, not so much of the man-woman problem, but of the split within Hagar; she writes, not of social movements like the liberation of women or the battle for aboriginal rights, but of the inner liberation of Morag and of the particular Métis experience of the Tonnerres.

Ultimately, Laurence's vision is hopeful. Her answer to Morag's question "Can they be beautiful and filthy?" would seem to be "Yes, they can be; they <u>are</u>." But Laurence says it symbolically as she has Pique return to the same Manawaka cemetery in which Hagar described the war between peonies and cowslips, the elect and the losers.

> "I went up to the Manawaka cemetery, and looked up Christie and Prin Logan's graves. Zinnias had been planted, and somebody was there, weeding. It was this plain little middle-aged woman with kind of stringy hair, looking sort of exhausted, you know? But she sounded quite cheerful. I liked her. I told her who my mother and dad were, and she looked surprised, but all she said was <u>Well, now, think of that; I'm glad Morag did have a child after all</u>. She said you wouldn't recall her married name, but you would know her single name. It was--"
>
> "I know," Morag said. "Eva Winkler."
>
> "That's right. How did you know?"
>
> "It couldn't have been anyone else."
>
> (Laurence, 1974: 437-8)

Eva Winkler, one of the Manawaka losers, plants not pompous peonies, but hardy zinnias and is glad for the good fortune of Morag. Peonies bloom briefly with a heavy perfume and then die. Cowslips run wildly over everything civilized and threaten chaos. But zinnias bloom for months without taking over anything else. They know how to survive, as Laurence would say, with some kind of dignity.

When I was a child
there was an old woman in our neighborhood
whom we called The Witch.
All day she peered from her second story window
from behind the wrinkled curtains
and sometimes she would open the window
and yell: Get out of my life!
She had hair like kelp
and a voice like a boulder.

I think of her sometimes now
and wonder if I am becoming her.
My shoes turn up like a jester's.
Clumps of my hair, as I write this,
curl up individually like toes.
I am shoveling the children out,
scoop after scoop.
Only my books anoint me,
and a few friends,
those who reach into my veins.

from Anne Sexton

"The Witch's Life"

Chapter 3

The Inheritors

> Perhaps I had really imagined that he was immortal. Perhaps he was immortal, in ways which it would take me half a lifetime to comprehend.
>
> ...
>
> I had feared and fought the old man, yet he proclaimed himself in my veins. (Laurence, 1970: 177-8)

If Margaret Laurence had not written The Diviners, her readers might suppose that 'proclamation in the veins' to be only negative. Like the God-image and the divided sensibilities explored in the previous chapters, much of the inheritance referred to in her first four Manawaka works is negative in its influence. As Hagar says, "the plagues go on from generation to generation." (Laurence, 1964: 254)

Hagar resents the ancestral almost to the end. In so doing, of course, she is continually fighting her own inheritance. Of her father, she says,

> He put his faith in homilies. They were his Pater Noster, his Apostle's Creed. ...
> ... I tried to shut my ears to it, and thought I had, yet years later, when I was rearing my own two boys, I found myself saying the same words to them. (5)

Hagar's is not an unusual experience but she detests it. She does not want to be like the wilful Jason Currie but knows she is. She is like him in ways she later sees as hurtful and alienating. "Both of us were blunt as bludgeons. We hadn't a scrap of subtlety between us." (36) A frequent lament of the aged Hagar is over her inability to use any tact or even to hold her tongue. And the very pride that she later calls her "wilderness" is in direct descent from Jason Currie who refused to attend Hagar's wedding or even to visit after his grandson's birth. Worse, she even resembles him physically, with a hawkish nose and a "stare that could meet anyone's without blinking an eyelash." (5)

Hagar, though, would rather resemble her father than her mother, that "meek woman she had never seen." (21) So rigid is Hagar's denial of that ancestry that she refuses to pretend to be her mother even to ease her brother Dan's death.

> ... 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 ... I was ... unable to do it, unable to bend enough. (21)

Hagar thinks of her mother as a "graceful, unspirited" woman who tried to please others and "saved her death" for Hagar's birth. (5) It is not surprising then that Hagar detests that personality. It is as though she takes an inner vow against her own

weakness, a vow against trying to please. So fearful is she of exhibiting any frailty, and so angry at resembling her father, the hawk, that she gradually petrifies into a fighting old lady. Hagar fights her whole inheritance, the God of the fathers included. It is ironic and fitting that her father turns to her for the war cry, "Gainsay who Dare!" in his litany of their highland ancestry. And Hagar, in shouting it out, loves it.

Once Hagar has owned her fear and pain, the frailty she has long associated with her mother, she is finally able to embrace that backbone she inherited from Jason. After all, it was that backbone that took her to meet Lees and enabled her to commit one act of love in carrying the bedpan heroically to Sandra Wong, and it was that confession of frailty that enabled Marvin to ask for her second act of love, her lie to him, her blessing.

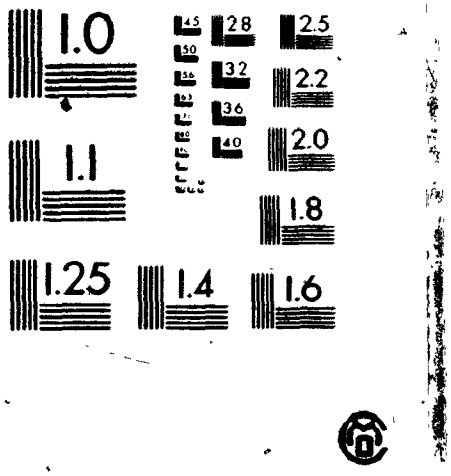
Hagar's story is about those inheritances which become inner chains unless they are embraced and redeemed. The proclamation in the veins is denied at one's peril; it must be wrestled for its blessing or it results in a paralysis of the soul. The wrestling, as with Jacob, is wounding, but the not-wrestling is enslaving.

It is interesting that Hagar's wrestling is largely what might be called "memory-work." Hagar "stumps around [her] room, remembering furiously." (3) It is one of those necessary ways of going home again referred to by Laurence. In Laurence's stories, the sifting of memories and the re-visioning that results is generally redemptive, a channel of grace.

That part of Hagar's inheritance which she does not really ever embrace is the land and the culture. She confesses that as a child she wished her father had never left the Highlands to come to the harsh prairie. As a dying woman, after a lifetime on the prairie, she still wishes for a different home. "If I could, I'd like a piper to play a pibroch over my grave. 'Flowers of the Forest'--is that a pibroch? How would I know? I've never even set foot in the Highlands. My heart's not there. And yet--I'd wish it, as I'm gathered to my fathers." (274) This problem of where one's ancestors really are, where one's heart must find its healing, is an on-going one in the Manawaka works; it is finally resolved by Morag in The Diviners. But Hagar begins the work towards that resolution.

Rachel is also weighted down at first by the negativity of her inheritance. The wrestling match with the ancestral is not an obvious theme in A Jest of God, unless one considers that the problem of Rachel's split sensibilities is, after all, one of her major inheritances. Further, her dependent relationship with her frail and domineering mother must be redeemed before Rachel is free to move on. As the story opens, it has her in a kind of spiritual paralysis. As she prepares for her mother's bridge party, she thinks,

> I could have gone to Willard's for dinner. I could have gone with Calla. I wish I had. Now that it comes to it, I do not know why I didn't, one or the other.



> It's her only outlet, her only entertainment. I can't begrudge her. Anyone decent would be only too glad. (Laurence, 1966: 18)

And even as she thinks critically of Calla, she reflects, "Oh God. I don't mean to be condescending. How can it happen, still, this echo of my mother's voice?" (5) It is not only her mother's voice but a timidity about her own welfare, a deceptiveness which Nick picks up in Rachel's voice, a strict sense of the proper, the right, a restrictiveness about her energy and person, a whole load of debilitating inheritance that needs redeeming in Rachel.

In psychological terms, Rachel is 'identified' with her mother. Her inheritance from her father is vague and mysterious, locked behind the undertaker's door through which she was never allowed to go for long.

> He always said, when I hovered, "This is no place for you." And I imagined then that it was the efficacy of the dead he feared for me, not knowing in what way they might grasp and hold me, and I wondered how he himself could stay among them, by what power, and I feared for him, too. (147)

Her father's unusual profession and its location is a part of her inheritance of feeling set apart, peculiar and needing to hide. As she explains:

> Around our place the spruce trees still stand, as I remember them forever. No other trees are so darkly sheltering, shutting out prying eyes or the sun in summer, the spearheads of them taller than houses, the low branches heavy, reaching down to the ground like the green-black feathered strong-boned wings of giant and extinct birds. (15)

This sense of the effect of space on spirit is strong in Laurence.

But just as strong is the isolation Rachel feels from her father. He would never go to church or agree to march in the Armistice Day parades with everyone else. And according to Rachel's mother he was never one to make any demands sexually. But except for these things he did not do, he is mystery to Rachel. His whole life was like his experience in 'The Great War': "he didn't speak of it." (129)

And so Rachel finally goes in search of him, down to that forbidden door behind which Hector Jonas now plies her father's former trade. She goes apologetically at first and then: "My voice ends, and I'm standing here, tall as a shadow, transparent, shivering. Then I don't care: Only one thing matters. 'Let me come in.'" (146) And with "some exercise of faith," (146) Hector Jonas opens the long-closed door.

What follows is one of the most powerful scenes in any of the Manawaka novels. Rachel has come looking for some redeeming excuse for her father's life. She wants a balm for her own pain and rejection, a plausible reason for his preference for the

"stiffs" and the bottle, and by implication, an excuse for her own paralysis. Specifically, she wants to blame her mother for his unhappiness. But Hector Jonas, the "dwarf seer" (153), confronts her instead with the issue of personal choice and responsibility.

