

E.J. Hinz and J.J. Teunissen

**Milton, Whitman, Wolfe and Laurence:
The Stone Angel as Elegy**

If death — both her approaching own and those of her husband and son (and father and brothers) — is the central concern of Margaret Laurence's protagonist in *The Stone Angel*, the major factor which prevents Hagar from coming to terms with her grief and pain is her conviction that her situation is unique. Thus when a well-intentioned minister tries to comfort her for her losses by saying "You're not alone," Hagar's multi-levelled response is "That's where you're wrong."¹ Similarly, in contemplating her own death, she observes: "Hard to imagine a world and I not in it. Will everything stop when I do? Stupid old baggage, who do you think you are? *Hagar*. There's no one like me in this world" (p. 250).

Laurence, of course, knows how mistaken Hagar is; though she, as author, makes us delight in Hagar's sense of individuality, she reminds us through Hagar's very name that her protagonist has a biblical prototype,² just as through her epigraph from Dylan Thomas she informs us at the outset that there have been others who have raged "against the dying of the light."

Furthermore — and more important — *The Stone Angel*, as a whole, is resonant with unmistakable echoes from Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel* — a novel which, in turn, takes its title from Milton's *Lycidas* and its Americanization of pastoral/romantic elegy conventions from Whitman's *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*.

Nor does Laurence disguise the fact that she is working in this "time honored" elegiac tradition. Hagar, like John Milton, is lamenting the death of one who died "ere his prime" — namely her son, John; like Whitman, she is also lamenting the death of "Bram" — a tall black-bearded, craggy-faced man — and the catalyst for her remembrance of their lives is her "lilac" colored dress: "The lilac is the exact same shade as the lilacs that used to grow beside the gray front porch of the Shipley

place" (p. 29). Finally, like Hagar, the protagonist of *Look Homeward, Angel* is someone who feels he is alone, and the central symbol of when her son dies.

Let us look, very briefly, then, at the basic features of elegy as they are reflected in *Lycidas*,³ with a view to appreciating first how Whitman adapts these to his purposes, then how subsequently Wolfe adapted Milton and Whitman, and finally how Laurence adapts all three.

The speaker in Milton's poem announces two reasons for his grief over the untimely death of Lycidas: first, he "hath not left his peer" as a poet, and second "we were nursed upon the self-same hill"; the speaker, in short, is left without a model, and the death of one so like him brings him to an awareness of the precariousness of his own existence. Accordingly, grief then turns to anger, as the speaker questions the ways of God — a questioning which involves a criticism of the clergy or those supposed to be the guides and comforters on such issues. Nor, however, does classical mythology offer any stay against the inevitability of death, and so the question that arises in turn is what is the point of the struggle? The answer is that the great work of art serves to immortalize the artist, just as through a great elegy the dead subject is immortalized. Armed with this insight, the speaker is able to perform the burial rites — the strewing of flowers — and to see Lycidas not as a "lost" soul but as a creature who has gone through the experience of death by water, who has suffered in the process a "sea-change," and who now by virtue of the speaker's art emerges as "the Genius of the shore." Confirming this insight, furthermore, is nature herself, as the final injunction of the poet to his pastoral mourners suggests:

Weep no more, woeful Shepherds weep no more,
For Lycidas your sorrow is not dead,
Sunk though he be beneath the wat'ry floor,
So sinks the day-star in the Ocean bed,
And yet anon repairs his drooping head,
And tricks his beams, and with new-spangled Ore,
Flames in the forehead of the morning sky:

Appropriately, therefore, *Lycidas* concludes with a shift from any otherworldly to the this-worldly connotations of "Look homeward," and from a limited to an omniscient perspective, with the omniscient viewer observing how the "uncouth swain" is prompted by the sinking of the sun "into the Western bay": "At last he rose, and twitch't his Mantle blue: / Tomorrow to fresh Woods, and Pastures new."

From here we can easily turn to Whitman's *Lilacs*, where both the poet and the subject of his elegy are "uncouth" and where many of the

poetic conventions used by Milton have their grounding in historical/geographical/political reality. The subject mourned here is quite literally the fallen Western star; the motif of seasonal renewal is quite literally called for by reason of his assassination in April; instead of the mythological flowers of *Lycidas*, we have those which are native to the environment:

When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd
 And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night
 I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.

Though Whitman too, like the speaker in *Lycidas*, has his moments of bitterness and despair — “O the black murk that hides the star! / O cruel hands that hold me powerless — O helpless soul of me! / O harsh surrounding cloud that will not free my soul” — possibly because there is less immediate identification between the speaker and the person mourned, there is initially less questioning of cosmic justice and more concern with providing an appropriate memorial. And this Whitman does by making the funeral cortege a panoramic journey across the great continent of America, just as he adorns “the burial-house of him I love” with pictures of the prolific and multi-faceted life of the nation. To the same effect, he performs Milton’s flower ritual in a distinctly democratic spirit:

(Nor for you, for one alone,
 Blossoms and branches green to coffins all I bring

 Copious I break, I break the sprigs from the bushes
 With loaded arms I come, pouring for you,
 For you and the coffins all of you O death.)

It is similarly in a spirit of comradeship that Whitman comes to terms with the idea of death, transforming the “brothers” motif of *Lycidas* —the bond between the speaker and his dead friend — into a bond between himself and death:

Then with the knowledge of death as walking one side of me,
 And the thought of death close-walking the other side of me,
 And I in the middle as with companions, and as holding the hands of
 companions
 I fled forth to the hiding receiving night that talks not,
 Down to the shores of the water, the path by the swamp in the dimness,
 To the solemn shadowy cedars and ghostly pines so still.

