

WORD AND FACT

Laurence and the Problem of Language

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“**T**HEN, MERCIFULLY, THE WORD WAS REVEALED TO HER.” After the momentary loss of her normally astonishing ability to speak — volubly, fluently, intoxicatingly — the market woman of “A Gourdful of Glory” (in *The Tomorrow Tamer*) regains her powers. Morag, novelist, protagonist of Margaret Laurence’s last book, *The Diviners*, is not so lucky: “The gift, or portion of grace, or whatever it was, was finally withdrawn to be given to someone else.” This utterance from the conclusion of this work clearly suggests that the Word has been withdrawn, as indeed, Laurence herself has claimed about her own writing career. Mammii Ama, the protagonist of the African short story, embodies a facility in many ways like that of Morag: in fact, Morag’s direct and detailed examination of her gift and her final recognition of its loss is merely the fullest treatment of a concern central to much of Laurence’s fiction.

In many associated ways, Laurence repeatedly questions the nature of the word. Without revealing a consistent philosophy of speech as it formalizes or, indeed, affects reality, she nevertheless reveals an often impressive power to scrutinize the nature of language and communication — and usually without the sententiousness of clichéd thinking that this somewhat fashionable topic often attracts.¹ Essentially the matter has two aspects, the words of human interchange and the words of imaginative vision, but, as Laurence makes clear in *The Diviners*, the two aspects are often closely allied. In terms of human relationships — for she fulfils the traditional role of the female novelist in making that her chief concern — Laurence repeatedly concerns herself with characters frantic to explain, often frustrated because they cannot find adequate words, because some acts transcend words, or because words themselves are untrustworthy. Always conscious of the tenuous and tricky relationship between words and fact, she presents protagonists for whom speech is beyond conscious control, either because they lose the ability to articulate or because their own inner voices take over, overwhelming their intentions. In terms of the creative property of words themselves, Laurence shows words to achieve almost talismanic significance; names, phrases, songs, legends achieve potent imaginative force in shaping reality for the Laurence protagonist.

"Mac — let me explain," Stacey MacAindra of *The Fire-Dwellers* thinks frequently. "Nick? *Listen* —," her sister, Rachel Cameron, of *A Jest of God*, thinks with equal frequency. It is more than family relationship that makes the two women similar: Laurence's characters are often desperate with the burden to "explain," to be what Stacey ironically calls "Explainer of the Year." "[I]f you would allow me to explain," implores Nathaniel Amegbe of *This Side Jordan*; "I had to tell him, make him see," recalls the narrator of *A Bird in the House*; "*Bram, listen* —," thinks Hagar in *The Stone Angel*; "I've got to tell someone," echoes Morag of *The Diviners*; "I felt . . . the old need to explain," says Violet Nedden of "The Rain Child" in *The Tomorrow Tamer*. The basis of the need is often obvious enough: "Do you good to tell it," says Murray Lees of *The Stone Angel*, thereby prompting Hagar's grimly wry observation that he is treating the need to speak "As though it were worms, to be purged." No doubt there is much truth in such a statement. Many characters simply require a confidant: "I have to speak aloud to someone. I have to," says Rachel, searching for a break in her silent isolation in order to extend the tentative freedom she has gained through her love affair. "And if [Mac] doesn't speak of [his problems] to some extent, one of these days he'll crack up," Stacey likewise says. But Violet Nedden offers an explanation more important to Laurence's general treatment of characters needing to explain: "We are all so anxious that people should not think us different. See, we say, I am not peculiar — wait until I tell you how it was with me." This character's analysis is partly accurate: to explain, Laurence suggests, is to be able to accept oneself. More important, it is to be accepted. Confronted by the complexity of existence, confused and guilt-ridden by their own behaviour, many of Laurence's characters (especially Stacey, Hagar, and Rachel) remain convinced that if they can but explain themselves — that is, make themselves known, not necessarily justify themselves — the terrible spectres of solitude and confusion will be exorcised. "I'd had many things to say to him, so many things to put to rights," recalls Hagar of her husband's unexpected death. Rachel, likewise, feels an urgent need to tell Nick everything about herself, particularly because his understanding will transcend the inherent difficulties of words: "There isn't much to say about myself, nothing that can be spoken. And yet . . . I feel as though I might talk to him and he would know what I mean."

