

THAT FOOL OF A FEAR

Notes on "A Jest of God"

George Bowering

MANITOBA was taken from the Cree, and the name means God's country. Neepawa means land of plenty. Margaret Laurence sets many of her stories in Neepawa, Manitoba, and calls the town "Manawaka". For a person such as Rachel Cameron, aware to much of irony in her life, the Cree names for her home might be taken as a jest of God. Anyone knows that in novels set on the Canadian prairie, place is a determinant, sometimes even a character. Margaret Laurence has been lately speaking of a sense of form for the novel. She would begin with a sense of form for the place. Not simply the flatness and the river, but also, in *A Jest of God*, the changing advertising signs over the front door of the funeral parlour Rachel nears as she is walking home. In the mid-fifties, when I arrived in rural Manitoba, I was told that this is God's country. You must be joking, I replied.

The town is split into two parts, each making the other feel guilty, and so is Rachel. Manawaka speaks with two voices, Scots-Canadian and Ukrainian. Rachel speaks with two voices that are unheard except when she speaks in voices, as in the tabernacle, or later in the ecstatic utterances concerning her experience of Nick. One gets the sense of place correctly when one gets the language right. Margaret Laurence is the rare Canadian writer who shows a care for the novel as good writing, language shaped to find literature. Serious writers know that the "content" of their work is no reality — all content is made-up or referential. In your language, in your voice, you can strive to make a record of the real, at least in so far as the written word may be taken as score for the tongue's workings.

In *A Jest of God*, seen as formally failed by some nineteenth-century reviewers, Margaret Laurence assays a responsive vocal style, the voice in the ear pursuing Rachel's mind even into the deep places where the most superior fiction (Joyce, Beckett, etc.) comes from. Instead of doggedly getting on with the "story", the draggiest part of a book, the writing begins in its place and expands outward from the keystone province.

From my reading I have a nice visual sense of the place, looking out from those eyes. It is not the narrator's grabbing control of her scene, because she doesn't have it as a prospect. That way vocal: instead of a sifted and settled version of Rachel's summertime adventure we get close with her most private mind in the present tense. We hold a present, and it is tense. If we can do so, we should read the book aloud.

Then we may hear Rachel's tense mind as she sits for the first time in the Pentecostal tabernacle. The reality is tolled by the music, as in poetry:

Oh my God. They can sit, rapt, wrapped around and smothered willingly by these syllables, the chanting of some mad enchanter, himself enchanted?

The rime tells the time. Here is a rare privilege in our fiction, the enjoyment of hearing the mind moving, rather than being on the receiving end of recollection, arrangement, description, and expression.

So I praise the process, beginning with place and voice, leading to that third thing hard to name, something like the risk or gift of getting naked, so that your nakedness may touch something that is not yours. The form of the novel, first-person and present tense, works as Rachel's opening-out does, to get naked. Margaret Laurence shows uncommon courage making this book, to confront social and deep personal stupidities and fears in the womb of her narrator. There is no prince charming waiting at the neck of the womb, but we inlookers are led to see Rachel finding herself, who had always been appalled by open utterance, expressing her desires physically, with tenderness and violence that both frighten and liberate her sensibilities to an extent. To an extent we are not urged to believe but simply allowed to witness.

MANAWAKA is in the brown middle of one of the world's widest countries, a long way from exotic, or so it would seem for anyone desiring elsewhere. Rachel has a mind, that is more important than any reveiwer has no-

ticed, and she feels as if her mind has already removed her from her town, as if the town is holding her by circumstances opposed to her mind. In this way she is fixed there by her mind. We are introduced to this state of mind as she listens to the children's skipping songs in the spring of the book, as Rachel's ears pick them out:

*The wind blows low, the wind blows high
The snow comes falling from the sky,
Rachel Cameron says she'll die
For the want of the golden city.
She is handsome, she is pretty,
She is the queen of the golden city —*

and a paragraph later we are similarly introduced to a sensing of the town's mindless dislike for the exotic, as the children sing:

*Spanish dancers, turn around,
Spanish dancers, get out of this town.*

But poor Rachel is not allowed even to associate herself with the Spanish dancers, who are hated not only for their strangeness, but also for their grace. She sees herself as an awkward crane-like creature, or a streak of chalk, or a "tin giant."

