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Surfacing and *The Diviners*: A Comparative Study

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SURFACING AND THE DIVINERS

A COMPARATIVE STUDY

by

Helen Beach Cannon

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

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in

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Approved:

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To Larry, who saw me through, and through,

and in memory of

Alice G. Hart and Bessie A. Merrill,

two friends who taught me to see beneath the surface.

The dilemma of gods is that however much they may love or hate mankind, in the end it is men themselves who decide their own fates, not in any theoretical way, not in a state of vacuum, but with deep emotional reverence to their fathers and their gods. Maybe at some point our ancestors and our gods will be free of us. But not quite yet.

Margaret Laurence, Long Drums and Cannons

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Helen Beach Cannon

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ABSTRACT

Surfacing and _The Diviners_

A Comparative Study

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This paper explores religio-folkloric connections in two works of Canadian fiction--_Surfacing_, by Margaret Atwood, and _The Diviners_, by Margaret Laurence. On several levels these books have striking parallels. They are here treated as novels of quest and in terms of elemental symbology.

(122 pages)

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I would like to write something of the genesis and evolution of my topic because I believe such an explanation will be helpful to the reader. Indeed, the pattern of my exploration--from general to specific, from surface to deep structure--reflects this paper's organization and its focus.

When I first began reading the works of Margaret Laurence and Margaret Atwood, I expected to find few similarities beyond their sex, their Canadian nationality, and the coincidence of their given names. As I progressed through their novels, though, I began to note connections, particularly in the underlying theme of religion--religion in its folk, its institutional, and its deeply personal and psychic senses. It was not until I read Atwood's Surfacing and Laurence's The Diviners, though, that I was struck by the remarkable parallels in religio-folkloric themes. "It almost scares/ a man the way things come in pairs," Robert Frost said (Frost 326). As I concentrated on Surfacing and The Diviners, I was not "scared," but intrigued by the parallels. I knew that these two works contained a richness of materials and uncanny similarities, ripe for comparative study. I knew they were the two books I wished to treat, yet I felt reluctant to leave behind all the other novels which made up what it pleased me to call the "Margaret

Phenomenon." If I were to focus my study on religious themes, then, for example, Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale, a dystopia envisioning religious fundamentalism run amuck, would be a prime example among her novels. And Laurence's whole Manawaka series, four novels plus A Bird in the House, a tightly knit collection of short stories usually included in the Manawaka set, was replete with religious concerns. Yet while The Handmaid's Tale presents some of Atwood's attitudes toward religion, it, like each of Atwood's novels, is a separate entity. Though an essential unity of mythic pattern underlies her fiction, the characters and locales are not linked, as they are in the Manawaka books. Laurence's Manawaka series, on the other hand, is an intertwined series that culminates in The Diviners. The Manawaka novels constitute a body--they are all of a piece--and that fact justifies, for me, their inclusion in this study of Surfacing and The Diviners.

Furthermore an overview of Laurence's set should put to rest any suspicion that the remarkable thematic overlapping in Surfacing (1972) and The Diviners (1974) was in any way a matter of direct influence. Though Laurence and Atwood have been admirers of each other's works, Laurence's thematic material was the pattern of her writing long before Atwood's publication of Surfacing.

What would account for the amazing dovetailing of religious theme and image then? Perhaps it should not be surprising to find such a saturation, since religion in one way

or another permeates every human life. Fiction, recording life, should be expected to reflect this emphasis.

Beyond this natural explanation, perhaps Laurence's years in Africa's Ghana and Somaliland tuned her sensibilities to certain elemental needs and belief structures--to qualities of the sacred and the profane, to myths and rites and symbols and taboos that might be especially apparent to an observer of non-industrialized, "uncivilized" cultures. Laurence's two African books, The Prophet's Camel Bell and The Tomorrow Tamer are, in the deepest sense, religious, both richly archetypal and undoubtedly formative in Laurence's later atunement. With Atwood, the explanation might lie partially in childhood, growing up as she did, living intermittently in the Canadian bush, observing nature with her botanist father and her maverick, sensitive mother, both parents out of the mainstream of organized religion. Nature, young Margaret saw, as infused with a certain holiness, and modern man's intrusion, as largely a desecration. Additionally, Atwood's study with Northrop Frye certainly encouraged an interest in archetype as psychological truth.[1]

Whatever the reasons, religious themes are present, and even dominant, in the fiction of both Atwood and Laurence, and certainly deep within the structure of the novels I consider here. Though I have abandoned the gargantuan task of examining religious themes throughout their works, nevertheless the pattern of overview is with me as I write. I

work with the realization that Laurence and Atwood are, in the deepest sense, religious authors.

In Surfacing and in the Manawaka set, there is no question but that religious themes, structures, and patterns have been employed with intent--not by chance or subconscious fortuity. By name and recurrently a reader can see the actual words *shaman, icon, diviner, totem, shrine, fetish, altar, oracle, taboo, priestess, apocolypse, pentacost, rite, offering, grace, absolution, redemption, confession, believer, talisman, sacrilege*, and, of course, *God*. And it is not by accident that Laurence has characters named *Rachel, Hagar, Christie, Lazarus, Matthew, Bram (Abraham)*, and *John* who people the half-fictional town *Manawaka* (Man awake)--or that Atwood's central character is nameless because of her damaged spirit and identity.

Here are myths, quests, sacraments, kinship systems and their primitive sources. Institutional religion, especially in its fringe and fundamentalist manifestations, appears in sharp contrast to personal religion. Empty formalism and pentacostal ecstasy stand in pallid counterpoint to the personal sacraments and sacred quests of central characters --characters who are not only at quest for spirituality, but who are driven to survive.

Much of my thinking about the religious emphasis in Surfacing and The Diviners came to me before I even attempted a literature search on the subject, and perhaps that is a good thing. Here in the hinterlands of Utah I have slim

access to Canadian materials. Though both Margarets are renowned in Canada, and though their international reputations are secure,[2] for some reason, little has been written about them in the states. For instance, though Margaret Laurence is revered in Canada as "the Canadian Tolstoy,"[3] at the time of her death (January 5, 1987) I could find no press notices in United States papers or journals, and Canadian papers were unavailable to me except later through the graces of a Canadian friend who clipped lengthy obituary tributes from major Canadian newspapers and sent them to me.

Many of the promising titles I requested through Inter-library Loan were simply unavailable. I was fortunate to secure from BYU Margaret Atwood: Language, Text, and System by Sherrill E. Grace and Lorraine Weir, and from the University of Utah, George Woodcock's marvelous anthology on Laurence, A Place to Stand On, as well as having my own copy of Clara Thomas' The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence.

According to MLA, some studies have been done on The Diviners and Surfacing. I can only trust that my analysis treats the comparison with a singular depth and affection.

THE MANAWAKA SERIES

> Manawaka is not so much any one prairie town as an amalgam of many prairie towns. Most of all, I like to think, it is simply itself, a town of the mind, my own private world . . . which one hopes will ultimately relate to the outer world which we share.
> Margaret Laurence, Heart of a Stranger

Before turning to The Diviners and Surfacing, consider first, then, the three earlier novels in the Manawaka series, with its outcroppings of religious reference, its richness of Biblical language and allusion, and its foundation rock of symbol, myth and ritual. In this series Laurence has created a fictional Canadian town, Manawaka, peopling it, tracing relationships and genealogy, ancestry and social structure in a manner comparable to Faulkner's Yoknapatapha County.

In each book of the Manawaka series, the central characters grapple with their tightlaced Scots-Presbyterian heritage, reacting against it, but being indelibly influenced by it. All are in quest of a personal freedom that lies outside the constraints of the religion they have known.

The Stone Angel (SA)

> We shall not cease from exploration
> And the end of our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time.
> T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding" (59)

In Laurence's complex and poignant first Manawaka novel, The Stone Angel (1964), religious themes are "ram-

pant," as is the memory of the 93-year-old narrator, Hagar Shipley. By using memory as a way of unfolding present and past almost simultaneously, Laurence has used a credible device. It is natural for old people to live in the past. We see Hagar, feisty, bitter, frightened--victim of the indignities and constraints of the narrowing world of old age. But we see her also as the proud, defiant youth and woman she had been. Like her Biblical namesake, she has wandered in the wilderness. "Pride was my wilderness," she confesses in an epiphanic last moment, "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 . . ." (SA 261).

Hagar's name not only has Biblical resonances. It is also, as all our names deeply are, a symbol of selfhood. Though Bram (*Abraham?*), her husband, may lack the polish and education she wishes he had, he at least acknowledges her uniqueness and not just her role. "You know something, Hagar?" he says in the midst of one of their arguments,

> "there's men in Manawaka call their wives 'Mother' all the time. That's one thing I never done."
>
> It's true. He never did, not once. I was Hagar to him, and if he were alive, I'd be Hagar to him yet. And now I think, he was the only person close to me who ever thought of me by my name, not daughter, nor sister, nor mother, nor even wife, but Hagar, always. (SA 69)

There is magic and power in a name, and Laurence almost never chooses one for a character casually.

A product of Manawaka's strictures, and of her mer-

chant father's Scottish pride, Hagar had bought a sort of reckless partial freedom through her marriage to Bramton Shipley. Marrying "beneath herself," she was disinherited by her father and made outcast by the smug class-conscious community. In her wool-gathering old age she fights against being put in a Home, resents the empty religious bromides of the town's minister, struggles to retain a measure of dignity, and remembers a long life of destructive willfullness. Having tragically lost her favored son, John, her Ishmael, partly through her own folly in trying to control his life, she comes at last to confess her guilt and to seek redemption through a deathbed lie. To Marvin, her less loved son, she tells the lie of love (that she loved him better than she had John), wrested from her as Jacob did from the angel, "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me."

But before this redemptive act, the story has moved poignantly forward on two levels, with its juxtaposed image of Hagar--senile, incontinent, grotesque, sardonic, and Hagar--young, strong, dark-maned, and ambitious. In her last ditch attempt to avoid being put away in the Silver-threads Nursing Home, Hagar has managed to flee to a deserted fish cannery upcoast from Vancouver. There, in this incongruous setting, another of the sacramental acts takes place. Cold, ill, without food, and not in control of either mind or body functions, Hagar is joined by another

human in extremity. Murray F. Lees (Murray *flees?*), just one of a number of Laurence's fringe religion characters, has come to seek refuge and to drown his sorrow in cheap wine. He lives with the tragedy of his infant son's death on his conscience, since the child burned in his crib while Lees and his fanatical wife prayed at the Redeemer's Advocates' Tabernacle for a revelation about the coming of the New Kingdom. In an almost Jungian sense, he fills the requirement for messenger of the gods, being part clown, part fraud.

These strange bedfellows, Hagar and Murray, their tongues loosed by wine, exchange roles of confessor and priest by turn, compulsively telling out, and thereby recognizing, their lives' sins. Their church is an old cannery, its floor "stained by years of dark oil and the blood of fishes" (SA 192), their altar a derelict fishing boat among decaying boxes and nets, their chalice a jug of cheap wine, and the Host, soda biscuits Hagar had brought along for sustenance. Loose in the empty room is the trapped gull, one of several instances in the Manawaka series of a bird in a room, signifying, after the folk-belief, *a death in the house*.[4]

With the coming of self-recognition, Hagar's quest is almost complete. It needs only, then, a true emblem--a sacred sign. "Rescued" from the fishery, hospitalized and dying, Hagar, in one last defiant yet submissive rite, wrests a glass of water, her sacramental cup, from a nurse.

She partakes, "I'll drink from this glass, or spill it, just as I choose. I'll not countenance anyone else's holding it for me.... I hold it in my own hands. There. There" (SA 275).

The cup of life at the moment of her death is a redemptive sacrament, yet a sign of her indomitable pride.

A Jest of God (JG)

> If any man among you thinketh himself
> to be wise, let him become a fool,
> that he may be wise.
> I Corinthians 2:18

In A Jest of God (1966), Rachel Cameron, like the barren Rachel of the Bible, is barren physically, but she is also barren psychologically. A spinster schoolteacher subtly dominated by her hypochondriac self-important mother, stultified by the community and by her own debasing humility, she, like her Biblical namesake, is destined to mourn for the children she never had. Symbolic of the extent of her pent-upness is the glossolalia scene, where Rachel finds herself, against her own will, speaking in tongues. Calla Mackie, in her proselyting fervor has persuaded Rachel to accompany her to a Pentacostal meeting at The Tabernacle of the Risen and Reborn. Beforehand Calla has explained her own belief in the "gift of tongues," and to Rachel it has seemed "indecent ... almost in the same class as what she calls foul language" (JG,32). Fearful to even be witness to ecstatic utterance, imagining, with horror, that Calla

may "suddenly rise and keen like the Grecian women wild on the hills, or wail in a wolf's voice, or speak as hissingly as a cell of serpents" (JG 38), Rachel, through the pitch and contagion of the service, and through her own desperate need to give some kind of utterance to her buried emotions, is the one who speaks in tongues. In a Jungian sense, her inner self has demonstrated lack of accord with her outer persona. In a religious sense, her hysteria, giving rise to moaning and babbling, may be a jest of God, but not the central jest of the title.

Rachel, ripe not only for glossolalia, but for love and freedom, allows herself to be seduced by Nick Kazlik, an old schoolmate from, in her mother's view, "the other side of the tracks." Nick not only brings a sexual liberation to Rachel, but he liberates a buried selfhood in her as well. He is able to make her no longer barren, but not in the way she at first believes, when she thinks herself to be pregnant with his child. Though the presumed pregnancy turns out to be not life, but a tumor of benign nothingness, her psychic fruitfulness and degree of freedom is real. (This necessity for a fruitful womb will reappear in Surfacing and The Diviners.) After surgery, coming out of the anesthesia, she says, "I am the mother now." In a sense she may now become mother to her own mother. She can leave Manawaka's constraints, she can give utterance to the benediction, "God's mercy on reluctant jesters, God's grace on fools. God's pity on God" (JG 246).

The Fire Dwellers (FD)

> --I stand in relation to my life both as child and as parent, never quite finished with the old battles, never able to arbitrate properly the new, able to look both ways but whichever way I look, God, it looks pretty confusing to me.
>
> Fire-Dwellers (40)

In the beginning was the Word. Stacey Cameron, of The Fire Dwellers (1969), city dwelling sister of Rachel, is one who puts faith in words, lives by words, and comes to realize that words fail. Much of this novel revolves around communication--or lack of it. Every human relationship hangs in the balance of words, and even human thought processes and attempts to communicate with the Divine rely on words (some philosophical debates on the subject notwithstanding).

Stacey moves through days and years built largely of words, not only outer words, but inner dialogues--a dialectic of self with self and, sometimes, self with God. Meanwhile, conversations with her taciturn husband Mac, are largely unsatisfactory and superficial, while conversations with her older children are, often as not, punctuated by slammed doors. Jen, her two-year-old daughter is not given yet to sulkiness, but symbolically, she cannot or will not even babble, "Mama" or "Dada," only hums a little. Conversations with Mac's father, Matthew, a retired preacher, usually dwindles to Sunday School sermonettes, with

Stacey's unspoken inner retorts. Talk with friends is masked by facades and social lies, and God, of course, never bothers to reply. "God knows why I chat with you, God--it's not that I believe in you. Or I do and I don't, like echoes in my head. It's somebody to talk to . . ." (FD 59). In Stacey's curious but credible inner prayer, she scolds God and then berates herself:

> Listen here, God, don't talk to me like that. You have no right. *You* try bringing up four kids. Don't tell me you've brought up countless millions because I don't buy that. We've brought our own selves up and precious little help we've had from you. If you're there. Which you probably aren't, although I'm never convinced totally one way or the other. So next time you send somebody down here, get it born as a her with seven young or a him with a large family and a rotten boss, eh? Then we'll see how far the inspirational bit goes. God, pay no attention. I'm nuts. I'm not myself. (FD, 168)

Though Stacey mourns her disbelief, she can't talk herself into a position of faith. The closest God ever comes to a revelation for Stacey is only bathos:

> I used to think there would be a blinding flash of light someday, and then I would be wise and calm and would know how to cope with everything and my kids would rise up and call me blessed. Now I see that whatever I'm like, I'm pretty well stuck with it for life. Hell of a revelation that turned out to be. (FD, 271)

If words fail her in personal and spiritual relationships, they bombard her from the secular media. Through newspapers, radios, and especially television, the apocalyptic world with its random, senseless death, its horrors and conflagrations, invades the insular world of her middle class, middle aged life. As she slogs through days of

family demands, of "wifely" responsibilities, of knee-deep trivia, the media daily force her to be aware of the holocaust "out there," to realize that all the people around her are also living in "burning houses." Sometimes the distance of horror is eclipsed to her own block--to her own family. And her dreams nightly burn with blood and fire and mutilation. Isolate and ineffectual, Stacey is as unable to prevent her best friend's suicide attempt or to rescue the child down the street from being killed by a passing car, as she is to stop napalm bombings on the other side of the globe.