> "Don't get me wrong, Rachel. He was a good guy, your dad. I thought the world of him ... He probably did less harm than your average guy, I know that. But I would bet he had the kind of life he wanted most." (152-3).

The effect is dramatically redemptive, but not in the way Rachel had hoped. She is forced to ask herself questions about her father that have not before occurred to her. Simultaneously, she associates his humanity with her own, his choices with her own.

Now she is able to release her parents into their human forms, to attribute to them no more or less responsibility than was theirs, and to admit that she cannot and need not know their mysteries. Whatever she has inherited is not necessarily a shackle, but hers to work with. And as she returns to her own room, she imagines her mother waking in fear, and mouths for the first time the mother-word, "Hush. Hush, now, sh, it's all right, go to sleep now, never fear, it's nothing." (157)

Rachel successfully does her work with the ancestral. Nick Kazlik does not. Both live with the consequences. There is something unresolved about the character of Nick. He leaves, unable to make a commitment to his parents or to Rachel, and the

reader never knows why. But there is at least a hint in his quoting of Jeremiah: "I have forsaken my house--I have left mine heritage--mine heritage is unto me as a lion in the forest--it crieth out against me--therefore have I hated it." (134) Nick shrugs it off as soon as it is said but Laurence does not treat it so lightly. Her emphasis in The Diviners and in her own essays on the necessity of coming to terms with the ancestral past would suggest that Nick's failure to do so is an important failure, perhaps even a paralyzing one.

Stacey Cameron MacAindra, like Hagar, has left Manawaka physically behind, but continues to wrestle daily with its legacies. What she seems to have emerged with is the Presbyterian sense of immanent hellfire and judgement and the wish to escape them. Here she identifies with her father, Niall, who she sees as having been unable to cope. Significantly, the totems she keeps when her father dies are his whiskey flask and his revolver. Later, deciding that she could never kill either herself or her children, she discards the revolver, but keeps the flask. And it is into liquor that she, like her father, chooses to escape because she can see no other option.

> But sometimes I want to abdicate, only that. Quit. Can't ... Even if I left one of those I'm-getting-off-the-world-letters saying 'I care about you,' they wouldn't believe it. And they'd be right. Goddam you, God. I'm stuck with it. (141)

Stacey is painfully aware of the one-sidedness of her heritage; she mourns her disbelief and resultant lack of comfort from, for example, the old hymns of her childhood. She sends her children to Sunday School and insists on never swearing in front of them; but for Stacey, these legacies have become what Luke calls "totems of the living dead," those "who have been separated from themselves for so long that it's only a dim memory" (227) Stacey has inherited the sense of doom without the hope, and the ethical shell without the faith that was its heart. Such an inheritance is in radical need of redemption. Symbolically, she remembers hearing loons as a child, "witch birds out there in the night lake, or voices of dead shamans, mourning the departed Indian gods ..." (172)

Stacey is in mourning for something departed. Longingly, she savours memories in a vain attempt to reclaim it. She remembers a time when she was different.

> Stacey, travelling light, unfearful in the sun, swimming outward as though the sea were shallow and known, drinking without indignity, making spendthrift love in the days when flesh and love were indestructible. (73)

And she, like her sister, Rachel, sifts the memories of the father who entombed himself before he died.

Among the memories of her father she finds a revealing one:

> My father's dead face, looking no different except the eyes closed, and I thought his face had been dead for a long time before he died, so what did it matter, but I didn't believe that. Something should happen before it's too late. (129)

Now Stacey realizes that "it's the ones who say goodbye before they're dead who bug" (130) her, and that she has inherited the tendency to be one of those. Eventually, as she recovers her will to live in the present, Stacey is able to give the name 'Dad,' so long reserved for Niall Cameron, to her father-in-law Matthew because he needs it. In so doing, she symbolically releases both her dead father and herself.

The other ancestor who needs release is Stacey's mother, so long thought of as "the soft persistent mew ... the voice that never tired of saying how others ought to be and never were." (18) Gradually, as Stacey listens to herself as wife and mother, she begins to judge her own mother less and identify with her more. She recognizes, for example, that in presuming to know Mac, she has echoed her mother's accusation to her father: "Niall--you come upstairs and quit drinking. I know what you're doing in there. I know you." (44)

More often, though, Stacey is reminded of her mother in her own interactions with Katie, her eldest daughter. Even as she assures Katie that she "never spoke to [her] mother that way," she hears an echo of her mother's whine, "I never thought a

daughter of mine would speak to me like that." (46) Stacey now realizes that she has never known her mother and admits: "... It's only now that this bothers me, now that I'm not seen either." (150) Finally she catches herself in a questionable envy of her mother. Her assumption has been that her mother always felt sure and righteous.

Maybe, Stacey understands, the ancestors were just human-size, deserving of neither worship nor condemnation, only fellow fire-dwellers after all. "Once I thought it was only people like Matthew and my mother who had that kind of weak eyes. Now I know it's me, as much." (164)

In the end, Stacey is able also to embrace consciously her personal legacy from her mother's generation of Manawakans. "Judgement. All the things I don't like to think I believe in ... I used to think about Buckle that he was as superstitious as a caveman. I didn't know then that I was, too." (296) But a ~~fear of hellfire is not all.~~ From that same heritage Stacey now claims her grit, her knowledge of "how to ... get by somehow," (277) her assurance that she "can ... if [she] sets her mind to it," (289), her sustaining wry humour. And even, from one of those old bridge cronies of her mother's, the trick of "dancing in her head." (303)

This struggle with the ancestors, of which the earlier Manawaka works contain undercurrents and traces, becomes a forceful thematic statement of The Diviners. Morag's story most closely parallels Laurence's own spiritual quest for her ances-

tral roots, and represents a culmination of the Manawaka canon. Morag must travel a long way to an understanding of the notion of being "gathered to her ancestors" (Laurence, 1974: 450) and to an acceptance of who those ancestors really were.

One of the central symbols in The Diviners is Morag's album of snapshots which she keeps "not for what they show but for what is hidden in them." (6) And one is reminded of Frye's assessment that "the story of the loss and regaining of identity is ... the framework of all literature." (1971: 21) Morag is an orphan who spends much thoughtful energy on that search.

As a child, she feeds hungrily on what she later refers to as "Christie's myths" of her ancestors.

> Among all of them people there on the rocks, see, was a piper, and he was from the Clan Gunn, and it was many of the Gunns who lost their hearths and homes and lived wild on the stormy rocks there. And Piper Gunn, he was a great all man, a man with the voice of drums and the heart of a child and the gall of a thousand and the strength of conviction. (Laurence, 1974: 49)

Morag identifies with Piper Gunn's wife, Morag, who, according to Christie, "had the wisdom and the good eye and the warmth of home and the determination of quietness." (85) What Christie as foster-father gives her is a heritage far more romantic and heroic than her actual one. What he also gives her, of course, is the heritage of growing up on the rejected side of Manawaka,

foster-daughter to a trash collector.

As an adolescent, Morag, through her friendship with Jules (Skinner) Tonnerre, is also introduced to the Métis heritage of her hometown. She is strangely moved by the 'Lazarus tales' of Rider Tonnerre and the Prophet (Riel) and the strong parallels in feeling and tone to Christie's myths.

> Okay, so this Rider, eh, he is so goddamn good on a horse he can outside any man on the prairies. They have races, see, and he always wins, him and King of the Lake. And Rider's rifle, now, it's called La Petite, and he's so good that he can be going full gallop on that stallion, and he never misses a buffalo at one thousand yards or like that. He's about seven-feet-tall, and he wears a big black beard. (144-5)

And Morag asks herself a question she will return to much later. "What is a true story? Is there any such thing?" (144)

Temporarily, Morag rejects all three as false for her. Piper Gunn and his woman are too fanciful, Christie Logan and his woman too pathetic, and the danger of becoming Jules' woman too threatening to her ambitions of leaving Manawaka behind. When Morag meets Brooke Skelton, she finds she cannot speak Christie's or Prin's names, and says of Manawaka, "It doesn't exist. It's unimportant." (198) That denial carries Morag through years of sterile existence as the wife of Professor Skelton, and almost costs her her gift for writing. Paradoxi-

cally, it is that very gift which saves her. Unexpectedly, Laurence tells us, Morag begins to write a novel and the writing of it gradually reveals the chasm between her and Brooke. Morag sees that he will not ever understand her need to write or to have the child she so desperately wants.

When Morag returns to Manawaka for Prin's death and funeral, she begins to understand the heart-wrong of her denial. "Had it been wrong to want to get away? No, not wrong to want to get away, to make her getaway. It was the other thing that was wrong, the turning away, turning her back on the both of them." (248) In her old room, she is comforted by:

> Ghosts of people and of tales. Morag, a child, a girl, a young woman. Christie ranting the old battle cry. Clowny Macpherson. Piper Gunn who led his people to bravery. Gunner Gunn, who once, unbelievably, had life as Colin Gunn, her father. Rider Tonnerre, the tales-man, the talisman. ... who has been real and who imagined? All have been both, it seems. (248-9)

The long-denied heritage will have its voice. When Prin dies, Morag longs for Christie's lost wildness and the tales he no longer remembers. And Morag recognizes that the tales are now hers to tell, but she cannot tell them to Christie. Significantly, she will tell them later to her daughter, Pique. As soon as she is back in Toronto with Brooke, she begins to experience

> the mad and potentially releasing desire to speak sometimes as Christie used to speak, the loony oratory, salt-beefed with oaths, the stringy lean oaths with some protein in them, the Protean oaths upon which she was reared. (255)

Finally, in a rage against Brooke's nickname for her, 'Little One,' Morag does let go with a string of Christie-oaths. She is stunned to recognize that she does not yet know "the sound of [her] own voice." (257) What Laurence is suggesting is that Morag must, as an adult, own and embrace that legacy before she can find herself. The sound of her own voice will not emerge from denial of those voices in her past.

