

University of Alberta

The Raven Mother:
Margaret Laurence's Dance on the Earth
A Reader-Response Study

by

Nancy Teresa Pekter



A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Department of English

Edmonton, Alberta

Fall, 1996



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ISBN 0-612-18175-8

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A Reader-Response Study

Degree: Master of Arts

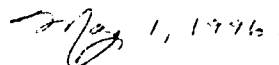
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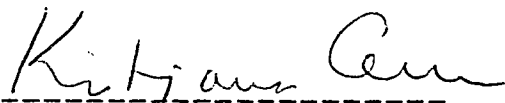
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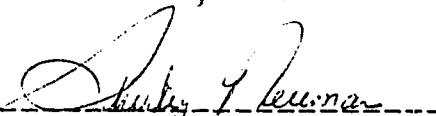
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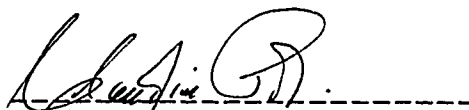
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Professor Kristjana Gunnars



Professor Shirley Neuman



Professor Claudine Potvin



Professor Bert Almon

*For my mother, Dorothy Edith (Gray) Pecker,
and
my grandmother, and my great-grandmother,
with love and respect*

Abstract

This work is a reading of Margaret Laurence's Dance on the Earth as a woman writer's autobiography; an investigation from a reader-response perspective. As I read this text I embroider it together with the works of other critics reading the same text, the writings of critics investigating the autobiographical process, and my own experience of writing my life. As I have struggled with certain issues and ideas in Laurence's writing, my own writing has changed direction and emphasis; this in turn has changed my feelings toward and understanding of Laurence's memoir. In the end, however, I am a radically different person and writer than I was before I began this project, and the most critical lesson I have learned is that each and every reading, writing, life-moment I experience in the future will build upon the self I have written into the following pages. This is my reality.

Acknowledgements

This work would never have been accomplished without the help, support, and creative understanding of Kristjana Gunnars – my ideal supervisor come to life. I am also indebted to a number of graduate students at the University of Alberta who gave me strength and listened to me as I worked through various aspects of this thesis. As she has always been, my mother was always there – waiting patiently on the other end of a long-distance call as I struggled to articulate my feelings about Margaret Laurence and her memoir.

And it *almost* goes without saying that I owe the greatest debt to my husband, Richard Pickard, who continually reread this manuscript “just one more time” – with an unfailing eye, ready encouragement, and a belief in my work that I sometimes lacked.

Finally, I must thank Margaret Laurence for giving me, albeit unknowingly, the gift of the book that started it all – the book that opened the floodgates and let my writing out.

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Introduction: Preludes

1

This coming-to-knowledge of the self constitutes both the desire that initiates the autobiographical act and the goal toward which autobiography directs itself. . . . Language, which operates according to a principle of division and separation, is the medium by which and through which the "self" is constructed. "Writing the self" is therefore a process of simultaneous sealing and splitting that can only trace fissures of discontinuity. (Benstock 11 and 29)

Even as I begin writing this, I am not sure that this is really a beginning. Traditionally of course, I would begin with a thesis statement. Olivia Frey notes that the traditional thesis statement belongs to "one convention of literary criticism that seems to pervade writings in our [English] discipline," and she calls this convention the "adversary method" (45). She goes on to suggest that

every graduate student knows the adversarial method. It is the necessity of establishing credibility or cognitive authority. It is the "Critics to date have ignored _____" or the "Critical opinion about _____ differs considerably, betraying how badly _____ has been understood." (Fill in

the blanks with your favorite novel and theme.)

(47)

The adversarial method is indeed something I know and have been using for years both as an undergraduate and as a graduate student. But this time, this one all important time, I want (and need) to write differently, indeed to think differently. I can rehearse all the reasons to write in a different way (and throughout this experiment I will discuss many of them) but the most basic reason for me, a twenty-something white Canadian (in fact Hungarian-British-Canadian) female, is that when I read, I read differently. That is to say that as I am reading I tend (unless I absolutely loathe what I am reading) to read as a lover of words, as someone who instantly exits this "real" world, adopts (easily) the shield of the suspension of disbelief, and laps up the world inside the book. I have always read like this.

It was only in the last few years of high school and then later on in university that I was forced to read as an untrusting, unbelieving reader. I admit that such a strong critical reading of texts was also quite seductive: I, as a lowly undergrad, could "undo", undermine, "undress" a classic, a canonical text, a great author in the space of a ten page double-spaced essay (think what I could do in a single-spaced world!). And it was incredibly tempting to believe that my ten page essay - essai - my formal "attempt" - could make a difference; that my paper could be the one that toppled Western literary criticism as we (undergraduates) knew it. It was tempting - but I also knew that it was false - they (the professors, the creators of Western literary criticism) would never let me ruin anything of theirs. But (and here's the rub) nor would they let me contribute anything.

For me, this is the crux of the matter - the heart at the very heart of

adversarial criticism - if each essay, each attempt is just another try at destroying, negating, de-constructing either the text (that monolithic, separate, undefensible, unmothered, unnatural creation) or the text written by another critic, then the adversarial method for me, to me, feels impotent, lacking, and angry. But where is the anger?

In the adversarial method, as Frey who is quoting Mary Field Beienky's and her colleagues' Women's Ways of Knowing notes,

At times, particularly in certain academic and work situations in which adversarial interactions are common, constructivist women may feel compelled to demonstrate that they can hold their own in a battle of ideas to prove to others that they, too, have the analytical powers and hard data to justify their claims. However, they usually resent the implicit pressure in male-dominated circles to toughen up and fight to get their ideas across. (qtd. in Frey 55)

Is the anger that I feel when writing an "ordinary" critical paper really directed at that other critic who said that Wuthering Heights is a flawed novel? Or is my anger there because I am not allowed to (or supposed to) engage with the text: all I can do is destroy it or defend it - and if I defend it, I risk being destroyed myself. The very next essay, that very next volley of literary criticism, might prove once and for all that I, as critic, deserve to be destroyed.

What I want, is a different kind of writing, one where I can be angry (if that's what I need to be) or caring or worried or critical but always connected.

A kind of writing where I can allow other voices (both my own and those of other readers, writers, and critics) to occupy space and time because I want them too. A kind of writing that is communal, centred on reading, written out of a woman's perspective. The kind of writing that Diane P. Freedman describes in The Intimate Critique:

Rather than some postmodern expression of perpetual alienation and decenteredness, this writing resembling a crazy-quilt gestures toward the kind of women's community a quilting bee recalls, the kind of community that helped Hester [Prynne] learn to read herself differently. And I write this as part of a community of creative critics refusing to be co-opted by the usual critical conventions of impersonality coupled with one-upmanship and the linear "logic" that keeps the poetic and personal from the professional and theoretical. (21)

I am not entirely sure that I can lose that impersonal, holier-than-thou voice I have long cultivated to discuss literature. I do want to lose it precisely because it took so long to "make" it, to "create" it, to be forced into it.

When I first read The Stone Angel, I gobbled it up. I read it too quickly that first time to even keep all the names straight. But I heard Hagar. I knew her. She was my great-grandmother, trapped in a nursing home for close to a decade (which she alternately enjoyed and hated) - and she wasn't. I read as quickly as I could to get to the end - I skimmed - too impatient for all the words. I needed the last words. And I got them - bang - between the eyes.

"And then - " (275)

There is no period. No ending

That was second year university. Scrawled alongside my study notes by Margaret Laurence's birth and death dates is a note: READ MORE OF HER BOOKS. I didn't. Or at least not until four years had gone by, disappeared, drowned in papers, research, late night phone calls, three deaths, a marriage. Both real life and scholarly life intervened. Then one summer (in Ethel Wilson's Swamp Angel country), I read more.

Devoured it actually. And in the following spring, I read her real last words, Dance on the Earth. I cried. I discovered her too late. Some of my tears were for her - at least half were for me. I read too late. I could have written her. I could have communicated - I could have told her I know all those songs too - I hum them on the street, in the grocery store, loud enough for others to hear - they just sneak up on me. I want to write too - I want to write to Margaret Laurence. It would have been possible if only I hadn't waited so long.

My great grandmother died. I was supposed to go away on a road trip to Oregon with my boyfriend. My mother was supposed to come with us. I would be giving a speech - Red Lion Inn, Portland, Oregon; Rotary International Convention; key-note speaker - me. The whole nine yards. My mother, her grandmother's favourite (?) perhaps - it always changed depending on who Gran was talking to - stayed. I missed the death and the funeral. Of course everyone missed the death - none of the family was there at the extended care home when it happened. But it's the funeral I feel badly about.

I've seen the pictures of the funeral (in-laws are good for that sort of thing. Not so emotionally involved; they can hold a camera steady, get the focus right, click, even during the sound of graveside silence). But I wasn't there.

The last time I talked to her, said good-bye to her, she held my hand, looked up at me (she was so small in that bed but not pale not her with her olive-coloured skin and her beauty marks and mapped moles. My skin has some of the same maps, maps to places I've never been, never seen. Places I never asked her about - places she forgot to mention because she was so stuck in the groove of the same old stories. Ninety-six years distilled into a half dozen stories (why those ones and not others, I wonder) and she told me to fly carefully. I told her (again) that we were driving. She said she knew that but wanted me to fly carefully anyway and that she loved me.

I didn't cry until after I left her room - the myth of having to be strong for the one dying lives on. Those may have been her last lucid words.

It was a hot June day in Victoria and I was in Portland, swimming in a hotel pool, gliding along the blue bottom oblivious. I didn't know "it" had happened. I didn't sense anything, feel anything. I didn't know when everyone else was saying good-bye. My "women's intuition" wasn't working.

Later, back home - the guilt remained. I wasn't there for the ritual good-bye, not in body nor in spirit. Other family members noticed, of course, and commented. "What would Gran have said?" they muttered. I ask too - "What would she have said? Would she have said it if I was there?"

So partly I cried over Laurence's memoir because I had missed again. There was a space - a gap - a time when I could have sent and received words - but I didn't.

But I am writing now. And I want to write in a way that gives me permission to let others speak. In a way that helps me come to terms with myself as writer and as reader. Again, as Jane Tompkins notes, writing in this untraditional way, she finds that

having released myself from the duty to say things I'm not interested in, in a language I resist, I feel free to entertain other people's voices. Quoting them becomes a pleasure of appreciation rather than the obligatory giving of credit, because when I write in a voice that is not struggling to be heard through the screen of a forced language, I no longer feel that it is not I who am speaking, and so there is more room for what others have said. (29)

I want to uncover my own "I" that feels comfortable existing on the same page with numerous other voices. I want to give space to the "I" that I feel exists - perhaps only in bits and pieces. But those pieces are still precious enough for me to want to find them and paste them together into some sort of presentation so that I can catch a glimpse of the unending possibilities.

This "collage," then, is my building of that "room" (not Woolf's [in]famous "room of one's own" but Tompkins' room - "place"), my creation of that space where I can exist together with all my ancestors, living and dead,

where I can read with love and the attention to detail that love begets. A room where there is the low murmur of conversing voices, the clink of china cups interspersed with more solid mugs, the aroma of orange pekoe, the occasional explosive laughter that is relief, release, and renewal all at once.

Even my father, if he is in the room (he is often too busy, doing work - manual labour - too busy for tea and conversation; although sometimes he comes in and grabs a mug, perhaps the one that says "Joe" [that really is his name] and pours himself a concoction of half tea and half milk), is part of the conversation, not dominating it. My mother will be the hostess - she is so good at putting people at their ease, letting other people shine, but saying important things herself, almost in surprise, as if she didn't know what was going to come out when she was brave enough to say something.

There are so many people to invite and, I admit, most of them are women. This isn't intentional (although I suppose a tea party metaphor/analogy seems too feminized a space for there to be many men. But if my father can come in with his dirty fingernails and purple checked pants and Hawaiian shirt and thick Hungarian accent couldn't anyone? Male or female?) but maybe it is. I do all my best talking (the kind I wish I could transpose into essays), interacting, interweaving with tea - and I'm tired of apologizing for that. As a tea drinker I should (technically) be relegated to some manse somewhere in rural Canada. But I refuse that position, that placement; I will occupy my space, my "room," my "manse" the way I want. I will write myself in together with the writings of others. I want everyone to be comfortable, sipping their tea, comfortable and engaged: not in adversarial discourse for the sake of being adversarial but in a discourse that is an exploring, a re-working, a re-piecing, a re-creating, a re-reading of themselves

and others, and therefore a re-being.

I accept the invitation that Laurence's memoir extends to me. I want to explore the way in which her words compel my own. I want to try to understand my emotional and critical reactions to her text. Within her world, the world she recreates for me on the page, I find both my own past, and a past I cannot recognize. So I will begin at the beginning - the beginning of both our stories. In her "Forewords" Laurence writes

My grandmother made quilts. . . . Some of them were patchwork with intricate designs put together from the scraps of the dresses she sewed or the many aprons she made for herself and as gifts. These quilts, done in some of the traditional patterns she must have learned as a girl, looked old and uninteresting to me when I was a child. They probably seemed the same to my mother and aunts. Quilts were viewed in those days not as works of art but as practical and affordable necessities. I am quite sure my grandmother never thought of herself as an artist or even a craftswoman. . . . But artist she was. I must have been six or seven when she made a quilt for me. . . . My quilt was the most beautiful I had ever seen and in my memory it remains the most beautiful. It was called "Wild Rose." (Dance 12-13)

Two things come to mind here - one an aside and one that is more important,

more central.

It's both fitting and ironic that this work on/with Margaret Laurence is to be done here in Alberta - a place/space/time so far removed from my past on Vancouver Island and all it stands for for me. Ironic that I really only noticed that the quilt pattern her grandmother makes for Laurence is called "Wild Rose" when I was already here. Of course I'm writing about it here, thinking about it here, in wild rose country, this place called Alberta. The personal does intersect with the scholarly.

The central issue is one of understanding and a feeling of comradeship, a feeling of being "comrades in arms" (not the soldierly kind, either). Maybe I didn't write to Laurence but I feel like I know her. I feel as if what she is writing about touches me on more than just an intellectual level. And that the other levels underneath the intellectual are, in this case, more important and more fruitful. I cannot fully explain what I mean by that. But I do want to continue to worry away at those connections.

Laurence goes on to say in her "Forewords" that she had the quilt made by her grandmother

for years, but when I was about thirteen, I decided I didn't like it any more. . . . My grandmother's quilt may be irretrievably lost, but the patterns and colours are clear in my mind. She died before I had mentally rejected it, but she had been dead many years before I came to recognize her artistry. I wish I could tell her. (Dance 13)

And there it is - there is the moment of sharing, of comradeship, of being "comrades at arms;" Laurence missed telling someone something important

to her, to both of them, too. Her “arms” weren’t always long enough at the right time either. But again, this is only part of it, only a bit of the connection I feel - or perhaps the connection I am making as I write.

My old, scholarly, critical voice (critical in the sense that nothing I do is ever right enough for it) is battering at the bars of my creativity, demanding access. It wants answers, not amorphous feelings of connection. I knew it would be hard to keep that voice locked out. Jane Tompkins says

According to [Alice] Miller’s theory [in The Drama of the Gifted Child], the critical voice inside me, the voice I noticed butting in, belittling, doubting, being wise, is “the contemptuous introject.” -- the introjection of authorities who manipulated me, without necessarily meaning to. I think that if you can come to terms with your “contemptuous introjects,” learn to forgive and understand them, your anger will go away. (39)

But there are two problems. First off, I’m back at that anger that I mentioned earlier, back as if I’ve only been going in circles rather than in constructive spirals as I had hoped for/envisioned. Second, Jane Tompkins makes it all sound so easy, so civilized - I am “to come to terms” with my noisy critical voice; I am to “learn to forgive and understand” - and Tompkins is talking about more than one voice here. Yet I can’t even shut off/ignore/drown one voice. Suddenly, this whole enterprise seems doomed to failure. All my reading seems to lead to nought - to the figure of zero - to nothing.

But I don’t really believe this. I want to acknowledge that I neither completely understand my anger toward and dislike of adversarial criticism

nor am I prepared to abandon it (criticism) completely, nor am I entirely prepared to “learn to forgive and understand” my “contemptuous introjects.” Instead, I want to write - through my anger, with it, because of it, in spite of it. I read because I love words and imagining other words, other worlds. I write because - because I’m not sure yet where my anger comes from and what it can do. But I want to find out.

In Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts, Nancy K. Miller takes up the thorny issues of personal criticism and personal knowledge of anger. She discusses at some length Jane Tompkins’ essay (from which I have been quoting), “Me and My Shadow,” and also Gerald MacLean’s response entitled “Citing the Subject” (Miller, Getting 4). After considerable rehearsal of the two essays (setting the stage as it were) Miller writes

If I were to make an authorial - not to say personal - intervention at this point, it would be to say that this is where I have been wanting to come since the beginning: this is it. It has to do with two things that are not only related to each other, but implicated in each other: showing and anger. I want to talk about the affect and effects of self-display and the spectacle of gender. (22)

Miller seems uncomfortable (perhaps even more so than me) with her “authorial intervention” here - for her as writer and for me as reader. Yet, although I am struggling with a more authorially in(ter)ventive form, in another way, I think I am more prepared to “intervene” and to accept “intervention” than she is - as a graduate student the stakes are lower; I have

less of a reputation to tarnish/lose.

But Miller continues and notes that “[t]he slip of anger passes through the conventions of gender” (23). Taken out of context, I am unsure about the meaning/implication(s) of this statement. Even re-inserting it back into context, I find I am more uncomfortable with what Miller calls MacLean’s presentation of “the literature of domestic violence” where his anger was “displayed” than with Tompkins’ “rage over female invisibility” (23). Am I conventionally gendered if I react this way? Is Miller too because her statement seems to imply a hierarchy/ continuum of acceptable to unacceptable angers?

But before I try to answer, I keep reading Miller’s chapter.

But this intentional calling attention to herself, the deliberate flipside of the inadvertent display of dingy underwear, while to many unfortunate - a lapse in taste - may not be what unfriendly readers finally find most distressing about the [Tompkins] essay. It is, I think, less the slip, than the anger; the slipping of anger into the folds of the argument: this anger is not merely a rhetorical trope: it’s not supposed to show, but it does. “She” is making a spectacle of herself. “She,” as has often been said of me, is “being emotional.” (23)

Here Miller makes a personal statement of connection to Tompkins - “admitting,” as it were - that she too has been accused of “being emotional.” And this is perhaps the worst cut of all; the deepest cut any female academic/serious female human being can suffer - because it is both true and

unacknowledgeable.

No wonder I'm angry - I'm not allowed to be angry, to admit anger (either into my own heart or out in public) - I'm not allowed to accept my own anger. And it is a vicious circle rather than an ever-widening spiral, a circle that keeps anger hidden, locked up, encircled.

I don't know what it is I did wrong - or at least part of me has chosen not to remember the precise details of my trespasses. But I can feel my anger. I'm sitting on my bed in my bedroom (that has two doors so it serves as hall as well), fists clenched. My face is wet with tears. When my father saw them earlier, in the heat of our argument - he laughed.

"You expect anyone to take you seriously? You just cry. If someone says you're wrong or tells you to do something you don't want - you just cry. A boy wouldn't do that - no one who means what they say cries. Go on - get out of here."

He always sees tears as the ultimate sign of weakness. I know this. I've watched him do the same thing to my mum. I am so angry at him - I can taste all the words I didn't get to fling at him, hurl at him. They taste bitter now and useless because they have been tainted, salted with my tears. But do they have to be useless? Hasn't he ever heard of tears of anger?

*Was this when I first began to mistrust both my anger and my tears?
Why did I believe him?*

I am an emotional reader and I think, if I'm really honest, I would have to admit to being an emotional writer. Even cut and dried critical essays only appeal to me if somehow the material connects to my emotions. Then, I can marshal up logical, rational arguments to support my forbidden, "emotional" view. The emotion itself, the original connection to the text, in the traditional academic world has to be suppressed, repressed, denied. Perhaps because, as Roland Barthes illustrates in The Pleasure of the Text, emotion suggests a loss of some sort.

Emotion: why should it be antipathetic to bliss . . . ?

It is a disturbance, a bordering on collapse:

something perverse, under respectable appearances;

emotion is even, perhaps, the slyest of losses. . . .

(25)

Why does emotion necessitate a loss? And perhaps more interestingly, what exactly is lost? From my point of view, I am no longer sure that such a loss is actually a negative.

