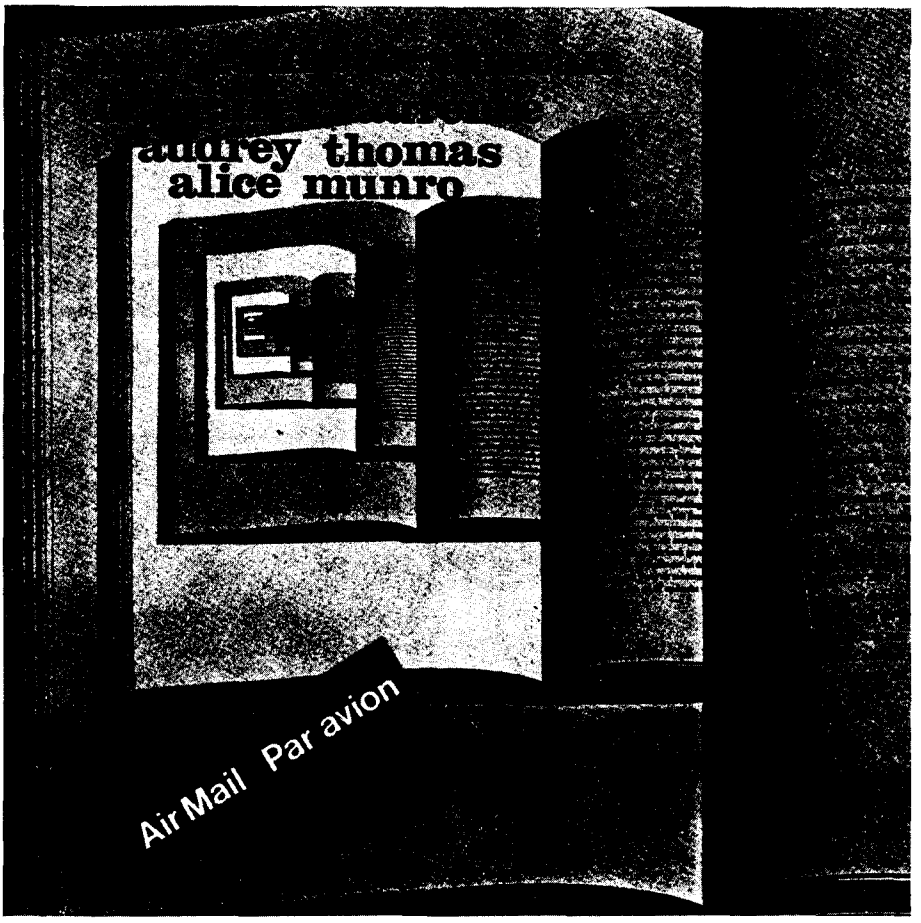
SOME INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON CANADIAN WOMEN'S FICTION

Pour ce numéro "international" des Cahiers de la femme, *nous avons invité trois éminentes féministes étrangères, qui étudient actuellement la littérature canadienne, à parler de romans écrits par des Canadiennes. Les trois articles qui suivent présentent une perspective internationale sur quelques ouvrages de Sara Jeannette Duncan, Margaret Laurence, Audrey Thomas et Alice Munro.*



MARGARET LAURENCE: *THE DIVINERS* AND AUDREY THOMAS: *LATAKIA*

Coral Ann Howells

A woman, if she is to write, Virginia Woolf once said (or words to that effect), must have a room of her own. The garret bit never appealed to Morag unduly, but by God, it is at least a room of her own. The only trouble is that she feels too tired and lousy most evenings to do any writing at all.

(Margaret Laurence, *The Diviners*)[1]

Once again I thought, 'I have money and a room of my own and there's no excuse, now, not to be writing fiction,' Just before I fell asleep, I wondered how you would have settled the New Year's kiss . . . You would have had an arm around each of us, of course, but you could not possibly have kissed us both at the same time. It was just as well I walked away.

(Audrey Thomas, *Latakia*)[2]

Women writing, two novelist heroines, both sharing the heritage of Virginia Woolf, reflecting on the conditions of possibility for their art, indicating the gap between ideal conditions and the reality out of which their fiction is produced. *The Diviners* and *Latakia* are novels written by women in rooms of their own, on their own. What kinds of fiction do women write in such circumstances? Why do they write? What are they thinking, and how do they feel?

These are women-centred fictions telling different stories about two very different women's lives; but the differences are

not so striking as the similarities, for Morag Gunn in *The Diviners* and Rachel in *Latakia* are engaged in writing out their memories, trying through their fictions to make sense of their lives by creating an order through their art which their lives do not possess. So for both of them their novels are "private and fictional words" (Morag's phrase) wrought out of personal emotion but transformed, objectified into novelistic discourse available to be read by others. Morag and Rachel tell their stories in much the same way: they both use modernist forms of narrative, fragmented and self-referential, mixing memory and desire, confounding their own and their readers' sense of any linear arrangement of past, present and future; their narratives represent a conflation of experience, contradictory and multiple, "flowing both ways" like the river ouside Morag's Ontario farmhouse in *The Diviners*. But the most striking similarity lies in the kind of stories they tell, for these two central characters are both facing the same problem: how to write new versions of female narrative and unwrite the old romantic fantasy narratives that are written into their psyches. This need to rewrite women's narratives so that they are closer to the realities of modern lives makes the parallelism between novels and real life so much less shadowy, and the women readers become "collaborative critics,"[3] participating in the heroines' dilemmas and their painful process of redefinition through the art of fiction.