And it is now that she claims another part of that heritage and deliberately has a child of Jules Tonnerre's. Symbolically, she affirms and celebrates the union of all parts of her heritage. Not only blood ancestry is true ancestry, according to Laurence. Morag, because of her past and her sympathies is also Métis, and this is true, as Laurence often says, "in the only way that matters." (348)

Morag's wrestling is not over yet. She tells Fan Brady that she has known for a long time she had to go to Scotland. She does so, indirectly at first through her Scottish lover, McRaith, while she lives in England. And then directly, to visit his home in the Highlands. On her way to Sutherland, ancestral home of the clan Gunn, she stops. Largely through her new

insight into McRaith, she sees the nature of human bonding clearly for the first time. "McRaith is not held to Crombruach 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." (390)

Morag sees now that Scotland is not the land of her ancestors. She is finally able to accept that Christie's myths are her reality, and Christie's real country is also hers. When Christie becomes ill, she announces to Pique a trip home. As Christie is dying, Morag owns her ancestry.

> "Christie--I used to fight a lot with you, Christie, but you've been my father to me?"
>
> ...
>
> "Well--I'm blessed," Christie Logan says. (396)

He is not alone in that blessing. For now Morag finds that she can stay alone in the old house without being threatened by its ghosts. She has befriended them; Laurence refers to them now as "the many versions of herself, combining and communing here, in her head, in this room with its time-stained wallpaper." (396) The blessing is complete when Morag arranges for a piper to play at Christie's funeral, "The Flowers of the Forest," the pibroch of the mythical Piper Gunn. Piper Gunn, hero-prophet, and Christie Logan, garbage collector-prophet, come together at last and Morag is "released into her mourning." (403)

Years later, when Pique is a young woman struggling to

accept and find the blessing in her own heritage, Morag recognizes Pique's journey. She understands that Pique will probably one day create a fiction out of Jules.

Finally, Morag accepts, as her own talisman, the plaid pin that Jules has traded her for the hunting knife. Margaret Laurence has carried these symbols faithfully through the Manawaka works to this moment. The knife was traded by Lazarus to John Shipley, Hagar's son, for the plaid pin she had entrusted to him. And John Shipley sold the knife to Christie Logan for a pack of cigarettes. Morag has inherited the knife and Jules the pin. The Métis totem and the Highland one come together symbolically. Some day Pique will rightly inherit them both. But, for now, Morag keeps the plaid pin. We now learn, as we did not from Hagar, that the motto on the pin is, "My Hope is Constant in Thee." Morag ponders:

> 'My Hope is Constant in Thee.' It sounds like a voice from the past. Whose voice, though? Does it matter? 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. (433)

What matters, Laurence believes, is that we "decide our own fates, not in any theoretical way, not in a state of vacuum, but with deep emotional reference to [our] fathers and [our] gods." (1968: 45)

Why is coming to terms with the ancestral past a religious and not a psychological issue? Why include it as a major thread in the religious sensibility of Margaret Laurence?

The answer is not complex. The human psyche may be guided by a religious function which is interested in cutting some threads and tying others together or creating a wholeness of person and community. Laurence tells tales of that weaving. Her stories are also religious in style; she does not write in explicitly psychological terms, though certainly one could approach her work from a Jungian stance. She prefers religious language like "prophet", "seer", "blessed", "Jehovah", "sorcerer", "second sight"; she quotes the Old Testament rather than Freud or Jung even though she is cognizant of both; she sends her characters to contemporary prophets rather than psychotherapists; and in the end, when her heroines receive new vision, she has them utter not analytical judgements, but blessings and prayers.

Laurence is not unaware of the political, social or psychological issues of being human, nor would she minimize them. As storyteller, she places them all in the larger context of the problem of the liberation of the human spirit.

WHAT THE BIRD WITH THE HUMAN HEAD KNEW

I went to the bird
with the human head,
and asked,
Please Sir,
where is God?

God is too busy
to be here on earth,
His angels are like
one thousand geese assembled
and always flapping.
But I can tell you where the well of God is.

Is it on earth?
I asked.
He replied,
Yes. It was dragged down
from paradise by one of the geese.

I walked many days,
past witches that eat grandmothers knitting booties
as if they were collecting a debt.
Then, in the middle of the desert
I found the well,
it bubbled up and down like a litter of cats
and there was water,
and I drank,
and there was water,
and I drank.

Then the well spoke to me.
It said: Abundance is scooped from abundance,
yet abundance remains.

Then I knew.

Anne Sexton

Chapter 4

The Second Sight

> "... he has the power. And he has the sight, too. That means he can see through walls and he can see inside a man's head and see what people are thinking in there." (Laurence, 1974: 146-7)

Jules Tonnerre is describing Louis Riel, his Métis ancestor, to Morag "I guess," he concludes, "you'd call him Prophet." (147) Morag carries the same sense of her mythical ancestor, Morag Gunn, wife of Piper:

> If ever they came to a forest, would this Morag there be scared? Not on your christly life. She would only laugh and say, 'Forests cannot hurt me because I have the power and the second sight and the good eye and the strength of conviction.' (52)

Louis Riel and Piper and Morag Gunn were unusual people, the sort of hero-figures around which myths are made. It is not difficult to imagine them having mystical abilities like the gift of second sight. But the point Margaret Laurence's stories continue to make is that such gifts are not the exclusive province of unusual people. "One of the things I am trying to do in my work is to proclaim that nobody is ordinary, to point out the extraordinary in the ordinary." (Wilson: 11)

What Laurence challenges us to imagine is the existence of such gifts not just in the Riels but in the Christie Logans, the Murray Lees, the Calla Mackies, the Rachel Camerons of this world. The 'prophets' turn out to be among us and numerous. Says Royland,

> "It's something I don't understand, the divining, ... and it's something that everybody can do, but the thing I don't usually let on about is that quite a few people can learn to do it. You don't have to have the mark of God between your eyebrows. Or if you do, quite a few people have it." (Laurence, 1974: 451)

What is 'divining' in Laurence's terms? For Morag, it depends not on eyesight but on "some other kind of sight." (4) More suggestive is Morag's reflection as Royland divines for water: "Like the slow pace of a piper playing a pibroch. Only this was for a reverse purpose. Not the walk over the dead. The opposite." (102) Divining has to do with a calling forth of life which is by implication hidden or only latent. Divining is a celebration of what is in such a way that it becomes clear to someone else; divining is prophecy, revelation.

The climactic Manawaka novel is titled The Diviners, but not because the prophetic appears there first in Laurence's work. Laurence also presents the prophetic in another form, as prophecy of doom, in the title story of A Bird in the House. The bizarre Noreen belongs to the Tabernacle of the Risen and

Reborn, that tactless 'other' religion of the Manawaka irregulars. Vanessa's father is sure that Noreen's religious faith serves as compensation for a boring life, but Vanessa is equally sure that Noreen dwells

> in a world of violent splendours, a world filled with angels whose wings of delicate light bore real feathers, and saints shining like the dawn, and prophets who spoke in ancient tongues, ... (85)

And then the sparrow flies in through a window Vanessa has opened and Noreen utters her devastating prophecy: A bird in the house means a death in the house. That winter Vanessa's father dies. Superstition or prophecy? Laurence does not answer that clearly; perhaps she is suggesting that there is but a fine line between the two. She uses that particular superstition prophetically again in The Stone Angel when Hagar is horrified by the presence of a seagull in the fish cannery.

> A seagull is flying in this room.... 'A bird in the house means a death in the house'--that's what we used to say. Nonsense of course. But the way the thing pulses--it scares and disgusts me. (Laurence, 1964: 194)

"Nonsense of course. But ...." And we are left with a sense of Hagar's impending death, and also a sense that the appearance of the seagull in Laurence's story is meant to be taken as more

than coincidence.

More often, however, Laurence connects the prophetic to a revelation, an event which stands as a hierophany in the lives of her heroines. The prophet brings the gift of second sight by what he or she says, does, or is. Christie Logan, Royland, and Morag consciously "divine," but in Laurence's stories, several others have the gift.

Hagar's prophet comes in the form of Murray Ferney Lees, part-time wino, and full-time salesman for Dependable Life Assurance. He got the job by prayer, he says, as the Redeemer's Advocate grandson of a circuit rider evangelist. Lees tells Hagar, prophetically, that she "never mixed in the right company." (205) What he perceives in Hagar is the spiritual pride and prudery that turns her to stone. As he recalls for her his pre-marital spiritual and sensual pleasure with his wife, Hagar is shocked and objects that such a combination is peculiar. And M. F. Lees goes straight to the heart of Hagar's problem:

> "God is Love, but please don't mention the two in the same breath. I loved that woman, I tell you."

Still, Hagar challenges:

> "You call that love?"

But to Lees' next question, she confesses to having no answer.

> "Lady," he says, "if that wasn't, what is?" (203)

Hagar believes that her sparrow friends led her to a pail of drinking water at the cannery, and eventually she perceives Lees also as beneficent. It is Lees who calls forth in Hagar her first true act of love. Struck by the depth of his need to be heard, and mollified by the wine he has given her, Hagar actually listens to the tragic story of his son's death and his own guilt and instead of admonishing him, she comes to a new insight:

> I can tell him nothing, I can think of only one thing to say with any meaning. "I had a son," I say, "and lost him." (208)

Now, in turn, Hagar tells for the first time her own guilty story of John's death. Lees takes his turn as confessor, but more. When he realizes that Hagar in her stupor is apologizing to him as if he were John, he gives her the needed blessing: "It's okay," he says, "I knew all the time you never meant it. Everything is all right ..." (221) And Hagar, as Laurence would say, is at last released into her mourning. The stone angel's tears begin to flow again. M. F. Lees, ordinary man, has played the extraordinary roles of prophet and priest, has been an agent of grace in what Hagar has believed to be a graceless world. Hagar, drunk, who hated Bram's drinking; Hagar, afraid, who loathed her mother's weakness; Hagar, begging forgiveness, who despised meekness--all through the agency of a man who offended her Presbyterian sense of decency. The jokes of God.

