

"A MYSTERY AT THE CORE OF LIFE"

Margaret Laurence & Women's Spirituality

Elisabeth Potvin

MOST CRITICS OF MARGARET LAURENCE who have focussed on the spiritual quest in her fiction have stressed the Biblical references which support an orthodox religious interpretation of her search for transcendence, in an attempt to reconcile her writing with the Judeo-Christian vision. One states the case like this: "How can [Laurence's] pejorative view of the institutional church be made to tally with a clearly Christian pattern of providential action which marks her novels?"¹ But *is* it clearly Christian? Laurence refused to be pigeonholed on her religious beliefs, stating, "I don't have a traditional religion, but I believe there's a mystery at the core of life."² "I don't think we can define God, but if there is a consciousness will aside from man, I think it leaves us a free will. It is up to us to save the planet."³ The "us" she refers to here is, I would suggest, women. In response to one query made toward the end of her life about whether her work implied that we should look toward a female principle for spiritual guidance, Laurence responded very emotionally that she had long hoped this trend would be observed in her work.⁴ She called *The Diviners* her spiritual autobiography, and it represents the apotheosis of her quest. To Margaret Atwood she confessed, "I don't think I'll ever write another novel."⁵

The female spiritual quest assumes a different form than the male heroic quest, which is generally linear and involves separation, achievement, and the conquest of culture over nature. The pattern for women is, by contrast, usually based on relating, nurturing and assuming responsibility for others, as theorists like Carol Gilligan⁶ and Nancy Chodorow⁷ have recently demonstrated. Unlike the male artist or seeker in fiction, the female artist faces major internal conflicts between the selfless role of the heroine and the self-expressive role of the artist.⁸ Estelle Jelenik claims that female autobiographies tend to be less goal-oriented than those of men,

concentrating more on inner reveries and social contexts than on external accomplishments.⁹ Heroism and spiritual salvation must then be redefined in the context of gender. Margaret Laurence is well aware of this, and in many respects her writing intuitively foreshadows the concerns outlined by contemporary feminist theories. She claims that her initial impulse in writing “seemed to be human freedom,” and adds that in later life, “in a profound sense it still is human freedom. . . . [which is] linked with some kind of growth and I would express this in terms of an inner freedom.”¹⁰ For her characters, the development of this inner freedom generally requires defiance of male authority figures, secular and divine. The challenge to the male heroic quest is most clearly, if humorously, outlined in her 1970 children’s work called *Jason’s Quest*. The hero Jason, a young mole, sets out on a quest for a cure for the “invisible sickness” which is destroying the city Molanium, accompanied by two cats and an owl — typical witches’ familiars. Molanium is culturally endangered because its inhabitants are afraid to grow and change, unable to relate to one another. Accordingly, the hero’s theme song mocks the static quality of Calvinism in the popular Protestant hymn:

Ride on, ride on in majesty!
Hark! all the tribes hosanna cry:
O Saviour meek, pursue thy road
With palms and scattered garments strowed.

In Jason’s story, the lyrics he sings are a parody of this hymn:

Bash on! bash on in majesty!
And thwart the fowling churls!
We will not be sedate and slow!
We’ll live in swoops and swirls.¹¹

In terms of a spiritual quest, Laurence also challenges gender-based definitions of sin and grace. Feminist theologian Valerie Saiving Goldstein contends that only men, whose sense of self is well-developed and separate, perceive pride as sin, and that women sin through

triviality, distractibility, and diffuseness; lack of an organizing center of focus; dependence on others for one’s own self-definition; tolerance at the expense of standards of excellence; inability to respect the boundaries of privacy; sentimentality, gossipy sociability, and mistrust of reason — in short, underdevelopment or negation of the self.¹²

These are faults which Laurence’s heroines struggle to overcome. They also typically follow the spiritual quest pattern outlined by another feminist theologian, Carol Christ, who describes a period of awakening followed by a descent and ascent, in imitation of the Demeter-Persephone myth.¹³ This descent pattern differs from the male heroic descent (evident in the work of writers such as Robert Kroetsch or Rudy Wiebe) by the fact that women remain symbiotically connected

to each other, whereas the male quest involves complete separation and the need to develop and prove a detached self-identity. An increased awareness of the mother-daughter affinity accompanies the female journey. Kathryn Allen Rabuzzi's concept of "motherhood" also corroborates the idea that women's search for autonomy is unique; she contends that mothering is a mystical experience because a pregnant woman is both one and two persons simultaneously. The spiritual hero can never have the dimensions of experience open to women, and compensates for this by individuation and striving.¹⁴

