

ATWOOD AND LAURENCE: POET AND NOVELIST

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Margaret Atwood and Margaret Laurence are two popular and respected figures within a culture that is particularly rich in female writers of both poetry and fiction. Much of the work of these two writers deals explicitly with the problems of feminine identity and the threats, both external and internal, to it. The titles of their works point to this theme — Atwood's *The Edible Woman* and Laurence's *The Stone Angel*, for example — but the titles also announce the central controlling image that will structure each of the novels in formal as well as thematic terms. Here, however, the similarity between the two writers ends. Technically the structural use made of that central image is different in each case, and this difference is one that is felt by the reader. It is not that Atwood, for instance, uses more imagery or symbolism in her fiction, but that she tends to have considerably more trust in her reader's ability to discern for himself the structural and thematic function of each image. *The Edible Woman* is indeed structured around the title image: most scenes occur at mealtimes; many of the jobs mentioned are food-oriented; many characters — including the heroine — have food-related problems. Yet at no time does Atwood actually *tell* us that Marian is or is in danger of being "the edible woman." Instead she *shows* this (to borrow Henry James's distinction), and it is the narrative imagery that brings about the thematic actualization. The reader is left to figure out the links for himself: Peter talks of hunting — equally terrifyingly with knife, gun, or camera — and Marian runs in her target-red dress. Such *showing* is very different from Hagar Shipley's *telling* the reader in *The Stone Angel*¹ that when her son John died, she did not weep but rather turned to stone; that, like the family stone angel in the cemetery, she too had been blind; and that at the end of her life it is her other son Marvin who is to be seen as Jacob wrestling with the angel — Hagar herself — for her blessing. The title image may indeed structure the novel, but Laurence then makes certain that the reader will notice.²

¹*The Stone Angel*, New Canadian Library (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1964), p. 243. All further references will be to this edition and will appear in parentheses in the text.

²This is not, of course, unique to female Canadian novelists. Mrs. Bentley of Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House* tells the reader of the "pretentious, ridiculous" false fronts of the buildings of Horizon when she first arrives there, and later she tells too of the purifying, terrifying wind (of honesty) that knocks them down at the end, as she and Philip face their mutual hypocrisy. Similarly, Robertson Davies explains what the title of his novel *Fifth Business* means in the epigraph and then underlines it by Liesl's explanation to the hero late in the novel before the final oracular pronouncement about the "inevitable fifth" by the Brazen Head. Both Ross and Davies, we might note, are prose writers primarily, not poets.

What is the cause of this difference in the degree of trust each writer places in the reader? One possible explanation might be found in the fact that Atwood is a poet as well as a novelist. A good poet *has* to trust her reader with images; she has no choice. A novelist, on the other hand, has an almost totally different set of rhetorical devices at her command, and among these are plot, characterization, and narrative exposition. It is in a sense natural, then, in terms of the conventions of the novel, that Hagar should *tell* the reader that she is that stone angel. It might be instructive at this point to examine in more detail the function of imagery in thematically similar novels of Laurence and Atwood in order to test this generic hypothesis. Is there a particularly novelistic use of imagery that is structurally different from what we might term a more poetic usage? Is it just a different kind of manipulation of figurative language in an extended narrative form? Or does the degree of trust placed in the reader enter into the process?

Although the title image of *The Stone Angel* is important to the thematic structure of the novel — the development of personal freedom and insight by the proud and figuratively blind Hagar Shipley — there are many other image strands that Laurence weaves into the texture of her novel. In a story about personal freedom and feminine identity,³ the choice of the name Hagar, which invokes the narrative of her biblical namesake, is obviously appropriate in terms of the structure of the plot. As William H. New points out in his Introduction to the New Canadian Library edition of the novel, Laurence makes less use of the story in Genesis of Hagar, the wife of Abraham's passionate marriage and mother of the outcast Ishmael, than of the more symbolic reading offered by St. Paul in *Galatians* 4: 22-27. Here Hagar is the bondmaid (a symbol of Mount Sinai), bearing a son "after the flesh," rather than "by promise." Laurence's Hagar too is an outcast in bondage. We know this, for she tells us herself that pride has been her wilderness and that never has she been free. Hagar has, moreover, always denied the importance of "the flesh." It was Bram's sexuality that had attracted her to him in the first place. "His banner over me was only his own skin" (p. 81), she tells us. Her "blood and vitals" rose to meet his, but she actually prided herself on never letting him know that she had "sucked [her] secret pleasure from his skin" (p. 100). The nights she would "lie silent but waiting" (p. 116) in his bed haunt her after she has left him: "There were times when I'd have returned to him, just for that" (p. 160). How ironic, then, that the Hagar we first meet is an old and obese one who must literally wallow in flesh, "embalmed alive" (p. 96) in the very substance whose power she sought to deny. The son she bore "of the flesh," her Ishmael, John, is (to her mind) of *her* flesh (that is, a Currie), not of Bram's, or so she deludes herself into thinking (see pp. 125-27, 167, 171, 204). And John is in fact the

