

# RIVER OF NOW AND THEN

## *Margaret Laurence's Narratives*

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**T**HE DIVINERS, Margaret Laurence's most recent novel, is overflowing with ideas about life, about life in Canada, and about life in Canada as experienced by a woman. Laurence has been quoted as saying, "Now the wheel seems to have come full circle — these five books [the Manawaka fiction] all interweave and fit together."<sup>1</sup> The extent to which *The Diviners* is made to interweave with the earlier books is, in fact, almost irritating. The Tonnerre family, members of which have appeared in *The Stone Angel*, *The Fire Dwellers*, and *A Bird in the House*, play a major, and thematically defensible, role in the present book. But why include Julie Kaslik (sister of Nick, Rachel's lover in *A Jest of God*) and her husband Buckle Fennick (Mac's tormented friend in *The Fire-Dwellers*), when our interest in them is derived from the earlier books, and not from anything they do in *The Diviners*? And it is a jolt to read that Stacey Cameron and Vanessa MacLeod, Morag's contemporaries, play together, since they have not previously seemed to exist on the same imaginative plane: Stacey of *The Fire-Dwellers* is a fully realized fictional creation, while Vanessa, of the short story collection, *A Bird in the House*, is more an effective narrative device than a memorable character.

Not only characters, but obsessive images familiar to Laurence's readers recur in *The Diviners*: the disemboweled gopher, which Stacey of *The Fire-Dwellers*, like Morag, saw as a child; the grotesquely fat woman imprisoned by her bulk (Hagar, of course, Buckle's mother in *The Fire-Dwellers*, and now Prin); the burning shack that trapped Piquette Tonnerre and her children, which Laurence has described twice before; and the greatest catastrophe Manawaka ever experienced, the departure of the Cameron Highlanders for Dieppe, mentioned in all Laurence's Canadian fiction.

Laurence has been quoted as saying that she will probably never write another novel, and one can almost feel, while reading *The Diviners*, the pressure on its author to make a final important statement about Life and Art. It seems to have

been Laurence's ambition in this novel, dense with themes and symbols, complex in structure, but meandering in plot, not only to clarify the ideas expressed in her earlier books, but to express all those ideas for which she never previously found a suitable fictional embodiment.

In the earlier Manawaka books, Laurence explored such themes as the difficulty of achieving genuine communication between individuals, and the limits placed on personal freedom by family and ethnic background, in ways that critics have come to identify as distinctively "Canadian". Her female protagonists merely survive rather than triumphing, and they grow up in a community which displays the "garrison mentality" in its need for rigid conformity and its fear of spontaneity and sensuality. But in *The Diviners*, Laurence has overturned the negativism of these Canadian literary themes. Morag is no Philip Bentley: she has published five novels. She is in touch with the needs of her body as well as her mind, and has striven to satisfy both. She has freely chosen a loving relationship with the Métis, Jules Tonnerre, and borne a child by him who seems to symbolize the healing of the division between culture and nature in the Canadian psyche.

At times *The Diviners* seems almost too self-conscious in its reworking of Canadian literary clichés. As just one example, Margaret Atwood has defined the "Rapunzel Syndrome" in Canadian literature: imprisoned by the repressive attitudes of the society around her, the woman passively awaits rescue by the prince.<sup>2</sup> Atwood points to Rachel in *A Jest of God* as a typical victim of this malaise. In *The Diviners*, Morag, caught in a stifling marriage, sees *herself* as Rapunzel: "Maybe tower would be a better word for the apartment. . . . The lonely tower. Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair." To Morag, however, "letting down her hair" does not mean waiting helplessly for the prince to save her; it means taking a first step towards freeing herself, by defying current standards of chic and letting her straight black hair grow out.

Cultural nationalism and women's liberation dovetail nicely here. Morag's marriage to the Englishman Brooke, whose taste and intellect she considers superior to her own, can be seen both as the outcome of the "colonial mentality," which considers indigenous culture inferior to that of the mother country, and as the result of growing up in a society that assigns housework to women and intellectual achievement to men. *The Diviners* comes to grips with currently-debated issues much more explicitly than Laurence's previous fiction: the search for a Canadian identity, the discrimination encountered by women, the unjust treatment of native people, and even ecology, find a place in the novel.

*The Diviners* also uses the most sophisticated narrative technique Laurence has yet attempted, and an examination of this technique provides a suitable introduction to the novel, since both its virtuosity, and the unfortunate outcome of this virtuosity, its obtrusiveness, exemplify the strengths and failings of the novel

as a whole. In *The Diviners*, Laurence not only attempted to refine the narrative devices she had used before, but, as with other aspects of this novel, to stretch her story-telling abilities in new directions.

