

# Pillar, Speaker, Mother: The Character of Calla in *A Jest of God*

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Critics of Margaret Laurence's Manawaka novels have been unanimous in their praise of Laurence's remarkable gift for characterization.<sup>1</sup> In fact, her central figures, described by Clara Thomas as "strong and strongly maternal,"<sup>2</sup> have always been the major focus of critical attention. This emphasis on Laurence's protagonists has, to a certain extent, obscured the importance of her minor characters. For example, Calla Mackie, Rachel Cameron's friend and colleague in *A Jest of God*, is referred to in the critical literature almost exclusively in terms of her unconventional religion and sexuality.<sup>3</sup> However, like Laurence's major figures, she is also "strong and strongly maternal." Indeed, Rachel notwithstanding, Calla is the only character in the novel who is directly connected with all its major themes: communication, rebirth, survival, and mother-daughter relations.

Calla is one of a group of minor characters described by Clara Thomas as somewhat "detached from the centre of Rachel's concern."<sup>4</sup> More specifically, because events are filtered solely through Rachel's consciousness, and because Rachel—obsessed as she is with her own insecurities—is a narrator of markedly limited perception, the complexity of Calla's character is not easily accessible. However, she is a much more important character than her brief appearances in the novel might suggest. Indeed, she rivals Nick as an agent of change in Rachel's life. Her presence in the opening pages of the novel, long after Nick vanishes, resolves it. She is reintroduced at critical junctures along the way, where she operates as catalyst in a

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to my colleagues Susan Gingell and Carol Morrell for their crucial help with this essay.

<sup>2</sup> Clara Thomas, *The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence* (1975. Toronto: McClelland, 1976) 193.

<sup>3</sup> There are two notable but briefly considered exceptions to this narrow perception of Calla's character: feminist critics Lois Gottlieb and Wendy Keitner make reference to Calla's maternal role in "Demeter's Daughters: The Mother Daughter Motif in Fiction by Canadian Women," *Atlantis* 3.2 (1977): 130-41; and Lorraine McMullen, in her overview of the traditional journey motif in fiction by women, recognizes Calla as the archetypal Guide figure, who accompanies Rachel on her descent and rebirth in "Images of Women in Canadian Literature: Woman as Hero," *Atlantis* 2.2 (1977): 134-42.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas 91.

process of integration that ultimately unites Rachel's conscious and unconscious desires. Calla's position in the narrative raises an intriguing question about Laurence's skill as a writer: how does she manage to create such a pivotal character and still leave readers with the impression that Calla is somehow "detached from the centre" of the narrator's concern? The answer can be found in Laurence's subtle but superbly skillful use of such devices as allusion and symbol, through which she conveys a remarkable amount of information about Calla—information which the narrator herself does not consciously possess.

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As many critics have noted, the gift of tongues in *A Jest of God* is a metaphor for communication—not merely verbal communication, but emotional, sexual and spiritual communication as well. Rachel and Calla have a falling out because they do not speak the same sexual language, as it were. By the end of the novel they have each gone through an experience which enables them to communicate meaningfully with each other and part in love. In short, Rachel and Calla may be measured against each other in terms of the theme of communication. The same holds true for the themes of rebirth, survival, and mother-daughter relations.

To understand how these three themes relate to Calla, it is necessary to review Rachel's relationship to them. First, Rachel goes through several kinds of rebirth during the course of the novel; she moves from the isolated world of her masturbation fantasies into real heterosexual experience. Second, Rachel demonstrates that one of the ways to survive the stifling atmosphere of Manawaka is to leave it; for if she stays, she runs the risk of turning into a version of Sapphire Travis, the eccentric teacher who sends the whole school into gales of laughter by dyeing her shoes a shocking pink. Finally, in terms of the mother-daughter theme, important changes occur in Rachel's relationship with her elderly mother: "I am the mother now," Rachel asserts at the end of the novel.<sup>5</sup>

Calla's relationship to these themes is equally important. First, she goes through a rebirth process which, in many respects, parallels Rachel's. But, while Rachel's is primarily a sexual rebirth, Calla's is a spiritual one. Calla is, after all, an active member of the Tabernacle of the "Risen and Reborn." Further,

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Laurence, *A Jest of God* (1966. Toronto: McClelland, 1974) 196.

Calla demonstrates how one survives Manawaka without having to leave it and without turning into a Sapphire Travis. And finally, in her offer of assistance during Rachel's pregnancy scare, Calla demonstrates an alternative to the kind of mothering Rachel is receiving from Mrs. Cameron.

