Margaret Laurence

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The Stone Angel

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Margaret Laurence was born in 1926 in Neepawa, Manitoba. She spent some time in Africa, and during this part of her career she published a number of books: among them *A Tree for Poverty* (1954), a translation of Somali folk tales and poetry, and *This Side Jordan* (1960), a novel about the emergence of Ghana as a nation which won Canada's Beta Sigma Phi Award (a prize for the best first novel by a Canadian). On her return to Canada, Laurence continued to receive acclaim for her writing. Between 1964 and 1974 she published a series of works often referred to as "the Manawaka novels" since they are all connected to the fictional town, Manawaka, which Laurence has patterned after her own birthplace. Among the Manawaka titles are the highly-praised short story collection, *A Bird in the House*, and Laurence's most recent novel, *The Diviners*. Margaret Laurence has also written children's books.

Titles by the same author also available in NCL Editions:

N70 *The Tomorrow-Tamer*
N87 *The Fire-Dwellers*
N96 *A Bird in the House*
N111 *A Jest of God*
N126 *This Side Jordan*
N146 *The Diviners*

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Do not go gentle into that good night,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
Dylan Thomas

Introduction

THE OPENING pages of any good novel do more than just introduce characters and establish setting: by imagery or situations, they also set the tone and give some indication of the problem or the conflict that the book will explore. So it is with Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*. In its opening pages we meet Hagar Shipley, the narrator, and some of her family; we are presented with Manawaka, Manitoba, and with the stone angel in the cemetery there; we are quickly made aware that Hagar can be both sardonic and wry, and that she still has a zest for life which makes her very attractive. And there is more. One of the most striking features about this book's opening pages is the fact that they are filled with empty threats: "If I told they'd—"; "You mind or I'll—"; "You shut up or I'll—." The speakers are children, and thus the threats do not stand out as unusual or incredible in any way; but their irony—the difference between the threatened situation and the actual occurrence—effectively introduces the themes and the tone of the whole book. In exploring the memories of an old woman during her last days, the novel continually juxtaposes desire and reality, expectation and event, what one wants and what one gets. In Hagar's struggle to comprehend why they are always different, and in Margaret Laurence's attempt to create her, are sensitive responses to the problem of being alive and mortal; and the two together form one of the most illuminating literary experiences in recent Canadian fiction.

The theme is one that has occurred throughout Mrs. Laurence's work, enunciated most specifically at the beginning of her travel book about Somaliland, *The Prophet's Camel Bell* (1963):

> In your excitement at the trip, the last thing in the world

> that would occur to you is that the strangest glimpses you may have of any creature in the distant lands will be those you catch of yourself.
>
> Our voyage began some years ago. When can a voyage be said to have ended? When you reach the place you were bound for, presumably. But sometimes your destination turns out to be quite other than you expected.

With a statement like this in mind, we can make a retrospective judgment about her first book. *This Side Jordan* (1960), set in Ghana just before it became independent, was a promising novel, even though its structure and characterization were a little too unsubtle. Its three main characters—Nathaniel Amegbe, the young African teacher who is caught between native traditions and western society; Johnny Kestoe, the white businessman working in the Gold Coast; and the Gold Coast itself—are each in search of independence, and each must find his own. One difficulty with *This Side Jordan* is that however well we understand Johnny and see that Nathaniel is Johnny with a different skin, we see also that this strategy is much too simple: Nathaniel's problems can only partly be shared by others who are foreign to all his traditions. Ultimately, the novel does not bring us to comprehend Ghanaians and the desire for independence in Ghana; but rather—by an oblique and probably unconscious route—it brings us to understand something more of a comparable but not identical desire in Margaret Laurence's native Canada. *This Side Jordan* gives us a "strange glimpse of the self" in other words, one which the later novels explore further.

