BEYOND GOD THE FATHER: THE MANAWAKA NOVELS OF MARGARET LAURENCE AS A FEMINIST REWRITING OF T. S. ELIOT'S *FOUR QUARTETS*

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If, according to Margaret Laurence, 'Humankind's Quest for the archetypal parents, for our gods, for our own meanings in the face of our knowledge of the inevitability of death, is central to mythology, religion and history'[1], it is also central to her own fiction. Her four Manawaka novels are sagas of spiritual quests for freedom. They enact journeys in time and place simultaneously; and unlike traditional male heroes, her heroines descend into the depths of their own being as well as the cultural past and return after discovering their own power. In that process, they seem to reject institutionalised religion and seek to find the god within who is the god of creativity and love - unlike the patriarchal God. This pattern is clear when we compare her four Manawaka novels with Eliot's *Four Quartets*. According to Helen Gardner, the *Four Quartets* is about the four elements as they also deal with renewal through death in relation to four elements, but there is a fifth element, the 'true unnamed principle of life' which becomes the subject of the poem.[2] Similarly, Woodcock has referred to the theory of elements of Empedocles providing the pattern of the Manawaka novels.[3] But whereas Eliot transforms the Heraclitean flux with a Christian theory of value as incarnation gives meaning to all time, Laurence's heroines redeem time by identifying themselves with the maternal principle of renewal and discovering their strength through humility, compassion and creativity. The paper proposes to bring out Margaret Laurence's Manawaka novels as a feminist rewriting of Eliot's *Four Quarters* as they are more concerned with a God more feminine, creative and subaltern.

Laurence's first novel *The Stone Angel*, like 'East Coker,' begins with the earth, more particularly the hill, the cemetery and the stone angel which releases Hagar's memory. But the stone in the novel also stands for the human body, and Hagar herself is described as a stone when she lost her son. At another level, the novel shows the interpenetration of life and death, the birth of vision or consciousness along with death, as Hagar becomes really alive at the end when she is reduced to a mere physical existence. But through love and understanding, she is able to break the chains. Like the stone angel, she also acquires vision at the end. This is

comparable to the interpenetration of light and stone in Eliot: 'In a warm haze the sultry light / Is absorbed, not refracted, by grey stone'.[4] Both 'East Coker' and *The Stone Angel* are concerned with the simultaneity of all time and converging of all journeys; and both suggest that time past and time future are present in time present. But in both the journey is not only horizontal but vertical. Hagar's descent into the dark at Shadowpoint is very much like the descent into the darkness of God and the way of dispossession by which one must go in order to possess what one does not possess.[5] Hagar becomes aware of herself only then in more than one sense: 'When the next small firework of light appears, he holds a candle. He stares at me, and then I'm aware of myself, crouching among these empty boxes'.[6] This is symbolic of the deeper transformation that follows. Interestingly, both Eliot and Margaret Laurence use the hospital as a symbol of suffering humanity and the ability to suffer for others as a means to transcendence.

Whereas Section IV of 'East Coker' uses the hospital and the wounded surgeon as symbols - 'The whole earth is our hospital / Where our only health is the disease' and 'the dripping blood our only drink'[7] - Hagar's experiences in the hospital are more literal, but there is the undercurrent of symbolism also. But while Eliot refers to the need for acceptance of sickness in the deeper sense and Christ's blood for saving us, Hagar also begins to accept her sickness gradually, though reluctantly. In her case, healing takes place with her experiencing human togetherness gradually, though reluctantly, with the fellow sufferers in the hospital which culminates in her act to alleviate the agony of Sandra needing a bedpan, which is a human counterpart to the holy Grail. At the end of Section IV, Eliot says:

> Love is most nearly itself
> When here and now cease to matter.
> Old men ought to be explorers
> Here and there does not matter.[8]

This is what exactly happens to Hagar at the end. She able to discover a deeper bond between various generations and different places. Specifically, she not only gives a gift for Tina, and understands and accepts the need for Troy and Doris, but also utters a lie to Marvin in order to affirm her love. In a scene which inverts the Lear-Cordelia reunion, she releases herself by releasing Harvin. In the words of Eliot, she is 'still and still moving / Into another intensity / For a further union, a deeper communion'.[9] That is why

at the last moment, she is able to drink water, which signifies acceptance of grace, though humanised.

