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Margaret Laurence and The First Person

In Margaret Laurence's Canadian novels, *The Stone Angel*, *A Jest of God*, *A Bird in the House*,¹ *The Fire-Dwellers*, and, most recently, *The Diviners*, one of her most significant techniques, next to her predominant use of the present tense, is her preference for the first person. Only in her last two novels does she turn to the third-person limited omniscient point of view, but even then there are sections in the first person, and the reader throughout participates as much in Stacey's and Morag's thoughts as he does in those of the other heroines. The reader sees each of the characters almost exclusively through her own eyes. Laurence is aware of the difficulties involved in using such a restricted viewpoint; Morag may be speaking for her when, referring to the novel she is writing, she realizes that she "knows more about Lilac than Lilac knows about herself, but how to convey this? . . . People have to be communicated to the reader solely through their words and acts, which Lilac often does not understand. The difficulties of having a main character who is virtually inchoate."² Yet Lilac, like Morag, is basically presented in the third person, and Laurence's most serious problems arise in her earlier novels, when she relies exclusively on the first person.

When she uses the first person together with the present tense, as she does in *The Stone Angel* and *A Jest of God*, the combination is indeed an unusual one.³ Mendilow's casual dismissal of the method, then, might be explained by the fact that it is so uncommon a combination that he had not encountered its effective use: "A narrative in the first person and written throughout in the present tense would, if it were possible at all, appear so artificial as to make any identification impossible. It would obviously be limited to sensations and thoughts

and exclude all action. It would also obtrude the act of writing itself."⁴ Laurence, then, undertakes a novel form that Mendilow asserts is impossible — although, it must be remembered, Mendilow's book was published in 1952, and much has happened to the novel since then; *Beautiful Losers* is only one example of a successful first-person, largely present-tense novel. Critical reaction to *A Jest of God*, however, tends to support Mendilow's view; there is an almost unanimous dissatisfaction with the method and the resulting characterizations. Thomas says that "Rachel's present is overpowering to her", and that "she can hardly ever see through to another Rachel, or to a wider world, and yet the reader has to constantly be made to see the whole potential person behind the neurotic facade."⁵ Harlow, feeling the same way, says that "one yearns for the third person point of view and the omniscient author — old-fashioned techniques for an old-fashioned story."⁶ New agrees that the first-person point of view "explains much of the difficulty."⁷ The other characters in *A Jest of God* are criticized for being similar cardboard figures; since they are necessarily seen only through Rachel's eyes, they "skim away" from the reader. Thomas is typical in her criticism when she says Mrs. Cameron and Nick are "almost stereotypes of selfish mother and casual seducer".⁸

Critical consensus would seem to be, then, that the method of *A Jest of God* is a failure. Perhaps its best defense comes from Laurence herself. Acknowledging that critics have disapprovingly called it a very "inturned novel", she says, "I recognize the limitations of a novel told in the first person and the present tense, from one viewpoint only, but it couldn't have been done any other way, for Rachel herself is a very inturned person."⁹ Although it is possible to accuse Laurence here of simply using the imitative fallacy, she does raise a viable argument to support her novel: it is, from beginning to end, purely Rachel's novel, and although it is possible that a limited omniscient point of view could have presented her story as well, it could not have captured that total subjectivity that makes Rachel a close relative of the confessional hero, alienated from herself and from the world, desperately trying to understand herself. To accuse *A Jest of God* of giving too narrow a view, or, as Mendilow accuses the autobiographical novel of doing, of creating a character who cannot present his own "unconscious reactions and prejudices convincingly",¹⁰ is to condemn the very qualities that are commendable in *A Jest of God*. The point is for the reader to see

things as Rachel sees them, to experience her from the inside, and yet to be able to see into the character herself and to understand her as she does not understand herself. The novel has difficulties, certainly, but it is far from being the inept work some critics have charged it to be. Braddock is one of the few who have understood what Laurence is trying to achieve: "I was conscious at the end of the book that I had not read about Rachel Cameron but experienced her."¹¹