Laurence dares to write about both - emotion and loss - so that instead of a lack, a hole, an absence, this missing piece (missing in the sense that other texts walk around that same emotional, lost, hidden hole), this missing piece is stitched into obvious relief (and for me, the connotations of this word "relief" are of equal importance - relief - meaning both vividness, distinctness and alleviation of, or deliveration from pain, distress, or anxiety). Because it is a loss, a hole, a lack - words cannot bring the lost back into the found, but words do encircle the wound, reclaim the space so that it is seen

again as a space. Even black holes, seemingly empty and above all black, are actually full - for they possess strong gravitational fields from which matter and radiation cannot escape. While "negative" and apparently empty, black holes contain more energy than the space surrounding them. So it is with the holes, spaces, gaps, lacks in writing. Energy is absorbed - and held, captive. But the energy isn't gone.

Laurence begins her "Forewords" this way:

I have heard it said that war is for men what
motherhood is for women. I find this appalling,
and essentially quite false. (Dance 3)

She continues

To my personal knowledge, this downgrading of
women in every field has been changing
considerably for the better, although still too
gradually, over the past forty years or so, but some
memories come back bitterly. (4)

And adds

It still makes me angry how thoroughly I had been
brainwashed by society, despite having been greatly
encouraged by two of my male professors at college,
whom I bless to this day. (5)

The black holes here are brought into relief, circled, encircled, noticed - Laurence's sense of being "appalled," being "bitter," being "angry," shows. I admit I was unsettled when I first read her "Forewords," her opening foray into battle. Is this an adversarial stance as advocated by the proponents of adversarial criticism? Or is this something else - something angry yet

personal? I feel that it is something angry yet still dialogic in an unadversarial, unantagonistic way. I can't decide if Laurence is talking or yelling, and if she is yelling, I am not sure if she would listen to me. There is only one way to find out.

I was shocked when I read the "Forewords" to your last book. I've read a number of memoirs/autobiographies but yours is different. I keep thinking about it and wondering why it has affected me so much.

I admit that at first I was struck (and therefore uncomfortable) with all the emotions you expressed. It wasn't that I didn't agree with your concerns or find your arguments convincing - rather I was amazed that you were willing (in such a public forum) to come out and talk about anger and bitterness and joy and fury. It was as if I could feel those same emotions as I read the words on the page - in a direct way that surprised me. I know about the art of rhetoric (thanks to a Filipino school and a class called "Argumentation and Debate") and the tools of persuasion and exaggeration it employs. I am also pretty familiar with didacticism (a teacher's certificate and numerous education courses ensured that) and yet, somehow, what you wrote affected me on such a personal, emotional, level that I know I wouldn't (couldn't) call your writing didactic.

It felt like (please pardon any impropriety on my part) you were talking to me - and somehow through me. Not having ever heard you speak - I could hear your voice.

Other readers have had other opinions about Laurence's memoir. But even when critics have been disappointed in Dance on the Earth, something about it makes them attempt to be poetic or mysterious in their own reviews of it. For example, Hilda Kirkwood remarks

This frank and, characteristically, not too personal account is a valuable record, but there are places where it sags, when disease has reduced her energy, and it seems unfinished in spite of the "Afterwords." We do not find in it the polish and vitality of Laurence's creative writing, nor should we expect to. The rest is not silence. (30)

Walter E. Swayze's review is positively glowing and, more than that, he is convinced that when reading this book one should be filled with love in order to fully appreciate its finer qualities:

Dance on the Earth frequently lacks the tautness and the precision of the works that Laurence had the opportunity to revise and rewrite many times, a treatment that was denied this volume. This is an oral volume, spoken in love and edited in love.

Read in love, it is warmly rewarding. (161)

It seems that no matter whether one hates or loves this book, the emotions are always involved in the reading. In this sense, my own approach simply partakes of the critical discourse surrounding the book.

Yet some critics are more willing than others to address the subjects that Laurence actually discusses - the subjects that bring out so many different emotions in her readers. Timothy Findley focusses on the individual

mothers as they are presented in the memoir and the emotions connecting them:

The cross-lines are numerous: sometimes amusing, but, far more often, angry-making and desperate. Every one of these women was presented with the choice of motherhood as sublimation of self or motherhood as survival of self. All of them, including Laurence, chose motherhood also as a means of expression. But for most of these women, the choice of motherhood meant giving up - to some degree, or entirely - all hope of becoming "the maker of works." (10)

And finally, Joan Givner addresses the way in which all the women touched by this memoir, the women contained within it and the women readers, are themselves connected and threaded together by Laurence's words and Laurence's emotions:

The reader of the autobiography finds herself in much the same situation as Laurence-the-daughter, caught in a web of memory, evasion, substitution and painful revelation. This exchange between writer and reader has all the characteristics of maternal discourse in which a foremother struggles to pass on information to a daughter who simultaneously craves and fears what she will hear. Almost invariably, the transmitting of vital information from one generation of women to the

next has been made shameful and embarrassing,
 placed under an ill-defined taboo, rendered
 unmentionable. (83)

Writer and reader are both caught up in a "web of memory," both clinging to emotion and yet afraid of that same emotion. There are various routes to take to exit the web but it is impossible to tell which string will hold, which string will break, and where the hungry spider lurks. In Givner's view, the text which Laurence spins contains both the truths about each string and the painful emotion associated with each string/memory. The question that remains is whether or not the daughter/reader will be brave enough to test the strings herself, once she has listened to her mother's/author's truths.

I feel like I can't move my limbs. I can hear voices - mostly female voices - and they sound both far away and very close to me. My vision isn't quite right either - everything seems murky, green, out of focus, yet kind of glowing. Perhaps I'm under water? That would explain the odd light and the way voices come and go, get stronger, then fade away. I look down toward my hands and feet. There are curling green tendrils wrapped tenderly around each of my limbs. The voices seem much closer now - I can almost make out individual words. There is also a delicate clinking sound, and laughter. I want to go toward the voices but. . . . But I am afraid to break away from the caressing, captivating vines. The water is warm, comforting. I know I should move, act, go forward. . . .

I wake up before I have come to a decision. Before I have come to movement. Even in the dark of my bedroom, my ears are still struggling, still

trying to make out any of those fading words - they feel important - before they fade away from memory too.

The image of the web is often used to describe writing but it is generally seen as the end result of the writing, not as the writing itself. In Barthes' view,

Text means *Tissue* ; but whereas hitherto we have always taken this tissue as a product, a ready-made veil, behind which lies, more or less hidden, meaning (truth), we are now emphasizing, in the tissue, the generative idea that the text is made, is worked out in a perpetual interweaving; lost in this tissue - this texture - the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web. Were we fond of neologisms, we might define the theory of the text as an *hyphology* (*hyphos* is the tissue and the spider's web). (64)

"Text means Tissue," text means web, web undoes, unmakes, the subject - I wonder who then is left to spin the text?

Chapter One: Past Perfect

One of the things that intrigues me most about Margaret Laurence's memoir is the dynamic of discrepancy. By this I mean her willingness to share her life with the reader, her openness regarding her emotions, coupled with her acknowledged reticence, a "commendable" attempt to shield her ex-husband, and her children, from public scrutiny. From the very start Laurence "confesses" that

I knew I didn't want to write the entire story of my life, for numerous reasons, one of them being that it *is* mine and from the start I recognized that there were areas I wasn't prepared even to try to set down. I wanted to write more about my feelings about mothers and about my own life views. I realized finally that this could only be done by coming as close as I could bear to my own life, but in such a way that I could also deal with broader themes that interested and absorbed me. (Dance 7)

There is a curious open giving, an invitation to the reader, - with one hand - and a taking back, a holding back - with the other. I don't intend to play hide and go seek (the truth) with Laurence's book but I am drawn to and inspired by her attempts to fashion her life and thereby re-fashion the past.

Laurence has certainly demonstrated her understanding of the fluidity of the past created by both time passing and by the inventive quality of memory itself. The oft-quoted last section of The Diviners illustrates this in a way that has both charmed and confounded critics and readers alike:

The waters flowed from north to south, and the

current was visible, but now a south wind was blowing, ruffling the water in the opposite direction, so that the river, as so often here, seemed to be flowing both ways.

Look ahead into the past, and back into the future, until the silence. (Diviners 477)

This passage seems to defy deconstruction, definition, delineation. It is as if this passage describes an event, a place, a “being-ness” that is complete and yet uncontained, a “being-ness” that occurs, has occurred, had occurred, well before Laurence wrote about it, and certainly before a reader’s or critic’s attempts to control it and keep it within strictly enforced boundaries of ordinary comprehension. As past perfect, it seems to be just that.

And yet Laurence is weaving these stories, the story in The Diviners and the/her story in Dance on the Earth, just as much as she is weaving her past into her own future. The photographs discussed/described in both books are arranged in chronological order, “[a]s though there were really any chronological order, or any order at all” (Diviners 14). Like the blocks of a quilt, or the words on a page, the pictures are arranged, read, both “for what they show,” and rearranged, re-deciphered in order to rewrite, reconstruct “what is hidden in them” (Diviners 14). It is this connecting, this sewing together of a random group of pictures that will make an artifact of her past. And perhaps in this way, past perfect will beget the future (perfect).

Helen Buss reflects on this patterning in Laurence’s fiction and focusses on the way in which Laurence (consciously or not) is refashioning her past in order to create both the present and her present fictions:

Rarely does a writer reveal so plainly the

autobiographical roots of her fictional work, the way in which one's identity as child of one's parent drives the currents of the imagination. It is that kind of impulse, that autobiographical impulse, to realize one's life, one's identity, by incorporating its characteristic patterns in creative endeavours that I wish to deal with in some of Margaret Laurence's works. Norman N. Holland compares this "identity theme" or patterning to the "mingling of sameness and difference as [in] a musical theme and variations" (Transactive 181). Holland asserts as well that "an 'identity theme' is determined by past events, yet paradoxically it is the only basis for future growth and therefore, freedom" (Readers 61). (Buss 148)

These quotations that Buss uses from Holland's article and book lead me to connections I have not been able to make before. Laurence herself remembers and outlines "the mortification!" (Dance 65) of having to take violin lessons as a young adolescent. And yet even then Laurence knew why music lessons were so important:

I hated that damned violin, but what kept me from saying so was that my Mum put such stock in my learning how to play. I wasn't so stupid that I didn't know why. I knew her real need was to give me every opportunity - oh dire phrase - to show I had inherited my other mother's musical talents. . . .

One day [finally] I confessed to Mum that I really wasn't interested in the violin; in fact I hated it, I wanted to quit. All I was interested in was writing. (Dance 66-7)

The Holland quotations (and Buss' additions to them) underline Laurence's own perception of her writerly rather than musical talent. Her love of the dance, her own dance or weaving together of fact and fantasy, creates a new kind of music, at once a variation of her "other mother's musical talents" and an expanding of them into a new, exploratory theme.

It seems to me then that the reverse of Buss' first statement is also true. Perhaps deeper than true. But, such a reversal leads me to the edge of the storm, my storm.

Rarely does a writer reveal so plainly the fictional roots of her autobiographical work. . . .

Several Fugues of a Minor Key

fugue *n. & v.* - *n.* 1. *Mus.* a contrapuntal composition in which a short melody or phrase (the subject) is introduced by one part and successively taken up by others and developed by interweaving the parts. 2. *Psychol.* loss of awareness of one's identity, often coupled with flight from one's usual environment.

Fugue #1

I am three or four years old. Tall for my age but not tall enough to see

much of anything in a crowd. It is very dark so my young mind assumes it is very late. Darkness always means night in my world.

We are in Mexico the three of us, my mother, my father, and I. We are in Mazatlan and it is Mardi Gras. I don't know what Mardi Gras is but I do know that I have been promised a parade. The three of us wait on the side of the street. I have a blue mask on that covers my nose and forehead. My eyes peer out the eyeholes from behind the sparkles of blue.

The parade is coming. The crowd jostles and sways excitedly. I can't see anything except the moving bodies in front of me. Suddenly, my dad whooshes me up onto his shoulders and now I am on top of the world - taller than all the other costumed spectators including my father.

I don't remember the parade itself. All I remember is being hoisted aloft. All I remember is the grand height so easily achieved. This, I think, is my first memory.

Variation

In talking to my mother I discover that our trip to Mazatlan was in January to March of 1974. I was 4, not 3, and it isn't really my first memory since I can remember my third birthday, in May 1972, when prompted.

So which memory really is the oldest one? The memory from Mazatlan feels the oldest but historically it isn't. What about herstorically or, as Alice Walker says, "mystorically" ("One" 382)? Why does the mist and mystery of my

memory rework this particular memory and recast it? Make it older than it is?

Fugue #2

Now we three are in Australia, somewhere on the east coast of that huge island. I am eleven going on twelve going on hateful. My father will be sixty-one in November. I am horrified. He seems so old. And he definitely seems older than the fathers of all my friends and newfound acquaintances. Bad enough that his clothes are different, his accent is so pronounced; worst of all, I am sure, is his age. I am convinced he wears it like a medal, proudly proclaiming his difference just when I want desperately to establish my indifference, and, therefore, my invulnerability.

One day, in the midst of one of our usual arguments, I tell him he is too old to have a child my age. His hurt and anger are so powerful they drown me for months. He doesn't speak to me except to bark commands for a quarter of a year. But his silence is torrential rainfall - loud and repetitive and eroding. By the end of the deluge the remains of my own shame for what I said in anger have been borne away by the swollen rivers of what I take to be his hatred. But my anger is still there, cold and implacable beneath layers of hardpan and rock.

Variation

When I mention this memory to my parents my father looks a bit uncomfortable then shrugs. "I don't remember," he says and increases the volume of his T.V. with the ever-present remote. My mother doesn't remember either.

She finds it funny though, like the antics of two small kittens rolling around play fighting in order to gain temporary supremacy. I laugh with her but wonder if either of us is really laughing inside. Laughter is often a dangerous ally. I have trusted it before when I was not ready for its demands of me. And again, here is mystery. No one remembers but me.

Yet how could either of them forget? Three months of silence in a travel trailer shouldn't be hard to miss.

Fugue #3

My father had another family before he became the father of mine. He had been married and had three children - two boys and a girl. Even as a young child I knew about this other family. I also knew that his other family was more unusual than "other" families usually were. Some of my friends at school belonged to more than one family but when my friends asked questions of their parents, questions about these "other" families, their parents told them stories which were always full of tears and angry words and hate. There had been a fight, a disagreement, a battle, or, at the very least a cold, slow-growing separation, and that's why the "other" families had been broken apart.

My dad didn't even have to be asked to tell his story. In his story, his other wife had been miserable, scared, lonely. She wanted my dad to take her and their son back to Hungary, away from the cold, the fear, and the hunger of the German and Austrian refugee camps. My dad finally agreed and took his small

family home.

But my dad couldn't stay in Hungary. He tried - and managed to stay several more years (during which he fathered several more children) but eventually, he couldn't stay any longer. What had been broken apart for him was his former country, his former life, his former dreams. So he dreamt again - and that dreaming brought him to Canada. But - and this was the part of the story that scared me the most, even more than his thrilling war-movie escape past Russian tanks and soldiers, - but he promised to bring his other family out to Canada too.

When my father tells this story he at once emphasizes and glides over this promise. He promised, ergo he would have done it if such promises could be kept. A somewhat confusing distinction for me to understand as a young child. But I understood the lack of anger all right. I understood the shaky ground on which I trembled, waiting. Waiting for that other family to appear.

The object of all my anger and confusion about this story then was alternately transferred between my father and my father's favourite picture, the picture of his other daughter. The framed, formerly black and white but now hand-coloured picture of my rival with her curly blonde hair, red, red lips, and her succulent bowl of cherries.

Variation

I think that since I'm older (almost in my early teens) I've gotten over my

fear and envy of this picture and the person it represents. I've met her by now and she's in her 30s. She has to dye her hair to keep it blonde and her face is as wrinkled as her hips are large (I spare nothing when it comes to describing her "attributes" to myself). And best of all, she no longer resembles her picture. But when my father tells me he likes my latest school picture because I look so much like her - something inside me gets harder, colder, more bitter. "Now he sees me because I look like her?" I think to myself.

Shortly after, I change my hair, get sucked into the whirlwind of junior high, and pretend I don't care what my father thinks. But I can't manage to forgive or forget.

Is this the birth of one of those angry, hostile, "contemptuous introjects" (Tompkins 39)?

Fugue #4

My father is in the opposite end of the house - in the bedroom or the bathroom or the living room - it makes no difference as long as he is "over there." My mother and I are working together. I am talking a mile a minute but only every so often. She responds, replies, but doesn't feel the need to talk so much. She laughs at my jokes and considers my sweeping statements about society, history, literature. She is always busy doing something (making a meal, preparing for Sunday School, organizing family history, getting us tea) but I

never feel ignored or extraneous. When we watch T.V., we keep the volume down. As often as not, we read side by side.

We both keep diaries/journals. "Mine's a diary," she says, "I don't put anything about feelings or whatever else in it. I talk about the weather and when I went to town, when the deer with the broken leg came to my garden to eat and when I changed the sheets on the bed. Don't expect anything else." I don't - exactly. But I know it's in there too, in between the daily boxes; in between the bones of her daily chores.

Variation

The year my parents were building the second-to-last new house, I was just about to start junior high. My father and I were still struggling to deal with each other. The three of us were back living in a small trailer, with an outhouse, and no extra room for privacy, no extra room at all.

In late June, the day before I received almost every award at elementary school, my father fell and broke his back. He crushed three vertebrae, cracked some ribs, and broke his shoulder blade. I saw him fall - or at least I saw his legs and feet disappear from view, disappear down into the basement through a hole in the floor of the first storey.

I walked over to the hole after he disappeared, slowly, carefully, deliberately. When I looked over the edge and saw his pale, slightly green face, and his hands gesturing in the air as he told the carpenter he was okay, "Just get

me some Vanquish," then I knew for sure he was still alive. And then I was scared. Scared because I had wished him dead more than once. Scared because I felt my wish/curse had almost worked. Scared because I finally understood it wouldn't ever just be my mom and me. He would always be here too.

In the story I told myself at that time, when I was a teenager, my father no longer existed. I had written him out of our family, out of our lives. I felt if I didn't have to argue with him any more then I would no longer be angry. I thought I could escape - even the memories.

Postscript : Past Perfect

The problem with rewriting your own life, rewriting your family scripts, is that the same old emotions are still there, lying in wait. Sometimes they are there to trip you up, confuse you. And sometimes those emotions translate themselves into new ones. But although these emotions may become transposed, translated - they are still difficult to deal with, to acknowledge, to understand, and to write through. Laurence writes about her experience of reconnecting to her past:

I think I never recognized until I wrote [The Stone Angel] just how mixed my own feelings were towards that whole generation of pioneers - how difficult they were to live with, how authoritarian, how unbending, how afraid to show love, many of

them, and how willing to show anger. And yet they had inhabited a wilderness and made it fruitful. They were, in the end, great survivors, and for that I love and value them.

The final exploration of this aspect of my background came when I wrote . . . A Bird in the House. . . the only semi-autobiographical fiction I have ever written. I did not realize until I had finished the final story . . . how much all the stories are dominated by the figure of my maternal grandfather. . . . Perhaps it was through writing these stories that I finally came to see my grandfather not only as the repressive authoritarian figure from my childhood, but also as a boy [himself]. . . . He was a very hard man in many ways, but he had had a very hard life. (Heart 5)

Here, Laurence could be describing my father. He too was a pioneer, a survivor, and still is an authoritarian figure "ever willing to show anger." And yet, while I struggle to see the boy who became the man, my father, the subject of so many survival stories, I chafe against the ease with which Laurence claims to have accepted her nemesis' origins, the ease with which she converts all of her grandfather's most difficult character traits into understandable and commendable character strengths - strengths she feels she can tap into herself - and the ease with which her earlier emotions become translated only into pride.

But Laurence herself, in various places, suggests that this apparent ease

is somewhat deceptive. And that pride in one's ancestors can often be tainted with many other feelings. Joan Hind-Smith's questioning of Laurence leads to this interpretation of the grandfather figure in A Bird in the House:

Looming like a malevolent hawk over the entire book is the dominating figure of Grandfather Connor (Simpson). A Bird in the House is, among other things, Margaret's struggle to put him in his place, to clear herself of his domination. However, as late as 1974, she said, "Whatever I did he disapproved of." (Hind-Smith 47)

I sense more reality here - or is it just that Hind-Smith's view of Laurence more closely mirrors my own perceived reality? Yet these are Margaret Laurence's words, spoken twenty-one years after the death of her maternal grandfather.