Guiding these “comrades three” to this natural temple is the hermit thrush — Whitman’s *naturalization* of the Christian symbol of ethereal protection, which Milton had invoked at the turning point of his elegy: “Look homeward Angel, now, and melt with ruth.”

What this angelic bird "carols" to Whitman's speaker, however, has nothing in common with the traditional Judeo-Christian reasons for ceasing to grieve and for not fearing death; nor does it promise immortality through art. Rather, the thrush's "powerful psalm" evokes the image of death as the archetypal Great Mother⁴ welcoming her lost sons home: "*Come lovely and soothing death,*" sings the thrush, who has only praise "*For the sure-enwinding arms of cool-enfolding death*"; "*Dark mother always gliding with soft feet,*" the thrush invokes:

*Approach strong deliveress,
 When it is so, when thou has taken them I joyously sing the dead,
 Lost in the loving floating ocean of them,
 Laved in the flood of thy bliss O death.*

*The night in silence under many a star,
 The ocean shore and the husky whispering wave whose voice I know,
 And the soul turning to thee O vast and well-veil'd death,
 And the body gratefully nestling close to thee.*

Those to grieve for, therefore, according to Whitman's speaker, are not the dead — "They themselves were fully at rest, they suffer'd not"; those to be grieved are the living who cannot articulate or share their grief: "for well dear brother I know," says the poet, "If thou wast not granted to sing thou would'st surely die."

The pain of inarticulateness in the face of loss is equally a major concern of Thomas Wolfe in *Look Homeward, Angel*,⁵ but to Wolfe *man's* greatest loss is not the death of a loved one but rather the loss of one's pre-natal, paradisaical existence, with all of human history being a search for the way back. In the words of the epigraph, words which echo throughout the work, "Naked and alone we came into exile" and "Remembering speechlessly we seek the great forgotten language, the lost lane-end into heaven, a stone, a leaf, an unfound door. Where? When?"⁶ Accordingly, for Wolfe death is not to be feared as an end to life; on the contrary, as the gateway to the return, death for Wolfe, as for Whitman, is to be welcomed. Death is to be feared only when one has forgotten the way back. But it is precisely here that Wolfe locates one of the primary functions of elegy—to provide the clues one needs or to restore the forgotten knowledge. And this explains the significance of the fact that *Look Homeward, Angel* continually looks backward as it moves forward, just as it also explains why the novel is a veritable encyclopedia of elegiac refrains and why the chief imperative for Gene from the moment of his birth is that he remember, remember, remember.

In Wordsworthian fashion, Wolfe sees the child to be most in touch with his lost heritage, and thus he reverses the import of the sea-change motif in *Lycidas*, associating it with the preconsciousness of his elegiac protagonist as a little child: "somewhere within or without his consciousness he heard a bell faintly ringing, as if it sounded undersea, and as he listened, the ghost of memory walked through his mind, and for a moment he felt that he had almost recovered what he had lost" (p. 31).

It is also this haunting knowledge of a previous existence that embitters his older brother, Ben, and which leads —metaphorically —to his sudden death "ere his prime." For while pneumonia is the actual physical cause, it is the inability of his doctor to provide the answers to his questions that precipitates his death: "Where do we come from? Where do we go? What are we here for? What the hell is it all about?" (p. 293). Had he had the education of his younger brother — or Wolfe — he would perhaps have not only understood but also realized that his imminent death was forecast in the "lilac" imagery used to describe the night in which Ben experiences the depth of his anguish (pp. 139, 140, 144, 149).

The relationship between Ben and his young brother also brings to full flower the brotherhood convention of elegy. Literally a "brother," both before and after his death Ben functions as Eugene's "angel," encouraging him to get away from "home" so as to look truly "homeward." Furthermore, Ben's death has the effect of healing the wounds of estrangement between the young protagonist and his brother Luke, a sailor. The solidarity of the two brothers is especially cemented when they visit the local undertaker, are exposed to the commercial formula for exorcising pain and guilt, and witness the hideousness of the attempt to deny death through the application of "rouge" to their brother's corpse. "That's art, boys," says the undertaker; "Did you ever see anything more natural in your life?" (p. 477). As Gene, in horror, realizes, however, instead of bringing the dead to life, such cosmetic art serves only the more emphatically to remind the bereaved that the dead have departed, and thus its only redeeming value is to stimulate the living to ponder the question, "Where has he gone?" (p. 476) — and in turn from whence do we come?

