

EVERY MAN IS AN ISLAND

Isolation in "A Jest of God"

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“**N**O MAN IS AN ISLAND, intire of itselfe,” quotes Ethel Wilson in *Hetty Dorval*, for Wilson like Donne believes in human community, and the novel examines the effect upon mankind of the wilful isolation of one of its members. Yet this truth is only partial. Margaret Laurence in *A Jest of God* suggests a complementary truth, that every man is an island, a theme more typical of the twentieth century and already apparent in the “Marguerite” poems of Matthew Arnold, with their overpowering sense of isolation and human incommunicability:

Yes! in the sea of life enisled,
With echoing straits between us thrown,
Dotting the shoreless watery wild,
We mortal millions live *alone*.
The islands feel the enclasping flow,
And then their endless bounds they know. . . .

Who order'd that their longing's fire
Should be, as soon as kindled, cool'd?
Who renders vain their deep desire? —
A God, a God their severance ruled!
And bade betwixt their shores to be
The unplumb'd, salt, estranging sea.

In her essay in the Tenth Anniversary Issue of *Canadian Literature*, Margaret Laurence observes that after the African novels her theme became “Ten Years’ Sentences”, “survival, the attempt of the personality to survive with some dignity,

toting the load of excess mental baggage that everyone carries, until the moment of death," and adds that Rachel's partial victory in *A Jest of God* is due to her "beginning to learn the rules of survival". Yet Rachel's acceptance of life is attributable to her acceptance of her central predicament, her essential aloneness. She cannot escape through dream, fantasy or nightmare: "I'm on my own. I never knew before what that would be like. It means no one. Just that. Just — myself." And with this comes the simultaneous realization that every one else is alone too, that even the closest human relationship cannot cross the barrier of self. She cannot bear the problems of her parents, even know them, nor they hers. Returning to the Japonica Funeral Chapel, her father's undertaking establishment, many years after his death, she meditates:

Everything looks just the same, but now it does not seem to matter much that my father's presence has been gone from here for a long time. I can't know what he was like. He isn't here to say, and even if he were, he wouldn't say, any more than Mother does. Whatever it was that happened with either of them, their mysteries remain theirs. I don't need to know. It isn't necessary. I have my own.

It is her recognition of this overwhelming truth that frees Rachel from her past failures, with her father, with her mother, even with Nick, and enables her to face her future with fortitude. And it is Laurence's ability to capture this truth, to recreate in fiction the sense of isolation, where human beings reach out to each other and reach out futilely, which makes *A Jest of God* and the earlier *The Stone Angel* notable achievements in Canadian and in world literature.

All the characters in *A Jest of God*, minor as well as major, are isolated. Only the young seem to be unaware of this, and Rachel envies their surface sophistication, their other-worldliness. The girls of sixteen are "from outer space. . . . Another race. Venusians"; the young lovers in the cemetery exist in and for themselves, and James Dougherty pulls away from his mother, wanting "to be his own and on his own". The old huddle together pathetically, to evade a sense of their own isolation, their subjection to time. The old men sit in the sunlight on the steps of the Queen Victoria Hotel, or gather by the oak counter in twos and threes to recall the past, their faces crinkled and unshaven, their throats scrawny with prominent adam's apples. The old ladies play bridge and gossip, yearning for the days of Claudette Colbert and Ruby Keeler, their voices "shrill, sedate, not clownish to their ears but only to mine, and of such unadmitted sadness I can scarcely listen and yet cannot stop listening". Mrs. Cameron at first seems shallow in her martyred and predatory coyness, but later to Rachel's

sharpened perception she becomes pathetic too, fearing the outside world as a child fears a dark cellar; Rachel has always blamed her mother for her father's withdrawal from life, but the rejection, she comes to see, was on both sides, and Mrs. Cameron mumbles in half sleep "*Niall always thinks I am so stupid*". And the middle generation too are alone. Calla lives with a songless canary, who does not even notice her, for she finds comfort in listening to some movement in the darkness of the night, and Rachel asks herself at the Tabernacle, as she sees her in new circumstances, "Don't I know her at all?" Willard Sidley, the self-possessed principal who has both attracted and repelled Rachel, she now views in a new light as asking her for something, perhaps condolence, and she wonders: "if he's asked for it before, and if at times he's asked for various other things I never suspected, admiration or reassurance or whatever it was he didn't own in sufficient quantity." And even funny little Hector, her father's successor in the Japonica Chapel, she sees for a moment of truth "living there behind his eyes".

