WORDS AND THE WORLD

"The Diviners" as an Exploration of the Book of Life

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CRITICS HAVE ADEQUATELY ANALYSED Margaret Laurence's last volume in the Manawaka cycle as an experiment in "voice and pictures" which attempts to convey the quality of experience through an "audio-visual" narrative process.[1] Still, it remains that *The Diviners* is patterned as much as a pilgrimage along epic lines as a *Bildungsroman*, and that Morag Gunn's archetypal quest for salvation and meaning is linked, through fable and dialogue, to an insistent theme: that of writing as a creative and communicative process indissociable from the problematic relationship between fiction and reality, between the Word and the World. Evident as it is in the programmatic title, *The Diviners*, the rendering of the exploratory process inherent in both experience and writing deserves more than a mere decoding of allusions because it proposes at the same time an exhaustive, coherent inquiry into the verbal creative process and a mimetic, self-contained symbol of whatever "divining" may be.

By professional, more than religious, definition, diviners at first appear to be somewhat different from word-makers, creators, and even readers. The story provides explicit answers to the question: what is it to divine? The professional diviner is, of course, Royland, a water-diviner who makes a living finding springs and wells underground with the help of a Y-shaped willow wand. Although one must have the gift, he concedes, this is no magic trick but only a process which works most of the time even though it cannot be explained. His character, however, is endowed with more than the usual professional and even human attributes. His name makes him the "king of the land," the Prospero of McConnell's Landing, the genius of inland and underground waters. He also is a fisherman, "the Old Man of the River" (as Pique likes to call him), a sort of river god or Fisher King who brings Morag offerings of pickerels. Like the mythical Fisher King he has been cursed. Indeed, his fanatical religious zeal (he thinks he has received "the revealed word") brought about his wife's suicide, because, though initially close to God, he had turned priesthood into tyranny. He is thus left

without offspring as a retribution for his sins. Even more than his long, grey beard, his "terrible eyesight" — he is too stubborn to wear glasses — marks him as gifted with "some other kind of sight," the visionary powers of a seer. Thus, Royland is not only a "diviner," through unseen vibrations, of water, but also a prophet from whom "Morag always felt she was about to learn something of great significance . . . which would explain everything . . . his work, her own, the generations, the river."

Morag is linked paradigmatically to Royland, not only as a substitute daughter (since he considers Pique his granddaughter), ready to welcome his wise teachings, but as an antithetic equal: she is 47 and he is 74; he is nearly blind, she is terribly myopic. They are companions in many ways, although she apparently does not have his gift. As she remarks: "She wasn't surprised. Her area was elsewhere. He was divining for water. What in hell was she divining for?" You could not doubt the value of water, she implies, the way you can doubt the value of words and literature.

"Old as Jehovah," "ancient," Royland embodies an inexpressible, archaic force. He is

> Old Man River. The Shaman. The Diviner. Morag, always glad to see him, felt doubly glad. He would, of course, not tell her what to do. Not Royland's way. But after a while she would find she knew.

Royland's gift as a soul-diviner duplicates his ability to release earth-locked water; he releases pent-up spiritual resources from others' innermost beings. He does not create them, however, and when Morag speaks of his Celtic second-sight he answers that *she* is the Celt, not he. Gradually, they exchange roles, or with time his powers at least seem to be transferred to her. One day, when he comes to see her, he says he has lost his divining abilities. He insists it is not an uncommon occurrence, rather a rule as one gets older and "by no means a matter for mourning." And as he loses his power, he imparts a lesson to Morag — maybe not the secret she expected, but one that enables her to hope:

> It's something I don't understand, the divining . . . and it's not 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.

The elect are more numerous than is believed. Royland's power (or faith) can be acquired by trying hard and, especially, by not attempting to understand and explain. And the gift can be transmitted:

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

Contrasting Royland's true achievements, to which existing springs testify, Morag doubts her own "magic tricks . . . of a different order," because the reality of her achievement — communication — cannot be gauged: "She would never know whether they actually worked or not, or to what extent. This wasn't given to her to know. In a sense, it did not matter. The necessary doing of the thing — that mattered." Such is the answer to her earlier, anguished question: "Why not take it on faith, for herself, as he did. Sometimes she could, but not always."

The second character who comes to mind as a diviner is Christie Logan. Their appearances, as well as their ages, point to a parallel between Christie and Royland. There is something clownlike about both — Royland is "a loon" and Christie laughs like a "loony" — and both are brothers to the mythical Piper Gunn. When Royland performs, he stalks the ground "like the slow pace of a piper playing a pibroch. Only this was for a reverse purpose. Not a walk over the dead. The opposite. . . . " This recalls the pibroch piped at the funeral of Christie and his tales of Piper Gunn.[2] Also, structurally, both men stand in the same relationship to Morag as adoptive fathers and as spiritual guides and mentors.[3]

Christie is early characterized as another type of diviner — a garbage reader. Like Royland, his appearance marks him as one of the elect. He "looks *peculiar*," slightly misshapen with bobbing head and "cloudy" eyes. He is soon revealed to be a clown, a jester, a sacred idiot. When he acts for the children, he is possessed, in a sort of drunken ecstasy.[4] He becomes, by physical similarity, a "redskin," i.e., a "natural" man or shaman, and uttters his divining words, "By their garbage shall ye know them." Christie yells like a preacher, a clown preacher: "I swear by the ridge of tears and by the valour of my ancestors, I say unto you, Morag Gunn, that by their bloody goddamn fucking garbage shall ye christly well know them." Christie prophesies, in biblical language as befits his role, and interprets men's "monuments in muck, reading their lives from their garbage — a true fortune-teller." Appropriately, the text reminds us that Christie gets into such states when "the whiskey is in him," thus linking this episode with another section, "Christie With Spirits." Here "spirits" is nicely ambiguous, the meaning slowly progressing from *alcohol* (namely "red biddy"), to *inspiration*, as "he gets into the subject he always talks about when the spirits are in him," then to *possession*: "the spirits are really in him. His eyes are shining. His right hand comes up, clenched. He is pretending he is holding a claymore . . . " until the "spirits start to get gloomy in him. . . . " He tells Morag tales "sometimes when the spirit moves him."