As Everywoman of the modern profane world, her temples and holy places have dwindled to supermarkets and beauty salons[5]:

> The long aisles of the temple. Side chapels with the flesh of chrome where dead fish lie among the icy strawberries. The mounds of offerings, jungles of lettuce, tentacles of green onions, Arctic effluvia flavored raspberry and orange . . . Music hymning from invisible choirs. (FD 66)

And if she is not attending this ritual service, with its checkout stand altar and piped in Musak, she is making a pilgrimage to another shrine:

> The priestesses are clad in pale mauve smocks. They glide and dart, the movements perfectly assured and smooth, no wasted effort. A heavy woman with heavy grey hair sinks down in a chair in front of a grapefruit yellow basin . . . She leans back her head to receive the benediction of the shampoo. The priestess's plastic sheathed hands administer to her scalp, the fingers like yellow talonless claws . . . . (FD 87)

And while in the States we have our Tupperware services,

for Stacey in Vancouver there were Polyglam Superware meetings, where the new "oracle" of plastic containers preached the doctrine and involved her congregation in ritual word games.

Meanwhile, Mac paid his obeisances to selling, being a circuit preacher of the pseudo-gospel of "Richalife" pills, potions, and creams.

Contrasted with modern man's plastic and chrome holy places are ancient symbols and elemental sources. Fire, of course, is both vital and destructive. Stacey is a "fire-dweller" as are we all--vulnerable to both inner and outer flames, yet dependent on its creative warmth and light. Stacey is also of water, called "Merwoman" by her erstwhile young lover, Luke. She looks to water as a life-force, a source of renewal, of ties with the ancient past:

> Stacey listening at night on the beach alone . . . listening to the lunatic voices of the loons, witch birds out there in the night lake, or voices of dead shamans, mourning the departed Indian gods. (FD 157)

But water, like fire, has its dual aspects, and she very nearly loses a son to its depths.

Fire, water, earth--all signify a sacred world beyond the ken of modern man. The ancients, better attuned, fascinate Stacey, suggesting a connection with something that has been lost. "At night the spruce trees held themselves intensely still, dark and immutable as old Indian gods, holding up the star-heavy sky" (FD 67). The

attraction of totem poles for Stacey suggests her desire for the sacred primitive world as contrasted with the profane world of modernity. (This *dis-ease* with the contemporary and the longing for the primitive have significance for what is to come later in this study.)

> And there they are--high, thin, bleached in the sun, cracking and splintering, the totems of the dead. And of the living dead. If I were one of them, the nominally living, I'd sure as hell hate people like me, coming in from the outside. You want to ask them if they know any longer what the poles mean, or if it's a language which has got lost and now there isn't anything to replace it except silence and sometimes the howling of men who've been separated from themselves for so long that it's only a dim memory . . . . (FD 206)

By the end of the book Stacey Cameron, though she has learned much about the failures of human communication, realizes, too, the necessity of holding some faith in words. What Laurence says in a critical work about the Nigerian author, Chinua Achebe, perfectly applies to what she herself has shown in The Fire-Dwellers:

> He shows the impossibly complicated difficulties of one person speaking to another, attempting to hear --really to hear--what another is saying. In his novels, we see man as a creature whose means of communication are both infinitely subtle and infinitely clumsy, a prey to invariable misunderstandings. Yet Achebe's writing also conveys the feeling that we must attempt to communicate, however imperfectly, if we are not to succumb to despair or madness. The words which are spoken are rarely the words which are heard, but we must go on speaking. (Long Drums and Cannons, 124)

And if Stacey goes on speaking, both to others and inside her own head, Laurence's next character, Morag Gunn, goes on writing, for she is a diviner of words.

CHAPTER II

THE DIVINERS AND SURFACING PART 1

> Diviners try to elicit from their clients responses which give them clues to the current tension in their groups of origin. Divination, therefore, becomes a form of social analysis, in the course of which hidden conflicts are revealed so that they may be dealt with by traditional and institutionalized procedures.
>
> Victor W. Turner, The Drums of Affliction

> The creative writer perceives his world once and for all in childhood and adolescence, and his whole career is an effort to illustrate his private world in terms of the great public world we all share.
>
> Graham Greene, Heart of a Stranger

I have now come to The Diviners, the culmination of Laurence's Manawaka series--the most complex of her works and, of necessity, the most complex focus of my study. Besides respecting The Diviners as a work of profound intricacy on its own, I view it, additionally, as a bridge to Margaret Atwood's fiction through her own complex novel, Surfacing. I am fascinated by the interplay of religious themes and motifs in the two books, and I hope to record contrapuntally some of them here.

It might be well first to briefly outline plot structures of the two books in order to be able to then concentrate on thematic aspects. Otherwise, plot lines may later get in the way when themes should be primary.

The central character of The Diviners is Morag Gunn, a child of Scottish Canadian farmers who died of infantile paralysis when Morag was very young. She is brought up by

Christie Logan, the town garbage collector, its "scavenger," and Prin, his wife, a kindly, illiterate, torpid, and grotesquely fat woman. For much of Morag's youth these foster parents are a great embarrassment to her. It is only later that she recognizes their gifts, especially Christie's provision of roots. As soon as possible Morag leaves Manawaka to attend the University at Winnipeg. Her English professor, Brooke Skelton, seems to represent all she has sought--education, position, a ticket to the Establishment life rather than the outcast status she has known. They marry and move to Toronto where Brooke moves up the academic ladder, as he wishes to do. After ten years of a semi-paralyzing marriage, Morag leaves Brooke, realizing they had never really known each other and that she has been only an object to him. She takes up briefly with Jules (Skinner) Tonnerre, her Metis lover from teen days in Manawaka, her only acquaintance from those days whose family had been less "respectable" than her adoptive one. She willingly becomes pregnant by him, then is thrown to her own resources, leading a life as a struggling writer with a child to raise. She and the child, Pique, live first in Vancouver, then in London, England. While there she is mistress to a Scottish painter, McRaith, until she returns to be with Christie Logan as he is dying. Realizing that her soul home is Canada, not Scotland, she settles on a small farm north of Toronto. There she writes and comes to understand herself and

Pique, who is by now a young woman. With flashback *movie bank* memories Morag reflects on her past and is able to philosophically come to terms with Skinner Tonnerre's tragic last years and death, and to accept change and loss in general, achieving a serenity which might appropriately be called a "state of grace."

Shifting from the plot of The Diviners to the plot of Surfacing, several points need to be noted. The narrator, purposely never named, is a young woman, ostensibly *emancipé*, who has learned of the disappearance of her botanist father from the island where the family had spent summers during her childhood. She goes in search of him with three companions, Anna and David (a sorry but perhaps representative example of modern marriage), and Joe, the narrator's would-be lover.

We are first given to understand that she is divorced and somewhat callous, having left her "child" of that "marriage" for her "husband" to raise. It turns out that these coldly given "facts" are lies to herself. The truth is that she had been made pregnant by a married man and had then been forced by him to abort the child. Her faith in human kind having been damaged by this affair, she becomes further disillusioned and, indeed, crazed, by her microcosmic island view of the lack of piety in her companions. She observes instances of modern man's desecration of nature and general loss of touch with the sacred.

Her search for her father becomes a search for lost innocence as well as for the man.

In the abandoned cabin she finds puzzling drawings done by her father. At first she takes these to be evidence that he had gone mad, a suggestion that he might be hiding somewhere on the island. She then comes to understand that the drawings are her father's renderings of pictographs he had located. By the maps he had drawn, she realizes that the rock art is now underwater, beneath a man-made lake. In diving for them, she encounters what may be her father's drowned body.

It is difficult to stay with plot level from here on, since plot dissolves into symbol, story to rites and passages. It would not be interpretive to say that the character tries to put off her humanity--to become animal and therefore guiltless, purified. She offers up her clothes to the "gods" of nature, plunges into the lake in order to be ritually cleansed, sets up a series of taboos, hides from her companions, and is finally left by them on the island, free then to complete her transformation. When the rites are accomplished, she is able to begin her rebirth journey. Only then can she respond in a human, whole way to Joe when he returns to the island in search of her.

Plots sketched, then, I would like to examine in this section three dominant motifs common to both The Diviners and Surfacing. These I will treat under the headings: *The Quest, The Image*, and *The Word.*

THE QUEST

If I had to classify The Diviners and Surfacing as fiction types and I were allowed only one descriptor, then I would have to typify them as novels of quest--the inner destination of the books' central characters being realization and integration of self. Both deal with pilgrimages to the interior. Both treat in almost Jungian fashion the initial divided selves of the central characters and their progression to individuation and self-discovery. Both books centrally involve the search for lost pasts and lost parents; both employ archetypal forms in the process.

Very early in Surfacing (S), for instance, the central character remembers having had her hand read at a party. "'Do you have a twin?' I said No. 'Are you positive?' she said, 'because some of your lines are double'" (S 10).

For Morag, of The Diviners (D), her Janus view is signaled in the very first lines of the book: "The river flowed both ways." This is to be thematic and recurrent, suggesting Morag's looking to past and future, her dual attention to both fact and fiction, and her dialectic between pragmatic, acting self and recording, reflective self. And the novel closes with emphatic clarification of the image:

> 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.* (D 452-453)

With another remarkably similar image, both books signal their protagonists' separation from self. Curiously, both characters imagine themselves within the wombs of their mothers. Morag looks at a faded sepia snapshot of her real mother, Louisa Gunn, who died when Morag was very young:

> Morag Gunn is in this picture, concealed behind the ugliness of Louisa's cheap housedress, concealed in her mother's flesh, invisible. Morag is still buried alive, the first burial, still a little fish, connected unthinkingly with life, held to existence by a single thread. (D 7)

And Atwood's character imagines she prenatally sees her brother's drowning:

> It was before I was born but I can remember it as clearly as if I saw it, and perhaps I did see it: I believe that an unborn baby has its eyes open and can look out through the walls of the mother's stomach, like a frog in a jar. (S 37-38)

And we begin to realize that this character's lies to herself, her division against herself, are deeper than merely an artistic juggling of fact and fiction. As she begins her pilgrimage back to her sources, though to her travelling companions she appears cool, modern, unflappable, within, the archaic self is rising to be cleansed, rising almost as gorge:

> we're here too soon and I feel deprived of something, as though I can't really get here unless

> I've suffered; as though the first view of the lake, which we can see now, blue and cool as redemption, should be through tears and a haze of vomit. (S 18)

So begins the liminal state of her passage to self and toward a certain wholeness. Here, though, the depth of her self's division is made pointedly apparent:

> I didn't feel much of anything, I hadn't for a long time.... At some point my neck must have closed over, pond freezing or a wound, shutting me into my head. (S 126)

This division of head and heart prevents her from being an integrated self, as the book's lines insistently make clear.

> I'd allowed myself to be cut in two. Woman sawn apart in a wooden crate, wearing a bathing suit, smiling, a trick done with mirrors, I read it in a comic book; only with me there had been an accident and I came apart. The other half, the one locked away, was the only one that could live; I was the wrong half, detached, terminal. I was nothing but a head, or no, something minor like a severed thumb; numb. (S 129)

This character will, before the book ends, devise for herself a series of rites and passages that are in accord with initiation mysteries in primitive religions, rites that will make her whole. Already, we have noted the classic separation from the mother. Still to come will be her symbolic initiatory death and her metamorphosis to a new, transformed state. Her rites of passage proceed in the classic archtypal pattern as described by Van Gennep, including separation from the world, penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return.[6]

Morag's self-division is comparable in depth to the

Atwood character's, only in that she, for a ten year period, is also victim--when her spirit and creativity are suppressed by a negative, demeaning marriage situation. Brooke Skelton, her university professor husband, robs her for a time of her inner self. Paternalistically he thinks of himself as her savior, having married her, this young student from an impoverished provincial background, whisking her off to the insular sterility of his Toronto academic life where she could be his princess, his Rapunzel in the tower. His diminutive for her is "Little One," though she is in her late twenties and five feet eight inches tall. He scoffs at her thinking and at her writing efforts, requiring of her only that she "keep on being happy and cheerful," both qualities antithetical to Morag's dark personality. She is to dress for her role as professor's wife, wear her hair as fashion dictates, and entertain his colleagues and students on demand.

Most damagingly, though, Brooke ridicules Morag's efforts to become a writer, just as Surfacing's protagonist had been ridiculed by her "lover"/teacher for her dream of becoming an artist rather than just a commercial illustrator:

> For awhile I was going to be a real artist; he thought that was cute but misguided, he said I should study something I'd be able to use because there never has been any important women artists. (S 60)

> I kept the scraps of his handwriting like saints' relics, he never wrote letters, all I had was criticisms in red pencil he paperclipped to my drawings.

> C's and D's, . . . he said he didn't want our relationship as he called it to influence his aesthetic judgment. (S 174)

As Atwood's character is directed to be commercial and trivial, so Brooke condescends to Morag, urging her to write for women's magazines--or not at all--but never seriously considering the worth of her novel in progress.

Brooke not only denies Morag artistic fruitfulness, he denies her a child as well, preferring to keep her as his child, his Nora in her doll's house. Forced during this whole long period to deny the Black Celt in herself, the "Morag Dhu," dark and proud, of her own Scots clan, she nevertheless gestates as a writer, shortly to give birth to her books, and partly through them, to her own true self. Morag further accomplishes her metamorphosis through her pilgrimage home, through her retreat to nature, and through, in part, the help of her shaman, Jules Tonnerre. He is one of the book's several <u>diviners</u>. It is his reentry into Morag's life that accomplishes the needed separation from Brooke.

> "I'm the *shaman*, eh?" he says.
> "I don't know," Morag says. "I never thought of it like that. But I know that whatever I'm going to do next or wherever I go, it'll have to be on my own." (D 273)

Paralleling Morag's having been denied a child by Brooke is the sublimated fact that the "I" in <u>Surfacing</u> has been forced to abort her child. She is a long time in facing the truth of that horror, but when she at last does, she must find expiation, or more, rebirth. She must

pass through symbolic madness and death in order to move to another mode of existence. Purified, she seals her ritual passage by mating and conceiving. Only then can her corrupted self be exorcised, forgiven:

> I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake where it has been prisoned for so long, its eyes and teeth phosphorescent; the two halves clasp, interlocking like fingers, it buds, it sends out fronds. This time I will do it by myself, squatting, on old newspapers in a corner alone; or on leaves, dry leaves, a heap of them, that's cleaner. The baby will slip out easily as an egg, a kitten, and I'll lick it off and bite the cord, the blood returning to the ground where it belongs; the moon will be full, pulling. In the morning I will be able to see it: it will be covered with shining fur, a god, I will never teach it any words. (S 191)

This imagined child is partly her aborted fetus, but partly, too, her own unsullied child-self.

Morag also must be allowed to conceive and have a child. She does this through her shaman Jules, but she will raise the girl child Pique by herself. As with primitive initiates, others may lead and instruct, but the final passage must be taken alone.

Furthermore, for both characters, the act of conception constitutes a mystery. As Eliade says,

> it is the revelation of feminine sacredness; that is of the mystic unity between life, woman, nature and the divinity. This revelation is of a transpersonal order, for which reason it is expressed in symbols and actualized in rites. (Beame and Doty 288)

THE IMAGE

The photograph as another image of self, but not

self, also plays heavily in both Surfacing and The Diviners. In looking through pictures from her past, the only true icons she has of her own dead parents and of her childhood, Morag observes, "I keep the snapshops not for what they show, but for what is hidden in them" (D 6). And in Surfacing the narrator, also looking at an album of photos of her youthful parents when she was a child says, "I was in most of the pictures, shut in behind the paper; or not me but the missing part of me" (S 128).

The collecting of photographs is in part an acquisitive trait--a way of holding onto things or connections. Susan Sontag observes,

> To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relationship with the world that feels like knowledge--and therefore like power. (4)

Morag could, then, be speaking for herself and for Atwood's character when she observes about the snapshops:

> *I've kept them, of course, because something in me doesn't want to lose them, or perhaps doesn't dare. Perhaps they're my totems, or contain a portion of my spirit.* (D 6)

What further does a photograph suggest? That is a question which needs to be considered in the reading of both of these books. It implies stasis, for one thing, a stoppage of time. In the photograph, time and form are frozen, preserved. A photo, like a mirror, reflects an image--in a way that seems to capture something of one's essence. Perhaps this is why Jules Tonnerre refuses to

have his picture taken. In his identity with his Indian ancestry, he retains a certain superstitious notion that something of himself will be lost to the photograph. Yet he clings to the snapshot of his daughter, Pique, as evi dence of his paternity and as an emblem of love. The protag onist in Surfacing also harbors the belief that "a camera could steal not only your soul but your body also" (S 139).

Pictures, furthermore, establish connections with our past. The central character in Surfacing, as does Morag, goes back and back to albums of pictures, studying them, trying to understand and connect with the man and woman who were her parents, looking, as well, for her lost self in the untainted images of her childhood.

> Photo album, I'm in it somewhere, successive incar-nations of me preserved and flattened like flowers pressed in dictionaries;. . . I used to hate standing still, waiting for the click. (S 79)

Ancestral links, symbolic images, essences caught, totems:

> Grandmothers and grandfathers first, distant ancestors, strangers, in face-front firing-squad poses: cameras weren't ordinary then, maybe they thought their souls were being stolen, as the Indians did. Underneath them were labels in white, my mother's cautious printing. My mother before she was married, another stranger with bobbed hair and a knitted hat. Wedding pictures, corseted smiles. My brother before I was born, then pictures of me beginning to appear.... My mother, in her leather jacket and odd long 1940's hair, standing beside the tray for the birds, her hand stretched out; the jays were there too, she's training them, one is on her shoulder, peering at her with clever thumbtack eyes, another is landing on her wrist, wings caught as a blur. Sun sifting around her through the pines, her eyes looking straight at the camera . . . . (S 128)

This last image, the one of her mother feeding the

jays is to be recurrent and emblematic--an icon. Indeed photographs are often present in household shrines. The scrapbook or photo album as Sontag notes, memorializes the family unit, "Those ghostly traces, photographs, supply the token presence of dispersed relatives" (9). Morag's true family connections are so fragmented that she keeps pictures, not in albums, but in an envelope. The only album in the Gunn household is one Christie brought home from the "Nuisance Grounds," its pictures missing, with only the captions remaining: "a family album, covered in red velvet (mouldy) and no name attached, no *family* name, but the pictures have things written in white ink on the black pages . . ." (D 41).

