

EVERY NOW AND THEN

Voice and Language in Lawrence's "The Stone Angel"

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MARGARET LAURENCE'S MAIN CHARACTERS seem to spend most of their waking hours seeking the right words to tell the story in which they live. Morag Gunn, the novelist-narrator of *The Diviners* (1974), is only the latest in a line of language-conscious figures.¹ Artful, articulate, and acutely aware of the limits of articulateness (her own or anyone's), Morag retrieves from memory not just the events of her life and the emotions she at least once attached to them, but also the language of different stages in her development. There was a language of class and place, a language of song and race, a language of teaching, a language of learning, a language of seeing, a language of knowing, a language of flesh and a language of shaping form. But how does it all come together? Out of her daily round and the tangle of her memories, out of the tension between now and then, she composes a world that sometimes rises to eloquence, and *every now and then* descends to the banal, and otherwise records the different reaches of the Canadian English tongue. That there should be this unevenness of diction does not seem to me a flaw in the work, but instead a deliberate effect: the novelist-author forcing the novelist-character to explore the limits of her verbal understanding, so that in turn the reader might learn the connection between mode of speech and pattern of thought. We are made conscious of the artifice of her linguistic variation, because Margaret Laurence chooses to make us aware; by making Morag a writer, by making Morag so deliberately reconstruct a life, she draws our attention to the process of fabrication, in other words — by indirection finding direction out. But to talk of Morag is to talk not just of the latest but also of the most obvious case of this authorial concern. Even with characters who are neither writers nor public speakers, Margaret Laurence calls our attention to the language they have access to, no matter how indirectly. So it is with Hagar Shipley in *The Stone Angel* (1964), the first of her series of Manawaka novels; Hagar's is a world that is riddled with the tensions of language and utterance, and it is with the language of Hagar's

world — and what it tells us about the shape and the reading of the novel in which she appears — that I am here concerned.

In fact, though it's not perhaps been apparent, I've been talking about *The Stone Angel* from the very beginning — indirectly (in order to emphasize the irony and the other indirect methods Laurence uses), and methodologically (for my opening paragraph, full of rhetorical salvos and variations in diction, deliberately emulates some of Laurence's stylistic techniques). For all the formality with which Laurence examines and employs every *now* and every *then*, that is, we have to listen in the text for the moments when she fades into the colloquiality of *every now and then*.² It is part of the way she shapes her characters, and part, too, in *The Stone Angel*, of the way the language she uses shapes an argument of anger into a revelation of love.

Let us begin, then, with the opening chapter of the novel, and with the language it uses to establish the character of the 92-year-old narrator and the earlier selves with which she claims kin. The plain contrast between Hagar's *now* and Hagar's shifting *then* is implied by the perspective of memory, and confirmed by the detailed record of events — but from the very beginning we are invited to see two features more of the character's dilemma and the novel's character. Each will, first of all, delve backwards into the past; the *structure* tells us this, for the novel opens with an *inversion*, with a reversal of standard English sentence order ("Above the town . . . the stone angel used to stand") (parenthetically we might compare this rhetorical gambit in function, if not in precise form, with the symbolic opening of *The Diviners* — "The river flowed both ways" — and observe how Laurence has continued to experiment with ways to probe the workings of the associational mind). Secondly, both Hagar and *The Stone Angel* as a whole will concern themselves with language, and in the process will draw inferences and conclusions from differences in usage and level of diction to which we must respond.

Thinking about the stone angel in the Manawaka cemetery, that is, Hagar speaks of why her father built it: to mark her mother's bones, she says, and then, with a sharp ironic edge that at once uses her father's colloquial vocabulary and criticizes her father for his patriarchal ambitions, adds "and to proclaim his dynasty, as he fancied, forever and a day." Almost at once she begins to discourse on the angel itself, in a sentence whose form enacts a careful contrast with what has gone before: "I think now she must have been carved in that distant sun by stone masons who were the cynical descendants of Bernini, gouging out her like by the score, gauging with admirable accuracy the needs of fledgling pharaohs in an uncouth land." Tonally, the sentence continues the irony we have already heard; semantically, it carries notes on the differences between style and public taste, between Europe and the Canadian West; but formally, it draws attention to its own formality. The techniques and cadences are those of stylized written

English: alliteration, assonance, slant rhymes, allusion, the doublets (as in other passages the triplets) of balanced parallel structures. This pattern of alternation between the colloquial and the formal voices continues through the rest of the chapter and then in varying ways through the rest of the book as well. The shifts in pattern are clear in sentences like those that concern the cowslips that grow naturally in the cemetery, about which Laurence writes (or Hagar remembers):

They were tough-rooted, these wild and gaudy flowers, and although they were held back at the cemetery's edge, torn out by loving relatives determined to keep the plots clear and clearly civilized, for a second or two a person walking there could catch the faint, musky, dust-tinged smell of things that grew untended and had grown always, before the portly peonies and the angels with rigid wings, when the prairie bluffs were walked through only by Cree with enigmatic faces and greasy hair.

The alliterative formality of "portly peonies" is deliberately comic here, for we hear Hagar's voice fairly spitting out her dislike of them; the use of the word "bluff," moreover, declares the degree to which Hagar uses the local idiom, and "greasy hair" declares a distance and distaste the old woman still maintains in her view of society. And then at once the discourse is rendered rigorously formal, as Hagar slowly fades into the past, declaiming in an elevated turn of phrase, "Now I am rampant with memory." Subsequent passages emphasize even more clearly the *writerly* quality of the language with which Hagar constructs the world. Between the informal put-down with which Jason Currie dismisses Telford Simmons's father and the childish singsong chant with which the children taunt Henry Pearl ("*Henry Pearl / looks like a girl*"⁴), Hagar finds the formalizing words to isolate No-Name Lottie Drieser from the plainly ordinary. The passage takes a cliché and a significant simile, and by turns alliterative and assonantal, shapes a different effect: "Then Lottie Drieser, tiny and light with yellow hair fine as embroidery silk, bold as brass although her dress was patched and washed raw."

