

RACHEL'S BENIGN GROWTH

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Rachel Cameron's tumour, which occasions the climax of Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God*, has provoked some scathing critical comments. In his belated review, J. M. Stedmond notices "the frustrating of [Rachel's] eventual desire to give birth when her 'baby' turns out (a trifle too pat for the purposes of the plot) to be a tumour, albeit benign."² Dennis Duffy objects to "symbolic happenings so blatant": "Rachel turns out not pregnant but suffering from a cervical tumour. Death instead of life, get it?"³ Margaret Atwood uses the tumour to prop up one of her *Survival* theories: Rachel tries to produce a baby and fails; she "thinks she is pregnant but manages to squeeze out nothing more than a tumour, and a benign one at that (what an image of complete sterility; a malignant one would at least have been growing)."⁴

Laurence is not guilty of such insensitivity and clumsiness. The benign tumour may be considered a pat solution to Rachel's problems only to the extent that it spares her the consequences and us the melodrama of the alternatives. The tumour is indeed symbolic, but not arbitrarily so, and appears blatant only to the reader interested exclusively in the action of the book. The novel is about Rachel's character, and all of the psychological and physical action surrounding the tumour and its removal contribute not to death but to Rachel's new life. Atwood's rash criticism deserves response only because deference to her opinions is so common. For the sake of her theory, she prefers to ignore both the physiological fact that even a benign tumour grows and the fictional fact that this tumour brings about Rachel's emotional and spiritual growth. Rachel's tumour is of course ambiguous, for it is neither the baby that she comes to want nor the malignancy that would have satisfied her somewhat tentative death wish and thus completed her unlively life. But it is very far from being either a facile solution to a novelist's dilemma or a symbol of death imposed on readers and protagonist by a gloom-infected writer.

When Dr. Raven tells Rachel that he believes she has a tumour, she reflects, "He is anxious . . . in case I should be too concerned over the

¹Margaret Laurence, *A Jest of God*, New Canadian Library (1966; rpt. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974). Page references will appear in parentheses in the text.

²"Review of *A Jest of God*," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 36 (July 1971), 382.

³"Critical Sympathies," *Tamarack Review*, No. 42 (Winter 1967), p. 82.

⁴*Survival* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), p. 208.

nature of the thing in me, the growth, the non-life. How can non-life be a growth? But it is. How strange. There are two kinds. One is called malignant. The other is called benign. That's what he said. Benign" (p. 180). Rachel is reflecting on the double meanings. A growth is a tumour, and it is not desirable; growth itself, however, is desirable, for it is a sign of life. When benign is opposed to malignant, it simply means nonfatal, a tumour which is not cancerous. But in any other context, it means benevolent. Rachel's noncancerous tumour is also a benign growth. It is not the growth of a new life in that it is not the baby she thought she was carrying, but she sees it as a nonlife, not as a representative of death. And excising it actually brings about a new life, her own.

Rachel's ambiguous feelings about life and death are set out clearly in the first fifteen pages of the book. First, Willard Siddley, her principal, offers her gifts of the flesh. He invites her to have dinner at his house with his wife and an old friend; as he talks to her, she becomes conscious of his masculinity and feels attracted to him even though she does not like him. She cannot accept any of this; she turns down his invitation and castigates herself for wanting to touch him, refusing conviviality, food, and her own sexuality all at once. Then Calla, a fellow teacher and Rachel's only good acquaintance, brings her a budding hyacinth and invites her to a service at the Tabernacle of the Risen and Reborn, offering gifts of life and of the spirit. Rachel finds Calla's warmth threatening; she silently mocks Calla's faith; she thinks of the hyacinth as a bribe; and she recalls a peach-seed necklace, an earlier gift, as vulgar and ugly. She cannot bring herself to decline any of these offers outright, but she cannot accept them wholeheartedly either. She promises that, although she is unable to go to the Tabernacle now, she will accompany Calla another time. While outwardly receiving her friend's gifts, she draws away inwardly.

