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**The Construction of Personal Identity in Twentieth-Century  
Women's Life-Writing: The Autobiographies of Willa Muir,  
Margaret Laurence and Janet Frame**

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**Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD**

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**December 2007**

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## Abstract

This study examines autobiographies by three women writers active at the mid-twentieth century. These works are chosen as appropriate sources for the examination of modes of construction and representation of personal identity. Margaret Laurence, and Janet Frame have been considered together before but the addition of Willa Muir has provided new possibilities for the analysis of writers who prove to have more in common than may at first appear.

These autobiographies constitute examples of narratives in which intellectually gifted and original literary women define themselves. This study explores the evocative, engaging life stories these women produced, in spite of the many obstacles they had to confront. It analyses how the authors in their autobiographies convey how they were socialised to fulfil certain roles – constrained in this way by their social identities – and at the same time, how particular identities, sometimes even the same ones, offered them strength and community in a sense of belonging.

Traditional ideas of selfhood and the notion of a unified, essential self are challenged by these texts. They also interrogate customary generalizations about autobiography, especially when they are considered from the perspective of gender.

Comparisons between these authors' autobiographical texts suggest that women's experiences – though exceedingly diverse over time and from one writer to another – generate some thematic similarities among their narratives, which could be a remarkably productive field of study for additional analyses of these texts, and which could helpfully inform future critical and theoretical approaches to the treatment of women's life-writing in general.



## **Acknowledgments**

For her inspiration, patience, incalculable help and encouragement I should like to thank my supervisor, Dorothy McMillan, who has not only been a hard-working and dedicated teacher, but also been a role model and a good friend to me over the last three years.

I am grateful to my fellow post-graduate students at the University of Glasgow, who have provided assistance and stimulating debate when most needed.

I should like to thank my family and friends for their continued love and support, without which I could have not finished this thesis.

Above all, I should like to thank my husband, for his opportune criticism, and for his unconditional and unfailing companionship.

**To My Parents and My Husband**

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## 1. Introduction

In spite of the fact that autobiography is impossible,  
this in no way prevents it from existing.  
Philippe Lejeune  
*On Autobiography*

For a long time in the history of literary criticism autobiography has been considered a minor, devalued genre. Interest in writing and reading autobiographies has, however, steadily increased during the last decades of the twentieth century and first years of this century, and at the same time the theoretical debate about life writings has become the 'cutting edge' of literary critical discussion. Given the protean nature of life writings, their immense variety of style, structure, tone, and other characteristics, this recent valuation of the genre may be explained by the tremendous potential of such versatile and resourceful texts. This potential implies stimulating challenges for both writing and reading autobiography. Particularly for those authors of autobiographies who are professional writers, writing an autobiography must call in question or clarify the image they present to the public; and as I shall suggest, specifically for women writers, it can help them to promote their status as writers. This thesis compares and contrasts autobiographical writings by three internationally well-known writers from different places and cultures: the Canadian Margaret Laurence, the Scottish Willa Muir, and the New Zealander Janet Frame; it analyses the authors' conceptualizations of selfhood and identity as expressed in and constructed by their life writings.

## 1.1 The Status of Autobiography

Before I embark on any specific analysis, I will clarify some basic notions about 'life writings'. First, it is important to note that the term 'life writing' comprehends various literary forms and kinds (for example, letters, diaries, autobiographical narratives, essays, journals, chronicles, novels, historical records, and so on) and diverse terms are currently used to describe 'life narratives', that is, writing with explicit self-reference to the writer (for example, confessions, autobiography, memoir, and so on). In short the immense diversity of life writings makes it difficult to accept any single generic classification as satisfactory. Traditionally considered as the main synonym for a work of 'life writing', the term 'autobiography' is a relatively recent one. In Greek, 'autos' means self, 'bios' life, and 'graphie' writing, so, taken together, the words correspond to 'self life writing'.<sup>1</sup> George Misch, in his *A History of Autobiography in Antiquity*, explains the historical origin of the terms:

The expression is first met with in the title of one of the collections suggested by J.G. Herder – *Selbstbiographien berühmter Männer* ('Self-biographies of Famous Men'), compiled by Professor Seybold, *I. Thuanus; II. Andrea* (Tübingen, 1796 and 1799). In his *Grand Dictionnaire Universel du XIX. Siècle* (1864), Pierre Larousse notes under the word 'Autobiographie': 'This word, though of Greek origin, is of English manufacture.' For this statement he gives no evidence. The great Oxford Dictionary gives as the earliest known use of the term a sentence of Robert Southey in the first volume of the *Quarterly Review* (1809).<sup>2</sup>

According to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, however – although most critics still cite Southey's anglicizing of the word – the term 'autobiography' was first coined in the preface to a collection of poems by the eighteenth-century English working-class writer Ann Yearsley.<sup>3</sup> But autobiography itself becomes a complex term. The more widely accepted and long-established definitions describe

<sup>1</sup> Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p.1.

<sup>2</sup> George Misch, *A History of Autobiography in Antiquity*, trans. by E.W. Dickes, 2 vols. 1907 (London: Routledge & Paul, 1950), p.5.

