

Regionalism, Nationalism and Internationalism in Margaret Laurence

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Margaret Laurence (1926-1987), Canadian author of national stature and nominee for the Nobel Prize in 1982, is one of the most 'regional' writers in the sense that Faulkner is and Hemingway is not. It is suggestive that Greta McCormick Coger, President of Margaret Laurence Society, calls Laurence's fictional town of Manawaka "A Canadian Yoknapatawpha".¹ Deeply rooted in the author's hometown of Neepawa in the Province of Manitoba, Manawaka is at the same time "an amalgam of many prairie towns", to borrow the author's words, and most of all, "simply itself, a town of the mind, my own private world, as Graham Greene says, which one hopes will ultimately relate to the outer world which we all share".²

To arrive at this goal of universal understanding, however, the reader is required to have a fair grasp of not only the physical but also the mental, spiritual, historical and cultural peculiarities of the region, a process which demands much from the outside reader. It is probably — at least partly — for this reason that my students respond less readily to Laurence than to Atwood, much as they take to Faulkner less readily than to Hemingway. The Scots-Irish Presbyterian tradition, for instance, obstinately retained in many of Laurence's major characters such as Grandfather Connor (*A Bird in the House*) and conditioning the mentality of the heroines of all the Manawaka novels and stories — Hagar's pride (*The Stone Angel*), Rachel's fear (*A Jest of God*), Stacey's frustration (*The Fire Dwellers*), Vanessa's need of coming to terms with her ancestors (*A Bird in the House*), and Morag's search for identity as well as struggle for creativity (*The Diviners*) — is utterly foreign to the Japanese readers at large, while the understanding of that tradition is essential to the thorough grasp of the inner lives of these characters. Marian in Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, or even the nameless heroine of *Surfacing*, with all their local and personal peculiarities, are general enough to gain immediate response from my students. Not so with Hagar or Morag. But when one has assimilated the unique backgrounds of the region the best one could and found oneself feeling fairly at home in the environment, one can begin sympathizing with the characters and appreciating the artistic achievement of the author. The reader will be able to comprehend in the process the particulars, the genii, of the region, which will ultimately relate to the outer world, as the author so earnestly hoped.

The purpose of the present paper is to explore the sources of this universality by tracing the development of Laurence's awareness of her region, her native country, and the world at large, to see how, sifted through the author's long years of experiences both national and international, the region was metamorphosed into a common possession of the nation and of humanity.

Laurence's attachment to her region and her inclination toward writing about it was obviously strong from her childhood. This is in contrast to Faulkner who had tried other themes before settling on his own background at the suggestion of Sherwood Anderson,³ or Hugh MacLennan, Laurence's predecessor as a national figure in Canadian literature, who had desperately groped after 'international' themes before yielding to what he considered to be local or national themes at the suggestion of his wife.⁴ It is true that Laurence had to struggle for many years with her ambivalent feelings toward her native region, like Morag Gunn in *The Diviners*, until finally she was able to come to terms with it. It is also true that Laurence, too, began her writing career with non-Canadian, African, stories. But in her case the act was more or less intentional. Her eventual goal was to write about her own region, her own people. Africa was "catalyst and crucible", as Patricia Morley defines.⁵

The name Manawaka first appears in "Pillars of the Nation", Laurence's juvenile story written for a Winnipeg *Free Press* contest when she was twelve years old.⁶ The story, which received honorary mention, shows the author's admiration for the pioneer ancestors of her region and testifies to her young ambition of becoming an author. It was difficult in her youth, however, to become an author by just writing about Canada, not to speak of her prairie hometown. Her misgivings were cleared when she read Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House* (1941) at about the age of sixteen. "Recognition, Revelation", she reminisces later: "I saw, reading it, that a writer *could* write out of a background similar to my own. You didn't need to live in London or New York. It was all *here*."⁷ Ross's work, set in a small town in another prairie Province of Saskatchewan, hit home in Laurence's mind and encouraged her to go ahead with her intention of writing about her region. Some years later, W.O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind* (1947), also set in a small Saskatchewan prairie town, widened her prospect, even though Ross's and Mitchell's towns were not exactly like Laurence's.

It is interesting to note here that Laurence's identity was always linked to her region, the Canadian 'prairies', while the identity of writers such as Ontario-born Atwood was linked to Canada rather than to Ontario. In *Survival* Atwood mentions that the animal stories written by Charles G.D. Roberts or Ernest Thompson Seton were most real to her in her childhood since they were Canadian stories, even though she was unaware then of the fact that they were Canadian.⁸ Laurence, too, read Canadian stories as well as English and American works, many of which impressed her greatly,⁹ but the ones she could truly feel at home with were those from the prairies.