For Wolfe memorial statuary has the same effect, and particularly that of a Judeo-Christian kind — which serves to mock rather than to satisfy man's spiritual yearnings by reason of its solidity. Thus the whole history/tragedy of the Gants begins with the father's being inspired by the sight of "an angel poised upon cold phthistic feet, with a smile of soft stone idiocy," with his subsequent frustrations taking the form of a desire to "wreak something dark and unspeakable in him into cold stone" (p. 4). Unable to carve such an angel himself, he orders

one, which has stood on his porch for six years, "weathering, in all the wind and the rain. It was now brown and fly-specked. But it had come from Carrara in Italy, and it held a stone lily delicately in one hand. The other hand was lifted in benediction, it was poised clumsily upon the ball of one phthistic foot, and its stupid white face wore a smile of soft stone idiocy." At times his muse, the icon is more frequently an ironic "Jacob's angel," with Gant wrestling with it to no avail: "Fiend out of Hell!" he roared. 'You have impoverished me, you have ruined me, you have cursed my declining years, and now you will crush me to death, fearful, awful, and unnatural monster that you are'" (p. 221). Appropriately, therefore, the angel becomes the tombstone of a local whore who had died "ere [her] prime" and is engraved with a verse of the most sentimental and doggerel but also piously Christian kind. Shifting immediately from this critique of religious memorial sculpture to Gant's reliving of the past through his shared memories with the whore's Madame, Wolfe in turn points to the true nature and function of elegy: not to memorialize the dead but through narrative remembrance to bring them back to life. Thus it is through the *telling* of the story of the Gants that Wolfe at the conclusion of the novel is able not only to summon the ghost of the dead Ben but also to breathe life into another of Gant's stone angels to the extent that it comes alive and raises its arm.⁷

It is with respect to this function of the elegist as necromancer, moreover, that one sees Wolfe going considerably beyond Whitman, just as it is herein that one begins to understand why — aside from the matter of innate propensity — Wolfe should have chosen to write his elegy in the form of a realistic novel rather than in formulaic verse. Whereas Whitman tends to focus on Lincoln's death and to provide no biographical or humanizing background, Wolfe's elegy is a minutely and lovingly detailed history of the lives of the Gants. As such the narrative extends to epic proportions Milton's conventional inclusion of a small sketch of Lycidas's past, although Wolfe also differs from Milton in the sense that the poet presents this information in retrospect whereas the novelist presents this past as a developing present.

Whitman's panoramic funeral cortege and his universalization of Lincoln's death to include all the Civil War dead are similarly adapted by Wolfe. In *Look Homeward Angel*, what is lamented — by virtue of being brought to life — are all the good old days of America, just as Wolfe ranges not merely geographically but also topocosmically from east to west and north to south. The American dream itself, furthermore, is seen by Wolfe as deriving from the dim remembrance of a lost continent, and Americans are seen to be haunted by "the terrible and obscure hunger . . . that makes us exiles at home and strangers wher-

ever we go" (p. 352). In this yearning and sense of loss, however, all the great poets are "Americans," and thus Wolfe's American elegy serves to bring these dead poets back to life at the same time that through an understanding of the resonance of their words young Gene Gant attempts to find his way back.

Where Wolfe most follows in Whitman's footsteps and most goes beyond him, however, is in the association of death and mother. Like Whitman he envisions night as "Deep womb, dark flower" (p. 191); as in Whitman, the grave is seen as a return to a loving mother earth: "Let the mothering womb of earth engulf me. Naked, a valiant wisp of man, in vast brown limbs engulfed" (p. 229); and as in *Lilacs*, death and the feminine are associated in terms of the sea: "O sea! . . . I am the hill-born, the prison-pent, the ghost, the stranger, and I walk here by your side . . . You are an immense and fruitful woman with vast thighs. . . . And you will bring me to the happy land, you will wash me to glory in bright ships" (p. 436). But Wolfe also reverses the metaphor; if death is like a mother, mothers themselves are death-dealing figures who deprive their sons of their true home by bringing them into this world, who cast off their sons at the same time that they will not set them free, who, instead of showing them the way back, are totally oriented to materialist values.

Announced in the epigraph to the novel — "In her dark womb we did not know our mother's face; from the prison of her flesh have we come into the unspeakable and incommunicable prison of this earth" — the association of mother and death and earth is also suggested by the major setting of the novel — the ancestral home of Eliza Gant *nee* Pentland, which is a mountain-ringed town, a spa for the sick and the "last resort" for the terminally ill. The second wife of Gant and of Scots descent, Eliza objects to her husband's occupation as a carver of tombstones on the grounds that "there was not money in death" (p. 15) — and so "leaving him to die alone" (p. 108), she sets up her own establishment, a boarding house. "Thus, before he was eight, Eugene gained another roof and lost forever the tumultuous, unhappy, warm centre of his home" (p. 107). In "the great chill tomb of Dixieland" (p. 108), he feels that there "was no place sacred unto themselves, no place fixed for their own habitation, no place proof against the invasion of boarders" (p. 112). And as he works for her, he comes to feel "the weariness and horror of time; all but her must die in a smothering Sargasso" (p. 244). In this respect, she is very much like the land itself. In contrast to the "devastating impermanence of the nation," as Gene sees it, "Only the earth endured — the gigantic American earth, bearing on its awful breast a world of flimsy rickets" (p. 352).

Whatever tender impulses Eliza has, they are always "too late" (p. 362), occasioning her sons to turn to other mother figures, and when she objects, Gene finally bursts out: "My God, my God, where are we going? What's it all about? He's dying — can't you see it? Don't you know it? Look at his life. Look at yours. No light, no love, no comfort — nothing. . . . Mama, mama, in God's name, what is it? What do you want? Are you going to strangle and drown us all?" (p. 365).

And this is, in effect, what she does to her son Ben. Just as his twin brother had died from typhoid when she took the family to St. Louis for the purpose of making money by renting rooms to visitors to the Exposition, so Ben dies of pneumonia, partly as a result of her stinginess with coal for heating the boarding-house and partly as a result of her failure to take his symptoms seriously and so to call the doctor.