Moreover, his name and his favourite swear words ("Jesus" and "christly") make Christie an incarnation of Christ. Indeed, he takes upon himself the physical and moral muck of the Manawaka community, making the Nuisance Ground homologous to a peaceful cemetery. His symbol is a heart pierced by a passion

nail, not unlike the image of the Bleeding Heart of Jesus Morag can see on the wall of Lazarus's shack.

A later episode develops "Christie's Gift of Garbage Telling":

> "Did I ever tell you, Morag, that telling garbage is like telling fortunes? . . . You know how some have the gift of second sight? . . . Well, it's the gift of garbage telling which I have myself, now."

Telling, in this sense, is richly ambiguous again since it means deciphering and recounting, interpreting and handing down to others through oral tradition. This is in part what Morag attempts as a novelist. Several years after Christie's death, she wonders: "Would there be a special corner of heaven, then, for scavengers and diviners? Which was Morag, if either, or were they the same thing?" And again, nearly despairing of emulating him, she proclaims her spiritual and vocational relationship to Christie just as she had to Royland:

> Christie, tell the garbage — throw those decayed bones like dice or like sorcerer's symbols. You really could see, though. What about me? Do I only pretend to see in writing?

Then, at last, Morag regrets that she could only see "too late" the beauty of Christie and his love for her. And she grieves at her lack of response: "I told my child tales about you, but never took her to see you. I made a legend out of you while the living you was there alone in that mouldering house." Indeed, literature is a pale substitute for life, words for feelings. One should keep legends for the time when death has taken our relatives, for myth-making cannot equal the giving of love.

This may be one of the secrets Morag was incapable of guessing, the message associated with her river- or bird-watching, or with the cry and flight of the geese, themselves associated on one occasion with Royland's divining. The flock sounds a "deep drawn resonant raucous cry that no words can ever catch but which no one who ever hears it will ever forget." Through this indescribable, yet unforgettable and eternal sound, divining and memory are associated. The river and the geese also become spatial equivalents through their north-south dynamic movement: the river seems to flow simultaneously in two opposing directions, while the geese twice-yearly ply their route between the arctic cold and the milder south. These movements can be watched and their meaning read by Morag. Part diviner, she is a bird-watcher and a river-gazer, still fascinated by the apparent contradiction, "even after the years of river watching." Bird-watching is not for her primarily a form of scientific inquiry: she is more interested in metaphor than in observation. She reads human behaviour (although railing against her own pathetic fallacy) into a bird giving advice to its fledglings, or adopts Eula McCann's deciphering of the sparrow's trill as a "loud and clear message," "Pres-pres-pres-pres-Presbyterian!" That for her bird-watching is a

means of gaining access to the primeval secrets of nature is revealed in the climactic and emblematic Great Blue Heron episode.

The apparition of the heron is led up to linguistically by Morag's fear of the weeds. They evoke in her mind "a river-monster, probably prehistoric, which has been hibernating here in the mud for ten million years and has just wakened. Or Grendel in Beowulf, and me without courage or a sword." The monster clearly represents a being contemporaneous with the beginnings of creation, waiting in the clay of life in an enchanted sleep, opponent of a mythical literary figure out of the dark ages. The prehistorical metaphor is continued through "mini-dinosaur bullfrog" until it turns into a "pterodactyl," thus making the heron into a divine, archetypal bird, "like a pterodactyl, like an angel, like something out of the world's dawn." The description of the heron began in a very literal fashion: it was simply signalled by its long legs, neck and beak as in La Fontaine's fable. Then it became a listing in a book compiled by a local Audubon: "A Great Blue Heron (note the generic name). Once populous in this part of the country. Now rarely seen." The third, evocative description at once transforms the bird into a mythical embodiment of flight, serenely balanced in its trajectory toward death and eternity. A "creature" and "a thing," the heron is indeed a monster, not only because of its hugeness or association with prehistory, but in the etymological sense of "monstrum." It is a prodigy which reveals and demonstrates some hidden meaning in creation.[5]

Filled with religious awe, communicating "in unspoken agreement," Royland and Morag take the boat home:

> That evening Morag began to see that here and now was not after all an island. Her quest for islands had ended some time ago and her need to make pilgrimage had led her back here.

Now is the log cabin of pioneer Sarah Cooper allowed to become properly Morag's home because it is no longer a retreat cut off from the world and time. The bird's flight has re-established for her a link with history and eternity. Such is the moral of the heron.

DIVINING THUS AMOUNTS, in many senses, to being able to read the meaning inscribed in the world, in nature, and in events by the hidden hand of God. It is the ability to discern a design or a "pattern." The word significantly recurs in the novel, calling to mind the Jamesian metaphor of "the figure in the carpet." When Morag scans snapshots of her parents, she cannot "discern the pattern" in her mother's dress; in another snapshot "you can see the pattern quite clear." At school, the visibility of a dress pattern similarly serves as

a criterion for the value and social standing refused Morag. "Pattern" refers to the used, worn-out condition not only of garments but of words, while the dress itself, according to the metaphor in Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, is the visible manifestation of essence and being. The metaphor of meaning is thus compellingly pursued when Morag, wearing glasses for the first time, can discern the patterns of leaves on the trees, thus reading what Whitman called "leaves of grass" as she would the leaves of a book.