Compared to the critical disapproval Laurence's use of first-person present received for *A Jest of God*, her use of it in *The Stone Angel* was received much more favorably, and comparison between the two novels in this respect is frequent. Stedmond believes that "first-person narration, which works well as a way of telling the ninety-year-old Hagar's story, allowing her to look back over her long life and see her experiences in some sort of perspective, brings us rather too close to Rachel, making us participate almost too actively in her self-pity."¹² Harlow agrees that "Hagar swims strongly in the last full tide of her life. Rachel drowns as a character in the first flood of her experience."¹³ What seems to have made the use of first-person present such a success in *The Stone Angel* is its being interspersed with first-person past. The reader can see things through Hagar's eyes in the same way that he could see through Rachel's eyes, but he has here the added advantage of seeing Hagar's own retrospective view of her past; and what is achieved, for both the reader and Hagar, is objectivity and distance. Thus the restricted viewpoint, ranging as it does over all of Hagar's life, facilitates a greater understanding of and identification with Hagar than it could with Rachel, yet it retains that sense of "experiencing" her life.

A Bird in the House, also a first-person novel, and a fairly obvious example of what Frye calls the *Künstlerroman*, or the fictional autobiography, has the same limitations as most novels of this type; its focus is naturally restricted, and the reader can be aware only of the perspective of the narrator. The greatest problem in *A Bird in the House*, however, is not its use of the first person, but of the temporal distance between the narrator and the experiencing child. Vanessa's first-person perspective, written, as Mendilow says, "backward from the present" as opposed to "forward from the past, as in the third-person novel",¹⁴ loses both the reader involvement a third-person novel would create and the involvement the reader feels in the lives of Hagar and Rachel, with their strong sense of presentness.

In *The Fire-Dwellers*, however, Laurence turns to the use of the third person, yet keeping the first-person focus through Stacey's thoughts. It is an interesting combination of viewpoints: all Stacey's thoughts are presented in separate, first-person passages, and all action and flashbacks are presented in the third person, yet from the limited omniscient viewpoint of Stacey. This use of the third person in the novel may be its most significant achievement. Mendilow especially recommends such a restricted, third-person viewpoint: "This method is by way of a compromise between the omniscient and the autobiographical methods; the artificial convention of the omniscient author is limited to one person only in the novel; on the other hand, the inflexibility and the various disadvantages attendant on the first-person novel are avoided."¹⁵ Laurence's combination of this third-person approach with a first-person point of view in the stream-of-consciousness vein is particularly effective, for it allows the reader to follow the action from an external vantage point and also zoom in on Stacey's thoughts. The continual jumps in perspective have the added effect of suggesting a kind of schizophrenic impersonalization of self, in the same way that Rachel objectifies herself in her later fantasies and that Marian McAlpin in Atwood's *The Edible Woman* begins thinking of herself in the third person. Thus the reader becomes aware that the thinking and feeling Stacey is usually very different from the woman who acts. Laurence admits that she feels a special interest in the style of *The Fire-Dwellers*, saying that its form is "wider, including as it does a certain amount of third-person narration as well as Stacey's idiomatic running inner commentary and her somewhat less idiomatic fantasies, dreams, memories."¹⁶ The form may be wider, but it is also tighter, and may suggest that Laurence is coming to accept a Jamesian principle, that "the first person, in the long piece, is a form foredoomed to looseness."¹⁷ Whereas *A Jest of God* was burdened with carrying both thought and action in the character's consciousness, *The Fire-Dwellers* is free to treat the external activities in a third-person framework.

The Diviners is even more emphatically third person. While structurally it may have closer ties with *The Stone Angel* and even with *A Bird in the House* in its use of two narrative levels and revaluation of a Manawaka past, it is *The Fire-Dwellers* it follows in its use of person. Both the narrating Morag and the younger Morag are presented in the third person, and, although initially there are italicized sections in the

first person representing some of Morag's thought, Laurence relies less and less on these as the novel progresses. They are, indeed, unnecessary, like a habit Laurence finds hard to break, for Morag's thoughts are all along being tied into the action and the third-person narration, without loss of clarity or sense of contrivance. For example: "Morag walked back to the house as slowly as possible, stopping to pick a dandelion seedclock and to blow the seeds into the wind. Nine. And it was actually noon. Inaccurate dandelion" (D, 237). It is a comfortable and unobtrusive movement into Morag's thought, more so than was the movement into Stacey's. Morag is, of course, a more integrated and self-aware character than Stacey, and the novel's style is an excellent reflection of this. The thinking-feeling Morag generally is also the acting Morag. That Morag's memories, however, are presented in the third person may suggest a kind of schizophrenic dissociation from her past, unless the actual format of these memories is considered. She calls them her "memorybank movies", and, as movies, they not only must run in an always-existing present, but star a highly visualized and objectified character, who, in all likelihood, the narrating Morag then interprets verbally in the novel she is writing.¹⁸ The film format makes the present tense and third person — and the imagistic, sometimes one-word descriptions — on the second narrative level particularly effective. On the first level, as well, Laurence shows a mastery of the third person unequalled even in *The Fire-Dwellers*.