The patterns of alternating formal and informal diction continue. With alliteration and syllepsis, Hagar speaks of Manawaka being largely "shacks and shanties, shaky frame and tarpaper, short-lived in the sweltering summers and the winters that froze the wells and the blood." We are told dismissively that the Shipleys have "squat brown names, common as bottled beer," as later we are told that the "square" prairie houses "squatted" during the Depression, their windows "boarded over like bandaged eyes." We are given an adjectival catalogue about the chicks on the dump (they are "feeble, foodless, bloodied and mutilated, prisoned by the weight of broken shells," and a formal catalogue of the dump itself, in which clichés, formal diction, and ironic jests, all juxtaposed, rebound off one another:

Here were crates and cartons, tea chests with torn tin stripping, the unrecognizable effluvia of our lives, burned and blackened by the fire that seasonally cauterized the festering place. Here were the wrecks of cutters and buggies, the rusty springs and gashed seats, the skeletons of conveyances purchased in fine fettle by the town fathers and grown as racked and ruined as the old gents, but not afforded a decent concealment in earth. Here were the leavings from tables, gnawed bones, rot-softened rinds of pumpkin and marrow, peelings and cores, pits of plum, broken jars of preserves that had fermented and been chucked reluctantly away rather than risk ptomaine. It was a sulphurous place, where even the weeds appeared to grow more gross and noxious than elsewhere, as though they could not help but show the stain and stench of their improper nourishment.

To this Hagar adds, in a passage that we must read as a comment on the fictional method as well as on the event itself:

I walked there once with some other girls when I was still a girl, almost but not quite a young lady (how quaintly the starched words shake out now, yet with the certain endearment). We tiptoed, fastidiously holding the edges of our garments clear, like dainty-nosed czarinas finding themselves in sudden astonishing proximity to beggars with weeping sores.

The formal and the vernacular, in "sudden astonishing proximity," that is, connect.

And what then? The novel, instructing us how to *read* the novel, requires us obviously to see things in both conscious and unconscious opposition. The linguistic tension, between formal and informal, enacts a social tension that exists both within Hagar and within the social structure of the world she inhabits. But we would be unwise to view any of these oppositions oversimply. The novel does not enact a rigid confrontation between two absolute sides, whether we call those sides high-born and low-born, stylish and crude, exclusive and inclusive, metropolitan and provincial, foreign and native, European and Canadian, static and dynamic, artificial and natural, learned and unlettered, or written and spoken in pattern or form. The examples of style I have been drawing attention to are only to a degree classifiable in such ways. Far more importantly, they demonstrate a shifting linguistic hierarchy, a fluid interpenetration between formal and informal patterns, which is neither rigidly coded nor *easily* interpretable. For these reasons, the shifting language patterns, like the novel's shifts in narrative perspective or narrative voice, convey more adequately than would an unalloyed style the kinds of tension that the particular character of Hagar Currie Shipley, and the particular generation that in her way she represents, must try to resolve. To hark back to my title and put this contention another way, we are led by the novel first to perceive a sharp categorical distinction between Hagar's *now* and Hagar's *then*, but then led further to realize that this binary distinction is not adequate to the occasion, and that (if we seek a parallel) such a distinction manifests Hagar's repressive, divisive, will; the fluid associations of memory, by contrast,

like the dynamic processes of the living colloquial language, are expressive and connective. Hagar has to come to terms with the ongoing language of remembering, in other words, as well as to understand the shaping effect that the divisive language of now and then has had upon her. Indeed, we might go so far as to say that the success of the novel stylistically derives directly from the interpenetration between levels of discourse, and that when it depends solely on one level (as it does in the straight narrative of Chapters 6 and 7, which recount the romance between John and Arlene and the events leading towards their deaths), then the novel is at its flattest, its weakest, functioning only to record externals and not to reveal the internal growth of the narrating characters as well.

TO FOLLOW FURTHER THIS IMPORTANT ROLE that the colloquial voice has in marking Hagar's world, we must now turn our attention to the elements which distinguish it from the *writerly* "thinking" patterns of Hagar's *educated* mind.⁵ I have referred already to several aspects of informal style: to localism, relaxed speech cadences, vernacular intonations. There are others, too: slang, vulgarisms, solecisms, and the unthinking speaker's more or less automatic reliance on the vernacular patterns, although Hagar's private finishing school has educated her childhood cadences almost out of her. Hence Clara Shipley, with her "impermissibles, I *seen* and *ain't*," offends Hagar, for they are "even worse coming from the woman than the man" — after which Hagar adds her own, genteel colloquial disclaimer, "the Lord knows why." At this point, of course, Hagar has little to do with the Lord: it's what *she* thinks that matters to her, and her *ironic* voice is to be heard through the phrase, somewhat condescending towards the world around her. She puns condescendingly, "a pint-sized peacock, . . . haughty, hoity-toity," thinking "*tend* — as though I were a cash crop" or "in their prime, as they say, like beef." And herself always precisely careful about pronoun case ("It wasn't I"; "It could not have been I"), she mimics her daughter-in-law Doris (who says "*Marv and me*" "are having a cup of tea," "It's me that trots up and down these stairs a hundred times a day"): "I dasn't give a good loud rap these days or you know what she'll say. Oh, the secret joys of martyrdom." About which, of course, Hagar knows a good deal.