Rachel's excuse for declining these two invitations is that she must help her mother entertain her bridge club. Rachel and her mother live above the Japonica Funeral Chapel, the modern version of the late Mr. Cameron's funeral parlour, and Mrs. Cameron is a suitable denizen of such a place. Obsessed with appearances, she hides her age and pampers her body to stave off harbingers of physical death, while refusing almost all activity and making the apartment look as if no living person occupies it. Her constant oblique criticism of Rachel is designed to stifle every emotion in her but daughterly devotion and guilt. Duty, not sharing or conviviality, is her attitude toward food. Rachel momentarily rebels. "I could have gone to Willard's for dinner," she says. "I could have gone with Calla. I wish I had. Now that it comes to it, I do not know why I didn't, one or the other" (p. 15). We see Rachel unable to accept life, but instead withdrawing from it into her mother's death-in-life. She is not choosing death, but she is hibernating. Mrs. Cameron imposes her values on her daughter, and although Rachel begins to understand how life-denying they are, she cannot throw them off. Mrs.

Cameron's chief fear is of looking foolish, and she recoils from unseemly behaviour as the worst possible evil. She has kept death at bay for decades; while Mr. Cameron was alive, she insisted on having antimacassars not just on the backs of her chairs but on the arms too so that the hands that touched death would not soil her furniture. Now she lives every moment conscious of her heart condition. Believing that exertion or excitement could cause her death, she does almost nothing but entertain her bridge club, for which Rachel does the work. But, concerned as she is with appearances, she has never consented to live either. Nor has she accepted the spiritual life that her church might have made available. She considers discussion of God or faith as unseemly as any other foolishness. Rachel lives under this law of spiritless conformity. She subjects every thought and feeling to the voice of her mother, which she carries around inside her, and this voice overrules almost all of her life-affirming impulses. When she chooses her mother, she chooses a safe middle ground between life and death.

When Nick enters her life, Rachel is forced not to choose her mother. Nick is attractive to Rachel in two ways. First, of course, he is attracted to her sexually and initiates her into sexual activity that until now she has been able to imagine only imperfectly. In him she finds a suitable object for the sexual love she has never before been able to express. Secondly, having come from a family as restrictive in its way as her own, Nick has been able to leave. However incomplete or unsatisfactory this breach may be, he has made it and Rachel has not. She loves and envies what she sees as his freedom from the irresistible parental force that circumscribes her life. So strongly is she drawn to him that when he calls her she goes out with him despite her mother's attempts to hold her with guilt over the abandoned bridge club or threats to wash the blankets. Her mother continues to cripple her, but now she can see what is happening; she admits to herself, "There are three worlds and I'm in the middle one, and this seems now to be a weak area between millstones" (p. 94). When she begins not to be ruled by her mother's ideals but to take on the responsibility for her own actions, she begins to choose life over nonlife.

After Rachel and Nick make love, but before she suspects that she is pregnant, she feels that he is implanted in her. ". . . the knowledge that he will somehow inhabit me, be present in me, for a few days more . . . gives me warmth," she thinks (p. 104), and later she reflects, "He inhabits whatever core of me there is" (p. 147). From her viewpoint he represents life, but Laurence makes sure that the reader's understanding of Rachel's indweller is less limited. Nick's name alone, suggesting both Old Nick the cosmic death-dealer and St. Nick the Christmas gift-giver, demands the reader's double vision. Nick's twin, his alter ego, who would have continued the family itself as well as the dairy, is dead. Nick has refused these duties, but he has not assumed any others. His children, like Rachel's, are his pupils, from whom, unlike Rachel, he remains detached. By leaving

Manawaka, he has escaped both life and death and has discovered neither in the city. Allegorically, Nick is both Rachel's husband Jacob and errant Israel. He represents the fertility and continuity of Jacob and at the same time the denial of these by Jacob's captive and sinning descendants.⁵ Nick does have the life-giving properties with which Rachel credits him; in sight of the graveyard he makes love to her and resurrects her from her inner tomb. To Rachel, Nick is the shadow prince come alive and thus not in shadow any more; to Laurence and to her readers, while Nick is indeed the prince, he retains his shadowy aspect.