In tracing Laurence's shift in consciousness from androcentric orthodox religion to "gynolatric,"¹⁵ or "woman-reverencing," spirituality in the Manawaka novels, I want to stress the predominance of fat goddess and grotesque mother images. Laurence also emphasizes the themes of birth, pregnancy, and mortality. Each novel represents the four elements central to ancient goddess worship: earth, air, fire, and water. Where she does use Biblical imagery, it is generally subverted, in an attempt to break away from the dualistic philosophy which has characterized Western theology, or to give precedence to the immanent which has historically been denigrated at the expense of the transcendent. Laurence wants us to see that spiritual freedom is not a question of either/or, but instead an acceptance of the possibilities of both/and.

The iconoclastic nature of each heroine's rebellion as she struggles against orthodox religious structures is marked by confrontation with such issues as motherhood, suffering, fate, generational conflict, and social withdrawal, all seen from a woman's perspective. Each woman embarks on her own journey involving a "dark night of the soul" and finds herself an outcast. Marginalization thus becomes a position of power, a way of knowing, a way of seeing differently. On one hand, Laurence regrets the tragic loss of community when strong individuals are alienated by stratified institutions which create the loss of genuine spiritual vitality and lead to the polarization of the individual and society. On the other hand, it is clear that Laurence herself was becoming increasingly disillusioned with and losing faith in patriarchal monotheism. And so I want to discuss how each of the Manawaka novels represents a progressive break with the god of patriarchy, and a journey towards female autonomy.

IN THE FIRST OF THE NOVELS, *The Stone Angel*, Hagar's pride resembles that of her Biblical namesake; it is what allows us to both admire her for her moral insight and condemn her for her moral blindness. Hagar is identified with the downtrodden and the weak, yet her courage and her strength prevent her from becoming pathetic or victimized. She is the forebear of Laurence's heroines, the first to resist Calvinism, while the final break is not made until it is created

by Morag in *The Diviners*. Hagar, whose name means “flight,” is the archetypal woman of Old Testament theology: the outcast Egyptian, the last survivor of the ancient fertility cults destroyed by the Hebrews, the slave of Abraham, the mother of the disinherited Ishmael.

The novel opens with a description of the stone angel: its eyes are uncarved, without even the pretense of sight, so it is “doubly blind,” like Hagar.¹⁶ Made of hard marble, it represents the inaccessibility of Hagar’s dead mother, and stands as a tribute to the father’s authority in silencing and blinding women. The flowers surrounding the grave are overgrown and untended, suggesting the decay of nature. Hagar’s childhood is one of separation and cruelty: her only female influence is an aunt who favours Hagar’s brother Dan; her father despises the “feminine” gentleness of Matt and the sickly weakness of Dan and beats the two boys, who in turn beat Hagar; it is natural that she becomes hardened against the traditionally female traits. Forced to identify with her father, Hagar attributes her strength to masculine sternness. His legacy to her is a puritanical and functional religion; his first catechism is about weights and measures, symbolizing that his sense of justice is quantitative rather than qualitative. Jason Currie is opposed to the flesh, as is suggested by the fence separating him from No-Name Lottie’s mother and the birch cane he uses to punish Hagar. For Hagar, he is God the Father:

Auntie Doll was always telling me that Father was a God-fearing man. I never believed it of course. I couldn’t imagine Father fearing anyone, God included, especially when he didn’t even owe his existence to the Almighty God. God might have created heaven and earth, but Father was a self-made man. (*SA*, 16-17)

Striving to imitate her father, Hagar is also expected to conform to standards of femininity, and is sent to the ladies’ academy to learn to cook and embroider. Despite her refusal to play the role of dutiful daughter, and her insistence upon marrying the man her father despises, Hagar remains like her father. Her attraction to Bram is sexual; he represents the opposite of her repressive father, and so she elevates his crudeness and earthiness until they acquire romantic dimensions. “His banner over me was love,” she confesses of Bram (*SA*, 80). But Bram also wishes to oppress her: “I saw with amazement that he wanted a dynasty no less than my father had” (*SA*, 101). In a parody of the apostle Peter, Hagar denies her faith in patriarchy three times, fleeing first her father, then Bram, and then her son Marvin. Yet she remains enslaved to the pride afforded her through patriarchal privilege, having borne Bram only the necessary heirs, like the Biblical handmaiden to Abraham. Except that there is no real saint to comfort this Hagar, only a stone one; only a rusty bucket instead of deep well (*SA*, 187). She has sacrificed her life for “my lost men” (*SA*, 6), thinking women “flimsy, gutless” (*SA*, 4), furthering Abraham’s dynasty by remaining a servant, but ignoring her own destiny. She sees herself as a man, dressed entirely in Bram’s clothing and recogniz-