It is her husband Bram, though, who offers Hagar the greatest linguistic challenge — as it is her son John, later, who continues to defy her efforts to train him: to train him, I might add, not so much to the linguistic patterns of her own day as to the linguistic patterns — even the archaisms — of an earlier generation still, which Hagar has unquestioningly adopted from the past as though dimly aware that the dynamics of the language, which she acknowledges but overtly

rejects, record the changes in society which she is unwilling to accept, if to see at all. She marries Bram because he is a challenge to the old code, just as he fancies her because she represents it. She alienates her father by choosing Bram, but expects him to "soften and yield, when he saw how Brampton Shipley prospered, gentled, learned cravats and grammar." But neither man alters. Bram continues with his mistakes: " 'This here's for you, Hagar,' " he says, and she is so caught up in his grammatical error that she fails to notice his gesture of conciliation towards taste, his gift of a decanter with a silver top: "I took it so casually," she recalls, "And laid it aside . . . Then he laughed. . . ." Steeled against syntactical rules and the niceties of diction, he walls himself off in deliberate affronts: "Bugger the money," "Won't the saintly bastard ever shut his trap?", "What the hell's the matter with you? Judas priest, woman," "I should of kicked the living daylight out of her," "I don't give a good goddamn."

We are given other examples, too, of controlled and uncontrolled speech: the Reverend McCulloch's formal intonations, the matron's "professional benevolence," Murray Lees's mock Pentecostal rhetoric, the senile babble of Miss Tyrwhitt in Silverthreads nursing home, the polite daggers and verbal fencing that constitute Hagar's conversation with Lottie Simmons over John and Arlene. Such passages reinforce for us the kind of articulateness Hagar possesses, the degree of control she exerts: *over* speech and *through* speech. Yet the important fact to bear in mind is that even for Hagar, language will not be static. Her language changes, partly by exposure to other patterns, partly by choice, partly by the accidents and unconscious alterations of time. The elements of language that reveal these changes are both lexical and dialectal; their implications instruct us both about Hagar's character and about the relation Margaret Laurence draws between Hagar's development and the development of Western Canadian society.

We are dealing in this novel with four generations: Jason's, Hagar's and Bram's, Marvin's and Doris's, Steven's and Tina's. The point about Hagar's two-sided connection with her own generation is made again if we consider the speech patterns they all use. Jason Currie, the Scots Presbyterian Western pioneer, speaks with the Scots burr, the Old Country idiom (" 'Do you want to grow up to be a dummy, a daft loon?' "), and the colloquial formulae of his birthplace (the homilies, the clan motto, the Selkirk Grace, and the tight-lipped message of approval: " '*Hayroot, strawfoot, / Now you've got it.*' ") He yearns for connection, but also for propriety, as we see in his three tonally different comments on Lottie Drieser's mother's death: the one full of pity (" 'Poor lass. . . . She couldn't have had much of a life' "), the next indignant and self-righteous (" 'Her sort isn't much loss to the town, I'm bound to say' "), the third at first appalled at the implications he thinks of and then formulaic and smug (" 'Consumption? That's contagious, isn't it? Well, the Lord works in wondrous ways

His will to perform' "). It is his overriding will to achieve success — which is measured in terms of financial security and public propriety — which dictates the way he educates Hagar. But his own Scots patriarchal upbringing recognized propriety in terms involving *language*; so in Western Canada by buying Hagar an Eastern education, he imposes on her an artificial tongue and presumes he has thereby provided her with status. But by so doing he has separated her from the Western rural norms of her generation, as represented by the speech of Bram and Telford and Lottie and Henry Pearl, and she spends most of her life listening to the quarrel between the voice of her training and the voice of the generation to which she belongs.

For despite Hagar's personal style, the ordinary language in Canada takes on its own characteristic patterns. Marvin and Doris emulate the flat norms of the generation before them; Tina and Steven — and their contemporary Sandra Wong — display the characteristic, American-influenced, laconic speech patterns of the present. My point here is fourfold: to say first that the standard process by which the English language has developed is to *adopt* foreign words into the lexicon rather than to *translate* them in, which means that the vocabulary makes English out of various original structures; second, that such borrowing has also taken place in Canada, which means that some words will have developed or re-rooted there and will geographically mark a speaker; third, that the successive waves of multicultural immigration into Canada are observable in speech pattern, at least while the society undergoes the process of producing a new norm for itself; and fourth, that Hagar's life records — through language — one angle of understanding these changes in social structure. Steven and Tina, urban, independent, and professional, that is, represent opportunities that Hagar either never had or could never seize, but they do so *in their own idiom*, without the particular artifice of speech that Jason had seen fit to value.