The stories in *The Tomorrow-Tamer and Other Stories* (1963) are also set in West Africa; but the author has by this time made titanic strides in learning how to make characters live on the page. This ability is evident in her two best novels, the two set in the invented but quite credible town of Manawaka, Manitoba: *The Stone Angel* (1964); and *A Jest of God* (1966), the Governor-General's-Award-winning novel about the frustrated creative energies of a woman approaching middle age. This last book, wryly and fatefully titled, does have a few difficulties with making the male characters more than stock figures; and for that reason, it is not as consistently fine as *The Stone Angel.* But the first person point of view in *A Jest of God* explains much of the difficulty and excuses some of it. The narrator, Rachel Cameron, sees the people around her on a flat plane; we

see them only through her, and she sees largely what she wishes to. But *we* are made to see into the woman herself, and when she is forced to recognize that she has been duped by events that she thought she had seen clearly, we are at the core of the book. The irony in this situation is the same as that in a response to an empty threat: a face different from the one that the person has put on is required. This irony raises an interesting question. If an individual has been able to steel himself for one unpleasant outcome, and if another outcome unexpectedly occurs, how should he react? And does he crumble or not? The epigraph to *The Stone Angel*, from a poem by Dylan Thomas, proclaims the alternatives: a person can "go gentle into that good night," or else "rage, rage against the dying of the light." Thomas advocates the fight for life. So does Margaret Laurence.

* * *

Even Mrs. Laurence's most recent book, then, takes us back into *The Stone Angel*, into the memories and the viewpoint of its central character, Hagar Shipley, who "often wondered why one discovers so many things too late. The jokes of God." Any mention of raging also takes us to Hagar, for her rages are one of the most vividly memorable things about her. Some of these are roaring reactions against meekness; some grow from impatience with her own physical frailty; but all are connected with pride, and typified by the clan motto her father has d'nned into her: "Gainsay who dare." Who *does* dare, when Hagar rages? Her husband, Bram, and her second son, John, dare certainly; and in another way, Time itself. In the memories of her men and in reminders of her morality, Hagar's character is unfolded.

In fact, the novel, told from Hagar's point of view, develops very much as an unfolding. Layer on layer of irony, character and meaning are revealed in the succession of events that the present brings back to the old lady's mind. The way in which present and past are brought together actually contributes to the irony of the characterization. Early in the novel, Hagar momentarily but consciously recognizes and refutes the idea that in aging she sometimes regrets her life: "Oh, my lost men. No, I will not think of that." But she does think, does lament, does remember, and her consciousness ceases to be always in control. The fact that she also rages and, in a special way, comes to love as well, makes her more complex still.

There are several key phrases that help us to comprehend

Hagar's exploration of her struggle with life. When she contemplates the difference between an event and its continued existence in the mind, she muses "how small the town was, and how short a time it took to leave it, as we measure time." How else can it be measured? We ask. And the novel considers this question. Again, Hagar has dreamed of the perfect future: "To move to a new place—that's the greatest excitement. For a while you believe you carry nothing with you—." But when you come right down to it, Hagar doesn't really want perfection. Or if she does, she wants it on her own terms: thus, as when Troy, the young minister, comes to pay a duty call on her, she will mentally or verbally lacerate a person who does not accept her reality:

> Even if heaven were real, and measured as Revelation says, so many cubits this way and that, how gimcrack a place it would be, crammed with its pavements of gold, its gates of pearl and topaz, like a gigantic chunk of costume jewelry. Saint John of Patmos can keep his sequined heaven, or share it with Mr. Troy, for all I care, and spend eternity in fingering the gems and telling each other gleefully they're worth a fortune.

However, even when she says this, she is concerned about her years—about whether or not they were good ones, about what one should get for their being "good," about their being "unfair," and about who or what is to *blame* for the injustices of an often bitter and always mortal life. They are the questions disturbing the old lady and us, if we think about them, for they focus ultimately on the problem of human responsibility. How much individuality and how much choice do we have in a world that is influenced by "jests of God"? Hagar's answer lies again in raging against the night, and in coming by this raging to an assertion of self and to a recognition of the self she has asserted.

Such a process is an essentially tragic one. It is not tragic in the sense of being the fall of a "great one" (though Hagar's pride can be seen as kind of *hubris*); but it is tragic in Frye's sense—an example of locating "the centre of tragedy . . . in the hero's isolation, not in a villain's betrayal, even when the villain is, as he often is, a part of the hero himself" (*Anatomy of Criticism*). It is not that Hagar was betrayed by pride and fear (though in another sense she is betrayed by her physical weak-

ness), but that Hagar, by obeying her inclinations, by adhering to that which she considers right, finds herself only in alienating herself more and more from other people. She recognizes this late in her life:

> Pride was my wilderness, and the demon that led me there was fear. I was alone, never anything else, and never free, for I carried my chains within me, and they spread out from me and shackled all I touched . . . Nothing can take away those years.