An examination of Laurence's use of the first person, however, is not the only, nor perhaps the best, way to approach her use of the narrator. Booth says: "Perhaps the most overworked distinction is that of person. To say that a story is told in the first or the third person will tell us nothing of importance unless we become more precise and describe how the particular qualities of the narrators relate to specific effects."¹⁹ For Booth a much more practical distinction is one between a reliable and unreliable narrator, for an untrustworthy narrator transforms the total effect of the work he relates. A narrator is reliable, Booth explains, "when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), *unreliable* when he does not. . . . The narrator is mistaken, or he believes himself to have qualities which the author denies him."²⁰

That Laurence's narrators would readily lend themselves to an examination from this perspective is easy to see, for not only are all her

characters, with the exception of Morag and possibly of Vanessa, in varying states of emotional upset, but the use of the first person (or a similarly-restricted third person) assures the reader that what he is reading is necessarily filtered through the subjective lens of individual perception and interpretation. As Edel says of Durrell's Justine, who "looks out at us from five mirrors at the same time", the reader is "transposed into a relative rather than a fixed vision".²¹

Laurence also frequently has her characters look out at the reader, and themselves, from mirrors, and her use of these mirror-images is perhaps the most interesting aspect of the unreliable subjective view. Although Booth deplors the "many cumbersome 'mirror-views' in modern fiction",²² Laurence is able to present significant insights into her characters by what they report seeing in the mirror. If objective detail is sacrificed — and it never seems to be entirely — it is for a more accurate subjective vision. Durrell quotes the Marquis de Sade as saying: "The mirror sees the man as beautiful, the mirror loves the man; another mirror sees the man as frightful and hates him; and it is always the same being who produces the impressions."²³ Laurence's mirrors alternate between hating and loving the people they reflect, although they tend to hate more than to love. In *A Jest of God*, for example, Rachel's glimpses of herself in the mirror are almost always unflattering. She never seems able to "succeed in avoiding" her eyes in the mirror, and she is continually confronted by images of herself in bedroom mirrors, in hall mirrors, in café mirrors, in store windows; she sees looking back at her "the narrow angular face . . . the grey eyes too wide for it";²⁴ "the featureless face, the tallness, a thin stiff white feather like a goose's feather" (JG, 75); a "thin streak of a person" (JG, 29). Yet, early in the novel, the reader is indirectly cautioned against accepting Rachel's description of her mirror self as any kind of objective assessment: she wonders, "do I see my face falsely? How do I know how it looks to anyone else?" (JG, 16) "Do I have good bones? I can't tell. I'm no judge" (JG, 17). Thus the reader learns to question Rachel's view of herself, and, if objective details are sometimes sacrificed, the reader receives much more significant information from her unreliable testimony — that is, her attitude to her appearance.

In *The Stone Angel* and *The Fire-Dwellers*, Laurence adds another dimension to her use of the mirror-image and to her use of the mirror that, like Rachel's, sees the viewer "as frightful and hates him." This is