If Rachel's is a sexual rebirth and Calla's a spiritual one, then we need to examine the relationship between sexuality and spirituality in the novel—particularly as that relationship is revealed through Calla. The word "lesbian" does not appear in this novel because the word is not in Rachel's vocabulary, for she is in many ways a typical Manawakan. Since, in Manawaka, even heterosexual sex is not a topic of polite conversation, homosexuality is unthinkable. Because the language for expressing the concept of lesbianism is, therefore, not available to Laurence, she uses symbols as a way of putting words in Rachel's mouth without putting ideas in her head that would falsify her character. There are three major symbols that reveal Calla's sexuality: flowers, colours and paint. Calla's primary activity in the novel is painting: she helps paint the Tabernacle, she paints her apartment inside and out, and, at school, she wears a smock decorated with smears of poster paint. Paint covers, hides and camouflages, just as Calla's smock hides the fact that she wears the same tweed skirt and bulky sweater every day (4). But, paradoxically, paint—or, rather, the colour of the paint Calla uses—reveals her sexual identity to us long before Rachel learns of it.

During the 1960's when *A Jest of God* was written, the colour lavender was adopted by the gay liberation movement as symbolic of its struggle for recognition. Lavender—or dark and light variations of it—is consistently mentioned in connection with Calla. For example, she shows her true colours, as it were, when she paints her apartment a "deep mauve-blue," which eventually lightens to something close to lavender: "The door is quite a mild lilac, but in this warren of cream and beige doors, it makes its presence known" (174). But it is not just Calla's walls and doors through which her sexual identity makes its presence known. On one of Rachel's visits, Calla wears a violet-coloured blouse (130), and her grey hair wavers "stiffly as though her head were paradoxically covered with sprigs of dry lavender" (135). She jokes with Rachel about following Sapphire Travis's example by dying her old brogues a pale lilac (47). Indeed, almost every scene in the novel which involves Calla contains either a direct or indirect reference to lavender.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Rachel's preoccupation with death makes her eye, if not her consciousness, especially alert to purple in its various shades because it is also symbolic of mourning. For example, whenever

As the "sprigs of dry lavender" suggest, flowers also offer clues to Calla's sexuality. In chapter one, she presents Rachel with a hyacinth:

She's carrying, I see now, a potted plant. A hyacinth, bulbously in bud and just about to give birth to the blue-purple blossom. . . .

"I was getting some for the Tabernacle. It's my week to do the flowers. So I thought I might as well get two extra, one for you and one for me. It's rather a nice one isn't it? I got them at Zimmer's. They had some gorgeous lilies as well, but I have a mean prejudice against those, as you know."

Calla's mother was exceptionally fond of white lilies, and christened her only daughter after one variety of them. Calla detests her name and no wonder. Nothing less lilylike could possibly be imagined. She's a sunflower, if anything, brash, strong, plain, and yet reaching up in some way, I suppose, even though that Tabernacle of hers seems an odd way for anyone to choose. (9)

This passage is loaded with symbolic significance. First, the blue-purple of the hyacinth is a variation on the colour lavender. Second, the hyacinth alludes to the myth of the youth Hyacinthus, who is the object and fatal victim of a jealous homosexual quarrel between Apollo and the West Wind. Further, Calla's hyacinth is "in bud and just about to give birth"; the same might be said of Calla's passion for Rachel which, a few nights later, bursts into full bloom after the incident in the Tabernacle. And finally, Calla rejects her name: to reject one's name is to reject one's identity—or, in Calla's case, to reject an identity imposed upon her from without. She rejects those aspects of female identity which society imposes on women, including conventional "femininity," heterosexuality, wifehood, and motherhood. Her rejection of the white lily, a symbol of death (as well as of sexual purity), emphasises the contrast between herself and Rachel, who lives her death-in-life existence above a funeral chapel. Then, of course, there is Calla's religious identity: the church of the Manawaken establishment is Presbyterian, and Calla rejects it.

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Mrs. Cameron suffers a mild heart attack, Rachel takes note of the violet pallor around her mother's mouth.