The regional consciousness is so strong in Canada that, with the exception, probably, of parts of Ontario, the centre of Canadian federalism, each province has its own identity consciousness, most strongly expressed in Quebec but fairly persistent in other provinces or regions as well, which is an obstacle to federal unity as exemplified by the recent national referendum. The role of literature is the more important here since, granted it is good art, fiction or poetry or drama can surpass the regional boundaries and possibly give a unifying effect to the nation — and even beyond that to all humanity. This was what Laurence was to achieve eventually, at least within English Canada; but before setting out on her life work, she had to spend many years of apprenticeship.

Laurence's professional training as a writer began at United College (present University of Winnipeg), where she took honors in English while actively involving herself with the student publication of *Vox*. The authors assigned to the English majors for reading in

classes were mostly from English literature, as they were a decade later at Victoria College in the University of Toronto when Atwood was there. Canadian writing was not taught in any courses. However, fortunately for the future Canadian author, as Laurence herself recalls, there were teachers who encouraged students to read Canadian writing, Arthur Phelps among them, who was a personal friend of Frederick Philip Grove and of Morley Callaghan.¹⁰ Laurence even met Callaghan in one of the meetings of the English Club of her college when the great author was visiting the town. Malcolm Ross was also in Winnipeg in those days teaching at the University of Manitoba, and according to Adele Wiseman, Laurence's lifetime friend and fellow writer, both she and Laurence had Ross as their teacher, since United College was affiliated with the University.¹¹ Ross was the one who would help start publishing Canadian classics in 1958 in the form of McClelland and Stewart's New Canadian Library series, thus contributing greatly to the development of modern Canadian literature.

The 1940s, when Laurence was in college, was indeed an important period in the development of 'national' literature, with the publication of such epoch-making works as MacLennan's *Barometer Rising* (1941) and *Two Solitudes* (1945) as well as Gabrielle Roy's *The Tin Flute* (1947), an English translation of *Bonheur d'Occasion* (1945), all of which Laurence read avidly. But when she finished college in 1947 she was still unprepared to venture into the field: she had too many problems yet to be solved, among them her ambivalent feelings toward her native region and toward her native country. She had shed the suffocating pressure of her hometown by coming to the city to attend college; but she had not found a new identity to replace the former. For all the rosy prospect of emerging nationalism in Canadian literature and culture, Laurence was still, albeit unconsciously, under the spell of colonial inferiority complex. She had to see London, she had to see the world, just as MacLennan had stayed in England as a Rhodes Scholar or Roy had stayed in Paris and London studying drama and creative writing before launching on their writing careers.

Laurence's chance came with her marriage and her husband's assignment to work in Africa. It was her sojourn in Africa in the 1950s, above anything else, that eventually transformed the provincial girl of modest ambition into a major writer of national renown.¹² Accompanying her engineer husband, Jack Laurence, to the British Protectorate of Somaliland (present Somalia) and later to Gold Coast (present Ghana), where Jack was engaged in the building of dams and reservoirs, Laurence went through a phase of culture-shock and initiation into comparative speculations on different cultures, as described in her travel journal, *The Prophet's Camel Bell*. By distancing herself from her native land, she could also gain a perspective which enabled her to see her own country on a wider, international scale. Laurence's nationalism was a product of her African years, with a strong tinge of anti-British imperialism, just as Atwood's was a product of her Harvard years with a decidedly anti-American flavor.¹³

The Laurences went to Africa as agents of British colonialism. As Canadians, however, from another semi-colony, they naturally could not share the views of the colonizers. In *The Prophet's Camel Bell* Laurence shows a remarkable understanding toward the Somalis and their culture, while criticizing the hypocrisy, self-complacency and lack of insight on the part of the British officials.¹⁴ Herself a stranger living in a foreign land, she tried her best to "know the heart of a stranger" (a phrase she had hit upon while reading the only available book on the ship coming over, the Bible) by getting herself immersed in the oral

literature of the Somalis through translation. By hiring interpreters and asking favors of specific people who could recite the tribal lore, Laurence scribbled down their stories and poems and brought out *A Tree for Poverty: Somali Poetry and Prose* in 1956. Her later researches into Nigerian literature resulted in the publication in 1968 of *Long Drums and Cannons: Nigerian Dramatists and Novelists 1952-1966*, which introduced to the English-speaking world such important authors as Chinua Achebe.