As he lies dying, therefore, he does not want to see her, and when Gene tries to comfort her, she can only weep "bitterly, helplessly, grievously, for the sad waste of the irrevocable years — the immortal hours of love that might never be relived, the great evil of forgetfulness and indifference that could never be righted now" (p. 454). Conversely, her pain takes the form of turning her into stone:

Eliza sat stolidly, hands folded, before the parlor fire. Her dead white face had a curious carven look; the inflexible solidity of madness.

"Well," she said at length, slowly, "you never know. Perhaps this is the crisis. Perhaps — " her face hardened into granite again. She said no more. (p. 459)

The real crisis for Eliza, however, occurs when, Ben having become comatose and no longer in a position to deny her, she sits at his bedside, "very stiff and erect in her chair, her white face set stonily," the rest of the family having "by unspoken consent" withdrawn to the shadows in order to "let Eliza repossess the flesh to which she had given life." But there is more to it than this, as Gene realizes when he sees her grasp on the cold hand of her son tighten: "Suddenly, with horror, he saw that she was watching her own death, that the unloosening grip of her hand on Ben's hand was an act of union with her own flesh, that, for her, Ben was not dying — but that a part of *her*, of *her* life, *her* blood, *her* body, was dying. Part of her, the younger, the lovelier, the better part, coined in her flesh, borne and nourished and begun with so much pain there twenty-six years before, and forgotten since, was dying" (p. 464).

As much as a son is part of his mother, however, so much is he also a stranger by virtue of his orientation to his other, pre-natal, home; and it is this step-mother situation which accounts at once for the mother's resentment of her child's search and her pity for his plight. When

earlier during his life Ben had sought the real mother in an older woman, for example, Eliza and her daughter commiserated but also with compassion for "Poor old Ben": "They thought of sons and lovers: they drew close in their communion, they drank the cup of their twin slavery as they thought of the Gant men who would always know hunger, the strangers on the land, the unknown farers who had lost their way. O lost" (p. 242).⁸ Similarly, Eliza is aware of "the lost and stricken thing" in her husband "which he would never find. And fear and a speechless pity rose in her when at times she saw the small uneasy eyes grow still and darken with the foiled and groping hunger of the old frustration. O lost!" (p. 16).

What leaves her men feeling lost, in short, is the extent to which her pity remains speechless, an inarticulateness which also cuts her off from the sympathy of those she loves. Fortunately, however, by the end of the novel Gene is sensitive enough to understand, even if he is not yet able to articulate. Thus, as he prepares to leave the family home and is saying his last goodbye to his mother, he watches her "turn quickly from him and with the queer unsteady steps with which she had gone out of the room where Ben lay dying" move toward the door. Rushing back to her, he tries "to speak, to get into a word, a phrase, all the pain, the beauty, and the wonder of their lives — every step of that terrible voyage which his incredible memory and intuition took back to the dwelling of her womb. But no word came, no word would come; he kept crying hoarsely again and again, "Goodbye, Goodbye." For Eliza, however, it is enough: "She understood, she knew all he felt and wanted to say, her small weak eyes were as wet as his with tears, her face was twisted in the painful grimace of sorrow, and she kept saying: "Poor child! Poor child! Poor child!" Then she whispered huskily, faintly: "We must try to love one another" (p. 513).

Partly as a result of her spoken compassion and releasing of her son in this way, Wolfe's elegy ends in the same spirit of "Pastures new" as does *Lycidas*, although with Gene himself assuming the posture of the angel on the promontory in Milton's poem: though standing in the middle of the town square, Gene was "like a man who stands upon a hill above a town he has left" and "who turns his eyes on the distant soaring ranges" (p. 522).

* * * *

Right from the very outset, then, Margaret Laurence locates her novel in the elegy tradition, for imagistically *The Stone Angel* begins where Wolfe's novel ends: with the stone angel "Above the town, on the hill brow" pointing to the distant ranges of heaven. Moreover, just

as Wolfe conflates Milton's angel and swain with a view to making clearer Milton's implication that spiritual consolation will come via artistic expression and that the distant ranges are really the lost continent of one's self, so there is an identification of Hagar and the stone angel, just as redemption for Hagar consists of her ability finally to articulate and act out her grief and so to come to terms with herself. Or again, just as for Wolfe "lost" refers to psychological and spiritual conditions and has the connotations of homelessness, so when Hagar cries out "O my lost men" as she first starts remembering, the adjective refers not merely to the fact that they are dead but also to their suffering as a result of her inability to show maternal affection and understanding.⁹

Like *Look Homeward, Angel*, furthermore, *The Stone Angel* is replete with allusions to other elegiac works, though significantly, whereas Wolfe's references are to the more classic models, Laurence's — in keeping with the down-to-earth quality of the narrative as a whole — are to the more popular and colloquial kind. To name but a few: Gray's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard" (pp. 45, 106); "Silver Threads Among the Gold" (p. 95); "The Prisoner's Song" (p. 106); "O My Darling Nelly Gray" (p. 115); "On Top of Old Smoky" (p. 188).¹⁰

"Meg Merrilies" in particular is Hagar's favorite, the last lines of which she observes give her "courage, more than if I'd recited the Twenty-third Psalm" (p. 163). Her difficulty, however, is remembering the lines — a difficulty that pertains to all of her recent activities. And herein Laurence adds a new dimension to Wolfe's emphasis upon the remembrance of the past as the essence of elegy, at the same time that she seems to be taking as her point of departure Gene Gant's observation that "If I had 40,000 years I should give all but the ninety last to silence" (p. 412). As a ninety-year-old woman, Hagar is verging on senility. Aware of this herself, stimulated by her wondering whether the stone angel is still standing and in turn conjecturing that like the other dead in the Manawaka cemetery she too is "doubtless forgotten" (p. 4), Hagar starts "remembering furiously" (p. 6). Like Wolfe, in short, Laurence sees memorial/tombstone art as serving only to remind the living that the dead are dead, and like Milton, she sees the writing of elegy — in her case the remembrance of the past — as the best way to ensure one's own immortality.