She will not bend to play a role, for example, even when role-playing would bring relief to another person. When her brother Dan is dying, it is not Hagar but another brother, Matt, who pretends to be their mother in order to give the boy some comfort. She refuses to play the role because her mother had been meek and frail. Similarly she refuses, early in the book, ever to be a housekeeper like Auntie Doll. But ironically these refusals all reverse themselves. In time Hagar finds herself playing the wounded mother, playing at being in a rage, keeping house for another and then, when she is very old and has fled her family to try to regain her independence and her past, she finds herself playing house by the sea like a child again. At such times, others, like Murray Ferney Lees, must play roles to comfort Hagar.

"How can one person know another?" Hagar is constantly asking; but "How can a person know himself?" is the deeper question that Margaret Laurence asks by implication. Even the first of these questions is double-edged. Hagar is not really known by the people around her, nor can Hagar really know them. Only late in her life, when she sees more clearly her relationship with her sons—the favourite, flamboyant John; and the solidly middle-class Marvin with whom she lives—does she come really to see her very self, and hence to see and know her role in life. Only then can she accept for even a moment, for the sake of others, a role that is out of character for her, and discover in it some degree of that capacity for love which she had always craved and which she has always but unknowingly possessed.

* * *

At one point in the novel, John is wrestling to re-erect the fallen stone angel on the Currie-Shipley grave above the town. Hagar wants to see him as Jacob, but she does not really know

him yet. John in wrestling with this angel is only himself, sweating, grunting, swearing. It is Marvin, visiting her in the hospital and holding her tightly, who

> is truly Jacob, gripping with all his strength, and bargaining. *I will not let thee go, except thou bless me.* And I see I am thus strangely cast, and perhaps have been so from the beginning, and can only release myself by releasing him.

Her response, her expression of a kind of love to him and to others in the hospital, leads to the denouement of the story; but the Biblical analogues thus referred to give another dimension to the book. The *Genesis* story of Abraham's two families is well known: the passionate marriage with Hagar, giving him a son, Ishmael; and the marriage with Sarah which, by a promise from God, gives him a son in Isaac, grandsons in Jacob and Esau, and a dynasty. But Margaret Laurence's story of Hagar is based not so much on the *Genesis* story as it is on St. Paul's reference to it in *Galatians* 4:22-27:

> For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a free woman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the free woman was by promise. Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from the mount Sinai, which engendereth to bondage, which is Agar. For this Agar is mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children. But Jerusalem which is above us is free, which is the mother of us all. For it is written, Rejoice, thou barren that bearest not; break forth and cry, thou that travailest not: for the desolate hath many more children than she which hath a husband.

We have already noted how Hagar was not free, and the numerous desert images in the book, together with the references which liken this story to the Biblical one, are many-sided: the prairie in drought is a desert; Hagar is called the Egyptian, Pharaoh's daughter; she wanders through wildernesses; her relationship with Bram, her husband, is of the flesh—"his banner over me was his skin," she says; and so on. The significance of such allusions is not simply that Margaret Laurence is exploiting Biblical archetypes, but that, having seen Hagar as an essentially tragic figure, she has placed her in a modern setting and ex-

plored her point of view. *Genesis*, in effect, gives us Sarah's viewpoint; St. Paul tells us his; and beyond those two lies Hagar's predicament, which we as readers are asked to understand. The son who takes after Hagar can never be Jacob, and is always the outcast without a home. Nor is she a Sarah, and though she is cast as the angel for Marvin's Jacob, she knows this can never be. When, at her request, Mr. Troy sings to her in the hospital—

> All people that on earth do dwell,
> Sing to the Lord with joyful voice.
> Him serve with mirth, His praise forth tell;
> Come ye before Him and rejoice.

—she knows the bitterness of her life and she experiences the moment of truth which is the deepest point of tragedy: "I must always, always, have wanted that—simply to rejoice. How is it I never could? I know, I know." Joy is for the Sarahs of the world; but she is Hagar. Her identity will not allow it.