"Heart of a Stranger" is the title Laurence later gave the collection of her essays published in 1976, which includes among others "The Poem and the Spear", her tribute to the bravery and integrity of the Somali leader, Mahammed 'Abdille Hassan. It is noteworthy that the fatal tribal war led by Mahammed 'Abdille Hassan against the British imperialist army is compared here to the battle at Culloden in 1746 when the Scottish Highland clans were "slaughtered by the British cannon" and driven out of the country to Canada and the United States (mentioned also by Faulkner through the Compson ancestors in *The Sound and the Fury*¹⁵), as well as to the battle at Batoche in 1885 where the Metis leader Louis Riel succumbed to the cannon of the Canadian army.¹⁶ In another essay in the collection, "Man of Our People", which focuses on Gabriel Dumont, Riel's adjutant general, Laurence dwells on the irony of the fact by quoting George Woodcock that the leader of the Canadian government at that time, Sir John A. Macdonald, who was chiefly responsible for the suppression of the Metis, was a descendant of the Scottish victims at Culloden.¹⁷ Laurence's sympathies were with the oppressed, whether they were the Somalis, the Highlanders, or the Metis. Rather than nationalism, Laurence expresses here humanism, supported by her strong sense of justice and human rights.

The juxtaposition of the Somalis, the Highlanders and the Metis, underlined by Laurence's new insight based on her understanding of different tribes, races and cultures, prepared the way for the future Canadian author to cope with the emerging nationalism of the 1960s and 70s characterized by such key words as 'mosaic', 'ethnicity' and 'multiculturalism'. None of these elements constitute central themes of Laurence's major works, with the partial exception of *The Diviners*, but the awareness and understanding of these factors permeate through her novels and stories, enriching and deepening the perception of the reader.

Back in Canada and living in Vancouver, Laurence brought out her first novel, *This Side Jordan* (1960), an African story set in Ghana, which established her as a writer. This was followed three years later by a collection of African stories, *The Tomorrow-Tamer*. She also began writing her first Canadian novel, but in order to tackle her long-cherished themes on her native land she still needed distancing herself. *The Stone Angel* (1964), her masterpiece, was finished in London; so were *A Jest of God* (1966), *The Fire Dwellers* (1969) and *A Bird in the House* (1970), a collection of short stories. Only *The Diviners* (1974), the last of the Manawaka cycle, was mostly written in Canada, where she came back in 1973 for good — though not to Manitoba but to Ontario. She never went back to her hometown to live.

The heroines of these Canadian novels and stories of Laurence's are all from Manawaka, of Scottish or Scots-Irish extraction like Laurence, though the generations vary, struggling and trying to discover themselves in the face of the changing world. The ancestral heritage characterized by the stern Calvinism of Scottish Presbyterian Protestantism as well as the tribal pride symbolized by tartan checks and kilts are both burdens and protection, chaining the characters and depriving them of inner freedom while

offering them havens for mental and spiritual security. The heroines seeking freedom and self-discovery must go through the stages of alienation, wanderings and finally coming home with reconciliation and self-knowledge.

The basic pattern here is general enough, despite the unique and the particular inherent in the Manitoban Scots and Presbyterians. Universality is further strengthened by the incorporation of the author's previous experiences and insights such as those acquired in Africa. Take *The Stone Angel*, for example. The heroine's name, Hagar, as well as the mention of "pharaohs" on the first page, remind one of Egypt and the Old Testament (granted one has biblical background). Laurence actually read the first five books of the Old Testament for the first time in her life when she had nothing else to read on the boat going to Africa. "Of all the books which I might have chosen to read just then", she writes in *The Prophet's Camel Bell*, "few would have been more to the point, for the Children of Israel were people of the desert, as the Somalis were, and fragments from those books were to return to me again and again. And there was no water for the people to drink — and the people thirsted [...]"¹⁸ The desert in Africa corresponds to Hagar's spiritual wilderness, arid and void, thirsting for water to the last moment of her life (the story actually ending in the midst of her movement to take the glass full of water). The effect is so powerful that, even without the previous knowledge of the Bible or of Africa, the reader can sense the inner desert of the heroine, and sympathize with her when she confesses: "Pride was my wilderness, and the demon that led me there was fear. I was alone, never anything else, and never free, for I carried my chains within me, and they spread out from me and shackled all I touched."¹⁹ Incidentally, the expression, "Pride has so often been my demon",²⁰ appears in one of Laurence's African stories, "The Rain Child" in *Tomorrow-Tamer* (aptly pointed out by Patricia Morley), showing another link between Laurence's African and Canadian stories and attesting to the universality of the author's intention.