The "I" character in Surfacing not only cherishes the photo image, capturing both instant and essence, she holds, too, the mental image of her mother feeding, taming the jays--her mother and father--links with nature, passages away from corrupt modernity, symbols of an authentic heritage where natural life had not been tainted by mass culture. This, the image in memory, like the photo, like a vision:

> I see her. She is standing in front of the cabin, her hand stretched out, she is wearing her gray leather jacket; her hair is long, down to her shoulders in the style of thirty years ago, before I was born; she is turned half away from me, I can see only the side of her face. She doesn't move, she is feeding them: one perches on her wrist, another on her shoulder . . . if I blink she will vanish. (S 213)

These are all positive images captured on film or in

memory. There are negative (no pun intended) photo images as well. The travelling companions, David, Anna, and Joe, in Surfacing, care little about locating a lost father. They are bent, instead, on having a lark in the woods and on adding to their filmic collage "Random Samples" to be, as I noted in my plot summary, a montage of the bizarre in contemporary life. The narrator disapproves from the start, calling it "Random Pimples" and recognizing its tastelessness, a representation of how far man has come from the sacred. On it were shots of the Bottle Villa that they encountered on their way to the Canadian back country--a house built entirely of pop bottles. Then there were the stuffed moose, dressed as humans. Clips included fish entrails and a demeaning scene in which Anna is forced to be filmed in the nude. When the narrator has become sacredly mad, she opens the camera to expose the film and to destroy the profane images.

> When I've unraveled the reels I open the back of the camera. The film coils onto the sand under the water, weighted down by its containers; the invisible captured images are swimming away into the lake like tadpoles . . . Anna with no clothes on jumping off the end of the dock, finger up, hundreds of tiny naked Annas no longer bottled up and shelved. (S 195)

With this act she symbolically does away with some of the sordid which so repulses her. Her action is like a voodoo charm, undoing the desecrators by destroying their images.

Similar to photography, and ancestral to it, is the capturing of visual images with drawings. The narrator, with her artist's eye, observes things as visual pictures

or paintings. Thwarted as a real artist, these pictures no longer make it onto paper, but remain graphic in her mind. As a child, though, before she was corrupted by societal influences, she had freely painted out the images. In a found scrapbook she comes back to records of this purer state,

> the scrapbook had early people, hairs blazing out of their heads like rays or spikes, and suns with faces . . . figures drawn in crayon . . . a woman with a round moon stomach; the baby was sitting up inside her gazing out. Opposite her was a man with horns on his head like cow horns and a barbed tail . . . . The baby was myself before I was born, the man was God . . . if the Devil was allowed a tail and horns, God needed them also, they were advantages . . . . They were my guides, she had saved them for me, pictographs . . . . (S 185)

These drawings from the untainted, animistic, green world of early childhood begin to give way to the mimetic influence of mass culture, running to decorated eggs and to Easter bunnies and then later to her teenage drawings of stereotype models in their society-dictated attire.

Not only had her mother left these albums and scrapbooks, taken as non-verbal, visual messages, but her father's legacy was non-verbal as well--cryptic drawings and maps that lead her not just to the ancient pictographs he had found dammed up beneath the man-made lake, but provide passage as well to her lost self, also deeply and artificially submerged. Hands, antlered figures, a half-human, half-animal--

> The body was long, a snake or a fish; it had four limbs or arms and a tail and on the head were two

> branched horns. Lengthwise it was like an animal, an alligator; upright it was more human, but only in the positions of the arms and front-facing eyes. (S 121)

Here, perhaps, were early man's picture albums, mounted on rock walls. Ironically, her father drowned in an effort to photograph these underwater pictographs--to collect them on film--his body held down, in part, by the heavy camera he wore.

Contrasted with the ancient rock art messages are the obscene graffiti the narrator and her brother had encountered when they were children. Finding what she took to be clams, pencilled on the walls of an abandoned government cabin, she remembers that when her brother explained, she

> was shocked, not by those parts of the body, we'd been told about those, but that they should be cut off like that from the bodies that ought to have gone with them, as though they could detach themselves and crawl around on their own like snails... but of course they were magic drawings like the ones in caves. You draw on the wall what's important to you, what you're hunting. (S 142)

Another image caught--when Morag goes to England and Scotland in search of her roots, not realizing yet that they are in Manawaka, McRaith, her artist-lover, paints her portrait, calling it "The Dispossessed." Understanding her as he does, he has captured on canvas much of the essence of her true self.

> One day he shows her the painting of Morag "Dhu"... Her features are in shadow. Only her black hair can be seen, and her eyes, clearly and unmistakably the eyes of Morag, angry and frightened, frighteningly strong. (D 379)

THE WORD

The photographic motif, still not exhausted, begins to relate to language, moving from the image to the word. Laurence has Morag dip into the past through flashback sections which she labels either *Snapshots, Inner Films*, or *Memory bank Movies*. These contrived labels for the movement between present and past, audio-visual narrative, seem all the more a contrivance because Morag's images of the past are more verbal than visual, her method narrative rather than filmic. As a writer, she calls up the past with words. Even when she is visually seeing past or present, she is always the writer seeing. In the tradition of *Kunstlerroman*, the book is an artist's novel, the history of a writer writing. While the Atwood character sees a scene with her water colorist's eye, Morag sees it, then immediately searches for *le mot juste* with which to describe it. Here is Atwood's artist protagonist:

> [Atwood:] The sunset was red, a clear tulip color paling to flesh webs, membrane. Now there are only streaks of it, mauve and purple, sky visible through the window divided by the window squares and then by the interlacing branches, leaves overlapping leaves . . . . (S 189)

And here is Morag, the writer:

> [Laurence:] The swallows dipped and spun over the water, a streaking of blue-black wings and bright breastfeathers. How could that colour be caught in words? A sort of rosy peach colour, but that sounded corny and was also inaccurate. (D 4)

While Atwood's character sees the world as images,

wordlessly, as an animal might, Morag continually translates the visible world, as well as her own mental world, into words. She is clearly a diviner of words. Frequently she sees the analogy between her magic and that of the old water diviner, Royland:

> At least Royland knew he had been a true diviner. There were wells, proof positive. Water. Real wet water. There to be felt and tasted. Morag's magic tricks were of a different order. (D 452)

And when the words flowed for her it was as if by divination to a buried well-spring. Like a shaman, she is possessed with words.

> the words not having to be dredged up out of the caves of the mind, but rushing out in a spate so that her hand could not keep up with them. Odd feeling. Someone else dictating the words. (D 404)

She is, as she says, engaged in a

> daft profession. Wordsmith. Liar, more likely. Weaving fabrications . . . convinced that fiction was more true than fact. Or that fact was in fact fiction. (D 25)

She knows through her craft, of the sporadic, sometimes-magic of words. "I used to think that words could do anything. Magic, sorcery. Even miracle. But no, only occasionally" (D 4).

While Surfacing's child made crayon drawings in scrapbooks, child Morag invented stories, pondered the meanings of words, and hung on the folk tales told her by Christie Logan and Jules Tonnerre. Surfacing's character is connected to her parents, and thus to the pure part of herself, by drawings, maps and pictographs. Her connect-

ions with significant others is not primarily through words:

> I kept expecting that after my mother died, word of some kind . . . . For awhile I went twice a day to the post office box . . . but nothing arrived, maybe she didn't have time. (S 42)

Earlier she had taken her dying mother's diary from the hospital, hoping for written indications of emotions, reflections, "but except for the dates the pages were blank" (S 26).

By contrast Morag lives with words from the time she is a child. Christie Logan's wonderful heroic tales of Piper Gunn, her half-imagined, half-mythic ancestor, give her a source of pride in name and birth that she could never have found otherwise. Christie weaves the tales for her, himself a word diviner as well as a scavenger of words and of garbage. Just a few lines, even will give the flavor of his magical telling:

> It was in the old days, a long time ago, after the clans was broken and scattered at the battle on the moors, and the dead men thrown into the long graves there, and no heather grew on those places, never again, for it was dark places they had become and places of mourning. (D 49)

Morag listens to tale after tale, sometimes inventing her own versions before she goes to sleep:

> Morag's Tale of Piper Gunn's Woman Once long ago there was a beautiful woman name of Morag, and she was Piper Gunn's wife, and they went to the new land together and Morag was never afraid of anything in this whole wide world. Never. If they came to a forest, would this Morag there be scared? Not on your christly life. She would only laugh and say, *Forests cannot hurt me because I have the power and the second sight and the good eye and the strength of*

conviction.
What means *The Strength of Conviction?*
Morag sleeps. (D 52)

Very early Morag is exposed to the power of mythologies conveyed through words. These will be for her sustaining myths and the inheritance she will eventually pass on. They are her link with history, and with eternity even, her protection against the evil eye.

She is drawn, too, to Jules Tonnerre, partly because he is also an outsider, but more, because he is a teller of tales, another diviner of words. She is enchanted by his rendering of his own legendary ancestor, Rider (Jules) Tonnerre. He has heard these stories from his own father Lazarus, handed down in oral tradition and having their own magic spell:

> Well, my old man he told me this about Rider Tonnerre, away back there, so long ago no one knows when, . . . and they call him *Chevalier*--Rider--because he handles a horse so good and because his own horse is a white stallion name of *Roi du Lac*, King of the Lake, and how Rider got that horse--he got it in a kind of spooky way, because once in a dream he saw it and it spoke to him and told him to spend one whole night beside this certain lake, see, which everybody believed was haunted . . . . (D 144-145)

As with Morag, these legends raise Jules above the sordid reality of his life--they help preserve an ethnic memory and pride. Furthermore, the tales later become words in the songs Jules sings, not on his Country-Western circuit where they would be ridiculed by bar room audiences, but for himself, for his one good friend, and for, when he is sporadically with them, Morag and Pique. At

those times the unity of their family is sealed as he sings the pride of his people. Pique, called halfbreed by her schoolmates, is inheritor of these ballads and of the pride inherent in them.

Morag finds Christie's readings of poetry in Gaelic by the ancient poet, Ossian, to be anodynes for the schoolbook Wordsworth she is forced to read. She also carries on imaginary conversations with Catharine Parr Traill, early Canadian pioneer woman of grit and intelligence. Morag continually feels the power of naming, listing things, cataloging them--flowers, items from the "Nuisance Grounds." Prime among the latter items is a Bible Christie had found, with

> real leather for the cover and the letters are in real *gold* or used to be but now you can hardly see them, and you can't read the book because it is in *another language*, but Christie says it is the Holy Bible in Gaelic. Throwing out a Holy Bible! Oh. But would God mind so much, seeing as it was in Gaelic? (*What means Gaelic?*) (D 42)

Her reverence for books and the words they contain is lifelong. In college Morag treasures her copies of Milton, Hopkins, Donne and Woolf, reading them perceptively and reverently.

Books play a significant part in Surfacing too, but in a different way. They are, for one thing, indicators of the people who read them. The Gothic romances, the pulp and fashion magazines that Anna reads, point to her shallowness. The narrator's father left books in the

cabin that are artifacts, emblems of his interests and of the thrust of his life: Edible Plants and Shoots, Tying the Dry Fly, The Common Mushrooms, Log Cabin Construction, A Field Guide to Birds, Exploring Your Camera, as well as the King James Bible, (which he enjoyed, his daughter recalls, for its literary qualities), a complete Robert Burns, Boswell's Life, Thompson's Seasons, and selections from Goldsmith and Cowper--the eighteenth century rationalists he had admired--men who lived by the Golden Mean. The narrator herself is illustrating a book of Quebec fairy tales, responding to Canadian lore, especially stories of metamorphosis--the boy become wolf; the king who learns to speak to animals. Later she will methodically burn all of the books, symbolically destroying a significant tie with the rational--with a characteristic setting man apart from beast.

Language in both books is shown to be not only a uniter, but a divider of peoples, groups and individuals. The multilingual aspect of eastern Canada highlights the dividing power of language. Jules Tonnerre is a cultural and linguistic victim:

> The lost languages, forever lurking somewhere inside the ventricles of the hearts of those who had lost them. Jules, with two languages lost, retaining only broken fragments of both French and Cree, and yet speaking English as though forever it must be a foreign tongue to him. (D 244)

As a school child he refused to sing the Canadian anthem in either French or English. They are not his tongues.

Brooke had spoken Hindi as a child but had forgotten most of it. Christie has almost lost his tie with Gaelic. The Gaelic Bible is unintelligible to him and he can only recite by rote the Gaelic verses of Ossian.

In Surfacing, the language barrier is the first indicator of other communication breakdowns to come:

> My throat constricts, as it learned to do when I discovered people could say words that would go into my ears and mean nothing. To be deaf and dumb would be easier. The cards they poke at you when they want a quarter, with hand alphabet on them. Even so, you would need to learn spelling. (S 14)

In The Diviners, then, words, books, languages, are cherished--the loss of language regarded as one of the greatest of human tragedies. Christie Logan, whose magic lay in words, lost his speech through a stroke. Morag, with him at his deathbed, sorrowfully hears his mumbling, but cannot make human speech of it.

> For Christie Logan to be unable to speak--what must that be like? Christie, who told tales, who divined with the garbage, who ranted in his sorrow like the skirling of the pipes in a Pibroch. (D 394)

Another of the cruel ironies in the book is that of Jules, also a teller of tales, singer of ballads, diviner of words, develops throat cancer which silences his song. These are, forgive the pun, unspeakable sorrows in the book--to be robbed of speech, that most human trait. The Diviners, along with Laurence's other works, is testimony of her personal faith in words. Laurence's words belong to Morag: "I have had, if any faith at all, a faith in the word. *In the beginning was the Word and the*

Word was with God and the Word was God" (Heart of a Stranger 225).

By contrast, in Surfacing, human speech must ritually be put by. The "I" character has learned that man's language has been made corrupt--that it has become a vehicle of concealment and deception, that words have lost their sacred meaning to become profane in the deepest sense. Her "lover" had gained her trust and her favors through his false use of the word love. "He said he loved me, the magic word, it was supposed to make everything light up, I'll never trust that word again" (S 55). All of his treatment of her belied a sacred meaning for the word, so that later, when Joe uses the word truly, for her it is meaningless, or worse. She cannot sully another relationship with such a word.

> 'Do you love me, that's all,' he said. 'That's the only thing that matters.'
>
> It was the language again. I couldn't use it because it wasn't mine. He must have known what it meant but it was an imprecise word; the Eskimos had fifty-two names for snow because it was important to them, there ought to be as many for love. (S 127)

Her former lover, one of the defilers of the language, had panted *love* in his passion, but he had coldly penciled C's and D's to paperclip to her drawings, killing a portion of her being. He said he *loved* her then showed her snapshots of his wife; he said he *loved* her, but forced her to have an abortion. Inductively she learns that love means something which maims and betrays, something that doesn't

enhance, but rather smothers life and creativity. Therefore, she is unable to tell Joe, her new "lover," that she *loves* him. He fails to understand that she has had to redefine love. "It is love, the ritual word, he wants to know again, but I can't give redemption, even as a lie" (S 192). Joe fails to understand that her saying this is, in fact, an expression of what he most wants to hear.

Surfacing's protagonist is unable to use a lie even for redemptive purposes. In contrast, Hagar Shipley, in The Stone Angel, ended her life with the redemptive lie that she loved Marvin best.

Morag recognizes some of the impreciseness and even ambiguity of the word *love*. Pique, trying to find meaning in her own mixed blood, trying to find her own true roots even as Morag had done before her, asks Morag if she had loved Jules:

> Morag sat with her hands around the coffee mug. Thinking. How to reply and get across that much complexity in a single well-chosen phrase? Impossible.
>
> "I guess you could say love. I find words more difficult to define than I used to. I guess I felt --feel--that he was related to me in some way. I'd known him an awfully long time . . . I'm not sure *know* is the right word . . . . (D 235)

She realizes the strengths and constraints of languages, ". . . the Eskimos have twenty-five words for snow and only one for flowers"[7] (D 407).

Whereas Atwood's character pathologically lies to herself, Morag willfully uses the language to artistically view the past. She freely admits that with words she can

fabricate her own past as well as the lives of the characters she creates. This fictive impulse is with her even at age nine or ten when she invents qualities for her real mother, who, she imagines, let the pretend dog,

> sleep in Morag's bedroom to keep her company. Some people wouldn't have allowed a dog to sleep at the foot of a bed, but Morag's mother doesn't mind, because she knows Morag wants Snap to be there so as she will feel safe. Morag's mother is not the sort of mother who yells at the kids. She does not whine either. She is not like Prin. (D 8)

Now, with almost forty years' distance, she observes of the same ten-year-old's embellished memory, "*All this is crazy of course, and quite untrue. Or maybe true and maybe not. I am remembering myself composing this interpretation*" (D 8). And later still she notes, "*A popular misconception is that we can't change the past--everyone is constantly changing their own past, recalling it, revising it. What really happened? A meaningless question*" (D 60).