Hagar does have some kinship with the stone angel on the grave, of course; but this is not the angel from Milton's *Lycidas*, looking homeward with compassion, for it is eyeless in its wilderness and for a long time so is she. The irony of such a situation is picked up by the other images in the book. In her rage for life Hagar is partial to flowers, but the prairie is dry, the houses are grey, and the flowers that are around her are always lilac and lily-of-the-valley, spring flowers that are associated with death and with funerals. She is partial to flowered silks, but Doris, Marvin's wife, who tends her in her old age, is always in rayon and acetate, brown and grey. Doris's hat, moreover, is made of artificial flowers, and her one unchallengeable talent is ambivalently and (ironically) described: she can make gravy that is "always a silken brown." But some of Mrs. Laurence's ironies are defiant with life: in the cemetery, cowslips grow

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

walked through only by Cree with enigmatic faces and greasy hair.

And Hagar herself, at the end of the book, is also as defiant as ever. She has discovered who she is, discovered that she is alone; there is no greater tragedy for her and yet no greater satisfaction. Her final words, "And then—," uttered in the novel at the time of her death, are part of a chronology and therefore part of time. But by leaving the sentence unfinished, Mrs. Laurence closes the book in ambivalence; it is possible that time stops, but possible also that it goes on, and is merely measured in a different way.

Though life has been bitter for Hagar, it has been precious as well; and in raging against the dying of the light she finds her only defence against servility and against a passive resignation to what she considers injustice. Her reaction to death is one both of defeat and triumph, for as earlier she has been continually surprised by the suddenness and shortness of life, so is she at the last assured that death is "quite an event." She meets it as *an* event, as a next episode in her story but it is an episode which, of course, we are unable to observe (another of the jokes of God).

So sympathetically has Margaret Laurence created Hagar that we see the world through her. In following the track of her mind as it travels back and forth in its personal narrative, we are moved—not only with her, but also by her—and we come at least to understand a little more about being alive. In controlling the point of view, and in unifying character with the method and the formal structure of the book, and in wedding the whole to her vision of independence and human responsibility, Mrs. Laurence has created in *The Stone Angel* a fine novel and an absolutely human world.

University of British Columbia William H. New
July, 1967.

Margaret Laurence

The Stone Angel

New Canadian Library N59

Introduction by: William H. New

McClelland and Stewart

One

ABOVE THE TOWN, on the hill brow, the stone angel used to stand. I wonder if she stands there yet, in memory of her who relinquished her feeble ghost as I gained my stubborn one, my mother's angel that my father bought in pride to mark her bones and proclaim his dynasty, as he fancied, forever and a day.

Summer and winter she viewed the town with sightless eyes. She was doubly blind, not only stone but unendowed with even a pretense of sight. Whoever carved her had left the eyeballs blank. It seemed strange to me that she should stand above the town, harking us all to heaven without knowing who we were at all. But I was too young then to know her purpose, although my father often told me she had been brought from Italy at a terrible expense and was pure white marble. I think now she must have been carved in that distant sun by stone masons who were the cynical descendants of Bernini, gouging out her like by the score, gauging with admirable accuracy the needs of fledgling pharaohs in an uncouth land.

Her wings in winter were pitted by the snow and in summer by the blown grit. She was not the only angel in the Manawaka cemetery, but she was the first, the largest, and certainly the costliest. The others, as I recall, were a

lesser breed entirely, petty angels, cherubim with pouting stone mouths, one holding aloft a stone heart, another strumming in eternal silence upon a small stone stringless harp, and yet another pointing with ecstatic leer to an inscription. I remember that inscription because we used to laugh at it when the stone was first placed there.

Rest in peace.
From toil, surcease.
Regina Weese.
1886

So much for sad Regina, now forgotten in Manawaka—as I, Hagar, am doubtless forgotten. And yet I always felt she had only herself to blame, for she was a flimsy, gutless creature, bland as egg custard, caring with martyred devotion for an ungrateful fox-voiced mother year in and year out. When Regina died, from some obscure and maidenly disorder, the old disreputable lady rose from sick-smelling sheets and lived, to the despair of her married sons, another full ten years. No need to say God rest *her* soul, for she must be laughing spitefully in hell, while virginal Regina sighs in heaven.

In summer the cemetery was rich and thick as syrup with the funeral-parlor perfume of the planted peonies, dark crimson and wallpaper pink, the pompous blossoms hanging leadenly, too heavy for their light stems, bowed down with the weight of themselves and the weight of the rain, infested with upstart ants that sauntered through the plush petals as though to the manner born.

I used to walk there often when I was a girl. There could not have been many places to walk primly in those days, on paths, where white kid boots and dangling skirts