Laurence's insight into the racial and cultural pluralism in society is best expressed through *The Diviners*, where the Scottish tradition and the Metis heritage are placed side by side and handed down to Pique, daughter of the heroine Morag and the Metis singer Jules Tonnerre. Laurence has actually been working up toward this climax throughout the Manawaka stories.²¹ The Tonnerres, descended from Jules (or Rider) Tonnerre, a warrior in the battle of Batoche, appear in all but one of the previous Manawaka stories as minor yet crucial characters: the warrior's son, Lazarus in *The Stone Angel* as a foil to the snobbery of the elite in Manawaka and as a cause of the death of John, favourite son of Hagar, which eventually leads to the heroine's self-knowledge; Lazarus' daughter, Valentine in *The Fire Dwellers* as means of disclosing hypocrisy in the white society while indirectly bringing about salvation to the MacAindra family and insight to the heroine, Stacey; and Valentine's sister, Piquette in "The Loons" in *A Bird in the House* as Vanessa's obscure classmate who will awaken in the heroine's mind deeper insight into life in the process of her growing up. Piquette, whose death in the fire remains a source of deep grudge in the heart of her brother Jules in *The Diviners* and reproach on the part of Morag, is the namesake of Jules and Morag's daughter Pique. Morag tells Pique Scottish tales told by her foster father Christie Logan, while Jules sings to her songs of his Metis family. When Pique sings her own song at the end of the story, the two traditions are fused together and she will become an inheritor.

Rich in other themes as well — such as Morag's quest for her real "home" which takes her to London, even to Scotland, but eventually back to Canada to the prairies; or Morag's

struggle for the fulfilment of creative instinct by writing stories as well as by bearing a child — *The Diviners* marks the peak of Laurence's achievement as a fiction writer. Manawaka as a setting constitutes only one third of the story, but the region follows the heroine wherever she goes, enriched by each of her experiences while the heroine pursues her path leading to the art of "divining". The visions Laurence created with her magic rod of divining are regional in their details, but national and universal in their appeal.

NOTES

- 1 G. McCormick Coger, "Manawaka: A Canadian Yoknapatawpha", *Margaret Laurence Review* 1, 1 (1991), 7.
- 2 M. Laurence, "A Place to Stand On", in: *Heart of a Stranger* (Toronto, 1981), 3f.
- 3 See K. Ohashi, *Faulkner Kenkyu* [A Study of Faulkner], 1 (Tokyo, 1977), 150.
- 4 See E. Cameron, *Hugh MacLennan: A Writer's Life* (Toronto, 1981), 133.
- 5 P. Morley, *Margaret Laurence: The Long Journey Home* (Montreal and Kingston, 1991), 45.
- 6 See C. Thomas, *The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence* (Toronto, 1976), 11.
- 7 M. Laurence, "Books that Mattered to Me", in: *Margaret Laurence: An Appreciation*, ed. C. Verduyn (Peterborough, Ont., 1988), 242f.
- 8 See M. Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto, 1972), 29.
- 9 See Laurence, "Books that Mattered to Me", 239-242.
- 10 See *ibid.*, 242.
- 11 See A. Wiseman, "Word Power: Women and Prose in Canada Today", in: *Memoirs of a Book Molesting Childhood and Other Essays* (Toronto, 1987), 50.
- 12 The importance of the African years in Laurence's writing career is stressed in both Thomas, *The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence*, 13-59; and Morley, *Margaret Laurence: The Long Journey Home*, 44-76.
- 13 See T. Tsutsumi, "Canada Bungaku to Nationalism: Laurence to Atwood no Baai [Canadian Literature and Nationalism: The Cases of Laurence and Atwood]", *Obirin Studies in English Language and Literature* 30 (1990), 25-39.
- 14 See M. Laurence, *The Prophet's Camel Bell* (Toronto, 1991), 25 and *passim*.
- 15 See T. Tsutsumi, "Manawaka to Yoknapatawpha: Laurence to Faulkner no 'Region' Hikaku Kenkyu [Manawaka and Yoknapatawpha: A Comparative Study of the 'Regions' in Laurence and Faulkner]", *Obirin Studies in English Language and Literature* 33 (1993), 91-109.
- 16 See M. Laurence, "The Poem and the Spear", in: *Heart of a Stranger* (Toronto, 1981), 73.
- 17 See M. Laurence, "Man of Our People", in: *Heart of a Stranger*, 229.
- 18 Laurence, *The Prophet's Camel Bell*, 17f.
- 19 M. Laurence, *The Stone Angel* (Toronto, 1980), 261.
- 20 M. Laurence, *The Tomorrow-Tamer* (Toronto, 1970), 125.
- 21 For details see T. Tsutsumi, "Canada Bungaku ni okeru Indian: Margaret Laurence no Sakuhin wo toshite [The Indian in Canadian Literature: Through the Works of Margaret Laurence]", *Obirin Studies in English Language and Literature* 32 (1992), 31-46.