Though Morag realizes that words are inadequate, that they sometimes fail, and that they have power to hurt as well as to heal, she never, never rejects them. The narrator in Surfacing does, must. Thrown together with Anna and David, marriage partners who inflict pain upon each other with words, she further observes the distortion and twisting of the language. Ironically, David, as a corrupter of the language, teaches "Communication" to adult night school classes. He is facile with words, but

he makes the language profane. At one point in her transformation she sees with new eyes, able to see David truly as he was, diseased, corrupted by his own misuse of words:

> he didn't know what language to use, he'd forgotten his own, he had to copy. Second hand American was spreading over him in patches, like mange or lichen. He was infested, garbled, and I couldn't help him: it would take such time to heal, unearth him, scrape down to where he was true. (S 179)

By comparison, Joe is taciturn, slow to speak, almost, in fact, animal-like, "growling," "grunting," "howling" (S 44, 50, 132, 215). His saving grace in her eyes is his distance from the verbal. He doesn't "make" conversation. "For him the truth might still be possible, what will preserve him is the absence of words" (S 186).

Language is not only the instrument of lies, it is the conveyor of the profane. As a child "she" had learned of dirty words:

> There are no dirty words any more, they've been neutered, now they're only parts of speech; but I recall the feeling, puzzled, baffled, when I found out some words were dirty and the rest were clean. The bad ones in French were the religious ones, the worst ones in any language were what they were most afraid of and in English it was the body, that was even scarier than God. You could say Jeesus Christ, but it meant you were angry or disgusted. (S 52)

Language, misused by others, has also been her shield, her way of falsifying herself, her instrument for burying her true self. In that sense it has protected her, but it has also fundamentally failed her. Associated with the rational, it had also failed her father, that man

of science and reason. He had died seeking the knowledge of ancient people who had respected the natural world, whose "signs [had] marked sacred places, the places where you could learn the truth" (S 171). In his turn to mysticism, she knew that at first he "must have been terrified, it would be like stepping through a usual door and finding yourself in a different galaxy, purple trees and red moon and a green sun" (S 171). Yet he had made the passage, as she must do--"he had discovered new places, new oracles, they were things he was seeing the way I had seen, true vision; at the end, after the failure of logic" (S 171). When she enters into her ritual passage, abandoning the rational (and words as its instruments), she is able to move from the head, where she has been locked for too long, to the body, where she can feel, and from there to a spiritual, transpersonal state, where she can <u>see</u>. "From any rational point of view I am absurd, but there are no longer any rational points of view" (S 199). This state had earlier been her goal:

> The trouble is all in the knot at the top of our bodies. I'm not against the body or the head either; only the neck, which creates the illusion that they are separate. The language is wrong. It shouldn't have different words for them. (S 91)

In a significant episode about the killing of the heron (treated in depth later) "she" at first thinks the heinous crime has been committed by the *Americans*--for her the archetypal enemy, the apotheosis of what she despises in society. She has her own definitions for American. When

she discovers that the killers were, in fact, Canadians, she finds even more reason for abandoning language, which she sees as an emblem of "everything you do." She wanted to disassociate herself as much as possible from the desecrators, her own kind. "If you look like them and talk like them and think like them," she reasons, "you are them . . . You speak their language, a language is everything you do" (S 153). Guilt by association.

It becomes clear, then, that abandonment of man's corrupted words, and all they encompass, must be part of the ritual journey. She may, though, learn a new language, but not any of the tongues of men--an animal language and the language of nature's gods, pure, honest, and uncorrupted. In those tongues, alone, there exist no idealogies, no lies, no subterfuge. She longs for a language that is fundamental:

> Birdsong wakes me . . . . I used to know the species; I listen, my ears are rusty, there's nothing but a jumble of sound. They sing for the same reason trucks honk, to proclaim their territories; a rudimentary language. Linguistics, I should have studied that instead of art. (S 47-48)

She remembers the folk tale of

> The king who learned to speak with animals, in the story he ate a magic leaf and they revealed a treasure, a conspiracy, they saved his life; what would they really say? Accusation, lament, an outcry of rage; but they had no spokesman. (S 154)

More and more she identifies with the animals as victims and makes atavistic moves toward their kingdom:

> the animals don't lie . . . . I realized it wasn't

> the men I hated, it was the Americans, the human beings, men and women both. They'd had their chance but they had turned against the gods, and it was time for me to choose sides. I wanted there to be a machine to make them vanish . . . that way there would be more room for the animals, they would be rescued.
> 'Aren't you going to answer?' Anna said, taunting.
> 'No,' I said.
> Anna said, 'God, she really is inhuman.' (S 180-181)

With this bit of dramatic irony, Anna has spoken the literal truth without knowing it. "She" is dehumanized.

Before she can learn the purer language, she must pass through the process of forgetting, calling up names in order to forget them. "I keep my eyes on the ground, names reappearing, wintergreen, wild mint, Indian cucumber; at one time I could list every plant here that could be used or eaten" (S 56). Later she observes, "the names of things fading but their forms and uses remaining, the animals learned what to eat without nouns" (S 175). She disassociates herself from human conversation,

> I had to concentrate in order to talk to him, the English words seemed imported; foreign . . . (S 176), . . . he didn't know what language to use, he'd forgotten his own, he had to copy. Secondhand American was spreading over him in patches, like mange or lichen. He was infected, <u>garbled</u> . . . and I couldn't help him; it would take such time to heal, unearth him, scrape down to where he was true. (S 178-179)

And when she imagines the conception and birth of her "lost child," she resolves, recall, that she will "never teach it any words" (S 191).

Only when the transformation is complete, when she has passed through the animistic world of primitives and childhood, even through an animal state, can she interpret

the messages she has sought from her dead parents. Earlier her childhood drawings of the god, father, devil figure, and of her mother with the transparent fertile womb, had not been clear, though she had recognized them as arcane guides left her by her mother,

> I had to read their new meaning with the help of the power. The gods, their likenesses, their true shape is fatal. While you are human, but after the transformation they could be reached. First I had to immerse myself in the other language. (S 185)

Her parents--deified, beyond her, lost--could only be made scrutable and approachable through her own metamorphosis. Words give way to visions. She sees her mother as she had been in the emblematic photo, hand outstretched, feeding the jays, taming them. Her mother is a link between man and nature, between human and ethereal. She is an earth goddess. She "does not speak" (S 213).

Her father in vision is not transitional, but transformed--become fish, deity, Christ-like:

> I see now that although it isn't my father it is what my father has become. I knew he wasn't dead.
>
> From the lake a fish jumps
> An idea of fish jumps
> A fish jumps, carved wooden fish with dots painted on the sides, no, antlered fish thing drawn in red on cliffstone, protecting spirit. It hangs in the air suspended, flesh turned to icon, he has changed again, returned to water. How many shapes can he take. (S 219)

Because this passage is significant in what it suggests about the transformation of language taking place here, I would like to consider it line by line.

"From the lake a fish jumps" Her vision has begun

with an actual fish which triggers in her mind the word *fish*: "An idea of fish jumps." Next the actual fish and the word *fish* become graphic, become the "carved wooden fish with dots painted on the sides" that she had seen and despised in a bar room. That garish icon comes to stand for modern man's removal of the word from the actual. The bar room sign is remote from sacrality of fish. It is, rather, a come-on to "fishermen," tourists, exploiters. It signals neither beauty nor utility, merely self-indulgent pleasure. She had felt repugnance over having had to kill and clean the fish her companions had so wantonly caught. She had felt party to their violation of nature. This iconographic fish of her vision is not, alas, an "antlered fish thing drawn in red on cliffstone" as archaic man had pictographically painted. For him that ideogram had represented, at least, "protecting spirit"--not mere commercialism. This, then, is her father's visionary message, given without words. To his artist daughter he has given images--images of lost sacrality. He himself seems to have moved through these stages of visionary fish, "flesh turned to icon, he has changed again, returned to water. How many shapes can he take." Her father deified, like the early Christian symbol for the word *fish* has shown her the way. Now even the mediation of the image must wither away, as she herself becomes other:

> In one of the languages there are no names, only verbs held for a longer moment.
>
> The animals have no need for speech, why talk when you are a word
>
> I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning . . .
>
> I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place. (S 212-213)

The Word has become, not flesh, but earth itself.

Ritually transformed and enlightened by visions, she can now re-enter the human world. She can admit, "For us it's necessary, the intercession of words . . ." She can face her own lies, admitting her invention of a "fake husband," seeing him at last not as a villain but as "only a normal man, middle-aged, second-rate, selfish and kind in the average proportions" (S 220). As with any visionary, she is sure of her vision. "They were here though. I trust that. I saw them and they spoke to me in the other language" (S 220). Furthermore her parents have given her insights about themselves. With her cleansed language she can understand, now, what their found messages had meant. They are not gods; they'll not appear again. She realizes that she'll "have to live in the usual way, defining them by their absence; and love by its failures." She is able to understand something of her parents as humans, not gods--her father "islanding his life in the midst of war," endeavoring both to protect his family from the world's folly and to "sustain his illusions of reason and benevolent order." Her mother, "collecting the seasons and the weather and her children's

faces, the meticulous records that allowed her to omit other things, the pain and isolation." She can respond now to their human frailty; can realize that there are parts of their lives she can never know.

At last she can re-admit the word *love* to her mind, entertaining it as a possibility. And when Joe calls her name, she can answer.

CHAPTER III

THE DIVINERS AND SURFACING PART II

It must be apparent by now that both Margarets are consciously employing classical religious elements in their fiction and that they both have more than superficial knowledge of the ancient themes they weave.

Laurence expressly notes her interest in matters ethnographic and anthropological in a 1983 interview with Rosemary Sullivan (Woodcock, A Place to Stand On 64). Sullivan comments on the astonishing degree to which Laurence penetrated African cultures in The Prophet's Camel Bell and The Tomorrow-Tamer. Laurence responds that she, "had read enormously and widely, books of anthropology and books written by Ghanaians too about their own culture." Her African experience attuned her sensibilities to "the richness of rituals," but "don't forget," she adds, "that I had come myself from a culture in which ritual was important . . ." (Woodcock, A Place to Stand On 67). Her books, richly layered with myth and story as they are, speak for her attunement.

Atwood, too, pointedly talks about sources of the mythic and the ritual in her writing. In an interview with Jan Castro,[8] Atwood comments on her fascination with myth (particularly Greek) and fairy tale (especially Grimm), and she pinpoints the sourcebook for Amerindian themes in Surfacing as being Indian Rock Paintings of the

Great Lakes by Selwyn Dewdney. His diagrams, drawings, and speculations were highly influential to her text.

I mention these two interviews as further indications of a more than casual use of folk forms and religious structures. These authors are using mythic metaphors not merely as poetic gadgets, but as religio-folkloric studies.

Even as I write this, though, I realize the danger of being reductionist--that dissecting analysis such as this carries the built-in danger that writer or reader, or both, may lose sight of larger views. Anthony Hecht, in his Obbligati, Essays in Criticism, suggests that the proper role of criticism is to be that of, "a musical obbligato that is a counterpart that must constantly strive to move in strict harmony with and intellectual counterpoint to its subject, and remain always subordinate to the text upon which it presumes to comment" (vii). The Diviners especially, has an epic dimension that ought not to be reduced to isolate symbols.

Yet I intend to move in even closer to religious themes and motifs, and to further note the surprising correspondences between the two books. As I do so, I would like not to lose sight of the books' deeper religious scope, nor of their artistic separateness. These are not twin works, and Laurence and Atwood are not carbon copies of one another. Both, though, are writing out of a

sensitivity to sacred themes, both are noting a loss of sacrality in contemporary life, and both are concerned with the continuing quest for spirituality and with the drive for survival. Each speaks with a voice that is unique, but each listens to a similar muse.

Of both Margarets I would say, further, that their touch is not light; the religious pulse in their writing is not faint or accidental, and their parallel use of archetypal symbols and themes is undeniable and endlessly fascinating.

The remaining religious themes, symbols, and motifs common to both books organize nicely under the elemental substances, Water, Air, Earth, and Fire. With these Empedoclean headings, I find some order in multiplicity.

WATER

> And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.
> Genesis 1:2

> Save me, O God, for the waters are come unto my soul.
> Psalm 69:1

Water is primordial, the first, the life-giving element. Taken alone, even the titles, Surfacing and The Diviners, suggest water. One *surfaces*, of course, in water, unless speaking metaphorically, and water dowsers *divine* for water.

"River of Now and Then" is the title of the first section of The Diviners, focusing our attention on moving water and its implications, and the first lines of the

book parallel the last lines of the book, quoted earlier,

> The river flowed both ways. The current moved from north to south, rippling the bronze green water in the opposite direction. The apparently impossible contradiction still fascinated Morag, even after years of river watching. (D 3)

The river's flow inescapably pulls our attention to the flux of time, the continuum of history. In a quite literal sense this is a *roman-fleuve*, the river's epic current sweeping along eddies of myth and debris of lives. We first see Morag in the present, forty-seven, an established writer, mother of a rebellious eighteen-year-old daughter. The book's opening scene has Morag at the river talking with Royland, by profession a water diviner, by spiritual gift, a diviner of truths. He not only magically locates inland, landlocked water, he also uncovers locked portions of Morag's psyche--locates in her, hidden well-springs. "He knew a hell of a lot more about her than she did about him" (D 101).

Royland's water connection is both necessary and tragic. He not only makes his way by dowsing for well-water, he also fishes the river. Morag calls him "Old Man of the River," "Jehovah," (whose spirit moved upon the *waters*) and "Loon" or "Loony" (the bird that dives into the water for fish). He is a sort of Fisher-King,[9] keeper of the Grail, and like that legendary figure, fishing is his pastime. Also, like the Fisher-King of legend, there is a tragic infirmity in him. Royland, almost blind,

belongs in the tradition of blind seers (the classic oxymoron). Morag's inverse double, he is near blind, she is terribly myopic; he is seventy-four, she is forty-seven. Both have "second sight" and "the good eye;" in short, are diviners.

Royland's tragic connection to water lies partly in his past, partly in his future. As a young man he had been a fanatical, Bible-punching circuit preacher. He lorded it over his young wife, requiring, in his zeal, celibacy in their marriage and joyless puritanical behavior of her. When she leaves him, fearing his patriarchal fury, he at last comes to his senses and tries to coax her back. Her terror of him is too deep, though, and she drowns herself rather than return to him. This metaphor of drowning is to be important in Surfacing as well--water not only as life-force, *aqua-vitae*, but water as life-destroyer. When Royland confesses this past to Morag, he concludes, "I'd been crazy as a coot . . . anyway, I found I could divine wells . . . . Seemed better to find water than to--" and she provides the contrary, "Raise fire" (D 241).

In his future, too, there is a water connected tragedy. The day will come when he will divine for water, only to find that his gift has left him. And Morag wonders, both for herself and for him, "The Old Man of the River, his powers gone. What happened to an ex-shaman? Was he honored as elder of the tribe or was he driven

forth? . . . The gift, or portion of grace, or whatever it was, was finally withdrawn to be given to someone else" (D 252).

The river, a recurrent symbol throughout the whole epic novel is always a symbol of becoming, not being; of movement, not stasis; of power and of holiness.

> Left to itself, the river would probably go on like this, flowing deep, for another million or so years. That would not be allowed to happen. In by-gone-days Morag had believed that nothing could be worse than killing a person. Now she perceived river slaying as something worse. (D 4)

Morag ultimately must settle on land near the river, returning to Canada where her roots truly are, to find rejuvenation and continuity on its banks. ". . . the river and willows and the gronk, gronk, gronk of the mini-dinosaur bullfrogs, it may be fantasy. But I can bear to live here until I die, and I couldn't elsewhere" (D 356).

Just as The Diviners begins and ends with the river, Surfacing's first section begins and ends with the lake. We are told that the lake was "entrance" for the narrator, and she ends Part One by symbolically lowering herself into its waters.

While in Laurence, water is a symbol of movement and of spiritual grace, in Surfacing, it is quite other. While the river in The Diviners is almost Heraclitian (You cannot step in the same river twice, for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you.) in its suggestion of flux and of process, the lake in Atwood's book has more Jungian

implications. When the "I" looks at her reflected image on its surface, it is a Jungian shadow that she sees: "My other shape was in the water, not my reflection but my shadow, foreshortened, outline blurred, rays streaming out from around the head" (S 165). In a Jungian sense this character's shadow is potentially destructive, containing the hidden, repressed aspects of her personality, as well as certain good qualities--creative impulses that had been suppressed, normal instincts such as love, repressed, and the child or primitive that has been devalued. Her shadow is also a reproach, not entirely of her own actions, but of contaminations of self by society. The lake contains not only the reflected shadow, but passage to her ultimate individuation and completion of soul. She must go into the lake to confront her shadow self and to slough off her guilt-laden personality. Her father's maps and drawings, his talismans and guides, lead her to an underwater pictographic wall. To reach it, she has to dive.