And as if one prophet would not be enough to open eyes that are 'doubly blind,' Margaret Laurence brings to Hagar another.

The Reverend Troy, at the bidding of Doris, has tried to bring salvation to the unregenerate old Hagar on several occasions. She sees him only as dutiful, as "God's little man," (34) and as Doris's conspirator in the attempt to move her to Silverthreads. Troy persists as she lies dying until, as Hagar says, his eagerness renders her helpless. Unable to tolerate the monotone of his prayer-voice, Hagar impulsively asks him to sing "All people that on earth do dwell." And the Reverend Troy finds what is for Hagar his prophet voice. As he finishes with, "Come ye before him and rejoice," Hagar has an astounding revelation:

> I would have wished it. This knowing comes upon me so forcefully, so shatteringly, and with such a bitterness as I have never felt before. I must always, always have wanted that--simply to rejoice. How is it I never could? ...
>
> 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. (261)

One cannot say that the Reverend Troy divined anything in Hagar; yet by being who he was with "the strength of conviction," he became a diviner to her. He became, in a way he could not have designed, an agent of grace, of revelation; in a sense, he opened up in Hagar the gift of second sight.

There is a third character who assists Hagar to see. She is

a tiny bird-like forerunner of The Diviners' Fan Brady, and her name is Elva Jardine. Hagar describes her as "such a measly little creature—that if she shriveled a trace more she'd disappear altogether." (230) But Elva Jardine refuses to disappear. And what she teaches Hagar is something about surviving with dignity in the time remaining to her. Because she comes from a town near Manawaka and knows the Pearls, she carries a credibility for Hagar. To this woman of empathy Hagar reaches out in gratitude and in response is blessed by the voicing of her own name. Hagar has not been called "Hagar" since her husband's death. Elva, like Bram long before her, has called forth the person from the angel of stone.

It seems implicit in the religious sensibility of Margaret Laurence that the prophetic comes from some rejected side of society ~~or~~ of oneself; the prophetic lies in the "other" of one's existence. For Hagar it is the weak, ineffectual man, Lees, and Troy, the official representative of the God she has rejected. For Rachel, the prophets are the lesbian evangelical Calla, and the strange man who replaced her father as town undertaker, Hector Jonas.

When Laurence first presents Calla, she has Rachel compare her appearance to that of a "wind-dishevelled owl." (Laurence, 1966: 32) It is an apt symbol because Calla plays a sort of wise fool to Rachel's puritan lady. Calla, unlike Rachel, has no fear of being a fool, only of not being given the gift of tongues, which she considers to be a kind of grace. She cautions Rachel early in the novel that: "We hold ourselves too tightly

these days, that's the trouble. Afraid to let the Spirit speak through us." (33)

When Rachel has her ecstatic experience at the tabernacle, she rejects Calla for a long while, but cannot entirely reject what she has learned about the limitation on her control of life. Much later, when Rachel does not know where else to turn in her agony over Nick, she finds herself at Calla's door. The visit is full of prophecy and of irony. Rachel is prepared to call St. Paul's caution about lack of understanding "the apostle's appallingly accurate sight," but she totally misses the relevance of Calla's other quote from St. Paul: "If any man among you thinketh himself to be wise, let him become a fool, that he may be wise." (166) She also misses the message in Calla's explanation for Jacob the canary's seemingly futile climbing of his ladder: "Maybe the angel at the top can't be seen by me." (168) And yet, the day comes when Rachel echoes both of Calla's statements. As she struggles to speak the heart's truth to Nick, she muses,

> If one speaks from faith, not logic, how does that turn out? I do not know except that I am so strong in it, so assured, that it cannot possibly go wrong. (181)

Rachel is finally willing to become a fool. And once she has become one, she finds the sort of wisdom Calla exhibited about her canary. She agonizes over Nick's motivations and then concludes:

> I don't know whether he meant to lie to me or

> not. As for what was happening with him and to him this summer, I couldn't say what it really was, nor whether it had anything to do with me or not. (232)

Rachel has learned something about limits on her ability to assess or control the lives of others; she has learned something about mystery and about the necessity of risk-taking. Some of it she owes to the agency of Calla, who refused to guarantee the quality of even her own love as she warned Rachel: "I guess I can't promise. You have to gamble on where the limits are. I don't know where they are." (215) Rachel has also learned how to divine what is there, such as Calla's love, and her own degree of courage. She has learned these things through her own experience, but also through the prophetic presence of "Calla, pillar of tabernacles, speaker in tongues, mother of canaries and budgerigars." (242)

Rachel's other significant diviner is Hector Jonas, whom she comes to see as a "comic prophet, dwarf seer," (152) and from whom she receives a redemptive insight into her dead father and into her own life. It is this strange little man who sees himself as selling "Relief" and "Modified Prestige" (149) who acts as an agent of grace for Rachel. She notices very early in their conversation that although the business of undertaking is his pet topic and being a salesman his self-image, he is prepared really to listen to her. Hector is a practical man with a prophetic sort of wisdom; he knows people in their bereavement

and about that knowledge he has what Christie Logan would call "the strength of conviction." It is in her interaction with Hector that Rachel moves into a certain new acceptance of what is. They sit together in Hector's renovated chapel, Rachel having been led "like a bride up the aisle" by Hector. They sit surrounded by "real veneer," and "simulated pine," and canned organ music, and "bleak blue light" at three in the morning. And Rachel perceives a meaning for her in it all, in this place where she never before was allowed to be.

> The blue light, and the chapel purged of all spirit, all spirits except the rye, and the sombre flashiness, and the terribly moving corniness of that hymn, and the hour, and the strangeness, and the plump well-meaning arm across the shoulders and the changes in every place that go on without our knowing, and the fact that there is nothing here for me except what is here now. (156)

What is here now is Hector Jonas, and the next gift he gives her is a glimpse of his personal pain as a fellow human. As he tells her about the sexual agony of his life, Rachel perceives the living man under the professional image. Rachel recognizes what is there under the surface; she is on her way to becoming a diviner. Eventually, she divines the truth available to her about Nick, Calla, her mother, and even Willard Siddley, her principal. More important, she divines the truth about

herself and her fears. "I was always afraid that I might become a fool. Yet I could almost smile with some grotesque light-heartedness at that fool of a fear, that poor fear of fools, now that I really am one." (222)

By the end of the novel, Rachel speaks with the voice of a prophetess:

> I will be different. I will remain the same. I will still go parchment-faced with embarrassment, and clench my pencil between fingers like pencils. ... I will be lonely, almost certainly. ... I will walk by myself on the shore of the sea and look at the free gulls flying. I will grow too orderly, plumping up the couch cushions just-so before I go to bed. I will rage in my insomnia like a prophetess. I will take care to remember a vitamin pill each morning with my breakfast. I will be afraid. Sometimes I will feel light-hearted, sometimes light-headed. I may sing aloud, even in the dark. I will ask myself if I am going mad, but if I do, I won't know it.
>
> God's mercy on reluctant jesters. God's grace on fools. God's pity on God. (245-6)

The redemptive process for Laurence's women is one which heals the destructive dualism of their Calvinist heritage. What was experienced as alien comes to be accepted finally as personal and related. In the story of Rachel we see that occurring

in relation to the prophetic. Carol Christ has noted, in her study of Doris Lessing's stories of female spiritual experience, that Martha Quest's prophetic experience is different from that of the Old Testament prophets. What Christ is defending here is her statement that "the new liberation myth ... suggests a relation to the ultimate which is different from the most common pattern in mainline Western religion." (240-1)

> The Old Testament prophet's experience may be characterized as the confrontation with an overpowering other .... Martha's experience, on the other hand, does not involve a radical confrontation with an other .... Her self is the center of an expanding horizon of experience .... For Martha, there is no radical duality between self and world. (241)

If Christ is right, what we see in Laurence is the story of women who are in process from one myth to the other. Laurence's women do face radical confrontations with an "other." It is through these confrontations that the dualisms themselves are confronted and redeemed. The "other" in Laurence is, of course, not often overpowering, unless one considers the jests of God. More often, the "other" which was looked for in apocalyptic forms turns out to be there in one's daily life. So it is for Stacey.

Stacey lives with the expectation of a prophecy of doom. She believes she sees and hears that prophecy in outer events

but is despairing of society's ability to respond. Even as she sees a flock of gulls in downtown Vancouver, she thinks:

> If they're prophets in bird form, they might as well save their breath. They aren't prophets, though. They only look it, angelic presences and voices like gravel out of a grave. Birds in prophet form. They couldn't care less. (Laurence, 1969: 9)

Given Stacey's expectation of the appearance and aura of a prophet, it is not surprising that she tends to miss several of the prophetic voices within and without. At one point, for example, she recognizes her years of competition for Mac with Buckle Fennick, but immediately she erases that insight as "unfair." Similarly, she admits to herself that Buckle scares her, and then calls that admission "untrue." (49) Twice she has an intuition of having seen Thor Thorlakson somewhere before, but both times she dismisses her own second sight. She even misses the real impact of her own joke about the god Thor and how he disguised his identity. Further, she senses that something is peculiar about her neighbour Tess, who delights in watching large goldfish eat smaller ones, but ignores the prophetic warning as Tess says to Jen, "You're as good as a little goldfish, aren't you, sweetie?" (98)

Stacey erases her own second sight because she expects that kind of authority to come from somewhere or someone else. She understands in a deep way why Clytemnestra murdered her husband,

but backs down in the face of a young professor because of his academic credentials. Looking to the wrong source for answers inevitably distorts her vision.