One cause of urgency which Rachel feels arises from the manner in which words can become for her, as for so many of Laurence's characters, empty, devoid of meaning. Herself evidently fascinated ambivalently by jargon and cliché, especially in her delineation of the secondary characters of *The Fire-Dwellers* — Tess Fogler, Thor Thorlakson, Dolores Appleton, The Polyglam lady — Laurence also presents protagonists typically sensitive to the clichéd word, the empty automatic phrase, what Rachel calls "set patterns of response." Stacey herself acts as a kind of authorial sensibility at many points, wryly observing the clichés of advertising

(she terms some of these “pieces of folk literature”). It is Richel’s sensitivity in this matter which is especially significant because hers is a struggle to break free from such “patterns,” especially because she feels their strength so acutely. Thus, for example, she fears the growth in herself of the typical grade one teacher’s “simper,” reminding herself that “Children have built in radar to detect falseness.” More important, she reacts against such set patterns in those closest to her — in Calla, whose speech is marred by “favourite sayings,” in her mother, whose use of the “pattern” is both more unconscious, and, for Rachel, more oppressive. For Hagar, such sensitivity to the automatic, empty phrase is directly related to her core of integrity, her distaste for anything spurious. Characteristically, she reacts against the newspaper style that clouds the fact, against the manifestly “false” term, “my dear,” and, similarly, against the false automatic apology. Interestingly, this automatic “I’m sorry” is singled out for considerably more extensive attack in *The Diviners*, where Christie’s disapproval of that “useless christly awful word” becomes a recurrent motif in Morag’s memory. And when Morag protests Maudie’s use of “Right On,” she merely articulates more clearly what many of Laurence’s protagonists feel, that the same words that can be so essential to both knowing and defining, can be equally debased, meaningless: “Right On. Dear little Lord Jesus, what did that mean? Like saying Great, Stupendous. No meaning at all.”

What further emphasizes the need for explanations in Laurence’s characters is the frequent difficulty they have in finding words, their realization that words often cannot possibly contain what they must. Hagar’s recollection, “I could find no words that would reach deeply enough,” an essentially trite and unremarkable assertion, resonates as it does because it epitomizes a central problem in Laurence’s novels. The problem here is further distinguished and made relevant to the underlying problem of words and fact by those instances where Laurence manages to suggest the primary processes both of comprehension and speech. This she frequently does in Nathaniel’s struggles to explain in *This Side Jordan*, and, in “The Tomorrow Tamer” from the volume of that title, she describes the protagonist’s father struggling for words, “trying to weave into some pattern the vast and spreading spider-web of his anxieties.” This struggle of the mind both to know and to make known is especially important in those narratives which focus, as so many of Laurence’s do, on the developing psyche. In such cases, the very failure to find words is directly related to the confusion of the inchoate consciousness. Thus, for example, in the title story of *A Bird in the House*, Vanessa MacLeod, the narrator, recalls her loathing of a hymn: “all at once the words themselves seemed too dreadful to be sung.” When her father asks why she so hates the hymn she is unable to speak of her loathing — even to herself she is unable to articulate her emotions. In this volume, the protagonist suffers many such frustrated attempts to verbalize, at one point even insisting upon the inadequacy of language

itself. Of the desolating view of one of Manitoba's great lakes stretching "out and out, beyond sight," she feels "No human word could be applied." Yet the distancing irony here between the awe-struck adolescent and the mature authoress again reinforces the sense of a developing consciousness struggling simultaneously for understanding and articulation.