<sup>3</sup> Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, p.2.

autobiography as a 'retrospective narrative of one's life'<sup>4</sup> or a 'retrospective prose narrative written by a real person, concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality'.<sup>5</sup> There are cases, however, where life narratives do not conform to these definitions, as, for example, when a narrative only covers the author's adulthood (as in the case of Willa Muir's *Belonging*) or when it structures the narration in a non-chronological order, going back and forward in the account of the same event (as in *Dance on the Earth* by Margaret Laurence). These definitions provide a rough working model but do not make subtle distinctions. It is probably best to concede that there is no intrinsic definition of autobiography, and even some extratextual definitions only transfer to the reader the problem of deciding if a specific piece of writing is an autobiography or not. For example, in 'Autobiographical Pact' Lejeune emphasises the contractual pact between writer and reader;<sup>6</sup> Bruss, in *Autobiographical Acts*, rejects any static view of generic structure, emphasizing the importance of audience reaction in the production of the autobiographical text.<sup>7</sup> In these approaches, as Robert Elbaz explains, 'although each autobiography contributes to the homogeneity of the genre, no autobiography in itself has any inherent characteristics which make it partake of the genre, for the definition of genre is extratextual: it lies in that receptive consciousness'.<sup>8</sup>

Secondly, the relationship between the autobiographical narrative and 'reality' or actual experience in the real world, is a highly controversial issue.

<sup>4</sup> Valérie Baisnée, *Gendered Resistance: The Autobiographical Writings of Simone de Beauvoir, Maya Angelou, Janet Frame, and Marguerite Duras* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), p.6.

<sup>5</sup> Philippe Lejeune, 'The Autobiographical Pact', in *On Autobiography*, ed. by Paul John Eakin, trans. by Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p.4.

<sup>6</sup> Lejeune, 'Autobiographical Pact', p.119-37.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Bruss, *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp.33-92.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Elbaz, *The Changing Nature of the Self: A Critical Study of the Autobiographical Discourse* (London: Croom Helm, 1988), p.4.

Undoubtedly, referentiality has a central place in a narrative dealing with the life story of a living person. It has been customarily assumed, moreover, that autobiography is characterised by the desire of its author to represent 'truth' rather than 'fiction'. Yet the very 'act of writing' implies an author with her/his subjectivity – motivations, choices, omissions, etc., and it also entails certain necessary distances: author-narrator-character. To sum up, in the process of writing an autobiography the activity of the imagination metamorphoses the original 'lived' story into the domain of art.

Thirdly, explanations of the ambiguity in the status of autobiography are related to its former devaluation as a literary genre. The main reasons for its being undervalued were not only the lack of specific conventions, forms, and terminology, that might have helped critics to consider autobiography as a 'proper' genre, but also the unfortunate association of autobiography with historiography and the view of autobiography as part of biography. According to William Spengeman, early critics of autobiography were like historians, concerned with analysing the life story of a key historical figure:

the historiographical bias of literary scholarship in the same period [during the first half of the twentieth century] conspired to place autobiography in the general category of biographical literature, where it served mainly as a source [...] of documentary data for biographers and historians.<sup>9</sup>

In Sidonie Smith's words, these early critics were 'moralists' who 'evaluated the quality of life as it was lived and the veracity of the autobiographer as he or she narrated the story of that life'.<sup>10</sup> For example, Georg Misch, one of the main representatives of this early criticism, says:

Various points of view emerged in regard to the assessment of autobiographical literature. Its documentary value for knowledge of the world of the man was accorded recognition

<sup>9</sup> William Spengeman, *The Forms of Autobiography: Episodes in the History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), p.190.

<sup>10</sup> Sidonie A. Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of the Self-Representation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p.5.

[...] and the utility of these works was emphasized: they did not merely aim at the reader's amusement but might improve him and do him some service, either by way of instruction or of warning.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, early critics were mostly concerned with the exemplary nature of the autobiographer's life. As Laura Marcus explains, autobiographical legitimacy was inseparable from its author's status and public importance; writing an autobiography was 'perceived to be the right of very few individuals: those whose lives encompassed an aspect or image of the age suitable for transmission to posterity'.<sup>12</sup> The veracity of the data reported in the autobiography was equally important: 'the most honest autobiographer [is the one] who is "writing" a confession and not an apologia, or who writes not for publication but for his own pleasure or for the entertainment and instruction of his descendants'.<sup>13</sup> This approach implies that the object of the critic's scrutiny, the writer of the autobiography, must be an eminent person – there is, of course, the question about the availability of ordinary people's lives accounts. In conclusion, the ambiguity in the status of autobiography as a genre, the lack of an intrinsic definition of autobiography, and its conflicted relationship with 'truth' and referentiality make the study of autobiographies not only an exceptionally contradictory, indefinite, and unrestricted area of research, but also a stimulating and challenging one.

## 1.2 Main Theoretical Approaches

There are a number of current theoretical approaches to the study of autobiography: Psychoanalytic, Marxist, Feminist, Historicist, and so on. Two main critical approaches stand at the extremes of a continuum of theoretical trends; the remaining approaches are located in between these two extremes and share –

<sup>11</sup> Misch, *A History of Autobiography*, p.10 (masculine pronoun kept as in the original).

<sup>12</sup> Laura Marcus, *Auto/Biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p.31.