I feel that Laurence and I have more in common than some of her more guarded discussions of her background reveal. But in talking with Hind-Smith, Laurence allows a different picture to emerge:

[Laurence] had managed to survive with dignity herself by transforming her hatred for her grandfather into a compassionate understanding of the suffering which his personality caused him. After A Bird in the House was published she said, ". . . I think I honestly kept on disliking him until I'd got all the way through these stories . . . and when I finished the last story . . . I realized that I didn't dislike him anymore, but that there were

things about him that I greatly admired.” (Hind-Smith 48)

Again however, I am disappointed. Instead of the truth I can sense, the truth that feels as if it is right below the surface of her words, Laurence avows that the genre of semi-autobiographical fiction provides an easy opportunity to face and lay still one’s family ghosts. While I too ponder the shifting sand of my admiration for my father, I know that addressing these feelings in writing is not easy. I know full well that it is all too easy for me to begin by contemplating his traits that I admire but know that before I am even aware of it, I have sunk into another place, another time, where I can only ruminate upon those qualities in him (many reflected in me) that disconcert me the most.

My admiration and dislike are so intermingled; not unlike grains of sand of slightly varying colour all tossed upon the same stretch of beach. Without a microscope, I cannot possibly tell how truly unique and separate each single grain may be. Laurence’s semi-autobiographical fiction, then, poses its own problems when inspecting the impact of such proud old men as her grandfather and my father on their daughters and granddaughters. In *A Bird in the House*, Vanessa, the fictional reincarnation of Laurence, says

When it became compulsory to view the body, after the accepted custom, I had to force myself to my feet. I had never looked upon a ~~dead~~ face before.

He looked exactly the same as he had in life. . . .
I was not sorry that he was dead. I was only surprised.
Perhaps I had really imagined that he was immortal.
Perhaps he even was immortal, in ways which it

would take me half a lifetime to comprehend. . . .

I had feared and fought the old man, yet he
proclaimed himself in my veins. (176-77, 179)

Always the connection(s). Fear, anger, pride. All of these cement the character Vanessa to her dead Grandfather Connor. Like my younger self, Vanessa had thought that death would provide peace and prevent those correspondences which she didn't want to have to acknowledge. But Vanessa knows at this point in the story that "he proclaimed himself in [her] veins." I think I know this (about my father) as well. Strange then, that this "fictional" rendering of a truth I supposedly admit, sends unexplainable shivers down my spine.

But misperceptions about relatives surround not only the loud angry family members with whom we clash. Those same overwhelming "characters" also colour the way we perceive everyone else around them - and us. Laurence describes her grandmother as she appeared to Laurence the child - in light of her husband - and as she now appears to an older Laurence - still in light of his reflection.

[Grandmother Simpson] was gentle and, I used to think as a child, docile, because she never argued with Grandfather. I see now that was wrong. It would have been futile to argue with him. In his opinion, there was only one point of view - his. All else was heresy. . . . She must have listened patiently to her husband's diatribes and then gone on and done things according to her own conscience. (Dance 63)

As a child, I too thought my father's wife (my mother) was docile and weak. As I grew older, I began to see that my mother's avoidance of confrontation with my father gave her a species of power that I could never seem to locate for myself. I envied her strategies and wished that my coping mechanisms were more like hers rather than his. But then my anger (his anger?) would flare up again and I would see her route as gutless and without the glory I thought I needed.

Laurence's use of the past perfect is an application at once of whitewash and of understanding - or so it seems to be, to me. "[T]hey had inhabited a wilderness," "he had had a very hard life," "I honestly kept on disliking him until I'd got all the way through these stories," and "I had really imagined that he was immortal": all these past perfect phrases create a past that is perfect. I am leery of accepting at face value the apparent cathartic effects of Laurence's writing down of this man; of the passage of time being conducive to the incubation of comprehension, compassion, and forgiveness. I want to believe in her view of the past, her past, perhaps not perfect, but reconstructed so that it becomes artfully arranged, dramatic, thematic. But I am wary. If Grandfather Connor/Simpson was Margaret's "malevolent hawk," how long did it really take before Margaret stopped feeling the *frisson* - the shadow of his wheeling, calling, airborne figure on her soul? Having been cast as a frightened field mouse, a tremulous young rabbit, myself, I am as yet unconvinced that that feeling will ever go away.

Perhaps not enough time has passed for me. Distance certainly has done little except make me doubt my own emotions, my own reflections on the past. And of course, death has not intervened. A fact that is ironic given my father's unceasing lament, sung since my earliest memories and

continued to this very day, that due to his advanced age, he is not long for this world (supposedly much to his relief). He is only sorry he will miss my tenth birthday, my high school graduation, my wedding day, my children's births. Of course, as each event is achieved, he fills in the blank with the next occasion in the life script he has created for me, never once commenting on how much he has actually witnessed.

But despite that wheeling, calling, circling, menacing figure, I catch myself telling funny stories, quaint stories, past perfect stories about my father and me, nevertheless. In these stories he and I "had had difficulty communicating," "we had had a fight," "he hadn't grown up in Canada so he didn't understand," or "his other children had treated him badly so he expected nothing better from me."

Does my past perfect rest on the hope of an eventual future perfect, perfect future? Perhaps my telling of my past, my story, my "mystery" will eventually lead to stories where the telling is not fueled by present anger and emotion. Perhaps. But still I am wary. I know that to write this anger and to write my father's role (as I see it) in my anger is also heresy. Unlike Grandmother Simpson and my mother, I have not listened patiently to the old man's "diatribes and then gone on and done things according to [my] own conscience." And, unlike Laurence, I still feel it is more of a curse than a blessing that he, my father, "proclaim[s] himself in my veins." His voice has become one of my "contemptuous introjects" (Tompkins 39), his voice is one that I must both fight and make room for. I can no longer remain naive and dream that it will just go away. His voice is also a part of me, just as Laurence's grandfather's voice will always remain a part of her - and of her writing.

I know that the rabbit warren that I have hidden in is limiting because it is underground, buried. But then so too are the emotions, the issues, the words that I am trying to find, to excavate, to patch together. I have been building underground tunnels for such a long time, safe, or so I thought, from my father's shadow, that I am no longer certain I can remember which tunnel leads to where or to what memory. On the contrary, the stories I routinely tell about my past always lead to somewhere specific. I know exactly where I'm going.

Down here, now, I feel claustrophobic, cornered, chameleon-like. Like Ariadne, I have always presumed I had, somewhere on my person, that magical, unending ball of thread that I could either use myself to find my way to the tunnels I needed, the Minotaur I needed to destroy, or that I could give to my Theseus, my prince, who would release me from my underground labyrinth. Cinderella-like, I would be carried off into the happy future awaiting me (my three-year-old self, after all, would not respond to any name but "Cinderella"). I would be carried away from the evil stepmother, or away from "Pasiphae, the scandalous queen who had coupled with a white bull from the sea" (Nichols 12). It is odd that I never noticed before that all these myths, legends, and stories that I tell in order to comfort myself down here demonize the mother - the female figure, the one family member I feel at ease with, connected to, allied with (most of the time), and loved by.

And the father in these tales is of course is to be pitied, supported, worshipped, at the very least acknowledged. So too, part of me still believes that if I could only turn the right colour, show the most dazzling aspect of my prised self, all would be well. My words would write me out of anything. My words would write me into my father's heart. My words would make the

key which would produce his pride - in me. As it is, though, I feel caught in a web of my own un-making. And perhaps these two things are two sides of the same magical, disappearing coin - the writing oneself out is opposite to but intimately connected with the un-making of oneself, one's self. In both cases I would disappear.

I now know that I must resist erasure. Even if writing cannot lead to a reconstructed me - monumental, whole, and therefore valid, I feel that I am resurrecting crucial bits and pieces of myself, this writing "I," this "I" who is both me and not me. This "I" who is me in times past and me reduced, removed, rewritten in time present. And these bits and pieces are valuable. But which part of this "I," this "eye," revisioning the past, has the strength to admit to the similarities I fear and the differences I crave in respect to my father himself, and his version of the "I" he wants me to be? Or, put another way, how do the bits and pieces of myself that I find as I write, how do they help illuminate the hard central part that I imagine is there, waiting to be discovered, released, knowing all the while that it is as much of a fiction as any of the other bits I manage to uncover as I write? I must somehow absorb that part of the writing "I" that both seeks my father's approval and denies him. The question then becomes how does the rest of me see "it," that bit of me with the patriarchal bent, in Sidonie Smith's terms, the "phallic woman" (Poetics 53)? I feel that I must knit at least those two aspects together in order to comprehend and possibly eradicate my perennial attraction to those stories that dehumanize, those tales that damage, the female figure, and therefore, in essence, me.

The rationale behind these last few lines is at once seductive and confusing. In a way, I feel that I have almost expressed the relationship

between the different aspects of "me." But, on the other hand, my words have missed the reality entirely. Yet what I have written, untrue and unrealistic though it is, is expressive enough to be frightening. Because so much of me is buried underground, unwilling to dare the open field, I am afraid of what I have written. I am afraid of both the truths embedded in my words and the unavoidable lies that are there too, uninvited but present nevertheless. How can I possibly acknowledge how angry I am with my father? How can I allow my words to hurt him or to hurt my mother? I am afraid to keep writing - but I am more afraid of stopping. Because really I don't have any idea what my father will think.

And that is one of the most simple and yet most difficult admissions I've ever made about him. I just don't have any idea how he thinks. I've spent a lifetime denying him, cursing him, being ashamed of him, writing him up as a character, but never knowing him. My stories of my past make him out to be not perfect, certainly, but explicable, and therefore those stories say something about me too - not just him. I'm the chameleon choosing colours for him, striving to reach him. If he "**proclaim[s] himself in my veins**" (bold added), what does that say about me? It is almost as if I cannot write for me, be for me. I am so enamoured of those patriarchal tales where the woman, as other, is ultimately destroyed, yet that means that in them, I am destroyed along with her. In placing myself as opposite to my father, I make myself the "other." It is not a position I am comfortable occupying any longer. But now, I do not know where I am - or where I write from.

Correspondence

Many women writers have been lost. And they have begun by writing their own lives, stating their own truths, starting with the beginning. And yet somehow, this solo, individual enterprise, leads to an entirely different place than I had imagined possible - a place of communication. As Jane Marcus explains, the writing down of one woman's life is only half of a personal, intimate, type of conversation:

We are [often] invited to participate in the process of mutual resurrection of our pasts, to follow [the autobiographer's] example and to contribute an analysis of our own struggles with memory and truth. "I would like to know," as opposed to "let me tell you," suggests continuing inquiry, question and response, and this is the shape of women's autobiographical discourse. The writer asks the reader to write her self. (133)

For me, Laurence's memoir represents memory crossed with imagination, pollinated by something else, something almost tangible but difficult to grasp. Her words, her memories, have engendered an outpouring of me, of my own words, in a way I cannot logically explain. Laurence's memoir/autobiography participates in the mutual discourse that Marcus describes above - a discourse centred around a book. Readers other than myself have been similarly drawn into "conversation" with Laurence's "book." One reviewer, S. A. McLennan McCue, makes the analogy that:

Reading this book is like nothing one can imagine

so much as sitting at Margaret Laurence's kitchen table in Lakefield and talking with her about her writing, her family, censorship, the peace movement, and all the things that were both important to and part of her. (75)

In some unidentifiable way, Laurence's book summons forth both her own writing self and the writing self of her reader(s). Of course, not every reader is a writer or a musician with words as Laurence is, hence the necessity of the presence of the kitchen table. Laurence's memoir solicits and creates neighbourliness, sharing, telling. A kind of telling that is in and of itself, a particular kind of attentive reading, a creative listening. And, as is communicated in any discourse, there is both joy and sorrow, understanding and incomprehension, love and anger. And both the positive and the negative emotions have an equal right to be at the table, for they all need to be expressed.

In your "Forewords" you publicly berate yourself for "how long, how regrettably long, it took [you] to find [your] true voice as a woman writer" (Dance 5). You say that in your first novel you "described the birth of Miranda Kestoe's child from the point of view of Johnnie Kestoe, the child's father" (Dance 5). Then you state that, thanks to a male reviewer, you never again "hesitated to write about birth . . . from the viewpoint of the mother" (Dance 6). Yet later on in your own memoir, a memoir of yourself as a mother, you give such short shrift to your own birthing stories. You set the stage very deliberately,

moving extraneous objects off into the wings before allowing/allotting yourself textual space to shine light on the births of your children. But you admit that you are telling their stories only because you finally reason (after a long preamble) "that their births are an integral part of my story as well as theirs" (Dance 135).

You turn the spotlight on, train it to the centre of the stage, and then, before the audience even has a chance to adjust to the new lighting arrangement, you disappear. There isn't even a whiff of smoke, a puff of dry ice, to mark the spot where you were. The light is still on, of course, but it is left to illuminate absence.

To explain. In writing about your birth experience with your first child, Jocelyn, you use two archival letters, letters written by you to your dear friend Adele Wiseman it is true, but historical, historicized, letters nonetheless.

I know you are aware of this historicizing for you add (perhaps somewhat apologetically?) "My young self sounds quite different from the way I feel now, but I couldn't entirely express my feelings. I was so guarded, so conventional" (Dance 139). But you don't add your feelings now, now that you are looking back at this event, this memory, this re-membering of the moment when your body became the site of a miraculous but problematic split. Now the daughter is mother too. But on the stage, all that is there, is daughter, your daughter.

Instead of exploring this duplicitous moment, writing it, exploding it (and thereby sharing knowledge of it) your rewriting of this past event instead produces a gap, a loss, a separation. The two are no longer one yet they are also

no longer two. Because you re-inscribe, re-introduce your former conventional, textual "self" into your current text and because you allow this previous self to merge with your present writing "self," the gap between your perceived sense of self-disclosure and the actual enclosure you create is both disconcerting and disheartening. As you write this scene, you, as mother, fade from sight.

Looking back, you re-read your honesty (marking it as culturally valid if still personally suspect). But where is your honest re-reading of your self/presentation now?

Am I expecting too much? Probably. But I need to hear those birth stories, those stories that make up "the core" of women's lives (Dance 135). I am disappointed that at the crucial moment in your memoir, at the very matrix of this book written "as a child and as a mother" (Dance 10), I feel deserted by the mother in you.

As daughter, I am struggling with my own representation, re-presentations of my past. As daughter, I want to negotiate the labyrinth of my ancestors, my blood, my island heritage. As daughter, I would like to re-vision my entrance into this world, re-vision my own primary connection to my mother-daughter. As nobody's mother, I want to hear the stories of motherhood, mothering, [m]othering, othering. My own birth story is lost in the clouds of the anaesthetic (the ether: ἄηθη f. root of αἴθη: burn, shine) pressed upon my mother. The words you remember hearing, "the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak," were never even spoken out loud to my mother. In my mother's case the

flesh wasn't even given the opportunity to burn or shine on its own.

My mother and I, then, are united in our search for the story of my birth, her only birthing. In listening to the stories of other births perhaps I will hear the whisper of my own. This is what I look for in your story - not just the opportunity to resurrect my past - but to right/write it for myself. I am sorry that your experience is so similar to that of my mother's birthing of me. What might otherwise, in other ways, have meant linkage (for similarity often leads to connection) dwindles into something more than disappointment because I wanted a connection to something different than my own experience.

Because you were unawake, unaware in the past, I hold you responsible for your own dulling, anaesthetizing rewriting of the birth event now. You knew better, know better, yet still you invite the old voices to re-tell the same, fogged story. I don't want or need more of the same to contribute to a past I can already barely imagine.

That moment, that creation of mother/daughter in the same space frightens me. Yet, it has a certain attraction for me as well. I keep pulling at the bandage, but slowly, feeling every hair as each one detaches from the adhesive separately. Each one triggers a different nerve ending, a different place on my body registers the pain. But of course, since my mind is the one in charge of imagining that moment, that mother/daughter moment, my mind is capable of pulling back, withdrawing from the fear and pain at any time. But I know that such withdrawal is only temporary, temporal - in another space, on another

plane, part of me is busy collecting information, rounding up stories, listening to the silences and emotions beneath mothers' words.

'What are you afraid of? What nuances in your heart, in your heart's story, were you attending to when you translated your birth stories into set scenes, closed scenes, in your memoir?

When you describe David's birth in Accra under the direction of Salome the African nurse/midwife you focus on both the laboriousness and the miraculousness of birth but again you more or less disappear. Your world views on peace remain, and valuable though these are, I wonder, what is it that cannot even be attempted in writing in these birth accounts? What is it that defies and confounds you, a writer who can write so eloquently about being a daughter? Why is it so difficult to express the emotions, the subjectivity of being a mother?

You say "I would like to reach back and back into time gone, and embrace these women as a mother embraces her grown children, with loving respect, as a grown child embraces a mother" (Dance 13), but I don't believe these two embracings are really the same. I imagine that it feels different to know that as a daughter you were once of your mother's flesh, yet as a mother, the grown child was/is flesh of your flesh, blood of your blood. Creating must feel different than created. Or does it?

Birth: Reborn

The birth story I tell myself is different from what I call my "picture memories." "Picture memories" are memories constructed after the fact, born of looking at pictures of myself at a young age. They are created by listening carefully to the spoken memories of those adults old enough to remember my firsts - my first Christmas, my first birthday, my first steps, my parents' first (and only) German Shepherd on guard duty by my buggy. But my birth story is different.

There are pictures of this too - the first picture of me is as a wizened yet flexible old woman, toes and fingertips on the same level. There are pictures of my triumphant return home - now held on the womb's exterior. But these pictures tell no real stories. They are static, stationary. Instead, I forage through my mother's recollections, then add just the right detail to reveal my beginnings.

The fact:

I was on time; I was a breech baby; I didn't see my mother for an entire day.

The fiction

When my father escorts my mother to the hospital, she asks him to stay and he does, figuring work can wait. When the doctor decides he should give my mother

an anaesthetic because I am backwards, he asks my mother first and she decides against it. When I am born my mother immediately sees the results of her labour. In that instant, she feels both the gravity and the freedom inherent in mothering a daughter. Our bond is not just that of parent/child but of teacher/teacher in a way no one seems to expect.

The reality

My father takes my mother into the hospital then leaves. As owner of a body shop, an autobody shop, he has cars to paint. Besides, this is 1969. Man is about to walk on the moon but he hasn't walked into his wife's delivery room - yet. My mother doesn't have a particularly difficult labour but because of my positioning they decide to put her under anaesthetic. She has no choice. Ten minutes later, I'm born. And no one who cares can remember that moment. I can only hope that I screamed. Groggy and frustrated, my mother finally sees me the next day. My father, however, got to see me through plate glass once he was off work. He didn't hand out cigars.

Only months later did our family physician note that I had a disjointed hip. "Was it from the birth?" I ask much later. "No one knows," responds my mother, "no one knows."

And the bond between my mother and me has remained to this day, surviving even the teenage years. I cannot believe that some mothers and daughters cannot talk freely. But even more frightening is another kind of

miscommunication. At the very end of her book, The Mother/Daughter Plot, Marianne Hirsch identifies and wonders about this disjunction since, as she says,

[t]he greatest tragedy that can occur between mother and daughter is when they cease being able to speak and to listen to one another. But what if they inhabit the same body, what if they are the same person, speaking with two voices? (199)

I cannot imagine becoming so separate from my mother that we two would be unable to communicate, unable to forge anew our standing connection. But it seems that when those mother and daughter voices “inhabit the same body,” only one voice can be heard at any one time. Unlike a ventriloquist and his dummy though, the voices often seem to be talking at cross-purposes rather than being engaged in a conversation. The mother/daughter communion so important to me seems impossible in the one body of a mother/daughter. Why does this slash that separates these two words become an insurmountable barrier when it exists in one woman’s body?

Transition

The Christian concept of God in three persons seems to be easier to absorb than this maternal paradox. Yet in our society women’s polyvalent voices must be diluted into one, single, unencompassing voice in order to be heard. The mother/daughter is not given space to speak. Brenda O. Daly and Maureen T. Reddy address this neglect of the mother/daughter’s subjectivity in the introduction to their book, Narrating Mothers, noting that

mother’s voices continue to be ignored. Even in

women's accounts of motherhood, maternal perspectives are strangely absent. We most often hear daughters' voices in both literary and theoretical texts about mothers, mothering, and motherhood, even in those written by feminists who are mothers . . . the subjectivity of mothers often disappears from even the most sensitive feminist discussions of mothering. (1)

I am heartened to find that other women have some of the same questions as I do. Yet questions themselves, even statements of "fact," often obscure the deeper problems, emotions, unmentionables. And they do not allay my fear of the seemingly inescapable split/separation from self that motherhood seems to entail.