ing only a woman's eyes when she stares at herself in the mirror (*SA*, 133). Even when she leaves Bram, she ends only by serving another man in her capacity as housekeeper to Mr. Oatley, as later she must serve the wishes of her son. Although maleness is privileged under Calvinism, the fate of men is hardly desirable: John says he has no real father, and neither of Hagar's sons can claim Jason's love or respect. A father's love is like a "honeyed butcher knife rammed" into a child's mouth (*SA*, 125). Both Jason and Bram deny the force of Eros; they are "different sides of the same coin" (*SA*, 184) and are buried alongside one another. Justice and love are irreconcilable according to the harsh Calvinist doctrine; like Joyce's god who sits paring his fingernails, this god has neither mercy nor compassion, and heaven is only an ersatz goal, according to Hagar:

Even if heaven were real, and measured as Revelations says, so many cubits this way and that, how gimcrack a place it would be, crammed with its pavements of gold, its gates of pearl and topaz, like a gigantic chunk of costume jewellery. Saint John of Patmos can keep his sequined heaven, or share it with Mr. Troy, for all I care, and spend eternity in fingering the gems and telling each other gleefully, they're worth a fortune. (*SA*, 120)

By the end of the novel, after the parodic communion feast with Mr. Lees, Hagar has returned to nature and the female. He too has lived according to the code of masculine pride, which has also victimized his child. Hagar descends from the Apollonian light into the dark cannery near the water, following the search pattern of Demeter looking for a lost child. For the first time, she cries — about how she has hurt her son John. After her epiphany, Hagar learns to value her femaleness. In spite of her isolation and pride, she has remained connected to her children from whom she continues to learn. Now life is seen as a cyclical process, described in distinctly female terms, as Mrs. Steiner suggests:

"It all comes as a surprise. You get your first period, and you're amazed — *I can have babies now* — such a thing! When the children come, you think — *Is it mine? Did it come out of me? Who could believe it?* When you can't have them any more, what a shock — *It's finished — so soon?*" (*SA*, 104)

Hagar compares herself to the Ancient Mariner, who frees himself after he blesses the creatures of the sea; yet she rejects the Coleridgean notion of divine intervention in achieving grace. She bestows her own blessings, first to her rejected son, and later to her hospital roommate Sandra, to whom she offers a bedpan — Hagar's notion of grace is very earthy. She is self-motivated in both of these actions, refusing to appeal to "Our Father": "I may as well hold out a while longer," she says to her minister Mr. Troy (*SA*, 290). She recognizes the strength of older women, who are rooted like old trees, and pass on their knowledge to virgin women like Sandra, who is "green and slender, a sapling of a girl," and Doris, the mother figure. Hagar is a crone in the sense that feminist theologian Mary Daly defines her: "A Woman

becomes a Crone as a result of Surviving early stages of the Otherworld Journey and therefore having discovered depth of courage, strength, and wisdom in herself."¹⁷