In some sense it can be suggested that Hagar has always known that the linguistic distinctions she makes are dislocating. Certainly her formal "speaking patterns" differ from her formal "thinking patterns" — and both are punctuated by informal interruptions and regional vocabulary. The Canadianisms (or sometimes the Canadian adoptions of isms from elsewhere) appear in phonology; they also show up in lexicon and local allusions — in words like *bluff*, *bald-headed prairie*, *shinplaster*, *gopher*, *chokecherries*, *slough*, *T. Eaton's*, *The Hudson's Bay*, *blackflies*, *a tin lizzie*, *saskatoons*, *Indian paintbrush*, *Toronto couch*, *sockeye*, *cohoe*, *Cariboo and Peace River Country*, *a two ninety two* — and in the endemic *eh* that we hear from John, Hagar, Sandra Wong, and from Marvin, when he uncharacteristically gets his emotions outside him and says to Doris, "Dry up, honey, eh?" Hagar will use such words without apology; but it's almost as though she doesn't hear the paradox that therefore emerges in her own voice. She *resists* changing forms and contemporary slang, but she expresses her-

self ably enough in the slang of an older day — in phrases like “stem to gudgeon” or “hey-day, go-day, God-send-Sunday.” Her adaptation to Murray Lees and her conscious response to Sandra Wong late in the book therefore mark a significant alteration in attitude which as readers we are meant to *hear* — for the change in language signifies an easing of the resistance she has erected against her own emotions, her ability to connect with others. “‘Quite — okay,’” she says to Sandra in the hospital, after voluntarily helping the girl: “I have to smile at myself. I’ve never used that word before in my life. *Okay* — *guy* — such slangy words.” We recall one of her last conversations with Elva Jardine in the public ward, mildly comic in the way the two old ladies rationalize their frailties and manipulate an out-of-date slang:

“My memory is very good . . . but sometimes a thing slips my mind — ”

“Yeh. Same here. Well, let’s hit the hay, kiddo.”

I have to smile at that. And then I feel myself sliding into sleep.

And then: shortly after, the tone changes, as we hear Hagar admitting something else:

“I can hear my voice saying something, and it astounds me.”

“I’m — frightened. . . .”

“What possessed me? I think it’s the first time in my life I’ve ever said such a thing. Shameful. Yet somehow it is a relief to speak it.”

And thus her resistance to herself eases more still.

Elva Jardine is of her own generation and her own rural background; Marvin is her son and therefore akin to her in another way; we might presume connections to be possible between them. But Sandra Wong is of a new generation and another background entirely (a background, moreover, from which Hagar’s experience of Mr. Oatley’s smuggling stories has further divided her); hence to connect with her is doubly significant. With the other patients, both in Silverthreads and in the hospital, Sandra demonstrates the processes of linguistic change that have been wrought by the demographic changes within the community. As we have seen, Hagar has approved of a strict pattern of speech; she does not suffer deviations from these patterns easily. In Manawaka, the poor and the “Galicians” and the Métis Tonnerres are all beyond the pale; at Silverthreads, the pointed ironies and Jewish cadences of Mrs. Steiner’s speech first attract and then dismay Hagar, so that she retreats into the formal balances of the language of her mind:

“Don’t mistake me,” she adds in haste. “Nobody said in so many words, ‘Mamma, you got to go there.’ No, no, nothing like that. But Ben and Esther couldn’t have me in that apartment of theirs — so small, you’d think you walked into a broom closet by mistake. I was living before with Rita and her husband, and that

was fine when they had only Moishe, but when the girl was born, where was the space?"

....

"Do you — " I hesitate. "Do you ever get used to such a place?"

She laughs then, a short bitter laugh I recognize and comprehend at once.

"Do you get used to life?" she says. "Can you answer me that? 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?*"

I peer at her, thinking how peculiar that she knows so much.

"You're right. I never got used to a blessed thing."

"Well, you and I would get on pretty good," Mrs. Steiner says. "I hope we see you here."

Then I perceive how I've been led and lured. She hasn't meant to. I don't blame her. I only know I must get out of this place now, at once, without delay.

By the end of the novel, in the multicultural ward, Hagar becomes accommodated to other cadences, however, and to her own part in the connections among them. At first it is only the flat accent of Elva Jardine that connects with Mrs. Reilly's Irish and Mrs. Dobereiner's German, with Hagar holding back:

"Funny, ain't it?" Elva Jardine says. "Take me, for instance. I could stuff myself with bread till the cows come home, and I wouldn't put on a blessed ounce. Well, it's God's will if a person runs to fat."

"That's so," Mrs. Reilly penitently says. "And I'm the willful creature, to be sure. To think it was you that had to point it out to me, Mrs. Jardine, and you a Protestant. I should be ashamed."

Her meekness turns my stomach. In her place I'd roar for bread until I was hoarse; and die of apoplexy if I pleased.

"Pan."

The voice is like a puff of smoke, faint and hazy. Then, as it comes again, it has a desperation in it.

"Pan. Pliz — pliz — "

Elva Jardine cranes her wrinkled neck like an aged seafarer in some crow's-nest, peering for land.

"Oh-oh. Where's that nurse got to? Nurse! Yoo-hoo! Mrs. Dobereiner needs the bedpan."

"All right," an unperturbed voice answers nearby. "Just a second."

"You'd better get a hustle on," Elva Jardine says, "or the dear knows what'll happen."

The nurse arrives, pulls the curtains. She looks tired.

"We're short-staffed tonight, and everyone needs a pan at the same time. I never knew it to fail. Okay, here you are, Mrs. Dobereiner."

"*Danke vielmals. Tausend Dank. Sie haben ein gutes Herz.*"

But then in the nighttime chorus, with Mrs. Dobereiner muttering passages from the Litany and the song of the Lorelei, and Mrs. Jardine expressing her love for

her husband, Hagar participates; the controls gone, the inner volition allowed to surface, she openly declares — even “almost screeche[s] — her abiding need for “*Bram!*” With these utterances of the last two chapters, moreover, we move into another level of understanding the language which *The Stone Angel* employs.