her use of the double vision, of the juxtaposition of a favourable self-image with a damning one, and in both novels it tends to become a confrontation between the young and the old, the then and the now. This occurs constantly in *The Fire-Dwellers*, where the Stacey in the present must learn to accept the fact that her mirror image is no longer that of herself at seventeen. At one point, early in the novel, she "strips and looks at herself in the mirror", and there is an immediate flashback to the younger Stacey, running down the stairs at home in Manawaka, as she "paused in flight like a hummingbird or helicopter and sneaked a glance into the mirror halfway down." Tormented by realizing now that "*I was actually pretty — why didn't I know it then?*" Stacey confronts her older self in the mirror: "—Oh Cleopatra. You old swayback. Four kids have altered me. The stretch marks look like little silver worms in parallel procession across my belly and my thighs."²⁵ Although the most frequent use of this double vision with Stacey involves images of her younger self, there are also effective juxtapositions of the present Stacey with the younger girls around her. The girl beside her on the bus makes her aware of being this "slightly too short and too amply rumped woman" (FD, 12); the girl on the peace march makes her visualize herself again as a woman "heavy in the hips, no longer young" (FD, 276). Perhaps the most effective use of the double vision, however, occurs in that excellently-written section of the novel where Stacey, trying to recapture her image of Stacey Cameron, "spinning like light", dances in the basement to the old Tommy Dorsey record. Before she does so, she "looks at herself in the full-length mirror", removes the dress with the print "in the form of small clocks, all of whose hands indicate five minutes before either noon or midnight", and puts on "a pair of tight-fitting green velvet slacks and a purple overblouse". She cannot, however, keep the hands of the Cinderella clock from striking midnight by removing the dress, and when, a few hours later, she sees Katie, "simple and intricate as grass", dancing in the same room to her own records, all the mirror images of Stacey — of herself at seventeen, of herself as she felt she looked as she danced, of Katie dancing now — are evoked in the bitter and self-caricaturing image that flashes into her mind: "Stacey MacAindra, thirty-nine, hips ass and face heavier than once, shamrock velvet pants, petunia-purple blouse, cheap gilt sandals high-heeled, prancing squirming jiggling" (FD, 137).

In *The Stone Angel*, the juxtaposing of two mirror images, Hagar Currie and Hagar Shipley, is also common, and in several respects it serves the same function as do the two images of Stacey Cameron and Stacey MacAindra. Like Stacey, remembering herself as a girl looking into the mirror, Hagar now realizes she was "a handsome girl. . . . A pity I didn't know it then."²⁶ And, also like Stacey, she finds it difficult to accept her aging, her turning, as Stacey turns into a swaybacked Cleopatra, into "the Egyptian, not dancing now with rowanberries in her hair, but sadly altered" (SA, 40). She is even more merciless than Stacey in describing her physical disintegration:

I give a sideways glance at the mirror, and see a puffed face purpled with veins as though someone had scribbled over the skin with an indelible pencil. The skin itself is the silverish white of the creatures one fancies must live under the sea where the sun never reaches. Below the eyes the shadows bloom as though two soft black petals had been stuck there. The hair which should by rights be black is yellowed white, like damask stored too long in a damp basement. (SA, 79)

Yet there is always present in the mirror the young Hagar, looking out of the same eyes; if, she thinks, she were to "approach the mirror softly, take it by surprise, I would see there again that Hagar with the shining hair, the dark-maned colt" (SA, 42). Thus, she says, "when I look in my mirror and beyond the changing shell that houses me, I see the eyes of Hagar Currie, the same dark eyes as when I first began to remember and to notice myself. . . . The eyes change least of all" (SA, 38). Her ability to look beyond "the changing shell", to see the one person in the two images of past and present is reminiscent of how Peter Walsh in *Mrs. Dalloway* can see Clarissa: as someone almost outside time, who partakes of the present and at the same time transcends it to remain a living part of their mutual past. Clarissa herself, however, achieves in her mirror a kind of denial of clock time that neither Stacey nor Hagar can quite manage to do; she "plunged into the very heart of the moment, transfixed it there — . . . collecting the whole of her at one point (as she looked into the glass)."²⁷

Rachel, Stacey, and Hagar can not quite collect "the whole of [themselves] at one point" and make the mirror love them. There is always a sense of despair in what the mirror reveals, and, particularly for Stacey and Hagar, a desire to see a much earlier image. Whether or not the reader is expected to believe the evaluations Stacey and Hagar make of their mirror images may not be as important as understanding the attitudes to the viewers that the mirrors also reflect.