THE RECURRING narrative device used in *The Stone Angel*, *A Jest of God*, and *The Fire-Dwellers* is the first-person, present-tense narrator who is also the central character of the book. This technique would seem to be a psychological necessity for Laurence:

I . . . have the sense of a whole world going on inside each skull and I can hardly bear it that this should be so, because I think I want a greater sort of contact with other people than in fact may be possible. I'm sure this is one reason why I do identify so much with the main character in my books . . . one has this kind of perfect identification or communication. . . .<sup>3</sup>

Paradoxically, the first-person technique provides Laurence as a writer with the feeling that she is sharing another person's mind while, by strictly limiting the point of view of each novel, it conveys to the reader Laurence's conviction that human beings are hopelessly isolated from each other.

*The Stone Angel* presents the reminiscences of ninety-year-old Hagar Shipley. The novel's present, revealed to us by Hagar speaking in the present tense, covers only a few days, as she "rages against the dying of the light." But Hagar's memories, in the past tense, range over her whole life. Laurence exercised great care in providing both the time and the motivation for these memories in the novel's present:

Being alone in a strange place, the nurse's unseeing stare, the receding heat of the day — all bring to mind the time I was first in hospital, when Marvin was born.<sup>4</sup>

Laurence wrote in "Ten Years' Sentences," a 1969 article, of her pride in being able to recapture the idiom of her grandmother's day:

Yet Doris never cared a snap about that pitcher, I'm bound to admit. Well there's no explaining tastes, and ugliness is pretty nowadays. Myself, I favour flowers . . .

but she also allowed Hagar some unlikely flights of rhetoric, whose equivalent is not to be found in her next two novels:

I now think 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.

Hagar's memories are presented in the order they occurred, which Laurence afterward viewed as an artistic mistake: "The flashback method is, I think, a

little overworked in it, and I am not at all sure that flashbacks ought to be in chronological order, as I placed them to make it easier for the reader to follow Hagar's life."<sup>5</sup>

In *A Jest of God* and *The Fire-Dwellers*, which portray much younger women, memories play a much smaller part than in *The Stone Angel*. Thus Laurence was able to present these memories out of chronological order without fear of confusing her readers. And she continued to take great care that these reminiscences seem to be called up naturally by events in the novels' present:

The Flamingo Dancehall is shut tight and locked, blinds drawn, but tonight it will be all mauve and green shifting lights, and blare, and couples. In the summer there are dances every night here now. It used to be only once a week, Saturdays, when I was about seventeen. Sometimes I'd go with three or four other girls, scarcely wanting to . . . (*A Jest of God*)

Stacey smokes and waits.

— I couldn't have gone in. Yes I could have. No I couldn't. And yet I'm curious as well. How do they stash them away? In grey-metal drawers like outside filing cabinets, chilled for preservation? I don't want to know . . .

Cameron's Funeral Home was never entered into by children. Stacey and her sister were forbidden . . . (*The Fire-Dwellers*)

*A Jest of God* marks Laurence's most sustained use of the first-person, present-tense narrative, and the technique produces a *tour de force* recreation of a troubled and often divided mind:

And Mother nods and says yes it certainly is marvellous and Rachel is a born teacher.

*My God. How can I stand —*

Stop. Stop it, Rachel . . . Get a grip on yourself now.

and

*Crack!*

What is it? What's happened?

The ruler. From his nose, the thin blood river. . . .

I can't have done it.

These dramatic effects are, however, offset by the equally striking limitations of Laurence's chosen technique. As Robert Harlow wrote of *A Jest of God*, shortly after it was published, "What is lacking is . . . objectivity, distance, irony. . . . One yearns for the third person point of view and the omniscient author — old-fashioned techniques for an old-fashioned story."<sup>6</sup> Harlow complained particularly about the presentation of the other major characters in the novel, which, apart from Rachel's impressions of their appearance and manner, relies on what they reveal about themselves in conversation with her. "Both Nick and Calla suffer from having to explain themselves . . . dialogue cannot be successfully used

in place of narration."<sup>77</sup> While it is true that we are never provided with the depth of characterization which would unify for us Calla's flamboyant untidiness, her devotion to the tabernacle, and her lesbianism, she is warm-blooded enough for the size of her role in the novel. The surface details: her use of "child," her pet phrases such as "the pause that refreshes," her messy and gaudily decorated apartment, are enough to sustain our general impression that she is good-hearted and down-to-earth.

But the characterization of Nick Kaslik is indeed a problem, since it is Laurence's plan to make him a major character in *A Jest of God*. Although his roots are in Manawaka, and many of his growing-up experiences parallel Rachel's, he is a stranger to her. Thus Nick has to tell Rachel (and us) everything Laurence wants us to know about him, during those few evenings he and Rachel spend together. Despite all Laurence's efforts to give verisimilitude to these briefing sessions (Rachel is rigid with shyness and someone must do the talking), the novel falters whenever Nick begins to reminisce. Although Laurence stoutly defended the narrative method of *A Jest of God* in "Ten Years' Sentences," she abandoned the strict first-person point of view in her next novel, *The Fire-Dwellers*.