> Pale green, then darkness, layer after layer, deeper than before, seabottom; the water seemed to have thickened, in it pin prick lights flicked and darted, red and blue, yellow and white, and I saw they were fish, the chasm dwellers, fins lined with phosphorescent sparks, teeth neon. It was wonderful that I was down so far, I watched the fish, they swam like patterns on closed eyes, my legs and arms were weightless, free floating; I almost forgot to look for the cliff and the shape.
>
> It was there, but it wasn't a painting, it wasn't on the rock. It was below me, drifting towards me, from the furthest level where there was no life, a dark oval trailing limbs. It was blurred but it had eyes, they were open, it was something I knew about, a dead thing, it was dead. (S 167)

What she confronts underwater is, on a literal level, her father's drowned body: "Some American guys found him in the lake. They were fishing, they hooked him by mistake . . . . He must've drifted; he had a camera around his neck big one, they think the weight kept him down . . ." (S 183-184). But in a more significant sense, what she confronts is her own suppressed self, and, in another way, she is meeting her dead child. ". . . I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake where it has been prisoned for so long . . ." (S 191). This vision is also a cathartic reenactment of the abortion's anesthetic unconsciousness.

> They slipped the needle into the vein and I was falling down, it was like diving, sinking from one layer of darkness to a deeper, deepest; when I rose up through the anesthetic, pale green and then daylight, I could remember nothing. (S 133)

That unholy submersion had been false, corrupting, while this lake submersion is cleansing, ritually healing.

Her brother's imagined drowning had also been false, untrue, an image of his boyhood biology experiments that had violated living things and so repulsed her. The memory of those frogs in bottles becomes mixed up with nightmarish abortion images in her mind,

> it was in a bottle, curled up, staring out at me like a cat pickled; it had huge jelly eyes and fins instead of hands, fish gills, I couldn't let it out, it was dead already, it had drowned in air. It was there when I woke up, suspended in the air above me like a chalice, an evil grail, and I thought, whatever it is, a part of myself or a separate creature, I killed it. (S 168)

She could not rescue the fetus taken from her womb, but she had been able to rescue some of the creatures from her brother's experiments:

> He kept them in jars and tin cans on a board shelf back in the forest, near the swamp. . . . Sometimes he forgot to feed them or perhaps it was too cold at night, because when I went there by myself that day one of the snakes was dead and several of the frogs, their skin dry and their yellow stomachs puffed up, and the crayfish was floating in the clouded water with its legs uppermost like a spider's. I emptied those bottles into the swamp. The other things, the ones still alive, I let out. . . . Afterward he trapped other things and changed the place; this time he wouldn't tell me. I found out anyway but I was afraid to let them out again. Because of my fear they were killed. (S 155)

Since she didn't fully prevent his experimenting, she felt herself to be guilty too, an accomplice. She carried not only the guilt for her abortion and her brother's cruelties, but for the collective wrongs of mankind. All this she must expiate. Having encountered the underwater vision, she must make ritual preparation for water passage to a forgiven, whole self. "I had to go onto the shore and leave something . . . . These gods, here on the shore or in the water, unacknowledged or forgotten, were the only ones who had ever given me anything I needed; and freely" (S 170). A modern Persephone, she joins the tradition of descent and return. "When I am clean I come up out of the lake, leaving my false body floated on the surface, a cloth decoy . . ." (S 208). When she is transformed-- reborn of water, "the boulders float, melt, everything is made of water, even the rocks" (S 212).

Beginnings and endings lie in water. She is absolved by her ritual plunge, and within her watery womb she believes that she carries holy life -- "the primeval one who will have to learn the shape of a goldfish now in my belly, undergoing its watery changes" (S 233).

Appropriately, when Joe calls for her, intercessor that he is, he stands balanced on the dock, neither land nor water.

AIR

> The birds fly in the white air,
> their cries slicing the frozen
> space between tree & tree,
> piercing blue, angels . . .
> M. Atwood, True Stories (96)

Once people believed the flight of birds was a portent: augury
M. Atwood, Surfacing (111)

Bird imagery is central to both Surfacing and The Diviners, and astoundingly parallel in them. Birds, as creatures of the air, will here represent that element. Further, herons and loons, the two primary bird symbols in the books, serve a transitional, symbolic role, moving as they do, from water, to air, to land.

First, at the heart of each book is a heron passage. Morag, through much of her life, turbulent, dark, struggling, has also been moving toward a wise, philosophic acceptance. This angle of repose and her progression toward it become clear to her at the moment in the book when she sees the heron. She and Royland have gone out in

a boat after Pique's departure alone westward. Almost as an epiphany, the bird's flight flashes meaning over what had gone before and what the future may hold.

> Then she saw the huge bird. It stood close to shore, its tall legs looking fragile although in fact they were very strong, its long neck and long sharp beak bent towards the water, searching for fish, its feathers a darkbright blue. A Great Blue Heron. Once populous in this part of the country. Now rarely seen.
>
> Then it spotted the boat, and took to flight. A slow unhurried takeoff, the vast wings spreading, the slender elongated legs gracefully folding up under the creature's body. Like a pterodactyl, like an angel, like something out of the world's dawn. The soaring and measured certainty of its flight. Ancient-seeming, unaware of the planet's rocketing changes. The sweeping serene wings of the thing, unknowing that it was speeding not only towards individual death but probably towards the death of its kind. The mastery of the heron's wings could be heard, a rush of wind, the wind of its wings, before it had mounted high and disappeared into the trees above a bywater of the river.
>
> Royland reeled in his line, and by unspoken agreement they took the boat home, in silence, in awe . . . Morag began to see that here and now was not, after all, an island. Her quest for islands had ended some time ago and her need to make pilgrimages had led her back here. (D 357)

For these two old diviners this has been a holy, revelatory moment. Royland has just acknowledged the passage of his gift and the fanaticism of his past. Morag, wanderer, has here realized the object of her quest. The moment of the heron functions as an epic image of acceptance and affirmation. The ancient totemic bird is a link with history and eternity. It suggests a connection with early ancestors[10] and with the earth and sky and water. It is a divine archetypal bird, primeval,

symbol of life and of extinction. Appropriately, its symbolic flight is the central transcendant moment in the section of the book called "Rites of Passage." Its flight is powerful yet serene, much like Morag at this point of her life. It is also moving, like Morag--like all of us --toward death. The future of its kind, like our own, is blighted by man's wanton use of the earth. From its lofty airborne flight, it soars with divine perspective above earth and the race of men.

In Surfacing, the *living* heron, with all its magnificence and prehistoric suggestion, appears only briefly:

> A blue heron lifts from a bay where it's been fishing and flaps overhead, neck and legs stretched back, winged snake. It notes us with a rasping pterodactyl croak and rises higher heading south east, there was a colony of them, it must still be there. (S 72)

Later, a crucified heron is the shocking image that confirms the necessity for the narrator to pass from human corruption to another, purer state. This heron section is so seminal to the work that I must examine it in detail.

Ostensibly on a fishing outing with her companions, but actually scouting for the pictographs, she encounters the sacrilege.

> I smelled it before I saw it; then I heard the flies. The smell was like decaying fish. I turned around and it was hanging upside down by a blue nylon rope tied round its feet and looped over a tree branch, its wings fallen open. It looked at me with its mashed eye. (S 137)

This bird is a victim, crucified, but upside down. Making himself accessory to the crime, David's first impulse is

to film this desecration for his "Random Samples."

> I saw a beetle on it, blueblack and oval; when the camera whirred it burrowed in under the feathers. Carrion beetle, death beetle. Why had they strung it up like a lynch victim, why didn't they just throw it away like trash? To prove they could do it, they had the power to kill. Otherwise it was valueless; beautiful from a distance but it couldn't be tamed or cooked or trained to talk, the only relation they could have to a thing was to destroy it. Food, slave, or corpse, limited choices; horned and fanged heads sawed off and mounted on the billiard room wall, stuffed fish, trophies. (S 138)

The heron, like Anna, like the fish caught merely for sport and amusement, like the frogs her brother had bottled for his experiments, like her aborted fetus, like herself--all had been made victims by the "Americans"--Americans being the symbol of all that is profane in modern man.

The heron embodies all victims. "In my head when I closed my eyes the heron dangled, upside down. I should have buried it . . . . A part of the body, a dead animal. I wondered what part of them the heron was, that they they needed so much to kill it" (S 140-141).

> The innocents get slaughtered because they exist, I thought, there is nothing inside the happy killers to restrain them, no conscience, or piety; for them the only things worthy of life were human, their own kind of human, framed in the proper clothes and gimmicks, laminated.[11] It would have been different in those countries where an animal is the soul of an ancestor or the child of a god, at least they would have felt guilt. (S 151)

She assumes that this crime against the heron has been done by a boat of vacationing Americans. When she discovers that the killers are in fact Canadians, her own

people, her association with the guilt and her need to purge it are even greater.

> But they'd killed the heron anyway. It doesn't matter what country they're from, my head said, they're still Americans, they're what's in store for us, what we are turning to. They spread themselves like a virus, they get into the brain and take over the cells and the cells change from inside and the ones that have the disease can't tell the difference. Like the Late Show sci-fi movies, creatures from outer space, body snatchers injecting themselves into you dispossessing your brain . . . . (S 152-153)

Then she muses on evil, considering the devil and Hitler, and comes back again to the evil done to the heron.

> the heron was still there, hanging in the hot sunlight like something in a butcher's window, desecrated unredeemed. It smelled worse. Around its head flies vibrated, laying their eggs. The king who learned to speak with the animals, in the story he ate a magic leaf and they revealed a treasure, a conspiracy, they saved his life; what would they really say. Accusation, lament, an outcry of rage; but they had no spokesman.
>
> I felt a sickening complicity, sticky as glue, blood on my hands, as though I had been there and watched without saying No or doing anything to stop it: one of the silent guarded faces in the crowd. The trouble some people have being German, I thought, I have being human . . . . The death of the heron was causeless and undiluted. (S 154-155)

Seeking to cleanse a universal evil then, she follows her father's maps to the heron island. From that violated heron "sanctuary" she will dive from one of its cliffs. Before she does, she looks up to see a plane, its flight calling to mind the living heron in flight. The plane, "an X in the sky," she labels an "unsacred crucifix" (S 164). But she remembers the divine heron image she had

seen earlier.

> The shape of heron flying above us the first evening we fished, legs and neck stretched, wings outspread, a blue-gray cross, and the other heron, or was it the same one, hanging wrecked from the tree. Whether it died willingly, consented, whether Christ died willingly, anything that suffers and dies instead of us is Christ. (S 164)

Then she dives, the sign of the heron her shaman. Later in her ritual passage as she waits for her body to metamorphose, she identifies with the heron's metamorphosis.

> I remember the heron; by now it will be insects, frogs, fish, other herons. My body also changes, the creature in me, plant-animal, sends out filaments in me; I ferry it secure between death and life, I multiply. (S 197)

In addition to these astoundingly powerful heron passages, there are many other uses of bird imagery in the two books. Morag herself is a birdwatcher. She notes the north-south flight of geese, symbolic underlying of the riverflow and its import.

> Very far up, they flew in their V-formation, the few leaders out front, the flock sounding the deep long-drawn-out resonant raucous cry that no words could ever catch but which no one who ever heard it could ever forget. A sound and a sight with such a spendour in it that the only true response was silence. When these birds left, the winter was about to happen. When they returned, you would know it was spring. (D 411)

She continually tries to identify and describe the creatures of the air. *"Those birds are not Blackbirds, Morag--the Rusty Blackbird is like that, only smaller and with shorter talons and tail--those are Grackles, Common Grackles"* (D 54). She tries, recall, to capture in words the

color of swallows as they dip and spin over the water. And later, again, watching the swallows, half mocks herself for viewing them anthropomorphically,

> Innumerable swallows (parents, aunts, uncles, cousins) veered in towards the nest and veered off again, squeeping in high-pitched voices, obviously saying *This is how you fly, kids! It's easy! Try it--you'll never be immobile again . . . .*
> *I look at the world anthopomorphically. Well, so what? And even if I didn't, they do learn quickly. Every year, to see them take off is a marvel.* (D 242)

> There were no swallows. Yesterday the air had been filled with their swiftness. Now there were none. How did they know when to leave, and why did they migrate all at once, every one of them? No stragglers, no members of the clan who had imperfect sense of time and season. (D 404-405)

Morag continually tunes eyes and ears skyward.

> The song sparrow was tuning up in the small elm outside the window. Its song was unambiguous.
> Pres-pres-pres-pres-Presbyterian! (D 96)

> The gulls scream imprecations, their tongues hoarse and obscene, but the white flash of their wings is filled with grace abounding. (D 291)

Surfacing too is infused with bird song, flight, and image. There are the jays, always associated with her mother feeding them, taming them, linking human and animal worlds. Her mother, as she is wasting away with cancer, looks like the birds she communicated with, "She was very thin . . . skin tight over her curved beak nose, hands on the sheet curled like bird claws clinging to a perch. She peered at me with bright blank eyes" (S 25). Her mother had often told the story of how, as a child, she had

jumped from the barn roof, trying to fly, breaking both ankles in the attempt. Her mother, confronting a she-bear in camp--"That was the picture I kept, my mother seen flying from the back, arms upraised as though she was flying, and the bear terrified" (S 95).

Most of all, though, except for the herons, loons are the predominant birds--loons with their own set of symbolic implications. An excellent study in loon symbology, "The Loon with the Ivory Eyes," by Phillis Morrow and Toby Alice Volkman, causes me to digress here before noting the use of loons in the books at hand. Myths about loons, the authors find, are as prevalent in the circumpolar region as the loons are themselves. Some myths attempt to explain the haunting cry, the long beak, and the necklace -- physical characteristics of the loon. One of the myths, elaborate and widely distributed, is particularly illuminating for this study. With variants, the myth tells of a boy, blind or blinded, who is deceived by his mother or grandmother, who lies to him that he has not shot the bear with his bow and arrow, when actually he has done so. When he discovers this deception he leaves, seeking the loon to plead for his restored sight. The loon brings the boy to a cliff and from there they dive and dive until the boy can see again -- can see with the acuity of the loon.

In all of the variants, the loon is connected with vision, not only human clearsightedness, but with a clair-

voyant "second sight." Along with this dual vision come other shamanic powers. The authors note the universal symbolism of the blind seer, where physical blindness is, perhaps, a source of inner vision. Specifically they conclude from their studies and the studies of others that the loon in all circumpolar regions, "literally gives sight to certain human beings" (Morrow and Volkman 148).

Further, they observe that birds are generally associated with shamanism, being guides to supernatural realms and a connection with the magical power of flight. The loon additionally suggests flight and diving, serving as a mediator, as I have said too, between the worlds of air and water--two realms of access to the supernatural. Specifically, regarding the loon burials Ipiutak, they conclude,

> The loon at Ipiutak has inset ivory eyes. We suggest that the ivory eyes of the Ipiutak loon skull represent the loon's supernatural and actual clear-sightedness, qualities vital both to the shaman, who must see in the other worlds, and to ordinary people, whose success in hunting depends, to a large extent, on acute vision. (150)

All of this is very interesting by itself, but especially so in considering loons as they appear in Surfacing and The Diviners.

In The Diviners Morag calls both Royland and Christie "Loonies." I had thought this to be reference to their being sacredly mad, which it probably is. Additionally, though, it suggests their second sightedness. Royland,

near blind, especially fits the classic model. "Royland came to the door, looking old as Jehovah . . . . Greybeard loon" (D 25). Curiously, Royland is associated with both loon and heron. When he divines, he stalks upon the ground like the ancient bird, like, too, the piper who plays the pilbroch lament for the dead over the grave of Christie Logan. "Royland began walking slowly. Up and down the yard. Like the slow pace of the piper playing a pibroch. Only this was for the reverse purpose. Not the walk over the dead. The opposite" (D 102).

Christie, too, is a loony and a seer. When he is taunted by the town's children, he acts, much to child-Morag's dismay, crazy, antic, "loony." But he divines the town's people by their garbage, shaman and seer that he is.

> "By their garbage shall ye know them," Christie yells, like a preacher, a clowny preacher, "I swear by the ridge of tears and by the valour of my ancestors, I say unto you, Morag Gunn, lass, that by their bloody goddam fucking garbage shall ye christly well know them." (D 39)

And then later, to Morag and Skinner, he further reveals that he can "tell garbage" like some tell fortunes.

> "You know how some have the gift of second sight?" Christie goes on, "Well it's the gift of garbage-telling which I have myself, now. Watch this." (D 74-75)

And he "christly well" does it, unearthing the town's secrets and hypocrisies, their pettinesses and even their (rare) kindnesses.

Morag, as bird watcher and listener, of course, hears

the cries of loons, watches their anomalous flight through air and water, but mostly, it is her identifying of the book's diviners with loons that is symbolically significant.

In Surfacing, the "I" character thinks her father might have gone insane--"crazy, loony." Later, wanting her father's assumed madness to be private, she contemplates burning his maps and drawings. At that moment she hears the voice of the loon. Later still, "She," in passage, is accepted by the loon. "Inshore a loon; it lowers its head, then lifts it again, and calls. It sees me but it ignores me, accepts me as part of the land" (S 208). Loons in Surfacing are part of the whole shamanistic holiness of the bird-animal world--connectors to sanctity of air; sacredness of earth.

