SPEAKING IN TONGUES: MARGARET LAURENCE'S *A JEST OF GOD* AS GOTHIC NARRATIVE [1]

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> Rachel Cameron says she'll die
> For the want of the golden city
>
> Laurence
>
> What does a woman want?
>
> Freud

What does a woman want, indeed? According to Margaret Laurence's novel *A Jest of God* she wants (that is, both desires and lacks the possibility) to tell her story and to come to terms with her father and her mother. Laurence's *Jest* narrates the awakening(s) of Rachel Cameron, a thirty-four year old elementary school teacher in the small prairie town of Manawaka, Manitoba, Canada. *Jest* is usually read as a novel in the realist tradition. However, I shall argue here that its formal features—plot, motifs, narrative strategies, image patterns—and its subject matter—women's anxieties about their visual and discursive positions— give it strong affinities to the Gothic narrative tradition. Reading the novel in light of the Gothic will allow us to focus on these aspects, to elucidate its concerns usefully, and to elaborate its relationships to the female Gothic tradition.

The novel's epigraph, from Carl Sandburg's "Losers," hints at the themes of the narrative and suggests its links with poetry and myth:

> If I should pass the tomb of Jonah
> I would stop there and sit for awhile;
> Because I was swallowed one time deep in the dark
> And came out alive after all.

This reference and similar Biblical allusions in the novel exploit one feature of Gothic narrative, its use of the supernatural, as a function of its concern with the non-rational.

The prophet Jonah embodies the conflict between speech and silence. He refuses to speak and flees from God. Certain that if he preaches the message of impending doom to Nineveh, the people will repent and so win God's mercy, he flees to avoid embarrassment. Jonah worries about his own reputation rather than the fate of the city, and prefers to be silent rather than use his oratorical power to effect change.[2] Other prophets argue with God; Jonah avoids his mission by sailing away. Aspects of his tale—sleeping during a shipwreck, being swallowed by a fish, and sulking at the outskirts of Nineveh—have comic implications, earning him the label of "fool of God," or comic hero (Sasson 348-50). Like the heroines of Gothic novels, he has an affinity for enclosed, womblike places: the ship's hold; the fish's belly. Other features of Jonah's story—sleeplike states, difficulty of telling a story, and discovery of secrets—also are prominent in Gothic narrative, and significant for *Jest* as well.

Rachel Cameron is the Jonah of *Jest*. Like Jonah's, her story is often comic, and she too, is a "fool of God." Like Jonah, she hides in womblike places and resists the story she wants to tell. That is, because she fears and is embarrassed by her own passions (spiritual, emotional, sexual), she silences herself and retreats from action, living a narrowly circumscribed life with her mother, May Cameron. She resists both plot movement and the voice that can tell her story. Her silencing results from her self-judging. As she learns to become more merciful, more self-accepting, she opens herself to possibilities of action and direct speech. A change in her discourse marks her psychological progression as she develops a stronger public voice and comes to accept all of her voices.

Voice has been central to *Jest* from its inception. As Nora Stovel notes, the word "voice" "may be the most often repeated word in *Jest*" (56). Laurence notes that she wanted to write the novel in the third person, but abandoned that because the story wanted to be told in the first person. The first person narration places the reader within Rachel's consciousness, which is often an uncomfortable place. Voice was the ground for early critical judgments. Some early critics faulted the novel for its limited range, and others praised it for its sensitive rendering of Rachel's sensibility. Robert Harlow wrote in 1967, "this book is a failure" because it lacks "objec-

tivity, distance, irony. The reader, instead of identifying, finds him--self (herself, too, I should think) silently shouting at her to get some eye-liner, save for a mink, strong-arm a man, kill her mother and stop bitching" (New 190). Herbert J. Rosengarten defended the book, arguing that "intense concentration on a single sensibility" heightens the narrative, and finding that objectivity and distance inhere in "Rachel's dual consciousness" (New 192-93).

The novel gets told with difficulty because Rachel's voice is halting, obsessive.[3] She begins her story as an observer, watching the children in the schoolyard, watching herself both in her immediate present as a teacher and remembering back to her childhood. She thinks of the "secret language" children share. In contrast, her own language is halting, and she finds difficulty establishing a voice. She frequently interrupts to judge her voice critically. She wonders: "Am I beginning to talk in that simper tone?" (8). Then, as a corrective, she speaks "more sharply than necessary," and cautions herself to "strike a balance" (9). But, if we read this story in Jungian terms (as many critics do),[4] we perceive that Rachel cannot achieve this desired balance until she accepts her shadow side. Locked in a pattern of avoidance, no wonder she finds "my own voice sounds false to my ears" (11).

Because she resists acknowledging her desires, she remains blocked. When she approaches a recognition of her "darker," "shadow" selves, she retreats, and stops the story. If she fears she is entertaining "morbid" thoughts or eccentric fantasies, she admonishes herself: "This must stop. It isn't good for me. Whenever I find myself thinking in a brooding way, I must simply turn it off and think of something else" (8). She retreats from her sexual fantasies : "I didn't. I didn't (25). . . . Rachel, stop it. You're only getting yourself worked up for nothing. It's bad for you" (121). Yet these private fantasies are colourful and engaging, in vibrant contrast to her stilted public language and constrained behaviour. Fortunately, almost in spite of herself, she comes to acknowledge her desires and to face the implications of sexual passion. Through a symbolic descent into the underworld, the womblike, tomblike mortuary presided over by Hector Jonas (/Jonah), she realizes that she has the power to affirm her passions, to choose life. As a result, her story, like Jonah's, starts as a tale of avoidance and becomes one of redemptive possibility. And, like Jonah's, this tale employs many Gothic narrative conventions.