<sup>13</sup> Misch, *A History of Autobiography*, p.10 (masculine pronoun kept as in the original).



more or less – characteristics of both of them. Valérie Baisnée calls the two main sets of approaches: ‘author centred’ approaches and ‘text centred’ approaches.<sup>14</sup> These two main sets would presumably hold true for any literary genre – or indeed any form of artistic production – but they have a particular significance for autobiography because of the special status of the self in life writing. In ‘author centred’, largely ‘humanist’ approaches, the main exponent of which is Georges Gusdorf, the autobiographer is the source and the core of her/his story, and she/he is the agent who communicates her/his experience to other individuals.<sup>15</sup> The artist has control over the story being narrated and over the interpretation of the past. Thus, the autobiographical self is represented as idiosyncratic and conscious, as being able to transform a personal story into a literary narrative. If we think of the author as in control in this manner the autobiography can also be described as an historical and anthropological document because an individual, in writing her/his story in a determined time is also necessarily writing about her/his contemporaries. At the same time, this approach assumes that the autobiographer undergoes an intense, sincere, and deep transformation of her/his self in the course of writing the autobiography. Therefore, autobiography becomes not only a genre, but also a practice, an act, where a search for self-knowledge is taken for granted, even if this knowledge cannot be reached. Because of that, Gusdorf suggests substituting the phrase ‘writings of the self’ for the term ‘autobiography’.<sup>16</sup> The disadvantages of this approach are that it is based on the illusion of an unproblematic ‘I’ and it disregards the problems that may arise in considering gender – such as the ways in which female experience of selfhood diverges from

<sup>14</sup> Baisnée, *Gendered Resistance*, p.4-5.

<sup>15</sup> Georges Gusdorf, ‘Conditions and Limits of Autobiography’, in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. and trans. by James Olney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp.28-48.

<sup>16</sup> Georges Gusdorf, *Lignes de Vie: Les Écritures du Moi* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1991), pp.53-67.

male accounts of dealing with the effects and significance of interpersonal relationships, with experiences of exclusion from institutions and from social power derived from the restrictive effects of a patriarchal society, and with concerns about female sexuality and identity.<sup>17</sup>

At the other extreme are various 'text-centred' or 'structuralist or post-structuralist' approaches. These approaches are predominantly interested in the writing and how the 'I' is built in the narrative so as to depict its unity or fragmentation. Thus, in a 'text centred' analysis the identity of the narrator is not assumed to correspond with the person of the author, but rather is an effect of the writing. That effect may still be authorised by the writer, but the further argument is how far the author is in control of textual effects. According to Philippe Lejeune -- a representative critic of the textual approach -- the author's proper name on the title page is 'the only mark in the text of an unquestionable world-beyond-the text', while the nature of the 'real person' remains unspecified.<sup>18</sup> This is to say that there is a fundamental linguistic split in the subject in an autobiography: 'I' represents a real person, a position in the discourse, and the protagonist in the narrative -- 'I' author, 'I' narrator, and 'I' character. In summary, according to the post-structuralist approach, 'autobiography is not a transparent, straightforward document unified by the "I" of its author'.<sup>19</sup> A positive aspect of this approach is that it does not depend on predetermined notions about identity; its main disadvantages are that although it constructs the individuality of the author as textual, it does not fundamentally challenge the 'myth of the author'. As Elbaz points out, such an approach 'does not depart from the ideology of the self; [it] posits a person -- a self, an irreducible entity -- although this self is not what

<sup>17</sup> See also 1.3 Contributions of Feminist Criticism.

<sup>18</sup> Lejeune, 'Autobiographical Pact', p.11.

<sup>19</sup> Baisnée, *Gendered Resistance*, p.6.

autobiography is about, since it is limited to the writing performance'.<sup>20</sup> Ultimately, the 'author centred' and the 'text centred' approaches are only the poles in a whole range of critical positions in the study of autobiographical writings, with all the others placed in between. And any analysis or interpretation of an autobiographical narrative must try to take into account this broad range of theoretical approaches.

As I have indicated, the 'I' in an autobiography stands for a divided concept. As Louis Renza explains, 'autobiographical writing thus entails a split intentionality: the "I" becoming a "he"; the writer's awareness of his life becoming private even as he brings it into the public domain or presentifies it through his act of writing'.<sup>21</sup> This is to say, that there is an 'I' who is writing a narrative which is a narrative about a connected but differently existing 'she/he'. Renza introduces the term 'persona' to represent the difference between the present of the autobiographer and her/his past.<sup>22</sup> According to Renza, what is significant is not the recreation of the past of the autobiographer out of materials selected from the memory and processed by the act of writing, but the imaginative creation in the present moment of writing. Besides, Robert Elbaz further explains that given the relational nature of the self, the 'I' in autobiography is not the self of the autobiographer, who is not the same person she/he was yesterday or ten years ago, so the author is not writing her/his own story, but the story of old 'personae' seen from a distant perspective, 'autobiography is a discourse not about the "I" but about a series of "he's", because a "he" does not conform to the mystified consistency and continuity of the "I": the narrative is made up of a

<sup>20</sup> Elbaz, *The Changing Nature*, p.10.

<sup>21</sup> Louis A. Renza, 'The Veto of the Imagination: A Theory of Autobiography', *New Literary History*, 9.1 (Autumn, 1977), 2-26, pp.9-10 (the masculine pronoun is kept as in the original).

<sup>22</sup> Renza, 'Veto of the Imagination', p.20.

multiplicity of personae'.<sup>23</sup> This does not mean that the 'I' in the autobiography is completely disconnected from all the historical continuities between its self and the series of 'he's' in the narrative, but it is possible to say that there is a 'textual' separation, because the 'I' of the written discourse in itself does not stand for the presence of the autobiographer's self, and there is a 'temporal' separation, because the autobiographer is distanced from that 'I' by the author's present – which cannot be experienced by that 'I'.