To discern word patterns and to wield language is tantamount to creating some degree of reality. Practically all references to words in *The Diviner*, from Morag's early attempts at school to her later hesitations as a novelist at work, point to this. Words generate words through sound combinations, it seems: "they are dumb, dumb-bells, dumb bunnies!" They generate images which give the illusion of being visually real: "Morag thinks of the sparks, the stars, and sees them again inside her head. Stars! Fire-stars! How does it happen?" Metaphors, born from words, change appearances in a funny way: "The blinds are pulled down the front-windows of the houses to keep out the heat. . . . The windows are the eyes, closed, and the blinds are the eyelids, all creamy, fringed with lacy lashes. Blinds make the houses to be blind. Ha ha." Very soon Morag masters the meanings of new words — "principal," "strap," or "recess" at school, and "gaelic" or "scavenger" out of school. From denotative, functional meaning she accedes to plural senses and connotations. When Prin calls her a "mooner," she superimposes her (preferred) new meaning, that of a child from a fabulous planet like the moon, on that of "daydreamer." She perceives the scandalous situation of a term whose morphology is at odds with its referent: "The flies are *blue-bottles*. How come they got this nice name given to them? They're ugly." A name is thus felt as emblematic of its referent and the reality link between signifier and signified is vindicated as a rule. Whereas Prin is a big, fat, slovenly woman in the novel, her "real Christian name is Princess. Morag thinks this is the funniest thing she has ever heard." Of course, such textual incidents or remarks must be read as pointers to the way in which the narrative should be decoded, not only as steps in Morag's discovery of words or of the fact that certain things, like the face of Botticelli's Venus, cannot be described for lack of them.[6]

The same words can mean different things in different places, and even at a later age, Morag notes dissimilarities between the referents of "bluff" in Ontario, where it applies to a ravine, and on the prairies where it designates a clump of brush. Or the same *signified* can have phonetically different *signifiers*, and Morag proudly insists that "coyote" should be pronounced "kiyoot" in Canada while only in John Wayne's movies does one hear "co-yo-tee." This introduces the notion of local linguistic custom, of the link between language and communal roots.

The most liberating use of words for children is the making of puns. Thus, Mrs. Crawford becomes Mrs. Crawfish in the classroom, or Christie, his face dusty and his skin red, becomes for a while a "redskin." And thus can Christie invert the usual phrase and say, "Bad Riddance to Good Rubbish." But one can run into contradictions, which at times seem inherent in language itself: "How can one say 'dead when born': how both at the same time?" As a child Morag early discovers proper usage. She comes to understand that Christie says, "Did they *learn* you anything today?" intentionally, whereas Prin would say it "not on purpose." And she discovers that status is attached to the *proper* wielding of words (note how "proper" recurs in the book, its meaning undefined by heraldic reference). Those who master the prevailing linguistic usage are rewarded at school and and placed in a special category; an "educated" elite is thereby granted status. Even in Manawaka Morag can acquire as a novelist the recognition she had been refused as a poor girl of the people. This power will eventually become her temptation — a sin — against which Lachlan, the newspaper editor, vehemently warns her:

> If you ever in your life presume to look down on them (those not very verbal people) because you have the knack of words and they do not, then you do so at your eternal risk and peril.

The writer's attempt at properly reading and expressing the pattern of life is an attempt at reducing chaos, dispelling ambiguity, eliminating "the blur" in vision. Some forty years later, Morag is still struggling with the same problem of rendering referential reality in words:

> How could that color be caught in words? A sort of rosy peach color, but that sounded corny and was also inaccurate.
>
> *I used to think that words could do anything. Magic, Sorcery. Even miracles. But no, only occasionally.*

As she reflects upon her "trade" as a writer, the protagonist is aware that she must aim both at mimesis and at respecting the prevalent cultural code; she must be neither inaccurate nor "corny." As a result, she is always compulsively looking for the right word. Speaking of "creases" to evoke the effect of wind on water, she catches herself: "Naturally the river wasn't wrinkled or creased at all — wrong words, implying something unfluid, like skin, something unenduring, prey to age." The right word is most difficult to find in the case of images, precisely because the link between the referent and the connotation is so tenuous. And words are always ambiguous because intent can modify meaning. Maybe the only occasion when Morag could be sure of the match between intent and meaning was when Christie (who often used "blessed" as a swear word in order to express surprise or indignation) answers, "Well, I am blessed" from his death bed with clear purpose and joy, as Morag thanks him for having been a father to her.

But which is the right word when love is at stake? When Pique asks Morag whether she loved Skinner, her father, Morag is unable to "reply and get across so much complexity in a single well-chosen phrase":

> I guess you could say love. I find words more difficult to define than I used to. I guess — I felt — I feel . . . I'd known him an awfully long time *then,* even. I'm not sure *know* is the right word, here.
>
> Who cares about the *right* word? Pique cried. Then, suddenly, the hurt cry which must have been there for years, "Why did you *have* me?"

There are times when words come too late and are ineffectual, times when some other means of communication should be established between living people; yet this does not negate the value of the word, in the form of the Book, within the larger context of the world.