It will be useful to review some definitions of Gothic and its features, so as to examine their function in *Jest*. Gothic narratives

blend fantasy and realism, depict stories of women's moral education and development, and use quasi-allegorical characters to explore psychological states (MacAndrew). The Gothic novel has been associated with women writers and characters since its inception in the late eighteenth century. In 1974 Ellen Moers coined the term "female Gothic," arguing that the Gothic "gives visual form to the fear of self" and explores the relations between parent (especially mother) and child. Most feminist critics read Gothic novels as explorations of the position of women in the family and the home. Tracing the genre historically, Kate Ellis argues persuasively that the Gothic novel addresses the anxiety caused by the emerging bourgeois family structure that locks women in the home in order to keep them innocent and powerless. Jacqueline Howard suggests that the Gothic novel is based on a "dialogic interaction of discourses" (141). She reads Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* as exposing the contradictory constructions of women's place in the late eighteenth century. According to Howard, *Mysteries* "constantly question[s] the norms of the supposedly real and ideal [and] reveals the contradictions and dilemmas posed by the privileging of moral and aesthetic sensibility in women" which set women up as morally superior, but also "weak, delicate and disordered" (141). As we shall see, Rachel Cameron faces similar contradictions, as she tries to negotiate the space between her mother's behavioural codes and her own desires. There is thus an area of critical agreement that finds female Gothic narrative to be an expression of particular anxieties (femininity, family relationships, the self as object of a hostile gaze, linguistic choices) of middle-class women. *Jest* articulates these anxieties in terms of Rachel's conflicts about visibility and voice.

The Gothic depends upon characteristic conventions of style, theme and structure. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick enumerates these concisely:

> the novel's form . . . is likely to be discontinuous and involuted, perhaps incorporating tales within tales, changes of narrators, and such framing devices as found manuscripts or interpolated histories. . . . Certain characteristic preoccupations . . . include the priesthood and monastic institutions; sleeplike and deathlike states; subterranean spaces and live burial; doubles; the discovery of obscured family ties; affinities between narrative and pictorial art; . . . unnatural echoes or silences, unintelligible writings, and the unspeakable; . . . guilt and shame; noctur-

> nal landscapes and dreams; apparitions from the past; . . . the charnel house and the madhouse. . . .The self is spatialized. . . . massively blocked off from something to which it ought normally to have access. . . . [The Gothic emphasizes] what's inside, what's outside, and what separates them. (9-13).

Sedgwick and others refer to devices such as the mysterious lover, the veil that both conceals and makes visible, the importance of spectacle and visual qualities, the portrait which (mis)identifies family members at crucial plot junctures, and the Oedipal situation in which an older male who ought to be protector and father becomes a sexual threat who denies the heroine access to a younger male. All of these Gothic elements appear in *Jest*.

In addition Elizabeth Napier lists stylistic features: "exaggeration, interruption and fragmentation" (48), and points to a characteristic flattening of character (32). Indeed, Rachel's narration is replete with these hallmarks. The secondary characters are stereotyped because they are seen through the filter of Rachel's jaundiced sensibility: the nagging, whiny mother; the mysterious lover; the emotionally absent father; the rebellious friend. For all her introspection, Rachel remains a relatively flat character. This is partly a function of the plot: as a psychologically repressed school teacher she has little scope for action. Similarly, she has a small emotional repertory—guilt and shame predominate.

Gothic narratives foreground women's sexuality, depicting womblike structures such as the castle or the monastic cell, alluding to mysterious family secrets, and emphasizing women's sexual vulnerability. However, mothers and the values traditionally associated with motherhood—caring, nurturing, empathy—are dramatically lacking in these novels. The Gothic tale presents a motherless (and often fatherless) young woman, unprotected, facing the dangers of patriarchal society. It is thus a kind of female bildungsroman, a story of a woman's education and development. Claire Kahane argues that at the centre of the Gothic novel "is the spectral presence of a dead-undead mother, archaic and all-encompassing, a ghost signifying the problematics of femininity which the heroine must confront" (336). As we shall see, Rachel Cameron must also confront her introjected memory of her father, who carries a similar weight for her. By rescripting her relationship to both parents Rachel addresses the problematics of femininity.