Writing as she does, from inside Rachel's neurotic head, Mrs. Laurence feels that she has to go to some objective means of presenting the town's kitschy insularity, and the entrapment of dreams. So she presents to the reader sitting behind Rachel's eyes a number of ikons such as the children's skipping songs. When Rachel goes to the teenage hangout Regal Cafe she sees venerable Lee Toy, "his centuries-old face not showing at all what he may think of these kids." Lee Toy is still sending money to his wife in China, a woman he has not seen in forty years. Rachel knows that like him she is isolated and secret, but fears that unlike him she is not relentless. Lee Toy's patient resistance is shown in the two pictures on his cafe's wall: a Coca-Cola poster and a painting, "long and narrow like an unrolled scroll, done on grey silk — a mountain, and on the slope a *solitary and splendidly plumaged* tiger." [italics mine.] The painting is that old Romantic trick, the dream stuff, in this case delicate and exotic.

So that when Rachel has her self-induced masturbation dreams, the image must be removed from the town that has taught her repression. The faceless fantasy-lover enters her in a forest or on a beach. "It has to be right away from everywhere." At one time it is a gaudy Hollywood orgy in ancient Egypt, Rachel as both escapist and voyeur, dreamy outsider in a tangle of flesh.

When she does finally lie naked with a man they are on the ground outside the town, but more important, her lover is a Ukrainian immigrant's son, whom she tries to picture as exotic barbarian rider from Genghis Khan's hordes. This lover has a face, of course, one that interests Rachel because of its slavish near-oriental cast, a face unlike the Anglo-Scottish faces of her ancestors. Mrs. Laurence makes much of the hold maintained by her people's ancestors. In *A Jest of God* that notion makes up a good portion of the sense of place.

Manawaka is a symbolic Canadian town, originally Scottish, with a patina (or mould, depending on your side of the tracks) of more recent eastern European immigration. Mrs. Laurence simply sees the Scottish side teaching emotional repression, but also that Rachel's notion of the exotic in the poorer section is a normal stereotype.

Thinking on another ikon, the sign over the undertaker's door, Rachel remarks on how it has been replaced and reworded more than once through the years in order to soften the idea of death, at least for the Scottish Protestants of the town:

No one in Manawaka ever dies, at least not on this side of the tracks. We are a gathering of immortals . . . Death is rude, unmannerly, not to be spoken to in the street.

Spanish dancers, get out of this town. Rachel's closest ancestor is her mother, who runs about tidying the house every night so that it will look "as though no frail and mortal creature ever set foot in it." When Mr. Cameron the undertaker had been alive, Mrs. Cameron had put doilies on all the furniture so that his corpse-touching hands would not touch the place of her habitude. She apparently felt the same way about his touch on her body, an interesting fear of the touch of both death and life, a double fear that her daughter has picked up. It is only after she allows herself to be touched, and after she then inaugurates the touching, that she takes some open-eyed control of her own life, and even over that of her mother.

Previous to that time, we may see Rachel's curious suspension in her attitudes toward the two churches. She can feel superior to the uppity Protestants who want their church to be bloodless and quiet, but she herself squirms with embarrassment at the very thought of being seen in the Pentecostal tabernacle. When she is in the middle of the famous service at the tabernacle, she suddenly associates the loud singing with her childhood dream of the horsemen of the Apocalypse. At that time her mother had wakened her to say, "Don't be foolish

— don't be foolish, Rachel — there's nothing there." Mrs. Cameron goes to her church every Sunday morning and there is nothing there, and she is no fool, has no chance now of becoming a fool, God's fool or her own. Later, when Rachel goes to her doctor with her fear of becoming a mother and finds that she has a uterine irregularity, she thinks

I was always afraid that I might become a fool. Yet I could almost smile with some grotesque lightheadedness at that fool of a fear, that poor fear of fools, now that I really am one,

really am the town fool, the object of its children's songs, and its potential teacher, not satisfied to be its grade two teacher.