*The Fire-Dwellers* is a type-setter's nightmare. Stacey's story is told in blocks of third-person present-tense narrative, flush right and left; paragraphs of first-person present-tense thinking by Stacey, indented with a dash; passages of dialogue, without quotation marks, indented about an inch from the left margin; memories of Stacey's childhood, in third-person past tense, with smatterings of present participles (conversation within these memories is indicated by italics); and the interruption of radio and television broadcasts in block letters. Although this complexity can be confusing, it is well-suited to the portrayal of a harrassed middle-aged housewife with little time for reflection and little gift for articulating her feelings:

You missed your calling, Mother. You should've been in the army. . . .  
Nuts to you. So long, Katie. 'Bye, kids.  
'Bye.  
Slam. . . .  
— Quick, coffee or I faint.  
EIGHT-THIRTY NEWS BOMBERS LAST NIGHT CLAIMED A DECISIVE VICTORY. . . .  
Stacey . . . switches off the radio.  
— I can't listen. . . . Listen, God, I know it's a worthwhile job to bring up four kids. . . . But how is it that I can feel as well that I'm spending my life in one unbroken series of trivialities?

Apart from the news broadcasts and the staccato bursts of conversation, however, the novel stays as close to Stacey's mind as the entirely first-person narrative of *A Jest of God*. As Allan Bevan points out in his introduction to the New Cana-

dian Library edition of *The Fire-Dwellers*, this limited point of view conveys the "terrifying isolation" of the characters. Stacey's conversations with her husband, as we know from sharing her mind, communicate a little of what she feels for him:

— Can't we ever say anything to one another to make up for the lies, the trivialities, the tiredness we never knew about until it had taken up permanent residence in our arteries?

Hi. You're late, Mac.

My God. Is that my fault?

And her uncommunicative husband's thoughts are as great a mystery to her as they are to the reader:

Stacey kisses him and he holds her unexpectedly close for an instant. She feels his tremor. . . .

— Mac, what is it? Are you nervous about the new job? You're only forty-three, for heaven's sake. Or what is it? Why don't you say?

On the other hand, the scenes involving the most relaxed figure in the book, the young, happy, self-reliant Luke Venturi, have the same jarring falseness as Nick Kaslik's monologues in *A Jest of God*. This is meant to be a twenty-five-year-old member of the counter-culture speaking:

Yeh? What did you plan to do with it? [Stacey has been speaking of her father's revolver.] Or rather, whom? Yourself, when the Goth's chariots and the final bill came in, or when some evangelist corporal decided this is the way the world ends, not with a whimper but a bang?

Before turning to the narrative problems Laurence faced in her most ambitious novel, *The Diviners*, it is interesting to look briefly at the almost perfect narrative form of her most modest Manawaka book, *A Bird in the House*. As Laurence sees it, the motivation for a short story is quite different from that for a novel:

With a novel the main characters come first, they grow slowly in the imagination until I seem to know them well. . . . Most short stories I've written seem to be triggered off by some event, either in my own life, or something I've observed or read about.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps because Laurence did not have such a desperate need to portray a single dominant character in all her complexity (although often at the expense of complexity in the other characters), her narrator, Vanessa, is perfectly and delicately poised between retrospective omniscience and her role as a child participant in the events she describes. In the early stories, particularly, Vanessa is an almost transparent recorder of the difficult inter-relationships of her parents, Aunt Edna, and her grandparents. Only an occasional passage, such as the one describing Vanessa's dissatisfaction with a clothespeg doll she is dressing while eavesdropping on an adult conversation, characterizes the narrator as a little girl.

There is some humorous exploitation of the gap between Vanessa the character's limited understanding, and Vanessa the narrator's adult awareness:

My grandmother was a Mitigated Baptist. I knew this because I had heard my father say, "At least she's not an unmitigated Baptist . . ."

but such "cuteness" is used sparingly.

I<sub>N</sub> *The Diviners* Laurence brought to bear all that she had learned in her earlier fiction about the advantages and drawbacks of various narrative devices. Again she was faced with a problem she had encountered when writing *The Stone Angel*. She had decided that Morag's life story, like Hagar's, would benefit from being told in a series of extended flashbacks. A novel that maintains a continuing tension between past time and present, the past moving rapidly and the present moving slowly, until the past catches up with the present, may appear to the reader to be more "manipulated" by the author than an equally craftsmanlike beginning-to-end narrative. Laurence had been aware of this in her analysis of the flaws in *The Stone Angel*. On the other hand, if *The Diviners* began with Morag's childhood and worked its way through her life to the present, it would lose the heightened contrast and modest suspense achieved by the flashbacks.

In Chapter Four, the hostile reception Pique receives in a small Manitoba town, set upon by drunken men of the community, is played off ironically against Morag's attempt, years before, to be accepted in just such a community, by dressing in "Good Taste" and using correct grammar. In Chapter Three, Morag receives a phone call from Pique's father, but we do not learn the circumstances of Pique's begetting until Chapter Seven. Similarly, at the beginning of Chapter Eight, Morag writes a nostalgic letter to Dan McRaith; we are left wondering who this man is until the middle of Chapter Nine.