The Book: the Bible. Throughout Morag's life, books are essential. In the family setting evoked by a snapshot of her at age three, she places "stacks of books" in the closet under the stairs, with leather bindings and "the names marked in gold." Books recur, though in less fine form, among the items rescued from the Nuisance Grounds and displayed in Christie's sitting-room:

> books, old old old books, and one has real leather for the cover, and the letters are in real *gold* but now you can hardly see them, and you can't read the book because *it is* in *another language,* but Christie says it is the Holy Bible in Gaelic. Throwing out a Holy Bible! Oh. But would God mind so much seeing as it was in Gaelic?

In spite of the attenuation in the last sentence, the sense of sacrilege is plain, because the Holy Bible is archetypal. Like the Blue Heron, it is divine, ancient and superlative. ("Gold" symbolically increases its value. It is the Book.)

Here, the book is, significantly, in another language, which implies that it should be translated and deciphered, and which introduces the theme of different and/or lost languages, an important topic in the novel. When the school children sing "O Canada," rendering the second line, in roughly phonetic French, "Teara da nose ah yoo," it always makes them titter: "They know it means the land of our forefathers but that is not what it seems to mean." French is perceived as possibly ludicrous through mispronunciation. Yet, when Morag listens to Christie reading Ossian and he shows her the Gaelic words but cannot say them, the "old language" is highly valorized:

> "It must sound like *something* in the old language" . . . Christie claims, . . . "I never learned the Gaelic and that is a regret to me."
>
> Together they look at the strange words, unknown now, lost, as it seems, to all men, the words that once told of the great chariot of Cuchullin:
>
> Carbad; carbad garbh a' chromhraig
> 'Gluasas thar comhnaird le bas;
> Carbad suimir, luath Chuchullin

Sar-mhac Sheuma nan cruiaidh chas;

"Gee. Think of that, Christie. Think of that, eh? Read some more in *our* words, eh?"

"*Our* words": language creates kinship and a sense of belonging, tradition and identity. At school, when Skinner Tonnerre does not join the children singing "The Maple Leaf Forever," Morag concludes: "He is not singing now. He comes from nowhere. He is not anybody." In fact, Skinner refuses to sing because the song does not belong to his cultural tradition. Of course, he should be able to speak French and Cree, but he only remembers scraps of these tongues. Morag's remark that Christie pronounces "Ossian" "aw-shun" and Skinner's remark that Morag pronounces "Jules" "jewels" point to translinguistic homophony, but they mostly emphasize lack of communication or language as obstacle. When Pique sings Louis Riel's song, which she has learned from a book, in French and then in English, she acknowledges: "I only know how to make the sounds, I don't know what they mean." Here, the non-French-speaking reader is in the same position as the non-Gaelic-speaking reader was when spelling out the stanza from Cuchullain's ballad.

When Morag plays the record of "Morag of Dunvegin" in Gaelic, she cannot understand the words nor even make out any kind of pattern and distinguish between the sounds:

> Yet she played the record often as though if she listened to it enough she would finally pierce the barrier of that ancient speech and have its meaning revealed to her.... Too lazy [to take lessons]. She would have liked to gain the speech by magical means, no doubt. Yet it seemed a bad thing to have lost a language. Talking to one or two old fishermen at Crombruach, she had realized that. They spoke a mellifluous English, carefully, as though translating in it in their heads and some of their remarks were obscure to her, but they would never explain or could not.
>
> Christie, telling the old tales in his only speech, English, with hardly any trace of a Scots accent, and yet with echoes in his voice that went back and back. Christie, summoning up the ghosts of those who had never been and yet would always be.
>
> The lost languages forever lurking somewhere inside the ventricles of the hearts of those who had lost them. Jules, with two languages lost, retaining only broken fragments of both French and Cree, and yet speaking English as though forever it must be a foreign tongue to him.

This need to recapture one's lost linguistic heritage and the inability to magically have access to it explain Morag's frustrated urge to look up the Gaelic nickname Dan McRaith has given her — Morag Dhu, Morag the black — in the Gaelic glossary in *The Clans and Tartans of Scotland*: "It says *dubh, dhubh, dhuibe, dubha*, but omits to say under what circumstances each of these should be used. Morag Dhu. Ambiguity is everywhere."

Again, words and books are not enough. There exist dictionaries, catalogues, lists of recipes and sets of tools and terms, but these must be reinterpreted, put in context, recreated by reader and writer alike. More interesting than Margaret Laurence's attempt at "audio-visual fiction" in *The Diviners* is her repeated reaffirmation that reading and writing are not only complementary but also homothetic or homologous activities. Just as a professional writer encodes in a text his reading of other books, including the Book of Life, so does a reader recreate the book he reads, or rewrite it in his specific idiom. From the genesis of fiction, the emphasis is thus displaced to reading as an active form of communication, most textual incidents in *The Diviners* being evident metafictional reflections on and hints at this process.

In the course of the narrative, the writer is defined not only as a diviner, with all the connotations the word assumes, but as a craftsman, in a coupling which evokes the "Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor" rhyme:

> Wordsmith, liar, more likely. Weaving fabrications. Yet, with typical ambiguity, convinced that fiction was more true than fact. Or that fact was in fact fiction.

The crux and truth of *The Diviners* may thus be found in its demonstration that fact and fiction are indistinguishable in appearance and may well be alike in essence.