The autobiographer's subjectivity and her/his relationship with the world is central to what is communicated in an autobiography. What the author is setting down in her/his autobiography is her/his version of her world and how she/he perceives her/his own personal identity within that world. Even in telling her/his life story, the writer is at work, transforming experience into art. And so in a sense, the autobiographical writer fictionalizes her/his life. Yet, at the same time, we will tend to read autobiographical writing against alternative versions of events in a way that we do not do with fiction. But emerging from these similarities and differences between the novel and autobiography, there is a further separation between the 'I' of the character who protagonizes the autobiography and that of its author. The tension between the 'I's in autobiography partially accounts for the impossibility of its classification:

We may say, then that autobiography is neither fictive nor non-fictive, not even a mixture of the two. We might view it as a unique, self-defining mode of self-referential expression, one that allows, then inhibits, the project of self-presentification, of converting oneself into the present promised by language.<sup>24</sup>

This would seem to give a great deal of freedom to the reader.

### 1.3 Contributions of Feminist Criticism

<sup>23</sup> Elbaz, *The Changing Nature*, p.11 (masculine pronoun kept as in the original).

<sup>24</sup> Renza, 'Veto of the Imagination', p.22.

Other important critical and theoretical trends have made fresh contributions to the study of autobiography and are distinguished by their challenging attitude to formerly unquestioned assumptions. Feminist criticism of the last quarter of the twentieth century demands that we rethink concepts of selfhood in the light of the problematic of gender and postmodern theory. The writers I chose to study in this thesis are all women who express in their autobiographies how they perceived their lives as fragmented and contradictory, as they attempted to fulfil the unattainable expectations society placed on them, and as they created and developed new self-understandings, far removed from the norms that oppressed them. They found traditional ideas of selfhood and the notion of a 'unified self' inappropriate to symbolize their individuality. Feminist critics question former definitions of selfhood, calling attention to the fact that any critical theory of autobiography implies an ideology of the self, and although it is not only feminist critics who call traditional notions of selfhood in question, that issue is particularly pressing when the traditional self tends to be conceived as male. For example, Shari Benstock questions the unity of the self as an illusion and refers to selfhood in an autobiography as giving a false image of a unified self.<sup>25</sup> Benstock compares forms of self-writing with the Lacanian mirror state of psychological development, where 'self' and 'self-image' might not be the same:

the most interesting aspect of the autobiographical: the measure to which 'self' and self-image' might not coincide, can never coincide in language -- not because certain forms of self-writing are not self-conscious enough but because they have no investment in creating a cohesive self over time.<sup>26</sup>

Felicity Nussbaum discusses the importance of considering the self as a socio-cultural construct, placed in a broader historical context:

<sup>25</sup> Shari Benstock, 'Authorizing the Autobiographical', in *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*, ed. by Shari Benstock (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), pp.10-33.

<sup>26</sup> Benstock, 'Authorizing', p.15.

theoretical notions of the subject make it possible to read [eighteenth-century] autobiographical writing as one textual location where women and men, privately and publicly, experiment with interdiscourses and the corresponding subject positions to broach the uncertainties of identity.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, autobiography would have the important function of presenting a politics of the self in order to subvert dominant discourses. Sidonic Smith adds to Nussbaum's socio-historical dimension, the significance of intertextuality in the process of creating and interpreting an autobiography.<sup>28</sup> According to Smith, self in autobiography is a 'cultural and linguistic fiction constructed through historical ideologies of selfhood, and the structure of language and processes of our storytelling'.<sup>29</sup> Other feminist critics focus on the way in which selfhood differs for men and women. Bella Brodzski and Celeste Schenck observe that the characteristics of the position of women in the symbolic order may be explained by the circumstance that a woman's sense of self is mediated by the identity that the dominant male culture imposes on her; the lack of a tradition of female individuality results in marginality and invisibility:

only a critical ideology that reifies a united, transcendent self can expect to see in the mirror of autobiography a self whose depths can be plumbed, whose heart can be discovered, and whose essence can be definitively known. No mirror of her era, the female autobiographer takes as a given that selfhood is mediated; her invisibility results from her lack of tradition, her marginality in male-dominated culture, her fragmentation – social and political as well as psychic.<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, if the post-modern male self is indeed decentred and fragmented as Benstock says, 'the self that would reside at the center of the text is decentered and often absent altogether – in women's autobiographical texts'.<sup>31</sup> Some of the strategies proposed by feminist critics to cope with the inadequacy of previous

<sup>27</sup> Felicity A. Nussbaum, 'The Politics of Subjectivity and The Ideology of Genre', in *Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Sidonic Smith and Julia Watson (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), p.165.

<sup>28</sup> Smith, *A Poetics*, pp.3-19.

<sup>29</sup> Smith, *A Poetics*, p.45.

<sup>30</sup> Bella Brodzski and Celeste Schenck eds., *Life/lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), p.1.