In *The Diviners* Laurence made extensive use of a technique that she introduced in *The Fire-Dwellers*: a third-person narrative which is so intimately connected to the protagonist that, on first reading, one is left with the impression that the story has been told in the first person. But the third-person narrative form of *The Diviners*, although it reveals only Morag's point of view, is far more flexible than the first-person narration of *A Jest of God*. At times it approximates a train of private thought:

The postcard from Pique yesterday. No address. Mustn't think of it. . . . But a somewhat more newsy letter would be appreciated. Idiotic. How many newsy letters had Morag written to Prin and Christie, after she left Manawaka? That was different. Oh really?

But at other times the third-person narrative is free to use flowing sentences and elegant turns of phrase which, while recording Morag's perceptions, do not masquerade as transcriptions of her thought:

The willows along the river had been changed by the alchemy of autumn from greensilver to greengold.

A few first person passages, in italic type, indicate Morag's thoughts, but there are far fewer of these than in *The Fire-Dwellers*. This is partly a result of the character being portrayed. Stacey is afraid to express herself honestly, either because what she really thinks is too vulgar or sarcastic for the social situation she finds herself in (the Polyglam party), or because, within her own family, her efforts at genuine communication are rebuffed (Mac's arrival home in Chapter 1). Thus Stacey's thoughts, in the first person, are a rebellious and often anguished protest against the falseness of her wife-and-mother façade. The mature Morag, however, usually says what she means. Sometimes she spares the feelings of people she considers pathetic:

"Anything you write *now*, I mean, will automatically get published —"

*Oh sure. Just bash out any old crap and rake in the millions. I get my thoughts from the telephone directory.*

But more often she attempts to be honest, even if the truth offends others, or hurts her own pride:

... I am forty-seven years old, and it seems fairly likely that I will be alone for the rest of my life, and in most ways this is really okay with me, and yet I am sometimes so goddam jealous of their youth and happiness and sex that I can't see straight.

Usually the italicized passages are used to highlight a particularly significant realization on Morag's part, and if these are to have their proper impact, they must be used sparingly:

Would Pique's life be better or worse than Morag's? *Mine hasn't been so bad. Been? Time running out. Is that what is really going on, with me, now, with her? Pique, harbinger of my death, continuer of life.*

Laurence's choice of tense for the narration of *The Diviners* was apparently just as carefully considered as her choice of person. *The Stone Angel* made what seems to be the obvious grammatical distinction between Hagar's present situation and her memories: the former are related in the present tense, and the latter in the past tense. But in the later books Laurence explored for herself the effects that can be created by different tenses. The present tense puts us *in media res* in both *A Jest of God* and *The Fire-Dwellers*. Both Rachel and Stacey are women with severe problems in their present lives, and we feel that we are sharing their struggles with them.



In *The Fire-Dwellers*, Laurence experimented with the present participle in place of the verb in some of Stacey's memories:

Stacey, swimming back to shore, coming up for air intermittently . . . thinking already of the dance she would go to that evening, thinking already of the pressure on her lake-covered thighs of the boys

Although this innovation was not followed through consistently, the passages in which the participle was used suggest that these memories are still an active part of Stacey's image of herself: she has not yet come to terms with the fact that she is no longer a carefree young girl.

In Chapter Eleven of *A Jest of God*, which is basically a present-tense narrative, Rachel describes her decision to take control of her own life in the retrospective tranquility of the past tense. Similarly, the aura of serenity in *A Bird in the House* seems to result from its consistent use of the past tense: all the hurts felt by Vanessa have been healed by the passage of time, and her insight into, for example, her father's ("A Bird in the House") and her grandfather's ("The Mask of the Bear") true natures has already been achieved. Although Laurence has said that the writing of *A Bird in the House* was a process of self-discovery for her,<sup>9</sup> we do not share the process, only the achievement. The fact that the adult Vanessa is an unknown quantity, the most faceless of Laurence's narrators, adds to the effect of calm detachment.

In *The Diviners*, Laurence's protagonist is, for the first time, a woman who has already found a measure of fulfillment, whose present life is busy and, by and large, satisfying. Thus Laurence's seemingly perverse decision to write of Morag's past in the present tense, and of Morag's present in the past tense, is the right one. The past tense narrative, in much of Laurence's work, suggests an achieved personal equilibrium, and this Morag possesses. On the other hand, Morag has experienced a difficult journey to her present autonomy, and she vividly recalls her earlier struggles; indeed, she feels that she is constantly reworking her past, even embellishing the events, in order to link her past life to her present life in a meaningful way:

What happened to me wasn't what anyone else thought was happening, and maybe not what I thought was happening at the time. A popular misconception is that we can't change the past—everyone is constantly changing their own past, recalling it, revising it. What really happened? A meaningless question. But one I keep trying to answer, knowing there is no answer.