Stacey fears fire and sees it as the symbol of doom in her fantasies. Yet it is water and drowning which are the real dangers for her. When she recalls her drunken behaviour at a party, she thinks of herself as "Stacey, face distorted into a swollen mask like the face of a woman drowned, the features blurred." (114) She has a flash of this other danger as she writes "Safe in the arms of Jesus" and immediately beside it "Lost in the Arms of Morpheus." (86) Symbolically, she smells the sea "salt warmth and decaying seaweed like the presence of some rank stinking turbulent primeval creature which has not yet realized the fact of its own passing." (43) Stacey is in danger not so much of being consumed by the fires of life but of drowning in confusion, self-erasure, and unconsciousness. Perhaps that is why Matthew's biblical quotation, though not intended to be so, is so powerfully prophetic for her. At the height of her confusion over the aborted affair with Buckle, Matthew quotes a Psalm: "Save me, O God, for the waters are come in unto my soul." Stacey dissolves in tears.

When Stacey runs for help it is to the sea that she goes. There she remembers the roots of her thirst for prophecy; she recalls being held as a child by the night voices of the loons which seemed shaman-like to her. She also recalls her love of "everything mysterious waiting to be discovered." (173) Now

Stacey acknowledges that what she has not accepted are the limitations that have come with aging and that she never did accept limits. She has not grasped "the fact of [her] own passing." (43)

That realization becomes flesh now in the relationship that ensues with Luke. Luke has more than the physician's name. Calling Stacey "merwoman," he very quickly divines her condition. "Who held you down?" he asks. "Was it for long? ... Why don't you come out a little?" (180-1) Much of Stacey's fascination with Luke comes from this perception he displays and his willingness to say what he sees. There is in Stacey a desire for answers, a desire to be read, to be divined. Significantly, she now remembers her former employer who did horoscopes and called himself 'Janus Uranus.' He used to exhort her to "think of the people who are waiting for the ineffable Word ... waiting to be told what life holds and withholds, the inalterable soul moments." (190) Stacey thinks of him as an eccentric, but partakes of that longing he described.

What Stacey gets from Luke is, as Laurence would say, not what she bargained for. The prophetic, of course, never is. He teaches her not about the future but about living in the present, about accepting her own limits without constant apology. Such learning is redemptive for the possessor of such a Calvinist bad conscience. Luke's answers to life are a blend of pragmatism and mysticism typical of Laurence herself. Later in the novel, it is evident that Stacey has found in herself that

same voice:

> Dear Lord and Father of mankind, forgive our foolish ways, as some goon once said. Reclothe us in our rightful mind. And so on. But what if this is our rightful mind, or at least the only one we're likely to have? Anyway, it is a good job. It's somewhere. It's better than nowhere. (288)

Luke's prophecies ground Stacey and call forth in her a latent grit, an ironic acceptance of reality that informs the tone of her later confession that she is, after all, who she is.

Finally, it is Luke who faces Stacey with what Laurence calls "the suggestion of choice." (228) Knowing that she will not go north with him, Luke nevertheless asks her to, and in so doing helps her to name what it is that she cannot leave. He recalls her to the centrality in her life of her mother-love, even as he tells her his own real age. And Stacey begins to see, even in her own prophetic dream, that "there is nowhere to go but here." (259)

Stacey now begins to perceive the reality of the people and conditions around her--of Mac, of Buckle Fennick and his grotesque mother. At the precise moment that she recognizes her own affinity with Buckle, she is hailed by a voice "raucous as the gulls'"; Valentine Tonnerre, the Métis, the "other" of Stacey's girlhood, approaches with the appearance of a female John the Baptist:

Immediately, Stacey's old expectation of a prophecy of doom

is aroused. She fantasizes that Valentine's appearance is a signal of judgement on Stacey's own children for the sins of the Manawaka fathers. But what Val reveals is just the truth about Thor Thorlakson, a truth even Stacey could have divined had she listened to her inner voices more carefully. Stacey now sees Val as a "known and total stranger," one to whom "too little can be said, because there is too much to say." (268)

The paradox implicit in the expression "known and total stranger" is central to the religious sensibility of Margaret Laurence. As her heroines recognize their oneness with people who have been considered "other," they simultaneously apprehend the essential mystery surrounding all persons. As Stacey finally says about Tess's suicide attempt, "I don't know and I do know." (271) A similar sense of paradox exists in Laurence's use of the prophetic. Gradually, her heroines realize that it is not so much the possession of the gift of second sight, as it is the faith to use it, that is crucial.

The Diviners, Laurence's final Manawaka work, most explicitly and fully explores the gift of second sight, and the role of prophecy. Morag, a writer, considers her work to be a kind of divining, yet is uncomfortable because she does not know whether it works or how long it will last. She envies Royland, her water-diviner neighbour, because he can see and touch the proof of his gift. In a sense, The Diviners chronicles Morag's wrestling her past for the answer to this concern. The Prophet Riel could "see through walls and ... inside a man's head"; what

about Morag? "What in hell was she divining for." (102)

Morag's experience of divining goes back to her childhood and Christie Logan. It was Christie who told her tales of Piper and Morag Gunn and their prophetic power. It was also Christie, the Scavenger, who showed Morag how to "tell the garbage, ..., like telling fortunes." (74)

> "You know how some have the gift of the second sight?" Christie goes on. "Well, it's the gift of the garbage-telling which I have myself, now. Watch this."
>
> Christie shovels out the stuff onto a heap on the dump. Bends down to throw some of the bones with his hands.
>
> ...
>
> Christie speaks. Like a spiel. Only different.
>
> "Now you see these bones here, and you know what they mean? They mean Simon Pearl the lawyer's got the money for steak. Yep, not so often, maybe, but one day a week. So although he's letting on he's as hard up as the next--he ain't, no he ain't, though it's troubling to him, too. By their christly bloody garbage shall ye know them in their glory, is what I'm saying to you, every saintly mother's son. ...." (74-5)

Morag is mortified by all this ranting and mentally dubs him "Crazy Christie." (76) He is part of the rejected "other" for her. Later, when she is a young woman trying to escape Manawaka

entirely, she resents his prophecy that "everything will go along with [her]." (207) Later still, after Christie is dead, Morag echoes that prophecy to Dan, Pique's boyfriend, when he expresses his desire to leave his heritage and especially his father behind:

> "You can change a whole lot. But you can't throw him away entirely. He and a lot of others are there. Here."
>
> Morag reached out and touched the vein on Dan's wrist. (354)

Now, in midlife, Morag recognizes that Christie had second sight and mourns the silencing of his prophetic voice. What Christie could see, she realizes, was what really is. Morag now honours this kind of vision and confesses her own past lack of it.

Morag arrives at such insight partly through the experience of living, but also by the divining agency of other prophetic persons. As Clara Thomas has noted, there are many diviners in Morag's life. "They function through many means and media. 'The gift or portion of grace' is translated into words or deeds by an act that is essentially an act of love ...." (1975: 168) One of those diviners is Jules Tonnerre. Initially, it is Jules who discerns the real difference between himself and Morag.

> "I don't have to <u>do</u> anything all that much. I'm

not like you!

...

You want it so bad I can just about smell it on you. You'll get it, Morag." (165)

Later, when Morag needs Jules, he understands why and the true role she needs him to play. Jules sees that Morag's "external self ... is at such variance with whatever or whoever remains inside." (248) After they have made love, it is the uneducated Jules who understands the deep significance of that joining. Accepting Morag's assertion that she must go away by herself, he divines:

"So you had to do this first, eh?

...

You were doing magic to get away. He was the only man in you before, eh?

...

I'm the 'shaman,' eh?" (272-3)

His is a wisdom with which Morag cannot argue, even though what he has divined was unconscious to her.

That weight of the voice of truth informs Laurence's sense of the prophetic. When early in Morag's life, Miss Melrose speaks with absolute conviction about Morag's destiny as a writer, Laurence writes:

Now it is as though a strong hand has been laid on her

shoulders. Strong and friendly. But merciless.
Someone is walking over her grave. (123)

Someone is calling her forth, saying what is.

The landlady danseuse, Fan Brady, plays a similar role for Morag, when Morag finally accepts that destiny and begins to write seriously. Fan is one of Laurence's clown figures; Morag considers her "nutty as crunchy peanut butter." (313) Laurence describes her as facially resembling a monkey, but adds, "from a distance, possibly, and under coloured lights, there would be a certain circus sequinned splendour about her." (308) Fan believes that her work is an Art and Morag discovers that Fan is "tough in the spirit, wiry and wary in the soul." (309) Fan in her Princess Eureka act with her python is an echo of a fallen Eve; she lives a lost Eden in which people with true grit go on and survive with dignity.

It is in relation to Fan that Morag learns her own need for some unity of spirit and flesh. Fan knows and speaks of the tragedy of sex without heart; Morag thinks that because she likes sex it will be different for her. But when she finds herself endangered by an unknown man's threat of violence, and then by pregnancy, she discovers her personal limits and takes the vow she describes as a "practicality of spirit and flesh."

> 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. (329)

Morag Gunn is becoming "tough in the spirit, wiry and wary in the soul." (309)

What continues to plague her, however, are her unresolved questions about the passage of time and the impermanence of things. It worries Morag that as a writer she will never know whether her magic works or not, or to what extent. And it worries her even more that she cannot count on her gift lasting even as long as she does. She has seen Christie Logan reduced to silence and agonized, "For Christie Logan to be unable to speak, what must that be like?" (394) She has also seen Fan Brady shorn of her Art and even bereft of the snake that propped it up for a while. Morag finds her answer when she goes to live on the river. Her prophets are an old man, a Great Blue Heron, and the river itself.