The mirror images in *The Diviners* likewise reflect Morag's view of herself, but her images differ significantly from those of Rachel, Hagar and Stacey — differ in the same way Morag herself differs from her fictional predecessors. Soon after the novel opens, the reader is presented with a mirror image of Morag in which she sees herself as “a tall woman, although not bizarrely so. Heavier than once, but not what you would call fat. . . . Eyebrows which met in the middle and which she had ceased to pluck, thinking what the hell. Dark brown eyes, somewhat concealed (*good*) by heavy-framed glasses. Long, dead-straight hair, once black as tar, now quite evenly grey” (D, 23). This is a self-assessment of, and by, a woman who has come to terms with her appearance, with her age; it is the image of a woman who prefers naturalness to cosmetic vanities, of a woman who has accepted herself. The use of the double image in *The Diviners* often serves, indeed, the opposite purpose that it does in *A Jest of God*, *The Stone Angel* or *The Fire-Dwellers*; the *older* Morag is the one with the more enviable mirror (self) image. Certainly, the younger Morag has few neuroses about her appearance: “She is tall and she doesn't care who knows it. Her tits have swollen out already, and she shows them off” (D, 49); she knows her figure “is a goddamn good one” (D, 89). But this is also the Morag who creates a playmate with, “not unnaturally, . . . curly blond hair, the opposite of mine, and sweet little rosebud lips” (D, 11); the Morag who, when told she must wear glasses, says, “I look bad enough as it is” and “in front of the mirror . . . rages and curses” at the “hideous” glasses making her look like “a tall skinny owl” (D, 100). It is also the Morag who later argues with her mirror about wearing make-up, about plastering “all this gloop” on her face. She “dislikes and feels alienated from herself with a lot of makeup on” (D, 261). Obviously, the narrating Morag no longer dislikes herself: she has integrated both her narcissistic younger self and her self-deprecating self. She has no time to waste mourning her lost youth and when, like Stacey, she feels jealousy of her daughter's “youth and happiness and sex”, she, unlike Stacey, discusses her feelings honestly, first with Royland and then with Pique. “I think it'll be okay now”, she says (D, 238). And it is. Morag, unlike Laurence's other Manawaka characters (Vanessa perhaps excepted) has learned to cope with her frustrations, has learned how to communicate. That is why the mirror loves her.

The use of the mirror-image, then, is perhaps Laurence's most

successful use of subjective narration, presenting both objective physical details and the character's own emotional reactions to what she sees. Laurence's use of the double-image as a function of the unreliable narrator extends, of course, beyond the mirror image to a more general use of what Thomas calls, in *The Stone Angel*, the "double-exposure". The use of the two narrative levels especially facilitates this juxtaposing of the old and the young Hagar, but, as Thomas notes, it is in the world of appearances and realities that the double-exposure technique is especially useful, showing the reader "Hagar, as she thinks she is and as she really is; Hagar as she reads her motives in the past and as they seem to us."²⁸ She can be as ruthlessly honest with herself as to admit, "I can't keep my mouth shut" (SA, 90), and "I'm unreasonable. Who could get along with me?" (SA, 99). She is perceptive enough to realize that "things never look the same from the outside as they do from the inside" (SA, 249), and finally that "pride was my wilderness" (SA, 292). Yet beside this Hagar exists the obviously-fallible woman who insists, "of course I'm all right, perfectly all right" (SA, 33); who sees nothing in Doris beyond the greedy "pouch-faced gopher";²⁹ and who decides Marvin and Doris would think of her sapphire ring as "a chunk of junk jewelry, that's all it is to them" (SA, 280). It is the Hagar who says of Marvin's letters that "he wrote home once a month, and his letters were always very poorly spelled" (SA, 130).

Yet it is relatively easy for the reader to accept these two contradictory Hagers, to shrug off her inconsistencies with a Whitmanesque "Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself." This is possible only because the reader is usually fully aware of her unreliability as a narrator. That is, he is fully in what Booth calls "secret communion" with the author, sharing knowledge about the fallible narrator. "We travel with the silent author", Booth says; he may "wink and nudge, but he may not speak"; he and the reader are "secretly in collusion, behind the speaker's back, agreeing upon the standards by which he is found wanting."³⁰ While *The Stone Angel* contains the most obvious evidence of this sense of collusion, it is present in all of Laurence's novels.