Unlike the speakers of Milton's and Wolfe's elegies, however, Hagar is not the innocent chronicler of the deaths of others; in each death she is implicated, if not directly to blame. As such, she is herself the death-dealing mother whom Wolfe explored in his reversal of Whitman's positive envisioning of death as a mother, just as Laurence also follows Wolfe in presenting men as creatures who have been exiled

from their true home and for whom women are the stepmothers to their loss. Whereas for Wolfe these concepts have Romantic connotations, however, Laurence explores them as concrete realities. Hagar's father, for example, is quite literally an exiled Scotsman and he quite literally wants her to play the role of surrogate wife. Similarly, her two brothers are in fact motherless sons, with the elder asking her to don the shawl of the departed mother so as to provide comfort to the younger son in his dying moments. Hagar's own son, John, also suffers the loss of home when Hagar leaves Bram to become — after the fashion of Eliza — a housekeeper.

Bram Shipley, too, is an "outcast" and in a step-woman situation by virtue of the fact that he is a widower (like Gant) when he marries Hagar, and his yearning for his true home is thus signified when in his dying moments he confuses Hagar with his first wife, Clara.

At the same time, in the case of Bram, Laurence does retain some of Wolfe's romanticism, for with his "hawk nose" and affinity with half-breeds, Bram functions as an "Indian" who is haunted by memories of his previous existence. This explains his passion for horses, as well as the tragic implications of Hagar's refusal to be motherly when he tries to make her understand: "I wanted to say 'There, there, it's all right,' but I did not say that" (p. 85). Nor does she utter the "mother words" when Bram needs consolation for his lost stallion or express understanding when he consequently places a boulder to mark the stallion's grave.

Bram, of course, would seem to be partly responsible, for having taken pride in the fact that he never calls her "mother," and thus there is an element of poetic justice all the way round that the only time Hagar responds maternally is when he is dying and in response to his delirious utterance of her name one night: "He lay curled up and fragile in the big bed were we'd coupled and it made me sick to think I'd lain with him, for now he looked like an ancient child . . . I placed my hand lightly on this forehead, and found the skin and hair faintly damp, as the children's used to be" (p. 183). Evocative of her earlier inability to comfort her brother, and registering a horror at the thought of a mother's being the lover of her child, this passage also contains a veiled critique of the major elegiac icon in the Judeo-Christian tradition: namely, Michelangelo's *Pieta*.¹¹ For in that sculpture, what is also incestuously horrifying is that like Hagar and Dan, the Mary who drapes her Son is depicted as being of the same age as the Son, suggesting a grieving lover rather than maternal sorrow. At the very same time, moreover, there is singular lack of emotional expression of grief on the face of Michelangelo's Madonna, who accordingly becomes the iconographic correlative of Hagar when her

son dies: "The night my son died I was transformed to stone and never wept at all" (p. 243).

If she could not express her grief in this instance, neither could she when Bram died, and accordingly neither could she give consolation to her son in his sorrow over his father's death. Her only apparent concern was with the dead and with the appropriateness of the burial plot and the namestone — occasioning John to say, after the fashion of *Lilacs*: "He's dead. He won't know or care" (p. 184). Himself the embodiment of Whitman's lines — "The living remain'd and suffer'd" — John turns, like the Gant men, to other mother figures, specifically to his step-sister, Jess, whose method of consolation involves recalling the Bram of her childhood: "He seemed a tall man in them days, a great big man with that black beard of his that he always hung onto when nobody was wearing beards anymore" (p. 196). Evoked in this image of the tall, self-principled man is clearly Abraham Lincoln, and it is also Whitman's elegy that is alluded to when Hagar returns at the news of Bram's imminent death: "At the Shipley place the rusty machinery stood like aged bodies gradually expiring from exposure, ribs turned to the sun. The leaves of my lilac bushes were burnt yellow, and the branches snapped when you touched them" (p. 169). What Laurence is also doing here, after the fashion of Whitman, is to universalize Bram's death by linking it to the drought — though Hagar, to be sure, sees the fact that all the farmers are suffering a common fate as only a grim *memento mori*: "The Shipley farm, I soon found, was in good company. However, much or little they'd worked, the upright men and the slouches, it amounted to the same thing now" (p. 168). At the same time, one can here see Laurence quarreling with the convention of recourse to universalizing tactics as a means of consolation, especially since in contrast to previous elegists, Hagar's subject is not metaphorically or platonically but actually and sexually "him I love" — a point which Laurence further emphasizes in the richly erotic connotations of her first allusion to Whitman's poem: "The lilacs grew with no care given them, and in the early summer they hung like bunches of mild mauve grapes from branches with leaves like dark green hearts, and the scent of them was so bold and sweet you could smell nothing else, a seasonal blessing" (p. 29).