The untaught town is realized by its language, the reported clichés of mother May's card-playing cronies: "I guess they must keep you pretty busy, all those youngsters" — poor vision of the teaching process, and "Well, I think it's marvelous, the way you manage" — no insight into Rachel's problem with managing. This catching of ordinary real dialogue is Margaret Laurence's first easy accomplishment, the stuff her earliest writing was based on, and useful here as the antagonist to Rachel's interior verbal trouble, just as the town is that speaks that way. At the extreme, Mrs. Laurence manhandles it into unconscious irony versus Rachel's overconsciousness, as when, speaking of a movie, one of the old women says, "The one next week at the Roxy is *The Doomed Women*. I can't imagine what *it* can be about."

The town teaches not only repression but also the desire to put up a good appearance. Constantly the town is accurately described to show that the outsides of buildings are misleading declarations, as Rachel's appearance might be. The quiet brick houses are too big for their remaining occupants. "Nothing is old here, but it looks old." Hector, the current undertaker in the building with the rose window, is the agent of the people's wishes to have someone unfamiliar and well-dressed take care of confrontation with a crisis in life. For him it is a business; as in the Scottish church it is the business to make a good appearance. Here is the cheapened hold of the ancestors. Calla's mother named her after the lily, probably because both sound and picture gave the appearance of prettiness, but Calla is not conventionally pretty. The calla lily is the symbol of death — death and a good though not exuberant appearance, basic white, like the town. But Calla rejects the mortuary flower and paints her door a lilac color, thus offending her neighbours, as Nick's father would have if he'd left his house painted the bright colours he wanted. While flinching at that openness, Rachel

tells Nick that she has always envied it, thinking of the Ukrainians as “not so boxed-in, maybe. More outspoken. More able to speak out. More allowed to — both by your family and by your self . . . In my family, you didn’t get emotional. It was frowned upon.”

PART OF RACHEL’S QUANDARY springs from the condition of her female-dominated world, a world that mitigates, by its condition, against her growing naturally out of her adolescence, perhaps. That condition traps her as much as the isolation of the shrinking town. Most of the males she sees are no help because they are remote or they are symptomatic of the town — Lee Toy, Hector the undertaker, Willard the school principal, the teenage boys in the coke cafe. Only James Doherty and Nick, two figures of outward, offer any surcease or hope.

James’ mother, to begin with, is atypical of the mothers in Manawaka. She lets her son run free in nature when he is supposed to be suffering under the town’s indoctrination in school. When she casually touches him, arousing Rachel’s jealousy, he squirms away, and his mother “smiles, not displeased that he wants to be his own and on his own.” One feels that this mother would not urge her child to believe that there is “nothing there” in his dreams.

The danger and sadness of corrupting youthful optimism was a theme running through Mrs. Laurence’s African stories. Rachel sees that she, desiring to be a mother especially to her favourite pupil, is in danger of fulfilling the role of typical Manawaka mother; and her relationship with James is more complicated than that. She knows that children can quickly detect falseness in their teachers, and become adversaries. She has a rather strong fear of becoming James’ enemy, so she becomes his tormentor, because she also knows that if she shows her liking and admiration of him, he will be made to suffer by his classmates, who have been taught by their community to detest and ridicule tender human touch. So she hits him with a ruler (for a moment unable to rule herself) or speaks sharply to him: “It’s so often James I speak to like this, fearing to be too much the other way with him.” She projects on to him her longing to realize her uniqueness: “Looking at his wiry slightness, his ruffian sorrel hair, I feel an exasperated tenderness. I wonder why I should feel differently toward him? Because he’s unique, that’s why.” (None of us is unaware of the sexual attraction, but that’s not my direction here.) But a paragraph later she betrays her

mind-forged manacles when she thinks of Calla, "If only she looked a little more usual." But she allies herself with James' uniqueness and independence of imagination, comparing him favourably with the majority of the pupils, who are given a "free choice" drawing class and have to wait for suggestions, their own (sad) houses, what they did last weekend. James draws a splendidly complicated and efficient spaceship, a vehicle to get him away from here, in all senses. Rachel may at times identify with James, or feel that she tacitly collaborates with him against the town's trap, or see him as potential wish-gratification, as parents normally do. "He goes his own way as though he endures the outside world but does not really believe in it," she thinks. Before she observes the unassuming rebellion of his mother Grace, she simply envies her, thinking that "she doesn't deserve to have him."