With Rachel in particular, the reader is constantly made aware that her judgements are neurotic and unreliable. This becomes clear after the first few pages: the reader is told Rachel as a child was "scared of not

pleasing", and it soon becomes apparent that she is still overly-conscious of her image. "God forbid that I should turn into an eccentric", she thinks in horror; "Am I beginning to talk in that simpler tone", she wonders; "Now I've spoken more sharply than necessary", she reprimands herself; "My arms . . . seem so long and skinny", she thinks critically; "I oughtn't to feel that way", she tells herself about James. All this confronts the reader before he finishes page three, and it is easy to conclude from the very beginning of the novel, then, that Rachel's hyper-sensitivity can distort objective reality. Thus the reader, involved as he may become in her perceptions, can still see her as she cannot see herself and must judge situations from his own perspective. When Rachel says of her mother's bridge games, "I don't begrudge it to her. . . . No one decent would" (JG, 15), the reader realizes that of course she *does* begrudge it, and feels guilty and not "decent" because of it. And when she says "It doesn't concern me, what she thinks" (JG, 55); "I'm not worked up in the slightest. . . . It's not of any real importance" (JG, 82); "The idea hardly crossed my mind" (JG, 150); it is clear to the reader that all these things *do* concern her and *are* important.

With Stacey, too, the reader is expected to see more of her than she sees herself, and to question such assessments of herself as "I had everything I always wanted" (FD, 76). The support of Stacey's thought by the third-person narration, however, somewhat reduces the sense of reader-author collusion, as the turning to a more impersonal point of view helps to objectify Stacey for the reader. While Rachel must exist fictionally solely through her own perceptions of herself, the character of Stacey has a firm anchor — the third person — in reality. Reader-author collusion becomes both easier and less necessary.

In *A Bird in the House*, the reader is also expected to see beyond those things that the child Vanessa sees, but the collusion here is more between the reader and the adult Vanessa, who shares the author's perspective. Vanessa the adult, then, must be seen as a reliable narrator, with a "calmly consistent viewpoint",³¹ although Laurence herself admits that her own attitude, especially toward her grandfather, changed between writing the first stories and the last: "I think I honestly kept on disliking him until I'd got all the way through those stories . . . and when I'd finished the last story I realized not only that I didn't dislike him anymore, but that there were things about him that I

greatly admired.”³² The reader, however, has little choice but to accept the validity of the narrator’s judgement throughout, even though the evolution of understanding occurs in both of the “two characters”. The young Vanessa appears as a relatively reliable narrator both because her observations are the memoirs of the older Vanessa and because her ego frequently disappears and she becomes merely an innocent medium for relating the adult tensions. Her main function seems to be more as a reporter than as a participant, making her presentation of the characters – usually through their conversations, which she often too conveniently overhears – valid for the reader. Although as she grows older and her perspectives apparently change, her judgements at any given point are usually legitimate – perhaps because the reader can never totally accept her credibility as a child instead of an adult.

The narrating Morag in *The Diviners* is, in terms of reliability, very like the narrating Vanessa, for she is, as has been earlier discussed, the most self-aware of any of Laurence’s characters, and, in terms of character development, she changes little, if at all. Like Vanessa, she has already “arrived” when the novel opens. The third-person narration further serves, as it does in *The Fire-Dwellers*, to reduce the sense of reader-author collusion and to validate Morag’s restricted viewpoint. And, like *A Bird in the House*, the collusion that exists tends more to be between the adult Morag and her younger self, who, like Vanessa, is often only “partly comprehending” (D, 126). The reader, then, with a certain smugness, can see beyond the young Morag’s avowals of hatred for Christie, her declarations never to “let on”, and her adolescent ambivalences about sex, for he is clearly in collusion with the adult Morag. And he has little choice but to accept her presentation of her past, for she warns the reader right at the outset that these are “invented memories”, that they are “maybe true and maybe not” (D, 7). It is meaningless, she says, to ask “what really happened”. The reader, then, is not given a chance, as he was in *The Stone Angel*, to evaluate the past for himself: Hagar gives the reader the facts, with her retrospective interpretation; Morag assures the reader the interpretation would have changed the facts. While such a view of the memory process is undeniably valid, Laurence reduces the reader’s sense of involvement in, and discovery of, the characters of either of the two Morags. It is a sacrifice she has made to create a self-aware narrator, and to present memory as a process whereby the distortions become the truth. The

collusion, in this case, tends to be between the adult Morag and the author.