Even feminists involved in the production of literary discourse find it difficult to allow one voice to carry more than one "subjectivity," more than one way of looking at the world. They too become caught up in the either/or dilemma marked by the slash itself. Yet there are other ways to look at these multiple positions, these multiple "subjectivities." Di Brandt recognizes that

[Joy] Kogawa's description of maternal language certainly suggests an alternative model, in which the semiotic and the symbolic exist carefully and respectfully in partnership with one another, rather than being structurally opposed. The language of the body is brought into the realm of words, not by alienation and subjugation, but through silence, through listening and respect. (120)

Because I often struggle with the typically aggressive relationship envisioned between the semiotic and the symbolic - and indeed, wrestle with the very meanings of these oftentimes (to me) nebulous terms - Brandt's sense that Kogawa manages to bring the two together, into "partnership" brings me peace of mind. There is something tremendously reassuring in (Brandt's description of) Kogawa's belief, illustrated through written language, that silence can bring two things together. I cannot fully articulate this idea but it calms me and suggests numberless possibilities for my own pen - if only I can find the words - and the silence.

I return to Laurence and to the way in which Di Brandt perceives Laurence's presentation of mothering:

Maternal consciousness, while thus representing an important and indeed imperative mode of perception, is not idealized by Laurence, nor is it a privileged position. The act of mothering is presented as a tremendously difficult one, filled with responsibility. (41)

The words "privilege" and "responsibility" are for me heavily laden with meaning. The maternal position is often touted as exemplifying both words, since a mother has both the privilege and responsibility of raising the future. Laurence's memoir certainly demonstrates the basic validity of this traditional assumption while at the same time, Laurence's recollections suggest other ways in which motherhood often denies women the right to privilege and responsibility - for themselves. The act of mothering, then, becomes difficulty multiplied by difficulty, not the least of which is the slippage into the sole subjectivity of the daughter - for it is felt by women

writers that only then can one hope to remain in the future tense themselves - safe from the "privilege" and "responsibility" of the present - safe from becoming seen simply as a mother-object rather than a complete human being.

There are so many things that I want to attend to in your memoir. There are so many threads to follow, stitches to ponder. I find myself focussing more and more on the borders of your "patchwork of the life-writing process" (Marcus 125), the borders of your quilted life. At first I feel guilty because I think I should begin by spending more time perusing the actual blocks themselves but I am enraptured by the way you stitch the whole thing together.

I decide to read up on quilts so that I will really understand, so that I won't miss anything. I learn that I should "not underestimate the importance of the carefully constructed border in the quilt" (Otto 67). And I learn that one must

Study the colors of the blocks. Do not be hasty when deciding on a border, as you will have to live with this choice the rest of your quilt's life. Some sashes and borders will be more complementary to the blocks than others. All sashing will divide, but some will enhance, bring out the best in the blocks, while others will dull the blocks, hide their original beauty. (Otto 69)

I discover that quilts are not only beautiful, common (in the sense that they are accessible and needed household items) artifacts but that they are illustrative of history, women's history, and women's perseverance. No wonder you had Alice Olsen Williams make your children a quilt. No wonder you passed your quilt back to Alice when you felt your time to leave this earth was near (Williams 10-12). I think that you too fell under the quilt's spell - after all it tells a story and yet warms and comforts all on its own, even if the story is not understood.

I turn now to Alice Walker's essay, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," where she so beautifully and clearly indicates that quilts are powerfully creative. At one point, Walker reminisces about the time when she saw, at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., a remarkable quilt,

a quilt unlike any other in the world. In fancified, inspired, and yet simple and identifiable figures, it portrays the story of the Crucifixion. It is considered rare, beyond price. Though it follows no known pattern of quilt-making, and though it is made of bits and pieces of worthless rags, it is obviously the work of a person of powerful imagination and deep spiritual feeling. Below this quilt I saw a note that says it was made by "an anonymous Black woman in Alabama, a hundred years ago." (239)

Maybe you couldn't write enough about your children's births to truly satisfy my

own yearning for a birth story, a real one. Maybe I just need to be glad that you do provide a quilt for me to hunker down beneath - even if I don't entirely understand your particular viewpoint on this story.

But you do write enough about your mothers to inspire me to write about and illuminate my own. I think that by attending to the borders you weave around the different blocks representing your mothers and the stages of their mothering you, I have been able, for the first time, to heed the quiet, muted tones of my own receipt of mothering.

For too long, I have been a building blazing with anger, engulfed, by the presence of my father. As clichéd as it is, has been, must be in our patriarchal world, I have been caught up in defining myself against him, in placing myself in opposition to him, in denying his genetics within me. I have been fighting him as representative of all patriarchy (a rather foolish belief since he is the "he" he is because of the same systems that make me focus on him so much) and as an individual that I felt must be overcome in order for me to thrive as a mature person.

Yet, among the noise and din of this crackling fire, among the smoke and the tumult, I have never stopped to notice the peacefulness of the one part of the building not inflamed. Rushing about with buckets of water, ducking charred timbers, does not leave one with a whole lot of time but still I never paid attention to the one place in the building where things were calm and quiet.

I could still see the glow of the fire, smell the burning objects, sense the

heat, but here, in this part of the building all is not quick movement, rapid decision, or anxious warfare. In attending to this space, this quiet, I am attending to a part of me, long overlooked, a part both given to me (if only I could stop long enough to notice) and illustrated by my mother.

Like you, I have been trying to trace the history of the men and women (especially the women, though their stories are often almost impossible to untangle, caught as they are in the web of ownership first by their fathers, and later their husbands) who are my ancestors, who constitute my family. As a recuperative process it is a difficult and painstaking task, one that I have barely begun, but, because of the hardship involved, every new fact is a reward in itself. Every new name provides me with another identity that I feel needs my embroidery, since history offers up so few of its own artfully constructed tales.

In thinking about my family tree, particularly in comparison to the one I drew up of your family, I wonder if perhaps the opaque blankness of the branches on my father's side explicates in part my continuous concern with my father. For he has come to symbolize not just the patriarchal society in which I live (and an older version which he has tried to impose on me against my will), but also an entire clan of people. Though all these people lived and worked and must have differed from my father, they have all (by their early deaths or the destruction of family records) been absorbed into the body/character of one man. It is no wonder that he looms so large in my mind and in my life. But is it really necessary?

Beginning Again: Family Tree Reworked

It is time to start appreciating and exploring the other side of my family tree. I recognize that I need to understand both aspects of my ancestry, male and female, if I am to make any sense of my origins. If I am to be able to come to terms with all the voices within me, I need to be prepared to listen to them all - even those that I can barely hear. Di Brandt's summary of the understanding of the terms "context" and "matrix" by the, as she puts it, "ancient Keres gynocratic society at Laguna Pueblo in New Mexico" (103) helps outline what I feel to be my dilemma:

Among the Keres, "context" and "matrix" are equivalent terms, and both refer to approximately the same thing as knowing your derivation and place. Failure to know your mother, that is, your position and its attendant traditions, history, and place in the scheme of things, is failure to remember your significance, your reality, your right relationship to earth and society. It is the same as being lost - isolated, abandoned, self-estranged, and alienated from your own life. (Brandt 103-4 quoting Allen 209-10)

Torn as I am between the traditional understanding of my place in this world as my father's daughter (including the ownership aspect encompassed by that "rational" and patriarchal world view) while not able to conceive truly of him and his ancestors as individuals, and the feminist conception of my position in this world as a responsible female in a long chain of matriarchal

(buried) culture, finding my "right relationship to earth and society" is fraught with difficulty. I can neither embrace my father and all that he stands for, providing all that he desires in a daughter, nor can I entirely repudiate him. Unlike Laurence, whose father died young, who manages to convince herself that she has come to terms with her autocratic, overbearing grandfather, that authoritarian representative of the patriarchy, I am much too close (and perhaps too like) the stubborn old man in my life. Without the luxury of a generation between us (except in years), my tumultuous relationship with my father has coloured even my search for maternal role models.

Unlike Laurence, who was surrounded by and seemed to recognize female role models at an early age, I have only recently come to understand that by being still and quiet, in other words, by actively listening, could I hear a kind of silence, a female silence, that was not created because of anger (as my father's so often was/is). Only then could I hear the silence of my mother and realize that, in actual fact, her silence speaks.

It has taken a long time for me to acknowledge her silence, my mother's silence, with respect. Prior to this I saw my mother's silence not as docility (Dance 63) but as surrender and weakness. I accepted my father's judgement about and example of silence, thinking it could only represent negative emotions like fear and anger. While I was ever willing to fight for my belief in the recuperative nature of tears, ever willing to suggest that they could mean more than just pain or sorrow, I could not comprehend that silence too has its many faces. And I certainly never dreamed that silence has its own language, and that if only I could stay silent long enough to hear it, perhaps even I could begin to understand it.

Chapter Two: Through the Silence

How to get to the silence. That is the question. My father's silence is alienating, distance-making, differentiating. How to get through that silence to the other. The silence I hear often now in my own mother. Beside my chatterbox self, she so often stands, listening.

I did, once upon a time, find another silence. A silence that surrounded me as if by happenstance or blind luck. But it was only while I was rereading my words above, rereading my past, that I remembered that quasi-imaginary place, a place where silence didn't just descend; it just was. A place I had all but forgotten. An imaginary place that began its life as real. For Margaret Laurence too, the place where one first notices things, the place one first calls "home" or "mine," continues to affect one's later life. In Heart of a Stranger, Laurence notes that

Because that settlement and that land were my first and for many years my only real knowledge of this planet, in some profound way they remain my world, my way of viewing. My eyes were formed there. (237)

My eyes first "opened" in a large deep pocket of Vancouver Island. We lived, my parents and cats and I, in a small, often damp, concrete block house at the end of a windy, hilly, dead-end country road. At least that's what the Highways Department signs would have said if there had been any. My father threatened to put up his own but never did. Or did he? That was "where my

world began" (Laurence, *Heart* 244); my road was a beginning, not an ending. I wonder if there really is a difference between those two words - beginning and ending. I think now they are just two ways of expressing the same thing.

But, as in all good fairy tales, nothing was as it seemed, for that dead-end road wasn't even literally a dead-end. The road continued and wound its way, even more torturously than it had previously. Through the forest, up and down steep hills, past swampy ponds, and finally to its real end - my school. Together my mum and I walked that road twice a day no matter what the weather (and, in the doubling required of fairy tales, my mother walked it twice my twice). So, I discovered even then that appearances can be deceiving, man-made maps can be mistaken, and an over-confident belief in the truth-content of words can be downright wrong - or right, depending on the circumstances. My "dead-end road" led to a completely different world.

Like any fantasy world, there were multiple places to explore. There were many small trails and several other roads that branched off and crisscrossed my road. Gradually, as my mother and I ventured farther afield, we began to understand the connections between the roads and how each road still remained true to itself. And as we became more familiar with each road, we realized that there was, not surprisingly, more than one way to get home.

That landscape came to feel like ours - mine and my mother's. We weren't surveyors or tenants or owners - but we walked over the land and began to feel we belonged. At least that was how it was for me.

And because we thought we understood the land, there were certain customs we adhered to. Only at Christmas time would we walk down "Christmas tree lane." The rest of the year, we left the trees to themselves, respected their privacy. We always walked up the "Big Hill" one way and down it another. It was easier - and meant we wouldn't wear out our path. And we only avoided the "Big Hill" in spring, late spring, when the flowers would be out in full force on the "other path." Like Gulliver, I saw this world from the viewpoint of a stranger. Everything but me seemed huge, significant. The salal bushes lining the paths seemed intent on overwhelming me with their superior height, and the "Big Hill" seemed to stretch on forever.

But while these routes were our most usual, it is the trail back from the piggery that I want to explore again. For it is that route that spawned my imaginary place, and my secret.

The piggery itself was fascinating. Ramshackle and dilapidated, falling in on itself yet still overwhelming because of its past, it was a magnet for all the dare-devil kids for miles around. Abandoned and an easy target, it was set on fire almost every summer. And several times those fires threatened to destroy all our property. But the last time I saw it, it still hadn't been burned to the ground.

My mum refused to let me get close to it even though I desperately wanted to peer inside. I don't know what I expected to see; certainly I wasn't prepared to really think about all the butchering that must have gone on there.

The only time I was allowed to get close was during blackberry season - then, because some of the biggest, juiciest blackberries grew on vines infiltrating the weathered boards, I was allowed to approach - but only to pick, not to peek. Usually we gave the piggery a wide berth and followed the path at the bottom of its overgrown field.

The trail worried its way from the open field into what felt like the heart of some enchanted forest. The Douglas firs, western red cedar, and the grandfather maples stretched their hairy limbs across the path, ill-prepared to let the sun see their secret ward. The old man's beard grew thickly on the branches so that the trees took on the appearance of withered, yet timeless, wizards presiding over their black and white world. And beneath all, through all, there was the creek.

This wasn't a creek that gurgled happily on its way - not here, in this spot. The creek and surrounds were dark and deep and mysterious - better than any illustrator's version of Snow White's forest. Sometimes, against my mother's express orders, I came back to this part of the path on my own. Breathless and full of my own audacity, I sat on the bank hunched over, searching the creek bottom for fish - I was sure they'd be monstrous - pale and sickly because of the lack of light with huge bulbous eyes attached to each side of their heads - "the better to see you with, my dear" - but I never did see them if they were really, truly there. Other times I'd wade in carefully, slowly, yet thrilling to the feel of the cold, cold water as it impressed itself against the

outline of my boots.

Never a raging river, the current in the creek remained steady except in late, dry summer. Sometimes, even in early spring when the waters were at their most powerful, the only way to actually see the current's movement was to wade in. Otherwise, the surface of the creek appeared to lie undisturbed and it seemed that the shimmery, slightly incandescent rocks were simply lying beneath a sheet of glass, a plain ordinary window.

But if I ever plunged my hand into that cold liquid and plucked a rock for my very own, I would gain nothing. For at home, once inspected in the light and dry of my room, I would discover that the magic had evaporated along with the water. So, instead, I resorted to reading those rocks through that windowpane - as if my life depended upon them. And whatever I saw there - became my own.

Crouched over that creek, I never admitted to seeing those things, those other things, that the piggery and the trails were famous for. But I thought about them. I'd heard the rumours and I'd heard the screams. Unlike those other Little Red Riding Hoods, my mother came with me on most of my excursions through the haunted woods. So I was safe. Or so she believed. I did see traces of scuffles. And I saw the undergarments festooning the salal. Like flags, these undergarments showed the way to a different kind of exploration. One I was afraid of. But to my mind they were also markers of power. At first, I thought it was the power of womanhood. But I learned.

In the papers, almost routinely, were printed stories of girls who were

chaste/chased, caught, and raped. These girls told their tales to the police, their parents, their friends. And no one believed them. They were branded liars, histrionics, hysterical. They were now women - in deed and in word. And they were powerless. Lost in the woods, they stayed lost to the rest of the world, even lost to themselves.

I inspected the undergarments carefully. I could never bring myself to touch them. Sometimes, I'd get a stick and prod them out of my way, or flick them farther back into the bushes. I would forget the names in the paper. But the few faces I saw . . . as I looked into my creek, my mirror on the world, I swore my knowledge would be different. If I had to obtain that kind of knowing - I would never be so stupid as to tell the world. My silent place taught me silence. Enchantment/ exploration. Danger/ knowledge. Belief/ silence. The moral of the story.

The most loved place, for me, 'in 'trus country' nas' in fact been many places. It has changed throughout the years, as I and my circumstances have changed. I haven't really lost any of the best places from the past, though. I may no longer inhabit them, but they inhabit me, portions of memory, presences in the mind. (Laurence, Heart 207)

Who are you? Where do you go inside your mind? I think I'm ready to

acknowledge my secret place. But I need to know how to use it to nourish my own writing. Instead, all I can manage is a return to the language of fantasy and fairy tale. How do I describe how it really was, what it really meant to me? How do I admit the horror, the danger, the attraction?

As a child, I wept bitterly when we moved, sure I would never return, never see the dark creek again, never fully understand its secrets - or my own. But I learned that my "best places" truly did "inhabit me." But what to make of such inhabitations, such occupations? As a woman writing, I must read the past, address the past, unearth the past - and face the danger. As I write the silence of those best/worst places, those most secret and dark and hidden places - pillaging, destroying memory - the fairy tale disappears. The forest looms, the screams reverberate inside my head. It was all so long ago - but in re-remembering those bodies, those women, I am faced again with my own body. And I am just as reluctant now to explore its knowledge as I was then. Only silence seems secure.

I worry that I am too introspective. That I am too busy watching me and my own concerns. But that is also a lie. I know I watch others - for signs, marks, spots - any indication that others worry as I do. You mention your "other side" - "the anxious, worried, sometimes deeply depressed side," the part you call the "Black Celt" (Dance 26). I have no easy label, no easy explanation for my worrying, my watching. But is it why I/we, as women, write?

I don't think women writers are any more
 "privately focussed" on their writing than male
 writers, and I certainly hope not, out of concern for

the quality of writing by either sex. I always thought all writers were privately focussed on their writing; this in no way implies an obsession with self.

(Laurence, Dance 234-35)

But does my writing this imply an "obsession" with my past self? The self that occupied those former "best" places; the self as character in the home movies that I have set in motion and cannot stop? Who is this self that I can see? Not a reverse image as in a mirror; not a copy or a poor reflection in a storefront window; but a three-dimensional, moving, breathing subject.

In all my memories, "I" am a character. I reconstruct myself - the way I hold my head, the way I cry, the way I show no fear. Reconstructed, "I" am invincible. I am not remembering by looking through my eyes of the past. No - instead I see the scene as I would watch a movie. The lights grow dim, the film rolls, and I stay here in my seat. The "I" becomes my object. My eye has the power of the observer. I am a voyeur of my own life.

Voyeur or voyager? Culturally and historically speaking, women have been neither. Watching myself watch and invent the sexual lives of others makes me an imaginary voyeur at best. Scavenging from my memories of the past, I attempt to create some larger pattern, some indication of the path I have taken from silence, to reading, to writing. But the voyage is both incomplete and suspect. There are too many trails to follow. Margaret Laurence's best places have become corrupt, contaminated in my reading of them in my own life. The fairy tale has gone sour. My words cannot rescue those other women, nor re-write their stories. But if I tell their stories again, break the silence again, I know already no one will be listening.

By writing, I have entered that same forbidden zone that Sidonie

Smith identifies:

despite the textual repression of woman that supports the phallic order, woman has chosen to write the story of her life, thereby wresting significance and, with it, autobiographical authority out of cultural silence. Desiring to become a generator rather than to remain merely an object of representation, she has sought to "come out of the wings, and to appear, however briefly, center stage."

But she is not man coming center stage; and therein lies the crux of her matter. She does not enter from the wings so much as she enters from that space beyond the wings of the patriarchal order and its textualizations. Hers is an extremely precarious entrance, then; hers, a potentially precarious performance before an audience whom she expects to read her as woman. (Poetics 42)

I seek the authority that implicitly rests in autobiography while understanding explicitly that my words, my appearance also (somehow) abolishes whatever power my words may otherwise have accrued. For my words, spoken by me, are gendered. The patterns I make are gendered. The way I think, while my own, is also engendered.

It is not a case of not being able to see the forest for the trees. Rather, it is the inability to see the forest from within the tree itself. I have been neither invited nor encouraged to write my life. Critics like Sidonie Smith delineate the hardships of the writing woman's life, and motherly trailblazers

like Laurence establish their own taboos since they are breaking so many patriarchal ones already. Voyeur, voyager, explorer, colonizer. None of the terms apply to me nor can I accept the connotations of a single one. If I am to write - no, I aim to write from the centre of the stage as a woman, because I am a woman. Not in spite of the fact. True, Sidonie Smith is mostly speaking of what women autobiographers experienced in the past. Nonetheless, even now, the taboo is present; it is a heavy burden, and Margaret Laurence not only feels it herself, she wants to visit it on me.

I will not accept that kind of injunction, that kind of forcible masking of my writing self. Despite the fact that one must confront "the politics of masking in a genre that promises self-disclosure" (Smith, "Female Subject" 119), my first confrontation must be with the woman Margaret Laurence left behind in her books. My fight is with the voice I hear as I read her comments. The voice toward which and against which I am writing.