But, curiously, James also focusses the realistic part of her mind. Ordinary repressed people like Willard can go ahead and strap a boy like James, protesting that it is a duty he doesn't relish, but Rachel considers that she at least realizes her odd sexual botherings while ordinary people do not. "*I am not neutral — I am not detached — I know it. But neither are you, and you do not know it,*" she imagines herself saying to the young married-man principal. (Such realization is often missed by readers of Rachel's book.) From that realization to directness of expression is where Rachel will have to go when she gets close to Nick, but she finds it taught by Grace during a scene in which she talks to James' mother about his truancy. Rachel offers the woman an excuse so that she can "save face," but Grace simply admits that she sometimes allows James to run around in nature instead of going to school. Rachel is so startled that she doesn't know what to say, strange position for an authority-figure to find herself in. She has found out that this mother simply loves her son, and wants for him what she would want in his place. Rachel's own mother characteristically says that she simply cannot understand why Rachel would want to do certain things, generally things that contravene the mother's poor wishes. So when James later hides from Rachel what he is drawing, she makes an "open utterance," striking him on the face with her staff of office, her ruler. Her response is similar to the end of the tabernacle scene — she is not sure she can distinguish between her spoken words and those she bottles-up inside. She is not sure she can watch her words.

As far as the community is concerned, little James has a lot of the Old Nick in him; and for Rachel, the older Nick is a kind of extension of what the son-surrogate James presents to her confusion. At first Nick, the boy who escaped the town, intensifies the normal battle within her. In their first conver-

sation he simply asks, "Been here long, Rachel?" and before speaking her hesitant answer, she thinks: "There is something almost gentle in his voice, and suddenly I long to say *Yes, for ever*, but also to deny everything and to say *Only a year — before that, I was in Samarkand and Tokyo*." He, on the other hand, is immediately open; he begins to tell her his family stories right away — he is the Ukrainian milkman's son. Rachel thinks: "He's easy to listen to. Easy as well, it almost seems, to reply to. If only it could be that way." She is, then, still thinking of herself as the acted-upon, the conditioned. Nick will teach the teacher to act upon her world and her words. As a beginning, she finds herself, unlike herself, pouncing for the telephone so that her mother may not beat her to Nick's voice.

Nick provides a curious balance for Rachel's incipient schizophrenia. His twin brother died as a boy, so that he is survivor of that relationship as well as his upbringing in the town. "I wanted to be completely on my own. And then it happened that way," he says. Now his closeness will offer one of Rachel's selves an opportunity to assert itself free from its unidentical twin. One might also remember that Nick's brother had been the more approved by his parents, just as Rachel's complying self is approved by her mother and the other controllers.

Nick suggests what he may do with Rachel, when on entering his parents' house with her, he goes to the windows and opens the curtains, to let the sun in. (She later refers to Nick as the sun.) We have earlier been told that Rachel's home is surrounded by the ancestors' trees to protect it from eyes (including the sun's) outside. Windows let light in, and they also let eyesight out. When Nick then enters her body and leaves his sperm there, she curiously thinks of herself in language that might speak of a house: "the knowledge that he will somehow inhabit me, be present in me, for a few days more — this, crazily, gives me warmth, against all reason." However, it is also language that could describe a disease, the dis-ease that Rachel is filled with when she imagines her body and her self occupied by foetus or tumour, or the eccentricities of advancing age and the town's influence. Reason, indeed.

Contrary to the invasion is Rachel's excursion, the risk she learns to take for the first physical love that comes to her in her thirties. She reaches out to him now; it is she who goes first to the telephone. She suggests to Nick that he could teach in Manawaka instead of Winnipeg, and is at once struck by her openness, her loss of pride: "No, I have no pride. None left, not now. This realization reaches me all at once calm, inexplicably, and almost free. Have I finished with facades? Whatever happens, let it happen. I won't deny it." Here is a lesson she

is learning from Nick, from time, and from her reading of St. Paul up in Calla's room. (Paul said to allow yourself to become a fool in order to find wisdom. That is, share in God's joke, don't be its butt.) The next time they are alone with one another's bodies, it is she who reaches out to touch first, to ask for it, and of course it is he who moves away first afterwards, saying that he is not God, that he can't solve anything. Finally, in the hospital in Winnipeg, the little tumour, which like a child she takes as a personal gesture from fate, departs, and with it goes Nick's inhabiting of her. Now she can move into that house, and when she does she arranges the furniture as she wants. Literally, she packs up and moves to Vancouver, where fools may live in God's grace, making their own traditions.