What the reader can discover in the adult Morag, however, is her sense of her own absurdity, and this produces a particularly effective type of irony. Whereas the irony that results from the double-exposure technique in *The Stone Angel* is produced largely by reader-author collusion, in *The Diviners* — as in *The Fire-Dwellers* and *A Jest of God* — it is irony produced by the main characters themselves, directed against themselves. In this regard, the novels show a kinship with the confessional novel, which not only “maintains the author’s detachment from his hero”, but also “gives the hero a weapon with which to destroy any romantic notions which might lure him away from the central purpose of his confession.”³³ In *The Stone Angel*, then, the reader sees the irony somewhat the same way as Mark Schorer sees it in *The Good Soldier*, in which “the fracture between the character of the event as we feel it to be and the character of the narrator as he reports the event to us is the essential irony.”³⁴ With Morag, Stacey, and Rachel, however, the irony frequently arises out of the characters’ own ironical and witty observations of themselves.

Morag, for example, as she instinctively grabs her glasses as she goes to answer the phone, observes, “probably she thought she needed them in order to hear” (D, 19). Walking, she “always carried a stick . . . to fend off the following: mad dogs frothing with hydrophobia; killer foxes, coyotes or some few ancient wolves . . . panting to pounce; and poisonous snakes. . .” (D, 189-90). “The swallows”, she adds, “were positively dangerous.” She resents being interrupted at work, but realizes that “if no one ever entered that door, the situation would be infinitely worse” (D, 286). Stacey, too, sees the contradictions and uncertainties in herself; she refuses to allow herself to rationalize, and berates herself mercilessly when she thinks she might be doing so: “you saw it all right but you couldn’t take it” (FD, 289). In her bitter conversations with herself, she always catches herself on the brink of lying, of wallowing in self-pity. “Do we deceive ourselves by any chance, Stacey, doll? Very well, then, we deceive ourselves. Bugger off, voice” (FD, 205). “Well, poor you. Let’s all have a good cry. What would you do if you weren’t on duty, bitch? Contemplate? Write poetry? Oh shut up” (FD, 172). Her diagnosis of her particular malaise is likewise handled with the same witty cynicism: “I am either suffering

from delayed adolescence or premature menopausal symptoms, most likely both" (FD, 87).

Rachel likewise can see herself ironically, and is aware of the neurotic person she is; like her sister, she can fantasize only up to a point before she confronts the lie, before she admits, "I'm dramatizing". Recounting in her mind a conversation she had with Stacey, she says: "I told her so. My voice was not upset in the slightest. 'Don't be ridiculous,' I said. I didn't, though. I didn't say a word. I don't know why I didn't. Stupid. Stupid" (JG, 21). She reconstructs an awkward experience with Nick, but cannot deceive herself into believing she behaved gracefully: "For a moment it really is soothing, and I can almost believe it happened that way. But the moment evaporates, and I am left with the cold knowledge of how I actually saw it happen, myself rearing up at the door sound, rising gawkily like a tame goose trying to fly" (JG, 130). Rachel, like Stacey, refuses to rationalize, and the clearness with which she sometimes sees herself often is both more ironical and insightful than those instances in which the author and reader conspire for similar ironies or revelations. Rachel knows *what* she does, even if she is not certain *why*, and, like the confessional hero, she is articulate about her despair, even if only to herself. She says, for example:

I honestly do not know why I feel the daft sting of imagined embarrassments. The ones that occur are more than plenty, God knows. I must not let myself think like this. I don't know why I do. Unless to visualize something infinitely worse than anything that could possibly happen, so that whatever happens may not seem so bad in comparison. (JG, 61).

Thus, although Harlow criticizes the novel for its lack of irony, and then says that the reader "simply gets tired of listening to Rachel taking pot-shots at herself",³⁵ the inner-directed irony that is the main ammunition of these "pot-shots" is adequate compensation for the more objective viewpoint that Laurence introduces in *The Fire-Dwellers* and expands in *The Diviners*.

However, whether the view through each of the character's "I" of her fallible self is predominantly intentional (as it is with Morag), unintentional (as it is with Hagar), or some combination of both (as it is with Rachel, Stacey and Vanessa), the reader is always able both to see her as she sees herself, and to see her with some degree of objectivity. Laurence's increasing reliance on the third person in her last two novels

may help to facilitate the latter, but she never loses the immediateness of the first person. It is Hagar, with the most defiant and assertive "I" of all, who stands as Laurence's most interesting character. Each of her heroines, however, is memorable in her own way, and this is a direct result of the author's choice of point of view, with emphasis always on the perceptions of the narrator, as she seeks to define her present self through her Manawaka past.