³See Clara Thomas, *The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976) and Laurence's interview with Donald Cameron in his *Conversations with Canadian Novelists* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1973), pp. 96-115.

real outcast Ishmael and not the wrestling Jacob she wants him to be, the one who would found a dynasty for her. That role belongs instead to the neglected Marvin, actually the more Currie-like of her sons (pp. 180-81). *Brampton Shipley*, like the biblical Abraham, has undertaken two rather different marriages; and Laurence's Hagar, like the biblical Hagar, also resents the man's first wife — a Clara this time, verbally close but not quite a biblical Sarah. It does not take much critical acumen to find these parallels. The opening page of the novel announces the desire of Hagar's father to "proclaim his dynasty" through the stone angel. He is referred to here in terms of one of the "fledgling pharaohs in an uncouth land," and Hagar is later called a "Pharaoh's daughter reluctantly returning to his roof" (p. 43). Years later, she watches John struggling to set right the same stone angel — upended and defaced — and wishes "he could have looked like Jacob" (p. 179). It is at the end of the novel that she explicitly tells the reader, however, that it was Marvin who was "truly Jacob, gripping with all his strength, and bargaining" (p. 304) with her, the real stone angel of the narrative.

The meaning of the other threads of imagery in the novel is made equally clear to the reader. Hagar prefers to wear real silk dresses in lilac or flowering patterns (pp. 29, 40); Doris, on the other hand, dresses in "dark brown artificial silk" (p. 28). Hagar loves flowers; the novel in fact opens with those that grow around the stone angel in the cemetery. The "funeral-parlor perfume" (p. 4) of these planted flowers is picked up in the Lily of the Valley perfume which Hagar's granddaughter gives her: "lilies of the valley, so white and almost too strongly sweet, were the flowers we used to weave into the wreaths for the dead" (p. 33), she tells the reader. Even the key to Frank Pesando's thorough article⁴ that traces the negative apocalyptic images of decay and the ambivalence of the sea as a symbol in the novel can be easily discovered in the text. Hagar silently argues against the minister, Mr. Troy, attacking his concept of the positive vision of salvation: "Even if heaven were real, and measured as Revelation says, so many cubits this way and that, how gimcrack a place it would be" (p. 120), she remarks. The imagery of the novel clearly conveys, as Pesando illustrates, the horrific vision of the Apocalypse which Hagar's pride leads her to perceive.

Such strands of imagery work to strengthen the basic thematic and narrative structures of the novel. Figurative language is also part of the stylistic texture of Hagar's individual expression. At the beginning of her reminiscing, the use of imagery in the form of similes is actually a very noticeable verbal tic, perhaps intended as an index of realism. Hagar uses images that one might expect her realistically to use — not always very subtle or even very pleasant ones. Her brother is "like a water beetle busily boating on the surface of life" (p. 22). As a girl she and her friends walked

⁴"In a Nameless Land: The Use of Apocalyptic Mythology in the Writings of Margaret Laurence," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 2, No. 1 (Winter 1973), 53-58.

carefully in the town dump “like dainty-nosed czarinas finding themselves in sudden astonishing proximity to beggars with weeping sores” (p. 27). In a single paragraph, Hagar’s bones fold “like the bamboo bones of a paper fan,” and she flounders “like a fish on the slimed boards of a dock,” while Doris tries to lift her, straining “like a calving cow” (p. 31). Soon after we find Doris puffing and sighing “like a sow in labor” and rasping “like a coping saw” (p. 55). If these multiple similes are intended to be a realistic contribution to the characterization of the narrator, it is interesting to note that they decrease in frequency as the novel progresses and as Hagar’s character becomes more fully realized.⁵ In fact, similes are gradually replaced by metaphors, some of which actually become narrative symbols. Hagar’s fear of Bram’s horses — “so high and heavy they seemed, so muscular, so much their own masters” (p. 83) — is obviously not unrelated to her response to her husband, but Laurence wisely refrains from underlining her metaphor’s import, and it thus gains in power for this reticence. Unfortunately such restraint is rare in the novel. Even after Hagar’s richly evocative fantasy of herself beneath the sea “tiaraed with starfish thorny and purple, braceleted with shells linked on limp chains of weed,” ready to float free and “journey with tides and fishes,” the heroine explicitly calls herself “baggage, hulk, chambered nautilus” (p. 162). Even the epigraph from Dylan Thomas (“Do not go gentle into that good night./Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”) enters the novel overtly as Hagar reviles her brother Matt for slipping into death without rage: “Why hadn’t he writhed, cursed, at least grappled with the thing?” (p. 60). Similarly, Hagar’s instinctive response to the old-age home is to “*flail against the thing*” (p. 95, her italics), and she herself does not at all “go gentle into that good night” at the end of the novel. Because the set of rhetorical tools available to the novelist includes explicit commentary as well as the structural functions of imagery, it is not unusual that Laurence should avail herself of both. What is perhaps more surprising is her need to use the narrative commentary as a means of insuring the reader’s comprehension of the function of the imagery.