Similarly, one can also see Laurence using and criticizing the universalizing convention when she associates the sense of futility which precipitates John's death with the spirit of the Depression. After his death, furthermore, upon reading of the number of Manawaka boys killed in World War II, Hagar links John's death to theirs by way of criticism of the media for their factual reportage, "making them sound like leaden soldiers, no one's sons" (p. 244). Even more, explicitly —

albeit ironically — upon being asked if she has children, Hagar at one point replies that she had two sons but that “one was killed in the war” (p. 104). For John did die in the war — as a result of her fight to keep him to herself — just as Marvin, the son who went to war, is scarred by her failure to show any maternal solicitude when he enlisted as a boy of seventeen.

With Marvin, however, it is still not too late to right the wrongs — he is still alive; but John died with all the necessary things left unsaid. How does one make peace with the dead? The answer prescribed by Wolfe is to bring the dead to life through remembrance whereby one can actually speak to them — and this is the strategy Laurence adopts as well. Before examining how she does so, however, it is important first to notice the way she rejects any traditional religious measures — thereby following Milton’s attack on the clergy in *Lycidas* as “Blind mouthes” or spurious shepherds to whom the “hungry sheep look up, and are not fed.” Like Wolfe, she also associates Christian consolation with tombstone art, the stone angel being “doubly blind, not only stone but unendowed even with a pretense of sight. Whoever had carved her had left the eyeballs blank” (p. 3). The other angels in the graveyard are seen as equally ineffectual: “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” (p. 4). Even more pointedly, when “God’s young fellow,” as Hagar satirically calls the clergyman, encourages her to pray and asks if she does not believe in “God’s infinite mercy,” her blurted reply is, “What’s so merciful about him, I’d like to know” (p. 120). Attempting to sing “Abide with me,” she hears her voice emerge only in “low mournful grunts, and I might as well be singing from a knitting book, for all the good it’s doing me” (p. 218).

Nor, after the fashion of *Lycidas*, does ancient history or mythology offer any solution, for as much as she might like to think of herself as “Pharaoh’s daughter” (p. 43), so she must admit that she is “the Egyptian, not dancing now with rowanberries in her hair, but sadly altered” (p. 40). Fearful of the nursing home she wonders: “Is it a mausoleum, and I, the Egyptian, mummified with pillows and my own flesh, through some oversight embalmed alive” (p. 96); what she finds in her “tour of this pyramid” is only “several small ancient women, white-topped and frail as dandelions gone to seed” (p. 97). And finally in the x-ray room of the hospital she wonders if she is confined in a vault: “The air is cool and stagnant, and I feel I have been kept in storage here too long. Perhaps when let I’m out, [*sic*] launched into

wind and sun, I may disintegrate entirely, like the flowers found on ancient young Tutankhamen's tomb, which crumbled when time flooded in through the broken door" (p. 111).

Instead of such preservatives, what Hagar requires are restoratives, on the one hand, and rituals of exorcism, on the other, which will enable her to relive the past and so to "melt with ruth," like Milton's angel; and it is precisely these which Laurence provides in the Shadow Point section of *The Stone Angel* — which she does, moreover, mainly through recourse to previous elegiac conventions.

First there is the Wolfe-like justice of the situation which causes her to run away from "home": just as she had deprived her men of their rightful home, so she is being uprooted and deprived of her home by the preparations for her removal to a nursing "home." Next, when she arrives at Shadow Point — an abandoned fish cannery where she will subsequently feel as if she were drowning like Lycidas — she meets in this version of Whitman's "secluded swamp" his hermit thrush: "How quiet this forest is, only its own voices, no human voices at all. A bird exclaims piercingly, once, and the ensuing silence is magnified by the memory of that single cry" (p. 150). In turn, just as for Wolfe the trapped bird is a symbol of the tortured soul (p. 457-58), so Hagar encounters a trapped sea gull, which she also wounds in her terror of its panic, and which accordingly becomes a symbol of her own state: "It flounders, half rises, sinks, batters itself against the floor in the terrible rage of not being able to do what it is compelled to do" (p. 218). But the gull also ultimately becomes the agent of her release in that it attracts the attention of two dogs — hell hounds, one might say — who were chasing the man who is to become her spiritual confessor, Murray Ferney Lees. In their relationship, the elegiac motif of shared pain is played out, with Lees's articulation of his grief over the death of his son enabling Hagar to articulate her grief and guilt for John's death. Preceding their mutual confessions, however, is a ritualistic sharing of wine and soda crackers — Laurence's way of continuing her critique of the inadequacy of Christianity at the same time that she revitalizes its rituals. To the same effect, Laurence makes Lees an ex-minister, now a "life assurance" salesman, whose son died when he and his wife were at a Bible rally on the topic of the end of the world. Not only does Lees hear Hagar's confession, however, he also functions as a surrogate son, *acting* the part of John and thus enabling Hagar to make peace with her son as if he were really alive.