Practically all of Morag's activities, past and present, tend to prove this truth. At five she would surround herself with imaginary creatures like Blue Sky Mother and Old Forty Nine, drawn from songs she had heard; she would project herself into blonde Peony or her true alter ego, Rosa Picardy, who slayed dragons and polar bears and was Cowboy Joke's mate. At forty-seven, she is still engaged in repeating the recreation of imagined memories from a handful of photographs in which, as in a pack of tarot cards, she guesses her past and future. Although she can recognize that some memories are "totally invented," she cannot stop elaborating upon scraps from her half-forgotten past, not only in a compulsive attempt to compensate for her being able to remember only her parents' deaths "but not their lives," but because a distinctive mark of the creative imagination consists in elaborating ancestors, in giving voice to a presence which, Morag feels, is "flowing unknown in my blood and unrecognized in my skull."

This explains Morag's peculiar relationship with her photographs, kept, as if in a treasure chest, in an "ancient tattered manilla envelope" which Christie had given her when she was five:

> I've kept them, of course, because something in me doesn't want to lose them, or perhaps doesn't dare. Perhaps they're my totem and contain a portion of my spirit. Yeh, and perhaps they are exactly what they seem to be — a jumbled mess of old snapshots.

Ambiguity again characterizes the snapshots which are preserved not so much for what they reveal as for what they conceal, "not for what they show, but for what is hidden in them." They are monuments to memory, totems, items to be deciphered without one ever being certain of their meaning and of the reality of the past.

The narrator presents a skeptical view of man's power to establish meaning and order:

> Morag put the pictures into chronological order. As though there were really any chronological order, or any order at all if it came to that. She was not certain whether the people in the snapshots were legends she had once dreamed only, or were as real as anyone she now knew.

More than one of Morag's psychological hang-ups, this is a clue, indicating how the novel should be approached and stressing the undefined, changing relationship between the real and the fictive.

One has to look for answers to the question of the status of fiction in the novel itself. Christie is unambiguous. Just as the Bible is the archetypal book and the blue heron is the archetypal bird, he establishes Ossian as the archetypal poet:

> In the days long long ago . . . , he lived, this man, and was the greatest song maker of them all, and all this was set down later, pieced together from what old men and old women remembered, see, them living on far crofts hither and yon, and they sang and recited these poems as they had been handed down over the generations. And the English claimed as how these were not the real old songs, but only forgeries, do you see, and you can read about it right here in this part which is called Introduction, but the English were bloody liars then as now. And I'll read you what he said, then, a bit of it.

Not only is Ossian cast as the superlative example of the poet, the nature of song (or ballad, or legend) is also defined as a collection of generations-old oral traditions. The relation between literary criticism and literature is also hinted at. Clearly, the stanzas by "Ossian" are taken from a volume which is described in accurate bibliographical fashion as "*The Poems of Ossian — In the Original Gaelic with a Literal Translation into English and a Dissertation on the Authenticity of the Poems by the Rev. Archibald Clark, Minister of the Parish of Kilmallie. Together with the English translation by Macpherson*, in 2 Vols., 1870." The extra and referential reality of the volumes is indubitable, and the truth (i.e., the non-authenticity of the poems and non-existence of Ossian) established in the "Introduction" is part of European literary history. Yet there is no way of going against "the strength of conviction" here evidenced by Christie. Not only

in his mind, but also in Morag's and in the reader's the existence of the bard and the authenticity of the poems are established as truth. His "act of faith" (embodied in the "Strength of Conviction" motto) duplicates the reader's "willing suspension of disbelief" usually required by tale-telling. This is a magical practice rooted in belief which, not unexpectedly, connects Morag and yet another ancestor-diviner, Old Jules Tonnerre.

In her "Tale of Piper Gunn's Wife," as she plans to set it down in her scribbler (a tale thought out is as good as written), Morag had decided: "*Forests cannot hurt me because I have the power and the second-sight and the good eye and the strength of conviction.*" This is the definition of a heroic wife, a persona Morag would like to project herself into, yet, interestingly, it also equates divining (second-sight) with "the good eye" (bringing luck as the antithesis of spell-casting or "the evil eye") and with "faith" or an active decision to entertain forceful belief — although Morag later wonders what "the Strength of Conviction" means and will try to find out in her quest throughout the novel. In other words, Morag's problem will stem from her eagerness to understand and her inability simply to believe, while faith constitutes a deliberate affirmation.

The characterization of divining as second-sight, or seeing through people, is developed in several scenes in which one character looks at the other intently, as though seeing the deeper truth and reality behind his appearance. This face-to-face reading of the other comes to a climax in the perfect understanding brought about by love. Not only is it referred to in John Donne's lines about two lovers seeing as one, which Morag explains at the university, but it is dramatized in the tête-à-tête between Skinner and Morag.

Second-sight or the good eye serves as a powerful talisman when the time for action comes. Thus, the strength of Louis Riel as a "prophet" is rooted in his strength of conviction, as evidenced in "Skinner's Tale of Rider Tonnerre and the Prophet." He is

> Somebody who can [be a leader] . . . who is just waiting the chance. — I guess you'd call him Prophet. He is like a prophet, see? And he has the power.
>
> (The power?)
>
> He can stop bullets — well, I guess he couldn't, but lots of people, there, they believed he could. 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 . . .
>
> Well, the Prophet, then, he's a very tall guy, taller even than Rider Tonnerre . . . and he carries a big cross with him all the time — this protects him, like. He's a very religious guy, see?

Here, although he is recounting a tale handed down by tradition, Skinner is also sketching, making up, creating the portrait of an archetypal religious and military leader, endowed with clearsightedness, with a sense of being invincible and with religious faith which enable him to rally people to his cause. His cross is

only a material sign for his faith, just as the fact that people believe he can actually stop bullets is sufficient, even if contrary to actual fact. And Riel is also cast as a "very tall man" — tall not only in actual height but in mythical size — a hero out of the "tall tales." In the following episode, the tale of "Old Jules and the War Out West," the Prophet is defeated, less because of the sheer military superiority of the English than because, instead of attacking, he "is walking around with his big cross, waiting for the sign . . . a bit too long, because by that time the big guns begin." Defeat comes to those who wait for omens too long or who cannot read them properly at the right moment.