**L**AURENCE'S CANADIAN novels, whether narrated in the present tense or the past, in the first person or the third, have always been constructed so that we share the consciousness of a single dominant female character. In each

novel Laurence has seemed to move closer to her own experience, and in *The Diviners* she has carried the parallels between herself and her protagonist farther than ever. Morag is, like Laurence, a divorced writer, author of a number of successful novels, who, having once made a romantic pilgrimage to England, settles down to work in a cabin by a quiet river in Ontario. Even Morag's smaller quirks are shared by her creator, as the many profiles of and interviews with Laurence have made known to her readers: for example, Morag chain smokes and refuses to learn to drive.

One is tempted to think, while reading *The Diviners*, that Laurence resorted to the numerous irritating ways in which the narrative, as Robert Fulford put it, "untactfully draws attention to itself,"<sup>10</sup> in an attempt to distance herself from her material. Perhaps these devices are the evidence of her struggle to create a fictional past for a character who, in the novel's present, bears such a close resemblance to herself. Morag's reminiscences are presented as a series of "Memorybank Movies," which break into the narrative flow, and whose often satirical titles undercut the emotions portrayed in them. For example, the account of Morag's newspaper assignment, covering the horror of the fire at the Tonnerre shack, is entitled, "Down in the Valley, Part III." The section in which Brooke, whom Morag has considered impervious to pain, describes the unhappy childhood that still haunts him, is called "Raj Mataj." This is witty, but to what end? Laurence's damaged heroines have often used mordant wit to deal with their pain. However, the premeditated appearance of the Memorybank Movies makes such humour distancing and unpleasant.

This obtrusive technique is particularly jarring in the early sections of *The Diviners*, when Morag is recalling her early childhood. Laurence's three earlier Canadian novels showed increasing skill in simulating the stream of consciousness. Hagar's reminiscences, although capturing the idiom of her generation convincingly, are expressed in well-formed sentences, suggesting written memoirs rather than thoughts. By the time she produced *Stacey*, Laurence was attempting to recreate the free associations and near-incoherence of the inner voice. But in *The Diviners*, for the first time, Laurence sought to reproduce the thoughts and speech patterns of a very young child.

Mercifully, she did not follow Joyce in returning her protagonist to the crib. Morag's earliest memories are expressed in adult vocabulary, as Morag examines a number of faded photographs. Successive Memorybank Movies portray Morag at five, six, seven, nine, twelve and fourteen, her development at each age distinguished not only by her opinions and her degree of awareness but, with great care on Laurence's part, by her vocabulary and syntax. Six-year-old Morag's first day at school is described this way:

Girls here. Some bigger, some smaller than  
Morag. Skipping with skipping ropes singing. . . .

And oh

Their dresses are very short, away above their knees.  
Some very bright blue yellow green and new cloth,  
new right out of the store. You can see the pattern  
very clear, polka dots flowers and that

Well oh

This is almost concrete poetry, suggesting an immature mind bombarded with new sights and sounds, while making it quite plain to the reader that this is Morag's first experience of her low social status. Morag at twelve is a vulgar little tough:

The girls yell at her, but Morag doesn't care a fuck. They can't hurt her. The teachers hate her. Ha ha. She isn't a little flower, is why.

but at fourteen she tries to be ladylike, while fuming at the social ostracism she now fully recognizes:

... no one will say *Good Morning* to Morag and Prin. Not on your life. Might soil their precious mouths. ... They're a bunch of — well a bunch of so and so's. Morag doesn't swear. If you swear at fourteen it only makes you look cheap.

This writing, at its strongest, becomes almost transparent, as the reader experiences the illusion that he is sharing Morag-the-child's thoughts. Then a wry Memorybank Movie title pulls him back to the surface of the page. As was noted earlier, in *A Bird in the House*, where we are constantly aware that the adult Vanessa is giving form to her childhood perceptions, a little cuteness goes a long way. In the early sections of *The Diviners* there are long passages of childlike thought which, when we are suddenly reminded of the author guiding our responses to Morag, become forced and un-heartwarming:

At four o'clock Morag can go home. She still does not know how to read. ... But knows one thing for sure.

Hang onto your shit and never let them know you are ascaerd.

MEMORYBANK MOVIE: MORAG, MUCH OLDER

As Morag matures, the narrative reaches one further stage of complexity in the Innerfilms: Morag's fantasies in the past. These tend to be extended self-mockeries:

*Innerfilm:* Outside the blizzard rages. ... Inside the little house, all is warmth, all is cheer. Morag, having put in an excellent day's work on her nearly completed novel (which will prove to be the best thus far) is reading in her comfortable chair. ... The basement contains shelves and shelves of bottled preserved plums, applesauce, pears, blueberries, chili sauce, crabapple jelly... all the work of **Morag's hands**. ... The friendly neighbourhood farmer is a bachelor (widower?)

yes). Although by no means an intellectual, he is a well-read man. Also handsome.  
And and

But Morag is portrayed as a strong-willed woman who has made a decent life for herself against heavy odds, and thus we become impatient with a negativism not supported by the novel's plot. Laurence has always given her protagonists a portion of self-deprecating humour, but in *The Diviners* this humour is beginning to seem more like the undisciplined voice of Laurence's own "Black Celt."