I SEE THE CHANGE in Rachel's consciousness as a result of her getting in touch with her body, that part of self the Scottish Christians preferred to cover with rough wool and to forget. Rachel's mother, poor dear, was mortified that her husband made his living by handling bodies, and kept his hands off hers. The first thing we see of Rachel is that she is displaced from her own body — on the first page of the book she imagines her eyes looking from a pupil's desk at Miss Cameron, the "tin giant". Odd metal for "the queen of the golden city". At other times she pictures her body, seen in fugitive reflections from hall mirror or street window, as a "stroke of a white chalk on a blackboard" (again two-dimensional, like tin), a "goose's feather", a "crane of a body", either bird or construction machine, such juiceless things.

We are also quickly introduced to her fear of aging and dying, especially poignant because she hasn't gone through all the steps of the life cycle thought appropriate to a woman of her age. The mature part of her consciousness joins with her immaturity in looking for the signs of her becoming an eccentric old woman. But her mother treats her as if she were "about twelve". Rachel is displaced from her womanhood's age as well as from her body: "What a strangely pendulum life I have, fluctuating in age between extremes, hardly knowing myself whether I am too young or too old." There is an operative irony in the fact that the story is being told in the present tense.

Rachel seems to prefer her inside to her outside, because it is abstract and hidden from outsiders, hence untouchable for two reasons. But her desire to be opened does battle with her sense of good taste and behaviour. While discussing

the misdemeanour and punishment of James, she concentrates her glance on her own nicely manicured fingernails with their colourless polish, and realizes that she desires to touch Principal Siddley's furry hands though they repulse her. She makes "reasonable" excuses to soften the guilt of her masturbation. She blames her rising during the climax of the tabernacle scene upon the touch of her neighbours who lifted her to her feet as a consequence of their movement. She is relieved by her own anger when Calla's kiss scares her away from her friend. Characteristically she tries to pass her fear of self-exposure off as disgust. About the people in the tabernacle she thinks: "How can they make fools of themselves like that, so publicly?" To become a fool one must cast off fear, not disgust, sometimes the Protestant fear disguised as disgust. If you like your inside better than your outside, there should be no obstacle to revealing it, certainly no reason for poor snobbery.

Taste is another idea that confuses things for Rachel. How can she be sure that her response to the awful beehive hairdoes of the town girls is not simply a mixture of her snobbery and her alienation from the present? She is jealous and hurt when she thinks that these empty-headed sillies are probably being touched by boys in farm fields and Fords every night. Later, Rachel sees herself as graceless and hasty in her scramble to get her clothes on after her first pastoral scene with Nick.

Any way, shortly after seeing the young beehive heads on the streets of town, she goes to sleep, and before conjuring her erotic onanist images, she is assailed by a vision of herself trapped by time, a giant clock:

The night feels like a giant Ferris wheel turning in blackness, very slowly, turning once for each hour, interminably slow. And I am glued to it, or wired like paper [two-dimensional again], like a photograph, insubstantial, unable to anchor myself, unable to stop this slow nocturnal circling.

In one sense time must simply be co-operated with — it is the earth, after all, that circles slowly and endlessly in the dark, the earth that Rachel has not moved over. But time, or the using of it, can also be a control device for the good folks of town. There is a second scene in which Rachel catches herself staring at Willard's hands — "with them he touches his wife" — and she quickly looks at something else, the familiar royal blue Bank of Montreal calendar, which "is not so frivolous as to display any picture." The hands and the calendar act dramatically here as objective correlatives of the conflict in Rachel's consciousness. But to this point Rachel is still caught being favourable to the closed

attitude. When Willard takes off his protective glasses and shows a look of vulnerability, Rachel feels almost affectionate, and moves backward instead of towards him.