However, the irony does little to mitigate Laurence's reiterated suggestion elsewhere that language is as inherently limited as Eliot's *Four Quartets* argues it to be. Even in an early short story, "A Mask of Beaten Gold,"² one character feels his inability to find words to contain accurately the reality of his wife: "The words only pursued her limpingly, unable to catch the reality of her, like dragonflies in the sun." Indeed, it is perhaps significant as a parallel to the whole movement towards silence suggested by the conclusion of *The Diviners* that the novel presents a protagonist who, in spite of her professional skill with words, increasingly feels their inadequacy. When during Morag's harassing last argument with Brooke, she complains, with so many of Laurence's characters, her inability to "explain" (in this case, her reasons for separating from him), her failure reflects not only the enormous emotional complexity of the moment, but also the weakness of language itself: "Words have lost meaning." And it seems that this conviction is no passing thought for Morag. From the very beginning of the novel she is shown grappling unsuccessfully for words to describe the quasi-symbolic river outside her Shallot. She is unsuccessful not because of her own failure but because of the limitations of words: "no one could catch the river's colour even with paints, much less words." Indeed, as an adolescent, she is thrown into a panic by the possibility that "Maybe there are not" words sufficient to the multiplicity of experience. Yet, though the matter is never explicit, Laurence simultaneously suggests that Morag's difficulty with words, more than just being a comment on their inadequacy, is related both to the departure of her genius and to her almost too acute sensitivity to words: "I find words more difficult to define than I used to," she confesses near the end of her writing career.

Yet elsewhere Laurence suggests that part of Morag's difficulty arises from the fact that some experience transcends any possibility of speech, that many kinds of communication demand a medium other than words: her very relationship with the largely non-verbal "halfbreed," Jules Tonnere, reflects her deep attraction towards an area of experience where language is less inadequate than irrelevant. Most obviously, such experience is sexual, "someplace beyond language." However, her whole relationship with Jules clearly embodies this level of experience "beyond language." As school children they share a grin of complicity; as adolescents they agree without words to meet for their first sexual adventure; as adults they share entire evenings while Jules "does not speak at all." Even shortly before Jules' death, Morag decides that, to him, there is "No way of saying everything she would like to say," and adds, significantly, "Maybe none of it really needed

saying, after all." While it is Morag's relationship with Jules that does most to stress this experience beyond speech, her two other affairs reveal much the same thing. At one point, for example, Morag remembers making love with Brooke, at first recalling (somewhat awkwardly) the broken cries of love-making and then deciding that there were "no words at all, and after all there are no words, none." As Morag sentimentally declares, "there are no words." Similarly, as she recalls making love with Dan McRaith, her third lover, she reflects that their love-making is "the continuation of their talking, the same thing in a different form."

If Morag (and, presumably, Laurence) goes farther than most earlier protagonists in discovering experience where words are irrelevant she merely extends a trait well established in the Laurence protagonist. Mr. Archipelago and Doree, for example, of "The Perfume Sea," discover after their first confessions of mutual affection that that affection goes beyond speech, that, as Doree says, "we don't need to talk about it any more." Rachel is most nearly like Morag, however. With an irony subtler than most of hers, Laurence shows the abandoned Rachel longing for the return of contact with Nick, at first bargaining with some vague transcendent power (as Laurence's heroines are wont to do) to relinquish her ability to touch Nick if only she might speak with him, but later reversing her claims: "Nick — if I couldn't speak with you, all right. I would accept that. If only I could be with you and hold you." The reversal is intensified when yet later she repeats her willingness to give up speech if only she might touch, thus not merely commenting unintentionally on her own priorities in the affair, but also showing the predisposition of Laurence's heroines (Stacey MacAindra is the other most notable instance) to abandon words only in the face of sex.