In my imagination, that creek became more itself than it had ever really been. My secret, silent place to which I retreated in spirit. It flowed both within its banks and throughout the entire labyrinth of trails. It flowed everywhere, covering all my past. It was as if, in memory, the creek flowed back upon itself, and became both its past and its future, leading forever a doubled life. And it engineered its own disappearance.

I'm not borrowing your "river of now and then" (The Diviners). That would be too easy. But I do have my own creek. I admit that I lost it. But your

novel didn't bring it back - a river is not a creek. And your writing about "best places" didn't do it. My writing did. My writing about me and my father and my mother - and my mother's silence. I don't know what the connection is exactly. But I know it's there.

You left your "shack" on the Otonabee River after you had completed your writing about your river. My creek is still with me.

I hear echoes of your voice, your past - "I have just recently sold my cottage. It has been wonderful for 10 years, and I wrote most of The Diviners there, but I think it has served its blessed purpose . . . the cottage was so bound up in my mind with the writing of The Diviners that I found I couldn't really write there any longer. . . . The cottage itself wasn't part of the novel, but that particular view of the Otonabee river really was, and that is the first time ever that the view I looked at, each time I raised my eyes from what I was writing, came into the writing naturally and as if meant to be." (Wainwright 71).

I left my creek long before I even started writing seriously - before its waters overflowed its banks and drowned even my memories of the creek itself. Until now.

I try to write fiction. It is weak and ineffective. I try again. But the only time I feel the power of words that I am searching for is when I mask reality with added details. When I fictionalize their stories - those girls I saw in the forest. And again, when I find my key to power there is another injunction - yours - waiting to trip me up, stop me. You have your own rules about how

fiction must work - and see your rules as the only right way to write:

Some people hold the erroneous belief that this kind of fiction [where the narrative voice is that of the main character and is most often written in the first person] is an evasion - the writer is hiding behind a mask, namely one of the characters.

Untrue. The writer is every bit as vulnerable here as in directly autobiographical fiction. The character is not a mask but an individual, separate from the writer. At the same time, the character is one of the writer's voices and selves. (Laurence, "Time" 156)

No, the writer is not vulnerable - not yet. Just as I am not, not as long as I hide behind the mask that what I am writing is fiction. If I am a weaver of lies then those girls really do not exist. And the girl who claimed she was raped but really wasn't - isn't real either. None of our stories are true. The characters are only make-believe, for they are only "one of the writer's voices and selves," they are not truth or fact or valuable.

Writing as vulnerability - when it is fiction. Fear and vulnerability that the truth will out. That the reader may suspect the true nature of the fiction, the reality behind the mask. Therefore, the converse invulnerability of autobiography if only the writer is brave enough to admit to knowledge of herself. To truly listen. To accept the responsibility so easily cast aside in the writing of fiction. For as Margaret Laurence attests:

Once the narrative voice is truly established - that is, once the writer has listened, really listened, to

the speech and idiom and outlook of the character - it is then not the writer but the character who, by some process of transfer, bears the responsibility for the treatment of time within the work. It is the character who chooses which parts of the personal past, the family past and the ancestral past have to be revealed in order for the present to be realized and the future to happen. ("Time" 156)

In autobiography, autobiographer and character meld. One must listen to oneself.

Sidonie Smith puts it another way:

the generic contract engages the autobiographer in a doubled subjectivity - the autobiographer as protagonist of her story and the autobiographer as narrator. Through that doubled subjectivity she pursues her fictions of selfhood by fits and starts.

(Poetics 17-18)

Autobiography too is fiction. But my fictions of myself are my own. No one else can write them. No one else can say them. And no one else should stop them up. Not object any longer. But writing, my writing, gives voice to my doubled self. Mask and masker. Mask and mask-maker. And when the mask speaks - . . . ?

Saying It (W)right

Each mask is named and identified. The parts are given out. The characters cast. And I, who have feared this moment, allot the most dangerous role to myself. Because, as Lynn Z. Bloom remarks,

[a]utobiography may be defined as a drama in which the autobiographer functions as both the playwright and the principal character. . . .

Playwright and heroine are distinctly different roles, despite the fact that one person . . . performs both - and controls both. (291-92)

Added to the vulnerability and the act(s) of judgement that the writing of self entails, is the impetus to perform and the controlling of that performance. Writer is director, director is actor, actor is nerves and performance and seeker of accolades.

Lurking beneath the bravura of performance is the old nemesis of woman, desire. Desire to maintain/obtain approval. The desire to sell one's self, one's performance. Commodification again. The politics of masking becomes the politics of prostitution. Prostrating myself for approval, fame, fortune. How unladylike. How unfortunate. How powerless. Again, the female autobiographer is encouraged to beat a quick retreat to fiction. For fiction - for females - is h(e)aven. The safe harbour for female writers, moored amongst the ropes and anchors of chastity and modesty and correctness.

In fiction, the writer maintains the illusion that she controls all - her power is omniscient, her eye is infallible. The reader is easily convinced that this is how it should be - all is well in fictional reality with the author

dependably at the helm and the ship anchored safely in the harbour. But if by some mishap I am blown away, blown off course, lose control of the wheel - . If fiction ebbs. . . .

Then I create another more plausible story to tell myself. Just as Margaret Laurence does. She does not admit to either creating her characters or borrowing them from real life:

I don't know where my characters come from, nor why I have to deal with these particular characters. I sometimes feel I do not have the power to change my characters, that I cannot really control them or what happens to them. They are acting out their own destinies according to their own motivations. . . .

Characters even keep doing things they are not expected to. They are not puppets to be manipulated but, rather, quite free to surprise me. (Fabre 199)

Criticisms greet this story - this belief in the "realness" of fictional characters. Aritha van Herk fingers it as a stance purposefully adopted by Laurence as her own way of perpetuating the mystique of genius (van Herk n.p.). Which fiction is to be believed: van Herk's or Laurence's? Both are truthful and neither is the truth. The issue is not veracity, but power. Power and who controls it. Oneself? Or one's mask? Margaret Laurence the playwright or Margaret Laurence the character? Or the critic's control?

Whom do I listen to when I write? All those voices inside my head are competing with each other. I don't think any one of them actually knows how to

help me. But the din of those voices erases the silence I thought I needed to write. Now all I can hear are stories. And the boundaries between my stories and theirs are permeable, liquid. Just as your boundaries must have been/must be.

I hold the ideal up to the light. The crystalline truth shines and sparkles. And when I take up my pen to write my truth the shattered pieces are all that I have left. There is no complete truth remaining.

So what is truth? In responding to this question, Dorothy Livesay, another Canadian woman autobiographer, succumbs to convention and writes that although she likes “Emily Dickinson’s evasive answer: “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant,” she also thinks that

[a]utobiography, or memoirs, are not written to satisfy a secret personal urge. They are written by an actor behind a mask. The aim must be to attract an audience. A formidable task; and one much akin to that of the novelist. (15)

Yet Dickinson’s answer is neither evasive nor possible. Livesay recognizes this as surely as she does her own mask, her own desire to write her version of truth, her take on reality. By denying her very personal, intimate motives underlying her memoir to which this quotation serves as a preface, Livesay recovers the mask of modesty for herself. Like almost all her literary foremothers, she divests herself of any intent save to write for others, for their pleasure, education, or enjoyment. She fashions her mask so that only her audience can see it. She herself, as actor, forbids herself the pleasures and the dangers of playwright. Mask is fixed, immobile. Truth may be slant but

there is nothing beneath. In this scenario, the actor too disappears. Like Laurence, Livesay feels the pull of the crowd, feels its desire for performance. But also like Laurence, Livesay retreats behind fictional reality. Memoirs are not real truth, Livesay avers, and the reader should believe the pre-face for it is truth. The true mask.

I reject fiction for now. My voice is too raw and elusive to bear up under the strain of fictionalization. My masks are the masks of self; those that I must understand, learn, slant, before I can move on. I know you have said "I have no objection to writers who do write straight out of their own lives, but apart from A Bird in the House, which is loosely based on my family and my childhood, I don't happen to be one of them" (Dance 209). But that is a lie. You do object to writers writing about themselves and you do write out of your own life. You mask your own life from yourself. And yes I know I am ignoring your explication of your own work but I do not do so lightly. I take your admonishments to heart. Where they burn me. For you have said in answer to interrogators:

I suppose I was lucky I did not start my career with autobiographical writing, because I was so close to it until the middle of my mature life that I would not have managed it artistically. In a sense we could say we have little identity until our story is told. Although I did not start with African stories, I may have needed some sort of identity then. And I could not achieve it until my story was told, the story of a small-town Manitoba girl. Fiction was

what made it real and settled. (Fabre 197)

Luck or conscious choice? Conscious choice based on fear. *You needed to tell your story - that small-town Manitoba girl needed to be set free. Funny that you should see fiction as your saviour; your place to make yourself and your story "real and settled."*

Fiction makes me unsettled at this point. Especially when it is unacknowledged as fiction. Masking is masking in any guise.

Why is it seen as more acceptable if this masking - this trying on of identities - takes place within the confines, the borders, of fiction rather than within the landscape of autobiography itself? What does autobiography discover/re-cover that everyone is so afraid of? I want not only to traverse that landscape of autobiography, I want to embrace it. I want not to be afraid of it, afraid of discovery, afraid of me. And I write toward it out of a desire, an impulse, to find the borders of truth, to find the borders of fiction and to write their meeting.

Gloria Anzaldúa, in her book Borderlands/La Frontera, talks about borders as they enclose and divorce people and nations. Yet Anzaldúa's definition seems equally applicable to the borders that define genres. In Anzaldúa's words:

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition.

The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants.

(3)

This hinterland created by fiction, imagination, and memory is threatening. I know it is an amorphous "country," precariously balanced above the chasm of self on one side and the vale/veil of fiction on the other. Verity dictates that by its very nature as writing, autobiography cannot capture its subject the same way a butterfly collector catches and mounts his specimen in a case. (But what of the flight and movement of the live butterfly? How does a pin recreate flying?) Must the autobiographer then single out, manipulate, and stage only those aspects of her self that are perceived to be within the pale?

The nightmare changes subtly from time to time. But the meat of it remains the same.

I am alone in the forest and am trying to find my way home. The labyrinthian paths all look unfamiliar. I then hear the droning of his motorcycle coming closer. My instincts tell me to scurry into the bushes and hide. My desires tell me to wait for him in full view. Here, the linearity breaks down. There is meeting and melding. His hand covers my mouth and his eyes look down into mine. He has been inspecting me and I feel myself found wanting. Wanting what? Then his face changes and metamorphoses into the face of an older man with skin pock-marked and gray. His skeletal hand reaches for my breast. My scream wakes me.

I never know for sure if it is a dream or a nightmare - but I am expected to know the difference.

The landscape of autobiography is filled with landmines and other

explosives. Traditionally, only the “ideal woman” or the “phallic woman” (Smith, Poetics 53-54) can gain entrance to the field on which she will be mauled and killed; on which men have always done battle with their versions of their own male subjectivity. But I refuse to accept either role. I will be neither the angel of the house nor the imitator of men. Margaret Laurence tries to avoid both as well. Yet, for Laurence self-denial and self-censure occupy the space of much of her memoirs. For Laurence, self-denial and self-delusion are everywhere rampant inside her memoirs and out. Even to descriptions of early, supposedly innocent, childhood events.

Laurence battles not only subjectivity but objectivity. She struggles against objectifying herself and/or mythologizing her past. But it is far more difficult than she is prepared to admit. Instead, in recounting even the most innocuous and unimportant events, Laurence continuously rewrites the truth in order to destabilize what she perceives to be her objectification as icon. As an example, Joan Hind-Smith recounts the story (approved by Margaret Laurence) of Laurence’s first “major” work:

About the time she was thirteen [Laurence] launched into an even more ambitious work - an epic novel about a pioneer family called Pillars of a Nation. She had already filled two scribblers with this story when she showed it to her stepmother. Mrs. Wemyss commented with interest that it was about people like Grandfather Simpson, who had himself been a pioneer. Peggy [Laurence] glared in disbelief; she was not interested in writing a story about someone like *him*. Pillars of a Nation was

abandoned. (9)

Yet, like all genesis stories, Laurence's has its own hauntingly dissimilar echo. Fiction becomes reality becomes fiction anew. The eye/I of 1974 (the publication date of Hind-Smith's book) (rew)rights the same past in the mid-1980s. The fiction is preserved and iconization is thwarted. In her memoir Laurence retells the truth. She states:

I had just completed my masterpiece, "The Pillars of the Nation," which filled two or three scribblers and was the story of pioneers. I believe it was in that story that the invented name Manawaka first appeared. The only part of the story I recall was a sensational scene in which the young pioneer wife delicately communicates to her husband that she is pregnant. . . . "The Pillars of the Nation" got an honourable mention [in the Winnipeg Free Press junior writers' contest] and I was ecstatic. (Dance 73)

Certainly, there is room to assume that Hind-Smith's version is simply incomplete and therefore inaccurate. Or is there? Joan Hind-Smith publicly acknowledges her indebtedness to Margaret Laurence "for patient replies to innumerable letters and telephone calls and for correction of factual error in the . . . manuscript[]" (Hind-Smith xi), implying thereby a search for and adherence to the truth. But if truth is told slant?

Laurence knows that self-exposure, particularly as a "non-hegemonic subject" (Smith, Poetics 120) - a woman - subjects one to the vagaries of self-doubt and fear of reprisal because one is allowing oneself to be exposed. But her exposure is varied, multiple, and therefore, safer. Her truth vacillates

somewhere between reality and fiction, a hummingbird in motion, describable, to a point, but always already uncatchable, unfixéd, and therefore, beyond the pale.

The numerous versions of the creation of Laurence's first "celebrated" story serve to underline the "emotional residue," the fear of the forbidden, inherent in autobiography. Stagnation is prevented by moving, flowing, truth. Joan Givner retells the same childhood incident but invests Laurence's memory with a mind of its own:

Judging by their titles, [Laurence's] first stories had patriotic themes. She designates as the earliest one to gain recognition "The Pillars of the Nation," written when she was fourteen years old and typed up by her aunt's secretary during a summer visit to Regina. But here her memory has played her false and she has substituted the fictional title from The Bird in the House. It was, in fact, "The Land of Our Fathers" which she entered for the summer competition organized by the Winnipeg Free Press, and which was listed among the "also rans." (85)

The multiplications of truth do "mean" something real, do form a separate truth of their own. Laurence's memory is not "false" or "lying." Truth is slant and multifaceted. Each story contains its own truth. The fiction is thinking that any one truth is enough.

Bulletin

A young Langford woman's car was found abandoned on Humpback Road. A search was conducted with police dogs early this morning and well into the afternoon. Although her purse was recovered near the car, no other traces of the woman were discovered. The police are asking anyone with information about Christine Smith to contact them immediately. At this time, they suspect foul play. No other information has been released.

My search for additional truths leads me to Timothy Findley's musings about Margaret Laurence and his view of her written versions of the truth:

This distinction between actual and spiritual biography is an important one for writers of fiction, and it is especially telling here, when Dance on the Earth is balanced in the scales with The Diviners and A Bird in the House. For readers of all three books, the reading of one must necessarily affect the reading of the others. The facts seem to jibe; the circumstances are often precisely similar . . . and they all seem to be the echoes and the shadows and mirrored images of one another. How can they not be the same? (Findley 10)

I find the image of the scales - blind Justice - disturbing. And the implication that fiction is better than reality is even more unnerving. Echoes and shadows and mirrored images are not the same - unless one is prepared to do away

with the categories of genre and acknowledge that the writing begun in one genre often bleeds into another. Yet neither genre must die, must it?

But, as so often for Findley, he goes on:

They cannot be the same because, in the first place, fiction is organized in such a way that the lives and events it portrays unfold in a patterned fashion that allows the reader to find a path from beginning to end. In biography, there is no pattern; there is only progress. Whereas, in *auto* biography, a pattern can be superimposed on that progress to provide a story line. Reflections on a life, however, are not the same as the life itself. And the business of all three modes of writing . . . is the business of providing divergent reflections. This way, an absolute distinction can be made as Margaret Laurence tells her "story" in A Bird in the House, in Dance on the Earth, and in The Diviners. The distinction is worth exploring. (10)

Here is Findley's "truth" about both Margaret Laurence and the varying genres she engages in writing through(out) her life. There is no overlap, no connection. There are only "absolutes," "distinctions," and therefore judgements. In Findley's view, every genre is dead, fixed, and impaled in place. There is no blood, there is no confusion, there is no alternative.

I turn my back on him and re-embrace Margaret Laurence - I want to understand not the "real" truth but her truth. Laurence writes that "[t]wenty-two years [after finishing and publishing The Stone Angel] the old lady is still

helping me" (Dance 165). She also bridles at the patriarchal view of biography - there must be progress at all costs - the same sort of "progress" Laurence doubted and feared - specifically for women.¹ Findley's language is the old petrifying language of patriarchy. There is no place for women, multiple border-crossings, or even the suggestion of cross-pollination. The human species is frozen in time, the same time when language de-scribed women, slaves, and the "New" World and all its inhabitants. Man is judge, jury, and colonizer. The borderland is unacknowledged, forbidden - tantalizing. There is the imposition of a "pattern" in order to permit progress. There is no organic growth. Any shoots that reach for the pale light of the hinterland are summarily pruned, all for their own good.

The offshoots of my imagination have already "corrupted" the fairy tale of the forest, tainted the "best places" of Laurence's reminiscences. But the muse of autobiography when heeded by a woman has more in store for the autobiographer than mere immorality. If autobiography is flirted with, courted, even when she is hidden under the guise of fiction, she leads the female autobiographer to the very debasement of her self, of her patriarchal self that is. And that ending spawns its own beginning.

Laurence continually dallies with the debasement - defacement - offered by autobiography in her fiction. She even listens to some of autobiography's promises. But the most Laurence is able to manage is a creative postulation of her self in the future. For Hagar becomes at once companion, bride, helpmate, and surrogate. Laurence first describes Hagar as character:

The character of Hagar had been in mind for quite a while before I started writing the novel which took

place with surprising ease. . . . I wrote about Hagar as an individual old woman, not reflecting whether she would be called universal or typical. She did come from my own Manitoba and family background but I felt she was an individual. . . . Of course when you talk about your grandmother you may end up talking about someone else's but this is not at all what you had started with. (Fabre 196-97)

Hagar is not Jane (Bailey) Simpson nor is she Margaret (Harrison) Wemyss, but she contains enough of both Laurence's grandmothers to incorporate some of their truths. And she is enough like them to cause real anguish for Laurence.

Character becomes de-based family. Hagar is not a conglomeration of people but an individual. Yet she is no more real or true than any of Laurence's other characters. Except to Laurence herself. And Laurence argues that she does not "conjure up" Hagar, Hagar comes of her own accord. Hagar automatically walks out of Laurence's life (Laurence's *bios*) into Laurence's writing - *graphe* - and Laurence as old woman is born:

I was sitting in our house in Vancouver and I suddenly began to write. An old woman had come into my mind. I suppose she had been there for a while, but all at once she became insistent. That novel became The Stone Angel. I had decided that I couldn't write any more out of Africa, and that what I most wanted was to return to my own people, my own land. I have often been asked if

Hagar is based on anyone I knew. No, she is not, but she is so deeply a part of my Scots prairie background that I imagine there must have been a number of similar women in the place where I grew up. (Laurence, Dance 155-56)

Now that you are writing out of your "own land," your own "prairie background," it becomes more and more difficult for you to face the questioning about reality and truth from your readers and critics. I hear your voice repeat in different ways the same themes. You accuse critics of willfully misinterpreting your work but you neglect to name them and therefore you cannot destroy their power over you. Do you not name them because they were too close to naming the aspects of you they found in your characters? Whatever the answer, you give these nameless critics their own space in your memoirs: "She had done exactly what I'd hoped she wouldn't do: she had said The Diviners was completely autobiographical" (Dance 208); "In the end, his review stated, among other criticisms, that The Fire Dwellers was autobiographical. Reading this, I found it difficult not to wish that he had broken not his leg but his neck" (Dance 209).

And yet balancing your anger and antagonism toward the autobiographical label is your own attraction toward writing autobiographically: "I find myself writing about odd things, not a novel, more like things about my ancestral families, especially the women. . . . More and more I want to speak about women (always have, of course, in my fiction, but now I want to get closer to my own experience . . . not necessarily directly autobiog

[sic], but close, I guess)" (*Wainwright* 63).

The fulcrum is the story that needs to be told - on one side autobiography and on the other fiction.

The fulcrum must not come to represent a solid dividing line between imagination and your own story. Your unease and anger are because you start to lose sight of those implacable, unreasonable lines yourself. And Hagar beckons.