I HAVE REFERRED TO DIFFERENCES between written and aural patterns, between formal and informal vocabulary, between learned and vulgar usage, and to the intricate tensions among them. I have referred to the connections between notions of language and attitudes to class, taste, and snobbery, between the localisms of language and the changing sociological structures of place, between the cadences of speech and the changing values of the speaker. But there is more. For the language in this novel is also *an act of communication*, which goes beyond any of these systems of analysis and also beyond any one of the separate physical acts of speaking, writing, or thinking-in-words. So it is that in coming to terms with the way Laurence has created Hagar, we are led to perceive the difficulties Hagar has in voicing her deepest self, or in translating, as it were, her wishes and needs rather than her biases and defences into *effective* speech.

From the fragmentary utterances of the novel's opening pages, the empty threats and the inarticulate, half-thought-through phrases, we presume we are to follow a narrative involving uncompleted communications. The narrative process then confirms this supposition by what Hagar directly tells herself and indirectly reveals to the reader. Repeatedly she finds herself hampered by the fact that her tongue will not co-operate with her mind. One way of interpreting such a statement is to understand it figuratively, as a comment on the discrepancy between her will to join in experience and the linguistic barrier which her father's education erects against it. Another is to see it as a literal truth: a declaration of the physical infirmities of the aged. Between these two positions is a third — one which is essentially psychological, which explores the *readiness* of the speaker to reveal the innermost self: in this case Hagar's readiness to admit her love, to admit her fear, and to reveal thereby a vulnerability which she has always scorned in others and (quite untruthfully) denied in herself.

Through much of the book she believes she is declaring the truth; but the careful reader will not wholly trust her. Sometimes she knows she lies, as when she tells Mrs. Steiner John died in the war, and wonders why, but more often — living the lie about high culture and evading her own culpability in John's death — she does not even know. Between her mind and her spoken words, between her intent and her actions, between her belief and the truth about herself, there lies a substantial chasm. In the novel Hagar gradually tracks her memories to-

wards the truth and towards an admission of fear and love; and as Laurence has structured them, the processes of the novel lead the reader to follow, more clearly than Hagar herself can, this growth in understanding.

For Hagar's prose has to it, as well as a balance between formal (and therefore conscious) speech and colloquial (and therefore familiar, even unconscious) speech, a kind of *burden* or refrain which draws our attention to the mixture of wilfulness and inability that sabotages her *acts* of speech. Repeatedly she tells of a disparity — always of her own making, though not always under her conscious control. The examples are numerous: when she can neither comfort her brother Dan nor communicate with her brother Matt, she "used to wonder afterward, if I had spoken and tried to tell him — but how could I? I didn't know myself. . . ." "I will not tell him more," she says about her conversation with the Reverend Mr. Troy. "Oh, but that was not what I meant to say at all," she thinks after insulting Marvin; "How is it my mouth speaks by itself. . . ?" "I wanted to say 'There, there' " to Bram, she thinks, one night after they make love, "but I did not say that. My mouth said, 'What is it?' But he did not answer." She wants to joke with her X-ray technician, "But I've bungled it. My voice . . . falters and fades." The fact that the voice does speak without the interference of her conscious will gradually leads, however, to the truth that will free her from the past. Fragmentarily she recognizes what is going on — indeed, she does so even to the degree that she is aware of how her memory associatively takes over her conscious mind (and for that matter shapes the novel). At first the revelations are both short and fragmentary, as when she discovers herself irrationally screaming at Marvin " 'I'm not worked up a bit!' Is it my voice, raucous and deep, shouting? 'I only want to tell you — .'"

She cannot complete what she wants to say here, partly because all her actions up to this point have been saying something else. Clearly, words are not always required for communication, as many of the other characters in the novel know. Doris and Marvin, for all their limitations, have a working marriage, and they can communicate by sigh and eyebrow. Tom and Elva Jardine touch each other in mutual tenderness. Murray Lees, talking of the springtime of his own marriage, declares his delight in the sweetness of sex with his wife Lou (and the "plain words" by which he recalls the fact take Hagar aback). For Hagar loves the body but denies it by her learned language. When they are first married, she says to Bram:

"It seems that Lottie Drieser was right about you. . . . although I certainly hate to say it."

"What did they say of me?" Bram asked. *They* — knowing more than one had spoken.

I only shrugged and would not say, for I had manners.

A "prissy Pippa" by her own admission, she uses her learned skill with words — her allusions to Coleridge and Browning and Keats and the classics (the satyr, Socrates' hemlock, the gorgons), and the Bible — to distance herself from life. She even refuses to admit to responding sexually to Bram, because she perceives it as a betrayal of her dignity. "It was not so very long after we wed," she recalls, "when first I felt my blood and vitals rise to meet him. He never knew. I never let him know. I never spoke aloud, and I made certain that the trembling was all inner. . . . He never expected any such thing, and so he never perceived it. I prided myself upon keeping my pride intact, like some maidenhead." But she tells more and he perceives more than she realizes, as when they part:

"I wouldn't take eggs onto a train," I said. "They'd think we were hicks."

"That would be an everlasting shame, wouldn't it?" he said.

"That's all you've got to say?" I cried. "Food, for heaven's sake?"

Bram looked at me. "I got nothing to say, Hagar. It's you that's done the saying."