YET EVEN WHEN THEY EMBRACE TOTALLY the need for words and their integrity, Laurence's characters must often come to terms with their own inner failure, the loss of their verbal facility. If *The Diviners* moves towards an acceptance of silence, that silence is variously explored, fought, and analyzed throughout her fiction. Nevertheless, most often the loss of the ability to find words is largely temporary and does not involve the faculty itself. In fact, Morag's loss of the power to "divine" at the end of *The Diviners* reflects a much more profound loss than that of most, though of course Morag's creative faculty is certainly more than a purely verbal one. With little obvious design, but entirely consistent with her treatment of the faculty of "word magic" in *The Diviners*, Laurence tends in all of her works to polarize characters, presenting both those with great verbal powers and those with very little, thereby emphasizing the inborn nature of the verbal faculty. Thus, for example, Godman, the wizened "oracle" of "Godman's Master" babbles garrulously when allowed the opportunity, his very

role as "oracle" serving as a hazy symbol of his verbal gift. In contrast, the servant girl Love, in "A Fetish for Love," remains nearly silent, her speech a mere "parrotting." In "A Gourdful of Glory" the polarity is explicit: on the one hand is Mammii Ama, intoxicated with the "golden lightning" of the word, capable of intoxicating others with her impromptu speeches and songs. On the other hand is her antithesis, "T'reepenny," who is capable of no words except her cry of "t'reepenny," who "only said one word, ever." The T'reepenny's, those of stunted speech, recur through Laurence's works — Phillip, a character of the "Mask of Beaten Gold," admits "I'm not especially articulate"; Clara, Brampton Shipley's first wife, is "inarticulate as a stabled beast" (or so Hagar claims, concerned as she is with the social status of correct speech); Jan, Stacey's youngest child, is almost pathologically late in speaking her first words; Mac and Ian, Stacey's husband and son, both choose to communicate with as few words as possible; Prin of *The Diviners* is always "simple," and becomes increasingly silent; indeed, Lilac, Morag's first fictional heroine, is, in Brooke's terms, "non-verbal." Yet Laurence is evidently fascinated more by Mammii Ama than by T'reepenny: those with the gift of speech, especially those with oratorical power, are one of Laurence's main types. Even the ironically presented proselytizers, Brother Lemon of "The Merchant of Heaven," clearly a study for Thor Thorlakson, the prophet of vitamin pills in *The Fire-Dwellers*, and, too, the "spell-binder" Tollemache Lees of *The Stone Angel*, vividly embody that power of speech that seems to fascinate Laurence. The rather absurd questers of "glossalalia," the "gift of tongues," in *A Jest of God*, likewise attempt to achieve a faculty whose pursuit is rendered futile, as Calla comes to suspect, largely because it is not a "gift of tongues" at all, but is the antithesis of a verbal gift. It is the real verbalizers like Mammii Ama, like Christie in *The Diviners* with his "legends" and his declamations on the "Nuisance Grounds," or, in another form, like Morag herself, that do most to contrast the inarticulate, at least until they lose their gifts or die.

Yet if Christie ends his life only after his power is gone, his speech "pretty garbled" by a stroke, if Prin sinks deeper and deeper into silence, and if Jules Tonnere likewise is silenced, no more able to sing, it is only after silence has achieved, through the course of Laurence's fiction, some small degree of grace. In *A Bird in the House*, the two nearly saint-like figures, grandmother Connor and the Chris of "Horses of the Night," both confer on silence their own kinds of strength, and even Calla of *A Jest of God*, realizing her friend's distress after her operation, is able to give Rachel an enormous "gift" of silence. As Stacey comes to realize, after her frantic efforts to speak openly with her husband, her failure is equivocal: "The silences aren't all bad."

What makes the passage to silence further equivocal is the fact that the power of the word is often seen as a potential burden, sometimes merely inconvenient, other times even dangerous. Repeatedly Laurence presents characters for whom