To be fair, some aspects of Morag's personality and development are deftly and convincingly portrayed, particularly her sensitivity to the power of language, both in its inhibiting aspect, as a social indicator, and its liberating aspect, as an exquisite medium through which an artist can communicate. Even at the age of seven, Morag notices the grammatical lapses of her guardian, Prin:

She was the only child and wasn't none too bright (you were supposed to say wasn't *any* too bright, but Prin didn't know that)

She relishes vivid colour and rich texture, even though they are found in bizarre forms in Christie's hovel, and puzzles over the proper way to describe them:

When she peers close [to the flies], she can see their wings are shining, both blue and green. Can they be beautiful and filthy?

... a blue plush (pl-uush — rich-sounding, but really it is like velvet only cheaper and not so smo-ooth on the fingers) cushion

Both aspects of language continue to play an important part in Morag's life. Her concern for "proper usage" epitomizes her feelings of inferiority in her relationship to Brooke:

"Shall we have some sherry?"

"Please," Morag says, having recently learned to say, simply, *Please*, instead of *Oh yes thanks I'd just love some*, or worse, *Okay that'd be fine*.

while her convictions about the beauty of the poetic *mot juste* are strong enough to allow her to combat Brooke's patronizing influence:

"... almost always if you get inside the lines, you find he's saying what he means with absolute precision. 'Sheer plod makes plough down sillion shine' — I'm not sure it really does, but it couldn't be expressed more concisely and accurately."

The mature Morag of the novel's present is no longer concerned with the social niceties. She has also come to doubt her earlier belief that language can accurately convey sensual experiences, although she remains convinced of the value of the effort:

How could that colour be caught in words? A sort of rosy peach colour, but that sounded corny and was also inaccurate.

*I used to think that words could do anything. Magic. Sorcery. Even miracle. But no, only occasionally.*

Laurence has been quoted as saying, “. . . it’s one of the most difficult things to do, writing about a writer. But I had to. At first I made her a painter, but what the hell do I know about painting?”<sup>11</sup> However, her believable portrait of the artist as a harassed Canadian woman is one of the most successful aspects of *The Diviners*. Morag experiences many of the barriers that can stand between a woman and creativity, including a husband’s ego, morning sickness, and sleeping children.

But in her presentation of the internal doubts that beset Morag as a writer (and which surely afflict Laurence as well), Laurence comes perilously close to sinking her novel under the weight of its self-consciousness. Morag agonizes, in true Calvinist fashion, about whether spinning tales may not simply be a form of telling lies:

A daft profession. Wordsmith. Liar, more likely. Weaving fabrications.

Elsewhere, Morag wonders whether, as a writer, she most resembles Christie Logan the scavenger or Royland the diviner. Does she simply “tell the garbage,” by fictionalizing other people’s pain, or is she, like Royland, the possessor of a special gift, which allows her to reveal to others basic truths that they could not see without her help? She comes to the tentative conclusion that fiction *is* her truth:

Yet, with typical ambiguity, [Morag was] convinced that fiction was more true than fact. Or that fact was in fact fiction.

Laurence shares Morag’s concern about telling the truth in fiction:

There’s not only the talent in writing well. . . . The greatest problem of all is to try and tell enough of your own truth, from your own viewpoint, from your own eyes, to be able to go deeply enough. . . . It sounds easy just to tell the truth. There is isn’t anything more difficult.<sup>12</sup>

And she seems to have concluded that this truth-telling is impeded by some of the ordinary conventions of novel-writing. Although this realization does not make Laurence’s “distancing” narrative devices any more successful, it helps us to understand why she chose them. Hagar’s and Rachel’s first-person narrative is abandoned for the third person in *The Diviners* because, after all, Morag is not *really* telling us her own story. Similarly, Memorybank Movies are substituted for a smooth transition into reverie, because no one has memories so detailed and complete, with all past conversations intact. Here, as with Morag’s difficulty in describing colours, the novel seems to comment on its own technique. Laurence has Morag draw attention to the “fictional” quality of her reminiscences:

Now I am crying, for God's sake, and I don't even know how much of that memory really happened and how much of it I embroidered later on. I seem to remember it just like that, and yet, each time I think of it, are there new or different details? I recall it with embellishments which don't seem likely for a five-year-old.

Later Morag muses that "everyone is constantly changing their own past." Apparently Laurence's Memorybank Movies are not simply, or even predominantly, the result of her effort to distance herself from her material, but are meant to illustrate her belief that every person, writer and non-writer alike, makes a fiction of his past truth, and by doing so, transmutes it into new truth. And the new truth is myth.