FOOTNOTES

1. For the purposes of this paper, *A Bird in the House* will be considered a novel, although it is, strictly speaking, an inaccurate classification. Thompson ("Margaret Laurence: *A Bird in the House*," *The Fiddlehead*, LXXXIV, 108-11) calls it a "whole-book", in which "some stories re-examine the same chronological period as other stories, but examine them with a new focus and a different pattern of events." It is, in any case, more than a collection of short stories.
2. Margaret Laurence, *The Diviners*, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1974, p. 184. All subsequent references to this novel will appear in the text, abbreviated as D.
3. The two novels certainly do not fit the conventional classifications; they have elements of the diary or "dear me" form, and are related to the stream-of-consciousness and confessional novel; the latter, says Axthelm in *The Modern Confessional Novel* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967, 8,9), is one in which the hero is, "at some point in his life, examining his past as well as his innermost thoughts, in an effort to achieve some form of perception." While he does this, however, he is also "suspending the course of external events", and this, of course, is not something Laurence's characters do.
4. Peter Mendilow, *Time and the Novel*, London: Peter Nevill Ltd., 1952, 107.
5. Clara Thomas, *Margaret Laurence*, Canadian Writers No. 3, New Canadian Library. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1969, 53.
6. Robert Harlow, "Lack of Distance", *Canadian Literature*, 31 (Winter, 1967), 71-75.
7. William H. New, Introduction to *The Stone Angel*, iv.
8. Thomas, *Margaret Laurence*, 51.
9. Margaret Laurence, "Ten Years' Sentences", *Canadian Literature*, 41 (Summer, 1969), 14.
10. Mendilow, *Time and the Novel*, 109.
11. John Braddock, "The Supreme Communicator", *Atlantic Advocate*, LVII (May, 1967), 57.
12. J.M. Stedmond, "Fiction: *A Jest of God*", *University of Toronto Quarterly*, XXXVI (July, 1967), 382.
13. Harlow, "Lack of Distance".
14. Mendilow, *Time and the Novel*, 107.
15. *Ibid.*, 114.
16. Laurence, "Ten Years' Sentences", 15.
17. Henry James, Preface to *The Ambassadors*, Edited by Leon Edel, Cambridge, Mass.: Riverside Press, 1960, 11.
18. See my forthcoming article in *Canadian Literature*.
19. Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Chicago: University Press, 1961, 1950.
20. *Ibid.*, 158-9.
21. Leon Edel, *The Modern Psychological Novel*, New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1955, 201.
22. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 172.
23. Laurence Durrell, *Balthazar* in *The Alexandria Quartet*, London: Faber and Faber, 1962, 208.
24. Margaret Laurence, *A Jest of God*, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1966, 16. All subsequent references to this novel will appear in the text, abbreviated as JG.
25. Margaret Laurence, *The Fire-Dwellers*, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1969, 18-19. All subsequent references to this novel will appear in the text, abbreviated as FD.
26. Margaret Laurence, *The Stone Angel*, New Canadian Library. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1968. All subsequent references to this novel will appear in the text, abbreviated as SA.

27. Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, New York: Random House, 1928, 54.
28. Thomas, *Margaret Laurence*, 40.
29. *The Stone Angel*, 58. Hagar continually sees other people in terms of animals: Doris is a "calving cow", "sow in labour", "scared duck", "shot partridge", a flea; Bram is a gray walrus, and his daughters are heifers; the women in the nursing home are variously described as mosquitoes and vultures. Most of all, however, she describes herself in animal terms. She remembers herself as "the dark-maned colt", and by contrast she sees herself now as the "old malevolent crow", the "fatted calf", and "earthworm impales", and "injured dog", and "old hawk", a crab, a fish.
30. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 300, 304.
31. Thomas, *Margaret Laurence*, 56.
32. Laurence, quoted by Donnalu Wigmore in "Margaret Laurence: The Woman Behind the Writing," *Chatelaine*, XLIV (February, 1971).
33. Axthelm, *The Modern Confessional Novel*, 11.
34. Mark Schorer, "An Interpretation," in Ford Madox Ford *The Good Soldier*, New York: Random House, 1955, vii.
35. Harlow, "Lack of Distance," 74.