the gap between the fact and the word is all too narrow. Like the sorcerer's apprentice they become the victims of the very power they otherwise prize. And the important psychological implication — important because it closely parallels the implication that Morag/Laurence's gift of "divining" is beyond any conscious control — is that the faculty of speech is closely linked to the subconscious. Despite their earnest efforts to control their speech, Laurence's characters again and again speak in a manner that defies their own intentions. When a character in an African short story claims, "I did not mean to say that," he is merely putting in conventional language a trait common to Laurence's characters: "I was not aware that I was going to speak until the words came out," claims the narrator of *A Bird in the House*; "I didn't mean to say that," Morag echoes, and adds, significantly, "I didn't even mean it." When Laurence writes similarly of Stacey that she "hears the vehemence in someone's voice that is coming from her mouth," she is not merely suggesting that such characters slip and allow themselves to be harshly frank. On the contrary, she is making it clear that they consistently utter that of which they have no conscious notion. This is especially true of Hagar and Rachel. "How is it my mouth speaks by itself . . . ?" complains the distraught Hagar. That her frequent lapses into unintentional asperity are not mere senility is made clear both by her own claim that she "never could" keep her "mouth shut" and by the fact that her weakness is frequently shared by the far from senile (though self-confessedly neurotic) Rachel. "I suppose it must be my voice, although God only knows what it is saying," she thinks, for example, when she finds her innate maidenly reticence taking over from her sexual desires in much the same manner that Hagar's innate bitterness takes over from her goodwill. Indeed, both characters undergo the similar terror of feeling utter divorce from the voice that speaks within them. At the prayer meeting as those around her attempt to gain the "gift of tongues," Rachel finds herself listening with fascinated horror to a "crying, ululating" voice only to discover it is "Mine. Oh my God. Mine. The voice of Rachel." Similarly, in the hospital, Hagar lies awake listening to the voices of her fellow patients, until she hears that "One voice has almost screeched. Some time elapses before I realize the voice was mine." The facts that Hagar's cry has been "Bram!" the name of her dead husband, and Rachel's been, as she observes, "the forbidden transformed cryptically to nonsense" confirms, not surprisingly, that the uncontrolled cry is indeed intimately bound to innermost personality.

And again, the nature of these inner voices seems significant simply because they are so like the voices that allow Morag to write, from a source within, beyond conscious control. Even as a girl Morag discovers that when she writes, "She does not know where it came from. It comes into your head, and when you write it down, it surprises you, because you never knew what was going to happen until you put it down." The rather cathartic nature of this verbal ability, like that of

the subconsciously based speech of many of Laurence's other characters, is made more explicit at several other points in Morag's revelation of her essentially Longinian view of her own creativity: at one point, for example, she says of her current work in progress, "I guess I'll have to go on with it" in spite of her discontent with it, and at another claims that writing creatively is like "Someone else dictating the words. Untrue of course, but that was how it felt, the characters speaking. Where was the character, and who? Never mind. Not Morag's concern. Possession or self-hypnosis — it made no difference. Just let it keep on coming." Admittedly, this smacks a little of melodramatics. But such a view of the relation between the ability to use the word and what the word signifies is intimately related to Laurence's continuing view of the word itself, the verbal faculty, and its subconscious basis.

WHAT GIVES MORAG'S PREOCCUPATION with the facility with words special urgency is the attitude, evident not only in *The Diviners* but also in most of Laurence's other works, that words have almost talismanic significance. More than being merely the ciphers of communication, a transparent medium of expression, they are for both Laurence and her characters of special portent in themselves. This is particularly the case with names. It is clear that both Laurence and her characters are acutely sensitive to names — to the correspondence between a complex and often unknowable identity and the word which acts as a symbol of that identity. Laurence's own sensitivity in this regard is obvious in even the most cursory review of her characters. The Biblical names, of course, are most obviously portentous — Rachel, Hagar, Christie, Matthew, Ruth, Moses, Adamo, Joshua, and so on. Fortunately, while Laurence tends to emphasize the Biblical associations, she usually avoids coyness, both because she makes emphasis on the names fairly unobtrusive (e.g., Hagar is merely called "the Egyptian") and because she keeps the Biblical parallels subtle. The ways in which Hagar is like her Biblical counterpart, for example, are not contrivedly obvious. The portentous Biblical names are matched by others equally portentous, names such as Calla, Jason, Lees, Mercy, Godman, Miranda, Love, or, perhaps too obviously, Mr. Archipelago.