<sup>31</sup> Shari Benstock, *The Private Self*, p.20.

criticism of women's autobiographies are: making visible a tradition of women's autobiographies (Jelinek;<sup>32</sup> Brodzski and Schenck<sup>33</sup>); diversifying the canon of autobiography by using cross-cultural and interdisciplinary approaches (Brodzski and Schenck<sup>34</sup>); and reintroducing men's autobiographies in that revised canon (Costello;<sup>35</sup> Smith<sup>36</sup>). Additionally, all these tactics may be oriented to solve the problems, mentioned by Costello, deriving from a totalisation of feminist theories that tend to isolate gender as the only category of analysis:

To fail to be resisting readers of the texts that are gradually being established as canonical in women's tradition, [...] feminist critics run the risk of replicating the exclusionary tendencies of the traditional canon. If we institutionalize gender as the only aspect of female subjectivity worthy of attention and rush too quickly to draw definite conclusions based always upon the same *a priori* theoretical formulations, we drastically limit our ability to adequately conceive the range of female subjectivities.<sup>37</sup>

#### 1.4 Autobiography or Memoir

Autobiography as a kind of writing may predate the use of the term to describe it; indeed, 'confessions' is perhaps the preferred term for early autobiographies as with Augustine or much later Rousseau. As I have indicated, the term 'autobiography' appears relatively late and in many cases subsequently takes over from 'memoir' as the preferred term for life writing. But modern critics and theorists of life writing have found it useful to deploy the terms to distinguish different kinds of life writing. And so as used by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, memoir is 'a mode of life narrative that historically situates the subject in a social environment, as either observer or participant; the memoir directs attention more

<sup>32</sup> Estelle C. Jelinek, ed., *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980).

<sup>33</sup> Brodzski and Schenck, *Life/lines*.

<sup>34</sup> Brodzski and Schenck, *Life/lines*.

<sup>35</sup> Jeanne Costello, 'Taking the "Woman" out of Women's Autobiography: The Perils and Potentials of Theorizing Female Subjectivities', *Diacritics*, 21(1991), 123-134 (p.132).

<sup>36</sup> Smith, *A Poetics*, p.43.

<sup>37</sup> Costello, 'Taking the "Woman" out', p.133.

toward the lives and actions of others than to the narrator'.<sup>38</sup> Bernd Neumann explains that the writer of a *memoir* places the history of his time before the story of his individuality.<sup>39</sup> According to Neumann, in a memoir the writer does not describe his vital experiences but his performance as the bearer of a social role and he emphasises the esteem, admiration, and respect he receives, or not, from 'others' – memoirs may also be written to complain about neglect. In the memoir there is a complete separation between the private and the public individual, who plays an active role in his historic circumstances. Before analysing any particular case of life writing, it may be useful to discuss some of the differences between autobiography and memoir as these terms are currently used. It can be said that memoir is centred on narrating *general roles* (for example, being a political leader in the 19<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>40</sup> being a missionary in Africa),<sup>41</sup> while the autobiography is centred in its *author's story*. For instance, when speaking of her autobiographical works, Simone de Beauvoir says: 'I really like my autobiography, because I feel that [it] complements and completes my position on women by telling how I lived, how I worked, how I won certain points and lost on others'.<sup>42</sup> Because of its emphasis on public roles, a memoir refers to *documents* and other recordings that registered the event/s it narrates, in order to demonstrate its veracity; a memoir is not entirely based on memories, as they could be misleading or mistaken – for example, Bismarck, after quoting numerous letters, political discourses, and other

<sup>38</sup> Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Madison: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p.198.

<sup>39</sup> Bernd Neumann, *La Identidad Personal: Autonomía y Sumisión*, trans. by Hernando Carvajalino (Buenos Aires: Sur, 1973), pp.16-20 (masculine pronoun kept as in the original).

<sup>40</sup> Otto Fürst von Bismarck, *Bismarck, The Man and the Statesman: Being the Reflections and reminiscences of Otto Prince von Bismarck / Written and Dictated by Himself After his Retirement from Office*, trans. by A.J. Butler, ed. by Horst Khol (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1898)

<sup>41</sup> Albert Schweitzer, *My Life and Thought*, trans. by C. T. Campion (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1933)

<sup>42</sup> Hélène Wenzel: 'Interview with Simone de Beauvoir', in *Yale French Studies* 72(1988), 5-32, pp.12-13.



documents by famous public figures, in relation to well-known historical and political events in which he actively participated, decides that the more appropriate way of ending his memoir is by including a letter from the Emperor Frederick.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, an autobiography trusts *memory* and enjoys the re-enactment of past times through creative imagination. Ultimately, the autobiographer recognises that 'truth' is not the centre of her/his enterprise of writing about her/his own life. As Mary McCarthy says about her autobiographical narratives 'Many a time, in the course of doing these memories, I have wished that I were writing fiction. The temptation to invent has been very strong, particularly where recollection is hazy and I remember the substance of a event but not the details'<sup>44</sup> or, when speaking about remembering details about the past, 'yet, the very difficulties in the way have provided an incentive',<sup>45</sup> and, recognizing her inability to know everything in the past, 'I have no idea whether this story is true or not. Nor will I ever know',<sup>46</sup> which could also be interpreted as a strategy to assert veracity – someone who says 'this may not be true' is to be trusted. Moreover, a memoir often stresses *duty*, with its protagonist portrayed as the bearer of a role and 'official' functions, while an autobiography gives importance to the *pleasure* of writing about one's own life, silently protesting against and resisting the slightest bit of pressure over the writing, arising from public roles the author may have played. The emphasis in autobiography is on recalling one's own life; historical events are secondary and although they tend to appear in relation to lives of famous, public individuals, autobiographers avoid giving them primary significance. Probably related to this is the fact that the 'cuts',

<sup>43</sup> Bismarck, *The Man and the Statesman*, pp.336-37.