During the tabernacle scene, too, Rachel is embarrassed by vulnerability that leads to people touching one another even in spirit. Calla explains that the “deep and private enjoyment” of making “ecstatic utterances” leads to a sharing of the ecstasy among people who have got together. This is a pretty obvious comparison with sexual experience, as are the words of the hymn the congregation sings: “*In full and glad surrender, / I give myself to Thee.*” Mrs. Cameron’s church, by contrast, is then seen as antagonistic to both spiritual touch and sexuality, a place where people present only their protective coverings to one another, and probably to the Holy Ghost. “I don’t think it would be very nice, not to go. I don’t think it would look very good,” says Mrs. Cameron to her daughter. Furthermore, she says it would not be nice for Rachel to go in her orange scarf, because it is too bright. The old woman would be “shocked” if her minister ever spoke to his God with emotion or sincerity, as if God were actually there. Even this church’s Jesus is beyond and out of touch:

... a stained glass window shows a pretty and cleancut Jesus expiring gently and with absolutely no inconvenience, no gore, no pain, just this nice and slightly effeminate insurance salesman who, somewhat incongruously, happens to be clad in a toga, holding his arms languidly up to something which might in other circumstances have been a cross.

This is another of the many pictures Rachel’s eyes and mind fall upon, the reflectors Mrs. Laurence is fond of holding up for the mind she has chosen to write from inside of. For instance, compare that Christ with the image of Rachel the lapsed Protestant when she is around Pentecostal Calla: “I hold myself very carefully when she’s near, like a clay figurine, easily broken, unmendable,” something you ask your visitors not to touch.

Part of the time Rachel feels like a rube, unenlightened, and much of the time she is bookish, as if that separates her from her environment, for good or for bad. But small towns usually contain a few bookish rubes, the untouchables, who are not the same as the town fools. When Nick gets through to Rachel, she turns against her bookishness, rejecting the words of “some nitwit in Shakespeare,” but the words still come. Rachel perhaps sees herself as a character in a novel; she is unfortunately analytical. She is prepared, because she knows herself as someone like Willard does not, to know it all.

But she has to learn that touch can come before and lead towards knowing — “yet I’ve touched him, touched his face and his mouth. That is all I know of him, his face, the bones of his shoulders. That’s not knowing very much” — and even that touch touches both ways, both people at once, so that knowing yourself happens from the skin inward. That touching of two makes “possession” irrelevant, her mother’s phrase, “*a woman’s most precious possession*”, something to reject in oneself. Her mother said of her father, “he was never one to make many demands upon me.” In contrast, Rachel finds “this peace, this pride”, when her body is touching Nick’s. They are most un-Protestant feelings for the soul. So also is her new way of viewing. She finds herself fixing on “a leaf with all its veins perceived, the fine hairs on the back of a man’s hands,” rather than accepting the Protestant and spinsterish “abstract painting of a world”.

Not only does touch lead to knowing, it leads to wanting to know, by touching: “Then I want my hands to know everything about him, the way the hair grows in his armpits, the curve of his bones at the hips, the tight muscles of his belly, the arching of his sex.” It is here that she is inevitably touching herself, getting past the two-dimensional pictures of her own body.

Now, too, her obscure sex-fantasies are being replaced by dreams of herself in bed with actual Nick, and the scene is no longer distant unnamed beaches, but “a Hudson’s Bay point blanket on the bed, scarlet”, something real to anyone who has felt such cloth on his bare skin. During the same daydream, Rachel notices that her cloudy fears have been touched away: “I’ve felt a damn sight better since I stopped considering my health.” This is not to say that Rachel is cured, but she is changed, and that is very much to the point for the woman halfway through her life who could have settled for declining sameness in the small isolated town. Still she fantasises, but now about marriage, and now the fantasy is rejected not so much from shame and guilt, but from a sense of reality.

Now she does not hurry past the mirror. She stops to look into it and sees actual woman, with blood running in actual veins. With a similar courage she descends for the first time to the funeral chapel below-floors, and makes another open utterance: “Let me come in,” directionless, or towards the site of her father’s peculiar laying on of hands. She feels some small surprise that she will do such a thing, but sloughs it off: “Suddenly it doesn’t matter at all to me.” When Hector tells her that her father chose a life in which he need not touch living flesh, she first says why mourn, then changes it to why cease from mourning.