Human relationships, then, are a reaching out, an attempt to cross the barriers of the "unplumb'd, salt, estranging sea". But the contact is spasmodic, momentary. In Arnold's poem, the lovely notes of the nightingale echo across the channel of calm, moonlit nights, and join the islands momentarily. Then each draws back into its separate world and the moment is lost.

ON A SUPERFICIAL LEVEL, *A Jest of God* is a love story with an unhappy ending. Yet the central relationships are not confined, static, but multiple and ambivalent. Rachel both protects James and threatens him; she loves her father yet hates him for his rejection of her. She loves her mother "as much as most children", yet wishes her dead. She longs for a child, yet she hesitates:

The process doesn't end with birth. It isn't just that, to be reckoned with. . . . You're left with a creature who had to be looked after and thought about, taken into consideration for evermore. It's not one year. It's eighteen, maybe. Eighteen years is quite a long time. I would be fifty-two then. All that time, totally responsible. There would not be any space for anything else — only that one being.

She searches for permanent relationships, with father, lover, child, to escape from her sense of isolation, yet isolation too brings invulnerability, an escape from the present, as she recognizes in the mournful train voice and the lonely call of the loons at Galloping Mountain:

They were mad, those bird voices, perfectly alone, damning and laughing out there in the black reaches of the night water where no one could get them, no one could ever get at them.

Even the relationship between twins is complex and shifting. Rachel considers Nick and Steve and wonders if twinship itself is an insurance against loneliness: "Would it make a person feel more real or less so? Would there be some constant communication, with no doubt about knowing each other's meanings, as though your selves were invisibly joined?" But Nick denies this:

I used to be glad we [Nick and Steve] weren't the same. . . . How would you like there to be someone exactly the same as yourself. . . . People used to group us together, although we were quite different. He never seemed to mind. He just laughed it off. But I hated it. . . . I wanted to be completely on my own.

Rachel's desire for sexual love, although it seems central to the novel, is in fact another aspect of her desire to reach out, to escape out of herself into another's identity. In the early part of the novel, the dream lover serves this function, and later, Nick. Rachel runs her fingers along Nick's ribs "just to feel you living there under your skin", to reach through skin and bone to the unique being underneath. For the moment of union, flesh, skin, bones and blood are connected, but only for this moment; when they pull apart they become again two separate, inviolate personalities. And Rachel comes to realize that the Nick she knows, like her father, exists only in her mind:

I talk to him, when he is not here, and tell him everything I can think of, everything that has ever happened, and how I feel and for a while it seems to me I am completely known to him, and then I remember I've only talked to him like that when I'm alone. He hasn't heard and doesn't know.

But the dominant relationship of the novel is not between lovers, but between mother and child where, for a period of several months, two human beings do exist within one skin. The child, Rachel thinks, "is lodged there now. *Lodged*, meaning living there. How incredible that seems," and again:

It will be infinitesimal. It couldn't be seen with the human eye, it's that small, but the thing will grow. . . . It will have a voice. It will be able to cry out. . . . [You] could see that it has the framework of bones, the bones that weren't set for all time but would lengthen and change by themselves, and that it had features, and a skull in which the convoluted maze did as it pleased, irrespective of theories, and that it had eyes.

Even in Part II, the summer with Nick, the desire for this child to replace her

loneliness is strong. The second time after she and Nick have made love, she whispers urgently to herself: "*Nick, give it to me.*" And it is this demand for a child which ultimately destroys her relationship with Nick:

'Nick —'

'Mm?'

'If I had a child, I would like it to be yours.'