In *The Edible Woman*, Margaret Atwood appears to be considerably more willing to trust her reader with the meaning of images, and I have suggested that her experience as a poet may be the basis of understanding the difference between her use of imagery and Laurence’s. It is as if Atwood chooses to hang the narrative upon a solid scaffolding of imagery, rather than to supplement the narrative and thematic lines by supportive and well-explicated image patterns — such as the stone angel or the biblical archetypes of Laurence’s novel. Atwood’s image of the potentially “edible woman” who is constantly threatened in a world of consumerism forms the

⁵It is interesting to note that Laurence feels she overworked the flashback technique in this novel but not the similes. See “Ten Years’ Sentences,” reprinted in *Writers of the Prairies*, ed. D. G. Stephens (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1973), 145-46.

structural as well as thematic core of the novel. Peter, the symbolically named rock of this consuming society, is the greatest external threat to Marian's identity and to her freedom. He is a hunter recounting *macho* tales⁶ and then bringing them terrifyingly to life as he stalks the fleeing heroine at several points in the narrative (pp. 73, 78-79, 245-46). At his party, Marian sees her boots sitting on newspaper outside the apartment door like "black leathery bait" in a trap (p. 227) for other boots; her coat lies on the bed a "sort of decoy for the other coats" (p. 228). It is not surprising that Marian should feel nervous when Peter asks her to pose for a photo "over there by the guns" (p. 232) in front of the aimed camera: "She should never have worn red. It made her a perfect target" (p. 244). She knows she must flee to her alter-ego, Duncan, away from the "dark intent marksman" (p. 246).

What takes Marian longer to realize is that the real dangers to her identity are as much internal as external. She at first acquiesces in Peter's view of her as his property, even to the point of feeling in herself a "sense of proud ownership" (p. 146) about him. Later, as she enters Duncan's apartment for dinner one night, she slips Peter's engagement ring into her change-purse, where it belongs, Atwood suggests (pp. 192, 203). Marriage is ultimate buying power. Yet it is while thinking about Peter, the hunting and photography fanatic, in conjunction with the sterile, *macho* Moose Beer commercials that Marian first perceives food as something that was once alive and first feels empathy with things consumed (pp. 150-51). She sees herself as both consumer and consumed, and her body begins its rebellion. From this particular narrative use of the image in the title of the novel comes most of the humour and the power of the rest of Marian's story. Even the narrative technique of the novel, however, becomes subject to the imagery. The first-person narrative of the first twelve chapters comes to a close with Marian's acceptance of her role as Peter's future wife. As she surrenders her identity and her resistance to being the "edible woman," the novel switches to an impersonal third-person narration, a reversal that is only righted again at the end of the novel when Marian consumes — at once internalizes and rejects — the image of herself as consumed victim.

If these structural uses of the title image were all there were in the novel, we would, somewhat paradoxically, already be dealing with a more extensive and a less explicit phenomenon than is the case in Laurence's novel. But there is more to be considered here. This novel is filled with many other types of consumers and their victims. The "office virgins" hunt husbands; the predatory Lucy helps Peter stalk Marian after her flight from his party. Clara is consumed by her body and her own passivity: the opposite of Ainsley, the consumer as manipulator. For Marian, it is not only food, but also her own female body that becomes prey. Early in the novel she has a dream in which her limbs are "like melting jelly" and her fingers are "turning

⁶*The Edible Woman*, New Canadian Library (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969), p. 69. All further references will be to this edition and will appear in parentheses in the text.