What Hagar affirms is a vision of herself as a "holy terror" (*SA*, 304), combining within herself the alienated dualities of Old Testament faith. Mr. Lees, the inverted Christ figure who has lost his faith, reveals to her that the spirit is inseparable from the flesh (*SA*, 227). It is to the flesh that Hagar turns her attention now. Repeated references to pigs, cows, and other sacrificial animals once seen as sacred because of their breeding ability, link many of the characters with Hagar, who is described as "calm as a stout madonna" (*SA*, 122). Bram is described as "lazy as a pet pig," and Hagar compares her mound of flesh to the land itself (*SA*, 169, 190). She is an obese and bloated woman, a "Job in reverse" (*SA*, 40). She is like a mother goddess figure, an exaggerated example of maternity gone out of control.¹⁸ The demonic aspect of motherhood replicating itself is shown in grotesque insect imagery as well.¹⁹ Other references to female fertility and autonomy include calves, held sacred to the goddess (*SA*, 94) and the mother cat who gives birth to her young in a corner, "licking herself clean afterward, with no one to ask who the tom had been" — this is the ideal way Hagar wishes to give birth (*SA*, 99). Perhaps the most dramatic animal image of fertility which evokes the ambivalence of maternity is the group of chicks which Lottie steps on, foreshadowing how she and Hagar will crush the sexual passion of their two children Arlene and John; Hagar admires this act as cruel but merciful (*SA*, 28). Repeatedly motherhood is portrayed as distorted or commercialized by contemporary culture, as in the advertisement for the nursing home Silverthreads which ironically claims that "only the best will do for mother" (*SA*, 53). Hagar cannot initially play the role of comforting mother to her brother, her husband, her father, or her sons, but gradually rejects her patriarchal upbringing and learns compassion for others for, as her nurse remarks, "Haven't you ever given a hand to anyone in your time? It's your turn now. Try to look at it that way. It's your due" (*SA*, 276). Accepting her maternalness and her place in this cycle, Hagar reclaims her son's love. Hagar initially despises "that vat of a woman," Clara (*SA*, 46), as the Biblical Clara despised Sarah, if only for the reason that Clara bore Bram only daughters, and Hagar has learned to denigrate femaleness, not having been selected as the mother of the chosen race. Her final reconciliation with herself as a woman is represented by her acceptance of a glass of water from Doris, whom she previously despised as "a broody hen" (*SA*, 29), a "calving cow" (*SA*, 31), and a "sow in labour" (*SA*, 55). The water symbolizes a kind of baptism into a new faith, an acceptance of the woman who has done the most to nurture and sustain Hagar, who finally permits herself to be mothered: "I only defeat myself by not accepting her." (*SA*, 308). This is what she claims she has most desired in her life, to be accepted, and "simply to rejoice" (*SA*, 292).

A *Jest of God* takes up theological issues where *The Stone Angel* leaves off: here we have the same fear of the flesh and the feminine, and again the spiritual transformation is through Eros and water. God is a “joker” whose Old Testament harshness is juxtaposed with maternal love;²⁰ what Rachel’s father most fears is contact with any living thing. As Rachel says, “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.” (*JG*, 95) Rachel’s view of God is “bifocal”: she inherits both the harshness of institutional religion and develops her own definition of a life force which affords her some joy (Russell, 441). She rejects the “pretty and clean-cut Jesus” (*JG*, 41). Where Hagar felt she failed in motherhood, Rachel’s dissatisfaction stems from not being pregnant. She is the stereotype of the seduced and abandoned woman, yet she is not waiting to be rescued by a male savior, as one critic contends:

One simply gets tired of listening to Rachel take pot-shots at herself. The reader, instead of identifying, finds himself (herself, too, I should think) silently shouting at her to get some eyeliner, save for a mink, strong-arm a man, kill her mother, and stop bitching.²¹

If Rachel has any inner conflict, it is regarding maternity, not her need to “strong-arm a man,” except as an instrument in becoming pregnant. Like the Biblical Rachel, who is envious of her sister’s fertility, Rachel is jealous of her sister Stacey and of James Doherty’s mother Grace (*JG*, 50) and seeks to mother her students; yet she can also contemplate the dark, destructive aspect of mothering in considering both suicide and abortion seriously. All of the jests of God in the novel involve the rejection of love: Calla’s for Rachel, Rachel’s for her sister, Mrs. Cameron’s for Rachel, Rachel’s for Nick, and Rachel’s love for her “unborn child.” The acceptance of an orthodox God is complicated for Rachel by her fear of rejecting her mother whose alliance to conventional religion is strong:

I always go [to church] though. When I came back to teach in Manawaka, I told Mother the first Sunday that I didn’t think I’d go. She said, “Why not?” I didn’t say God 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. (*JG*, 39)

The “alive” aspect of Christianity is represented by the Evangelical Temple attended by Calla, where ecstatic religion and speaking in tongues is confused for Rachel by her sexually ambivalent feelings toward Calla, the “mother of canaries and budgeriars” (*JG*, 137). Calla offers to take care of Rachel and her unborn child, but Rachel is afraid of what Calla represents and equates her with the caged birds. Neither extreme of maternal love, as a form of domination, will do, nor will Nick’s love bring satisfaction: “I am not God,” he tells her. Nick, associated with Apollo and the sun (*JG*, 176), most desires separateness — “He is so apart”

(*JG*, 85) — and Rachel, who is associated with Eve and with water (*JG*, 86, 141), wants closeness.