There still remain, however, Bram and her father, just as there also remains the need to come to terms with her own imminent death. And here Laurence provides a significant variation on the Whitmanesque

motif of death as a lover. It is a variation that had previously been employed by both Emily Dickinson and perhaps even more importantly by another great Western prairie novelist, Willa Cather: specifically it involves viewing death as the ghostly bridegroom.¹² The motif is first hinted at when Hagar wanders into "Some sort of sanctuary" at the nursing home and sees a man in the shadows:

The man's shoulders are very wide, and his hair has a kind of shagginess about it. Although his face is hidden, I can see he's bearded. Oh —

So familiar he is that I cannot move nor speak nor breathe. How has he come here, by what mystery? Or have I come to the place he went before. This is a strange place, surely, shadowed and luminous the trees enfolding us like arms in the sheltering dark. If I speak to him, slowly, so as not to startle, will he turn to me with such a look of recognition that I hardly dare hope for it, and speak my name? (p. 106)

When the man moves, the illusion disappears, but leaving Hagar crying and saying to her daughter-in-law: "It's nothing. I'd like to go home now, if you don't mind. I'd just like to be taken home" (p. 107).

The motif recurs again in the hospital, when to the litany of pain and yearning recited by the other lost women in the ward, Hagar spontaneously shouts out "Bram!" Immediately after, Hagar gets up, thinking she is searching for the bathroom but clearly looking for a different kind of relief: "I'm standing now in a long corridor, it seems, and all around I can hear the steady grinding of breath. In the distance is a light. I know I must steer toward it" (p. 275). And she tries again in the same way a little later, but more specifically now: "The light is on beyond that open door. If I reach it, someone will speak. Will the voice be the one I have been listening for? What keeps him? He surely could say something. It wouldn't hurt him, just to say a word. *Hagar*. He was the only one who ever called me by my name. It wouldn't hurt him to speak. It's not so much to ask" (pp. 284-85). We can understand, then, the significance of the perfume which her little room-mate dabs on her wrist — a kind of anointing for burial: whereas her own granddaughter had given her "Lily of the Valley" — which flowers Hagar observes "we used to weave into the wreaths for the dead" (p. 33) — the little girl anoints her with a perfume called "Ravishing" (p. 303)

If Hagar thus prepares to meet death in the form of Bram, she also becomes reconciled to her father by way of the music she would like played as a memorial: "If I could, I'd like to have a piper play a pibroch over my grave. *Flowers of the Forest* — is that a pibroch? How would I know? I've never set foot in the Highlands. My Heart's not there. And yet — I'd wish it, as I'm gathered to my fathers. How could anyone explain such an absurdity?" (p. 306). According to Thomas Wolfe this

“absurdity” could be explained in terms of the haunting knowledge we have of our true home, and Hagar herself would understand; feeling that her children are trying to deprive her of her house, she protests: “I bought it with the money I worked for, in this city which has served as kind of a home ever since I left the prairies.” But then she adds a multi-leveled corrective: “Perhaps it is not home, as only the first of all can truly be called that” (p. 36).

Yet finally it is a very distinctly female form of consolation that Laurence offers Hagar and which constitutes *The Stone Angel's* unique contribution to the elegy tradition: namely, the very concrete notion that dying may be simply the reverse of the birth process — which experience women know best from their role in the process. Thus the concluding section of *The Stone Angel* begins with Hagar musing about the birth of John and his initial breathing difficulties in the unfamiliar air: “He couldn’t have known before or suspected at all that breathing would be what was done by creatures here. Perhaps the same occurs elsewhere, an element so unknown you’d never suspect it at all, until —” (p. 307). Although Hagar dismisses the analogy as “wishful thinking,” it does nevertheless give her the strength to reject the “masculine”/Judeo-Christian solution to confronting death: “Ought I to appeal? It’s the done thing. *Our Father* — no. I want no part of that.” Accordingly, the novel ends with Hagar’s “death” taking the form of an assertion of life or the type of independence associated with birth. Not a Christian symbol of redemption, the water she requests is a form of amniotic fluid — as Laurence emphasizes by describing Hagar’s pain in terms of “soft flesh held under by the sea” and also by Hagar’s need to “get back, back to my sleek cocoon, where I’m most comfortable, lulled by potions” (p. 308). Small wonder, therefore, that there is an “urgency” about Hagar’s request or that entrance into future time — “And then —” should be ushered by the “mother” words “There. There.”

Small wonder, too, that the novel concludes with Hagar’s ability to sympathize with Doris’s attempts to mother her, or that the first time she should have found herself taking Doris’s side and admitting that her own experiences were not unique was in the context of giving birth. That is, when on the trip to the “Old Folks” home Doris remarks on the “sweetness” of new-born calves, Hagar retorts: “If she’d ever had to take their wet half-born heads and help draw them out of the mother, she might call them by many words, but *sweet* would not be one of them. And yet it’s true I always had some feeling for any creature struggling awkward and unknowing into life. What I don’t care for is her liking them when she doesn’t understand the first thing about it.

But why do I think she doesn't? She's borne two children, just as I have" (p. 94).