Capable of tears, she turns to stone when John dies. Educated to be the "chatelaine," she is embarrassed to become "the egg-woman" instead. For safety, she closes herself up, as she indirectly admits when Marvin and Doris first raise the possibility of selling the house and storing the furniture:

If I am not somehow contained in them and in this house, something of all change caught and fixed here, eternal enough for my purpose, then I do not know where I am to be found at all.⁶

But there finally follows a set of reconciliations. Murray Lees is boring and crude, but she finds his voice "comforting," and when she talks to him about John, she speaks aloud once again without knowing it, this time the truth. When she utters Bram's name aloud in the hospital night, it is an open declaration at last of her desire and her need. When she deigns at last to hear the Reverend Mr. Troy, he sings, and all the "fumbling of his speech is gone. His voice is firm and sure."⁷ But the partings that proceed to take place are still troublesome. Mr. Troy thinks he has failed, and she "can't muster words to reassure him"; she tells Doris the truth, but Doris does not believe her; she "would have liked to tell Steven that he is dear to me" but instead they "have nothing more to say to one another." And the parting with Marvin is most troublesome of all. She deliberately lies to Marvin and calls him "A better son than John"; what she means by this she is herself unsure, except that the reconciliation itself matters to them both. When she later reflects, though, that it was "a lie — yet not a lie, for it was spoken at least and at last with what may perhaps be a kind of love," we still cannot accept the statement at face value, for it is couched in that writerly balance, that formal "thinking" rhetoric with which she has all through the book distanced herself from what she didn't want to face. What the phrasing suggests is

that she finds “a kind of love” but refuses fundamentally to back away from her feistiness; “She’s a holy terror,” Marvin says — a *holy* terror: struggling to hold life, as it were, “in my own hands,” to hold in another kind of balance her independence and her need. What she thinks about one of her last quarrels with Doris — “I won’t take back the words” — could stand as a kind of paradigm for her whole life, the colloquial thought being redolent with meaning: which takes us once more back into the language of the novel.

LET ME DO SO BY RETURNING to the rhetorical passage of the opening page, to the sentence about the stone angel itself:

I think now she must have been carved in that distant sun by stone masons who were the cynical descendants of Bernini, gouging out her like by the score, gauging with admirable accuracy the needs of fledgling pharaohs in an uncouth land.

I have referred already to the artful shape of this sentence, and I have referred, too, to the propensity of English to derive its vocabulary from a variety of sources — a fact that the “multinational” character of the words in this sentence only confirms. But further consideration reveals something else as well, which derives from the main distinction one makes in dividing English words by their root-derivation — between the native or “Germanic” words and the Romance or “latinate” and “Classical” ones. By and large the native words are the everyday ones, the words for family, animals, farm and house, the words for praising, the words for swearing, and the sentence function words like *then* and *now*. The latinate words record ideas, attitudes, the language of civil mores, social style, and aesthetic order. It’s the difference between a title like *chatelaine* and a function like *egg-woman*, between the domesticated *petunia* and the wild *cowslip*. It’s a rough distinction, and one which the native speaker less *realizes* than *responds to*, not knowing precisely where the words come from, most of the time, but knowing when vocabulary, level of usage, and given audience meet. Now Laurence didn’t invent this distinction, of course, but she makes deliberate and creative use of it. Her ordinary vocabulary, influenced as it is by the word-stock of the King James Version of the Bible, is markedly Germanic: this fact, coupled with the supple way she manipulates current idiom and Canadian localism, helps to give her writing its vernacular character — and therefore to a Canadian reader its sense of familiarity: which makes the occasional latinate passages seem all the more sharply outlined, more consciously foregrounded. To go back to the stone-angel sentence, then, is to appreciate how latinate (or classical) the key words are — *distant/masons*, *cynical/descendants*, *gauging/gouging*, *admirable/accuracy* — as well as how ordered the pattern is, and to reflect on the audience for whom the sentence is shaped.

In one sense the audience is the reader, of course, but this holds indiscriminately true for all the words in the book; within the book, the sentence appears to be one that Hagar concocts for Hagar herself to listen to, an articulate shaping and orderly interpretation of events, one which will, as we have seen, defend her against the *flow* of life, the *body* of truth, the *nature* of change. But these are the evasive moments. The moments of revelation come during the passages of uncontrolled utterance, when the *natural* Hagar can be heard — not less feisty, but certainly more caring, more in tune with the world around her. They come in the vernacular interruptions, therefore, and in the native vocabulary of her ordinary speech. We hear her ironies, her beliefs, and her wants all mixed together, but what I am emphasizing here is the fact that the regional or “daily” vocabulary persists to puncture the forms of discourse she uses as her defence and (she thinks) *her* norms. The true base, I suggest, lies in the community from which she cuts herself off. But that her connection with it persists despite her artifices and her outward beliefs appears in most central metaphors she uses — of which I propose to look at two: those involving animals and shade.

Various commentators have remarked on the animal imagery, and indicated how it suggests that Hagar perceives the animal rather than the spiritual in the human beings around her — or perhaps in the nature of life. Certainly it would be in character for Hagar to value the body but to use a language which would at once demonstrate this preoccupation and yet appear to devalue the body's importance. Indeed, to follow the animal comparisons through the book is to come up with quite a catalogue: early on Jason considers an uninformed person a “daft loon”; shortly after, Hagar, still touched by her father's accent, is afraid Doris will think her “daft entirely” if she takes “both her hands in mine and beg[s] forgiveness,” but goes on at once to characterize itself as “an old mare, a slow old sway-back” and Doris “a calving cow”; then on subsequent pages she hears “frogs . . . like choruses of angels with sore throats”; she calls herself and then Marvin “fish,” herself a “colt,” Jess and Gladys “heifers,” Doris a “pouch-faced gopher,” herself a “crow,” a “constipated cow,” and a “berserk bird,” Doris a “flounder,” the Silverthreads patients “ewes,” Bram an “eel,” the Tonnerre boys a “swarm,” the Oriental wives “tinned shrimp,” John a “spider,” herself a “chambered nautilus,” Clara a “cow,” Arlene a “pouter pigeon” (though John calls her a “rabbit”); she calls John and herself “two moles” when they are scrabbling to put the angel up again; her pursuers (as she sees them) are both “hounds” and “hunters”; Mrs. Reilly is a “slug,” Mrs. Dobereiner a “mosquito”; she herself is a “ladybug,” and with June bugs in her hair becomes the “queen of moth-millers, empress of earwigs”; she has “a parody of a smile, a serpent's grin”; and when Marvin tries to aid her once again, she “snappishly” ironizes over her hospital transfer, which is cast as a need for a “new wing,” though whether of bird, insect, or angel she does not make clear. Now I can appreciate,