Rachel must learn to overcome her fear of mortality, and, while the first four chapters focus on death and the repression of nature, even the introduction of Nick in the fifth chapter and his resurrection of her physical nature cannot help her overcome this completely. As Carol Christ's model proposes, heroines on a spiritual search must make an independent descent into the landscape of their fears. Breaking an old taboo, Rachel literally descends into the bowels of the funeral parlour and gets drunk with Hector, the "comic prophet, dwarf seer," as she calls him (*JG*, 124), who allows her positive insights into death so that she may re-emerge whole. Like Mrs. Kazlik, the old woman whom Nick admires for being "inner-directed," Rachel learns defiance and can say "No" to her mother three times, and assert, "I am the mother now" (*JG*, 184). She also rejects the stifling mother love of Calla, who insists on calling her "child" and desires to help Rachel raise her baby. Her longing is "to be borne," a pun which refers to herself and to her future maternity: "Give me my children," she demands, as did her Biblical namesake (*JG*, 181). Like Hagar, she rejects the "faith of the fathers" — "God's pity on God," she concludes (*JG*, 202) — in favour of an acceptance of living in the present, and a strengthened view of womanhood. Rachel acknowledges the ambivalence of motherhood; she listens to neither "my mother's archaic simper voice" (*JG*, 90), nor Calla's voice, the "pillar of tabernacles, speaker in tongues" (*JG*, 198), but relies on her own inner voices: "My speaking voice, and then only that other voice, wordless and terrible, the voice of some woman mourning for her children" (*JG*, 181).

With *The Fire-Dwellers*, we move from the Old Testament God of wrath to the New Testament God of love, but his love offers nothing to redeem women, nor is modern religion much different from urban consumerism: it devours women. Laurence claimed that her protagonist, t Stacey, who "mourns [her] disbelief," is Hagar's spiritual granddaughter.²² The choppy, nonlinear style of the novel reflects a rebellion against conformity and conventionality. The plot of the novel is exceedingly mundane: a Vancouver suburban housewife seeks liberation and has an extramarital affair; one could be describing a Harlequin romance. Yet the important point is that Laurence inverts the mundane and the sacred: hairdressers become priestesses, supermarkets become temples, and Stacey communing with the birds is described as a prophetess. "God has a sick sense of humour, if you ask me," she retorts.²³ The sacredness of consumerism in modern society is reflected in the mass rally held by the Richalife company, which sells

Not Just Vitamins — A New Concept — A New Way of Life with testimonials. *Both Spirit and Flesh Altered. Richness is a Quality of Living.* Singing ads on local stations, blond angelic trilling. Rallies. Gimmicks falling like the golden shower of stars from fireworks. Oh Jesus lover of my soul. (*FD*, 34)

Richalife is headed by the silver-haired god of thunder (*FD*, 45), Thor, who drinks sacrificial blood (tomato juice) to prove he is a reformed alcoholic and proclaims “we’re not just selling vitamin pills — we’re selling ourselves” (*FD*, 40). He is also strongly critical of Stacey’s mothering abilities, which immediately puts her on the defensive (*FD*, 42). Stacey chooses this occasion to become drunk in a mockery of Thor, playing the role of the Nietzschean clown who announces that God is dead. Secular religion is a cheap substitute for old-fashioned salvation; for women, particularly, it offers only celluloid distractions like magazines, diets, vitamin pills, drugs, cosmetics, extramarital affairs, and the occasional night course which, instead of being a “rich cultural experience,” reinforces the emptiness of male culture, as is suggested by the gender exclusivity of their content: “Mythology of Modern Man” (*FD*, 4), “Man and His Gods” (*FD*, 53), and “Varying Views of Urban Life” (*FD*, 72). Women are ritually sacrificed to perpetuate male dominance, as Stacey recognizes in her Ancient Greek course, where the professor chastises her for identifying with Clytemnestra, to which she responds:

The king sacrificed their youngest daughter for success in war — what was the queen supposed to do, shout for joy? *That’s not quite the point we’re discussing, is it? She murdered her husband, Mrs. MacAindra.* Yeh well I guess you must know, Dr. Thorne. Sorry. *Oh, that’s fine — I always try to encourage people to express themselves.* — Young twerp. Let somebody try killing one of his daughters. But still, he had his Ph.D. (*FD*, 32)

This sense of alienation can be traced back to the patriarchal myth of the Garden of Eden:

Where did it start? Everything goes too far back to be traced. The roots vanish, because they don’t end with Matthew [her father-in-law], even if it were possible to trace them that far. They go back and back forever. Our father Adam. (*FD*, 167)