This seems so unforced that I feel he must see it the way I do. And so restrained as well, when I might have torn at him — *Give me my children.*

Nick's reply, "I'm not God, I can't solve anything," is primarily a protection of his own independence, his ego, but it is also a recognition that Rachel demands too much of human relationships. Like her sister Stacey and Gracey Dougherty, she seeks a child for her own fulfilment, to escape her isolation as a separate being, and God alone can grant her freedom.

In the first part of the novel, Rachel satisfies her maternal instincts through her classes of seven-year-olds, although even then she realizes that the phrase "my children" is a threat to her as it is not to Calla. She faces the summer with regret, for "this year's children will be gone then, and gradually will turn into barely recognized faces, no connection left, only *hello* sometimes on the street." Later she tries to explain to Nick:

I see them around for years after they've left me, but I don't have anything to do with them. There's nothing lasting. They move on, and that's that. It's such a brief thing. I know them only for a year, and then I see them changing, but I don't know them any more.

Her affection for James Dougherty, her "exasperated tenderness", her belief in his uniqueness and her contempt for the moronic mother who "doesn't deserve to have him", are clearly the result of such a substitution. For after the summer, as she watches the children entering her classroom, "two by two, all the young animals into my ark", she realizes that there will never be another James, "no one like that, not now, not any more".

Yet it is in Part I that she learns the true nature of the mother-child relationship. She has despised the possessiveness which leads her sister Stacey to rush home to Vancouver and her children after only a week's visit: "I know they're quite okay, and safe, but I don't feel sure unless I'm there, and even then I never feel sure — I don't think I can explain — it's just something you feel about your own kids, and you can't help it." After observing Grace Dougherty with James, Rachel comprehends:

Her [Grace's] voice is filled with capability. She gains strength from his presence. This is what happens. I've seen it with my sister. They think they are making a shelter for their children, but actually it is the children who are making a shelter for them. They don't know.

But while she understands this in principle, she has not accepted it in fact; she too wants a child to shelter and be sheltered by, and the discovery that she carries not a child but a tumour she attributes to "a jest of God". Her wail is like that of the other Rachel "wordless and terrible", and Rachel "weeping for her children . . . [who] would not be comforted because they are not." The children of Rama were real; their destruction was real. Rachel Cameron's child is an illusion; yet it is Rachel's recognition of this illusion which ironically frees her.

"*I am the mother now,*" Rachel's apparently cryptic remark under anesthesia, indicates her acceptance of her role as adult and mother to her ageing child. She comes to see that, under her mother's foxiness, her calculated emotional appeals and demands, lies a terrible fear of isolation and desertion which is the lot of every human being, even mothers. Her mother is like a child, totally dependent, totally trusting: "She believes me because she must, I guess. If I came back late a thousand nights, I now see, and then told her I'd be away an hour, she'd still believe me." And while Rachel resents her mother's dependence, even wishes her dead, she concedes, "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." She agrees that, to take her mother to Vancouver, away from home and memories, is cruel, unfair, and may even cause her death. But she also realizes: "It isn't up to me. It never was. I can take care, but only some. I'm not responsible for keeping her alive." Her present child is elderly; her future children may be only her school-children, yet she comprehends at last that the tie of motherhood does not ensure immunity from isolation: "It may be that my children will always be temporary, never to be held. But so are everyone's."

While human relationships are an attempt to counter isolation, death is a recognition of it, and thus it plays a central role in *A Jest of God*. Donne's statement, "any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind" approaches death as a destruction of human community. In Laurence, however, death merely accentuates our consciousness of an isolation which already exists. Nick and Steve, though twins, are separate identities, and the death of Steve does not effectually alter the personality of Nick. Rachel's father and mother are separated not by death but by life, and similarly, Rachel lost her father long

before he entered the world of the dead which he had always preferred. Rachel's "child" is lost, yet it has been not living but dead, a symbol of Rachel's negation of life. It is only in facing death that we are able to assess life, and to recognize our own isolation.