In the following scene, Rachel goes to see Calla, and is now disconcerted to

see the fear she has instilled in the woman who would like to touch her. To find herself capable of such control now that she has learned how good it is to abandon oneself to two-way touch is source for a new kind of guilt, but one that leads to instruction. It is echoed in the words of St. Paul, as read here by Calla, who does not realize their immediate application: *“If any man among you thinketh himself to be wise, let him become a fool, that he may be wise.”*

That is a version of Margaret Laurence’s theme.

Rachel has pondered it another way just before hearing those words. She thinks that “if you think you contain two realities, perhaps you contain none.” I like to think that the operative word here is “contain.” Reach out, Rachel, fill yourself up. Something has to give. “My trouble, perhaps, is that I have expected justice. Without being able to give it,” she admits to God, who is not there, of course. She is going to lose Nick, but it was his body her fingers pushed against to send feeling back into her own.

One of the lovely things about Margaret Laurence’s novel is the gradualness of change. It is not that Rachel realizes steadily. Her early weakness and confusion, her thirty-five-year old character traits are still there, at the end of the book. They are just not so bad now. They are accompanied by the later knowledge and experience that alternate with them in her mind, and modify them somewhat. For example, when Rachel goes to the Parthenon Café to think about her pregnancy, her tired mind talks to Nick. At first she wants him to be there so that she can see him and speak with him, not asking to touch him. But two pages later, after she has faced her self in the middle of crisis, thinking of abortion, she admits that she could forego speaking with him if she could hold him and lie down beside him. Touch is the first thing she wants now. She manages to go again to Calla, to touch her with an admission of her trouble, to establish greater intimacy than they have ever known. At the same time, Rachel decides to shake her mother’s formerly awful control: “My mother’s tricky heart will just have to take its own chances.” There is confiding and confidence, outside and inside.

Margaret Laurence has spoken of Rachel’s experience as part victory, part defeat. The woman has managed to step outside her own mind for a little, to see the eyes looking back as not totally stupid nor totally ridiculing. While Dr. Raven is touching her womb to find life or tumour, Rachel has a moment of seeing the real world, one in which any individual person has to make his own way. Dr. Raven, the old family friend, is “one well-meaning physician who wants to help me pull myself together and yet can’t help having an eye on the clock, the

waiting room still full." All life goes on, everyone's, and time is not just a tyrant tying lonely Rachel to some monster clock. He hasn't the time to concentrate on her.

So Rachel steps into the middle ground she could not reach earlier because of the grip of her ancestors. Whereas she had formerly been seen by her mother as child, by herself as ageing spinster, and perhaps by the reader as arrested adolescent, she now becomes woman and mother in a weirdly symbolic birth scene. After the tumour is removed and she is lying in the Winnipeg hospital bed, she hears herself saying "*I am the mother now.*" She is referring largely to the relationship between herself and old Mrs. Cameron. She will complete the age-old cycle, becoming the mother of her ancestors, those people we all see as children, socially or historically. When Rachel begins to assert herself and take over control of the family affairs, including especially the leaving of the old town, her mother makes the complaint of all children being moved, that she cannot stand to leave all her playmates. Her mother says to Rachel, "you're not *yourself*," and either she is or she is not.

Rachel has changed somewhat, and change is life, as they say, though not often enough in Manawaka. When she encounters Nick's parents on the street back home, she is surprisedly open in introducing herself to them. But as Mrs. Laurence cautions, this is a story of real life, not a Hollywood movie set in New England. When she speaks to Nick's parents and finds that Nick lied to her about his being married, we have another in a series of unshurenesses about misunderstandings; we still have a woman near middle-age, waving her hands at the mist of life and its meetings. I am changing and coming into focus, but who am I?

ONE OF THE REASONS for my attention to *A Jest of God* is the seriousness of the work as literature. Margaret Laurence is an unusual bird among Canadian novelists, in that she works on the premise that form (not "structure") matters pre-eminently in the endeavour to simulate reality. What happens happens *in* the writing, not in front of it. One sees through the eye, not with it. Mrs. Laurence is not talking *about* life; she is trying to re-enact the responses to it. I differ from most commentators in praising the success of the present tense and the interior, confused, first-person narrative. The subject of the book is Rachel's mind, and the realism consists in our separation from it by

virtue of its unsureness and confusions. That separation brings us so close. Because we are in the position of wanting to talk to Rachel.