Often as sensitive as Laurence to names are the characters of her books, especially when they are concerned with the suitability of the name. Violet Nedden, for example, is as humiliated by the inappropriateness of her name to her bulky stature as is, for identical reasons, Calla. Calla is hardly lily-like as her name suggests, but, Rachel feels, is instead like "a sunflower, if anything, brash, strong, plain." Of the many characters in *The Tomorrow Tamer* who likewise feel the significance of names, one of the most prominent is Constance of "A Fetish for

Love," intrigued alike by the names of the "Mammy lorries" — "Tiger Boy, King Kong, One-Time Boy" — and by the name of a servant — Love. It is in fact the unknown source of this girl's name — possibly drawn from Biblical teaching, or, Constance's husband more feasibly suggests, from a company of ironmongers — which she somehow feels provides a clue to the enigmatic character of the girl. Yet more typical of the Laurence outlook are those characters for whom the name itself becomes a kind of clue to reality, the name acquiring great symbolic significance. Typical of this attitude is the narrator of "The Drummer of All the World," who is so overwhelmed by the potency of the names of the native gods that he "learned some of the other names of Nyame" and "for a whole year . . . called God by the name of Nyame" and at another point "invoked Nyankopon's strong name, Obommubuwafré." Similarly, Stacey is able to weave an elaborate fantasy about the northern wilds of British Columbia, using as key referents, "names like silkenly flowing water, Similkameen, Tulameen, Coquihalla, the names on maps." In *This Side Jordan*, Laurence goes so far as to make Johnnie Kestoe identify and analyse the relationship between the powerful name and the self: "Magic symbols — a rune, a spell, a charm — the thing that made him different from any other man on earth. His name John Kestoe. What proved identity more than a name? If you had a name, you must exist. I am identified; therefore, I am." In Johnnie's case, his semi-conscious musing upon his own name is made consistent with his general concern with names and reflects his desire to reassure himself of his own significance. However, as a rather obtrusive element in the flow of his thoughts, even though afforded a distancing irony, it seems to reflect even more Laurence's own interest in the significance of names.

Where names are thus so powerful, the act of naming becomes critical because that act establishes the name's ability both to reduce an identity to essence and, equally important it seems, to influence that identity. Mr. Archipelago's adopted name is an obvious instance. Both Johnnie Kestoe's naming his new daughter after his mother and Nathaniel Amegbe's naming his new son Joshua are likewise given enormous emotional and symbolic weight, in the latter instance reflecting Nathaniel's immense burden of hope and ambition: "Cross Jordan, Joshua." Even simple and relatively unstressed acts like Vanessa's instinctive, assured naming of the half-Husky (in the story of that title) as "Nanuk," is an act both of recognition and of creation. This is particularly true of Vanessa's private name for her grandfather, "The Great Bear," a name which because of its highly evocative nature (what Vanessa calls its "many associations") goes beyond the obvious appropriateness Vanessa consciously recognizes to attain an enormous imaginative influence on her assessment of her grandfather.

Again, however, *The Diviners* develops much more fully than any previous books all such matters concerning words: as Morag herself thinks, "I don't know why names seem so important to me." At this point, as an adult, she adds, "Yes,

I guess I do know. My own name, and feeling I'd come from nowhere." Such is certainly the case in her fruitless attempts to penetrate the enigma of her Scottish lover's Gaelic name for her, "Morag Dhu." Nevertheless, this is only part of the truth. After all, as a creative artist, distantly echoing God's creative act by making the Word flesh, she is especially attuned to the indefinable power of names. At one point, for example, she becomes intoxicated with a list of wildflower names and, at another, fantasizes enviously of the Adam-like power that belongs to whoever is first able to give such wildflowers their names: "Imagine naming flowers which have never been named before. Like the Garden of Eden. Power! Ecstasy!" It is perhaps significant that she somewhat facetiously adds, "I christen thee Butter-and-Eggs," for such a name for such a flower (like Vanessa's name for her grandfather) is clearly an act both of recognition and creation. Again, the word and the fact are reciprocally influential. This is especially true of Morag's reactions to peoples' names. Her uneasiness that her daughter Pique should have a friend with the same name as her own former lover, and that Pique should be given a name like that of her aunt (Piquette) but distinct from that tragedy-laden name, evince her implicit belief in the power of the name.