Fiction - autobiography. Back the other way. There is no balance to be found. Hagar is your destiny. You give her more room in your memoir than you seem to understand. She is of your grandmother's generation but she is of your blood. And it is by listening to her voice that you re-capture your own. You describe the writing of her story as if you were given divine inspiration. And in your heart you believe you are. When, in your memoir, you remember and recreate the writing of The Stone Angel, you say:

The novel poured forth. It was as if the old woman [Hagar] was actually there, telling me her life story, and it was my responsibility to put it down as faithfully as I could. (156)

Enter not the traditional faith, hope, and charity but the writer's trinity: faith, hope, and responsibility. Responsibility to and for one's self, one's character(s), and one's past. A responsibility born out of caring - and fear.

Laurence feels the weight of both fear and responsibility. After completing The Stone Angel, Laurence hesitates before she shows the manuscript to her husband, Jack, because

[t]he novel meant more to me than anyone else

knew, and I was frightened. . . . Jack wanted to read it. I didn't want him to. I think I knew his response would be pivotal in our marriage. I didn't want anybody except a publisher to read it. I allowed him to read it in the end, and he didn't like it much, but for me it was the most important book I had written, a book on which I had to stake the rest of my life. Strange reason for breaking up a marriage: a novel. I had to go with the old lady, I really did, but at the same time I felt terrible about hurting him. (Dance 157-58)

Laurence and object - a thing out there and separate. No - Laurence and soul, Laurence and "the old lady" - more real and more integral to Laurence than her husband, the heroic, and almost mythical, in her rewriting of him, Jack (Dance 141 and 143-44). Laurence believes she must choose between them - the hero and the hag/witch. And Laurence chooses the old woman, the witch, the seductress, the writing, the writing from her own past, the writing (for) her own self - the writing of her self. Before she even knows it.

It is a good trade, in the end. As Laurence faces the last few months of her life, gradually succumbing to the ravages of her spreading cancer, Laurence writes to Timothy Findley and admits:

Prognosis is about 6 months. . . . I am getting excellent care. I am not sinking into the slough of despond, nor do I intend to. Odd, you know, from being here, where there are so very many old women, chronic care patients, I can now see (as

possibly I didn't quite, or not entirely, before) that I did get it right in The Stone Angel. . . .

(Wainwright 87-88)

But there are always dual/duelling stories, even towards the end:

I suppose the one novel I've written that was not thought, by at least some reviewers, to be autobiographical in some sense was The Stone Angel. Even the most obtuse of sensibilities could not imagine that I was a ninety-year-old woman.

(Dance 208-09)

What about the most magical of sensibilities - Laurence's own? Somehow - she imagines herself, projects herself into that ninety-year-old body.

Did you write Hagar so you wouldn't have to live her? Is that possible? Of course not - of course maybe. This is the magic. Not even you know what it means.

Helen Buss charts Laurence's move from writing fiction to writing openly about herself in this way:

Laurence says that she thinks "all writing . . . is a kind of self-discovery. In a profound sense there is something of you in all your characters; they are almost all of them in a way disguises for you, in one or another of your aspects, and very often you discover things about yourself through the characters that you hadn't known before"

Writing one's own disguises. Reading one's self in one's writing. The act of delayed discovery. Discovery in the act of writing. Discovery long after the (f)act of writing.

I see Hagar as Laurence herself projected both forward and backward in time. Hagar, as one aspect of Laurence, presents herself to the viewer - originally Laurence, later her readers - as another true version of Laurence herself. The hero, Jack, was not prepared to meet his past/future. The reader who thinks Laurence is simply equivalent to Hagar is also caught in a web of fairy tales and easy answers. What begins as a search for the truth leads back to the roots of fiction.

Hagar never gives up. Her story is hers to the end. And Laurence takes on aspects of it for herself. The truth is not that Laurence is Hagar - Hagar is Laurence - but that each reflects something of the other and both project across time, through space, and beyond truth. Laurence changes herself in response to Hagar just as in "reality," she changes her image of her grandfather in response to herself. There is a trail of masks leading the autobiographer like breadcrumbs to the decomposing and edible gingerbread cottage. But if taken internally, the masks lead to a different presentation of the slanted truth.

Circling the Curses

Writing, that cursive action of joining, piecing together letters, stitching with words, thoughts, gluing thoughts to histories, cutting out

different shaped selves, contains within it an almost unnoticeable curse. Unnoticeable at least until one is caught in the act of joining, in the act of writing - wrighting - as in wheelwright. The person who makes or repairs wooden wheels - wheels - those circles of continuity, eternity, tradition, moving forward, wagoning into the history of the future, across the prairies of the past - Laurence's past - my past. Writing the word - not "the Word" but words that in their way help construct and fashion the self, by one's self, without being spoken, written as "other."

In one of Laurence's letters to Timothy Findley she tells him that after reading his novel, Not Wanted on the Voyage, she understands why he has named his writing-house Arkwright - "There are playwrights and shipwrights and from time to time arkwrights" (Wainwright 86). Both Findley and Laurence enjoy the "joke" of retelling Noah's story and of presenting their own words as latterday arks - containing within their own works their own worlds. I know enough now to realize that I must follow the words in the round, the words as they circle and wheel in my past but I do not know yet if they will lead me to my own ark - leave me safe and dry, floating above the water but still following its currents.

Following the circles of connection in my own mind, I arrive back at Emily Dickinson - wordsmith - wordwright - all on her own. Lacking Margaret Laurence's "tribe" of writers, undiscovered by a wide audience until after her death, Dickinson's dashes - contrary to their linear aspect - represent the circularity I want to find for myself in my own writing. Circling, wheeling, turning, returning, rewri(gh)ting, I crave the connections that I myself am able to create. Long ago, I plucked those rocks and removed them from the creek. And their magic disappeared. But here, using words as the

liquid in which to suspend my interest in and discussion of Margaret Laurence, I introduce Emily Dickinson's spect(ato)re self. I harness tribal-dweller and solitary shaman together. The words are the magic. And this is the truth both Laurence and Dickinson write.

The following poem, written by Emily Dickinson, identifies and acknowledges the fear that is yoked together with a woman writer's truth, with her very self-expression:

I took my Power in my Hand
 And went against the World -
 'Twas not so much as David - had -
 But I - was twice as bold -

I aimed my Pebble - but Myself
 Was all the one that fell -
 Was it Goliah - was too large -
 Or was myself - too small?

(540)

8. was myself] just myself - / only me - / I -

(Dickinson qtd. in Howe 73)

Emily Dickinson - cipher - spinster - siren. Expanding of the diminishing of the self: line 5 "Myself;" line 8 "myself." The workings out of which word is best to render the self: "myself," "me," or "I." Poet, novelist, arkwright, autobiographer. If female - and I am that - then taking the "Power in my Hand" threatens to undo the very self I am attempting to recreate. Unlike David, neither Margaret Laurence, nor Emily Dickinson, nor I have the patriarchal God's blessing as we pick up our pens, write our words, and send

them out onto centre stage. But despite differences in time, place, and genre, and across more borders than I am supposed to cross, I know that we all raise our hands and fire.

And the power of writing, the power of firing off what's in one's hand, this launching of the "Pebble" of words, strikes so terrifyingly close to the mark in the centre of the wheel that the female self feels certain she must fall. Society claims that she will as soon as she hits the dreaded "mark." There is therefore no one more surprised than the female David when she realizes she has withstood the unnamed threat, she has fallen, but she is not destroyed. She is just not on the same plane. She no longer occupies the same space. "Myself," "me," and "I" have all been re-moved. Is this then the curse? Flat out knowledge of all one's own masks?

curse *n . & v . - n . 1.* a solemn utterance intended to invoke a supernatural power to inflict destruction or punishment on a person or thing . . .
 5. (prec. by *the*) *colloq .* menstruation. 6. a sentence of excommunication . . . [OE *curs* , *cursian*, of unkn. orig.]

Perhaps the tree of knowledge of good and evil was both a curse and a gift - but a gift that (women) writers must continually abandon and discover as they (w)right themselves. Knowledge of self is both good and evil - and it is a pointer to excommunication - communication outside - communication beyond the pale yet within the confines at one and the same time. Writing becomes (w)righting.

But this knowledge of good and evil, this righting, in no way partakes

of the old morality, the traditional views of right and wrong perpetually (super)imposed on women authors and their characters. I yearn for my own ri(gh)tes, created for me and by me alone. Yet our old habits die difficult and diverse deaths. Even our pathfinders are seduced by the age-old male ideas of searching. The path of masks leads first to the old paths I am determined to forsake. Even maternally-minded readers like Helen Buss have difficulty exiting the mire of traditional criticism in order to postulate new ways of discussing literature. Her view of Laurence's book The Diviners partakes of both the new and the old:

Margaret Laurence plays a part in the "pioneering" effort to find satisfactory patterns by which women may find their "true individuality." In creating Morag she creates for herself and others, not a role model to be emulated, but rather an identity process. Morag is not really a character in the traditional sense, but a feminine mode of questing, one which involves the articulation through language of the mutable self as it forms and reforms through a lifetime, creating the prismatic reality of the creative woman. (Buss 164)

"Questing" implies a search for a specific, holy object. Yet if their God is not our god - if men search for patterns, meanings, order, objects - then women evade the "quest" of the epic. I am following the masks of myself, the truths of Margaret Laurence, not because I desire an object to be found, but because I am implicit in the writing. I am in the writing, not at the end of it. As "mutable self" I strive through words, not because of them.

The words of Margaret Laurence are the masks. And the masks go in circles. Laurence herself christens The Diviners "spiritual autobiography" (Dance 208). As such, this novel, The Diviners, absorbs and produces magic. Referred to as "her last great novel, The Diviners [] dazzled us with its scope and scale and moved us with its unwavering insight" (Denham 33). The magic almost hurts the eyes/ 'T's. Morag's unwavering quest(ion)ing into the past, present, and future through the cauldron of memory - reveals and hides. There is no linear process or progression where one event leads inexorably to another *predicted* event. The cauldron doesn't work that way. Neither does my mind. My memories suspend on a waterwheel which turns and turns and baptizes me with water droplets. There is no progress - there is only the circling - always.

Created, creative, and cursed, The Diviners "took a lot out of me" (Wainwright 120), Laurence admits. And unlike Morag, Laurence found I was not meant to write the [next] novel that I laboured on mightily for some years . . . one has to go where the writing leads. I find myself more obsessed (if that is the right word) with my own personal (and hence everyone's) ancestors and with the survival of our earth. (Wainwright 123)

Fortune's wheel has turned in a similar fashion already and will again. Fiction begets truth - slanted or not.

In her memoir, Laurence recalls another moment when "the writing leads" her away from the novel she was working on to another kind of writing entirely. Because she "had so many self-doubts" about The Stone Angel, Laurence

put the manuscript away for a whole year while I got out all my old diaries from Somaliland and wrote The Prophet's Camel Bell. This account of our experiences in East Africa was dedicated to Jack, for it was our common story. I think I half-realized that it was also my farewell to him. (Dance 157)

Time folds back to 1962, and the fashioning of The Prophet's Camel Bell, an early masking of Laurence's writing to self. In her thirties, she is not yet the mature matriarch allowed to write autobiography. By not naming herself, by naming another self, by naming "you," Laurence hopes to avoid the curse, and the power.

Instead of beginning The Prophet's Camel Bell, an account of her *own* experiences, in the first person, Laurence purposefully shies away from the subjective pronoun "I" and fastens instead on the objective "you." Early on in chapter one Laurence writes:

And in your excitement at the trip, the last thing in the world that would occur to you is that the strangest glimpses you may have of any creature in the distant lands will be those you catch of yourself.

(Prophet's 10)

Running from the reality of fiction, Laurence leaves her guard down - intentionally, forgetfully, mistakenly? - only to be possessed by the muse/witch of autobiography. But the possession in this circle, in this wheel of writing down experience, is incomplete.

"You" is not me. "You" is not Margaret Laurence. Are you the muse/ the witch named and therefore brought to life? Cursed and powerless?

Cursing and powerful? If "you" really do represent the impulse, the compulsion, to write autobiography, why does Laurence still hold "you" at arm's length? I am discovering that the asking of questions is easy; stumbling toward answers I do not understand or do not want to hear, is excruciatingly difficult. The "you" in The Prophet's Camel Bell is not the muse of autobiography, nor is it a reaching out specifically to me, Laurence's reader. The "you" represents distance, perspective, and an objectivity Laurence felt/feels compelled to create. By writing/righting these memories from the past, Laurence is acting as her own interpreter - an interpreter of her younger, idealistic self. And, by returning to the past and locating her naive self there, anchoring her idealism in Africa, Laurence is able also to gain perspective on the woman she is when she is writing her new reality, her fictionalized past. Before she can choose Hagar, she must understand and forgive the younger version of herself.

Of course, I do not know if any of these assumptions I am making about Laurence are true. But I know that they are indeed part of her truth, part of her life-truths. For writing about Laurence and her struggles with her writing - whether it be writing/righting the past, writing herself, writing new fictions to explain herself - has proved to be more circular than I had ever imagined. My arguments and my analyses all revolve around the same central issues. And this discovery is both heartening and disconcerting. For as I had envisioned early on, writing a woman's life is not about progress or linearity or any of those other patriarchally prescribed components of "real" autobiography. But at the same time, as a product and a part of a still patriarchal culture, I find it difficult to continue to circle the same questions. True, each time I approach from another direction I feel that I have a better

impression of how to ask the question or how to respond in writing, but yet, I am never sure.

In my father's world, there is right and there is wrong. He is right and I am wrong. In my mother's world there is patience, understanding, and *entendre* (listening and hearing). And in my world? There is Margaret Laurence, a writer I have tried to use as beacon, as compatriot, as cipher. I am beginning to know that I cannot write myself to an understanding of her even though this was part of my original wish and goal. Somewhere during the righting/ writing, something has changed. Just as a visit to the chiropractor settles you into yourself, cracks your bones into more comfortable connections, in writing Margaret Laurence, writing to her and against her, my bones have come back to me. It is at times extremely uncomfortable. But they're mine. The bones of my life. A story as real as I can make it.

News Story

The bizarre story began April 28, 1994 when [Christine] Smith's car was found abandoned on Humpback Road. . . . A huge search effort was launched with police, tracker dogs, choppers, a dive team for the Humpback Reservoir and hundreds of volunteers.

Three days later Smith stumbled into a Parksville gas station with a story of [a] dirty hermit who lived in [an] isolated trailer who kidnapped her at gunpoint.

So detailed was her story that her statement was 75 pages long and the

Mountie sketch artist was able to draw a picture of the phony hermit. . . .

[Smith actually voluntarily went with a friend to his house.] A day and [a] half later, however Smith . . . heard about the huge search effort [and] . . . she decided to give people the abduction story that was in their minds. . . . (Watts 132)

I have never been abducted, captured, or raped. I have seen evidence of the stories women have told. The labyrinth of paths near the Humpback Reservoir has kept many secrets. But I have told the stories, the stories of those girls, lost in the woods. The stories people wanted to hear, the story that was in their minds. And I have told the stories that no one wanted repeated - the stories embedded in my bones themselves - my stories. In this way, Laurence and I are exactly alike. And the bones of our stories are real, the curse is true, and the circling continues. The authors of Interpreting Women's Lives describe this circling of the truth in another way. They remark that

[w]hen talking about their lives, people lie sometimes, forget a lot, exaggerate, become confused, and get things wrong. Yet they are revealing truths. These truths don't reveal the past "as it actually was," aspiring to a standard of objectivity. They give us instead the truths of our experiences. They aren't the result of empirical research or the logic of mathematical deductions. Unlike the reassuring Truth of the scientific ideal,

the truths of personal narratives are neither open to proof nor self-evident. We come to understand them only through interpretation, paying careful attention to the contexts that shape their creation and to the world views that inform them.

Sometimes the truths we see in personal narratives jar us from our complacent security as interpreters "outside" the story and make us aware that our own place in the world plays a part in our interpretation and shapes the meanings we derive from them. (Personal Narratives Group 261)

While writing this paper, I have been seduced occasionally to quest for "Truth," hoping to find the answer, the definitive key to Margaret Laurence and her writing. But time and again, Truth eludes me and instead I am thrown back on the multiplicity of the past, caught in the web of reminiscences - Margaret Laurence's, those of other critics, and my own. My past recreated provides no answers for why I am writing now, and neither does Laurence's. But both of us, at the same time as we are anxious to write, are anxious to find, if not Truth, then Cause. Instead, our recreations lead us to emotions, to singular moments in time where we can breathe in those exact same feelings again and again even from our place in the present. Our bones, then, contain not only the imprint of the memories, but of the feelings those memories rely on for their veracity in our lived experiences, in our lives.

For Margaret Laurence, as for me and as it was for Christine Smith, the stories are already there. The obstacles to freeing them, however, are many.

And it does not matter if they are fiction or not. In some way more real than "reality," these stories belong to us. But first, we have to overcome certain barriers. I have already mentioned the feelings of fear and responsibility that colour women's writing; but of equal importance is the sensation of guilt.

Throughout Dance on the Earth Laurence underlines the fact that

[g]uilt and fear can do strange things to the mind and the body. I questioned my right to write, even though I knew I had to do it. I had just wanted everything - husband, children, work. Was this too much? Of course it wasn't, but the puritan conscience can be a fearsome thing and . . . in a woman . . . the results are self-inflicted wounds scarring the heart. (159-60)

The curse of having a heart and the power of guilt and fear. A heavy burden, this sword, with caring and responsibility on one side and guilt and fear on the other. For some time now I have been too sure of my own power to overcome this double-edged sword. But I am not a mother. Although I write, I still have the relative luxury of only having to defend my version of history to the past, I do not have to do the same for my future. And already the sword weighs heavily in my hands. Can "Pebble" defend itself from sword?

Is Margaret Laurence's voice an echo of the voices of her mothers? Is my voice somehow more mine because of the trace of the qualities of my mother's? Laurence relates instances when her mothers support her, even though all the strictures of society were against whatever action she had chosen. Even her mother-in-law, according to Laurence, throws in her lot

with Laurence rather than with her own son:

My mother-in-law was probably the only person in either family who truly understood what I was experiencing and who gave me her total support and love. She knew how much I cared about Jack and our children, but she, and she alone, knew too how much I had to follow, with doubt and with guilt, but with certainty, the vocation that had been given me . . . she seriously considered taking her young child and leaving her husband [too] so she could concentrate on her writing. She stayed of course. Her decision was very much a product of her background. (Dance 129)

Of her background and of her time. Elsie Fry is maybe one of the only people who could understand Laurence's following of her vocation, "with doubt and with guilt, but with certainty." While Laurence is "allowed" to make the opposite decision, and leaves her marriage, the doubt and guilt that accompany her have not been lessened with the passage of a generation. Laurence's voice here echoes the pain and regret that Laurence feels marked Elsie Fry's scarred heart and that Laurence knows marked her own. Laurence feels that Elsie "must have wondered sometimes why it couldn't be possible both to have children and to write books" (Dance 129) just as Laurence herself, years later, struggles with the same question as she attempts to fill both roles.

The maternal voices that Laurence hears throughout her maturing years continue to reverberate inside her head and her heart as she negotiates

her position as writing mother. In an effort to vindicate her own choices, she assigns thoughts, ideas, and feelings to these other, earlier mothers that they may never have had, outside of Laurence's own imagination. For instance, Laurence rewrites her step-mother's real life, saying

I've often thought, though, that in another, later era [Marg Simpson] would have gone to university, stayed on for her master's and doctorate, and become a professor of English literature. She had a passionate and enduring interest in literature and a real love of education, of knowledge, of learning.

(Dance 46)

Whose voice says the words first - Margaret Laurence's or Marg Simpson's? For neither woman becomes a professor of English literature. Does this matter to Marg[aret]?

Because Laurence has chosen to say these words, reconstruct the past in just this way, I already know the answer - it matters to Laurence - now, as she is writing. By rewriting our lives, we discover those things that are most important, most critical to us. It does not matter whether or not Marg Simpson ever felt the regret that Margaret Laurence ascribes to her - it does matter that Laurence feels it when she remembers her step-mother. The power of the regret is in the telling, Laurence's telling. One voice speaking out boldly, loudly. Or one voice, hardly above a whisper. If the situation is conducive to the transmission then the message will be heeded. And one voice projected into a rocky, well-shaped valley will produce its own mate, create its own response.