After Nick has fled back to the city, Rachel misses her period and assumes that she is pregnant. She knows that she will have to bear the child or have an abortion and that she will have to do it alone. Her indecision over which to do is complex, for in a way the baby itself represents death. Cassie Stewart's illegitimate twins look to Mrs. Cameron like Cassie's attack against her own mother. Rachel speculates that finding out about her pregnancy might give her mother a fatal heart attack. And she even worries that she herself might die in childbirth. Furthermore, having a baby would not only ruin her social standing and employment possibilities, but also quell the small measure of independent thought and action she now has. Yet she has longed for children of her own; she has felt possessive of her pupils and mourned when they left her, and, refusing contraception, she has fantasized about a baby throughout her affair with Nick. She understands these ambiguities so thoroughly that her decision to have the baby comes as an affirmation of life in its wider aspect whether or not this choice brings various kinds of death in the narrower perspective. She feels that her overriding responsibility is to shelter this life that now inhabits her, a responsibility which, with Calla's support, she accepts with joy. Apparently because of Nick, Rachel has come out of the emotional dormancy she has until now tried so hard to maintain.

But Rachel is not pregnant at all. She endures the removal of the tumour in a trance, half expecting that she will "come back to life and find that the child had begun perceptibly to move" (p. 182). After her surgery, the tumour is gone, her phantom baby is gone, and so is Nick. Throughout her crisis, she has imagined conversations in which he has comforted her and smoothed out her difficulties. Now she remembers him and their time together, but her fantasies are over. And so, she finds, is her choosing of mere existence. When her doctor says, "You are out of danger," she replies, "How can I be — I don't feel dead yet" (p. 184), because she recognizes that living consists in more than being safe. A short time after she returns home, she quits praying for "nothing to happen" (p. 186); in life, things happen.

⁵To perceive the Rachel-Nick and Rachel-Jacob relationship, compare page 148 with Genesis 30:1-2. On page 110, Nick quotes from Jeremiah 12:7-8, taking the role of the Israelites whom Jeremiah is warning, and on page 141, like the forgetter of Jerusalem in Psalm 173, he admits that his right hand has "forgotten its cunning."

Indeed, she herself can make things happen. She knows that her decision to take her mother and leave Manawaka might hasten her mother's death, but she is confident that her choice is nevertheless in favour of life. She shoulders the responsibility for herself, and she also takes on a new kind of moral responsibility for her mother. She does not imagine that she is completely changed, or that her new life in Vancouver is going to be very different from her old one in Manawaka. She understands merely that she is now a fully adult woman, not a virgin dreading old age as she was before, and that she will never become an old lady pretending, like her mother, to be a girl. "I am the mother now," she says (pp. 184,196). She will no longer be the spiritual daughter of her life-denying, death-denying mother, but instead on behalf of them both she will make as whole a life as she can.

The photo that Rachel thought was of Nick's son was actually of Nick himself as a child. Nick in this way is his own child, as, allegorically, he is both patriarch and descendants. Similarly, Rachel is the mother of herself, because her experience, and especially her decision to have the baby, has brought about her rebirth. But Nick returns to his suspended animation in the city rather than come to terms with his parents, whereas Rachel, in an act analagous to her acceptance of her pregnancy, takes on moral as well as physical responsibility for her mother. She will now nurture and support both her mother and herself as her children. Like the biblical Rachel, her womb has been opened and her guilt is taken away.⁶ When her nonmalignant tumour is gone, so is her bondage to nonlife; her benign growth has enabled her to give birth to herself.

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⁶See Genesis 30:22-23. In Old Testament imagery, Rachel, as the mother of the Israelites, is analagous to Jerusalem, their mother city. Similarly, in the New Testament, she is seen as the mother of the New Israel and is analagous to the New Jerusalem. The skipping song that makes Rachel Cameron "queen of the golden city" (p. 1) places her in this tradition, and thus her rebirth too is allegorical.