

MARGARET LAURENCE AND THE PATTERNS OF PILGRIMAGE

Clara Thomas

La religion a toujours été importante pour Margaret Laurence: ses sept années en Afrique ont amélioré et approfondi sa compréhension d'elle-même et de ses origines manitobaines. La plupart de ses romans contiennent des thèmes de pèlerinages qui reflètent sa recherche personnelle et son interprétation de la vie. Mais ce n'est qu'avec Morag, dans The Diviners, que Laurence a développé un modèle complet de pèlerinage: de l'Eden, à travers l'exil et les restrictions légales, à la maîtrise progressive de la sagesse, de la révélation, et de la promesse d'une vie nouvelle.

Depuis la parution de ce livre, Margaret Laurence s'est peu à peu engagée dans l'action politique et sociale. Elle consacre maintenant la majeure partie de son temps et de ses énergies à la paix et au désarmement. Ses choix sont déterminés par ses convictions religieuses et son sens des besoins immédiats. Dans un discours récemment, elle se qualifiait de "chrétienne, femme, écrivaine, parent, membre de l'humanité, et participante à la vie. . ." Son oeuvre créatrice doit attendre pendant qu'elle fait le travail qu'elle doit faire — maintenant.

From *This Side Jordan*, her first, Ghana-set novel, to *The Diviners*, the fifth of her Canadian, Manawaka works, Margaret Laurence's fiction presents patterns of pilgrimage that reflect her own life's quest and meaning. Jean Margaret

Wemyss was born in 1926 in Neepawa, Manitoba, her father's side of the family Scottish in background and Presbyterian in religion, her mother's, the Simpsons, Irish and Baptist, as were Vanessa's parents and grandparents in *A Bird in the House*. In fact, the importance of religion in her own childhood can best be gleaned from the story of Vanessa, though there are strong references to both its strengths and its failures in all her works.

United College in Winnipeg, which she attended from 1944 to 1947, was an amalgamation, after Church Union, of Wesley College (Methodist) and Manitoba College (Presbyterian). It incorporated a theological seminary, but to Margaret Wemyss and most of its students it was a first-class liberal-arts college, in healthy and stimulating competition with the University of Manitoba. Winnipeg was a city of many faiths and many races, as it has been since its founding. It had been the centre of Methodism's "Social Gospel," with J. S. Woodsworth, the first head of the C.C.F. party, its prophet. In Laurence's time there it retained much of the yeasty social activism that had been its trademark for some decades. College was a liberating experience for her beyond the purely intellectual; she became committed to a kind of liberal political activism (a direct heritage of the Social Gospel) that predates in her life

any of her published writing and that has claimed a major portion of her time and energy since the publication of *The Diviners* in 1974. After graduation she worked for the *Winnipeg Citizen*, a Labour daily; there she learned a good deal about the problems and practices of unions in a practical apprenticeship to the ideals and ideas in which she already believed.

Marriage to Jack Laurence, an hydraulic engineer, and a move, first to London, England, and then to dam-building projects in Somaliland and Ghana, began Margaret's second major broadening of horizons. As she has recorded in *The Prophet's Camel Bell*, the story of the Somaliland experience written some ten years later, she read the Old Testament on the voyage out and found on her arrival a desert people whose way of life, governed by the harsh demands of the seasonal search for water, had not changed since biblical times, although their religion was Muslim. She also found herself "a stranger in a strange land." Distanced from Canada as she now was, she began to see that all peoples' problems are the same in kind, though not in place or time, and that the great themes of literature — love, endurance, survival — are universal.

After two years in Somaliland the Laurences were in the Gold Coast from 1952 to 1957, the years just before independence, when the British colonial administration gave way to the new nation of Ghana. These African years matured Margaret Laurence and consolidated her purpose and the writing talent that she had practised since childhood, but hitherto without confidence and without conscious direction. Besides *A Tree for Poverty*, her translations of Somali poetry, her years there are represented by only one published story — "Uncertain Flowering" — its title perhaps better describes her writing at that time than the story it represents. In the Ghana years, however, there was a flowering indeed; she was happy and fulfilled; her two children were born in these years; she became an eager student of African history and reli-

gions; she was passionately caught up in the Ghanaian hopes for their coming independence; and she began to write the stories that were later collected in *The Tomorrow-Tamer*. Barbara Ward, the great economist, third-world advocate, and Christian activist, was at that time in Accra. Margaret Laurence worked with her for a time, typing the manuscript for Ward's *Faith and Freedom*, whose final paragraph could well be an epigraph for all of Laurence's work to come:

The roads we have followed in blind confidence have proved false roads. To realize this is the first step in the search for another route. And of that search, it can be said in the light of man's spiritual history that those who seek shall find, to those who ask shall be given, and those who knock shall have reopened to them the doors of creation, freedom and spiritual life.

Two of *The Tomorrow-Tamer* stories carry a large weight of her musings on religion at this time, and all of them are based on her intense awareness of the disruptions caused by one society's impositions on another and the tragedies of failures in communication that inevitably follow. Matthew, the missionary's son in "Drummer of All the World," is caught between his troubled knowledge of his father's sincerity and the confusions and resentments the missionaries' message brought to the old tribal religions and social structures; in "The Merchant of Heaven" the naïveté and unconscious racial arrogance of Brother Lemon, entrepreneurial preacher of the "Angel of Philadelphia" mission, are finally pierced and defeated by Danso's painting of an African Jesus for the new church. In the novel *This Side Jordan*, set in Ghana but written after the Laurences moved back to Vancouver, the warring claims of diverse religions for the spirit and the will of individuals are intensively explored. Nathaniel Amegbe is a partner in both the emerging new world of Ghana and the old one; he is tortured by the recognition that he now belongs nowhere, neither to the tribal world and the gods of his father, Nyereme, the

Great Drummer, whom he loves and reveres, nor to the world of Western values and Christianity which his missionary teachers instilled in him with such conviction. At the end his hope for the future rests in the next generation, in his son, to whose African names he insists on adding Joshua: "Cross Jordan, Joshua."