The dictionary defines an echo as

echo *n. & v. - n. (pl. -oes)* 1a. the repetition of a sound by the reflection of sound waves . . . 3. a close repetition of something already done. 4. a person who slavishly repeats the words or opinions of another. 5. (often in *pl.*) circumstances or events reminiscent of or remotely connected with earlier ones.

But for me, while some of these meanings are suggestive, none account for the way in which a mother's pain, regrets, longings, and aspirations become lodged not only within the daughter's voice, but within her very bones. I much prefer the definition of "Echo" afforded by my dog-eared but still golden book of myths for children. Within its brittle pages, the connections between people and their emotions (represented by gods, satyrs, nymphs and the like) become not transparent but translucent. The mysteries of connection remain, while at the same time, the evidence of such connection is explained.

In this realm, Echo is not merely repetition, but wood nymph full of gay chatter - until the curse comes. Then Echo no longer tells her own stories. Instead she must give voice to the stories of others. Her only power is that of having the last word. Others' voices create her own. Unable to overcome the curse, cursed but not cursing, Echo cannot win her lover, not even with his own words resounding in her heart. Scarred and broken, Echo retreats to the caves and the valleys of the forest. Physical form fades away, leaving Echo embedded in rock. Voicing but also voiceless.

This story of the gay nymph Echo has meaning in the world of mother-

daughter relationships just as much as it does in its own realm of myth and mystery. While Laurence is struggling to capture the words and voices of her mothers, she cannot help but wonder if she has really managed to transfer their voices to the page. And yet, there is also the fear (part of the curse for daughters) that in getting our mothers' voices right, balanced, there - our voices disappear, our stories fade away, and we as daughters are left embedded in rock - voicing but also voiceless.

We are telling their stories - which need to be told - but in doing so we may be denying our own stories, our own concerns. There is a sense that we cannot distinguish between the two. Where do our mothers end and where do we begin? Where do our voices merge and become one and where does the daughter's voice stand alone? The line of course is not straight - it is a circle. And after all this, the circle comes back to my fictions of self - as true and as false as my stories of (m)other. Lorna Irvine, in her essay in The Lost Tradition, succinctly puts this circular connection this way: "So it is that the daughter inevitably carries her mother with her" (250). The circle encompasses both. Echoes - of me and not me. I am at once a reproduction of my mother and a complete original.

Echo but not echoing - unless I allow it. With my ear to the ground I hear only the angry footsteps of my father. But standing within this circle, inside the pale, I hear different voices, different echoes. And, like Laurence, I am unsure if I am the one who speaks first.

Conclusion: Rock and Bird

Embedded in rock, the daughter has difficulty finding and releasing her own voice. But freed from rock, entirely free, the daughter has no anchor to the past, no grounding for her own flights of imagination, no understanding of herself as part of a female tradition. In reacting to and against the voices inside her - the voices of her mother(s) - the woman writer feels surrounded by impossibility. There seems to be no way to escape from and yet carry aspects of the past with her as she writes. While the daughter wants to make room for her mother(s)'s voice(s), she feels that these same echoing voices unfairly restrict her own creativity and her own desires. She has stories to tell but is afraid that if she spends too much time listening to all the voices and all their stories she will become immobilized.

Because I am not the son my father hoped for, it is expected that I will continue to disappoint - him. But I know that in writing my own voice (that which carries so much of the silence of my mother's) I will never match my own expectations either. While my mother has never pressured me to be or do anything that she wanted, I ache with wanting to tell all her stories, the ones I haven't even heard.

My father's stories are there, ripe for the picking - they get bigger and more luscious every time he tells them. But the stories my mother tells, the ones her mother tells, the ones my great-grandmother used to tell, they all fade away as soon as you reach out toward them, as soon as they are spoiled by ink. They are

*invisible ink in reverse - they are only seen as long as they remain invisible, only
heard in all the things the women in my family never talk about.*

*My voice, spiralling out of rock
That hard place my father claims
Is not inside me
The tough place only men have*

*My hands encircle china
Too fragile for me
Neither within nor without
The voice strangles me escaping
From the stone I carry*

*My grandmother looks
Brittle and cracked
Fine china crazed
I chisel out the truth
Again - and yet
The splinters infect only me.*

For Laurence, who feels that writing is “a gift” (Dance 199) that can be “revoked” at any time, the threat of actually becoming solid, immovable rock unable to write any stories at all is very real. Although Laurence relies on the knowledge and experiences of her foremothers when she is writing, she must maintain a constant balanced tension between their voices and her own. Otherwise, Laurence risks becoming vulnerable to a damaging petrification and silencing that she expects will completely paralyze her. Often, as Joan Givner emphasizes, this vulnerability of Laurence leads to a kind of desperate forging ahead as she is writing:

Since [Laurence] bore such heavy burdens
and since guilt is notoriously paralyzing, the
frequency of images of paralysis and petrification in
the memoir are not surprising. Of her writing
technique, Laurence says that she surges forward
from chapter to chapter, not daring to look back lest
“like Lot’s wife” she is turned to stone. I think the
analogy could be extended far beyond her writing
technique. . . . The stone angel in the title of her
novel becomes the image for her worst fears about
herself. (Givner 92)

An intriguing image is introduced by Givner here, that of the “stone author.” I have already noted that, as Dickinson’s poem suggests, words can become “Pebbles” hurled at the Goliath of our choice. But for Laurence as for Dickinson, the most important opponent is the disparaging voice, the critical voice, located within the self. Sometimes, that critical voice echoes the words, tones, ideas that we daughters attribute to our mothers. At other

times, the voice is none other than that of our own paralyzing fears. Regardless, it is a voice that for Laurence is both impetus and obstacle to writing herself.

*"If you don't have anything nice to say, then don't say anything at all."
 "Children should be seen and not heard." "You should never ask an adult his/her age, it's rude." "Don't tell me what you would do, I'm the mother - I make the decisions around here - the way I want them to be made." "Go to your room."*

Go to my room - and write. Write the things I wasn't supposed to say - or think. Write poems based on bits of nothing, pieces of everything, scraps of conversation garnered from eavesdropping - another occupation I wasn't to have. They were only one-way conversations I thought to myself, already justifying my writing at the age of eight and a half, as I sat upstairs in the living room by the open window, listening to the people talking on the payphone down below.

My dad wouldn't have cared if he'd ever caught me. It was my mom I was worried about. I should respect people's privacy. I should know better. I wouldn't like it if other people listened in on my private conversations.

Now I can't tell where her voice stops and my voice begins. I just know that most of what I write about isn't mine. So I feel embarrassed, sneaky, guilty. I don't feel turned to stone at the prospect of someone reading my writing - I feel like I should get up, abandon my window, curl up in my bed - and by my distance from the scene of the crime - deny everything.

Even in her early years, Laurence presents herself as a being that at any moment could be turned to stone. The house which she and Jack inhabited in Accra, on the Gold Coast, was problematic in that it was not really designed for the climate, political or otherwise. Laurence remembers:

Occasionally we'd leave the dining-room doors open and bats would flit in. I was petrified of bats, and would stand turned to stone as Jack, understandably annoyed, yelled, "How the hell do you expect me to get this damn bat out unless you help me?" Oh, true. (Dance 143)

If Laurence recognizes that she becomes "petrified" and "turned to stone" due to a relatively unthreatening and insignificant nocturnal creature, she certainly understands her propensity to become fixed, static when she is unable to write herself out of the silence of her own making.

The "worst fears about herself" are most likely Laurence's fears that the gift will be taken away before she has finished her latest project, that the voices she hears as she writes will be silenced, and that they will be silent because they (through her own criticisms of her own work) cannot condone what she has already committed to paper. In Dance on the Earth, the section that Givner paraphrases actually states

I tend to start at the beginning and work through to the end of the first draft, hardly daring to look back, "lest," as I always say, "like Lot's wife, I am turned into a pillar of salt." (186)

Not only can rereading her own writing cause Laurence to become stone, as Givner suggests but, like Lot's wife, she may be inflicted with the curse of

God. And therefore, her own words might become unbearable, for herself and others.

In the centre of her being, Laurence feels “petrified.” The act of writing stories about herself and about other “fictional” characters allows her to circle that sense of threatening immobility, to examine it more closely from all sides, to touch the stone itself without becoming stone in her turn. Where Givner sees this petrification as a negative influence on Laurence’s (writing) life, I sense that Laurence’s own fascination with this hard, hidden part of her spurs her on. It is as if this “stone” within her is inscribed with messages, messages that can only be released by the continuous movement/wash of language across its surface. Then, and only then, is Laurence able to refigure the stone, recast it as something she can turn to for strength at the same time as she fears it.

In a way, it seems as if this stone, this sense of impending immobility is a small piece of death itself. For Laurence says of her writing “[T]here are moments when I feel inadequacy creeping over me like a shroud. The hell with it, tho [sic]. I will rise like the phoenix and write this damn novel” (Lennox 214). These are the moments when Laurence feels her writing brings her close to death itself - the ultimate immobile position. Earth, air, fire, water. Transmuted the elements become stone, bird, phoenix and _____. The last I cannot yet name. But out of shrouded stone-cold death and out of those words released to the winds, allowed to take flight in order to purify and renew their author (“all the pages I had previously written had gone up in smoke in a backyard bonfire” [Dance 185]), come ashes, and a new birth - as phoenix.

I chose my own gift a few years ago - an anniversary gift it was supposed to be. My husband never questioned why I had to have it. I think he was just happy enough to be off the hook himself. It's a silver ring carved by a man named John Lancaster, a half white, half Kwakiutl artist. It depicts a raven - that raucous bird that appears to me everywhere.

Difficult manoeuvring is indicated here as I don't want to be accused of cultural appropriation. I am (as far as I know and not including the darker skin of my London-born great-grandmother) as "white as white can be." I am in no way native Canadian. Unless you consider that I was born here too. And that I thought my uncle was the raven until I was six or seven years old. Turns out he was just really good at imitating the raven's cry. But I thought it was him. He looked enough like the raven with his dark hair and visible Adam's apple (one would have to have a very visible Adam's apple to make that distinctive sound, I thought).

But consulting the papers that came with the ring:

"It was Raven - the Transformer, the cultural hero, the trickster, the Big Man . . . - who created the world. He put the sun, moon and stars in the sky, the fish in the sea. . . . Raven gave the people fire and water. . . .

"Full of magical, supernatural power, Raven could turn himself into anything at any time. . . . His legendary antics were often motivated by insatiable greed, and he loved to tease, to cheat, to woo and to trick. But all too often the tables were turned on the hapless Raven."

The ring circles my middle finger on my writing hand. The raven is not mine - culturally speaking. But I thrill to its voice whenever I hear it. I wear it as a symbol of my own trickery - against myself as much as against anyone else. I remind myself how often Raven calls, using that croaky voice, demanding to be heard, songbird or no. I feel no connections to the phoenix but Raven has something I want.

And, as phoenix, Laurence feels herself to be new, invincible, creative - yet she is still concerned about the waning of such powers. She says:

Worked for five hours, went for a long walk to
unwind my head, have now just come back from a
swim, and I feel Great [sic]! All will be well, I now
feel. . . . Like some kind of phoenix, I keep rising
(staggering up, rather) from my own ashes. I
wonder how long I will be able to keep on doing so?
(Lennox 229)

For a time, Laurence is immobility mobilized. She is the voiceless, voicing. She has overcome stone, death, and ashes in order to create anew. And what she creates in this time of new-found strength is her monumental novel, The Diviners.

Echoes from my own childhood assail me. And they clamour to be heard even though I am not sure how they are supposed to fit in with Laurence and her writing.

Three voices: "Paper!" "Rock!" "Scissors!" In this children's game, rock breaks scissors - as an adult, trying to write, I wonder if those scissors are now a double-edged sword, waiting to unhand me. Scissors cut paper. Paper covers rock. I need to find out if rock can produce words that will cover paper.

I intend to change the rules of the childish game being played out inside my head.

The vale of tears is exchanged for the valley of echoes. From all sides the valley resounds with voices. And, it is here that the bird surmounts the fire. This valley is, for Laurence, filled with "the company of other writers, members of [her] tribe" (Dance 158). And she both belongs to this tribe and fears it, just as she writes the stone and hides from (within) it. Laurence takes comfort in the existence of her tribe, even while she fears letting them down. Laurence writes:

I have a sense of community . . . which keeps in *touch*
(that is a good word; means so many things) through
messages and through seeing one another. . . .

Hoping for the people you love. Praying, even. . . .

What is a good realization is to know that however
the dark cave within oneself threatens, *we are not*
alone. I begin now to explore this feeling and to have
much more faith in it than once I had. (Wainwright
16)

Laurence is able, knowing that her tribe is out there, inhabiting the same sort of wilderness that she inhabits, to write from within "the dark cave." To

explore the dark cave, to touch the walls of her dark cave. She is able to mine from within since she feels the support coming to her from without.

Describing the launch party for A Jest of God, where she is surrounded by writers and critics and hangers-on, Laurence notes

I was a babe in the literary woods, or perhaps I had
come from the woods into this place that I found,
and still find, bewildering. (Dance 180)

The lights, attention, and glory of "the whole literary scene in what [she] came to call the V. M., the Vile Metropolis," are things Laurence both wants and rejects (Dance 180). While her tribe is composed of other writers, people who understand the pull of the different voices, the strength of the ancestors, even they cannot completely stave off the sense of isolation from within which Laurence writes, nor can they protect her from the hoopla of publishing or her own buried, hardly admitted, enjoyment of it all.

"You can do anything. Even though you are only a daughter, you are my daughter and you can be anything you want to be - an astronaut, the prime minister, a famous doctor or lawyer." My father's voice. Never mind that I still scribble and that I still try to make him proud of what I actually do, instead of what I could do (in his eyes). I have sent him stories for his birthday, Christmas - at a loss as to what else I could possibly give him.

If my writing ever leads anywhere, I think I will share Laurence's ambivalence toward it. Because, after all, he won't understand it. And my mother - will she feel all the embarrassment and guilt that I am supposed to feel?

Will writing my truth hurt and pain my mother? For if I do write her, for her, I can never do her justice. My father is easier - I have spent so much time running up against his hard edges. But hugging someone close to you so that your own boundaries become blurred - so you can't tell where you leave off and she begins - that doesn't make for a very precise character sketch.

Stone may rest against stone, but still each remains alone and isolated, even in the same valley of echoes, because the voices each writer hears are hers/his alone to hear. And for women writers like Laurence, the loneliness is especially poignant. Annette Kolodny describes the isolation women writers felt in the past for:

again and again, each woman who took up the pen had to confront anew her bleak premonition that, both as writers and as readers, women too easily became isolated islands of symbolic significance, available only to, and decipherable only by, one another. (252)

Laurence knows her tribe to be composed of both sexes, but fears that only one sex really cares to hear her transcription of her ancestral echoes, "herstory." And although Laurence supports the idea that it is necessary for women to finally find their own voices, to read other women's voices, and to hear those voices, she is equally concerned with all of humanity, male and female. If women are simply to be read and written for one another, then, for Laurence, women's "symbolic significance" decreases accordingly.

Laurence struggles both within and without. How to listen to and yet

transform the echoes of all the voices? Especially the female voices silent except inside Laurence's head, silent except when they are engaged with Laurence's own voice, silent unless she writes them for the world to see. First Laurence addresses her foremothers as a species of fictional characters:

I'm dealing with themes close to my own psyche and heart. . . . And one main theme is fiction - the way we make fiction from our own pasts and the way we make legends from our parents and ancestors, and are ourselves in the process of becoming legends and myths. . . . History as fiction; fiction as history. Ambiguity is everywhere. But I have this strong sense of continuum. . . . I get the sense of *flow*, of the past always being both the present and the future, of one generation departing and another arising. (Wainwright 103-04)

Later, perhaps caught even more strongly within the current of her river of now and then, Laurence returns to the reality of these fictions - and the possibility that what is lost may somehow be regained through the writing of another fiction. A fiction based on the truths that she feels within her heart. When Laurence looks at her foremothers as relations, as relative(s), she says:

What stuns me, looking at my own family, is how pitifully little I know about the women, even my grandmothers . . . and how much about the men. Lost histories . . . perhaps we must invent them in order to rediscover them. . . . (Wainwright 63-64)

Out of the hard place representing her own death, Laurence can resurrect a

kind of truth about her foremothers. Writing from within, labouring to bring life to voices silent so that the new generation, Laurence's generation, could speak and be heard, Laurence attempts to recapture the stories of her female forebears by attending to the hard truths and beliefs she comes up against time and time again, in her own words, her own soul, her own blood. Past is present is future is past again. The cycle comes full circle. The writer conceives of her foremothers just as they conceive(d) her.

Shrunken and faded

The colour of cold tea

My mind bends

Trying to accept

This sweet old walnut woman

As servant - both nubile and owned

Air raid sirens

Go off in my head

Faster than her voice can quaver now

I feel his hands on my body

The breath hot in the air

Full of violence

The smoke of death
More appetizing to her
Than the broom closet
Than the safety his hands
Afforded - because his wife was in the back corner
But some walnuts are tough.

Even though the male voices seem to carry better, seem to surmount the distances of time and space more easily, Laurence's concern mirrors my own - she too wants to rehabilitate the voices she can feel inside her heart even if they are difficult to really hear. They do echo inside her, somehow. Out of the stone come the ashes of failed writing attempts, and out of the ashes rises the phoenix. Writing within and through the fire of the past is not an easy task. "Ambiguity is everywhere," says Laurence as she tries to shape that same ambiguity into history and fiction.

The trick seems to be one of balance. Finding a balance between sentimentality and judgement, emotion and distance. The sections of varying lengths in Laurence's memoir attest to the difficulty of both creating and sustaining such a balance, such a chorus of voices. As writer of present and past, Laurence must navigate swiftly and carefully between her position as conductor and her position as choir member. The power she wields in one office must be relinquished in the other. Again, the circle breaks open to reveal the often invisible power struggle between a woman writing herself and writing her forebears. Traditionally, authority and power are invested in the words themselves. And traditionally, one male author could wrest such

power for himself. He could speak of "we" and "men" while he really meant "me" and "I." And women have only just begun exploring the opportunities available to them as speaking subjects, the "I"s of a text.

The problem for women like Laurence, however, is creating a voice that speaks an "I" at the same time as it speaks a female family, a whole female circle of relationships, of community. And the risks of attempting such a voice and failing are great. Margaret Laurence risks losing herself by postulating her mothers as women and herself as other. I risk losing my own mother, succumbing instead to the temptation of accepting the authority of the "I" position in order to combat my father's hold over me in a way he would both understand and (here I fantasize) accept. The curse of writing our female ancestors then is a risk too impossible to take, and too much a part of ourselves to avoid. Women writers hang in the balance.

Nan Bauer Maglin suggests some of the problems that may plague us:

In the literature of matrilineage often the strength of the women in our past is sentimentalized or is magnified so that our own strength appears to be negligible - especially in terms of the hard physical and social conditions of the past. Sometimes our genealogical and historical mothers become not persons but symbols (which we need) and lose their multidimensionality. (263)

Maglin's understanding of the "literature of matrilineage" serves to underscore both the content and the structure of Dance on the Earth.

Laurence struggles with the impulse to mythologize her mothers, particularly her birth mother and her step-mother. Although Laurence seems to have

been aware of the risks, she still writes about her mother as about a symbol, a symbol of strength and connection.

When Laurence describes Verna's death she says simply:

It must have been so hard for Verna, having to leave her child and husband and go into death. I used to think I was the unfortunate one, losing my mother when I was four. I see it slightly differently now that I have had my own children and have been able to see them grow into maturity. Now I grieve for her, for Verna, for her having to leave.

(Dance 41)

But in reality death is not so simple. Verna did not have a choice and she may not have realized that she was "having to leave" this life for good. The child of the mother though, the child involved in reconstructing stories of her past and therefore herself, needs to present her mother's death as both heroic and unwelcome. Only in this way can the mother become both symbolic and highly personalized - even though Laurence never really knew her at all.

In a book celebrating motherhood, the mothers must each fulfill certain roles given them by the daughter-child. Laurence, luckily, has a number of women who come under the title of mother (herself included) so that no one mother becomes a caricature of that paragon of virtues, the angel of the house. Yet each woman serves as an example of one aspect of the "perfect" woman: the perfect wife (Verna), mother (Marg), artist (Elsie Fry), or teacher/shaman (Margaret). However, because of the way Laurence envisions and presents her mothers in this work of memory, she does destroy

their identities as rounded, multidimensional, fallible women.