Death also permeates this novel: various characters are killed or attempt to kill themselves, and media images of Viet Nam continue to haunt Stacey. Society’s mass death wish is the antithesis of Stacey’s yearning for purity: the two polarities are represented by the violence-obsessed Buckle and the gentle fisherman-artist Luke. Luke refers to Stacey as “Mer-woman,” half land and half sea. The image of the sea-whale (*FD*, 233) recalls the mother goddess figure, the sea representing the primal womb; it is echoed again in the description of the enormous figure of Buckle’s mother, the “undersea giant woman” (*FD*, 159), found blindly crawling around on her hands and knees with her “big tits bumping on the floor” (*FD*, 262). Stacey is linked to these images by her size and by the fact that, as Buckle’s mother survives his death, so she survives the fate of Tess. Juxtaposed with the transformative water symbols are those of fire, suggesting passion, escape, and destruction. “Better to marry than to burn, St. Paul said, but he didn’t say what to do if you married *and* burned,” remarks Stacey (*FD*, 211). Although she longs for escape

to the water-filled country of her dreams, she cannot leave her family. Her decision to remain at home may not appear to be the choice of a truly liberated woman, but in many respects it is more courageous than fleeing responsibility for patriarchal tokenism in the work force or the nostalgic escapism offered by Luke. It is a woman's choice; one which cannot be understood by a male deity: "Listen here, God, don't talk to me like that. You have no right. *You* try bringing up four kids. Don't tell me you've brought up countless millions because I don't buy that. We've brought up our own selves and precious little help we've had from you" (*FD*, 168). Like Rachel, Stacey makes her journey of descent into the basement, where she dances drunkenly in her golden slippers, and now God is only a spectator. Her quest is to become more self-reliant and she proclaims, "Give me another forty years, Lord, and I may mutate into a matriarch" (*FD*, 308).

A fully-developed matriarch, a woman unafraid to go deep into her past or forward into her future, is what we meet in *The Diviners*. Thus far Laurence has presented us with the three phases of a woman's life: the virgin Rachel, the mother Stacey, and the crone Hagar. In this final novel, we have a woman who encompasses all three. Morag is not just a seeker, but also a creative artist, shaper of her own destiny. Recognizing that socially institutionalized oppression relies upon the spiritual legitimation of God the Father, she discovers the sublime in the lower, more banal realms, along with the socially marginalized — in Christie's role as trash collector, in Jules' as an outcast Metis, and in herself as an adopted misfit. Like many postmodern protagonists, she questions the dominant definition of reality and prescriptive belief system. There is no final truth, she writes to her friend Ella, only the interweaving of history and myth. When she was a child, Morag claimed it was possible to love Jesus but not God.²⁴ But as an adult, Morag questions her belief in God as well, and doubts that institutional religion holds much significance in her life. As the reviewer of her first novel states, "Miss Gunn obviously has it in for the Church" (*D*, 214). As God decreases in status, the fat goddess increases in stature. In the first "snapshot" we have of her, Morag appears as "buried alive" in the flesh of her mother. Prin is also a grotesque mother figure, and Mrs. Gerson is portrayed as the ideal matriarch. Catherine Parr Traill represents Morag's spiritual mother and replaces God in the heroine's interior monologues. But even this model is eventually abandoned because it is too unrealistic and abstract (*D*, 332). Motherhood inspires ambivalence: Pique denies her mother repeatedly and Morag is as envious of her daughter's sexual freedom as Stacey was of Katie's. Pique, fruit of the *hieros gamos* of Morag and Jules, marks the beginning of a new matriarchal lineage, blending the Highland and Metis myths with her own, and inheriting the strengths of her mother and Catherine Parr Traill after all the fathers are buried. Her iconoclasm is what ensures her future survival.

If women are the key to salvation, men, on the other hand, appear rather negatively, particularly when controlling female sexuality and birth processes. The

doctor who interferes with Pique's birth is depicted as extraneous, and Brooke's censure of Morag for writing about abortion is clearly condemned; she publishes her novel under her maiden name to avoid association with him. Brooke wants Morag to remain his bride-child: fresh, dependent, having no past, and childless — he describes children as “accidents,” and refers to Morag as his “little one.” But Morag does not want a daddy. Brooke's frustration as a failed creator (and Morag's frustration at the academic institution which has failed her) is reflected in what Laurence portrays as Brooke's desire to usurp Morag's ability to give birth — to her novel, to her child, to her self. Except for Jules, who is described as a shaman helping her do magic (*D*, 223), all of Morag's sexual encounters are with hostile or insensitive men like Chas or Harold. Even her adulterous relationship with Dan MacRaith, which she initially rationalizes to herself as healthy, gradually becomes unacceptable to Morag once she begins to empathize too much with his wife Birdie and to wonder about the welfare of his children.