Piper Gunn stands in very much the same relationship to Morag as Old Jules Rider Tonnerre stands to Skinner. In "Christie's Tale of Piper Gunn and the Rebels," Gunn plays a role comparable to Riel's as a leader. He finds his people, the Sutherlanders, "sitting on their butts and [doing] nothing," just as Riel found the Métis. And Gunn arouses them to battle through the power of his music:

> So walk he did, along every farm on the river front, there, and he played the entire time. He began with the pibrochs, which was for mourning. To tell the people they'd fallen low and wasn't the men their ancestors had been. Then he went on to the battle music. And the one he played over and over was "The Gunn's Salute." A reproach, it was.
>
> The Sutherlanders listened and they knew what he was saying. They gathered together and Piper's five sons with them, and they took the Fort at the rising of the day the very next morning.

The most evident characteristic of these two tales is the fact that each one stems from an oral tradition which runs counter to the other; each one presents a version of the past which apparently negates the antithetic version of the other insofar as each side may claim to have been the only heroic one. But the two traditions also are complementary, just as the Gunns and the Tonnerres are needed to converge and create Pique. When Christie tells the tale of Piper Gunn and the Rebels, Morag has not yet heard Skinner's tale of "Old Jules and the War Out West." Yet she has learnt about the Canadian past in History class, and her heart is on the side of the Métis, partly because of her attraction to Skinner. She reacts accordingly at the end of the tale:

> (I liked him, though. Riel, I mean.)
> That so? Well, he had his points, no doubt.
> (The book in History said he was nuts, but he didn't seem so nuts to me. The Métis *were* losing the land — it was taken from them. All he wanted was for them to have their rights. The government hanged him for that.)
> Métis, huh?
> (Halfbreeds)
> Well, well, hm. Maybe the story didn't go quite like I said. . . .

Similarly, when Skinner tells "The Tale of Lazarus' Tale of Rider Tonnerre," where tradition is at second-remove, a frequent occurrence in tale-telling (namely the existence of variants) is introduced. Variants can result from the telling of the same tale several times, yet each performance is unique, as Skinner comments: "Lazarus Tonnerre sure isn't the man to tell the same story twice, and maybe he couldn't remember, because each time he told it, it would be kind of different."

The questions Morag asks the tale-teller are concerned with accuracy of name and detail. "Arkanys?" she asks, which leads Skinner to explain his father's term: "That is how my dad called the Scotchmen. Men from Orkney, I guess." And when Morag interrupts him with, "Hired guns? I bet they weren't," he reacts the way Christie did above: "Sure, they were. Anyway, it's just a story." Each claims a right to his own version of a story and disclaims it as exclusive or as historical truth. Finally, when Morag provides precise historical references like the "Falcon's Song" and "The Battle of Seven Oaks," Skinner only answers: "Is that so? I never connected it with that, because my dad's version was a whole lot different." Alternative versions are, then, up to a point, potentially equal in the value of the truth they convey.

More important than Christie's willingness also to consider the point of view of the Métis as an antithetical variant is Morag's measuring a story (tale or legend) against the yardstick of History. It is commonly assumed that what is printed in history textbooks and taught at school is true. Indeed, it is consecrated, official "truth" but nothing more. Rather, truth is not reality but the interpretation of it by and for a given person or group at a given moment. Such recognition is implied in Morag's remarks about the official, national characterization of Louis Riel as a "mad" rebel and her own conviction that he was not. A further example of how partisan truth enters into history is provided by Lachlan McLachlan when Morag's report on Piquette's death mentions that "the deceased's grandfather fought with Louis Riel in Saskatchewan in 1885, in the last uprising of the Métis." Lachlan just deletes the sentence, saying "that many people hereabouts would still consider that Old Jules fought back then fought on the wrong side." If truth is nothing more than individual conviction or group consensus, it ensures that history and legend, factual report and fiction, are on the same footing. This is the point of Morag's interruptions when she listens to Christie's later stories or to Skinner's tales. Earlier Morag was only able to respond to the unlikelihood of certain details — "Did they eat *foxes*?" or "They walked? A *thousand* miles? They couldn't." — which caused the teller to reduce the scale of epic descriptions in order to achieve a sense of versimilitude. In the later stories, Morag intervenes as a critic, an intellectual, full of bookish knowledge, in order to re-insert legend into history, to sift myth from fact, or at least to distinguish clearly between the two. When Christie tells about Piper

Gunn and the Rebels, her acceptance is mitigated ("You are romantic, Christie") or skeptical. She identifies "the short little man, with burning eyes" whom the teller calls Louis Riel as "Louis Riel," and she restores official truth: "The government Down East sent out the Army from Ontario and like that, and Riel fled, Christie. He came back, to Saskatchewan, in 1885." Later, she even denies that the Sutherlanders had taken back the Fort.

The teller is forced to compromise on unimportant points ("this Reel or Riel, however you want to call him") and to acknowledge the possibility of different versions:

> Well, some say that, others say different. Of course I *know* that the Army and that came out, like, but the truth of the matter is that them Sutherlanders *had taken back the Fort* even before a smell of an army got there.... I'm telling you, what happened was this. Piper Gunn says to his five sons....