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A woman has three ways of dealing with her sexuality in ultra-conservative Manawaka: she can marry and pursue a heterosexual lifestyle; she can repress her sexuality and let it turn her into a neurotic, as repression is doing to Rachel; or she can sublimate it in religion—turn her sexual energy into spiritual energy. It is this last alternative which Calla chooses. She rejects her sexuality, just as she rejects her name, and in the end she is neither lily nor hyacinth, but sunflower, “reaching up in some way” toward a higher spiritual plane. The Tabernacle is in many ways a positive influence on Calla. Her needs are fulfilled through the sense of community she experiences there. She is oblivious to Presbyterian disapproval of the Tabernacle on the basis of its gimcrack appearance and its unconventional form of worship. For Manawaka’s Presbyterians, religious faith is like sex: a topic unfit for polite conversation. But for Calla, faith is a working force in her life: “For me,” she tells Rachel, “it’s the rock of my soul” (10).

It is hardly surprising that Calla’s sexual needs are somehow met at the Tabernacle, for the act of worship there is like a descent into the psychic reservoir of repressed sexual desires: “The painted walls are heavy with their greenish blue, not the clear blue of open places but dense and murky, the way the sea must be fathoms under” (30). As Sandra Djwa has pointed out, this underwater image may be seen as an allusion to the murky depths of the Freudian unconscious: “In *A Jest of God* [the] discovery of the self is developed as a series of psychic descents which, like the reference to Jonah and the whale in the epigraph to the novel, involves the fear of losing the self by drowning and of being swallowed up alive.”<sup>7</sup> Further, the decor of the Tabernacle is not its only sexually suggestive feature. The words of the preacher turn “the gift of tongues” into a sexual metaphor: “Thus we can all participate—yes participate—in the joy felt and known by any one of our brothers or sisters as they experience that deep and private enjoyment, that sublime edification, that infilling of the spirit—” (34). The erotic language used to describe the experience of speaking in tongues emphasizes the metaphorical relationship between spirituality and sexuality. Even the language of the hymns is suggestive: “*In full and glad surrender, / I give myself to Thee . . .*” (34).

<sup>7</sup> Sandra Djwa, “False Gods and the New Covenant: Thematic Continuity Between Margaret Laurence and Sinclair Ross,” 1972; rpt. in *Margaret Laurence: The Writer and Her Critics*, ed. William New (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1977) 77.

Given this sexually charged atmosphere, it is not surprising that Rachel, whose fear of her own "impotent sexuality . . . has been repressed into [her] subconscious, . . . finds herself carried on a wave of barely disguised sexual emotion"<sup>8</sup> and begins to express her desire verbally: "Chattering, crying, ululating, the forbidden transformed cryptically to nonsense, dragged from the crypt, stolen and shouted, the shuddering of it, the fear, the breaking, the release, the grieving—" (36). This outburst suggests that Calla has been made the butt of one of God's jests: God has withheld the gift of tongues from Calla and has given it instead to the faithless Rachel — or so it seems. As a result, Calla suffers a temporary crisis of faith, until she discovers that her preacher has — ironically — miscommunicated the truth about the gift of tongues; through her rereading of St. Paul, Calla learns that even the faithless may speak in tongues, and that even these voices "are not without signification" (135).

That the eruption of Calla's sexuality occurs just moments after Rachel's verbal eruption is significant. Calla has been moving toward and expression of her energies through religion, but she has failed to achieve that expression. Her bitter disappointment, combined with the quickening of her passion in response to the erotic atmosphere of the Tabernacle, unleashes those energies, which are now expressed to Rachel. With the same spontaneity and loss of control that caused Rachel to speak in tongues, Calla expresses her sexual desire. What is happening, in effect, is that neither Rachel nor Calla is communicating the way she wants to. What Rachel wants—and what she later achieves with Nick—is sexual communication; what Calla wants is to communicate spiritually by speaking in tongues. Each seems to have achieved the other's goal, and the rest of the novel is devoted to straightening out this unfortunate reversal, so that by the end each woman has achieved the kind of self-expression she has been striving for.

Calla is virtually written out of the novel at this point. Not until a hundred pages later do we discover how she has coped all summer with her disappointment and trauma. When we do catch up with her, we find that she has coped very well indeed: she has thrown herself into the physically demanding job of painting:

We finished painting the Tabernacle a week ago. It turned out a great success. . . . We did the walls in eggshell. . . . Trimming and woodwork

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<sup>8</sup> Djwa 77-78.

in moss-green. It's a real improvement, I must say. I got so good with a roller that I'll never use brushes again for walls. Or ceilings. I did most of the ceilings, because I've got a head for heights. . . . (132).