There are now so many women writing and so much writing about women that we are bound to ask what they write about. Is it always about love and marriage and domestic matters which have been the traditional subjects of women's novels? And the answer is (a qualified) yes. Virginia Woolf stated the possibilities admirably in a slightly different context in the 1920's:

> *We are not pleading merely for courage and sincerity; we are suggesting that the proper stuff of fiction is a little other than custom would have us believe it . . . Everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought, every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon, no perception comes amiss.*[4]

This is an ample programme, wider than most women novelists have embraced, for it is true that 'custom' (both literary and social) has defined the common areas of female interest. And even if the old marriage narratives have been updated in the light of women's changing social and sexual opportunities, women-centred novels still tend to focus on sexual experiences. Rosalind Coward in her recent survey of modern women's fiction has astutely pinpointed the dangers here:

> *This has the effect of reproducing the ideology where women are viewed in relation to their sexual history. Women again defined through their sexuality, are the sex to be interrogated and understood. Becoming my own person or woman . . . is how a woman deals with her sexuality.*[5]

The story of self definition through sex is arguably only one of the possible stories that a woman might tell, though it is likely to be a part of any woman's story. But there is another traditional kind of female narrative which is more insidious because it is linked not only to sex but to caring and to those poles of power and dependence that have for so long been the stories of male-female relationships, and that is the romantic fantasy narrative. Easily dismissed when it comes in the form of Harlequin or Mills and Boon romances, it is less

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easy to dispel when it is written into women's psyches. These fantasy narratives are based on woman's adoration of the powerful male and on an exaggerated evaluation of him, so that a woman feels free to abandon herself to strong male desire and male power. As fantasy it is very appealing precisely because it rests on ideals of protection, dependence and lack of responsibility, which have deep roots in childhood as well as in conventional beliefs about women's relations to men.[6] It is as protean a form to be grappled with as Virginia Woolf's Angel in the House, and as resistant to reason – as women have discovered.

Both Morag Gunn and Rachel find themselves caught in that old fantasy narrative, but given their very different social situations and what they have become as successful middle-aged novelists, they are both trying to write different stories in their fiction and in their lives. All the time they are confronting what Robert Kroetsch has called "traditional cultural dependencies."[7] He used the term to describe the efforts of "the best Canadian artists," and we can use it equally of "the best women writers" on that analogy with the colonial mentality through which Margaret Laurence described women's condition:

> *These developing feelings also related very importantly to my growing awareness of the dilemma and powerlessness of women, the tendency of women to accept male definition of ourselves, to be self-deprecating and uncertain, and to rage inwardly. The quest for physical and spiritual freedom, the quest for relationships of equality and communication, these themes run through my fiction.*[8]

The uncertainty and rage and the quest for freedom are there in both *The Diviners* and *Latakia* and are the source of much pain to these women and also to their men, as Morag and Rachel try to break free of stereotypical images, only to rediscover the insistent doubleness and contradictions at the heart of the stereotypes and of themselves.

Certainly these women have found a voice through their fiction. They no longer suffer in silence, though their novels are full of women who still do – like Prin with her monumental quietness, or Eva Winkler, always "soft and apologetic," in *The Diviners*; or the black-robed Greek women sitting in the street in *Latakia*, spinning and embroidering and talking only to one another. Neither of them is complaining about the price of trying to combine womanhood and writing, as earlier generations of women have done. Indeed for both of them writing fiction is the way to self-assertion, the way out of oppression. They are both women with children: Morag has one daughter and Rachel has three. (Why daughters? Does it make the question of inheritance simpler?) Both trace careers of finding and defining themselves through sex and family relationships as much as through writing. They rejoice and are exasperated by women's multiple lives, expressing their need for children and their need for men, their awareness of fragmentation – all of which are the real conditions out of which their fiction is produced:

(Morag) *How to get this novel written, in between or as well as everything else?* (p. 366)

(Rachel) *It was eleven p.m. I had been up since seven, being mother, writer, teacher, lover.* (p. 24)

These women define themselves in a variety of ways other than the sexual, and as divorcees they lead their present lives ouside marriage. Both have discon-

tinuous sexual relationships with men – Morag with Jules Tonnerre (the father to her child) and with Dan McRaith, and Rachel here at the end of her two-year long affair with Michael O'Brien. They recognise that such arrangements ought to be ideal for women whose deepest energies go into their writing:

(Morag) *If he (Dan) were here all the time, she suspects that she would become impatient with him, resentful of anyone's constant presence . . . Looked at that way, it's ideal. Why do I keep on feeling badly about it then?* (p. 380)

(Rachel) *Although I love you in some very real way, I do not miss you. You – or our relationship – got in my way . . . I can't afford that kind of involvement.* (p. 29)

and I HATE YOU

I LOVE YOU

EVERYTHING ABOVE THIS LINE IS TRUE

It's all so bloody complicated, isn't it? (p. 29)

These novels are riddled with contradictions and mixed feelings: "Too many years. No brief summary possible. Accept it and let it go" (*The Diviners*, p. 438).