Not surprisingly, most of Laurence's chief characters are equally fascinated and puzzled by words and phrases, feeling somehow that those words are prior to the fact, that they create their own reality. In many instances puzzlement directly reflects a child's struggles to understand the baffling adult world. Such, for example, is the case with Vanessa MacLeod's deification of the mysterious words, "Depression" and "drought," and Morag's considerably more frantic attempts to penetrate the mysteries of Prin's use of the word "cord": "What? What cord? What means *Cord*?" In fact, in this latter novel Morag's desperate "What means . . . ?" acts as a kind of leitmotif, later in her life being echoed by her own daughter. More closely related to Laurence's intensely personal attitude towards words, though, is the manner in which she presents characters for whom ordinary words, like names, are highly evocative, capable of creating their own reality. Even Hagar recalls as a girl staring at the words and pictures in her little reader, hoping "they'd swell into something different, something rare." And for Mammii Ama, the very nature of political freedom becomes somehow secondary to the powerful word itself: "He be strong, dis Free-Dom, he be power word." This fascination with words is particularly felt by the two characters who are also writers (and who, of course, in some ways are Laurence herself), Vanessa and Morag: for Vanessa, "Great Bear Lake," "Rest beyond the river," and "Slowly, slowly horses of the night," achieve particular significance. Of this last instance, for example, she dismisses the intended meaning of the line, insisting that "to me it had another, a different relevance." Morag is even more drawn by words: "Words words words. Words haunt her." As a child, she is especially fascinated by Prin's word, "moonier," and, like Vanessa, she dismisses conventional meaning in favour of her

own: "to her it means something else." As an adult, she is likewise fascinated with the shifting meanings of words, as though their very uncertainty not merely reflects, but actually constitutes her own: "Fan . . . is . . . in a very good bargaining position? *Bargaining position*. One of the sexual postures not mentioned in the Kama Sutra. *Postures*. The ways in which one lies." So strong is this attraction to words in themselves that she will even play a Gaelic record over and over again, listening to what is in fact "Just a lot of garbled sounds."

Yet for Morag the greatest power of words is achieved not by their effect in isolation or in phrases, but in the stylized forms of songs or fiction. Indeed, the talismanic power of words is especially felt by those who are able to go far beyond mere fact so that more than merely using words or names like "mooner" or "Great Bear Lake" to define a personal reality, they use whole configurations of words to establish an existence that is at once fictional and real. Implicit in her early works, this view of the fictional word becomes explicit in *The Diviners*. In an early story such as "The Perfume Sea," for example, we encounter Mr. Archipelago who "enjoyed talking about himself" simply because "no one could ever be sure where truth ended and the tinted unreality began." Clearly, this kind of character, disposed to create a fictional reality, intrigues Laurence. Nick Kazlick's father in *A Jest of God*, for instance, is hardly integral to the action. To the whole notion of subjective and objective reality, a key theme in that book, however, he is integral. Thus Nick makes repeated reference to the unselfconscious fabrications of his father, and Rachel herself is impressed by the power his mind seems to have over external reality: "He walks as though the rest of the world were an interesting but unlikely story he had once told himself." Chris, the subject of "Horses of the Night," is another such figure, creating his own (almost pathological) reality. Yet, when Vanessa says of Chris' two fictional horses, "I had known for some years, without realizing it, that the pair had only ever existed in some other dimension," she is merely saying in other words what becomes explicitly repeated and emphasized in *The Diviners*. As Morag thinks, looking back on her life as a "Wordsmith," she has often, ambiguously, felt that "fiction was more true than fact. Or that fact was in fact fiction" (thus directly echoing Laurence's much quoted view that "fiction is more true than fact").³ She has even felt, in the past, that "words could do anything. Magic. Sorcery. Even miracles." The reality of Morag's own "magic" use of words, her novels, is evident at several points: while writing her novels she finds it tormenting to leave her fictional world for the objective one. As she says of one character's fictional plight, "The blood is no less real for being invisible to the external eye."