EARTH

> I squat among rows of seeds & imposters and snout my hand into the juicy dirt: charred chicken bones, rusted nails, dog bones, stones, stove ashes. Down there is another hand, yours, hopeless. . . (I'll want to make a hole in the earth the size of an implosion, a leaf, a dwarf, a star, a cave in time that opens back & back into absolute darkness and at last into a small pale moon of light the size of a hand, I'll want to call you out of the grave in the form of anything at all)
>
> Margaret Atwood, "Earth," True Stories (76)

> "Thou shalt not oppress a stranger, for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt"
>
> Margaret Laurence, The Prophet's Camel Bell (9)

If water is the dynamic force in The Diviners, then earth represents stability. Those individuals and groups denied rootedness in the land are the book's victims, at least until they can regain or adopt their lost Eden. Dispossession from the land and the perils of rootlessness are thematic. Morag and Jules are joined in a sad way by their common losses of heritage--Jules as part of the victimized Metis minority, and Morag, linked by ancestry to the eighteenth century Scots highlanders robbed of their land and forced to emigrate to America. Ironically, it is these Scotsmen who are, for the most part, responsible for the repression of the Metis. This unspoken fact is a barrier between Morag and Jules, responsible in part for the discontinuity of their relationship.

Lazarus Tonnerre, Jules' father, is the most deeply tragic figure of all in the book, having felt "a stranger in the place where he lived his whole life" (D 338). The town brands him "half a man" (D 462), even denying his body admittance to the local graveyard, fearing that "his halfbreed bones" would spoil their cemetery (D 268). Yet his tales, as retold by Skinner to Morag, spoke of possession of the land--valiant ancestral battles under the leadership of Big Bear, Prophet Louis Riel, and Gabriel Dumont, united in the vain effort to maintain sacred Indian land. The Indians (the Crees and the Stonies) had joined in--

The Prophet and his guys and the Indians and their

> guys, they'd just beat the shit out of the Mounties at someplace, and everybody was feeling pretty fine. But what happens then? What happens is that the goverment from Down East sends in this fucking huge army, see? Not just with rifles, hell no. They've got the works. Cannon, even machine guns probably, if they were invented in those days. (D 148)

Years later, Skinner (Jules) still smarts from this loss, though it is remote from his time. His songs chronicle the tragedy of his fathers:

> The Metis they met from the whole prairie
> To keep their lands, to keep them free
> They gathered there in the valley Qu'appelle
> Alongside their leader, Louis Riel. (D 344)

So begins his long poignant ballad.

Paralleling his recounting of dispossession are Christie's tales of his and Morag's ancestors, dispossession their ancient war cry. The Gunns, who lost their ancient heaths and homes, wandered homeless until Piper Gunn,

> a great tall man, a man with the voice of drums and the heart of a child and the gall of a thousand and the strength of conviction. And when he played the pipes on the shore, there, it was pibrochs he played, out of mourning for the people lost and the people gone and them with no place for to lay their heads except the rocks of the shore. (D 49-50)

With his pibroch lament, "Flowers of the Forest," he rallied these homeless souls:

> *Why do you sit on these rocks weeping?* says he. *For there is a ship coming,* says he, *on the wings of morning . . . and we must gather our pots and kettles and our shawls and our young ones, and go with it into a new world across the waters.* (D 50)

A new world--new land--home for the homeless.

Child Morag, herself dispossessed of parents, their

land, house and furniture--sold to buy the mortgage--comes to Christie Logan's run-down home. It will be a long time before she will feel rooted to him and to his land. She holds, rather, to the half mythic Scots heritage Christie gives her through tale and poem. Not until she is a mature woman with a child, and expatriot in England, does she realize where her true roots lie. Longing for his home, the Scottish painter McRaith has painted out of his own yearning a work he calls "The Dispossessed." He tells Morag of his need "of the *place* --the geographical place, the sea and the shore . . ." (D 382). Then he invites her to come with him, "away over there is Sutherland, Morag Dhu, where your people came from. When do you want to drive there?" Morag considers, then says,

> "I thought I would have to go. But I guess I don't after all."
> "Why would that be?"
> "I don't know that I can explain. It has to do with Christie. The myths are my reality . . . Christie's real country where I was born . . . Home (What means *Home*?) (D 390-391)

Her dispossession has not been deeply tragic, but liminal passage, necessary before she can freely inherit her past. Upon realizing, she returns to Canada in time to be with Christie before he dies, in time to tell him that he had been like a real father to her. When he dies, she tenderly finds a piper to play "The Flowers of the Forest," the long-ago pibroch, the lament of their fathers, over the grave of Christie Logan.

Interred in the earth, in the Manawaka cemetery where Hagar Shipley's Stone Angel stands, his mortal remains rest not far from the Nuisance Grounds where he had been "Scavenger." "All the dead stuff together there on the same hill. [The Nuisance Grounds] . . . A little above the town, the second hill, the same hill as the Manawaka cemetery" (D 70). There, along with mountains of tin cans, saucepans and kettles, bedsprings and broken bottles, Christie had found a newborn baby, wrapped in newspapers, dead and discarded. The secret of that profane burial lies buried with Christie, whose personal religion kept him above town gossip, whose personal integrity made him something of a Savior, as his name suggests. Cemetery and municipal dump--earth images.

Furthermore, burials confirm possession of the land, sacralizing the earth. A poignant line from Margaret Atwood's long narrative poem, Journals of Suzanna Moodie, equates the two symbols of possession of the land: "I planted him in this country like a flag" (31).

A pragmatist, but also a poet and a dreamer, Morag sometimes longs for the Biblical promise of a new heaven and a new earth. She holds imaginary conversations with Catharine Parr Traill (sister to Suzanna Moodie, and a Canadian pioneer having similar grit). Catharine is for a long while Morag's idol--a woman who tilled the earth, planted in it, tamed it. Morag at last recognizes that

her own earth connection is otherwise.

> I'll never till these blasted fields, but this place is some kind of a garden, nonetheless, even though it may be only a wildflower garden. It's needed, and not only by me. I'm about to quit worrying about not being an old or a new pioneer. So farewell, sweet saint--." (D 406)

Querencia is a Spanish word that means the sense of being nourished by a place where you belong. Pique, like her mother before her and certainly like her wandering, dispossessed father, must search for her *querencia*, for the sense of well-being and connectedness that come from attachment to a place on earth. Morag is wise enough to let her go on her quest, wise enough to realize that the quest will likely bring her back.

Barry Lopez writes of the power of association with the land:

> For some people, what they are is not finished at the skin, but continues with the reach of the senses out into the land. If the land is summarily disfigured or reorganized, it causes them psychological pain. Again, such people are attached to the land as if by luminous fibers; and they live in a kind of time that is not of the moment but, in concert with memory, extensive, measured by a lifetime. To cut these fibers causes not only pain but a sense of dislocation. (279)

In Surfacing the "I" character suffers psychological pain for a number of reasons, among them her keen awareness of the disfigurement of the land. She struggles with paradigms of dominance/subservience, and, for her, women's victimization by modern man. The rape of the landscape is a desacralizing process, just as her own "rape" had desecrated her spirit and the flesh of her flesh. From her

parents, almost primitives in sensibilities, she retains a sense of the sacredness of the earth. What Lopez writes of a Lakota woman's representation of her hunting people's notion could be said of Surfacing's message--that a

> spiritual landscape exists within the physical landscape. To put it another way, occasionally one sees something fleeting in the land, a moment when line, color and movement intensify and something sacred is revealed, leading one to believe that there is another realm of reality corresponding to the physical one but different. (273-74)

Modern man in his rational, scientific, often exploitative view of the land, has lost this relationship, says Lopez,

> and what is lost is profound. The land is like poetry: it is inexplicably coherent, it is transcendent in its meaning, and it has the power to elevate a consideration of human life. (274)

The "I" in Surfacing, from the book's first lines, notes with psychic pain what has been done to the land--how it has been desecrated.

> I can't believe I'm on this road again, twisting along past the lake where white birches are dying, the disease is spreading up from the south, and I notice they now have seaplanes for hire. (S 9)

This is not natural disease; it is disease that comes of man's tampering with the land. Quebec Hydro has raised the level of the lake; tree disease is somehow resultant. A sacred spot has been defiled--a beauty has been disfigured.

> There was a covered bridge here once, but it was too far north to be quaint. They tore it down three years before I left, to improve the dam, and replaced it with the concrete bridge which is here now, enormous, monumental, dwarfing the village. It's the dam that controls the lake: sixty years

> ago they raised the lake level so that whenever they wanted to flush the logs down the narrow outflow river to the mill they would have enough water power. (S 20)

Now even the utilitarian reason has passed and mainly tourists come, "wives, who sit in twos on the screened blackfly-proof porches of the single-room cabins and complain to each other while the men play at fishing" (S 20).

The whole heron section is a terrible emblem, too, of man's loss of sacred touch with the land, of his useless killing of its creatures. "Bottle Villas," road signs, tourist attractions, mar the landscape like "Random Pimples," as the narrator dubs them.

On the forested island where her parents had their cabin, the "disease" has not invaded, yet the island still seems vulnerable, as all land is nowadays, no matter how isolated. The cabin itself

> [is] built on a sand hill, part of a ridge left by the retreating glaciers; only a few inches of soil and thin coating of trees hold it down. On the lake side the sand is exposed raw, it's been crumbling away: the stones and charcoal from the fireplace they used when they first lived here in tents have long since vanished, and the edge trees fall gradually, several I remember upright are leaning now. Red pines, bark scaling, needles bunched on the top branches. A kingfisher is perched on one of them, making its staccato alarm-clock cry; they nest in the cliff, burrowing into the sand, it speeds up the erosion. (S 38-39)

This is natural entropy--acceptable and accepted. Wanton changes made by technological man are quite other. The fragility of this natural spot--the idyll of her

childhood--is made even more apparent when she is approached by Bill Malstrom (the name is not gratuitous), a land developer who wants to buy her parents' land, ironically in order to build a retreat for members of the Michigan Wildlife Protection Association of America. The "Americans" again--the disease is spreading. All they want to do, he assures her, is install a power generator and a septic tank. He covets the spot because of its "rustic charm." Of course she refuses to sell.

In The Diviners the cemetery and the Nuisance Grounds are earth symbols; in Surfacing the garden has similar symbolic import. Garden imagery is rampant in Atwood's short stories, in her poetry, and it is prominent here as well. From the time the narrator has a child, she noted the garden as a source of "the power."

> The beans that were left too long would yellow after the first frost and split open. Inside were pebbles, purple-black and frightening. I knew that if I could get some of them and keep them for myself I would be all powerful; but later when I was tall enough and could finally reach to pick them it didn't work. Just as well, I think, as I had no idea what I would do with the power once I got it; if I'd turned out like the others with power I would have been evil. (S 43)

The habit of composting--the giving back to the land--is ingrained in her. She religiously returns to the land the parings, the carrot tops, the fish bones and entrails. For her the fish remains are "fertilizer," offerings to the land. For David they are "Random Sample" material.

> He goes for Joe and the camera and the two of them solemnly film the fish innards, collapsed bladders and tubes and soft ropes, rearranging them between takes. (S 79)

Images of her mother in the garden link her and female kind with fertility, the garden echoing the archetypal motif of the mother as vegetation deity and nurturing figure. Inescapable, too, are connections of the garden with Eden, a spot uncorrupted but vulnerable. Food from garden ground is permissible to eat when she is in her liminal state--edibles prepared by human hands are taboo.

> The food in the cabin is forbidden, I'm not allowed to go back into that cage, wooden rectangle. Also tin cans and jars are forbidden; they are glass and metal. I head for the garden and prowl through it . . . I eat the green peas out of their shells and the raw yellow beans, I scrape the carrots from the earth with my fingers, I will wash them in the lake first . . . . Red foods, heart color, they are the best kind, they are sacred; then yellow, then blue; green foods are mixed from blue and yellow. I pull up one of the beets and scratch dirt from it and gnaw at it but the rind is tough, I'm not strong enough yet. (S 209)

Along with root foods that the garden earth yields, certain wild foods are not forbidden. Mushrooms, those earthiest of plants, become part of her acolyte diet. The poisonous *Amanita*, Destroying Angel, though, she must save till she is "immune," has the power. Other mushrooms she eats, "the yellow food, yellow fingers" (S 211), finding their musty earth taste pleasant, sacramental.

Morag, too, contemplates mushrooms, not as ceremonial food, but as symbols of a sinister power coming from the

earth. "The Destroying Angel, dramatic Old Testament name. Wonderful name. Terrible mushroom" (D 405).

For Surfacing's novitiate, even the outhouse, a direct enough earth receptacle, is now forbidden. "I leave my dung, droppings, on the ground and kick earth over. All animals with dens do that" (S 209).

Close to the earth in another sense, in the classic liminal state, as described by Victor W. Turner,[12] this transitional personna goes filthy, naked, and identifies with animals--creatures of the earth. To move toward becoming animal is, for her, not atavism, not going back or downward on the evolutionary scale. In her eyes animals are to be trusted; humans are not. Animals do not defile the earth; humans do. She can learn from the animals, receive the power from them.

A foreshadowing of her preference for animal over human appears early in the book as seen in her alliance with Joe, who is always described in animal terms. He has, in fact, few human dimensions save love and his craft --which happens to be the making of pottery, connecting him, too, with the clay of the earth. A partial catalogue of Joe's animal traits makes his animal/earth connection fairly obvious (and sometimes faintly ludicrous):

> From the side he's like the buffalo on the U. S. nickel, shaggy and blunt-snouted, with small clenched eyes and defiant but insane look of a species once dominant, now threatened with extinction. (S 10)

> His back is hairier than most men's, a warm texture, it's like teddy-bear fur . . . . (S 48)

When she crawls in bed beside the sleeping Joe, awakened and startled he says, "Who? Who? repeating it like an owl." As if she were approaching a wild animal, she muses,

> I'm afraid to touch him at these times, he might mistake me for one of the enemies . . . but he's beginning to trust my voice. (S 48)

> Behind me something lumbered, crashing. It was Joe . . . . (S 172)

> I ran my fingers over his furry back. (S 110)

> I remember the hair on Joe's back, vestigial, like appendices and little toes: soon we'll evolve into total baldness. I like the hair, though, and the heavy teeth, thick shoulders, unexpectedly slight hips, hands whose texture I can still feel on my skin, roughened and leathery from the clay. Everything I value about him seems to be physical . . . . (S 65-66)

When at last the "time is right" for her to be sexually receptive in an almost animal cycle sense, she leads Joe away from their bed, away from the cabin--to the <u>earth</u>.

> We go over the ground, feet and skin bare; the moon is rising, in the gray-green light his body gleams and the trunks of trees, the white ovals of his eyes. He walks as though blind, blundering into shadow clumps, toes stubbing, he has not yet learned to see in the dark. My tentacled feet and free hand scent out the way, shoes are a barrier between touch and earth . . .rabbits warning us and each other. On the far shore an owl, its voice feathered and clawed, black on black, blood in the heart. (S 190)

Here she has moved beyond Joe's animal-like qualities. He is now less animal than she is, and when he shivers she notes, "He need to grow more fur" (S 190). On the ground together, she receptive to him, "pleasure is redundant, the animals don't have pleasure. I guide him into me,

it's the right season. I hurry" (S 191).

Then comes the powerful passage I have already cited (page 26 above) where she imagines how she will give birth, this time not in an artificial hospital setting, but as an animal might, squatting on leaves, "the blood returning *the ground* where it belongs." (S 191) (italics added)

All of this, of course, is in accord with the Jungian concept of the Self symbolized by an animal, representing our instinctive nature and our connection with our surroundings. The time rhythms of animals correspond, says Jung, to ways that our unconscious is attuned to the space-time continuum of our surroundings (207).

In tune with the animals, she is also one with the earth itself. She makes for herself a "hollow lair, dry leaves underneath and dead branches leaned over, with fresh needle branches woven to cover" (S 209). Half animal, half acolyte in privation, she endures hunger, cold, grave-like confinement. She is not feared by the creatures of the earth, nor does she fear them. The frog with gold-rimmed eyes she addresses as "ancestor." She feels the plants' growth, "sucking moisture up through the roots and succulent stems, their leaves sweating . . . . Under the ground the worms twine, pink veins" (S 210). Of the earth, she gradually emerges, returning to sanity--to a purer human state gained through ritual passage. She

sees with new eyes. The "rules" are almost over. "I have to get up, I get up. Through the ground, break surface, I'm standing now; separate again . . ." (S 213). As in Indian emergence myths, she is resurrected from the earth; she is reborn, auto-chilthonic birth. The earth from her eyes, she can now see her mother in vision. She can allow the separate visions of her father and mother finally to fade, "back into *the earth, the air, the water*, wherever they were when I summoned them. The rules are over" (S 219). [Italics added.]

FIRE

> But his word was in my heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones . . .
>
> Jeremian 20:9

> What is accomplished by fire is alchemy, whether in the furnace or the kitchen stove.
>
> Paracelsus

> Will the fires go on, inside and out? Until the moment when they go out for me, the end of the world . . .
>
> Margaret Laurence, The Fire Dwellers (279)

> Burning burning burning burning
> O Lord Thou pluckest me out
> O Lord Thou pluckest
>
> burning
>
> T. S. Eliot, "Fire Sermon," The Wasteland (84)

Eliot's "Fire Sermon" section of The Wasteland begins with water and ends with fire. So, too, in The Diviners and Surfacing water precedes fire. Water--lake and river--is present in actual and symbolic ways. Fire, however, is

process, not matter, not significantly present in the lines of the books, but kindled within the characters, numinous and alchemical--transforming. Fire is implicitly present in its ancient suggestion of change, energy and spirit. Fire as elemental, the first principle, the transforming source, I impose on these works and on my own study, by way of summation and synthesis.