The sanctuary of the Tabernacle has been transformed from a murky, underwater, sexually suggestive room into a light, bright, and airy space. In keeping with the significance of the egg as a symbol of rebirth, the sanctuary has been painted in "eggshell." The colour functions as an allusion to Calla's spiritual rebirth. She has discovered her "head for heights"—spiritual as well as physical heights—for she has finally received the gift of tongues: "I don't guess I could describe it, Rachel. It was peace. Like some very gentle falling of rain" (136). The experience is decidedly post-orgasmic. Most important, Calla is at home, not in the Tabernacle, when she receives the gift. And this is hardly surprising, given that the sexual ambience of the Tabernacle has been transferred, through Calla's painting, into her lavender-coloured apartment. What this seems to suggest is that Calla has somehow got her sexuality under the kind of control she wants. She has managed to seal it off from the rest of her life, to sublimate it, and to find fulfilment on a spiritual plane.

Calla's sublimation of her sexual desire is, in many ways, a triumph. By rechannelling, rather than repressing, her energy, she avoids the fate of her unfortunate double, Sapphire Travis, whose name may well be an allusion to Sappho. Indeed, the connection between Calla's name and the rejection of her lesbian identity seems to find an echo in Laurence's characterization of Calla's eccentric colleague. Unlike Calla, who broadens her life to include activities at the Tabernacle, Sapphire's method of dealing with her sexual identity is to narrow her world to the limits of her Grade One classroom. As a result, she treats everyone as if they were six years old: "Rachel, dear, would you be a very very good girl and pour me a weeny cup of tea?" (2-3). If she infantilizes the adult world "all the time" (2), by implication she infantilizes herself as well—perhaps an attempt to return to a pre-pubescent and less problematic stage of sexual development. This infantilization is entirely in keeping with the theme of arrested maturity which Laurence inscribes in the characters of Rachel and Nick. Sapphire's life is a travesty, as the name "Travis" can be seen to suggest: she has become, not only a caricature of a child, but also a parody of the sexually independent career woman—a stereotype which the characterization of Rachel, as well as of Calla, serves to undermine.

While Calla's method of coping with her sexuality is more positive than that of Sapphire Travis, there is nevertheless an element of tragedy in it—not because Calla lives a celibate life, but because her choice in favour of celibacy is not entirely a free one. The Manawaka status quo dictates that a lesbian lifestyle is out of the question for her, so she must stifle her sexuality, just as her pet canary stifles his song. And, like her canary, who also has a "head for heights" in that his favourite pastime is climbing to the top of his tiny ladder, Calla remains within her cage—the cage of Manawaka's sexual mores.

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Calla's role as Rachel's surrogate mother is related to her sexual identity. Her love for Rachel makes her more sensitive to Rachel's emotional and psychological immaturity than is Mrs. Cameron, who puts "appearances" and her own needs before the welfare of her daughter. Calla's feeling for Rachel goes beyond the limits of comradeship; indeed Calla is the only person who truly loves Rachel, and there is no evidence to suggest that Calla is not entirely aware of that fact. It is Calla who consistently worries that Rachel works too hard, that she does not socialize enough, and that she judges herself too harshly. In spite of Calla's embarrassing generosity to her, even Rachel realises that Calla is "kind and well-meaning" (3). There is a selflessness in Calla's love that triggers her protectiveness toward Rachel. She is particularly sensitive to Rachel's need for protection against intimidation by people like the subtly sadistic Willard Siddley: "Once Calla said to him, 'Don't be so mean, Willard,' over something he'd said to me, and he replied, 'Oh come on, now, can't you take a joke?'" (8).

Rachel's extreme self-consciousness, awkwardness, and lack of sexual experience are more characteristic of a young adolescent than a middle-aged woman, so it is not surprising that Calla automatically calls her "child." There is even something resembling teenage rebellion in Rachel's reaction to the endearment: "I wish she wouldn't call me *child*. It sounds ridiculous. I've asked her not to, but she doesn't stop" (9). After their quarrel, when Calla does stop, Rachel's childlike need for her surrogate mother surfaces:

She pushes the tea cup towards me, across the table. She used to put the sugar and cream in my tea, for me, but she does not do that now. Another thing—she does not say *child* any more. Only *Rachel*. As though formality or great care had been forced upon her. I've wanted her to stop saying



*child* or *kid* for a long time, yet now I feel unreasonably bereft. (46)

Rachel feels like an abandoned child whose mother is not preparing her tea for her anymore or addressing her in terms of motherly endearment.