IT IS BECAUSE death reveals the true nature of individuality that its truth is evaded by the people of Manawaka. Hector changes "Japonica Funeral Chapel" to read "Japonica Chapel" because "lots of people aren't keen on that word." People do not die; they "pass on". When Rachel suggest that death is unmentionable, Hector replies: "Let's face it, most of us could get along without it." He succeeds as a business man because he understands the human psychology of death. "*What am I selling?*" he asks Rachel, and answers himself: "One: *Relief*. Two: *Modified Prestige*." He alleviates the panic of the bereaved when faced with the body, and handles all the details according to three price ranges, to simplify problems of choice concerning oak or pine, velvet or nylon: "They want to know that everything's been done properly, of course, but the less they have to do with it, the better. . . . You take your average person, now. It's simply nicer not to have to think about all that stuff". This refusal to face death reaches its extreme in the cosmetic skills of the undertaker who paints and prettifies "the last dried shell . . . for decent burial". It is not merely a denial of reality for appearance but an attempt to make death look like life, to negate the difference. The ultimate form of this denial is seen in Mr. Kazlik who, in his senility, asks after Rachel's father and calls Nick by the name of his dead brother.

Yet this denial of death is healthier than Rachel's fascination with it which both obsesses and frightens her. She emerges out of a background of death, as the daughter of the local undertaker who prefers his silent companions downstairs to friends or family. As a child, Rachel was not allowed to go down into the funeral parlour, and she came to believe that there must be some power of the dead which might grasp and hold her as it had held her father. Her mother is morbidly concerned with death, saving the pink nylon nightgowns sent by Stacey every Christmas "for hospital and last illness, so she'll die demurely." Even the house itself, with the Japonica Chapel downstairs, represents a world of shadow and nightmare; the dense growth of spruce trees surrounds Rachel and separates her from the world outside:

No other trees are so darkly sheltering, shutting out prying eyes or the sun in summer, the spearheads of them taller than houses, the low branches heavy,

reaching down to the ground like the greenblack feathered strong-boned wings of giant and extinct birds.

From the beginning of the novel, Rachel is caught between the world of dream and the world of nightmare and death, as indicated by the childish jingle she overhears and remembers: "Rachel Cameron says she'll die / For the want of the golden city." Here the contrast is accentuated between the real world of wind and snow and the illusory world of the child and adolescent. "She is handsome, She is pretty, / She is the queen of the golden city." The choice is simple: the dream or death, and it is her failure to move from the simple alternatives of the child to the more complex understanding of the adult which marks Rachel's delayed development.

In Part I, Rachel's world alternates between dream and nightmare, love and horror. The images of the night are Poe-like, demonic. Night brings "*Hell on wheels*"; it becomes "a gigantic ferris wheel turning in blackness, very slowly . . . interminably slow. And I am glued to it, or wired, like paper." The essence of Hell is its isolation, its annihilation of humanity by sucking it into the maw of meaninglessness or tearing it apart, skin from bone:

The slow whirling begins again, the night's wheel that turns and turns, pointlessly. When I close my eyes, I see scratches of gold against the black, and they form into jagged lines, teeth, a knife's edge, the sharp hard hackles of dinosaurs.

Countering these horrors are scenes of love: the dream lover with blurred features, under the sheltering wall of pine and tamarack, or the Egyptian girls and Roman soldiers, banqueting on oasis melons, dusty grapes and wine in golden goblets, and copulating sweetly under the eyes of slaves. The sexual union of the love scenes counters the isolation of Hell and death, but these scenes too merge into death. In the first, the shadow-prince disappears to be found downstairs among the bottles and jars, king of the silent people. And in the second, the scenes of copulation fade into nothingness: "The night is a jet-black lake. A person could sink down and even disappear without a trace."

THE JUXTAPOSITION OF LOVE AND DEATH OCCURS not only in the dream world but in the real one. The sequence of Rachel's first visit to the Kazlik house and her conversation with Hector in the Japonica Chapel is central to the structure of the novel. But earlier, Rachel comes upon the young lovers in the cemetery, as spring replaces winter and the crocuses bloom palely against the

grass of last year “now brittle and brown like the ancient bones of birds”. In Part II, when Nick and Rachel first make love, Nick quotes the lines of Marvell: “*The grave’s a fine and private place / But none, I think, do there embrace.*” And as they pull apart after Rachel demands her child, and return finally to their separate selves, Nick comments, “I never realized you could see the cemetery so well from here.”