In this novel, nature is again associated with femaleness, but it acquires more mystical dimensions, as in Wordsworth's sense of nature embodying “wise passiveness.” The river, like time, flows both ways, metaphorically evoking both birth and death. Morag's fertility is associated with her foray into the ravine with Jules. The forest is her true element (*D*, 41), and she is described as a pagan witch, a “lonely watcher of the waters.” Morag's epiphany of the “here and now” is represented by the flight of the blue heron, which is “ancient-seeming,” an “angel,” “something out of the world's dawn. . . . [as she watches] the soaring and measured certainty of its flight” (*D*, 292). The New Jerusalem is a failure, according to Morag, and her return to nature is paralleled by an increasing awareness of the bond with her daughter. Morag combines the phallic instruments of power: spear, knife, and divining rod, with her symbols of herself as moon and water in the mythic figure of the Black Celt Morag, the Celtic triple goddess of Morrighan, protectress of the land. Like Royland, who says he gave up preaching his hellfire and brimstone doctrine because it “[s]eemed better to find water than to. . . . Raise fire” (*D*, 197), Morag finds her rebirth in water. Likewise Pique, whom Morag refers to as “harbinger of my death, continuer of life,” is named after her ancestress Piquette, who also survives trial by fire.

IN SUGGESTING THAT LAURENCE'S FICTION was evolving toward a female-identified spirituality, I am really claiming that it reaches back to its beginnings, for her African writings celebrate the joy of female sexuality, pregnancy, and religion. This detached, but not disinterested, exuberance exists because, in her African works, Laurence can view her characters from a cultural distance, not yet recognizing her personal complicity in the colonization of Africa

or her own involvement in authoritarian regimes, both secular and religious. Her real concern with the psychosocial dimensions of feminism are muted and undeveloped in this early work, because her liberalism is still male-identified. Yet in her evocation of the fertility goddess Nyame in *The Tomorrow Tamer* (*TT*, 128), or in *This Side Jordan*, women are seen as the ultimate source of life, power, and compassion: "If men had to bear the children, the world would die of your fear."²⁵ Water and fire are again the essential elements of spiritual wholeness in these works, and acquire special significance in an African context, where women's oppression is equated with colonization and freedom is again asserted through an emphasis on the body and nature. In *This Side Jordan*, England is personified as an aging crone: "Britannia's no longer a buxom wench who can give or withhold her favours. She's a matriarch, and an emaciated one at that" (*T SJ*, 170). The river which Nathaniel must cross in order to "come over into salvation . . . was the warm slimy womb of all" (*T SJ*, 247); and the ebony Madonna, another central symbol in the novel, becomes for him "the Mother of all men" and a metaphor for black emancipation (*T SJ*, 274). And Johnnie Kestoe ends by recognizing his abuse of the young black girl and embracing the feminine, naming his new daughter after his mother Mary. *The Prophet's Camel Bell* marks Laurence's recognition of the political implications of her position in Africa, and she begins to identify with the poor women who come to her begging for relief from the pain caused by clitoridectomies:

What should I do? give them a couple of five-grain aspirin? lunatic audacity of shoving a mild pill at their total situation was more than I could stomach. . . . They had not really believed I would give them anything. Women had always lived with pain. Why should it ever be any different?²⁶

When Laurence realizes that it can be different, that it is women who participate in the exploitation of their own sex and perpetuate patriarchal values, at the bidding of their men, her outrage becomes palpable. The notion that women's resistance is limited because of their relationships with men was something that Laurence could recognize in a culture other than her own, but eventually it hit home. When she finally acknowledges her inadvertent alliance with male privilege, a theme she explores in the Manawaka novels, her faith in the world as it exists is badly shaken. Looking increasingly toward a definition of "inner freedom" that was true to her instincts as a woman, Laurence challenged the parameters of conventional wisdom and traditional faith. Who knows what kind of spiritual heroine she might have envisioned had she dared to continue writing along the same path? It is perhaps no wonder that Laurence's own community banned her final novel as "obscene" — no doubt it disturbed the prevailing sense of morality, and the promotion of its ideas logically extended might lead the reader into dangerous territories.