compiling this list,⁸ that the animal references permeate the entire book, but I can neither see any particular progression — ontogenic or phylogenic — in the arrangement of epithets, nor any philosophy governing the selection beyond the suitability of each word to the comparison at hand: *unless* we consider the effect of the word choice itself. Of the thirty epithets I've named, only five (*pigeon*, *serpent*, *nautilus*, *mosquito*, and *gopher*) are not drawn from the Germanic wordhoard — and *serpent* is Biblical and *gopher* a North American Indian word. Only *nautilus* is unusual; in the way that *albatross* alludes to Coleridge, it may be another covert literary reference, in this case to a poem by Oliver Wendell Holmes⁹ and in any event in context (beside “hulk” and “baggage”) it is an educated irony. The rest are equally ironic, but also reductive, ordinary — attempts to assert either the ordinariness of Hagar's antagonists (as she perceives them), thus reducing them from some presumed superior status, *or to admit Hagar's own ordinariness*, the ordinariness of her social milieu, the ordinariness of the animal body that has always threatened or embarrassed her, and which slowly decays.

The animal body is the substance of the world Hagar has primarily seen in shadow, and here the other strain of imagery reveals its function — partly to return us to appreciating the process of human time, partly to contrast Hagar with the two women who dominate the way she thinks about herself: No-Name Lottie with her tasteless ornaments and silken hair, and Doris with her propriety and her “rayon shoulders.” Hagar has kinship with them both; her sense of propriety links her with Doris despite her overt protestations, and her delight in silks links her with Lottie despite her inclinations. But Lottie has a capacity that Hagar lacks. Lottie can confront reality, and knows her own connection with the chicks she destroys on the town dump. Hagar, preoccupied with death but always less able to confront it, more fearful of the moment — until the very end of the novel, when she still chooses to rage — wears Oriental silks and bright colours of life against it: as the imagery tells us. In one passage we are told that the children

played shadow tag around the big spruce trees that shaded and darkened that whole yard. All of us except Lottie, that is. She went home.

And about Doris we are told that

She wears her dark brown artificial silk. Everything is artificial these days, it seems to me. Silks and people have gone out of style, or no one can afford them any more. Doris is partial to drab shades. She calls them dignified, and if your dignity depends upon vestments the shades of night, I suppose you're well advised to cling to them.

By contrast, Hagar struggles with the dark, as she struggles against her own body. Leaving Silverthreads, she feels she is “Emerging out of the shadows . . . [.]

gifted with sight like a prowling cat," finding "the darkness not complete after all." But it is to Shadow Point she must go before she can reconcile herself with the past, declaring more truthfully than she realizes: "I'll have a word or two to say . . . before my mouth is stopped with dark." She still needs Bram, the eel who could "swim . . . in a pool of darkness"; but as she is unable yet to be reconciled with herself, the darkness threatens her: "I merely sit on the bed . . . until the dark comes and the trees have gone and the sea itself has been swallowed by the night." Once again we recognize in *this* prose, however, the tell-tale signs of elevation and defence, which convey less the world of shadow than her artificial way of *thinking about* the world of shadow. Only in the hospital at the end does she come closer to realizing that one kind of language has been illusory, and that the trust she has placed in *form* has paradoxically not been in *substance*:

when the lights are out, the darkness swarms over us and talk between bed and bed is extinguished. Each of us lives in our own night, a drugged semi-sleep in which we darkly swim, sometimes floating up to the surface where the voices are. If you shut your eyes after looking at a strong light, you see shreds of azure or scarlet across the black. The voices are like that, remembered fragments painted on shadow. I'm not as frightened by them as I was before. Now I know where they come from.

At the same time, the eel or fish image persists through passages like this as well, or as when Murray Lees speaks to her at Shadow Point: "His voice is blurred, or else it's my hearing. The words swim waveringly to me across the dark that separates us." And so to learn words, she discovers, is not only to learn form but also to learn communication, which is as often an act of the body as an act of mind, a kind of sexuality of speech, a fertility of hearing, which governs the reader as well as it governs Hagar herself.

How then do we hear that central contrast in the narrative form — the distinction between *then* and *now*? Which is substance and which shadow? Clearly, to think of the structure is to differentiate Hagar thinking and speaking in the present from Hagar living and reacting in the past: but this is not the same question. Throughout Hagar's quest to relive the moments that have eluded her and to stave off the moment that awaits her, she thinks of her past life not as *then* but as something interpenetrating *now*: as something ongoing, as a body of moments of transformation. "I think now," she writes; "Now I am rampant with memory"; "Only now, when I recall it"; "Up flames the pain now"; "Emaciated trunks of maple and poplar were black now" — until at Shadow Point she is "crying now," "trembling now," "feeling better now"; "If there's a time to speak, it's surely now," she thinks — but hallucinates about Arlene instead, so that her ostensibly calm reasonable speech does not connect with the present; "I'll sleep now," she adds, and thus we are led irrevocably towards the separateness she has always sought and feared, towards her moment of death

and her unquiet peace. At this point the novel shifts again: "And then —," it closes, *on this moment*; and we are asked to hear through the language — in the triple meaning the word *then* has: meaning *next* and meaning *on the other hand* and meaning *at that time in the past* — the paradox that has been Hagar's life. We hear continuity in the phrase, and we hear alternative possibility, and we hear the finality of the past imposing itself on the present moment. Hence to close the novel this way is therefore on the author's part a remarkable dramatic ploy.