Claire Kahane summarizes the typical Gothic plot:

> Within an imprisoning structure, a protagonist, typically a young woman whose mother has died, is compelled to seek out the centre of a mystery, while vague and usually sexual threats to her person from some powerful male figure hover on the periphery of her consciousness. Following clues. . . she . . . discovers a secret room sealed off by its association with death. In this dark, secret centre of the Gothic structure, the boundaries of life and death themselves seem confused. Who died? Has there been a murder? (334)

A chart will summarize these features and indicate how Laurence uses them in *Jest*:

CONVENTION:	EXAMPLE:
multiple narrators	Rachel's voices
priesthood and monastery	Tabernacle of the Redeemed; Scottish Protestant Church
sleeplike/deathlike states	Rachel's unawakened sexuality
subterranean spaces/ live burial	mortuary below house
doubles	Nick/Rachel; Nick/Steve; Rachel/Calla; Rachel/Stacey
obscured family ties discovered	Nick/Steve
unnatural silences; the unspeakable	Rachel's frequent silences; speaking in tongues
guilt and shame	Rachel is paralyzed by guilt and shame
dreams	Rachel dreams of dead people
apparitions from the past	Rachel's introjection of Niall Cameron
charnel house and madhouse	mortuary, hospital
self blocked off	Rachel is repressed
difficulty of telling story	Rachel's repression
mysterious lover	Nick
visual quality	specular quality of Rachel's story; eye imagery
innocent, virginal heroine	Rachel
exaggerated emotions	Rachel's fantasies and worries
a significant picture of a family member	Nick's photo
imprisoning structure	rigid home; society

vague, usually sexual threats	possible pregnancy
discovery of secret room	mortuary
boundaries of life and death seem confused	is Rachel bearing life (baby) or death (tumour)?

Kahane's paradigm is the thread we will follow to elucidate Rachel's quest for a narrative voice. We will focus especially on the visual and voice imagery, the imprisoning structures, the sexual threats, and the discovery of a secret room where the boundaries of life and death seem confused.

As a narrator, Rachel is acutely aware of how her voice sounds, of how she looks to others. Her mother raised her according to middle-class codes of decorum, cautioning her to avoid shame and embarrassment. An apt pupil, Rachel tries to become silent and invisible so as to avoid the judgment of others. Moreover, she has become her own judge. As Nancy Bailey notes "Rachel engages in discourse with herself but usually as if she were addressing an external and unsympathetic listener" (Rebirth 63). She is one of the typically self-conscious observer/narrator heroines of female Gothic that Susan Wolstenholme characterizes as "observers observing themselves interacting with others, as well as observing eyes through whose vision the story forms itself " (60). Wolstenholme argues that in Gothic narratives " 'vision' [is] a metaphor for narrative" (60). As we shall see, visual imagery parallels voice imagery in *Jest* to inscribe Rachel's movement from silence and invisibility to voice and presence.

Eye imagery pervades *Jest.* Situated between her young pupils and the other adults in Manawaka, Rachel is both an observer and a vulnerable object of observation. Rachel's use of eye imagery reveals her self-consciousness and vulnerability, her sense of being open to hostile scrutiny. When Willard Siddley approaches her she is discomforted by his gaze as he "leans down and looks at [her] earnestly from behind his glasses" (13). His gaze establishes his authority, but it is an inhuman, repellent gaze "like the blue dead eyes of the frozen whitefish" (13). When she is unable to sleep, Rachel fantasizes about the unseeing eyes of the corpses her mortician father prepared for burial: "their open eyes are glass eyes, cat's eye marbles, round glass beads, blue and milky, unwinking " (25). When she is uneasy and plans to leave Calla's Tabernacle, she thinks of walking "through a gauntlet of eyes" (42). Remembering

an embarrassing moment, she thinks "the eyes all around have swollen to giants' eyes" (54). Passing a group of teenagers, she thinks "I don't like . . . having to endure the confident dismissal of their eyes" (61). To avoid the coercive force of observation she dresses conservatively and unfashionably, wearing a three year old navy wool dress (10) and hair that looks "exactly as it's always done, nondescript waves, mole brown" (19). (She will later find Willard's eyes less threatening, and she will revel in thoughts of becoming visible.) Shrinking to invisibility, Rachel exists tenuously within a series of imprisoning structures.

In the novel, social institutions are "spatialized," presented as figuratively imprisoning structures. In each site—school, church and home—Rachel is infantilized and subjected to scrutiny. In each site she must choose speech or silence. The novel starts, appropriately enough, in a school, a site where young people learn the language and behavioural codes available to them. The school is, of course, a creation of and vehicle for the state ideology. In Laurence's novel, the state is not directly visible, but its hegemonic power manifests itself in all the social institutions described in the novel (Hughes 41).

The novel begins with a jump rope rhyme into which Rachel self-consciously interpolates her own name:

> Rachel Cameron says she'll die
> For the want of the golden city

The children playing in the schoolyard prophesy Rachel's spiritual stagnation, her want—that is, the longing for and lack—of spirituality, "the golden city." Watching the children play, Rachel remembers herself as a child, and thinks wryly that she finds her role as teacher less powerful than she had believed it would be. The first three paragraphs contrast Rachel's stagnation to the vibrant spontaneity of the children.

However, as we read further we find that this school discourages spontaneity. Instead, it is a training ground for producing more Rachels. The girls feel pressure to fabricate stories so as to curry favour. Rachel observes: "Interesting creatures, very young girls, often so anxious to please that they will tell lies without really knowing they're doing it" (11). In fact, Rachel herself frequently behaves this way, at school, with friends and in her home. In school where she might use her power to be maternal and nurturing, she is instead like a child herself, unconfident and selfconscious. Accord-

ingly, her classroom voice "sounds false to [her] ears, a Peter-Rabbitish voice" (11), the simpering voice of the schoolmarm. Although Rachel ostensibly manages her classroom, she is subservient to the principal, Willard Siddley, and silences her desire for compassion in order to act as his agent of discipline. Self-consciously, she observes herself: "I can hear my own voice, eagerly abject. Probably I would get down on my knees if this weren't frowned upon. I hate all this. I hate speaking in this way. But I go on doing it" (51).