transparent" (p. 43). Over a hundred pages later, similar identity threatening imagery is suggested in Marian's response to her office party: "she was one of them [the fat ladies], her body the same, identical, merged with that other flesh . . . ; she felt suffocated by this thick sargasso-sea of femininity" (p. 167). As she prepares for Peter's party, this imagery reaches a climax (but is still never explicitly pointed out by the author). Marian sits in the bathtub, looks at her body, "somehow no longer quite her own," and suddenly fears that she is dissolving, "coming apart layer by layer like a piece of cardboard in a gutter puddle" (p. 218). As she then imagines Peter's friends regarding her, she fears "losing her shape, spreading out, not being able to contain herself any longer" (p. 219). As a safety measure, she attempts to bind her body in an unneeded girdle, to squeeze it into a tight red dress, and to hide her face behind a mask of makeup. But as the narrative progresses, we (and Marian too) see that the dress seams must be split (p. 260), that the only way to stop the expanding flesh and resultant identity loss is to return to the natural, to the cold that defines as it contracts. This is the point at which Atwood's epigraph becomes relevant. The need for a chilled surface upon which to operate when making puff pastry (quoted from *The Joy of Cooking*) is connected not only with the food imagery of the novel in general, but also with a certain important character, usually found sitting out in the cold — namely, Duncan. It is he, in fact, who teaches Marian that "hunger is more basic than love" (p. 100), though both devour. "Florence Nightingale was a cannibal" (p. 100), he informs her at their first meeting.

On her way home that night, Marian notices an advertisement on the bus with a picture of a nurse and a caption asking that one "give the gift of life" (p. 101). Shortly after this incident, Marian thinks of the interviewers her company employs, housewives lured by the appeal to the "embryonic noble nurse" (p. 109) in them. At this point in her musings, Marian feels hungry. It is now the reader who must make the connections from nurse to advertisement to laundromat to Duncan to Florence Nightingale to "hunger is more basic than love," and Atwood trusts her reader to do so, eschewing more obvious explanations. She reinforces the pattern only a few more times in preparation for the narrative culmination of the imagery: we find a nurse with a food tray in Clara's hospital (p. 134), and the girls in the hairdresser's preparing Marian for Peter's party are referred to as "nurses" under whose hands Marian is "totally inert" and passive (p. 210). All this apparently incidental use of nurse imagery in relation to food and to consuming comes to a climax when Marian makes love to Duncan, only to learn that she is not the first, not the initiator into experience of the child-like innocent creature she wants to see in Duncan. He tells her afterwards, as they lie outside in the cool snow, that it was "just as good as usual," and, as the implications of this response to her "life-giving gift" hit her, "the starched nurse-like image of herself she had tried to preserve as a last resort crumpled like wet newsprint" (p. 264).

It is only at this point that Marian can come to terms with her identity. Her mock effigy of Peter's vision of herself, in the form of an edible woman-shaped cake, must also be cooled outside (before icing), as Marian herself had been. Peter cannot face the externalization of his attitude to his fiancée and flees at Marian's invitation to devour her substitute. Marian, however, finds her parodic image rather appetizing, realizing all the while that she has brought her fate upon herself: "that's what you get for being food" (p. 270), she addresses the cake. And this constitutes the only self-conscious comment upon the central imagery made by the author in the novel. This chain of food imagery is sustained throughout the book and yet, because of an absence of explanation or underlining, does not obtrude into or interfere with the narrative line. In fact, it helps develop and create it. The cumulative effect of the extended and interlinking strands of imagery is one of tight structural unity on all levels, including plot and character. The plot is in fact temporally organized around meals. The novel opens with breakfast; we pass to coffee breaks and lunches, dinners, drinks, and parties. Peter's critical party is structurally central: not only does the hunting and consuming imagery reach a height, but all the characters in the novel come together, however briefly, in one room.