If Hagar's element is earth or wilderness, symbolising pride, the element of Rachel in *A Jest of God* is (as in 'Burnt Norton'), air, and her dominant attitude fear, coming out of her repression of which the patriarchal church and the school are outward symbols. But the tabernacle episode reveals her unconscious repressed desire forcing itself into articulation in the form of 'chattering, crying, ululating, the forbidden transformed cryptically to nonsense, dragged from the crypt'.[10] Whereas the congregation sings a song of praise enacting surrender, the heteroglossia is suggestive of the 'semiotic' in Julia Kristeva's terms. Rachel's psychic sickness seeks healing through sex with Luke whereas her attitude to the children in the school show her repression. Rachel descends to the mortuary where she is in the grip of fear regarding pregnancy.

Also in *A Jest of God*, the hospital and sickness are related to a birth which is almost a death, and a death which is a renewal - also as in Eliot. Rachel's attitude to children is comparable to Eliot's in 'Burnt Norton' which deals with the children's laughter in a garden - which is an illusion. But Rachel's child turns out to be a rumour. Earlier Nick says, 'I am not God - I can't solve anything' to Rachel's desire: 'If I had a child' I would like it to be yours'.[11] He shows a boy's photo which mistakes to be his son's. This leads to the end of the affair. This is a parallel to her mistaking the rumour for a child. But when the rumour is removed, she becomes a real mother - in a deeper sense - possibly to her own mother. This shows a kind of psychic rebirth as she transcends the Oedipal stage of hostility to mother as well as her repressed desire for the father. She has been running away from her father as well as life-denying religion, which is only the institutionalisation of the fear of father.

Her relationship to her parents is parallel to her relationship to God, and while coming to terms with herself and her roots she comes to terms with the Jest of God and the knifing reality. Like Patrick White she sees God as a vivisector or a cruel joker who inflicts suffering as surgery for curing the soul of its sickness. Here the parallel and the difference between Laurence and Eliot is unmistakable. If Eliot's God is Love, 'itself unmoving / Only the cause and end of movement' revealed 'Sudden in a shaft of sunlight / Even while the dust moves',[12] Laurence's last circular sentence identifies God with mankind as divine fool. In the words of Patricia Morley, 'This is the culmination of an intricate pattern of the folly of fear and the fear of folly'.[13] Eliot also speaks of fear and folly together:

> Do not let me hear
> Of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly,
> Their fear of fear and frenzy, their fear of possession
> Belonging to another, or to others, or to God.[14]

What is important is the discovery of a deeper affinity between the human and the divine jester, between the human and divine comedy, though there is more of irony in Laurence. The circularity in the whole sentence as well as 'God's pity on God' enacts the split and synthesis of the Jesting God and the protagonist. Rachel also acquires more strength and freedom and the descent into a 'deeper darkness' is also an ascent into the apocalyptic and human. When she moves away from Manawaka in search of a new life she seems to be carried by air. As Woodcock puts it, air is her element and in the end her liberation.[15]

Just as *A Jest of God* resembles Eliot's first quartet 'Burnt Norton', particularly in the use of air imagery, there is an affinity between Laurence's *The Fire Dwellers* and Eliot's *Fourth Quartet* in the use of fire imagery. The fire here stands for not only the fire of a world threatened with holocaust as in 'Little Gidding' but also the 'inferno of unsatisfied urges in Stacey herself,' in the words of Woodcock.[16] Whereas in Eliot the inferno is brought out in Dantesque terms, in Stacey it is more destructive than purifying - it is the fire of destruction in the unreal world around her as well as the fear within of an apocalypse of terror.