Clara Thomas considers the Great Blue Heron to be an epic simile, "an image of acceptance and affirmation central to the resolution of The Diviners, and to the final and cumulative meaning of all the Manawaka novels." (1975: 156) Significantly, Morag sees the Great Blue Heron when she is in the company of Royland whom she considers to be The Shaman; in fact, it is Royland who spots the bird.

> Then it spotted the boat, and took to flight. A slow unhurried takeoff, the vast wings spreading, the slender elongated legs gracefully folding up under the

> creature's body. Like a pterodactyl, like an angel, like something out of the world's dawn. The soaring and measured certainty of its flight. Ancient-seeming, unaware of the planet's rocketing changes. The sweeping serene wings of the thing, unknowing that it was speeding not only towards individual death but probably towards the death of its kind. The mastery of the heron's wings could be heard, a rush of wind, the wind of its wings, before it mounted high and disappeared into the trees above a bywater of the river. (Laurence, 1974: 357)

From the heron Morag learns what Royland meant when he said, "I don't reckon I really need to understand it, ... I just gotta do it." (26) The Great Blue Heron continues its flight even though unknowing "that it [is] speeding not only towards individual death but probably towards the death of its kind." (357) And it is the flying, the 'necessary doing of the thing,' that matters. The mastery of the gift, Morag sees, does not require understanding so much as it requires faith. She senses in the flight of the heron, a symbol of the continuity that runs through past, present, and future. "That evening, Morag began to see that here and now was not an island." (357) Pique already knows that, and at a young age is seeking the blessing in her ancestral Métis wound; it is for that reason that Morag believes Pique almost has the gift of second sight.

That sense of connectedness finally affords Morag the degree of hope which she has been seeking. As Royland tells her of his loss of the ability to divine water, she accepts without needing to be told that it is not a tragedy. She wonders what will happen to Royland without his gift; but she has at last a comforting knowledge about the gift itself.

> The inheritors. Was this, finally and at last, what Morag had 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 is, was finally withdrawn to be given to someone else. (452)

Many times, Morag has noticed how the river flows both downstream with its current, and simultaneously upstream with the wind. "The river flowed both ways." (3) Now she understands the message: 'Look ahead into the past, and back into the future, until the silence.' (453) Morag has grasped a sense of time as cyclical, continuous. Further, she now accepts the mystery that is hers, not to fathom, but only to trust in and act upon. "Morag returned to the house, to write the remaining private and fictional words, and to set down her title." (453)

So ends the Manawaka cycle as it began--in prophetic tones. Laurence's women have followed the prophetic voices within and without increasingly to the finding of their own voices. They have in some way become prophets, finally possessed of that vision which sees specifically what is, and its connections to

all that is. They have learned with Hagar to speak the heart's truth with Rachel to honour their own mysteries, with Stacey to value their own strength, and with Morag to act on the present gift, in faith.

WELCOME MORNING

There is joy
in all:
in the hair I brush each morning,
in the Cannon towel, newly washed,
that I rub my body with each morning,
in the chapel of eggs I cook
each morning,
in the outcry from the kettle
that heats my coffee
each morning,
in the spoon and the chair
that cry "hello there, Anne"
each morning,
in the godhead of the table
that I set my silver, plate, cup upon
each morning.

All this is God,
right here in my pea-green house
each morning
and I mean,
though often forget,
to give thanks,
to faint down by the kitchen table
in a prayer of rejoicing
as the holy birds at the kitchen window
peck into their marriage of seeds.

So while I think of it,
let me paint a thank-you on my palm
for this God, this laughter of the morning,
lest it go unspoken.

The Joy that isn't shared, I've heard,
dies young.

Anne Sexton

Chapter 5

Something Splendid

> The eyes change least of all. John's eyes were gray, and even near the last they looked the same to me as the boy's, still that hidden eagerness as though he half believed, against all reason and knowledge, that something splendid would suddenly occur. (Laurence, 1964: 33)

According to Laurence's stories, John Shipley's belief is only half futile. In each of the Manawaka works, something splendid does occur, but not suddenly. What occurs for Laurence's heroines is a gradual conversion not of their circumstances but of their view of these circumstances. They look out on the same world through the same eyes, but they are standing psychically in a new place and therefore have a new vision. That vision is one of increased depth into the true nature of reality. It comes from a sacred as opposed to a profane standpoint in that it sees connections deep at the heart of things and can, therefore, tolerate the tension of paradox. Stacey's affirmation, "I see. Maybe I do begin to see" (Laurence, 1969: 257), is paradigmatic of the transformation that occurs also in Vanessa, Hagar, Rachel, and Morag.

The conversion of Vanessa McLeod is difficult to trace because of the short story form of A Bird in the House. It is

evident, however, in her changing vision of her Grandfather Connor. As a child she hates and fears the rigid old Irish Methodist. The story of her struggle with Grandfather Connor closely parallels Margaret Laurence's own history with the spectre of her Grandfather Simpson. From one standpoint, he was an unregenerate and ruthless old tyrant who made childhood miserable. Nevertheless, when she begins to see her own connections to him and to all humanity, she carries that knowledge in her eyes. He "proclaimed himself in [her] veins," (Laurence, 1970: 179) and that recognition alters her vision.

> Many years later, ..., I saw one day in a museum the Bear Mask of the Haida Indians. It was a weird mask. The features were ugly and yet powerful. The mouth was turned down in an expression of sullen rage. The eyes were empty caverns, revealing nothing. Yet as I looked, they seemed to draw my own eyes towards them, until I imagined I could see somewhere within that darkness a look which I knew, a lurking bewilderment. I remembered then that in the days before it had become a museum piece, the mask had concealed a man. (74)

Such enlargement of understanding is indeed splendid, something which enlarges life itself. This kind of redemption is central to the religious sensibility that informs the stories of Margaret Laurence.

Hagar Currie Shipley suffers the effects of the profane standpoint for ninety years; Laurence's story connects her metaphorically to a doubly blind stone angel. Nowhere in Laurence is Michael Novak's theoretical structure more relevant than to Hagar. Threatened by what Novak calls "the experience of nothingness," (1970: 115) which for her would be to leave those possessions which define her to die in a nursing home, Hagar runs away. She has already been attempting to re-vision her story by sifting her memories, but the flight to the fish cannery signals a new desperation, a new rejection of the "ordinary, given secure world." (Novak, 1971: 11) Prophetically, Hagar speculates that her reasons for coming to the cannery have had more to do with seeking than with hiding. She misconstrues her own prophecy and hints at seeking death, "willing [her] heart to cross over" (171); but Hagar's heart is about to cross over in another sense. It is symbolic that she prepares herself as a fool-queen for whatever is to happen. Putting June bugs in her hair, she muses:

> If I've unearthed jewels, the least I can do is wear them. Why not, since no one's here to inform me I'm a fool? ... They liven my gray, transform me. I sit quite still and straight, my hands spread languidly on my knees, queen of moth-millers, empress of earwigs. (193)

The hierophany which ensues with M. F. Lees signals the

beginning of a change in Hagar's vision. Earlier in her life, she insisted that her eyes were the same as they had always been. (33) After the fish cannery, that statement is no longer true. Hagar looks back on her drunken night with Lees and thinks, "... now that I give it a second thought, it doesn't seem so dreadful. Things never look the same from the outside as they do from the inside." (222)

To mark this point of departure for Hagar, Laurence presents an image of the new way in which Hagar's eyes see. As she leaves the cannery on Marvin's arm, Hagar looks at Lees for the last time. "He holds my eyes. He won't let me go. Then I see, to my surprise, that he is waiting for me to pardon him." (225) It is a striking moment. Hagar, the stone angel, now perceives the blessing power she has been withholding for so long. She almost persists in that role. Then, looking into Lees' eyes, she remembers how he pardoned her the night before.

> 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 eased. He looks surprised and shaken, yet somehow restored. (225)

Hagar, of course, will speak crossly again before she dies; it is, as she says, in her nature. She is not, after all, some entirely new creature. She is the old Hagar, but increasingly in

flesh now rather than stone. The experience with Lees continues to hold her eyes. She sees with increasingly redeemed sight.

Hagar hates everything about the hospital Marvin takes her to. She says so, for all to hear; but she also knows something else.

> It's not Marvin's fault. It's no one's fault, the soft disgusting egg, the shrunken world, the voices that wail like mourners through the night. Why is it always so hard to find the proper one to blame? Why do I always want to find the one? As though it really helped. (235)

Having so realized, Hagar has the grace to apologize to a nurse for speaking harshly. Now Hagar encounters Elva Jardine and learns to identify herself at last with the elderly and sick. Elva brings to Hagar out of the Manawaka past the sense of dignity in a difficult life. Elva, the flimsy prophetess-angel, calls forth Hagar's compassion and gratitude and then blesses her by using her name, Hagar.

If these changes in Hagar seem small, a major one does occur. A second hierophany follows swiftly in the life that for so long has avoided grace. The Reverend Troy sings a hymn and Hagar is shattered by the recognition of her lifelong inner denial of joy. Laurence's religious sensibility is at its ironic finest as Hagar's first experience of genuine rejoicing occurs around the incident of the bedpan. The spiritual awakening may

occur in the singing of a hymn, but the conjugation of that spirit occurs in the most concrete and earthy of events.

Hagar's young oriental roommate, Sandra Wong, has found her way to Hagar's newly exposed heart because she speaks just like Tina, Hagar's granddaughter, and because she seems connected to Hagar's own past as housekeeper to a man who smuggled Oriental women into Canada. When Sandra returns from abdominal surgery and cannot get a nurse to come with the bedpan, Hagar is suddenly enraged by Sandra's plight. This is a new experience for Hagar, this outrage on someone else's behalf, and she is emboldened by it to a heroic act. The dying old woman gets out of bed and makes her treacherous way to "the shiny steel grail" (269) in the bathroom. Almost toppling, she assures Sandra that she is "okay" and smiles at her own use of slang. Then, in terrible pain, she makes it to Sandra's bed.