We are early convinced of a versimilitude of thought, while being introduced to young James in the classroom. Rachel's mind is on him, asking herself why she speaks so harshly to him in particular when it is to him that her feelings go out most longingly. Then before thinking on him some more, she asks herself why she didn't bring a coat to work, as the spring wind makes her shiver, and a cold will pull her down so surely. We know then that in some way her spinsterish fear of aging and getting cranky about her declining health is related to her desire to love a son, especially one who exhibits the independence of mind that Rachel has betrayed in herself.

Mrs. Laurence engages the reader continuously this way, inviting and obligating him to evaluate Rachel's thoughts, not simply to receive them toward a narrative completion. We remember that we are at all times privy to Rachel's speaking to herself, and must, for instance, evaluate her adjectives. When she says to herself, "My great mistake was in being born the younger. No. Where I went wrong was in coming back here, once I'd got away. A person has to be ruthless. One has to say *I'm going*, and not be prevailed upon to return," a reader may want to substitute "courageous" for "ruthless." Yet the reader is still the half of the dialogue who is holding his tongue. He should extend to her some of his imagination, *i.e.* sympathy; he should not condemn her, or her vision of reality. Somewhere between that "ruthless" and "courageous," or whatever the second adjective may be, rests the real. The real is like the real in real life — it is mainly encountered in dialogue, encountered but never totally characterized in words.

Similarly the reality of character is found in how the person talks more than in what he says. Mrs. Laurence engages this poetic discovery as a literary approach. So the language with its rhymes and cadences reveals the condition of Rachel's shocked mind as she finds herself speaking ecstatically in the tabernacle:

Chattering, crying, ululating, the forbidden transformed cryptically to nonsense, dragged from the crypt, stolen and shouted, the shuddering of it, the fear, the breaking, the release, the grieving —

Not Calla's voice. Mine. Oh my God. Mine. The voice of Rachel.

What I mean to say is that Mrs. Laurence does not seek to use words to explain (L. *explanare*, lit., to make level.) the important things that are hap-

pening. Take for instance Rachel's words on her wishing that something bad will happen to her mother:

You mean it all right, Rachel. Not every minute, not every day, even. But right now, you mean it. Mean. I am. I never knew it, not really. Is everyone? Probably, but what possible difference can that make? I do care about her. Surely I love her as much as most parents love their children. I mean, of course, as much as most children love their parents.

Rachel's mind picks things up and lays them down like a distracted woman walking through a department store. As we have seen, she gets a purchase on her life after she discovers that she is no longer the child, but something like the new mother. In the passage just quoted, Mrs. Laurence does not introduce the product of Rachel's mind. She shows the motion of the machinery. No fooling.

One small section of the novel is told in the past tense, the first four pages of chapter eleven. It is the scene in the Winnipeg hospital, a scene that is both interlude (the only time told outside of the little town and Rachel's day-to-day confrontations with its people), and dramatic keypoint. The past tense both fills in the news and provides a sense of Rachel's mind taking control of her situation, especially striking after ten chapters of up-close hesitations in the immediate present.

Certainly when one speaks to God one has to use the present tense (*cf.* Stacey, in *The Fire Dwellers*), as Rachel does at the end of chapter nine, through her irony, declaring her decision to have a child of her own for a change. If God is alive he may or may not be having his little joke. If this happens in the present tense, it happens to you, and that makes it more important than funny. God's jests are not just vocal — the word is made flesh, *i.e.* the eternal present. It is in understanding this that Margaret Laurence chose wisely to write in the present tense, to present the fool made wise by folly.

God's grace shines on fools. Poetry is hospitable to the fool's tongue, and *vice versa*. Rachel's acceptance speech is poetry:

All that. And this at the end of it. I was always afraid that I might become a fool. Yet I could almost smile with some grotesque lightheadedness at that fool of a fear, that poor fear of fools, now that I really am one.