As a consequence, truth is defined explicitly as what the teller of the legend says it is, here and now, because this is necessary for the telling to function and the tale to exist. The teller may know (rationally or by having read volumes of nonfiction) that certain historical events took place, but the telling of the tale demands another truth, not so much a different version as a different *kind* of truth whose criteria are not to be found in fact but in language. Later in her life, when writing fiction about the same episodes, Morag discovers that legend and history mix, indeed, in an unbelievable and inextricable fashion:

> I kept thinking about the tales Jules once told me, a long time ago about Rider Tonnerre. Which brings to mind a curious thing — something that must've come from Old Jules. Rider was called Prince of the Braves, Skinner said, and his rifle was named La Petite. Infactuality (if that isn't a word, it should be), those names pertained to Gabriel Dumont, Riel's lieutenant in Saskatchewan, much later on. That's okay — Skinner's grandad had a right to borrow them. I like the thought of history and fiction interweaving. The tale of how Rider got his horse, Roi du Lac, I've recently discovered, comes from a Cree legend — probably Old Jules didn't know that. You wonder how long that story has been passed on.

She then readily accepts and even welcomes "the thought of history and fiction interweaving."

IT THUS APPEARS THAT THE CRITERION for evaluating the success of a story is not the measurable degree of truth it contains but the "agreement" — both as pleasure and mental or spiritual adhesion — it can evoke in the audience: "I liked it fine" is Morag's ambiguous appreciation.

Evidently, such dialogues and episodes of story-telling as we find in *The Diviners* have to be read as parables of the writer's situation and the way litera-

ture functions. They also point at the difference existing between oral text and written literature. The gestural or verbal response of the audience while the tale is being performed and told, as well as the comments which express pleasure or displeasure after the telling, are clear signs of success or failure. The same goes for the singing of a song as is evidenced in the several sessions when Skinner or Pique perform and the listeners' emotions are shown through their physical or verbal response. But, in the case of fiction, the audience is absent; the person reading a tale is separated from its teller by time and distance. This probably entails more creative participation on the part of the reader, but it also leaves Morag at a loss as to how she can measure her success as a novelist. In spite of the bunch of review clippings she receives from her agent at the publication of each novel and of the statistical reaction they more or less adequately express, she continues to wonder about the way in which her novels are being read and about the degree of communication she has achieved.

> At least Royland knew he had been a true diviner. There were the wells, proof positive. Water. Real wet water. There to be felt and tasted. Morag's magic tricks were of a different order. She would never know whether they actually worked or not, or to what extent. That wasn't given her to know.

Literally, no writer can gauge how his books will be read, deciphered and understood by readers.

To revert to the ambiguous relationship between tale (or fiction) and truth, a further step towards reversing the status of history as official record and the status of personal versions or visions of it is provided by the Battle of Bourlon Wood episode. As in the case of Ossian's poems, the bibliographic reference to a real, extra-textual book, *The 60th Canadian Field Artillery Battery Book* (1919), the reproduction of its complete Table of Contents and a partial listing of its illustrations all serve to authenticate and establish its existence as fact. Christie only has to read what the book "says" — an 18-line, third person, matter-of-fact, condensed report of military operations in the Bourlon Wood section on September 26th. Since he actually was on the battlefield with Morag's father, Christie can comment, "Oh Jesus, don't they make it sound like a Sunday school picnic?" Consequently, he feels moved to tell his eyewitness version of it: "Well, d'you see, it was like the book says, but it wasn't like that, also. That is the strangeness. . . . " His is a story of fire, mud, and slime, guns pounding, horses dying, noise, and a man blown to pieces, and such fear that it left him "shaking like a fool" at the time and still leaves him shaking as he evokes the events again.

"It was like the book says and it wasn't like that, also. That is the strangeness." Such is the Janus-faced appearance of reality and/or literature. Not lies, as Morag-the-novelist first thought, but ambiguity. Ambivalence, rather monumen-

tally symbolized by the apparent contradiction with which the narrative opens, as opposing dynamics arrest the river in statuesque stasis:

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

The first paragraph not only introduces the theme of "the River of Now and Then," the possibility of a simultaneous journey back into the future and ahead into the past; the complementary action of the two elements, air and water, also serves as a superlative paradigm or emblem cast in bronze, of the ambivalence of reality couched in words and "divined" in fiction.

Only thus can the dilemma of the writer be solved and can Morag accept what she at first half-ironically called her "trade" as a worthwhile vocation. Quite rightly, A-Okay Smith had once said "with embarrassing loyalty and evident belief: 'It's there you have to make your statement'." Morag meditates that she could fail and that she cannot write a novel in such an intentional fashion, possessed as she often is by her characters: "They'd been real to her, the people in the books. Breathing inside her head." Word-beings are therefore akin to the old, long-lost languages "lurking inside the ventricles of the hearts of those who had lost them" or to one's real or imaginary ancestors. The writer is possessed like a shaman, chosen as a vehicle or voice for spirits to speak through:

> The words not having to be dredged up out of the caves of the mind but rushing out in a spate so that her head could not keep up with them. Odd feeling. Someone else dictating the words. Untrue, of course, but that was how it felt, the characters speaking. What was the character and who? Never mind, not Morag's concern. Possession or self-hypnosis, it made no difference.

Again, the narrator refuses to act as a critic, to analyze the nature of character and of so-called inspiration, but fully accepts the role of the writer as "posssessed" (in a fashion comparable to Christie moved by the spirits) while claiming the responsibilities attached to it.