A MAJOR THEME in *The Diviners* is the process of myth-making, and in particular, the application of this process to the needs of the Canadian imagination. In discussing this theme, we must consider the other characters in the novel. The presentation of the supporting players has always caused Laurence considerable difficulty. Because of her determination to limit herself to the point of view of her protagonist, these characters either succeed or fail on the believability of what they say. Laurence has had particular difficulty in devising realistic dialogue for male characters, and for characters considerably younger than herself: the two problems came together disastrously in her characterization of Luke Venturi in *The Fire-Dwellers*. Her most believable male characters, such as Bram and Mac, have been relatively taciturn, the motivation for their action largely supplied by the woman protagonist, who explains in her own idiom why they may have behaved as they did.

As we might expect from this most self-aware of novels, *The Diviners* deals with the problem of stilted dialogue for romantic leads and ingénues by incorporating the unbelievability into the characterizations, of Brooke:

"Why, Morag? Why are you so determined to destroy me?"

This is all the more terrible because she knows the pain is real and yet there is something melodramatic, to her ears, in what he is saying. . . .

"Have I ever?" he says. "Have I ever wanted to damage you? Never. Never. Never."

Add two more *nevers* and it might be Lear at the death of Cordelia.

and of Pique:

" . . . anyway, I stopped at a house, and asked if I could please wash, as I'd had a slight accident, and they called the cops."

*She tries to speak my idiom to me. She never says Pigs, cognizant of my rural background.*

In the past Laurence has given mythic dimensions to otherwise rather sketchy characters by suggesting that their relationships to the protagonist re-enact a biblical situation. Thus *The Stone Angel's* Hagar (like the biblical Hagar) lives in exile from her husband Bram (Abram), and her son John, like Ishmael, is also an outcast. In *A Jest of God* Laurence developed the parallels between Nick Kaslik and the biblical Jacob, not only in his relationship to Rachel (who, like her biblical namesake, demands of him, "Give me my children"), but also in his relationship to his twin brother Steve, the brother who (like Esau), was disinherited.

In *The Diviners*, Laurence takes the essential elements in these myths: exile and dispossession, and reworks them in Canadian terms. These experiences are not limited to Canadians: Brooke has lost his boyhood India forever, and Dan McRaith, the Scotsman, knows no Gaelic. But Brooke retains his language; he still has an identity as an Englishman, and McRaith retains the land, journeying back to Crombruch to renew his creative powers. The Canadian characters have lost both their language:

[Gaelic was] just a lot of garbled sounds to her. Yet she played the record often, as though if she listened to it enough, she would finally pierce the barrier of that ancient speech. . . .

Jules, with two languages lost, retaining only the broken fragments of both French and Cree, and yet speaking English as though forever it must be a foreign tongue to him.

and their land:

I'd like at some point to go to Scotland [writes Morag to her friend Ella] where my people come from. . . . it haunts me, I guess.

The Métis, once lords of the prairies. Now refused burial space in their own land.

Morag's life is an illustration of what will and will not heal the pain of these losses. Morag loves, in turn, three men: the Englishman, Brooke Skelton; the Scot, Dan McRaith,<sup>13</sup> and the Métis, Jules Tonnerre. Only the relationship with Jules bears fruit, a child who carries the blood of the two people who possessed the land before them. Brooke represents the cultural inheritance that attracts many Canadians to England ("I guess there's something about London, as a kind of centre of writing," says Morag), but makes them feel that their own country is inferior. Dan McRaith represents the country from which Morag's ancestors, too long ago for her to know their names, set out for Canada. But the value of these cultures for her, Morag comes to realize, is mystic and not literal.

In *A Jest of God*, particularly, the demands of the myth with which Laurence was working made the realistic level of the novel less effective. All Nick's Jacob-like revelations are made to Rachel in the course of normal conversation, and, as

has been pointed out, these monologues are not only boring but unconvincing. Laurence avoided this failing in *The Diviners* by striving less for a continuous narrative flow. Christie Logan, Morag's guardian, is the first spinner of tales in the novel, and his stories of Piper Gunn, Morag's mythic ancestor, are set off both typographically and stylistically from the rest of the text. Although Christie is always a colourful speaker, the language in the tales has an archaic sonority:

*Christie's First Tale of Piper Gunn*

It was in the old days, a long time ago, after the clans was broken and scattered at the battle on the moors, and dead men thrown into the long graves there, and no heather grew on those places, never again, for it was dark places they had become and places of mourning.

Although, as Morag enters adolescence, she begins to correct Christie's story-telling from her history books, she later gives up the chance to enter Sutherland, the home of her ancestors, saying to Dan:

"It has to do with Christie. The myths are my reality. . . . And also, I don't need to go there because I know now what I had to learn there. . . . I always thought it was the land of my ancestors, but it is not."

"What is then?"

"Christie's real country. Where I was born."