Like Rachel at the end, Stacey at the beginning assumes a rough equality with God: 'Maybe He'd say, 'Don't worry, Stacey, I am not all that certain either. Sometimes I wonder if I even exist'. And I'd say, I know what you mean, Lord. I have the same trouble with myself".[17] The external god seems to be of no help to her. Her terror arising out of life's patternlessness is overcome by a descent into the archetypal and the discovery of her own inner strength. Her descent into the elemental and the archetypal is a revolt against the values of the patriarchal world. But unlike her mother before her, she begins to rebuild her married life and this is preceded by her memory of an attempt to exorcise her father's ghost after his funeral. There is also a change in her relationship with Katie by seeing it in relation to her relationships with her mother.

She wants God to be born a mother next time if he wants to know human suffering. But the archetypal mother is here alive when she says: 'Let me die before they do. Only not before they grow up, or what would happen to them?'[18] As Buss puts it, 'The recurring images of apocalyptic

destruction in *The Fire Dwellers* express Stacey's unconscious fears of the results of too great an emphasis on the Logos concepts of monotheistic patriarchy'.[19] Even though Stacey does not become strong enough to dispel her fear even at the end as she feels the city receding as she slides into sleep, there is some growth. As Scott puts it, 'This word 'gone' is gone from the end of last line' of the rhyme 'Your house is on fire / Your children are gone',[20] though the image of God is still linked with only the destructive aspect of time passing - unlike in Eliot's *Four Quartets*. Eliot speaks of love that purifies and consumes, the Pentecostal flame as well as the bombs, and though he speaks of the death of all elements there is also removal.

In *The Fire Dwellers* there is a correlation between time passing and both destruction and the breakdown of communication. Stacey seems to change within five minutes from a teenager into a dowdy housewife. Her affair with Luke is an attempt to regain her youth. But soon she realises that one can conquer time only in time - not running away from it, but by accepting its changes. And then, time also becomes a redeemer. And this is linked with freedom from self into 'we' when Kate and Stacey express their concern for Jan. It is significant that in her final soliloquy she accepts change - but as a matriarch: 'Give me another forty years, Lord, and I may mutate into a matriarch'.[21]

It is only in Laurence's last novel *The Diviners* that the search of woman for liberation is completed: when Morag descends into the depths of her being as well as her past, and divines the divinity of the waters of creativity within. Hence, unlike Eliot's fourth quartet, where the dominant element fire is the fire of creation and destruction, in Laurence water becomes a symbol of death and creativity, time the destroyer and the creator, time past and time future. The novel begins and ends with the river running both ways. But though in the beginning there is the end and vice versa as in Eliot, there is growth in the vision of the novel and the protagonist.

In the beginning and the end the daughter leaves Manawaka in search of the paternal past, and her physical journey is paralleled by Horag's journey into the past. By a wonderful technique Laurence makes us see that the way up is the way down. When Horag and Pique understand each other, they accept/create their past/future.

At the first level, the novel is the story of a mother and a daughter - or of two daughters in search of their lost father. We can see this as a re-enactment of Prosperine's search for her daughter and also as an inversion of the Prospero-Miranda story. Pique's search for her father finds its

prototype in Horag's search for her parents, re-enacted in her memory. Horag as a child had grown up under the protection of foster parents who were themselves outcasts. This archetypal outcast as it were finds her foster parents in Christie Logan and Prin, who are her creative roots.

Christie's tale of Piper Gunn provides the base for Morag's creativity. As part of her quest, Horag goes back to Nuisance Grounds: first to bury Prin, who first discovered her creativity; and then when Christie is sick. Her acknowledging him as her father while rejoining him is significant: "Christie, I used to fight a lot with you, Christie, you have been my father to me.' His responding words are slurred and whispered but she hears them: 'Well, I am blessed', Christie Logan says'.[22] Here we have an inversion of the reunion of Lear and his daughter. Christie or Little Christ is a symbol of foolishness and suprarational vision. He is subtly linked with Christ, though in a more humanised, feminised and subalternised sense. It is significant that Horag does not love God, but:

> Jesus is another matter. Whatever anybody says of it, it was really God who decided Jesus had to die like that. Who put it into the head of the soldier, then, to pierce His Side? (*Pierce?* The blood all over the place, like shot gophers and) Who indeed? Three guesses. Jesus had a rough time. But when alive, He was okay to everybody, even sinners and hardup people and like that.[23]

Interestingly, after this reference to Christ, it is said that: 'Christie doesn't care whether Morag goes to Sunday school or not. He wouldn't. He never goes to church himself. Although a believer. But not liking the Reverent McKee'.[24]

Morag's relationship with Jules Tonneree, who represents the Metis people, shows a solidarity between the dispossessed. When she quarrels with her husband Brooke, who symbolises the male bourgeois, she moves west in search of her past as well as motherhood, both of which are provided by Jules, her shaman. Again she discovers her motherhood in another sense through her novels (in the company of Royland) as well as through the discovery and acceptance of the lost daughter, who is also linked with water.

Pique's search for her parents is completed when Morag gives her the pin and the knife, symbolic of her acquiring the tales of the mother and the music of the father. Here there is a discovery of a deeper identity of the mother-daughter which is a re-enactment of the myth of psyche as well as the feminist inversion of the Holy Trinity - Father, Son and the Holy Ghost - as Mother, Daughter and the Holy Ghost as creative word.[25]

We find a parallel to this in Royland moving from being a preacher to a diviner: 'I thought that I had the revealed word,'[26] but only in 'water, the real wet water there to be felt and tasted'.[27] The novel ends with a linking of the Holy Water with the Holy Word as the water is closer to earth; it also symbolises compassion and creativity. Laurence's quest for god ends with water, the most feminine element. The river at the end, also running both ways, is different from the river in the beginning, though it is also the same river as now it has absorbed the underwater weeds: 'Near shore, in the shallows, the water was clear, there were the clean and broken clamshells of creatures now dead, and the wavering of the underwater weed forests, and the flicker of small live fishes'.[28] Here is a reconciliation of life and death. This is similar to Eliot's final synthesis of the rose and the yew tree in the last quartet. The reference to the sand receiving the sun shows the merging of the goddess of earth with the god of the sky. This can be linked with Pique's acquiring the patriarchal and the matriarchal symbols: the knife of Jules and the pin of Horag, as well as the song of the father and the stories of the mother.

In conclusion, the quest of the heroines of Laurence's Manawaka novels for freedom is comparable to Eliot's quest for freedom from time in the *Four Quartets*. In both, the four elements signify the principle of renewal through death. But whereas Eliot's focus is on the eternal that gives meaning to flux, and to him all time is eternally present, Laurence's heroines participate in 'God the Verb who cannot be broken down simply into past, present, and future time, since God is form-destroying, form-creating, transforming power that makes all things new'.[29] Here, self-renewal by identifying and unleashing the creative centre in themselves is more important. In Eliot, the elements stand for change, but they also embody renewal. In Laurence, the characters wrestle with their 'element' which itself becomes a means of redemption. Also, Laurence's characters are not as much alive to the love of God in the traditional sense, but they seek and find a god more feminine, human and even subaltern. And the emphasis on the creativity of God is revealed in women becoming creators of their own freedom and identity, both in the word and in the world. In the case of Eliot, divinity or the Word gives meaning to Life; in the case of Laurence, the word itself becomes Divine. Hence, when 'confronting the nothingness which emerges when one turns one's back upon the pseudo-reality offered by patriarchy, the contemporary woman is saying 'I am'.[30] Eliot's journey is back to God who is our home, whereas Laurence's

characters' journey is back to earth and water - to Manawaka, symbolising cultural and creative roots.

In all this - the protagonists' discovery of creativity in relation to the four elements as well as her concept of God as vivisector and jester - Laurence is also comparable to Patrick White, but his is still a white male god who is more a vivisector than a creator, and the creativity is brought out more in male terms. Again, while the protagonists of both writers achieve humility through suffering, and achieve a kind of divinity when they accept their humanity, Laurence's heroines achieve a fuller humanity by discovering the divinity within.

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[25] Buss, p. 66.

[26] *The Diviners*, p. 240.

[27] Ibid., p. 452.

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