> There. I'm there. I knew I could. And now I wonder if I've done it for her or for myself. No matter. I'm here, and carrying what she needs. (269)

No matter. What matters, as Morag will say in The Diviners is "the necessary doing of the thing." (Laurence, 1974: 452) And Hagar has done it. There follows a marvellous scene of pure rejoicing when Sandra and Hagar, returned to their 'right' relationship by a shocked nurse, recall the climactic moment.

> The girl is laughing.

"Mrs. Shipley--"

"Yes?"

She stifles her laughter, but it breaks out again.

"Oh, I can't laugh. I mustn't. It pulls my stitches. But did you ever see anything like the look on her face?"

I have to snort, recalling it.

"She was stunned, all right, wasn't she, seeing me standing there? I thought she'd pass out."

My own spasm of laughter catches me like a blow. I can't stave it off. Crazy. I must be crazy. I'll do myself some injury.

"Oh--oh--" the girl gasps. "She looked at you as though you'd just done a crime."

"Yes--that was exactly how she looked. Poor soul. Oh, the poor soul. We really worried her."

"That's for sure. We sure did."

Convulsed with our paining laughter, we bellow and wheeze. And then we peacefully sleep. (Laurence, 1964: 269-70)

There remains for Hagar one more necessary doing, one more thing that matters. The lifelong alienation from Marvin must be healed. Hagar now discerns the difference between the lie that stone tells, and the lie of the loving heart. Stone angels lie by their very appearance and demeanor about the things of the

spirit. Spirit is not rigid, constant, and above life as the cemetery angel pretends; spirit can only be perceived when it is enfleshed. The lie that stone tells is the lie that alienates. Lies of the loving heart connect. Hagar finds it impossible to mouth the stoical lie that she is fine and hears herself blurting out the heart's truth of her fear to Marvin. Hagar's confession at last releases in Marvin his own deep need for her blessing.

> I stare at him. Then, quite unexpectedly he reaches for my hand and holds it tightly.
>
> Now it seems to me he is truly Jacob, gripping with ~~all~~ his strength, and bargaining. 'I will not let thee go, except thou bless me.' And I see I am thus 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. (271-2)

Hagar gives Marvin what he wants. She tells him he's been a better son to her than John, and reflects that it is a lie--"yet not a lie, for it was spoken at least and at last with what may ~~perhaps~~ be a kind of love." (274) Later she calls it one of her "truly free acts." (274) Has she done it for Marvin or for herself? No matter, because she "is here and carrying what [he] needs." (269) Once again, she has done the necessary for some-

one else.

In his own turn, Marvin returns, albeit unwittingly, a blessing on Hagar. To a nurse in the corridor, he says and Hagar overhears, "She's a holy terror." (272) Robertson Davies complains about this event.

> Even then, as she approaches a measure of self-recognition, we cannot tell quite how she takes it. Probably she thinks that a holy terror is a fine thing to be. (New: 111)

Robertson Davies has missed the point. What Hagar hears and feels deeply gifted by is not the epithet but the blend of "such anger and such tenderness" (272) in Marvin's voice. Hagar knows that his depth of feeling for her is more than a stone angel could reasonably have expected at the end of her life. She describes more than her physical condition when she says, "Now I can breathe." (273)

Clara Thomas and Sandra Djwa both perceive a Christian sacramental pattern in The Stone Angel and especially in the final symbol of the glass of water which Thomas calls "the gift of grace." (1975: 88) Hagar's receipt of grace, however, is much more evident in the cannery, bedpan, and blessing incidents. What is striking about the glass of water event is the unregeneracy of Hagar's basic position in life. It is a moment which lends credibility to the religious stance of the author. People are not changed utterly by the advent of grace into their

lives. They are rather, as Rachel says, different and the same. There is moving evidence of how Hagar is different; now, appropriately at the last, there is witness of the way in which Hagar will not change.

> Bless me or not, Lord, just as you please, for I'll not beg. (274)
>
> ...
>
> I'll drink from this glass, or spill it, just as I choose. (275)

Laurence's character is consistent. Her approach to God and life have been parallel from the beginning and they still are. As the god-vision is redeemed, just so far is the life-vision altered. Hagar's transformation is splendid, but stone does not completely dissolve in three days. Hagar goes out insisting on holding her water and her life "in [her] own hands." (275) Anything else would be less than credible.

The same sense of what constitutes a 'splendid' occurrence informs Laurence's story of Rachel Cameron. Rachel is transformed from a "thin streak" of a daughter (Laurence, 1966: 36), who is preoccupied with the fear of being foolish, to a woman who perceives herself as mother and honoured member of the company of fools that is humanity. She finds not solutions, but rather an enlarged and essentially different view of the problem of human life and her own life in particular.

Rachel knows and speaks prophetically of her essential

problem early in A Jest of God.

> Nothing is clear now. Something must be the matter with my way of viewing things. I have no middle view. Either I fix on a detail and see it as though it were magnified-- ... --or else the world recedes and becomes blurred. (105)

What Rachel describes is precisely what Novak calls the profane standpoint. Rachel cannot see as the grown-up Vanessa could, the man behind the mask. She cannot see Calla's love behind her strangeness, Willard's loneliness behind his visits, her mother's fear behind her complaints. Further, she believes that life just happens to her and that she has no choice. Even her occasional insight she perceives as being out of her influence.

> The layers of dream are so many, so many false membranes grown around the mind, that I don't even know they are there until some knifing reality cuts through, and I see the sight of my other eyes for what it has been, distorted, bizarre, grotesque, unbearably a joke if viewed from the outside. (184)

Both the layers of dream and the knifing realities Rachel blames on the jokes of a god who is not otherwise alive for her. There follows a gradual transformation through the incidents with Calla, Nick, Hector, and the birthing of a tumour. Rachel's position on vision, choice, and the role of God shifts.

One of her final statements in the novel sounds similar to the old position but is not. Confronted by a panic-stricken mother who wants to know what will become of her, Rachel utters what to her has been a nineteenth century cliché: "Well, in the end--the end--it's in other hands." (235) What Rachel means by it now, however, is:

> 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. (237)

This 'enormous relief' is what Novak refers to as the "strange healing and joy" (1971: 11) of the religious or sacred standpoint in which living comes first. What Rachel has learned is that occurrences which are disasters "from every point of view except the most inner one" (Laurence, 1966: 164) are not true disasters; that the most inner point of view is what she can trust, now that it is free of its shackling fear of foolishness and its glass pride. It is not fear but the fear of fear that she has lost. She has discovered the deep truth of the statement that it is, in the end, in other hands, and also the implicit freedom and acceptance that understanding implies. But she has also discovered, within that faith, the world of choice. In short, she has apprehended paradox at the heart of things. "This," she says of her reasons for resigning her teaching position, "like everything else, is both true and false." (240)

This sense of paradox is central to Laurence's stories. What her heroines learn is to move increasingly away from a dichotomous viewpoint to a place in which they can tolerate, and sometimes even celebrate, the tension of paradox. This healing of vision is only possible for persons who honour the advent of the spirit in and through their own concrete experiences of the flesh. What is birthed cannot ultimately be denied; one does so at the price of one's own voice and being.

Rachel at last acquires the needed middle view. Sandra Djwa concludes that Rachel discovers the futility of her dreams of "the golden city" and the "true covenant of the spirit [in] that dispensation which allows her to give and take affection in the sometimes mundane but always real present." (New: 83) This either/or stance is more native to Djwa than it is to Laurence. Rachel, it is true, gives up her utter dependence on divine intervention in the order of things; she also learns to see what is in the present, that ability Northrop Frye calls "sense." (1963: 151) But she does not abandon her dream that "anything may happen." (Laurence, 1966: 245) She does not abandon, in Frye's terms, her "vision." (151) Frye, however, defines the religious life as the "manifestation of vision in the world of sense." (151) For Rachel, perhaps for any daughter of a male god, that process must also be reversed. Sense must come to inform the world of vision so that the dichotomy between them can begin to heal.

What Rachel adopts is a stance of hope rather than of

wishing. Wish is closed and has an object at heart; hope is open-ended. Hope knows that nothing may happen, and goes on hoping. Hope rests on paradox. Rachel achieves a whole way of seeing that includes both sense and vision. She sees the now and at the same time its symbolic connectedness with what has been and what is to come. She moves to a sacred standpoint. The radical experience of her sexuality has moved her not only to an apprehension of herself as mother, but also to a sense of her connection with all mothers. "It may be that my children will always be temporary, never to be held. But so are everyone's." (Laurence, 1966: 245) This statement represents a transformation. It is not resignation with which she speaks, but radical hope. Rachel, whose physical posture has been one of trying to make herself narrower, now moves forward with a certain openness to whatever portions of grace await her. She who has been a reluctant jester now moves willingly into the company of fools.