That is, Christie's tales were valuable to Morag as myth, and not as history.

Jules Tonnerre, Morag's lover, is also a teller of tales, about his Métis ancestors, Rider Tonnerre and Old Jules. As with Christie's tales, the point is made that their value does not lie in historical accuracy:

Rider was called Prince of the Braves, Skinner said [writes Morag to Ella], 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.

Jules' stories stand even farther apart from the text than Christie's. After Morag first goes to bed with Jules, they have a brief conversation about his family as he walks her home. Although we are invited to assume that Jules told Morag his stories then, they are grouped together, each with a title, several pages later.

When Morag incorporates these tales as well as Christie's into her mythology, she has come to terms with what Margaret Atwood calls the "ambiguity" of Canadian history, for in Christie's tales Riel is a villain, and in Jules' he is a hero. "Canadians," writes Atwood, "don't know which side they're on."<sup>14</sup> So, the proper response is Morag's when, in relating these stories to her small daughter Pique, she takes neither side.

The gift of myth-making, like the gift of divining, is "finally withdrawn to be



given to someone else." There comes a day when the adult Morag requests a story about Piper Gunn and Christie is unable to remember one; when Jules, whose myths had reached a further stage of refinement when he recast them as folk songs, develops throat cancer and sings no more. But Pique is also a folk singer and will continue the myth:

Would Pique create a fiction out of Jules, something both more and less true than himself, when she finally made a song for him, as she would one day, the song he had never brought himself to make for himself?

At the end of the novel, Pique, whose restless search for identity has, as the time scheme of the novel allows us to see, paralleled Morag's own, is making a journey back to her father's people, with her grandfather's knife as a talisman. But she also wants to carry a Scottish plaid pin of her mother's, and Morag assures her that, when she is "gathered to her ancestors," Pique may have it as well. And then, symbolically, Pique will recover the birthright that Lazarus Tonnerre and John Shipley, the original possessors of the knife and the pin, and both exiles in their own land, had traded away.

Laurence's *The Diviners* is a noble work with obvious flaws. In it, Laurence probably touches on most of the ideas she wants to express, most of the values she wants to affirm before she falls silent, but at a cost. The novel contains far too many characters, some of them, like McRaith, important to the theme of the book, but dull as individuals. It has far too many obtrusive narrative devices, and while they were no doubt carefully considered, they produce a book much less impressive than the novel Laurence now considers naive in narrative form, *The Stone Angel*. But Laurence will probably not be surprised if the critical response to *The Diviners* mixes respect for the scope of her effort with disappointment at its flaws:

Sure I'm ambitious . . . *extremely* ambitious, because — Heavens, let's not deceive ourselves — to try and get down some of the paradoxes of the human individual with everything that has gone to influence their life — their parents, the whole bit about history, religion, the myth of the ancestors, the social environment, their relationship with other people and so on — even to *attempt* it means attempting the impossible.

and she concludes, quoting Graham Greene:

For the serious writer, as for the priest, there is no such thing as success.<sup>15</sup>

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Quoted in Marci McDonald, "The Author: All the Hoopla Gets her Frazzled," interview with Margaret Laurence in *The Toronto Star*, 18 May 1974, p. H5.
- <sup>2</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), p. 209.

- <sup>3</sup> Donald Cameron, ed., "Margaret Laurence: The Black Celt Speaks of Freedom," *Conversations with Canadian Novelists* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1973), p. 105.
- <sup>4</sup> Except for *The Diviners* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), all quotations from Laurence's books are taken from the New Canadian Library (McClelland and Stewart) editions.
- <sup>5</sup> Margaret Laurence, "Ten Years' Sentences," *Canadian Literature*, 41 (Summer 1969), p. 14.
- <sup>6</sup> Robert Harlow, "Lack of Distance," *Canadian Literature*, 31 (Winter 1967), p. 74.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>8</sup> Margaret Laurence, "Author's Commentary," *Sixteen by Twelve: Short Stories by Canadian Writers*, ed. John Metcalfe (Toronto: Ryerson, 1970), p. 71.
- <sup>9</sup> Cameron, p. 99.
- <sup>10</sup> Robert Fulford, "The Book: It's Fascinating Despite the Flaws," *The Toronto Star*, 18 May 1974, p. H5.
- <sup>11</sup> Margaret Atwood, "Face to Face," an interview with Margaret Laurence in *Maclean's* (May 1974), p. 44.
- <sup>12</sup> Graeme Gibson, ed., "Margaret Laurence," in *Eleven Canadian Novelists* (Toronto: Anansi, 1973), p. 189.
- <sup>13</sup> Did Laurence intend the suggestion of insubstantiality in these names? Skelton, apart from its literary overtones, sounds a little like "skeleton": Morag is getting the bare bones of a culture without the substance. And McRaith suggests "wraith."
- <sup>14</sup> Atwood, *Survival*, p. 170.
- <sup>15</sup> Cameron, p. 114.

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