But it is this acceptance and letting go which is as difficult to live as it is to tell, for it means the rejection of the old fantasy narratives just at it means, more painfully, rejection (subjective and objective case) in the heroines' lives. When they do manage to free themselves, what is there? Morag and Rachel are alone and writing in rooms (or houses) of their own. As Margaret Atwood wryly remarked of Morag and the perils of women's creativity; "The central character is a successful woman writer, but it becomes obvious to her that she cannot write and retain the love of a good man. She chooses the writing . . . and at the end of the book she is living alone."[9]

Both recognise that the love story is only part of their lives and their fiction, maybe not even the most important part: "But there's Crete and this village and this street and all that seems much more interesting than the story of how I fell in love with you and all the complications of the affair" (*Latakia*, p. 30).

They want to write about places, about significant non-sexual moments in their lives, about myths and legends of the prairies and of Crete. They succeed in writing such fictions, managing to celebrate their power as novelists and entering into some kind of self-possession by the end. Morag can say "Of course. I *am* okay. And in a profound sense, this was true" (p. 450). Rachel concludes "Meanwhile I will enjoy this rare spaciousness and keep on observing" (p. 171).

Yet this celebration is always accompanied by a deep unease. In Rachel's case there is her outcry of pain: "As though the finished product had not somehow been earned. How do you know what pain, what loneliness, went into those books?" (p. 118). For Morag, whose art has always been a mystery, there is the threat that such a gift could be withdrawn from her as it is from Royland the water diviner:

At least Royland knew he had been a true diviner . . . Morag's magic tricks were of a different order. She would never know whether they actually worked or not, or to what extent. That wasn't given her to know. In a sense, it did not matter. The necessary doing of the thing – that mattered (p. 452).

"And remember, the best revenge is writing well."

(Audrey Thomas)

As professional novelists Morag and Rachel are aware of the status of fiction and they never mistake their novels for reality. Writing is a deliberate displacement – an "illusion" as Rachel calls it, a "fabrication" in Morag's words. Fiction is always and only metaphor, a recognition that these heroines write into the titles of their novels as they do into their endings. Morag's is at least a confident metaphorical gesture: "Morag returned to the house, to write the remaining private and fictional words, and to set down her title" (p. 453). The final word refers both to the title to her book and her title deed to possession of herself. Rachel's ending is more precarious, as real life dissolves into metaphor. The Cretan place named Latakia has become "a private metaphor for any situation in which, for whatever reasons, you were in over your head. In the end, it became a metaphor for you and me" (p. 167). She ends her novel, paradoxically "the longest love letter in the world" and "this imaginary monologue," looking out at the sea, now as smooth as a skating rink: "Goodbye Michael. I love you, my dear. I'm going skating. And remember, the best revenge is writing well" (p. 172).

Not *living well* as the old saying has it, but "writing well;" and if, as Rachel claims, "you write with your whole body" (p. 124), writing well is one way to restore the balance by writing oneself out of living into language.

These novels both end with women writing, celebrating the novelist's power to create order through telling stories – "But there's no one version. There just isn't" (*The Diviners*, p. 350). And they celebrate alone.

[1](Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974; McClelland and Stewart Bantam, 1975), pp. 293-4. All references to *The Diviners* will be taken from this paperback edition.

[2](Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1979). All references to *Latakia* will be taken from this edition.

[3]Judith Kegan Gardiner's phrase in her essay "On Female identity and Writing by Women," in *Writing and Sexual Difference*, ed. Elizabeth Abel (Brighton: Harvester, 1982), p. 191.

[4]Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction," in *The Common Reader* (1925); reprinted in *Collected Essays* II (London: Hogarth, 1966), pp. 106 and 110.

[5]Rosalind Coward, *Female Desire: Women's Sexuality Today*, (London: Paladin, 1984), pp. 183-4.

[6]For discussion of women's romantic fiction, see R. Coward, *ibid.*, pp. 189-96; also Ann Snitow, "Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women Is Different," in *Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, eds. A. Snitow, Christine Stansell, Sharon Thompson (London: Virago, 1984), pp. 258-275.

[7]Robert Kroetsch, "Death is A Happy Ending," in *Canadian Novelists and the Novel*, eds. D. Daymond and L. Monkman (Ottawa: Borealis, 1981), p. 248.

[8]Margaret Laurence, "Ivory Tower or Grassroots? The Novelist as Socio-Political Being," in *Canadian Novelists and the Novel*, p. 258.

[9]Margaret Atwood, "The Curse of Eve – Or, What I Learned in School," in her *Second Words* (Toronto: Anasi, 1982), p. 266.

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