In the school Rachel finds a friend, another teacher, Calla Mackie, who speaks in a different voice, "slangy and strident" (37). She advises Rachel "If you once said . . . 'Now listen here, Willard, quit making a mountain out of a molehill—'" (52). But Rachel worries that such assertion is beyond her capability. As a friend, a teacher who speaks forthrightly, Calla functions as a double of Rachel, suggesting alternative possibilities. It is chiefly as a spiritual guide that Calla performs her doubling function. Her openness to spirituality is the impetus for Rachel to speak in a new voice.

The novel juxtaposes two kinds of Christian religious institutions. One, characterized by emotional emptiness, is the Scottish Presbyterian church Rachel attends at her mother's behest. The other is Calla's church, the more passionate, ecstatic fundamentalist Tabernacle of the Risen and Reborn. May Cameron's church is a bland, pallid one which encourages the congregants to be silent and invisible. To speak aloud in this setting is to risk censure and embarrassment. May is appalled when an elderly choir member is permitted to sing a solo off-key (148-49); Rachel finds a noisy child offensive. In contrast, Calla's Tabernacle celebrates human voices. This is a place where desire is expressed, a place of urgency and ecstasy where the hymns exhort "surrender" and "Rejoice!" (41-2), where congregants may speak ecstatically in tongues. Yet Rachel feels trapped here, overwhelmed by the noise: "I hate this. I would like to go home. . . . The hymn-sound is too loud" (38). She describes the Tabernacle in highly charged, detailed, sensuous language, noting the colours, smells and sounds as her heightened self-consciousness leads her to careful observation in this scene (37-43) "The light seems distant and hazy, and the air colder. . . and foetid with the smell of feet and damp coats. It's like some crypt, dead air and staleness, deadness, silence" (37). Significantly, she equates this space with a crypt, foreshadowing her epiphanic experience in the mortuary. As we shall see, similarly intense visual and sensual imagery will characterize the mortuary scene. Rachel perceives the people in the Tabernacle as alien, animal-like: "The lay preacher is

praying... his voice like a husky dog's, a low growling. Beside me, the hulked form of the farmer sits crouched over. They all seem to be crouching... It's not a zoo, not Doctor Moreau's island where the beastmen prowled" (38-9). (Of course, the negative here indicates that Rachel does think of zoos and beast men, and again, tries to stop herself from continuing this train of thought.)

This place threatens Rachel's carefully managed decorum, and opens a space for transgression of her code of emotional repression. She fears embarrassment, the unseemliness of other people's "ecstatic utterances... [or] the Grecian women wild on the hills" (37). Yet, to her horror, it is her own voice that speaks in tongues and cries out its longing: "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—" (42-3). Her ecstatic voice, like the veils of Gothic heroines, both calls attention to her and conceals meanings, for it encodes her desire, but she doesn't yet understand how to interpret it. Her exclamation links Rachel, however unwillingly, to the passionate women she fears, the ecstatic "Dionysian women [who] rend themselves on the night hills and consume the god" (42). Thus, the Tabernacle, which seems imprisoning may provide clues for escape, for release.

Her family home is the most imprisoning place, but we shall see that Rachel finds secrets there that help her escape. She lives in her father's house, the ironically named Cameron Funeral (funereal?) Home. An emotionally empty man, the mortician Niall (nihil?) Cameron is spiritually dead in his lifetime and physically dead by the time Rachel tells her tale, yet he holds her in thrall just as surely as any living Gothic villain exerts his power over the heroine.[5] Niall's retreat from life into his basement abode of death haunts the house. His presence in Rachel's imagination sets up the typical Gothic Oedipal situation we have previously alluded to in which an older male who ought to be protector and father becomes a sexual threat and denies the heroine access to a younger male. Niall Cameron's legacy of withdrawal, emotional absence, death-in-life keeps Rachel from expressing her desires for emotional and sexual connection. But a young man, Nick Kazlik, helps revitalize Rachel.[6]

In her connection to Nick, Rachel is verbally inept, verging on speechlessness. Their conversations reiterate a pattern of missed clues, avoided topics, misunderstandings. She spends a great deal of time replaying their words afterwards to discover what really

happened. In their first encounter when he asks her "What is there to do here in the summer?" she misses the point and mumbles "I don't—well, not a great deal, I guess" (70). Her response initiates a pattern of negativity, hesitancy, confusion and closure of communication that structures their exchanges. In contrast, her fantasy life takes on new power and energy. These fantasies veer between embarrassment at her sexual inexperience and dreams of a golden future with Nick. She makes small talk to keep the conversation going, but she does not mention the topic that keeps her awake at night, her fear that she may be pregnant. As readers have noted, the relationship is doomed from the start. Several of their trysts occur within sight of the cemetery, clearly presaging the sterile nature of their relationship. Tellingly, in one fantasy, she imagines he proposes marriage in terms of death: "Listen, darling, do you think life as a Grade Eleven teacher's wife would be a fate worse than—" (122).