The writer is thus defined as an interpreter of the past, a transmitter of tradition in a relevant and usable form to new generations, as well as a diviner of the pattern of the world. Again, art and belief are reconciled in action; for, like divining, writing has to be taken on faith because it sometimes, magically, works and sometimes does not. Morag's letter to Ella concerning *Prospero's Child* contains a paragraph which is another way of answering this question:

> I have always wondered if Prospero would be able to give up his magical advantage once and for all, as he intends to do at the end of *The Tempest*. That incredibly moving statement "— what Strength I have's mine own. Which is most faint —" If only he can hang onto this knowledge, that would be true strength.

> And the recognition that the real enemy is despair within and that he stands in need of grace, like everyone else — Shakespeare did know just about everything.

Of course, Morag is speaking for herself, alluding to the magical island she has tried to build in order to fend off harsh reality. And her enemy is her own despair at not coping with her responsibilities as a twentieth-century Canadian woman, mother, and writer now that she has definitely asserted her own worth in the face of Manawaka and achieved recognition. She still stands in need of love and grace and security, however. And she finally learns from Royland's loss of his divining powers the lesson that she, too, can be an inheritor and have inheritors: "The gift, the portion of grace, or whatever it was, was finally withdrawn to be given to someone else." She can experience this "now," at the end of her career and of the narrative, which has been an exploration or incantation leading to such epiphany and self-realization.

Also, she has been able to see the sign (the Great Blue Heron's rising) and to accept the token. The token is the plaid-brooch of the Shipley family which, properly traded against the knife of Lazarus Tonnerre (whose hieroglyphic mark is at last read for what it means, a half-inverted "T"), provides Morag with the symbolic weapon she needed to slay the Grendels of doubt, "an arm in armour holding a sword." She also receives (adopts?) a motto blessing her with what she lacked, the Strength of (religious) Conviction: "My Hope Is Constant in Thee." Finally, her war cry, "Gainsay Who Dare," allows her to assert herself as well as to create a possible meaning and order in a world where she could see no pattern. "Everything is improbable. Nothing is more improbable than anything else," explicitly applies to the coincidence of the knife finding its rightful owner but also refers, by extension, to the not improbable, hence possible — it is a matter of faith — design of a superior order or providence.

With the buying of the house at McConnell's landing, the protagonist has found her roots: "Land. A river. Log house nearly a century old built by great pioneering couple, Simon and Sarah Cooper. Ancestors." She has accepted her ancestry to be, not of pre-revolutionary Scottish stock but of post-immigration Canadians, "here and now." She has allowed the half-breed line of the Tonnerres to blend with a line of Scottish descendants to make a truly Canadian offspring, whole in the flesh and spirit of Pique. She duplicates this creation in life and blood with a creation in words by writing *Shadows of Eden*, which follows the trek of the Sutherlanders to Hudson Bay and York Factory. She thus allows history and fiction to blend:

> Christie always said that they walked about a thousand miles — it was about a hundred and fifty, in fact, but you know, he was right; it must've felt like a thousand. The man who led them on this march was young Archie MacDonald, but in my mind the piper who played them on will always be that giant of a man,

Piper Gunn, who probably never lived in so-called real life but who lives forever. Christie knew things about inner truths that I am just about beginning to understand.

All passion spent, and confidence — however fragile — restored, the quester/writer at middle-age thus brings to a close her spiritual pilgrimage, the wiser for knowing the limits of her ignorance, the more secure for having experienced the presence of a pattern and meaning in the Book of the World. She can finally proceed to return to "the house, to write the remaining private and fictional words and set down her title." The phrasing is ambiguous and broad enough to duplicate literal meaning — the final words and title of a novel (possibly *The Diviners*) in the process of completion — and the connotation of a life to be continued and a title to be claimed, be it that of inheritor through heraldry and tradition or that of diviner through clear vision and deliberate faith.

NOTES

[1] See, among others, Marcienne Rocard, "Margaret Laurence s'oriente-t-elle vers un roman audio-visuel?" *Etudes Canadiennes*, no. 8 (1980), pp. 113-20.

[2] Royland and Christie are also linked through their connection with the Great Blue Heron (see Note 5).

[3] Lachlan McLachlan is another of Morag's mentors and guides. It is symptomatic that the only occasion when he performs as something more than a newspaper editor should be signalled by a change in his appearance: "God help me, I have all the symptoms of a pregnant woman this morning — except I suppose they don't normally twitch or imagine their eyeballs are falling out." No mere mimetic expression of his headaches, words make him akin to Royland (nearly blind) and to Christie (twitching); they transform him into a seer. His frequent references to God and inspired tone ("low but slightly menacing") emphasize that his warning is supremely important — "you do so at your eternal risk and peril." It literally becomes a message from God about the sin of intellectual pride.

[4] "He is twisting his face like different crazy masks. His tongue droops out. . . . He crosses his eyes and his mouth is dribbling with spit. Then he laughs . . . like a loony."

[5] It is to be noted that the heron's gait and stalking along the river connect it with Christie, with Royland when he is divining springs, and with the pibroch players, especially Piper Gunn; he also is "The Old Man of the River" as totem.

[6] Morag's description of Venus in Botticelli's painting significantly connects the goddess with the archetypal woman. She has "tresses, as it says in very ancient tales and the bardic songs . . . like a queen in the old old poems, like Cuchullain's queen, the woman beloved by all men." An antithetic homologue of Morag, Venus also is "an angel," i.e., an archetypal being of the air like the Blue Heron. But what strikes Morag most is that "maybe there are not [any words to describe her]. This thought is obscurely frightening. Like knowing that God does not actually see the little sparrow fall."