It is not solely Morag, however, who is a "Wordsmith." Christie and Jules, as they both re-make the past in legends and songs, are equally the creators of a fiction truer than fact. Throughout her own career Laurence has been much interested in legends and songs. She has in fact collected and translated Somali

legends and poems in *A Tree for Poverty*, but, more important here, she has, in her fiction, included many fragments of poems, songs, legends for verisimilitude, local colour, or, of course, thematic relevance. The "Ladybird" rhyme of *The Fire-Dwellers* is an obvious instance of this last use, but the influence, for example, of the African proverbs and parables on the protagonist of "The Drummer of All the World," of "The Song of Solomon" and hymns on Vanessa, of songs and poems on Hagar, are profound and pervasive. Indeed, in this last book, Reverend Troy's singing of a hymn transforms both himself and Hagar, providing her, "shatteringly," with the knowledge of her own deepest values. For Morag, however, such examples of extended creativity are important not only for their personal symbolic meanings or their relations with the past. They are, in addition, significantly related, first, to her own sense of Gaelic heritage and, more importantly, to her view of the creative word. Of Jules' stories and songs, she insists, "It doesn't matter a damn" whether or not they are objectively true; of Christie's fictitious hero, Piper Gunn, she likewise insists (rather melodramatically) that he "probably never lived in so-called real life but . . . lives forever. Christie knew things about inner truths that I am only just beginning to understand." So important is this kind of "inner truth" for Morag that she eventually realizes that the Gaelic heritage she had long believed to exist in Scotland exists, in fact, in the fictitious — but, of course, "true" — words of Christie. As a pattern of acceptance, relevant to Margaret Laurence herself, *The Diviners* thus embodies both the acceptance of silence and the acceptance of Canada.

Though rarely does she directly or fully consider the nature of language and its relation to what it symbolizes, the characters whose responses she shapes repeatedly reflect a closely connected series of attitudes towards the nature of words and speech. Admittedly, few would claim that Laurence's position in Canadian letters is due to her stature as a "thinker." Yet it is evident that her presuppositions (in this case, about the use of words) whether conscious, unconscious, or more likely, in the vague area between, are both pervasive and tellingly indicative of an impressively thoughtful sensibility. What makes the examination of Laurence's treatment of the issues dealt with here of peculiar interest is the somewhat ironic fact that *The Diviners* serves in general as the most fully articulated account of ideas suggested in earlier fictions at precisely the same time that in this last book Laurence suggests the loss of her ability to articulate in fiction.

NOTES

- ¹ Indeed, she satirizes in passing the fashionable jargon-laden approach to the problem through Jake Fogler of *The Fire-Dwellers*. She writes of him that he is "fond of talking about the breakdown of verbal communications and the problems of semantics in mass media."

² *Tamarack Review*, 29 (Autumn 1962), pp. 3-21.

³ See Clara Thomas, *Margaret Laurence* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1969), p. 14.

BREAKING AND ENTERING

Richard Hornsey

Someone was watching
as he drowned among lilacs
in the privacy of his own back yard

Someone listened
when he whispered
that chestnut trees
are candelabras
which burn all night

And someone watched him
walk with his lady
warm palms gently locked
feet feeling textures
of concrete and grass

Someone listened
when he had gone
somehow slipped the bolt
and entered the world
of his rooms

And all was changed
violated, penetrated, opened,
drawers eviscerated
the toilet bowl broken
letters stolen
the mattress split and gutted

So now
behind screwed-down windows
deadlocked doors
the sound of a radio ever playing
he too
watches and listens and waits