In important ways, Nick is a double of Rachel. Both are self-absorbed. Like Rachel, Nick is struggling to come to terms with his parents. He is still trying to deal with the death of his twin brother Stefan. At one point he cries, "I'm not going to be taken over by a dead man" (149). Similarly, Rachel must resist possession by a dead man, her dead father. Their last conversation is especially cryptic, a communication breakdown that terminates the relationship. Nick shows her a worn photo of a boy of about six who looks like him. Often in Gothic fiction there is a picture of a family member that holds important clues for the heroine, and typically she misreads it, leading to complications and confusions that are later resolved.[7] Nick's photo may be an old one of himself or possibly of Stefan, but Rachel mistakenly assumes that it is his child and that he is showing her the photo to let her know he is married and a father. The conversation that ensues is minimal. Rachel asks "Yours?" He replies "Yes. . . . Mine." She is pained and tells him "I have to go home now" (155), thus failing to share her confusion or to respond in any meaningful way. Her failure to explore the meaning of the photo may indicate to Nick a lack of sympathy, and may be the reason he ceases to call her. When she later learns that Nick is not married, Rachel is at first angry, then realizes that "he had his own demons and webs . . .. As for what was happening with him and to him this summer, I couldn't say what it really was, nor whether it had anything to do with me or not" (197). In her new assessment, Rachel stops projecting her fantasies on to Nick.

Although short-lived, the affair creates a space for Rachel to rebel against her mother's rules, and to experience her sexuality. Nick betrays her: he implicitly lies to her and does not tell her when he leaves Manawaka. Yet, she is propelled into change through this encounter. As Laurence comments, Rachel is reaching out for connection. Further, she must face her fear of sexuality and the threat of a possible pregnancy. Matthew Martin notes that Rachel's voice does begin to change, as she addresses Nick in the imperative "take your clothes off" (61). Moreover, Martin argues "through her sexual encounter with Nick, Rachel herself begins to restructure her desire away from the phallus" (61). Ultimately, the affair indirectly triggers her confrontation with her introjected construct of her father, and rescripts her relationship with her mother.

One aspect of Gothic narrative is the heroine's recognition, a change in perception that springs her from the trap. Through her pursuit of the secrets contained in the imprisoning structures, she moves from innocence to experience, becoming aware of external threats and of ways to resist them. For example, in Ann Radcliffe's novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Emily St. Aubert's recognition that Montoni is a bandit helps to put him into proper scale; it translates him from a demonic villain into a bad human. Similarly, Rachel's ability to see her parents for what they are reduces their constraining hold over her and frees her to perceive them as flawed humans rather than demonic figures. This recognition frees Rachel from her dead father's grasp and makes possible her more assertive relationship with her mother.

Sleepless after one of her dates with Nick, Rachel descends to the mortuary in the basement of her house. In this space, she carries out the typical Gothic heroine's journey through the labyrinthine maze of an imprisoning structure, and finds the secret room. Rachel's description here parallels the description of the Tabernacle in its rich use of imagery and sensuous detail, its exotically pictorial quality. The language is ornate, fanciful. The mortuary scene emphasizes imagery of light and dark, seeing and not-seeing. Rachel's guide here is a "comic prophet," Hector Jonas, the mortician who has taken over her father's business.

> He grasps my hand and I'm tugged zig-zag along a corridor, into the depths. Then a door. He opens it with a sweep and a fling, as though announcing the heaped and laden treasure of every pearled Sultan that never lived. But he's forgotten the dark, so I can't see even a gem of his riches. . . . [After the lights

> are on] On low tables at either side are set candelabra as many-branched as trees, and the wax tapers in them are violet and peppermint green. (131-32)

In conversation with Hector, she comes to terms with the spectral presence of her father. In the mysterious room that holds the secrets of life and death, Rachel confronts the fear that has been paralyzing her. She comes to see her father differently when Hector tells her Niall "had the kind of life he wanted most" (131). These words enable Rachel to put her father's story into a new perspective, to loosen his hold on her:

> *The life he wanted most.* If my father had wanted otherwise, it would have been otherwise. Not necessarily better, but at least different. Did he ever try to alter it? Did I, with mine? Was that what he needed most, after all, not ever to have to touch any living thing? Was that why she [May Cameron] came to life after he died?
> If it's true he wanted that life the most, why mourn? Why ever cease from mourning? (131)

Through the words of the "comic prophet" Rachel begins to gain insight into her family secrets. She realizes that her mother was probably stifled by her father, and so gains more sympathy for her. Moreover, acknowledging that her father had choices, she comes to see the possibility of choice in her own life.

After freeing herself from her father's ghost, Rachel must come to terms with her mother. This confrontation is the most difficult, and the most far-reaching. Rachel must learn to nurture herself, to see herself compassionately rather than judgmentally. In order to achieve this, Rachel must confront the problematics of the mother-daughter relationship. As she does so, she finds sympathy for her mother, and comes to reverse their roles, becoming the caretaking parent of her mother.