Michelangelo captures fire in the sense I apply it to these novels:

> It is with fire that blacksmiths iron subdue
> Unto fair form, the image of their thought
> Nor without fire hath any artist wrought
> Gold to its utmost purity of hue
> Nay, nor the unmatched phoenix lives anew
> Unless she burn
>
> Michelangelo, Sonnet 59

"Unless she burn . . ." Neither Morag nor the nameless "I" can be artistically productive or psychically and spiritually whole without an inner fire. And though both characters are associated predominantly with water--Morag with its moving-onward aspect, and Surfacing's "I" with its ritually cleansing power--both too have need of fire's inner light. Central to the books and to my analysis is the question, what is the source of spiritual fire for these two women? The texts of both books resoundingly answer where it is not. Fire is not present in its transforming and creative sense in structured religion, where spiritual flame is usually alleged to be most present. In the childhoods of both central characters we see their brush with institutionalized religion and their consequent

rejection of it. In this way both books discriminate between authentic religious experience and rote observance.

Atwood's "I" character has been raised, for instance, by parents who found their religion in closeness to nature and to one another. With a child's natural curiousity for the unknown and the half-denied, "she" is fascinated by the building and the ritual of the village Catholic Church.

> We never could find out what went on inside the tiny hillside church they filed into on Sundays: our parents wouldn't let us sneak up and peer through the windows, which made it illicit and attractive. After my brother began going to school in the winters he told me it was called the Mass and what they did inside was eat; I imagined it as a sort of birthday party, with ice cream--birthday parties were my only experience then of people eating in groups--but according to my brother all they had was soda crackers. (S 63)

When the lure of the forbidden causes her to beg to go, her father doesn't approve.

> He reacted as though I'd asked to go to a pool hall: Christianity was something he'd escaped from, he wished to protect us from its distortions. But after a couple of years he decided I was old enough, I could see for myself, reason would defend me. (S 63)

Significantly, all of this reminiscence is juxtaposed with her adult attempts to illustrate the Tale of the Golden Phoenix. "The bird has to be yellow and the fire can only be yellow too, they have to keep the [printing] cost down, so I can't use red; that way I lose orange and purple also" (S 62). For her favorite fairy tale about

the bird born from the flames she must constrict the fire that she would have brightly burn. The placement of this tale with her flashback to childhood experiments with formal religion seems to suggest constriction of flame there also. For one thing, she learns that she must wear conventional clothes to worship services, "itchy white stockings and a hat and gloves" (S 63). She goes with a girl from her school, not a Catholic child, but a girl whose family belongs to the United Church and who takes "pursed-mouth missionary interest" in her. Instead of the heady Catholic ritual she had imagined, she finds herself in a Sunday school in the cellar, where the blackboards have "KICKAPOO JOY JUICE printed on them on orange chalk," and C.G.I.T. [Canadian Girls in Training] beneath. The teacher hands out pictures of Jesus without thorns and robes, "but alive and draped in a bed-sheet, tired-looking, surely incapable of miracles" (S 64).

Afterward, she goes home with the family where they offer a set grace over graceless food (pork and beans followed by canned pineapple). Unfailingly they chant a rhyme notable only for its impropriety: "Pork and beans and musical fruit/ The more you eat the more you toot" (S 64). Well, these were not the holy mysteries she sought. After this experience she confides in her brother that she supposes she will become Catholic, cautioning him not to reveal the secret to their parents. "Catholics are crazy," he retorts, telling her they believe in the B.V.M.

(which initials neither he nor she understand) and further, that if she goes to Mass she'll turn into a wolf (S 65). (Later, in her liminal period, of course, this threat of metamorphosis would have have held no terror, only appeal --animal as Self, animal as Sacred, animal as True.)

The allure of conventional religion soon fades, as does her attempt at prayerful, direct communication with God.

> I didn't last long at Sunday School. One girl told me she had prayed for a Barbara Ann Scott doll with figure skates and swansdown trim on the costume and she got it for her birthday; so I decided to pray too, not like the Lord's Prayer or the fish prayer but for something real. I prayed to be made invisible, and when in the morning everyone could still see me I knew they had the wrong God. (S 83-84)

What gods does she then accept? Where is the burning transforming holiness she seeks? Where is the power? She regards herself as a potentially holy spirit. She has prescience even as a child, for instance, that if she had nearly drowned as had her brother, she would have "surfaced" in a special way.

> If it had happened to me I would have felt there was something special about me, to be raised from the dead like that; I would have returned with secrets, I would have known things most people didn't. (S 85-86)

The lake, as purifier, has its gods to which she makes her offerings. The lake takes on the purifying aspect of fire. Her baptism is not by fire, but by water. Yet her parents are, until her passage, pillars of fire for her, leading her back to an earlier sacrality. She

observes about her father,

> he needed an island, a place where he could recreate not the settled farm life of his own father but that of the earliest ones who arrived when there was nothing but forest and no ideologies but the ones they brought with them. (S 68)

Her father, then, represents in part a connection with primitive man in the sense that Eliade viewed him--man in tune with the sacred, his world in both space and time revolving around the sacred. Industrialized society, for Eliade and for Atwood's "I" represents the profane. The "Americans" in Surfacing are, in fact, symbolic concentrations of the profane in modern man, for whom time and space and, especially nature, lack sanctification. For Atwood's character, as for Mircea Eliade, archaic man saw the world to be fraught with sacred passages. Eliade, in his book, The Sacred and the Profane, sees primitive man as having been in tune with the sacred in every aspect of his life. His world, in both space and time, revolve around sacrality. Modern man's world is, by contrast, profane. Only in the unconscious center, says Eliade, does the sacred still reside. It is this unconscious sacred center that Atwood's character dives to find. Religious man--the Indian ancestors, whose rock art her father loses his life trying to preserve, saw the whole of existence as potentially sacred--his space on earth, the space of his dwellings and places of worship, the very time frame he lived in--sky, earth, water, animals,

stones, and his own body, he sanctified. As the obverse of sacred man, "nonreligious" man has lost the concept of existence suffused with sacrality. The cosmos for him holds no message. A heron for him is not sacred, waters are not holy, land and its trees can be destroyed and to him it seems no violation, no desecration.

The "I" of Surfacing is victim too, part of the book's paradigmnatic scheme of dominance/subservience:

humans	vs	the land
Quebec Hydro	vs	the lake
men	vs	women
Canadians	vs	the French
whites	vs	Indians
civilization	vs	nature
colonialism	vs	nationalism
corrupted self	vs	untainted self

As victim, "she" is caught between the sacred and the profane, tied to her childhood and to the thrust of her parents' lives which she views as essentially sacred. Yet she is keenly part, too, of the modern world with its profanities, dealing with her own guilt and psychic mutilation in false ways--fabricating a reality which prevents her from being complete.

It is only with her dive into the lake that she is metamorphosed; it is only with this baptism that she receives "the power," and it is the *power* which I equate with *fire*. This power--spiritual insight, fire--allows

her to see things truly, as they are. "The power flowed into my eyes, I could see into him, he was an imposter, a pastiche" (S 152). With the power she sees nature suffused with light and holiness. She watches a mushroom, for instance, "It sprang up from the earth pure joy, pure death, burning white like snow" (S 150). Her vision quest is fulfilled. For a moment she holds the power, sees the vision, is baptized with fire. I like Mark Schorer's insight:

> that the so-called spiritual alchemists . . . did not intend the transmutation of metals at all, but the transmutation of man's material consciousness to spiritual consciousness, his lower to his higher self. (47)

The protagonist's state of consciousness is indeed altered; she is essentially changed. Both geographically and psychologically she has slipped out of the modern human world. She is in her passage, in another time--another place. When she meets Joe, she wishes she "could tell him how to change so he could get there, the place where I was" (S 146).

In passage, *fire* is her goal and also her instrument. In the cabin's fireplace she has literally burned her connection with the past, her art portfolio, her wedding ring, books, maps, photo albums, scrapbooks, clothing, artifacts that must be translated through the purification of fire,

> the Golden Phoenix awkward and dead as a mummified parrot. The pages bunch in my hands; I add them one

> by one so the fire will not be smothered, then the paint tubes and brushes, this is no longer my future . . .
>
> I slip the ring from my left hand, non-husband, he is the next thing I must discard finally, and drop it into the fire, *altar*, it may not melt but it will at least be *purified*, the blood will *burn* off. Everything from history must be eliminated, the circles and arrogant square pages. I rummage under the mattress and bring out the scrapbooks, ripping them up, the ladies, dress forms with decorated china heads, the suns and the moons, the rabbits and their archaic eggs, my false peace, his wars, airplanes and tanks and the helmeted explorers; perhaps at the other side of the world my brother feels the weight lifting, freedom feathering his arms. Even the guides, the miraculous double woman and the god with horns, they must be translated. The ladies on the wall too with their watermelon breasts and lampshade skirts, all my artifacts.
>
> Theirs too, the map torn from the wall, the rock paintings, left to me by my father's will; and the album, the sequence of my mother's life, the confining photographs. My own faces curl, blacken, the imitation mother and father change to flat ashes. It is time that separates us, I was a coward, I would not let them into my age, my place. Now I must enter theirs. (S 206-207) [Italics added.]

Fire consumes; it also transforms, gives light.

> Something has happened to my eyes, my feet are released, they alternate, several inches from the ground. I'm ice clear, transparent, my bones and the child inside me showing through the green webs of my flesh, the ribs are shadows, the muscles jelly, the trees are like this too, they shimmer, their cores glow through the wood and bark. The forest leaps upward, enormous, the way it was before they cut it, columns of sunlight frozen . . . . (S 181)

Such a state of fire, of vision, of otherness, cannot long be sustained in its intensity. Even the salamander cannot exist forever in the flame. The power dies down and her fingers become not magical, but "empty as gloves," and her eyes again "ordinary" (S 171).

Yet not quite ordinary. Though she leaves the flame

of the vision state, the powers remain present, informing her daily reality. She is in touch with nature, in touch with herself and with the truth of ner own past. She has a new way of seeing that will allow her to live in the world and with herself. Like Lily Briscoe in To the Lighthouse, she has had her vision. Formerly rejecting words, she can at last admit, "For us it's necessary, the intercession of words" (S 192). She can now view her parents' lives as holy, but not superhuman or deified. She can acknowledge her debt to the ancient past, to the nature gods she knows, but she can also re-enter the present to re-possess her self, her sanity, her humanity. She is equipped now with the power to live on in an imperfect world. The embers of the fire--the "power"--her vision of the sacred, she carries with her.

And what of Morag? What is the source of fire in her life? Clearly throughout the book, hers is a religious pilgrimage--a search for light, one of the properties of fire. Early on she discovers that it is not the rigidity of Manawaka's Scots-Presbyterian dogma that will ignite her already dark temperament. And though even her childish musings already have the strong Biblical rhythm that will mark her adult speech, it is not expressly through Biblical precept that she moves toward the light. Ultimately it is through a divining of man's deepest powers, those of the race itself, that she finds her true spiri-

tual fire.

Even as a child Morag saw conventional religion as too narrow and too demanding to embrace the whole of reality. When she is only six and has lost both parents to infantile paralysis, she struggles unsuccessfully to justify the ways of God to man. "Morag is talking in her head. To God. Telling Him it was all His fault and this is why she is so mad at Him. Because He is no good, is why" (D 17). Later, in the Memorybank Movie entitled, "How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds," the perhaps ten-year-old Morag shows her early leanings toward love, not punishment; communication, not stricture. She seeks, not the refiner's fire, but the light of love--human warmth.

> Morag loves Jesus. And how. He is friendly and not stuck-up, is why. She does not love God. God is the one who decides which people have got to die and when. Mrs. McKee in Sunday school says God is LOVE, but this is baloney. He is mean and gets mad at people for no reason at all, and Morag wouldn't trust him as far as she can spit. Also, at the same time, she is scared of God. You pray at nights, and say "Dear God--" like a letter, but slipping in the Dear but for other reasons as well. Does he really know what everybody is thinking? If so, it sure isn't fair and is also very spooky. (D 77)

When, as a teenager, Morag announces to Christie that she won't go to church anymore, of course he doesn't mind. He is not a church-goer himself, but he is one of the book's diviners--source of light and truth. "Christie doesn't care whether Morag goes to Sunday school or not. He wouldn't. He never goes to church himself. Although a believer" (D 77). He sees the hypocrisies and injustices

couched in Prin's Unitarianism. Morag sees it too. "In Christ there is no East or West, in Him no North or South --Oh yea? Like fun there isn't" (D 109).

I have already noted Christie as the "clowny preacher"--the diviner and teller of garbage and, ultimately, Morag's spiritual father. He preaches the socialism of the junk heap--"One man's muck is everyman's muck" (D 46)--and he takes it upon himself as Christ took upon himself the sins of the world. His personal religion lies partly in his belief in the past--in the ancestors. "*This is the Valour of My Ancestors*" (D 47). Christie lives by this ancestral motto. In World War I military action at Bourlon Wood, Christie valiantly saves Morag's own father, though in the telling of the story he reverses things, making Morag's father to be the hero. This he does to bolster Morag's own pride in parentage, ancestry. Nevertheless, it is Christie who saved--Christie who is the savior. No one credits his valor in war, though, and certainly not later when he is town scavenger. Yet he protects a girl's name from the scandal of abortion and the wrath of her father, takes in the orphan Morag and fathers her, honors his sedentary half-witted wife, and tells the parables of a forgotten people, preserving through tales their history.

> "*The Ridge of Tears,*" Christie roars, "that was the war cry. Oh Jesus. Think of it. The Ridge of Tears. And the crest, then. A passion nail piercing a human heart, proper. I always wondered what the hell *proper* meant, and now I'll never know, for

who is there to tell me?" (D 162)

When Morag asks why it matters, Christie answers with the fire of conviction.

> "It matters to me," Christie rants, "By heaven and all the stars of midnight and by my own right hand and by the holy cross its own self, I say unto you it bloodly damn well matters to me then . . . . I used to think the only clean job in the world was collecting muck. I chose to be the one who'd collect it. (D 162-163)

According to Victor Turner, a diviner

> exonerates or accuses individuals . . . in terms of a system of moral norms. Since he operates in emotionally charged situations, such norms are restated in striking and memorable fashion. Thus he may be said to play a vital role in upholding tribal morality. (The Drums of Affliction 51)

Christie certainly cries his message in "striking and memorable fashion," but there are few in Manawaka who will listen, and Morag discerns its truth and meaning only later, reflectively, when she is mature enough to truly understand. Acknowledging him as diviner, she passes on his heritage of words to her little child, Pique, through her own *Tales of Christie Logan*. Employing his device of truth through tales, she teaches the parable of his life. Morag remembers the *fire* she saw in his eyes:

> He had very blue eyes, Christie did, in those days, and when he was telling a tale, his eyes would be like blue lightning and you would forget his small stature, for at those times he would seem a giant of a man. (D 367)

Here, then, is a fire source for Morag, though she has to leave Manawaka to realize it. Christie is one of her shamans, leading her to light. Jules Tonnerre, as I have already said, is another. Jules--his very name

(*tonnerre* = F. *thunder*) linked to the natural *fire* of lightning--has fire in his temperament too. Angry and passionate, he ignites a sexual fire in Morag, certainly, but he also fans her own hot defiance and rebelliousness. In his past there is literal fire as well. His sister, Piquette, outcast by society, is consumed along with her children by fire, caught in her drunken stupor and burned with its flames. Morag, a cub reporter for the town paper at the time, is sent to cover the tragedy. To her horror she sees the Tonnerre shack, their only holding, burned to the ground together with its outcast occupants,

> a mass of tangled still-smoking charred timbers and twisted shapeless blackened metal . . . the pile of blackened debris where three generations of Tonnerres had lived. Burnt wood. Bois Brules. (D 158)

The newspaperman, Lachlan, who sends Morag to the awful scene, Lachlan who has people as his religion, is another of the book's light givers--leading Morag toward the social gospel she will come to embrace. Speaking of the outcast Tonnerres, he tells her

> Those people know things it will take you the better part of your lifetime to learn, if ever. They are not very verbal people, but if you ever in your life presume to look down on them because you have the knack of words and they do not, then you do so at your eternal risk and peril. (D 155)

Here from Lachlan, then, is another sermon that "sticks" for Morag--a sermon not delivered from any pulpit or within any chapel. To a great degree Morag is Laurence herself and her true belief can be seen in Laurence's own

credo, as she wrote it in Heart of a Stranger:

> The theme of survival--not just physical survival, but the preservation of some human dignity and in the end some human *warmth* and ability to reach out and touch others--this is, I have come to think, an almost inevitable theme for a writer such as I, who come from a Scots-Irish background of stern values and hard work puritanism. (6)

Morag's time with Brooke Skelton lacks this human warmth and dignity; her marriage to him becomes smothering to her own creative fire and individuality of spirit. Brooke is ice, and Morag requires fire. Her spunk almost smothered, Brooke one day pushes her too far. Her outburst is reminiscent of Christie's flaming tirades. Until this point of provocation she has suppressed the rising "desire to speak sometimes as Christie used to speak, the loony oratory, salt-beefed with oaths, the stringy lean oaths with some protein in them, the Protean oaths upon which she was reared" (D 255). At last she can check her tongue no longer, and it flames with Christie's words.