Rachel also has a kind of childlike awe of Calla's strength and capability, and has much more difficulty accepting what she sees as weakness in Calla. In the Tabernacle, Rachel steals a sidelong glance at Calla and tries to come to terms with what she is doing in such a crackpot place:

How can Calla sit there, head inclined? How can she come here every week? She is slangy and strident; she laughs a lot, and in her flat she sings with hoarse-voiced enjoyment the kind of songs the teenagers sing. She can paint scenery for a play or form a choir out of kids who can't even carry a tune—she'd take on anything. But she's here. Don't I know her at all? (31)

Rachel is like a rebellious adolescent in that stage of development when children become most critical of parents because they are embarrassingly out of fashion.

The answer to Rachel's question, "Don't I know her at all?" is an emphatic "No". Even after the revelation of Calla's love for her, Rachel persists in her adolescent perceptions. For example, several weeks after their quarrel, she pays Calla a reluctant visit, and, with a child's characteristic insensitivity to the human qualities and longings of its parent, Rachel makes a highly critical survey of Calla's apartment:

Everything in her living-room seems to be piled in the middle of the room. The turquoise chesterfield; the glass-topped coffee table; a confusion of books and letters; two unthriving potted pink geraniums; pictures done by her class last year on huge sheets of newsprint with poster paints—clumsily intricate castles and ocean liners; innumerable unemptied ashtrays, a brown pottery bowl of coffee sugar with a brass spoon bearing a gargoyle's leering face and the words *The Imp of Lincoln Cathedral*; a square cushion with a yellow fringe and an ivory satin cover painted with a towered church and the lettering *The Turrets Twain—St. Boniface, Manitoba*. (131)

The tone of this cataloguing of Calla's treasures is one of mild contempt for her sloppiness and bad taste. Rachel misses

completely what these objects say about Calla: her lack of pretension, her love of colour and flowers, the value she places on the work of her pupils, and her disregard for appearances. Rachel is also oblivious to the poignant message of the castles, the ocean liners, and the souvenir from a very remote England; Calla's dreams of adventure and travel to exotic places are unknown to Rachel. In the comic juxtaposition of these romantic symbols of distant places and the vulgar souvenir from the considerably less romantic and not-so-distant St. Boniface, there is also a touch of sadness.

On the evening Rachel turns to her for help, Calla reveals, for the first time since the incident of the kiss, the real depth of her feeling for Rachel:

"You could move in here, if you wanted. Or if you wanted to move away entirely, beforehand—well, there isn't any particular reason why I couldn't move, if you wanted someone by you. It might be kind of a strain on your finances for a time, but I don't think you need to worry all that much. We could manage. As for the baby, well, my Lord, I've looked after many a kid before." (175)

In suggesting this plan, Calla is immediately identified with Mrs. Stewart, who, as Rachel learns from Mrs. Cameron, takes care of her twin grandchildren while their unwed and doubly disgraced mother Cassie goes out to work. Given the sepulchral tones in which Mrs. Cameron delivers this anecdote of the thoughtless Cassie and her humiliated mother, it is hardly surprising that Rachel chooses to confide in her surrogate mother rather than her biological one.

Calla's unconditional offer of moral and practical support gives Rachel the courage to face the anticipated confirmation of her pregnancy and the subsequent social condemnation. Sick with fear, she waits her turn in Dr. Raven's waiting-room. The terrifying moment arrives, and she is called. As she walks carefully toward the examination room, familiar words echo in her mind: "Rachel, hush. Hush, child. Steady. It's all right. It's going to be all right" (177). These are an echo of Calla's words of comfort, crooned softly over Rachel on the evening of her humiliating experience at the Tabernacle (36).

This is not the only occasion when Calla's words surface unbidden from Rachel's subconscious. Here is one of Rachel's fantasies in which she rewrites history:

The car, his. He turns off the engine, and they are in the quiet, and he bends toward her, but with an unforeseen deliberation, as though he's forming words in his head and hasn't quite achieved them. She has no idea what he is going to say. "Rachel, look, honey, I'm not so marvellous at saying things—"

No. All wrong. He's quite good enough at saying anything he wants to say. And he doesn't say *honey*. He says *darling*. Somebody else must have said "honey," but I can't think who it could have been, or when. (115-16)

Rachel is attempting to clear the lines of faulty verbal and sexual communication between herself and Nick. It is therefore significant that she unthinkingly substitutes the endearment "honey" for Nick's characteristic "darling." "[H]oney" is what Calla calls her the evening their lines of verbal and sexual communication become crossed: "Rachel, honey, . . . it practically kills me to see you like this," Calla says as she touches her lips to Rachel's (38). Calla's "honey" is motivated by a more profound love than Nick's "darling," and although, as the last sentence suggests, Rachel is not conscious of it, she is trying to imagine in Nick's love the depth and sincerity she can count on in Calla's.