May Cameron is an inadequate mother, trapped in her feelings of inferiority ("Niall always thinks I am so stupid" 193), and her concern for appearances. As Margaret Atwood points out, May Cameron "plays guilt like a violin" (214). She tyrannizes Rachel. Infantilized, powerless, Rachel speaks timidly, apologetically:

> "I'm going to a movie."
> "Oh. What's on? Maybe I'll come along."
> "I mean I'm going with someone."

> "Oh. I see. Well, you might have said, Rachel. You really might have told me, dear."
> "I'm sorry, Mother. I just–"
> "You know how glad I am, dear, when you go out. You might have mentioned it to me, that's all. It's not too much to ask, surely. . . "
> "I'm sorry."
> "Well, it's quite all right, dear. . . . I'll be just dandy. Don't you worry about me a speck. I'll be perfectly all right. If you'd just reach down my pills for me from the medicine cabinet. As long as . . . I can get them handily, in case anything happens. I'm sure I'll be fine. You go ahead and enjoy yourself."
> . . . . . .
> "Maybe I shouldn't go." (72-3)

While we may both laugh and cringe at May Cameron's controlling tactics, we must set her behaviour into its social and psychological contexts in order to understand its wellsprings.

Feminist theorists direct our attention to the problematized position of motherhood in contemporary Anglo-American society. Although they are being critiqued for their limitations, particularly their focus on white, Anglo-European middle-class motherhood as a universal or norm, these analyses opened important discussions about the functions of motherhood and caretaking, and addressed the debasement of motherhood prevalent in late capitalist society. Among these theorists, Adrienne Rich and Julia Kristeva point to a devaluation of the experience and imagery of motherhood. Kristeva finds that the image of the mother has been subsumed by the image of the Virgin Mary, a woman whose power depends upon her son's, and whose sensuality is denied. Rich writes about the ways in which the Anglo-European construction of motherhood deprives women of nurturing: "There was, is, in most of us, a girl-child still longing for a woman's nurture, tenderness, and approval, a woman's power exerted in our defense" (219-220). Luce Irigaray argues that patriarchy separates women from each other, and that mother-daughter relations have not been given expression (Wright, 262-66). Nancy Chodorow theorizes that women seek emotional fulfillment through mothering, because they do not find it in heterosexual relationships. Whatever the strengths and weaknesses of these analyses, *Jest* depicts a patriarchal society which has devalued motherhood and curtailed women's power.

Both Helen Buss and Warren Stevenson analyze the relationship between Rachel and May in terms of the archetypal Western mother/daughter myth, the story of Demeter and Persephone. But whiny, repressed May (despite a name which suggests flowering, fertility and rebirth) is an unlikely candidate for the richly fruitful Greek goddess. Stevenson attempts to resolve this paradox by arguing that she is in mourning, Demeter lamenting the loss of her child and withholding her fertility. Buss argues that because May has "no real power over her world, she gains it through . . . manipulative devices" (33). In another context, Sherrill Grace suggests that Demeter "may be lost because from the onset of patriarchy women have lived primarily in terms of their fathers and Father" (44). Buss explains that maternal deprivation is "at the root of the problems of Laurence's heroines. . . . [It] stems directly from the absence of cultural values that offer a context for the mother-daughter relationship to fulfill its positive functions" (32). As we shall see, because Demeter's power has been curtailed, her daughter must become a powerful, mothering figure in her stead. Consequently, Rachel must find within herself and within a women's subculture life-affirming values to counteract the deadness of the patriarchy.

Tyrannized by May and locked into Manawaka's rigid codes of proper behaviour, Rachel is terrified when she believes that she has become pregnant, and even contemplates suicide in her desperation. To bear a child out of wedlock in Manawaka is to bring stigma and shame upon mother, child, and, indeed, upon the entire family. Nevertheless she decides to keep the child. With this decision she makes a courageous leap. She commits herself to action in the public world, action that flies in the face of May Cameron's and Manawaka's decorum. Consequently, Rachel is both relieved and disappointed to learn that she is not pregnant after all. The expected child turns out to be a tumour, a "benign growth."

Rachel has entered a secret room, the basement mortuary, to learn her father's secrets and to confront her issues with him. Now she must journey to another secret room to learn the secrets of motherhood. This room is the hospital where she goes for an operation to remove a tumour. When she wakes after the operation she is obsessed with what she might have said while anesthetized, and learns that her words were "I am the mother now" (191). Margaret Atwood sums up her situation: "Rachel's false pregnancy is an ambiguous indication of the lesson she comes to learn: how to be a mother, to herself first of all, since true mothering has been denied her" (214). Matthew Martin asserts "Rachel inverts the Oedi-

pal binary opposition that privileges the phallus over the womb. Rachel's supposed pregnancy is the material signifier of this change" (62). As Rachel gains confidence in herself she becomes more powerful in relation to her mother and willingly accepts her caretaking role for both herself and her mother. She comes to see her mother's vulnerability and so learns to be more honest and more respectful toward her. She leaves the hospital physically healed and spiritually reborn, a Persephone ready to be reunited with her mother Demeter.