The spiritually free woman depicted in the Manawaka novels is not unique to Margaret Laurence. Other Canadian women writers — Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro, Mavis Gallant, Adele Wiseman, and Isabel Huggan, to name but a few — have given us heroines whose courage and defiance have allowed them to resist surrendering to the dominant patriarchal ethos. Northrop Frye claims that Canadian consciousness rests on an image of the land as an “unsievable virginity.”²⁷ I can only assume he meant this as a challenge to the Canadian male psyche: to penetrate the secret, to conquer nature, and to overcome that tenacious and amorphous mystery which confronts him. Perhaps Canadian women have developed a different approach — one which does not involve violation, but is receptive to natural mystery, divining an unvanquished spirit. Throughout all her writing, Laurence’s spirituality is based upon a revival of the primal, the sensual, and the mundane. In these terms, she envisioned an ancient but paradoxically very new *mythos* which established her as one of the spiritual foremothers in the development of the Canadian consciousness.

NOTES

- ⁴ See Gwen Cranfill Curry, “Introduction,” *Journeys toward Freedom* (Ph.D. thesis, Kenneth Russell, “God and church in the fiction of Margaret Laurence,” *Studies in Religion*, 7 (Fall 1978), 435.
- ² Valerie Miner, “The matriarch of Manawaka,” *Saturday Night*, 89, 5 (May 1974), 18.
- ⁸ Donna Wigmore, “Margaret Laurence: The Woman Behind the Writing,” *Chate-laine* (Feb. 1971), 54.
- ⁴ See Gwen Cranfill Curry, “Introduction,” *Journeys toward Freedom* (Ph.D. thesis, Indiana University, 1980).
- ⁵ Margaret Atwood, “Face to Face,” *A Place to Stand On: Essays by and about Margaret Laurence*, ed. George Woodcock (Edmonton: NeWest, 1983), 27.
- ⁶ *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982).
- ⁷ *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1978).
- ⁸ Carole Pearson, “The Artist,” *Who am I? Female Portraits in British and American Fiction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), 199.
- ⁹ *Women’s Autobiographies* (Bloomington & London: Indiana Univ. Press, 1980).
- ¹⁰ Clara Thomas, “A Conversation about Literature: An Interview with Margaret Laurence and Irving Layton,” *Journal of Canadian Fiction* 1.1 (Winter 1972), 67.
- ¹¹ *Jason’s Quest* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1970), 115.
- ¹² “The Human Situation: A Feminine Viewpoint,” *The Nature of Man in Theological and Psychological Perspective*, ed. Simon Doniger (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 165.
- ¹³ *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest* (Boston: Beacon, 1980).
- ¹⁴ *Motherself: A Mythic Analysis of Motherhood* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1988).

- ¹⁵ The term was coined by Edward C. Whitmont, *The Return of the Goddess* (New York: Crossroad, 1982).
- ¹⁶ *The Stone Angel* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1964), 3.
- ¹⁷ *Gyn/Ecology* (Boston: Beacon, 1978), 16.
- ¹⁸ See *SA*, 46, 56, 92, 133, 170, 259, 261, 307 for examples.
- ¹⁹ See *SA*, 118, 170, 178, 216.
- ²⁰ *A Jest of God* (London, Melbourne: Macmillan, 1966), 95.
- ²¹ Robert Harlow, "Lack of Distance," *Canadian Literature* 31 (Winter 1967), 74.
- ²² George Woodcock, *The Sixties: Canadian Writers and Writing of the Decade* (Vancouver: Univ. of British Columbia Publications Center, 1969), 10-16.
- ²³ *The Fire-Dwellers* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1969), 75.
- ²⁴ *The Diviners* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1974), 63.
- ²⁵ *This Side Jordan* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1960), 264.
- ²⁶ *The Prophet Camel's Bell* (1963; rpt. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1965), 64.
- ²⁷ *Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English*, ed. Carl F. Klinck (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1965), 826.

G17024

Fred Cogswell

In 1940 the lottery was war,
 My ticket number G17024,
 And then it was I staked my puny claim
 With a cipher more meaningful than name.
 The prize was peace and freedom for us all,
 The odds that favoured victory were small,
 But yet when 1945 came around
 The unexpected happened and I found
 Myself secure in new civilian dress
 And had at last for very own, no less,
 What I had lacked for many years, a will
 With which to steer my life. I have it still.
 And when that happened, G17024,
 As if it had not been, was then no more.
 But now, after years of being free,
 In age I find that number haunting me.