<sup>44</sup> Mary McCarthy, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (London: Heinemann, 1957), p.9.

<sup>45</sup> McCarthy, *Memories*, p.11.

<sup>46</sup> McCarthy, *Memories*, p.17.

or changes in the narration from one point to another in a memoir are generally marked by public, historic events, while in an autobiography, they are coherent with the chronological development of the individual who is writing the story. For example, Edwin Muir travelled extensively – with his wife Willa – in Eastern Europe during a time of significant historical upheaval. His autobiography is not, however, structured in terms of political events, but rather in relation to the places where they lived together and where they were happy or suffered anxiety and sickness.<sup>47</sup>

Since the end of the eighteenth century the period of childhood has been felt to have special significance for the formation of the self. Thus, for example, Wordsworth's 'The Child is father of the Man' acknowledges childhood as a unique and significant period of life, proposing that 'whatsoever is seen in the maturest adult, blossoming and bearing fruit, must have pre-existed by way of germ in the infant.'<sup>48</sup> Consequently, in research dealing with autobiography as an exploration of interiority, of subjectivity – as in this thesis – the period of childhood and its treatment in autobiographical documents, is crucially important.<sup>49</sup> A number of autobiographers consider childhood as the basis of her/his identity, and autobiographies most of the time *end* with the achievement of identity by their protagonists – as in the case of Janet Frame's three-volume autobiography, which concludes when the protagonist returns to her native country in order to develop her career as a novelist.<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, for a

<sup>47</sup> Edwin Muir, *An Autobiography* (London: Hogarth Press, 1954).

<sup>48</sup> William Wordsworth, 'My Heart Leaps Up When I Behold', in *Selected Poetry*, ed. by Stephen Gill and Duncan Wu (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.122. Thomas De Quincey, *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. by Daniel Sanjiv Roberts, vol. 19 (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2003), p.68.

<sup>49</sup> Andrew O'Malley, *The Making of the Modern Child: Children's Literature and Childhood in the Late Eighteenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp.11-16.

<sup>50</sup> Janet Frame, *The Envoy from Mirror City*, in *Janet Frame: The Complete Autobiography* (London: Women's Press, 1998).

memoirist, childhood is not an important period of life to be narrated because a 'proper' memoir *starts* at the point of the achievement of identity, which normally occurs later in life. Bismarck's two-volume memoir begins with the sentence 'I left school at Easter 1832', and in the first chapter, titled 'Political views of youth', the autobiographer discusses how he felt inclined to a diplomatic career;<sup>51</sup> Albert Schweitzer mentions the whole period of his childhood, his youth, and his studies at the university, only in the first fifteen pages of his two-hundred-and-eighty-eight-page memoir, which is mainly dedicated to the discussion of his significant work as a missionary in Africa.<sup>52</sup>

The Memoir may be characterised as a kind of text that places emphasis on quotations and 'faith in the facts', while an autobiography tends to focus attention on the narration itself and its use of imagination. The memoirist places the exigencies of *reality* over the exigencies of *interiority*, while the autobiographer seems to work the other way around, writing a work of art that considers what 'reality' is. For example, Edwin Muir describes his writing of his autobiography as taking 'notes for something like a description of myself, done in general outline, not in detail, not as a story, but as an attempt to find out what a human being is in this extraordinary age which depersonalises everything';<sup>53</sup> in the first version of his autobiography, called *The Story and the Fable* – the story of one man enacting the fable of Man – he also emphasizes the closeness between autobiography and poetry, the dimension of autobiography as a work of art, an act of imagination: 'the Eternal Man is what has possessed me during most of the time that I have been writing my autobiography, and has possessed me in most of

<sup>51</sup> Bismarck, *The Man and the Statesman*, pp.1-21.

<sup>52</sup> Schweitzer, *My Life and Thought*, pp.11-26.

<sup>53</sup> Edwin Muir, *Selected Letters of Edwin Muir*, ed. by P.H. Butter (London: Hogarth Press, 1974), p.100.

my poetry'.<sup>54</sup> Thus, in the case of the memoir, others' judgment of the author is more important than self-reflection, and this makes it more difficult to comprehend the memoirist's individuality. This is the case in a number of memoirs where the narrative is structured entirely around an important historical event or character, rather than in relation to the protagonist's life story -- such cases are easily suggested by their titles, as for example, *Stalin's Doctor*, *Stalin's Nurse: A Memoir*,<sup>55</sup> or *My Years with Louis St Laurent: A Political Memoir*.<sup>56</sup> Memoirs start and finish with the performance of a social role; on the other hand, it seems that most of the time the emphasis in autobiography ends where the public function starts, probably because it does not document facts, but remember what has been 'lived' and felt.

### 1.5 Letters and Diaries

Diaries and collections of letters, especially those written by writers, provoke much interest among scholars. Some of the main reasons for such attention are: they are thought of as an enriching record that offers further insight into their author's explicitly literary writing; they may also complement our larger sense of literary history; and they apparently diminish the distance that separates the readers from their favourite writers, prolonging the sense of intimacy felt after reading their books.<sup>57</sup> Poststructuralist theory has, however, reinforced the opinion that the narrator in a letter or a diary does not give access to the voice of an unmediated autobiographical speaker; the creation of a persona goes on in letters

<sup>54</sup> Edwin Muir, *The Story and the Fable* (London: Harrap, 1940), p.261.