This connection to—and mothering of—a living mother is a new twist in the Gothic formula.[8] In nineteenth-century Gothic novels the mothers were almost always dead or absent. Twentieth-century novels may be starting to address the mother-daughter reconnection because of changing demographics and power structures. First, mothers are more likely to survive to reach their daughters' adulthood and to require caretaking as they age. In addition, I would argue that Rachel's assumption of the mothering role reflects a validation of motherhood as a powerful and affirming status. Yet Rachel's stance indicates a paradox central to contemporary women's lives. Speaking as daughters, women feel unmothered, lacking warmth and tenderness. They are unsympathetic, often hostile to their mothers. However, as mothers themselves, they appreciate the difficulties and problems of the maternal role.[9] We have many stories of women speaking as daughters, few tales told by mothers. Consequently, Rachel's new sympathetic and caretaking relationship to her mother is an unusual one in contemporary literature, however much the reversal of mother-daughter roles may be increasing in contemporary families. Few women writers have as yet followed Laurence's lead in this renewed respect and sympathy for the mother as the daughter becomes her parent.

Now considering herself the head of the family, a person capable of initiating changes and making decisions, Rachel applies for a job in Vancouver and plans to move there with her mother. Strikingly, she finds a new voice in which to speak with May, as exemplified by this discussion of their impending move.

> "Now please don't be silly, Rachel. It's out of the question, dear, I'm afraid."
> "No. It's what we're going to do."
> "I realize you might like somewhere else for a change. . . . I know it's a strain for you—no, you needn't contradict me—I

> can see it—a strain. . . living here with someone who can't help the fact that she's not so lively as once. . . "
> "Yes. That's right. It is."
> "What?"
> "A strain. It is sometimes a strain. . . . You want me to say no of course it hasn't been a strain, and of course I want to stay here and I'm sorry I ever brought up the subject. . . . But I can't. I can't do that now."
> "Rachel, you're not yourself. You're not talking a bit sensibly, dear. I can hardly follow you. . . . "
> "I'm so—I mean try. Try to listen." (198-99)

Where formerly, she might have dropped the subject or apologized profusely, Rachel now states her position and repeats it. She remains sympathetic to her mother, but she asserts her decision to escape from her constricted world to enter a potentially larger one in Vancouver.

The novel concludes with mother and daughter on the bus heading West. The last words are Rachel's offering the blessings "God's mercy on reluctant jesters. God's grace on fools. God's pity on God" (209). Helen Buss suggests that Rachel has become a mother god offering to bless the father god. Whether we accept this interpretation or not, her voice here is clearly more self-assured than that of the simpering schoolmarm of chapter one who cringed before her students. Rachel has found a voice that does not hesitate to address God. (And again, as in Jonah, the aspect of God's mercy is foregrounded over the aspect of judgment.)

Further, by coming to terms with her shadow, by accepting and valuing her passionate side, by identifying with her mother and with her mothering capacities, Rachel liberates herself from her fears and constraints. She is now able to make direct eye contact, and finds that Willard's eyes are not so frightening after all. Rather than try to become invisible, she welcomes visibility: she is willing to become a fool or an eccentric, to look strange. "I may begin to wear outlandish hats. . . and dangling necklaces. . . and all the kids will laugh, and I'll laugh too, in time" (209). Some writers assert that Rachel has one inner and one outer voice, or a false and a true voice. Barbara Powell argues that at the conclusion, Rachel's strong and weak voices have been reconciled, brought into harmony, and thus the ending is optimistic. But harmony seems a far cry from Rachel's experience. While I concur with Powell's belief that the ending is optimistic, I suggest that the optimism derives from plenitude of

possibility rather than reconciliation of voices. I believe that Rachel has many voices which will continue inner dialogues. In affirming her multiplicity and richness of potential, she welcomes possibilities, and thus insures that she will have a story to tell. Fear of eccentricity silenced her voice at the start of the story; at the conclusion, her welcoming of all possibilities opens the narrative to new stories that can be written beyond the ending. At the novel's start, her rich imagination produced morbid brooding and fantasies of the past. Now, her imagination produces fantasies of her own varied future.

* * *

If Kate Ellis is correct in her claim that the Gothic mode reveals anxieties over the changing place of women in families, it may be that times of change in social roles lead to the production of Gothic fiction. It is significant that the period in which Laurence wrote *Jest*, the mid 1960s, a time of renewed interest in feminism, saw a flowering of Gothic novels by women. Some of the notable women's Gothic texts written between 1963 and 1972 are Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, 1963; Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, 1968, *The Four-Gated City*, 1969, and *The Summer Before the Dark*, 1973; Margaret Atwood's *Edible Woman*, 1969 and *Surfacing* 1972. Like *Jest*, these Gothic-marked narratives conclude ambiguously, with their protagonists poised to encounter new possibilities.

Laurence incorporates the Gothic conventions, but, along with other contemporary women writers, she modifies them to rescue the heroine from the trap of Gothic. The nineteenth-century Gothic novel typically restores a heroine to the society from which she has been temporarily removed during her struggles. Thus, the ending is a conservative one usually sealing the heroine's fate with death or marriage (entrapment within another convention). Rachel Cameron has escaped both of these endings: she does not die of cancer, she does not marry Nick. Her fate remains open, deliciously various, some of the prospects enumerated in her reverie "Where I'm going anything may happen" (208).

We need to ask: why does Laurence structure the novel according to Gothic conventions? are women's stories necessarily linked to the Gothic? if so, why? of what use to Laurence are these conventions? Juliann E. Fleenor writes: "It seems that whenever women reach back to find a literary form to convey protest, or

rage, or terror, or even humour, they find the Gothic. It seems that the Gothic form allows us—as readers and as writers—to express the conflict [between mothers and daughters] for which patriarchy has no name" (28).