Such hope is "radical" because she is fully aware that her new freedom is limited and conditioned by her past; yet she has hope. She carries Manawaka within her and she knows it. Djwa understands Laurence's story to say that one must "break away from the voices of the past." (New: 71) Once again, Djwa's dichotomous way of putting things misrepresents Laurence. For Laurence what is required is not a breaking away from, but a coming to terms with, the ancestral. One must be able to carry what is in one's veins with grace so that it flows through and gives energy to life rather than clogs the arteries. One must not escape from, but redeem, the sins of the fathers. In fact,

in Laurence's stories, there is no effective escape. Even death is called a "gathering to one's ancestors." (Laurence, 1964: 274)

It is this lack of an escape route which Stacey bemoans. Her eyes are occupied so much in the search for it both behind and ahead that she has almost no sense of the now and its impact. Ann Ulanov has written that clarity of vision is "to see what is, not what one wishes were there" and that clarity of action is "to accept what is." (332) Stacey, when we first meet her, has neither. The splendid something that occurs for her is that by story's end, she finds a considerable measure of both. Nowhere is that more evident than in her question about her husband, Mac: "Who is this guy? Why did I never know?" (Laurence, 1969: 240)

There are many answers to Stacey's question: Mac has hidden parts of himself to appear more adequate; Stacey has been preoccupied with her own dilemmas; career and family concerns often distance people. Laurence is thorough and honest in her assessment of the contemporary human situation. But more important than any of these has been Stacey's inability to "stand any light." (164) Her terror-filled vision has so often rendered her senseless. She has been a direct inheritor of her father's wish to consort with the dead in dark subterranean places rather than be attentive to the present. Stacey wants out but is resigned to staying in.

Laurence's story says that redemption, for Stacey, consists in coming out of darkness and self-negation into the light of

what is, and daring to open her eyes and her heart. Stacey must dare to look upon the reality of people like Buckle and Tess and embrace it in all its complexity. Buckle, she sees, is both perverted victim and heroic son; Tess is both beautiful and ugly; Mac is both strong and weak; she herself is both powerless to change certain facts of existence and deeply able to redeem her own relationship to them. Typically, Laurence illustrates the latter by a reference to a mundane and very earthy issue. Stacey hates facing the druggist's supposed incredulity when she needs more birth control pills. One day she realizes that those very pills are a sort of proof of her ongoing desirability, an affirmation of her sexuality, a life totem. Stacey gains a hold on paradox, and a capacity to celebrate what is. She discovers clarity of vision and action.

From her new stance which sees into, under, and around things, she is able to affirm what happened for her with Luke. Previously, her style has been to erase herself and therefore to erase the value of her experiences. She denigrated her sexual love with Luke as the pitiful attempt of an aging woman to regain her youth. With the sight of her new eyes, she is able to say:

> I said unspokenly Help and you didn't turn away. You faced me and touched me. You were gentle. You needn't have been, but you were, and that I won't forget or cease being glad for. (277)

The old Stacey would have been grateful; the new one is "glad." Celebration replaces apology.

Further, Stacey accepts the reality of choice in her life, past and present. Given that the fires will "go on, inside and out" (307) for the rest of her life, she can still choose. She can choose whom to call "Dad"; she can choose to focus on what she calls "the trivialities" (307) of her present; she can choose Mac; and she can choose to accept herself. Most important, she can see now what she has previously not been able to take. Her connections, for example, to her parents, to her mother's bridge cronies, to Matthew, to her daughter, even to Tess. Her connection to everyone else's fear. Her connection to God. The sight of Stacey's Manawaka eyes is redeemed. Allan Bevan in his introduction to The Fire-Dwellers concludes that what Laurence presents in this story is hope

> based on a new form of faith, faith in one's self and in others, on selfless and generous love, on acceptance of one's responsibilities, and on a willingness to make some sacrifice for others. (xiii)

This statement renders Laurence a mere secularist. Hope for Laurence is based on redeemed vision, a spiritual, not an ethical, issue.

The viewpoint of Laurence's female characters is at first utterly patriarchal, hierarchical and ethical, Calvinist and spare, judging and analytical, divisive and directed. Even

Stacey, who is good at seeing more than one possible interpretation continues to think in either/or terms and wants to know which interpretation is "right." Such a point of view, when it stands alone is profane. As Novak says, it sees and names only the 'spadeness' of the spade and none of the other dimensions of its meaning. It also determines a profane motivation for action in these women; they tend to act only on principle. Rachel goes dutifully to the tabernacle because she said she would. Hagar uses her sexuality only dutifully. Stacey promises to diet because she should. Morag struggles to be the "good" wife to Brooke. As long as this motivation is the case, the action of these heroines is one-sided and not expressive of their full natures. It is full of spiritual righteousness, but it lacks soul. It is full of head, but it lacks heart.

The apprehension of grace occurs in confrontations with the "facts of life," birthing, loving, dying. Assisted by prophetic voices within and without, it involves a certain finding of soul and heart, a new motivation for action, a new viewing-point from which to look on Life. One does not, however, abandon one's head or the rest of the patriarchal inheritance. One cleaves to both in an acceptance of the essential tension of the sacred standpoint.

When we meet Morag Gunn, she like Hagar is engaged in sifting memories, seeking to redeem her own story. She has abandoned her efforts to screen the past from view; now she is choosing to see it all more fully, to come to terms with it.

Adrienne Rich calls this activity "re-vision, the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes," and claims that for women it is "an act of survival." (1979: 35) Margaret Laurence would not limit that necessity to women. The struggle to redeem the ancestral past is no less crucial to Jules than it is to Morag. Nevertheless, it is primarily the story of Morag that Laurence tells in a sure way; Jules would be one of those characters who would always have, for Laurence, the heart of a stranger.

What Morag learns about is the existence in herself of that other kind of sight she perceives in Royland. Simultaneously, she learns the limitations of that sight. It occurs to her finally that pure lucidity would produce an "unbearable perception of everything," (Laurence, 1974: 206) and that certain things, therefore, are not given to us to know. She has feared going "blind inside," (263) but understands finally that the real danger has been her chosen blindness to Christie, to Brooke, to her own Manawaka inheritance.

The problem within her control has been her illusion about clear sight. She has believed she could separate fact from fiction, past from present, the adult Morag from the child, and still see. Now she understands that all the characters in her past have been both "real and ... imagined," (248) and that "here and now [is] not, after all, an island." (357) She is seized with an urgency to write about what she can still see, rather than waste more time trying to see everything. This finding of her own eyes and her own voice is splendid. It

enables her to make full use of her gift, the sight of her own particular eyes, and to say to her inner critic:

> I'm going to stop feeling guilty that I'll never be as hard working or knowledgeable or all-round terrific as you were ... I'm not built like you, Saint C., or these kids, either. I stand somewhere in between. And yet in my way I've worked damn hard, and I haven't done all I ~~would've liked~~ to do, but I haven't folded up like a paper fan, either. (406)

Morag arrives at a sense of destiny and a deep sense of connectedness in her life. It is clear to her, in the end, that since it is not given to us to see far into the river, we must see deeply into the now, appropriating and acting upon that portion of grace (452) which is given to us and trusting in its connectedness to both past and future. We must wrestle the angel in the given for its blessing, so that "apparently impossible contradiction[s]" become "apparent and possible." (3) Laurence suggests that paradox is at the heart of the universe and that we can grasp it only in the flesh, the given concrete event. The river flows both ways. Impossible, unless seen. Christie was not Morag's father and, also, he was. Impossible, unless experienced.

This refusal of Morag's to dichotomize, this holding to the paradoxical in the concrete, and still getting on with "the necessary doing of the thing" (452) is what Morag means by going "with God." (450) On a human level, it is akin to the "mastery

of the heron's wings" (357); fragile-looking yet strong, threatened with extinction and yet alive; the heron does what it is meant to do with an unquestioning grace, with "soaring and measured certainty." (357) It goes with God.

Epilogue

Once I read Gabrielle Roy's The Road Past Altamont. In the section titled "My Almighty Grandmother," she says something about her view of God.

> ... it could not possibly have been a man who made the world. But perhaps a woman with extremely capable hands. (16)

I found that view charming and also completely foreign. How I envied her what I took to be a Catholic sensibility that included the femaleness of God! My own experience was more conditioned by that influence of Luther that Eric Erikson accuses of de-throning the Mother of God. (68) God's hands, if I ever considered them, held nothing save the reins of power. Reading Margaret Laurence was like coming home. It was heartland.

I, too, have in my ancestral dowry a sternly patriarchal Scots Presbyterian grandfather in a massive brick house. The house, in reality, was a tall narrow half of an old Ottawa semi; in my particular reality, it was massive. It had front and back stairs, a third floor before the stairs to the attic, and a pantry you could hide in. Grandfather Watt died when I was three and holds, therefore, no place in my conscious memory. But my mother tells of a time when I announced at the table, "I have to pee!" and then dissolved in tears. On the way upstairs, my

mother asked why I was crying. "Grampy," I spluttered, "Grampy look at me 'Shame for you.'" I still react to a disdainfully raised male eyebrow. He's there in my veins.

And so is Hagar. That spiritual pride and brittle backbone that despises weakness, that inability simply to rejoice, but also that propensity for sifting memory to a new conclusion, that willingness finally to repent--all are there. I know how it happens that her spiritual granddaughter develops a tendency to erase herself, along with a particular brand of courage that refuses to give up.

Both my kilted Watt uncles marched off to the European front never to return. My family crest promises to be "Always Prepared." The skirl of the pipes gives me gooseflesh. I actually have inherited from the two sides of my family a hunting knife and a plaid pin--and all the problem of the inner split they symbolize. I remember when the joy of Easter resided in applause for my new outfit. I remember bargaining Stacey-like with God, and looking for signs of His terrible disapproval. When I established final and irrevocable control over my own fertility, I lived with a sense of some devastating and imminent judgement from a God I had long ago ceased thinking of in such terms. Laurence is right; the knowledge stays in the blood from ancient times.

My advisor once challenged my blankness about a thesis topic with the statement that somewhere I already knew what it was. He was right. It had been years since my reading of

Laurence. But the Manawaka canon had continued to haunt me. I did not conduct a search for my subject. It came to me forcibly that I must write about Laurence's religious sensibility. It was a necessary doing.

Someone will say, "Oh, well then, you can't write a thesis on Laurence. You're standing up too close." And I'll reply, "I just did. I wrote it with 'the sight of my own particular eyes.'" (Laurence, 1976: 218)

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