<sup>55</sup> N. Romano-Petrovna, *Stalin's Doctor, Stalin's Nurse: A Memoir* (Princeton, N.J.: Kingston Press, 1984)

<sup>56</sup> John Whitney Pickersgill, *My Years with Louis St Laurent: A Political Memoir* (Toronto: University Press, 1975)

<sup>57</sup> Russell Brown, 'Selves in Letters: Laurence, Purdy, and Laurence-Purdy', in *La Création Biographique/Biographical Creation*, ed. by Martha Dvorak (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes et Association Française d'Études Canadiennes, 1997), pp.219-25 (p.219).

just as in other literary works. For example, in a letter to her friend Al Purdy, Margaret Laurence says that in his letters he seems to be hiding behind a mask; and of herself, she writes: 'I use clichés all right, but seem to have some unwanted knack of turning myself temporarily and chameleon-like into a good middleclass housewife type'.<sup>58</sup> This remark serves to remind us that letters and diaries are partial documents, and they may even be the outcome of their writers' conscious bias or a desire to seize control of their larger narratives.

Recent scholars have tried to clarify what constitutes a work of literature; some of them have focused their attention on the use of language in literary texts. For example, according to Terry Eagleton, 'perhaps literature is definable not according to whether it is fictional or 'imaginative', but because it uses language in peculiar ways. [...] Literature transforms and intensifies ordinary language, deviates systematically from everyday speech'.<sup>59</sup> For a text to be considered literature its author would have to show some care with linguistic effects or formal construction, which seems to be the case of most letter writers and diarists. Therefore, several studies have suggested that correspondence and personal diaries should be treated as literature and their linguistic effects and formal construction should be analysed. For example, Julia Epstein, examining Fanny Burney's epistolary writings, explains:

[Burney] took the same care with [her letters] as she did with her novels. She demonstrates a lively, purposeful sense of audience in her epistolary writings, and she viewed these manuscripts as an important part of her *oeuvre*. The rhetorical and narrative sophistication of her long complexly structured journal-letters shows that Burney practised the arts of letter writing as a literary form akin both to the essay and to the novel.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Margaret Laurence and Al Purdy, *Margaret Laurence-Al Purdy: A Friendship in Letters: Selected Correspondence*, ed. by John Lennox (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1993), 23 October 1967.

<sup>59</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), p.2.

<sup>60</sup> Julia Epstein, *The Iron Pen: Fanny Burney and the Politics of Women's Writing* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1989), p.47.

Rebecca Earle points out that several scholars have examined the literary quality of letters and have stressed the connections between fictional epistolarity and contemporary letter-writing practices.<sup>61</sup> Earle shows that the current canon of European epistolary literature, which 'moves easily between real and fictional correspondence', could illustrate those connections: 'Ovid's lengthy poem, the *Heroides*, the quasi fictional correspondence of Abelard and Héloïse; the letters of Madame de Sévigné; the notorious (and fictional) *Portuguese Letters*; Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* and *Clarissa*; *La Nouvelle Héloïse*; *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*; and the writings of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu: all appear side by side in studies of letter form'.<sup>62</sup> Earle's explanation of the popularity of epistolary novels is that they offered their readers 'the delicious sensations of intimacy with their letter-writing protagonists'.<sup>63</sup>

The issue of privacy in relation to letters and diaries remains, however, a point of debate. Like other literary works, letters and even diaries, appear to be directed to an audience, real or implied, conscious or unconscious. For example, Fanny Burney addressed her first journal to 'Miss Nobody', as only 'to Nobody can I be wholly unreserved -- to Nobody can I reveal every thought, every wish of my heart, with the most unlimited confidence'.<sup>64</sup> Precisely because of their chosen form as written documents, 'all diaries imply readership, even if the reader and writer are one and the same'.<sup>65</sup> In the case of epistolary writings, the recipient, normally addressed at the beginning of each letter, makes evident the existence of an audience. The practice of writing familiar letters communally -- as for example,

<sup>61</sup> Rebecca Earle, ed., *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-Writers, 1600-1945* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), p.1.

<sup>62</sup> Earle, *Epistolary Selves*, p.2.

<sup>63</sup> Earle, *Epistolary Selves*, p.5.

<sup>64</sup> Frances Burney, *The Early Diary of Frances Burney 1776-1778*, ed. by Annie Raine Ellis (London: Bell, 1907), p.19.

<sup>65</sup> Judy Simons, *Diaries and Journals of Literary Women from Fanny Burney to Virginia Woolf* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1990), p.10.

in the form of added codas and postscripts – as common in the seventeenth century as in the twentieth, questions the private status of the letter. Letter reading was, also, until recent times, a social activity. As Earle indicates, ‘letters were routinely read aloud, and a particularly interesting letter might be passed around an even wider readership. Letter writers indicated those unusual passages which should *not* be circulated, rather than the reverse’.<sup>66</sup> For example, on the 17<sup>th</sup> October, 1784, Alison Cockburn, on her receipt of a birthday letter from the Reverend Robert Douglas, minister of Galashiels, wrote:

A lady, a particular favourite was alone with me when I got it. [...] You are right not to trust me with good letters. You might as well send me an ortolan to eat alone. That she heard me read the letter, that she put it in her pocket, is as certain as that many have read it, though it discovers my antiquity day and date.<sup>67</sup>

Margaret Laurence, writing to Ian and Sandy Cameron – who were in charge of Laurence’s children in England while she was in Canada – asks them not to show the particular letter of hers to her daughter and son, because she is writing about their father’s difficult personality.<sup>68</sup> Thus, the assumption of intimacy in letters and diaries writing is not as straightforward as it might appear at first.