> "*Little one.*" Brooke, I am twenty-eight years old and I am five feet eight inches tall, which has always seemed too bloody christly tall to me but there it is, and by judas priest and all the sodden saints in fucking Beulah Land, I am stuck with it and I do not *mind* like I did once, in fact the goddam reverse if you really want to know . . . and that's the everlasting christly truth of it. (D 256)

Brooke coldly asks her if she is "due to menstruate!"

When Jules wanders into Toronto and he and Morag meet, by accident or fortuity, she invites him over for a friendly visit. Brooke's slurs about, not only Morag's

past but Skinner's racial background, cause Morag to follow Jules, leaving Brooke for good. Yet she might have gone with Jules even without excuse of the insults. He ignites and attracts her always. Morag, seeker of Fire, but associated with Water, is drawn to Skinner, has their fiery Pique by him--yet Jules and Morag, Fire and Water, can never live together long. The embers of their love, though they live apart, are never quite extinguished.

It is a more comforting warmth that Morag finds in Royland, whose fire and brimstone past is behind him, but whose warmth and light make him another of Morag's shamans. He sheds light upon her own soul and helps her to understand her fellows. Margaret Laurence, in a University address called "If I Had One Hour to Live," articulates Morag's social gospel, which is also her own:

> It is my feeling that as we grow older we should become not less radical but more so. I do not, of course, mean this in any political party sense, but in a willingness to struggle for those things which we passionately believe . . . . There is a line from the old Anglo-Saxon poem, "The Battle of Maldoon," that I think of frequently. It is this: "Mind must be firmer, heart the more fierce, courage the greater, as our strength diminishes." (D1)

Then she ends the address quoting from the Bible, the book Northrop Frye calls *The Great Code*--"I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live . . ." (Deuteronomy 30:19).

This is the code and the gospel Morag learns and lives by, led to it by Christie and Jules and Royland and

by her own inner light.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Before I close this paper's study (though not my continuing interest), I would like to put the parts back together--to *surface*--and view my authors, their books, and my own thoughts unfragmented.

I have approached these two books as archetypal narratives and have gone to structures and symbols. Structurally, for example, I have classified The Diviners and Surfacing as novels of quest--as contemporary myths of descent and return. Furthermore, I have made this a comparative study, concentrating on pairs of themes and symbols which I have found to be so abundantly *there*.

But the cautionary story is told about blind philosophers "seeing" an elephant, perceiving only its parts and mistaking them for the whole. Come to think of it, I have been feeling about the parts of two elephants, amazed at how the trunks and tails match. Before the two pachyderms amble off, though, I would like to catch a glimpse of them whole. I would like, in other words, to make some very direct comments about both Margarets--their works, interrelationships, and differences--and about my own analysis.

Margaret Atwood I view as the more tonally incisive of the two authors. She is a poet and a scholar/literary critic, as well as a novelist and short story writer. Her

first-hand awareness of other literary disciplines shapes her fiction writing. Her study with Northrop Frye, one of the seminal minds of our age, has had long-term implications in her writing, placing her work in the context of a poetic renaissance somewhat shaped by Frye, but filtered through her own unique poetic sensibilities. Though she protests that Frye did not shape his students' minds like Play-doh, she cannot and would not disavow his influence. Studying with him was more like "being watched by a sunflower," she says, and the extent of her longtime trust in him may be seen in the undergraduate literary parody she wrote and published in which she "applied archetypal criticism to the Ajax commercial [analyzing] the eternal battle of the recurrent figure of Housewife against the dark and menacing figure of The Dirt" (Second Words 398).

I have come to see Surfacing as more representative of her fiction than I had originally thought. It carries themes, methods of her poetry, and treats issues of her critical concern--matters of victimization, especially where women are the victimized.

Twelve years younger than Laurence, she treads a path cleared by Laurence for Canadian women writers. Laurence became something of a creative grandmother to a whole generation of creative writers, Margaret Atwood prime among them.

Though both Laurence and Atwood have been deeply

concerned with matters of feminism and Canadian nationalism, Atwood seems to me to be the more strident, though no more caring than Laurence. Her critical work, Survival, for instance, has a quality of almost missionary zeal, presenting Canadian authors as the sometimes oppressed and unsung. Although Atwood has traveled widely and has taught and lectured in the United States (she currently holds the Berg Chair at Harvard), she is strongly nationalist, loving her homeland and disapproving of the insular hauteur of the United States writing community.

Laurence, by contrast, though also a spokesman for women and for her native soil, is more a humanist than a feminist; more an internationalist than a nationalist. When she heard The Stone Angel praised because of its "Canadianism," she objected:

> I feel so strongly against that point of view. I think the thing that matters least about a novel is whether it's Canadian or American or English or African, or what it is. I think the only thing that matters is whether it's a good novel and I hate really to have my writing talked about as Canadian writing. (Callaghan 11)

Laurence's work crossed the boundaries of sex and nationality; Atwood's is in the spirit of our times--though the themes she probes are ancient.

I have read Atwood's novels, her short stories, her poetry, and much of her criticism. She is an alarmingly bright, original and talented writer in each of these genres. What had at first seemed to me disparate about

her works, now appears connected. The novels, each so diverse in approach, setting and character, I now see to be part of a consistent mythic vision. The women characters, central in all of the novels except Life Before Man, are in each case victims, and their archetypal experiences are filtered through Atwood's distinctive poetic voice. They are characters afflicted with neuroses; each single-minded, duplicitous, divided against herself, and a victim. Atwood's approach is mythic, even though the novels are made up of realistic elements. Her effect is sometimes surreal. From Laurence's books the mythic can be distilled; in Atwood's novels we find the pure distillate.

If given the chance to meet Margaret Atwood, I would be terrified, certainly not relaxed. I have listened to taped interviews she has granted and note that she can be quite sharp--caustic over failures on the part of the interviewer to do her homework.

By contrast, Laurence was said to have been warm and generous with those seeking her professional help. Her friend, Ken Adachi, writes of this: "Her support of Canadian literature and young writers knew no bounds" (Adachi D2). And William French says: "When she was writer-in-residence at the University of Toronto, she was a kind of mother confessor to students with personal problems. It was emotionally fatiguing and time consuming, but she believed it was part of her duty" (C5).

On the lecture circuit, talking on everything from literature to social injustice and disarmament, though articulate and beloved, Laurence was known to be terrified. She shook until she had to be provided with a special table to grasp to keep from toppling over, and a chair to sink into when her legs shook to much to hold her. This would not be germane except that it reflects a gentle quality in her works.

Laurence, from her newlywed days in Africa, felt an attunement to human issues. Her humanitarianism is the bedrock of all her writing, and The Diviners, as culmination of her life's work, has perhaps, the most human touch. The comparison of her works with Tolstoy's is felicitous, because they both are most concerned about truly capturing the expansiveness of life and the essence of character. While Atwood's characters are instruments of archetypal message, without ever being didactically so, Laurence's are deeply and roundly human, sometimes almost homespun. One would never describe an Atwood character as homespun.

I talk of the mythic and religious in my analysis of both authors, and I still believe it is inherently present in their books. For Atwood, the inner probe is piercing, Jungian--religion merging with the psychoanalytic. For Laurence, the mythos seems to evolve through the unfolding of lives. On the deepest level, the works of both are religious; their paths to that religious center differ.

Laurence reaches it narratively, in an almost old-fashioned way. Atwood gets there through the compression of poetry. Morag grew and developed by the myths she encountered; the protagonist of Surfacing moved through ritual to a position of survival.

Both Margarets have cared, not only about victimization, but about survival. Atwood's celebrated and controversial critical work, as well as the lives of her fictional characters attest to that. But before Atwood had written Survival, Laurence had addressed the subject directly:

> The theme of survival--not just physical survival, but the preservation of some human dignity and in the end some human warmth and ability to reach out and touch others--this is, I have come to think, an almost inevitable theme for a writer such as I, who came from a Scots-Irish background of stern values and hard work and puritanism, and who grew up during the drought and depression of the thirties and then the war. (Heart of a Stranger 6)

I cannot account for the serendipitous juxtaposition of theme and image in The Diviners and Surfacing. Despite differences one would expect between two creative artists, the startling resonances are there. The religious and folkloric themes I have explored do not begin to tap the depths and richness of these two novels. While other themes can profitably be explored, none could be more central to the works than religion.

EPILOGUE

Within a short time after completing this study, I received through the mail from friends, two remarkable missives. One was an interview Margaret Laurence granted to her friend Donald Cameron (1973), the other a speech recently given by Margaret Atwood on her acceptance of "Humanist of the Year" award. Both of these late additions to my materials seemed to confirm the stance I have taken here--to be tacit blessing from the Margarets upon my own tortuous path to their truths.

Atwood, hesitating a little in accepting her award because she is "not a card-carrying humanist" or a card-carrying anything, nevertheless shows her humanist colors in these words:

> All totalitarianisms begin in a perception of social imbalance. All begin by promising to set things right . . . . All have some version of the end justi-bying the means. All project evil onto a group of scapegoats, the witches, the Christians, the Jews, the Gentiles, the blacks, the whites, the commies, the capitalists, the Catholics, the Protestants--and promise to do away with evil by getting rid of the scapegoat. All proceed by dehumanizing the scape-goat which justifies the inhumanities which are then practiced . . . . Totalitarianism comes from a fail-ure of the human imagination--our failure to imagine each human being as fully human as we are. ("Margaret Atwood" 6-7)

Laurence, vindicating what I had perceived but said less well, cogently states her philosophy:

> I think that I see not only my characters but myself and everybody else in a world which is not devoid of religion. I don't have any feeling, personally, of loyalty to the traditional Christian religions . . .

I think of myself as a kind of religious atheist, if you like, or religious agnostic, who knows? but I do not really believe that God is totally dead in our universe, you see. I don't know even what I mean by God, but I don't think, personally, that we do live in a universe which is as empty as we might think. A lot of my characters, like myself, inhabit a world in which they no longer believe in the teachings of the traditional church, but where these things have enormous emotional impact on them still, as they do on me. There is a great deal, for example, in the Bible which really hits me very hard; it seems to express certain truths about the human dilemma and about mankind. The expression of various facets of human life and of human life searching for a consciousness greater than its own--that is, in God--some of this moves me in a way that great poetry moves you. I'm particularly attached to the King James version of the Bible because it <u>is</u> the poetry of it that really hits me. A great many of the characters feel as I do about it. There's an enormous emotional inheritance. I am a Christian in the sense of my heritage...and part of the impact is not that you believe it, but you mourn your disbelief. This is Eden lost. (Cameron 111-112)

NOTES

[1] Margaret Atwood studied at Victoria College, Toronto, where she was Northrop Frye's student. She herself quips of his influence: "Well, being a former student of Frye's does help out with the answers. When someone asks you, live, on air, how come you're such a pessimist and why you don't have happier endings, you can think to yourself, 'because I'm writing it in the ironic mode, thickhead'" (Second Words 406).

Critic Sandra Djwa further asserts that Frye made his students "aware of the place of myth in interpreting and shaping cultural consciousness." "As critic and teacher," she says, "Frye had a far reaching effect on Canadian writing" (Davidson and Davidson 17).

Additionally, Sherrill E. Grace comments that, "Under the influence of quasi-structuralists like Frye and James Reaney, Atwood views myth as a system that articulates and unites the individual and universal, indeed, all the basic dualities of existence . . ." (Davidson and Davidson 58).

[2] David Stouck, in his book on Canadian authors, has unqualified praise for Margaret Laurence: "No Canadian writer has enjoyed a greater degree of popular and cultural success as [sic] Laurence . . ." (243).

Atwood herself comments on the international reputation of Laurence: "The Diviners is a large and complex book, an orchestration of themes as well as a collection

of stories. It's about Canada as well as Manawaka, about the need to give shape to our own legends, to rediscover what is really ours, what is here. Paradoxically, The Diviners is at once the most 'international' of Laurence's books and the most national. They are not mutually exclusive" (Woodcock, A Place to Stand On 26)

In a similar vein, Arnold and Kathy Davidson, editors of a collection of critical essays on Atwood, comment on her international reputation: "Even though she has not yet been translated into Japanese," they write from Japan, "Margaret Atwood is still widely read on this far side of the Pacific, read in English, which is a definite tribute to her very broad appeal" (9).

Despite these broad international reputations, book sources in Utah, at least, are distressingly unable to provide copies of books by Laurence or Atwood.

[3] George Woodcock spends several pages favorably comparing Laurence with Tolstoy, then he concludes: "Margaret Laurence positively resembles Tolstoy in possessing the panoramic sense of space and history, developed to a degree no Canadian fiction writer can rival" (The World of Canadian Writing 43).

[4] "A Bird in the House," title story of Laurence's collection of Manawaka short stories, gives support to my assertion that the gull in the warehouse room foreshadows Hagar's impending death. In this story the young narrator Vanessa hears from the evangelical hired girl, Noreen,

that a bird in the house indicates a death will soon take place. Vanessa rejects this, as she rejects Noreen's fanatical faith, but the bird in the house does correspond to the death of Vanessa's father. The child reluctantly learns that though we reject faith and fable, their effects remain uncomfortably present in our lives.

[5] Both Atwood and Laurence resent the molding, manipulating aspects of a consumer society. Just as Stacey attends "supermarket services," so Marian of Atwood's The Edible Woman wanders the supermarket aisles, lulled by the Muzak and converted subliminally by the labels: "You let the thing in you that was supposed to respond to the labels just respond, whatever it was; maybe it had something to do with the pituitary gland. Which detergent had the best power symbol? . . . It was dangerous to stay in the supermarket too long. One of these days it would get to her. She would be trapped past closing time and they would find her in the morning propped against one of the shelves in an unbreakable coma, surrounded by all the pushcarts in the place heaped to overflowing with merchandise . . . " (The Edible Woman 177-179).

[6] These are the steps to rites of passage that Van Gennep establishes in his definitive study, 1909. Van Gennep has shown that "all rites of transition are marked by three phases: separation, margin (or limen), and aggregation" (Victor W. Turner, "Betwixt and Between" 4).

[7] Observe that Laurence and Atwood apparently had different sources on this linguistic matter. Actually, the information on the Eskimo words for snow has become almost proverbial and formulaic rather than precise. Reports of Eskimo words for snow range from twenty-five to over a hundred.

[8] This is taken from a taped interview recorded at Washington University (American Prose Library, April 1983, St. Louis, Missouri).

[9] Margaret Laurence herself calls Royland a Fisher King figure, in an interview with Michelle Fabre.

"**Fabre:** *About Royland, I suppose one must see him as the Fisher King.*

Laurence: *Absolutely. And also as the old man of the river in a sense--but as the Fisher King--and the King of the Land*" (Woodcock, A Place to Stand On 209).

[10] Again, in the Michelle Fabre interview (see Note 9), Laurence directly states her symbolic intent.

"**Fabre:** *Do you use the blue heron in the same way? In order to make him a totemic bird?*

Laurence: *Well, I wanted him to be an ancient bird. A sort of ancestor. He is a totem, sure, but he establishes a relationship with the early ancestors of the earth itself . . .*" (Woodcock, A Place to Stand On 209).

[11] "framed in the proper clothes, laminated"--The whole subject of clothes and coiffures would make another yeasty area of comparative study. For example, Brooke's

plan for remaking Morag includes his urging her to dress according to fashion's dictates and to have her hair "done." When Surfacing's protagonist begins to take on society's corruption, her childish drawings turn from original and imaginative to carbon-copy, paper doll fashion sketches. In The Edible Woman the central character Marian, also a victim, dresses, at one point in the book, to please her fiance, Peter. Her face and hair made artificial and her dress constricting and unnatural, she relinquishes part of herself to the dictates of fashion. More than that, though, in her bright red dress she has become the "perfect target," pointedly a victim. And Peter, with his camera aimed, the obvious hunter, "once he pulled the trigger she would be stopped, fixed indissolubly in that gesture, that single stance, unable to move or change" (The Edible Woman 251-252).

The stereotyping, role-fixing, constraining aspects of dress, of course, are pushed to the ultimate horror in Atwood's Handmaid's Tale, where women are defined and delimited by their dress.

[12] A number of points that Victor W. Turner makes in his analysis of the liminal phase of *rites de passage* have direct bearing on Surfacing. Neophytes, notes Turner, "are allowed to go filthy and identify with the earth, the generalized matter into which every specific individual is rendered down." "Their condition," Turner continues, "is

one of ambiguity and paradox, a confusion of all the customary categories . . . they are neither one thing nor another; or maybe both . . . . Since neophytes are not only structurally 'invisible' (though physically visible) and ritually polluting, they are very commonly secluded. . . . The neophytes are sometimes said to 'be in another place'. . . . They have to be hidden . . . . A further structurally negative characteristic of transitional beings is that they have nothing . . . . Their condition is the very prototype of sacred poverty." Other salient symbols or conditions for the liminal state are, according to Turner, submission to taboo, to ordeal, to sacred silence, to nakedness, to association with death/birth symbols. These rites and symbols, Turner concludes, give the neophyte "ultimate standards of reference . . ." whereby the being is actually transformed, "from one kind of human being into another." Their "betwixt and between period" has been "fruitful darkness" ("Betwixt and Between" 4-20).

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