I originally thought this was a flaw - both in Laurence's thinking and in the structure and presentation of the memoir. I agreed with Joan Givner's assessment of Laurence, of Laurence's relationship with Hagar (as a surrogate mother to Hagar), and of Laurence's relationship with her (female) readers:

Laurence's sense of a taint of contamination in her relationship with her "old lady" shows the constraint that is heaped on all associations between women, even when they are as unphysical as those between a novelist and her fictional character. That constraint also sets at odds the biographer and her subject, the autobiographer and her reader, the critic and her text. (Givner 93)

I felt that my own understanding of Laurence - as subject, writer, text - had been jeopardized because of the way Laurence props up each mother in her memoir as (to refer back to Kolodny's quotation) "isolated islands of significance, available only to, and decipherable only by," another woman. As female critic, I could not seem to make any substantial statements about all these women, connected by their maternal links to Laurence. I did indeed feel "set[] at odds." As female reader, I could react *emotionally*, as I have recorded previously in this exploration, but even that emotion was somehow marred by the distance that Laurence maintains between herself as biographer and herself as subject. I am continuously searching for more connections, not more distance.

I was also frustrated by the way in which Laurence's memoir purports to be about Laurence's mothers, written, as Laurence explains in the

"Forewords," "for my mothers and for my children" (Dance 10), yet these women all seem to be present only as shadowy objects - not as real subjects. I want(ed) realism, verisimilitude, characters I can hold onto. And because I keep circling the same concerns and the same questions (whether I am reacting emotionally or intellectually), I have finally had to acknowledge that the questions, in this situation, are the answers. I have to admit that, just as I have found that I cannot write my mother as anything other than what I imagine her to be, Laurence cannot write/right her (m)other(s) either. And this is not a flaw. For the woman writer, it is a condition of being, breathing, and (w)righting herself in this world.

Because, as Sidonie Smith says rather enigmatically in her A Poetics of Women's Autobiography, the woman writer's

is an extremely precarious entrance, then [into public discourse]; hers, a potentially precarious performance before an audience whom she expects to read her as woman. Her very choice to interpret her life and to reveal her experience in public signals her transgression of cultural expectations. Her very voice in its enunciations remains haunted and haunting; for the language she appropriates has been the instrument of her repression. . . . The "specificity to a female retrospective," to use Nancy K. Miller's turn of phrase, lies in the negotiation of two universes informing woman's act of reading. It lies in the struggle to generate the truth of her own meaning and against a sentence that has

condemned her to a kind of fictiveness. (42)

Laurence knows she is attempting something that partakes of two worlds. Certainly, as critics such as Estelle C. Jelinek have proven, women have long been writing autobiographies despite the fact that the very act of writing their lives signalled their “transgression of cultural expectations.” But while the very act of taking up the pen signals the transgression, much of the content of women’s autobiographical stories was formulated to regain and write/right the women’s status as good women.² But what happens when the “cultural expectations” of the twentieth-century assume that great women writers will and should explore their own lives within the standard autobiographical format in order to explicate the greatness of their artistic gifts, while still requiring (albeit much more subtly) that these women writers nevertheless present themselves as women? In the case of Margaret Laurence, she both gives the literary community what it wants and tries to hijack the autobiographical format to suit and meet her own ends.

In other words, Laurence’s “performance before an audience whom she expects to read her as woman” (writer) is tailor-made for and predicated on just such a reading. She knows that every reader approaching her memoir will view it as a memoir of a woman writer first and as a life of a woman second. And the “I” she reveals in Dance on the Earth will never be sufficiently real nor alive nor “womanly” for these readers. Her “I” will never be a close enough approximation to the fictive construct of the “woman writer” that readers carry in their heads and hearts, a construct to which I too must confess. Hence, I think, Laurence’s precarious balancing act between an idealized world she imagines, where women have not been condemned but are instead direct descendants and directly connected to the

"female principle . . . of what we call God" (Dance 14), and the world which she inhabits presently and knows far too intimately, a society which holds "a deeply aggressive and punitive attitude towards women" (Dance 36-37). A society that both "allows" women to write, yet still, in numerous indirect ways, suggests that women should cast their energies elsewhere.

Turning again to Joan Givner, I admit that I still appreciate her critique of Laurence's double position in her memoir. Givner remarks that:

Laurence in her determination to present herself, above all, as a "good mother" has risked becoming a latter-day Angel in the House, an obstructive presence for women writers who look to her as a foremother. (93-94)

But while I appreciate this comment (and have alluded already to the idea that Laurence is setting up herself and her mothers as various aspects of the "angel in the house"), I do not entirely agree with Givner's assumptions.

Even though Givner continues by suggesting that

it makes no sense to reproach foremothers for an evasiveness they cannot help, to upbraid them for withholding the sordid facts [nor should] . . . our respect for them . . . compel us to take their words at face value and avert our eyes from what they hide.

(94)

I think Givner does Laurence a disservice by not examining the very words that Laurence writes, by not ascribing to them their own "face value." What I am groping towards as I writ(h)e and wriggle in my own labyrinth of argument, my own patchwork of women's words, lives, and emotions, is that

the finding of the sum of all these “good” women Laurence has chosen to memorialize is equivalent to the patriarchal scientist’s search for unequivocal Truth. And it is not a quest I am willing to undertake.

Earlier, it might have seemed as if I was suggesting (by analogy) that Laurence’s “Truth” could be found within the “stone” that Laurence feels at the very core of her being. And, in a way, this is exactly what I was suggesting. It is exactly what all my academic training has prepared me for. But I know, in my heart, that such an image serves only as illustration, as attempt, not as rock-solid explication. The only solids among the shifting truths, the many versions of truth, I and every reader of Margaret Laurence’s “I” must negotiate, are the discrete moments of time, the specific memories Laurence focuses on, creates, even, because of their *significance to her* at the *moment* of writing. Their solidity is not in their factuality but in their generation of meaning for Laurence and her perceived audience. She thinks these particular images, pictures, memories say something about who she is. While as writer of her life she cannot predict my reaction to her text, as reader of her own life, she can adjust and manipulate her own memories so that her presently-felt emotions and her past “facts” merge. And it is in this coming together of fact and fiction, self and not self, that I can see more of Laurence-as-writer, Laurence-as-reader, than any number of biographies could show me.

As Sidonie Smith notes above, “the specificity to a female retrospective . . . lies in the struggle . . . within and against a sentence that has condemned her” (Poetics 42). Of course her truths are lies, her “I” is not equivalent to the “real” Margaret Laurence, and her recreation of her mothers serves only to mythologize and sentimentalize the actual women to an alarming degree,

when seen in light of the fact that the very sentences she writes undercut her emotions, undermine her reality, and undo her experiences. Confined to sentences, her emotions, realities, and experiences become amputated, ambushed, spoiled. The things she is trying to express remain only as shadows of their former selves; their voices are only dim echoes. For no words can contain all that which Laurence is attempting. All that which I naively thought I could critique, understand, and emulate.

My mother wanted more children. I had always assumed that I, the perfect daughter, was enough. I remember feeling more than a little crestfallen when I stumbled upon the fact that she had desired more children. But, because I am my mother's daughter in ways that even I don't completely understand, I immediately took up her cause.

Of course, I was too late, since my mother's body had been operated on and her womb removed. Part of me was no doubt happy about that. I could be supportive of my mother's desire without having to pay the price of an actual sibling. But I still couldn't understand my father's reasoning for saying no. So what if he had other children already? My mother didn't - and she wanted them.

But does any of this explain my own ambivalence about becoming a mother? Recently, an old family acquaintance skewered me with his eyes and said "I assume you are planning to follow the natural course of events and have children?" The answer, "Yes," was supposed to be on the tip of my tongue, ready to fall off. But it wasn't. I don't know where the answer has gone. Perhaps I

am afraid that, like my mother, and all the mothers before me, if I really want something, then I will be denied it.

No words can express all the emotions, all the experiences, all that is entailed when daughter becomes mother. "Her very voice in its enunciations remains haunted and haunting" (Smith, Poetics 42), because she is voicing subject and voiced object all at once. And if, as daughter only, she tries to write/right the past finding new meanings in its old patterns, then she risks becoming a different kind of mother. For, as Lynn Z. Bloom writes,

in women's autobiography the author, in recreating and interpreting her childhood and maturing self, assumes a number of the functions that her own mother fulfilled in the actual family history.

So not only, in this sense, does the daughter-autobiographer become her own mother, she also becomes the recreator of her maternal parent and the controlling adult in their literary relationship. . . . This may be an unfamiliar position for the daughter, it is certainly a reversal of the power and dominance that prevailed during the first twenty years of her life, a span of time that receives considerable attention in these autobiographies. (Bloom 292)

It seems that the act of telling one's story as daughter, regardless of whether or not one has, in her turn, also become mother, catapults the daughter into the mother position.

I can feel her leaning over my shoulder, watching as I write. She's not really watching me of course - she just needs a pen, something off her own desk that I'm borrowing.

But she's watching this now too. I don't want her to think that I'm getting it wrong. That I'm judging her harshly. That I'm being too hard on everyone except myself. As Raven - as Trickster - I should have magic to protect me. But like him, I am liable to run into mishap, easily upset, and made vulnerable.

Am I doing the right thing? Does it matter so much that she might not think so? Can I really give myself permission to (re)write her life?

I thought Margaret Laurence was just being oversensitive, taking time to claim that she didn't want to impinge on her children's lives; now I wonder why she didn't feel the same guilt about writing the lives of her mothers. Maybe Laurence has learned to trust that faith of hers, that faith that goes with her into her dark cave, that faith of her mothers (if someone would only rewrite the hymn).

Not only is the daughter now duelling against the patriarchy and its rules governing who may be a power broker on her own (since her mother, now relegated to the position of daughter in this literary world, can no longer intercede on the daughter's behalf and attempt to protect her), but in appropriating power for herself, even in the supposedly safe backwater of

discussing strictly female relations, the daughter must be prepared to accept all the components of authority, including responsibility. This is not to say that the patriarchy has claimed responsibility for the actions and abuses feminists and minorities have accused it of; rather, it is to underline what the daughter, from living in her father's house, understands only too well - the fact that wielding authority leads to abuse and misuse of that same power - at great personal cost both to the aggressor and to the victim. Writing about the mother forces the daughter to address issues that she may prefer to ignore - issues of power and authority in her own family, in her own home, in her own heart. Wanting to write may make the daughter feel guilty and afraid; being forced to write as the adult, as the one with the power, the one in control is heady and terrifying. Being the mother isn't as easy as it looked.

I do not know how comfortable Laurence is with this maternal position. Dance on the Earth does tell the story of Laurence as actual mother. But the sections where Laurence describes her maternity are quite problematic, as I have indicated earlier. Yet because of the amount of space devoted to her three mothers (both within their own designated chapters and within Margaret Laurence's own), as they mother her and as she indicates her reactions to their mothering, it seems that Laurence finds it easier to write from the figurative mother position than from her literal position as mother to Jocelyn and David.

Anticipating death should never be an easy task

Yet, because he spoke of it so often

It became as real as truth to me

But it was all a lie

His death never arrived when he said it would.

I no longer practice death in my mind

Now that I am perhaps closer to its coming

And I certainly have never anticipated her death

I have held no rehearsals, unable to even begin to imagine

That death, that separation -

That impromptu betrayal

Leaving me, her daughter, against a full stop.

Whereas previously in this work I would have (and indeed did) scold Laurence for evading her duties as actual mother (and as my literary foremother), I now acknowledge how, in describing her own mothers, Laurence is actually better able to demonstrate her mothering technique. Since written words cannot encompass the polyvocal discourse of motherhood (containing within it as it does one's constant position as daughter-still), perhaps mothering one's own mothers can at least suggest one's maternal possibilities. Lynn Z. Bloom states that while some mothers are much more remote from their daughters, physically and psychologically[,] . . . these mothers, or their idealized essences, have nevertheless been profoundly influential as

positive role models and possessors of characteristics or values their daughters wished to acquire. The impact of these more distant mothers has not been intentional, nor has it emanated from them; rather, it has been willed into existence by the daughters at an early age. (296)

In just such a way does Laurence rescue her birth mother from death, rehabilitate her step-mother from the evil role assigned to her in fairy tales (Dance 50), and resuscitate her mother-in-law's former interest in writing (Dance 129).

Just as Bloom describes, Margaret Laurence "mothers" her own mothers, investing them with the qualities and characteristics most important to her in a mother - and, therefore, in herself. As their "mother," she is able to see qualities in them that may never have existed in actual fact but, just as mothers do for their daughters, Laurence is able to will these qualities into existence. And these qualities, imagined or not, are integral to her very survival. In the early 1960s, Laurence recalls,

Sylvia Plath, the poet . . . had killed herself. . . .

I was living in the same area, also in a crummy flat, also separated from my husband, and also with two young children. I had often felt depressed. . . . But I knew in that instant . . . that I was not within a million country miles of taking my own life. No thanks to me, and no blame to Sylvia Plath. I had been given, as a child, as a teenager, so much strength by my mothers. Plath's

fate may have been indicated years ago. (Dance 162)

Givner analyzes Laurence's response to Plath's death and presents it as further evidence of Laurence's "conflicts about motherhood" (90). For Laurence

concluded that she was not in danger of suicide.

The reason? Her mothers had given her strength.

Thus, in a stroke [Laurence] blames Plath's mother for the suicide and places on all mothers the

burden of responsibility for their daughters' well-being. (Givner 90)

The issue Givner touches on here is twofold. Yes, perhaps Laurence is guilty of a "dangerous essentialism" (Givner 90) rooted in her belief that motherhood is an integral part of womanhood. But these are her beliefs. Essentialist or not, they help shape how Laurence views and makes sense of her world. And, in her world, the daughter who becomes a mother has to become the mother she knows best - her own. Her voice has to echo the voice of her mother(s), she has to take her place within that community of women.

Unable and unwilling to stand alone as a sacrificial, monolithic, and arrogant writer of self, of "I," Margaret Laurence chooses instead to write from within the pale of a panoply of feminine positions: as woman's rights advocate, worker for peace, daughter, writer, and mother, and mother-daughter. Writing as mother-daughter is difficult and new. Our society has always had such an either/or view of life and individuals that it is almost impossible to conceive of a voice that might be both mother and daughter at one and the same time. Critics still find it easier to point to those moments

within the text where the dyadic voice breaks down; that point where there is anguish, anger, loss. The point where either the mother or the daughter stands alone - scared, confused, betrayed.

That is the point where the daughter can only be the daughter; where the mother can only be herself. It is the ultimate betrayal, this betrayal of all you, as the daughter, hold dear. This moment marks the time (one of many) when daughter suddenly births her own mother - her voice exits your lips, her fear closes your throat, and her protection leaves you vulnerable in a completely new way. There is no incubation period, no warning, no manual. Writers, women writers, are left to write (on) their own, trying to choose between the two voices - or trying to connect this new voice to their old one - forced to become hyphenated without ever crossing a marked border, without leaving one country for another.

It is as if women writers are like the woman in Michael Timmins' song, "Rock and Bird." Timmins' lyrics read:

*She captured both Rock and Bird
tied one to the leg of the other
kept them as prisoners
until they knew who was master
then she threw them to the sky*

*Bird with unbarred wings disappeared
Rock with weighted heart returned
and Rock became her anchor*

and Bird became her dream. (Tunmins n.p.)

By apportioning the qualities of the angel of the house to all the women in her life, Margaret Laurence attempts to subvert her own "subjectification" or solidification as larger than life: patriarchy's statue and tribute to the successful woman writer and mother. Breaking the mould of the angel of the house as if it were a piñata, Laurence gives away the pieces to the women she loves, including herself. But the pieces have not been destroyed. Instead, they honey the voices of the mothers and daughters, and the mother-daughters. To some degree I suppose, Margaret Laurence's memoir fails, because the voices are only whispers, tracings, and they often seem to disappear or fall silent.

But in all the ways that any woman (writer) can matter to me, Margaret Laurence matters. She acknowledges both her rootedness to the past, her connection to rock, and she still gives herself permission to dream in her own voice, to take wing. She has helped me dare to read my own life, write my own voice(s). And, in the end, I am left with the same stories I always knew - if only I had been listening.

I have just recently learned to think of myself as a Hungarian-Canadian. But I have always focussed much of my attention on the left hand side of that equation, even before I acknowledged that I could be considered a mathematical problem. I have always defined myself against my father, choosing to deny his "otherness" - his accent, his clothes, his old world views. But if I wrench myself away from that position, that struggle -

My mother, back door feminist that she is, is there in the kitchen, in the garden, in the woods where she has always been. While he wanted me to fit into certain categories, she showed me how limiting categories can be; while he banged around and made loud noises, she was unobtrusive yet productive. While he anchored and held my attention captive, she let my imagination roam free. She let me fill in the blanks, let me write my own stories.

And she showed me my first raven. Together, we listened to his loud raspy voice. He eyed us, way down below him as he sat perched on a fir tree, until he decided we were too insignificant to worry him, and spread his wings, and wheeled away. It wouldn't be the last time I saw him. I am still on the lookout.

Notes

¹ In the essay "A Constant Hope: Women in the New and Future High-Tech Age" Laurence writes "The new religion . . . affects women deeply now, and will continue to do so, as does the use to which a lot of the high-tech stuff is being put and will be put in the future" (Dance 229). Laurence is greatly concerned with, and by, the costs of "progress," specifically the price women are forced to pay.

² See particularly Estelle C. Jelinek's two books Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism (1980) and The Tradition of Women's Autobiography: From Antiquity to the Present (1986) for valuable discussions on the issue of writing oneself up as a "good" woman.

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Appendix: Expanded Abstract

Writing an abstract for a thesis is never a particularly easy task. It is generally assumed that once the author of a thesis has completed said thesis, she will be able to describe it and contain it within a few pages. But, in my case, what I have written remains unwilling to be caged or categorized. I am, however, able to say what my writing is not: it is not traditional, it is not adversarial simply for the sake of being adversarial, nor is it confined to one genre or type of writing. In other words, this work crosses borders, mixes scholarly criticism and the strictly personal, and makes connections between prose, non-fiction, and poetry. (All the poetry, unless otherwise noted, is my own.)

In more usual academic terminology, the present work provides a reading of Margaret Laurence's posthumously published memoir Dance on the Earth. My writing is a reading of Dance on the Earth as a woman writer's autobiography; an investigation from a reader-response perspective (given that reader-response criticism is about the direct and undecorated impact a specific work has on a reader's life - emotionally, psychologically, and physically). Therefore, as I read this one text I embroider it together with the works of other critics reading the same text, the writings of critics investigating the autobiographical process, and my own experience of writing my own life. At the same time, such a weaving together of a variety of writings requires that I stay fully open to the impact each and every word has on me and how I subsequently think about the writing process, as exemplified by Laurence's book.

Producing this work has not been an easy task but it has been a uniquely enriching and expanding process. In remaining attentive to the

sometimes subtle and most often difficult changes in my perceptions of reading and writing, I have tried to discuss and delineate the varied colourations that these changes produce/reflect in my response to Laurence's work. In other words, as I have struggled with certain issues and ideas in Laurence's writing, my own writing has changed direction and emphasis, and this in turn has changed my feelings toward and understanding of Laurence's memoir. In a sense, my writing becomes one of a series of mirrors, receding endlessly into the distance - each time I write and reflect/read that writing I become a different writer and the whole cycle begins again. Another way of describing this cycle is to think of my writing as an echo of Laurence's, produced because of her voice. Yet my writing is a dissimilar echo because I am a different writer, and once my voice speaks, the original voice (Laurence's) sounds different as well.

I am not alone in my discovery of this effect; thus I also touch on some of the critical discourse surrounding the production, criticism, and understanding of autobiography, specifically women's autobiography. Yet because my interest is in a subjective experience and perception, I in no way claim that my analysis of the field of women's autobiography is exhaustive, but neither is that my intent. Instead, I have been occupied with the honest interpretation and exploration of the texts and segments of texts that spoke most to me as I was engaged in writing both my self and the self I read in Laurence's works, fiction and non-fiction alike. My reading then was much more extensive than my bibliography indicates but my writing has (of necessity) had to be, perhaps somewhat arbitrarily, curtailed.

In the end, however, I am a radically different person and writer than I was before I began this project and the most critical lesson I have learned is

that each and every reading, writing, life moment I experience in the future will build upon the self I have written into the following pages. There is no ultimate conclusion to be drawn, no truth to be discovered; rather there is an experience to be had, lived, read. In short, I believe, now that I've begun writing, that "language is our most powerful tool for organizing experience and, indeed, for constituting our social realities" (Bruner qtd. in Healy 85). This is my reality.