The most important reference to Calla's maternal strength is made through a subtle but effective use of literary allusion. In the opening chapter of the novel, Calla is described as "stockily built, not fat at all but solid and broad." Rachel tells us that Calla thinks "she ought to have been Ukrainian, [that] in fact she has that Slavic squareness and strong heavy bones" (3). This description is recalled later in the novel when, just before Rachel turns to Calla in her crisis, Nick describes the only Ukrainian woman who is referred to at length in the novel: his very maternal mother:

"She's—oh, you know—solid. Physically and spiritually. . . . And yet in some ways she is eccentric, I suppose. Or—not so much that, just completely inner-directed. You'd never think it to look at her. . . . She's got this marvellous belief in her own intuition. Not towards everything—only where her kids are concerned. . . . She knows what is going on without being told." (145)

"When something can't be said, she doesn't try to say it. . . ." (146)

In her spiritual commitment, Calla is also eccentric and inner-directed, and, like Mrs. Kaslik, she "knows what is going on without being told." When Rachel confides in her, Calla does not

need to ask if Rachel will keep the baby. She also knows that Rachel is suffering real disappointment, rather than relief, when she learns that she is not pregnant after all: "I'm sorry that things weren't different for you. That it wasn't what you thought, when you came to my place that day" (197).

There are two incidents in which Calla demonstrates that she, like Nick's remarkable mother, knows the point beyond which words are inadequate. When Rachel turns to her, Calla's best offer of help is an unspoken one: "Maybe she'll pray for me, and maybe, even, I could do with that. But she hasn't said so, and she won't, and that is an act of great restraint on her part" (176). The second incident occurs after Rachel's surgery:

Calla came into the city to get me, to come back with me. She didn't fuss or treat me like an invalid, the way some people might have done, for ever asking after one's comfort until the burden of reassuring them that you are fine becomes unbearable. No, she simply said, "you won't want to talk much, I expect," and for the whole three hours we hardly said a word. I wanted to thank her for this gift, which had cost her something, but I could not seem to clarify my mind enough to decide what could be said and what could not. So I never mentioned it, and she thinks still, no doubt, that I never noticed. (185)

This passage also demonstrates that Rachel has finally passed out of adolescence and into maturity. At last she realises that, in their relationship, Calla has always sacrificed her own needs to those of her friend. On the day of her departure from Manawaka, Rachel stands facing Calla and suddenly recognizes her: "Calla, pillar of tabernacles, speaker in tongues, mother of canaries and budgerigars." In her parting words, there is a suggestion of this sudden recognition and an acknowledgement of the sexual relationship which could not be realised: "I'm sorry things weren't different for you. I mean that I wasn't different." This acknowledgement "had to be expressed and offered," Rachel realises, "because the truth is that she loves me" (198).

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The tragedy of Calla's life is a paradox, for it is one of setting, and she is remarkable in her ability to survive in the emotional wasteland of Manawaka. Celibacy, her insurance against the potential threat of social alienation, by no means entirely eliminates the sensuality reflected in her love of flowers, bright

colours, and lustily sung hymns. She is unique among Manawakans in her display of openness, warmth and generosity. Her total disregard for local conventions of dress, style, and religion is unique and refreshing. In an atmosphere which forces ageing single women into neurotic behaviour and social isolation, Calla remains cheerful and outgoing. She makes her work and her worship—necessary for whatever practical and social reasons—enjoyable and fulfilling activities in themselves. In a society where truth is sacrificed for the sake of appearances, Calla is forthright and, at times, disarmingly honest. These are the qualities which allow her the personal insight she needs for survival in a stifling milieu. It is true that Calla has stumbled painfully against the narrow limits of permissible freedom in Manawaka, and there is indeed an element of tragedy in that. But, in her refusal to relinquish all her individuality, she has gone beyond those limits, and therein lies her triumph. In answer to Rachel's parting words of regret, Calla replies: "Not to worry . . . I'll survive" (198). And, as Margaret Laurence herself once said, "It is a triumph, in a sense, just to survive."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with Margaret Laurence, *Canadian Writers on Tape* (Scarborough, Ont.: Van Nostrand., n.d.).