Despite her fascination with death in Part I, Rachel fights for survival even here. She wears a white raincoat so that she can be seen by a driver on a dark night; she worries that she might set fire to the house by smoking in bed. The turning point in her movement away from death and back to life occurs in the scene with Hector in the Japonica Chapel, where she relinquishes her hold upon the past and the dream of her father, not as he was but as she wanted him to be: “Nothing is as it used to be, and there’s nothing left from then, nothing of him, not a clue.” She recognizes in her voice a bitterness, “some hurt I didn’t know was there”, and concedes the truth of Hector’s claim: “I would bet he had the kind of life he wanted most.” Her father had chosen his own path in life, isolation from human contact and communication with the dead. In turning away from this, Rachel comes to accept both her father’s right to his choice and his rejection of her:

If my father had wanted otherwise, it would have been otherwise. Not necessarily better, but at least different. Did he ever try to alter it? Did I, with mine? Was that what he needed most, after all, not ever to have to touch any living thing? Was that why she came to life after he died?

She refuses suicide — “*They will all go on in somehow, but I will be dead as stone and it will be too late then to change my mind*” — and faces life, with resignation: “Everything is no more possible than it was. Only one thing has changed — I’m left with it.” And she accepts too a limited form of free will: “I will have it [the child] because I want it and because I cannot do anything else.” Laurence’s “modified pessimism”, as she calls it in “Ten Years’ Sentences”, is the recognition with Edgar in *King Lear* that life must be endured, that we are not free to determine the manner of our death any more than our birth:

We must endure
Our going hence, even as our coming hither;
Ripeness is all.

While death isolates, then, love is an attempt to cross the barriers of isolation. But isolation may involve not only separation from other human beings but a

separation from God. The modern doubt of God which implies too a sense of loss is conveyed by Arnold's lines: "Who renders vain their deep desire? / A God, a God their severance ruled!" and the vagueness of "a God" suggests the vain searching for some power of justice and order beyond human life, a theme more explicit in "Dover Beach". Laurence's title "A Jest of God" in itself suggests that the novel is concerned with something beyond human limitations, with a God all-powerful but mocking who as an outsider looks down upon a world "distorted, bizarre, grotesque, unbearably a joke".

The people of Manawaka evade a real recognition of God as they do of death. The church the Camerons attend is tasteful and controlled, essentially unreal like the scene on the stained glass window of "a pretty and clean-cut 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." The minister is "careful not to say anything which might be upsetting," for the large part of the congregation is like Mrs. Cameron: "If the Reverend MacElfrish should suddenly lose his mind and speak of God with anguish or joy, or out of some need should pray with fierce humility as though God had to be there, Mother would be shocked to the core." The superficiality of this view of God is underlined when Rachel invokes Him as the only authority on her mother's heart, in place of Doctor Raven: "'God?' she shrills, as though I had voiced something unspeakable," and then, as an ex-choir member, she hastens to concede: "'Well, certainly, dear, of course, all that goes without saying'."

Specifically contrasted with this empty ceremony are, on the one hand, her father's professed atheism and on the other, the flamboyant exuberance of *The Tabernacle of the Risen and Reborn*, with its pictures of Jesus "bearded and bleeding, his heart exposed and bristling with thorns like a scarlet pin-cushion." Its pulpit is draped in white velvet, and the wood is "blossoming in bunches of grapes and small sharp birds with beaks uplifted". While the congregation of the Reverend MacElfrish denies sensation and a direct communication with God, the people of the Tabernacle flaunt emotion in a form of eroticism. To Rachel with her tight restraint, the Tabernacle suggests a Hell, dark, cold and "foetid with the smell of feet and damp coats. It's like some crypt, dead air and staleness, deadness, silence." The room becomes claustrophobic, "swollen with the sound of a hymn macabre" and the people "crouching, all of them, all around me, crouching and waiting". Their exhibitionism is, to Rachel, indecent: "People should keep themselves to themselves — that's the only decent way." Yet the

congregation of the Tabernacle uses religion to escape from themselves and their own isolation into a relationship with those in their circle and with God. Their escape may be momentary; Calla must return to her room and her songless canary. It may be unreal, for the speaking in tongues too is illusionary. Yet Rachel is horrified not because she understands the unreality, but because she fears public exposure of her inner self. It is not only Calla's admission of love for her which makes her feel violated; it is her denial of commitment, not only to Calla but to God. She cannot share Calla's religious experience for she will not accept its premise:

In full and glad surrender,
I give myself to Thee,
Thine utterly and only,
And evermore to be.