In another context, the short story writer Clark Blaise has commented on the structure of narrative in this way:

[The first paragraph is a microcosm of the whole, but in a way that only the whole can reveal. . . .

In the stories I admire, there is a sense of a continuum disrupted, then re-established, and both the disruption and reordering are part of the *beginning* of a story. The first paragraph tells us, in effect, that "this is how things have always been," or at least, how they have been until the arrival of the story. It may summarize . . . or it may envelop a life in a single sentence . . . until the fateful word that occurs in almost all stories, the simple terrifying adverb:

Then.

Then, which means to the reader: "I am ready." The moment of change is at hand. . . .

And the purest part of a story, I think, is from its beginning to its "then." "Then" is the moment of the slightest tremor, the moment when the author is satisfied that all the forces are deployed, the unruffled surface perfectly cast, and the insertion, gross or delicate, can now take place. It is the cracking of the perfect, smug egg of possibility.¹⁰

To read *The Stone Angel* properly requires listening, I suggest, in this way: for the possibilities — to listen to the message that the *voice* in the words declares, a message often hidden, often indirect, often overlaid with fabrication and contrivance, but there to be heard. The novelist has created a book of echoes; she invites us to understand what F. R. Scott has referred to as the "cabin syllables," the "nouns of settlement," the "steel syntax" of the New World. For Scott, in his poem "Laurentian Shield," the land "stares at the sun in a huge silence / Endlessly repeating something we cannot hear. / Inarticulate, arctic, / Not written on by history, empty as paper. . . . / It will choose its language / When it has chosen its technic, / A tongue to shape the vowels of its productivity."¹¹ But for Margaret Laurence, the Manawaka World shows history already shaping character, the paper no longer empty, the language in flux, and the voices repeating words for us to hear with care. In *The Stone Angel*, we follow an old woman less through the shadow past than through the present mazes of her mind, and listen while she unravels the substantial possibilities that have been her life's story.

NOTES

- ¹ George Bowering, for one, has noted how language is a recurrent *subject* in Laurence's work; see "That Fool of a Fear: Notes on *A Jest of God*," *Canadian Literature*, 50 (Autumn 1971), 41-50; see also Theo Quayle Dombrowski, "Word and Fact," *Canadian Literature*, 80 (Spring 1979), 50-62.
- ² John Baxter, in "*The Stone Angel*: Shakespearian Bearings," *The Compass*, 1 (August 1977), 3-19, points to Laurence's orchestration of a "plain" and an "elaborate metaphoric style," finding a parallel with Shakespeare in that the two styles "interanimate each other."
- ³ In an admirable essay on art and nature in *The Stone Angel*, Dennis Cooley also begins with an analysis of this passage, and through his essay refers to a number of the same passages as I do: but to the rather different end of arguing the Jungian nature of the novel; Cooley's use of "conscious" and "unconscious" is also different from mine, therefore. See "Antimacassared in the Wilderness," *Mosaic*, 11, no. 3 (Spring 1978), 29-46.
- ⁴ Cf. the later chant concerning Hagar's brother Matt.
- ⁵ Laurence herself avers "I felt... an enormous conviction of the authenticity of Hagar's voice," "Gadgetry in Growing: Form and Voice in the Novel," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 27 (1980), p. 54; Simone Vauthier notes, however, in "Notes on the Narrative Voice(s) in *The Stone Angel*," *Études Canadiennes*, 11 (December 1981), 131-53, that the novel is told not by one voice but by at least four.
- ⁶ Her concern for putting *framed* pictures on her walls also reiterates this notion. On the Benjamin West painting, see Laurie Ricou's "Never Cry Wolfe," *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 20 (Winter 1980-81), 171-85. Various critics have examined order in the novel, or the contrast between order and nature, including Cooley, Linda Hutcheon ("Pride and the Puritan Passion"), André Dommergues ("Order and Chaos in *The Stone Angel*"), and Pierre Spriet ("Narrative and Thematic Patterns in *The Stone Angel*"); the last three articles are all in *Études Canadiennes*, 11 (December 1981), pp. 55-61, 63-71, and 105-19 respectively.
- ⁷ On the role of Mr. Troy and the framing function of The Lorelei and Litan allusions, see David Jeffrey, "Biblical Hermeneutic and Family History," *Mosaic*, 11, no. 3 (Spring 1978), 91-97.
- ⁸ The list is not exhaustive; Cooley mentions still other examples. The point is that they occur *throughout* the book.
- ⁹ I.e., "The Chambered Nautilus," which reads in part: "This is the ship of pearls, which, poets feign, / Sails the unshadowed main, / The venturous bark that flings / On the sweet summer wind its purpled wings / In gulfs enchanted, where the Siren sings. . . / Still as the spiral grew, / He left the past year's dwelling for the new . . . / Stretched in his last found home, and knew the old no more. . . / Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul, / . . . / Till thou at length art free, / Leaving thine outgrown shell by life's unresting sea!"
- ¹⁰ "To Begin, To Begin," in *The Narrative Voice*, ed. John Metcalf (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972), pp. 22-26.
- ¹¹ *Events and Signals* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1954), p. 16.