"Hunger is more basic than love" for Marian's natural verbal expression as well. She works for a marketing research firm (since, as she tells Duncan, "we all have to eat" [p. 55]), but also perceives the food-oriented company itself in terms of a layered ice-cream sandwich, with her own department as the "gooey layer in the middle" (p. 19). On a hot day she feels as if "enclosed in a layer of moist dough" (p. 37). Her hangover makes her head feel "as empty as though someone had scooped out the inside of [her] skull like a cantaloupe and left [her] only the rind to think with" (p. 83). It is not only Atwood's heroine who is associated with this food imagery, however. Ainsley, as Len perceives her, seems "as young and inexperienced as a button mushroom" (p. 122). It is at Peter's party, as Marian passes around pickled mushrooms (p. 231), that Len rejects Ainsley and Fish takes her on. The latter, we recall, is the graduate student with the theory of Alice in Wonderland with her caterpillar "importantly perched on the all-too-female mushroom" (p. 194). He is also obsessed with the concept of the poet as "pregnant with his work," about to give birth ("I mean birth; birth") to the poem after a long "period of gestation" (p. 198). Concomitant with this obsession of Fish's is his belief in the need for "a new Venus, big-bellied, teeming with life, potential, about to give birth to a new world in all its plenitude, a new Venus rising from the sea . . ." (p. 200). The reader then notes with delight his tender significant patting of Ainsley's pregnant belly as, Venus-like, she stands drenched by Len's baptismal beer (p. 241). But Atwood refrains once again from underlining the couple's "rightness," each member for the other. The imagery has made the links, and it is up to the reader to perceive them.

This same degree of trust in the reader, this policy of metaphoric *laissez faire*, is found throughout *The Edible Woman*. In thematic terms, as in *The Stone Angel*, the most serious threats to the heroine's freedom and identity are to be found within the woman herself. Hagar Shipley cries out: "Pride was my wilderness, and the demon that led me there was fear. I was alone, never anything else, and never free, for I carried my chains within me, and they spread out from me and shackled all I touched" (p. 292). Marian McAlpin, on the other hand, literally internalizes (by eating) and destroys the image of herself as a consumable consumed entity. The final plot image of the cake gains its power from the steady accumulation and interweaving of imagery of food, hunting, and consuming that work to develop, not merely illustrate, the themes of the novel. The internalized dangers to the self that the poetry of *Power Politics* suggests here take on literal plot reality. In the poems Atwood hints that the solution to identity problems must come from within; here that concept is taken almost literally.

It is not at all surprising, of course, that Atwood should manifest similar themes in her verse and in her fiction. This has always been the case for poet-novelists. Emily Brontë's poems as well as *Wuthering Heights* ring with themes of defiance, desolation and death, as man tries in vain to recall childhood's lost harmony with nature. D. H. Lawrence's books of verse seem to parallel in miniature the moods, themes, biographical details, and characters of his prose (fiction and non-fiction) being written contemporaneously. It would also not be surprising to find similar poetic images or even similar poetic structures in the verse and prose of poet-novelists. The dialectical narrative form of Nellie and Lockwood in *Wuthering Heights* is prefigured in many of Brontë's poems through the structure of implicit or explicit dialogues (for example, "The winter wind is loud and wild"). Very few writers seem to switch definitively from one form to another, as did Hardy, for instance. Hardy, of course, claimed that he always considered himself a poet and that it was a relief to return to his true vocation after 1897. The poems, however, share themes, moods, and even narrative patterns with his late prose works. Other poets — often women — have turned to fiction for what almost seem at first to be therapeutic reasons. Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* is autobiographical, but it is of more interest as a novel. The title image, as in *The Edible Woman*, is central to both the meaning of the novel and its structure as well as to the heroine's psychological state. The novel, in fact, operates on two planes: that of the objective world of narrative and that of the inner psychic world glimpsed through the imagery. It is in this juxtaposed structural use of the two modes that Plath resembles Atwood and indeed other poets who have turned to fiction.⁷

⁷See my forthcoming article in *Canadian Literature* on Leonard Cohen as a poet who writes fiction: "The Poet as Novelist: A Matter of Trust." The American poet James Dickey has also written a novel, *Deliverance*, the meaning of which is conveyed mostly through images. In fact, one could argue that there is a noticeable weakening in emotional impetus in the narrative when Dickey turns

The Stone Angel and *The Edible Woman*, though closely related in theme, ultimately have a rather different effect upon the reader, especially on one who is rereading them. Laurence's popularity is well-deserved and the preceding study might be used to suggest that one reason for her success, especially in the mass market, lies in her "readability," in the care she takes to enable the reader to see thematic connections. While Atwood is also a popular figure, it is perhaps more as a cultural spokesman (since *Survival*) that she is best known. Her novels are more dense — in terms of both narrative and imagery — and are often best appreciated after a number of readings. Less is explained, much is left to the reader, and a second reading yields more new connections and an increased richness of evocation. This last fact alone might suggest that, indeed, poets who write novels do have a rather different "hermeneutic" relationship to both their readers and their narrative structures than do most novelists.

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to traditional novelistic means of thematic exposition — that is, when the characters are allowed to talk about the terror, violence, magic, and beauty of the river. It is as if Dickey momentarily turns total novelist and loses his natural poet's trust in the reader's ability to deal with the imagery himself.