Rachel's relationship to God is ambivalent. She observes the Sunday ritual of church to save argument with her mother, but she does not believe: "I didn't say God hadn't died recently, within the last few years, but a long time ago, longer than I could remember, for I could not actually recall a time when He was alive." Yet she cannot accept His non-existence. After her exposure in the Tabernacle, she remarks, "If I believed, I would have to detest God for the brutal joker He would be if He existed." And later, when she learns of the "child":

I could argue with You (if You were there) until doomsday. How dare You?
My trouble, perhaps, is that I have expected justice. Without being able to give it.

Doubting the reality of God, she demands His existence. She comes to admit the exaggeration of both her "monstrous self-pity" and her self-abasement, indeed her uniqueness to God among millions of beings. And she confesses her deep need:

Help — if You will — me. Whoever that may be. And whoever You are, or where. . . . We seem to have fought for a long time, I and You. . . . If You have spoken, I am not aware of having heard. If You have a voice, it is not comprehensible to me. No omens. No burning bush, no pillar of sand by day or pillar of flame by night.

Yet even when she turns to God, not through "faith, or belief, or the feeling of deserving anything" but through desperation, she has not yet renounced her own desires. For having accepted life instead of death, the child instead of abortion, she is not prepared for the final irony, the tumour: "*Oh my God. I didn't bargain for this. Not this.*"

Thus she finally faces her own isolation. Even God cannot solve her problems. She has admitted earlier that she imagined horrors, exaggerated them, to make the real ones seem lesser. Now there are no more horrors, for she no longer needs them. She has feared to be a fool, but now she has no more fears, for "I really am one." Like King Lear, she achieves wisdom through folly; as St. Paul has said: "*If any man among you thinketh himself to be wise, let him become a fool, that he may be wise.*" Her reply to her mother's question, that God may know her future, surprises Rachel herself, although she does not yet know whether this is "some partial triumph . . . [or] only the last defeat". But her new wisdom brings compassion, not only for men, isolated and alone, but for God Himself, isolated from man: "God's mercy on reluctant jesters. God's grace on fools. God's pity on God."

Thus *A Jest of God* represents Rachel's descent into the world of nightmare, the "Everlasting No," and suggests too a return to life, a modified "Everlasting Yea," as anticipated in the quotation from Sandburg's "Losers": "[With Jonah] I was swallowed one time deep in the dark / And came out alive after all." The tone is more bitter, more ultimately pessimistic than either *The Stone Angel* or *The Fire-Dwellers*, for both Hagar and Stacey affirm the importance of human relationships to give meaning to an unstable universe. Yet despite adverse criticism, the novel is on the whole more universal than *The Fire-Dwellers*. Rachel's world is no more confined than our world; it has the same potentialities, the same failings. Her thoughts, however trivial and self-concerned, reflect our thoughts and momentary reflections if we record them impartially. Her view of Calla, her mother, Nick, is one-sided, uncorrected by an omniscient narrator; Laurence rejects what is, after all, only a fictional device for a technique closer to reality. For this is indeed her primary message, that we can never truly know another human being, never penetrate behind their facade, since words which reveal also conceal. We must accept others as they appear to us, reach out to them in compassion, yet be free to stand alone.

A Jest of God, like *The Stone Angel*, deals with a universal human problem, and the protagonist is close to the primitive essentials of love, birth and death. In the moment of facing death, both Hagar and Rachel affirm life. While Rachel's predicament is essentially feminine, it is also human. If the child were real, Rachel would become dependent upon another human being for her existence; she would live for the child. But the "child" does not exist, and Rachel is forced to face the essential isolation of the individual: "We mortal millions live *alone*."