The seven years in Africa were a catalyst to Margaret Laurence's talents, broadening and deepening her understanding of herself and her Manitoba background so that *The Stone Angel*, the first of her Manawaka works, was — and remains — a unique explosion of power and authenticity among Canadian novels. Hagar Shipley speaks to every generation of readers in her own bitter, indomitable voice. Her final journey toward self-knowledge and freedom is hers alone, and yet, with its strong biblical links and its underlying sacramental pattern, from self-serving and self-destroying pride to love, understanding, and the gift of grace, it is everywoman's and everyman's. Hagar sets the pattern for all the Manawaka heroines — she is a pilgrim, a seeker — and all the seekers (Rachel, Stacey, Vanessa, and finally Morag), reflect the patterns of Margaret Laurence's own continuing quest. Laurence is a novelist, however, and her characters are no mere allegorical representations; consequently they, like Hagar, speak to us with the total authenticity of individual women whose problems must be faced and understood, like our own, in their own times and circumstances.

Only with Morag in *The Diviners* did Laurence work out an entire pattern of pilgrimage; that pattern is the same one that Northrop Frye finds in the Bible and has demonstrated in *The Great Code*: from Eden through exile and the restrictions of law, to the gradual getting of wisdom and, finally, to revelation and the promise of new life. With Frye, Laurence shares a Miltonic as well as a biblical base. The Miltonic is especially strong in *The Diviners*, as Morag lives in her present and relives her past with

its clashing drives toward freedom and the concomitant demands of responsibility. "Paradise Lost" evolves finally into "Paradise Regained" in *The Diviners*, and Morag's revelation begins with her sighting of the great blue heron and her recognition of cosmic plan and purpose through time and space. It ends with her recognition of all the "Diviners" and her acceptance of the temporary nature of her own gift:

The inheritors. Was this, finally and at last, what Morag had always sensed she had to learn from the old man? She had known it all along, but not really known. The gift, or portion of grace, or whatever it was, was finally withdrawn, to be given to someone else (*The Diviners* (McClelland and Stewart, 1974), page 369).

Morag's story ends with peace and the reassurance of her sense of continuity among peoples and through generations. But Margaret Laurence's own life since the publication of *The Diviners* has been more and more a return to the social activism that first infused her in her Winnipeg years, at its roots a manifestation of the Social Gospel as she recognizes and acts upon it. Readers of all ages and both sexes identify with her works; because the patterns of pilgrimage are so basic to the structure and so obviously and deeply a part of their author, readers identify with Margaret Laurence personally. Her weekly mail is enormous. Beyond scrupulously answering it all, without benefit of secretary, she accepts many of its appeals to speak or write as both her privilege and her responsibility. Movements toward peace and disarmament, those most crucial of all the issues of our time, claim much of her time and energy — Project Ploughshares (an interchurch movement), Operation Dismantle, and Energy Probe among them. Women's and Native peoples' rights are high on her list of priorities. She supports the Canadian Abortion Rights Action League (CARAL) and has spoken on censorship to Ontario provincial judges.

Those who urge her to get on with the book she also has in pro-

gress at the expense of these various claims do not understand either the religious conviction or the sense of urgency which now determines her involvements — her public influence is great in this country, and she does the work she feels she must do . . . now. Many other writers before her have turned aside from their creative work to follow what seemed to them to be the dictates of a higher responsibility, Milton among them. In May, 1982, she received the honorary degree of Doctor of Sacred Letters at Emmanuel College, Victoria University, Toronto. In her convocation address she spoke the credo by which she lives:

Ours is a terrifying world. Injustice, suffering, and fear are everywhere to be found. It is difficult to maintain hope in such a world, and yet I believe there is hope. I want to proclaim and affirm my profound belief in the Social Gospel. I speak as a Christian, a woman, a writer, a parent, a member of humanity and a sharer in life itself, a life I believe to be informed by and infused with the Holy Spirit. I do not think it is enough to hope and pray that our own lives and souls will know grace, even though my entire life as a writer has been concerned with my belief that all human individuals matter, that no one is ordinary. Our Lord's new commandment speaks very clearly. "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." . . .

If we have been given any commandment, as I believe we have, then surely it must mean that we pray and work and speak out for peace, and for human and caring justice for all people that on earth do dwell.

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Alone. . . or lonely?

To be *alone* is to be quiet,
freed for a time from the pressure
of having to respond
with words
and smiles
and reassuring actions.

To be *lonely* is to search desperately for a kindred spirit,
for one fellow-pilgrim
among the many others
who travel life's crowded highways
with me.

To be *alone* is to have time to ponder
who I am
— The daughter of a freeing God
— a unique, response-able
person.

To be *lonely* is to try in vain to respond
to another's need for friendship
when our two souls can find no common ground
on which to stand.

To be *alone* is to have time to reach out
toward the creating Presence
who, I believe, dwells in and around
each of us.

To be *lonely* is to smile
and chatter
and try to please
while I am crying bitterly deep within.

To be *alone* is to celebrate my uniqueness,
to colour my aura the rose-gray
of early dawn.

To be *lonely* is to be isolated by my uniqueness,
to colour my aura
fog-gray.

I wonder — do I have too much loneliness
because I have so
little alone-ness?

Genevieve Carder
Toronto, Ontario