The Gothic novel—with its emphasis on multiple levels of narration, on modes of discourse, on tensions between fantasy and reality—is about the position of women within a discursive community. Rachel's quest for her voice illuminates this struggle. At the same time that she learns to develop a range of voices for the public world, she comes to terms with the voices of her private world. She needs the power of her fantasy, her passion, her desire, to move the plot along. However, she needs the structure of discourse and of a relatively stable linguistic community to inscribe her story. Her linguistic choices have real consequences for her. At first her fear of these consequences silences and paralyzes her and constrains her choices. As she opens herself to risks, her possibilities for story and action open up.

CODA: SOME BIOGRAPHICAL SPECULATIONS

One can never equate the author's life with a character's life. Nevertheless, it is quite likely that anxieties—similar to Rachel's—about voice and about her position within a discursive community faced Laurence at the time she was composing *Jest*. Probably all writers (and women more than men?) share these anxieties. Before writing *Jest* Laurence wrote non-fiction essays, translations of poetry, a novel and short stories about African subjects. She wrote the first draft of *The Stone Angel*—her first novel about Canadian subject matter and her first with a woman as narrator—in Vancouver in 1962. She then left her husband, and moved to England with her two young children, hoping to carve out a career as an author and expecting to find a congenial community of writers that would welcome her. I believe that *Jest* raised more anxieties for Laurence than did her earlier writing because her material was now closer to her own life, and because she had just left her husband in order to become a serious writer. In writing *Jest*, she was putting her career on the line. When she began writing the novel money was scarce. She was unsure whether she could support her family through her writing. *Angel* had not yet appeared in print, and she did not know what

its reception would be. The English literary community was not welcoming and supportive. Writing and rewriting Rachel's story, Laurence inscribed her own anxieties of authorship.

NOTES

[1] This article was prepared during a sabbatical leave from the University of Rhode Island. The research was conducted at the University of British Columbia through the generous hospitality of the Centre for Research on Women's Studies and Gender Relations, the Department of English, the Library, and the Arts Computing Centre. An earlier version of this article was presented in a seminar at the Centre for Research on Women's Studies in November 1994.

[2] Another interpretation is that Jonah prefers the God of justice to the God of mercy, and is angry that God relents toward Nineveh. In this context, note that the God Rachel Cameron invokes at the novel's conclusion is a God of mercy.

[3] See Powell for a useful discussion of Rachel's voice. She catalogues the stylistic features that shape Rachel's discourse. I disagree with Powell's interpretation of the novel's conclusion, as will become apparent.

[4] Nancy Bailey, for example, writing in *Studies in Canadian Literature,* explains:

> "Jung used the term 'persona' to describe the mask which the ego consciously assumes to meet the world. . . . If the individual. becomes totally identified with this persona, other valid parts of the personality which are . . . neglected will tend to act negatively and in unexpected ways. . . . Individuation involves the integration of inner and outer worlds. It is a blending of complementary elements which allows the realization of the whole self, whose conscious sphere will be enriched and enhanced by its access to the unconscious. . . . In Jung's analysis, as in Laurence's world, the inner self and the mask will always be in some opposition, but in the secure personality, the persona will rest solidly on the unconscious; otherwise, extremes in the persona may be balanced by extremes in the unconscious" 309-11.

[5] Sherrill Grace has remarked of Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing* that the male characters "embody a death principle" (42). This is true as well of the men in *Jest*. The gentle men have been damaged (Niall Cameron has been traumatized by war; Nick Kazlik is caught in his own "webs"); others exercise power at the expense of sensitivity (Rachel Cameron's principal enjoys punishing recalcitrant pupils and exerting his authority over the teachers in his school).

[6] Perhaps it is worth noting some of the meanings of the word "nick": notch, groove or slit, incision, indentation; notch used as a means of keeping score; the critical moment, as in "the nick of time"; to unite, couple (used of breeding stocks); to catch, take unawares, to nab, steal. Nicholas, an early Christian saint is the patron

saint of scholars, especially school-boys, the Saint associated with the birth of Christ and the Christmas holiday. Saint Nicholas, the Bishop of Myra, is associated with legendary miracles to help the poor, sick and unhappy. One of his miracles is providing a bag of gold as a dowry to enable impoverished young women—who would otherwise be forced into prostitution—to get married. On the other hand, Old Nick is the devil. This range of connotations suggests Nick's ambiguity. He becomes a screen onto which Rachel projects her desires for love, sexuality, and most especially, for children. He arrives in the nick of time, to take her unaware, to couple with her, and to steal her out of complacency or despair.

[7] In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* a miniature portrait of the victim's mother identifies him as a member of the Frankenstein family to the vengeful monster who murders him and places the portrait in Justine's pocket to implicate her in the murder. In Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho* Emily mistakes the meanings of both a miniature portrait of a beautiful woman and a wax image that appears to be a rotting corpse. See Henry C. Phelps for a useful discussion of Nick's photo.

[8] I thank the anonymous reader for this journal for pointing this out.

[9] For a discussion of this pattern, see Hirsch, 26-7.

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