Not only does Hagar come to have sympathy for Doris in this way, moreover, but also with Bram's first wife. Thus when after his death she cleans the attic, she first finds a "No Cross No Crown" motto embroidered by Clara and mocks both its brand of consolation and the "sausage fingers" which wielded the needle. But then she finds "one more trophy — a little gold ring set around with seed pearls, and in the center, covered with a speck of glass, a miniature wreath of the sort that used to be woven from the hair of the dead . . . and I wondered whose it had been. Then I recalled Bram's telling me one time that his firstborn had been a boy who had died. I held the ring in my hand and wondered how Clara must have felt about that boy, to fashion such a patient wreath and keep it hidden away here" (pp. 193-94). Similarly, Hagar becomes reconciled with her erstwhile rival (actually her step-sister) when she goes to see her in the interests of preventing her son's marriage to Lottie's daughter and the latter concurs:

She's everything in the world to me," Lottie said. "Everything. I lost two before I finally had her. She's all I've got. You don't know —"

And then I did know, and cursed myself for my meanness before, for thinking myself the only one. (p. 212)

It is also their mutual experience as mothers which ultimately makes Hagar reluctant to leave the "mewling nursery of old ladies" (p. 264), as she had at first sarcastically called the *other old women* in the hospital. In short, whereas our previous elegists had used the motif of brotherhood as a means of contending with death, Laurence introduces the concept of sisterhood, and whereas other elegists had focused on the universality of death, Laurence focuses on the common experience of women in giving birth.

Accordingly, if this essay has demonstrated that *The Stone Angel* is best appreciated through a recognition of the tradition to which it belongs, this in no way has the effect of making Laurence a mere imitator. What we have instead is a marvelous example of that symbiotic relationship between past and present which T.S. Eliot described in "Tradition and the Individual Talent": if previous literature provides a necessary context for the artist of today, so the latter enables one to look at the work of predecessors with fresh eyes — makes it come alive with latent possibilities and the things which remain to be said. Conversely, when one locates *The Stone Angel* within the elegy tradition, then the approaches taken to its predecessors become directives for a whole range of new ways to look at Laurence's novel — such as the way it is a novel about the kinds and the nature and function of various arts,

or the way it advises Canadian artists to "look homeward" for their materials, or of the way in which Laurence's characterization of Hagar serves to exorcise Canadians' guilt about their remote past and to provide a living memorial to the vitality of our more recent ancestors.

NOTES

1. Margaret Laurence, *The Stone Angel* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1968), p. 121.
2. Laurence's use of biblical prototypes to question Hagar's sense of uniqueness was addressed by Evelyn J. Hinz in a paper entitled "The Religious Roots of the Feminine Identity Issue," presented at the XVth Congress of the International Association of the History of Religions (Sydney, Australia, August 19, 1985). See also, Sandra Djwa, "False Gods and the True Covenant: Thematic Continuity Between Margaret Laurence and Sinclair Ross," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 1/4 (Fall 1972), 43-50, and Leslie-Ann Hales, "Spiritual Longing in Laurence's Manawaka Women," *English Studies in Canada*, XI (March 1985), 82-90.
3. For a survey of the elegy tradition from Theocritus to Milton, see Scott Elledge, *Milton's "Lycidas": Edited to Serve as an Introduction to Criticism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).
4. For a discussion of Whitman's major innovation in this respect, as well as for a review of previous approaches to the poem, see Evelyn J. Hinz, "Whitman's 'Lilacs': The Power of Elegy," *Bucknell Review*, XX/2 (Fall 1972), 35-54. A more recent survey — which does not refer to Hinz's article — is provided by Mutlu Konuk Blasing, "Whitman's 'Lilacs' and the Grammars of Time," *PMLA*, 97 (January 1982), 31-39.
5. There are numerous discussions of the implications of Wolfe's use of the refrain from *Lycidas* as his title, but only one discussion of *Look Homeward, Angel* and the conventions of elegy: Nancy Lenz Harvey, "Look Homeward, Angel: An Elegiac Novel," *Ball State University Forum*, 13 (1972), 29-33. This study, however, is limited to a focus on formal elements, and does not involve any consideration of the differences between elegiac articulations in verse and prose fiction. Similarly, though Wolfe is frequently associated with Whitman, it is typically not in the context of elegy but rather with respect to the way in which both reflect characteristic American attitudes. Precise comparisons of their elegies, along the lines of our discussion, remain unexplored.
6. Thomas Wolfe, *Look Homeward, Angel* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), epigraph.
7. In his criticism of the plastic arts in this respect — and in his concomitant demonstration of the way in which the verbal arts can make funerary art come alive — Wolfe may be seen as following John Keats. See our essay, "'Ode on a Grecian Urn': Keats's *Laocoon*," *English Studies in Canada*, VI (Summer 1980), 176-201.
8. The pointed allusion to *Sons and Lovers* in this passage, and in turn the similarities between Wolfe's *Bildungsroman* and D. H. Lawrence's was the subject of a paper read by Evelyn J. Hinz at a recent D. H. Lawrence Conference (Seton Hall University, South Orange, N.J., April 9, 1985).
9. Laurence's familiarity with Wolfe's work is suggested by Morag's quarrel with him in *The Diviners*.
10. Other more indirect references are made to Amy Lowell's "Patterns" (p. 44); Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (p. 126); Hamlet's elegy for Yorick (p. 154); *The Ancient Mariner* (p. 186); *The Waste Land* (p. 191); "Lady-bird, lady-bird" (p. 191).
11. Criticism of the implications of the *Pieta* is registered in numerous twentieth-century works and was violently expressed by Lazlo Toth's attack on the sculpture. See here our essay, "The Attack on the *Pieta*: An Archetypal Analysis," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, XXXIII (Fall 1974), 43-50. Particularly has the configuration been criticized by women: see our essay, "The *Pieta* as Icon in *The Golden Notebook*," in Doris Lessing, eds. Annis Pratt and L. S. Dembo (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1973), pp. 40-53.
12. See Dickinson's "Because I could not stop for Death" and Cather's *O Pioneers!*