Letter and diary writing is not, and it has never been, an exclusively female activity. Yet, it may be felt to fulfil a unique role in women’s lives. During the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, silence and modesty were considered female virtues, so women turned their diaries into channels of communication, while other modes of expression of personal identity were restricted. It allowed them to gather surreptitious thoughts. For instance, Abba May Alcott, Louisa’s mother, who was a model of womanhood, the inspiration for the dutiful and

<sup>66</sup> Earle, *Epistolary Selves*, p.7.

<sup>67</sup> Alison Rutherford or Cockburn, *Letters and Memoir of Her Own Life; Also "Felix", A Biographical Sketch and Various Songs*, notes by T. Craig-Brown (Edinburgh: Printed for David Douglas, 1900), p.172.

<sup>68</sup> York University, Toronto, Canada, Margaret Laurence Fonds, Letter from Margaret Laurence to Ian and Sandy Cameron, 9 November 1973, Call Number 2005-0491001(01)

equable mother of her daughter's novels, poured into her diary her frustration and suppressed anger: 'I am almost suffocated in this atmosphere of restriction and form'; she found her husband and children 'mostly stupidly obtuse' and considered their demands on her time and patience 'invasions of my rights as a woman and a mother'.<sup>69</sup> The potentially seditious function of diary writing is illustrated by the experience of Fanny Burney, who was told that 'journal keeping is the most dangerous employment young persons can have'.<sup>70</sup> Writing a diary, nevertheless, was less shameful than writing poetry or a novel, which could imply publicity, polemic, and competition in a traditionally male field. Even until the first half of the twentieth century, diaries 'became indirect means of resistance to codes of behaviour with which they [women] were uncomfortable, allowing for a release of feelings and opinions which had no other vent'.<sup>71</sup> For example, the notoriously unconstrained diarist Anaïs Nin wrote in her diary: 'It is feminine to be oblique'.<sup>72</sup> In general, diaries and letters make it possible to access certain dimensions of personal experience not appropriately documented anywhere else.

In spite of their similarities and closeness, letters and diaries differ from autobiographies in the basic feature of their temporal perspective. In opposition to the retrospective process of creating autobiographies, letters and diaries leave answers and results for the future. As Linda S. Bergmann says about letters – and the same could be said of diaries – 'letters offer not retrospective, resolution, and closure of a life and its experiences, but projection, speculation, and creation of a

<sup>69</sup> Abigail Alcott, *The Unpublished Diary of Abigail Alcott*, Houghton Library, Harvard University; quoted in Simons, *Diaries and Journals*, p.6.

<sup>70</sup> Burney, *Early Diary*, p.20.

<sup>71</sup> Simons, *Journals and Diaries*, p.4.

<sup>72</sup> Anaïs Nin, *The Diary of Anaïs Nin*, vol. 1 (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1966), p.58.



life in the making'.<sup>73</sup> This is not to say that the content and language of letters and diaries are not controlled by their authors, but notably, they are probably not subjected to the same level of censorship and revision as autobiographies or – in the case of letters and diaries produced by writers – works of fiction.

The sequential organization inherent to a diary or a corpus of letters emphasises, at the same time, its writer's own continuity and discontinuity. Like all forms of autobiographical writing, letters and diaries 'help to impose a sense of wholeness on the disparate and transient concept of selfhood'.<sup>74</sup> Judy Simons speaks of the therapeutic and metonymic value of diaries – the same could be said of letters – through the recalling of particular details during the process of writing, and its concomitant exposure of the self.<sup>75</sup> Letters and diaries are manifestations of a constantly changing subjectivity, just in the middle of planning and developing projects, unaware of the conclusion of her/his story. The mere fact of keeping a diary helps its author to understand the fluctuations of the self. In the same way, the most unlikely letter can function as an autobiographical representation of the self. Letter writers create ephemeral epistolary selves. These documents allow the reader an insight into the author's mind at a given moment. For example, a letter from Willa Muir to her friend Margaret Fay Shaw Campbell in January of 1964, may help the reader to understand the state of mind and the difficulties the author faced when starting to write her autobiography:

I have actually got started to my Memoirs book, which I think I am going to call: *Belonging*. I fear that it is going to read like a novel, and people won't believe it; but it is all true. I am beginning it with my first meeting Edwin, in 1918, and how. (*And how!*) Truth, as I believe has been said before, is stranger than fiction; so, as my material is too *fancy* I have to present it in the plainest words.

<sup>73</sup> Linda S. Bergmann, 'The Contemporary Letter as Literature: Issues of Selfreflexivity, Audience and Closure', *Women's Studies Quarterly* 3.4 (1989), pp.137-38.

<sup>74</sup> Simons, *Diaries and Journals*, p.13.

<sup>75</sup> Simons, *Diaries and Journals*, p.11.

This keeps me busy.<sup>76</sup>

To sum up, the author's self, as shown in the comparisons between particular letters or between diverse isolated diary entries, seems to be less unified and/or fixed than in autobiographies. Consequently, the examination of correspondence and personal diaries adds a dynamic quality to the study of their author's changing conceptualizations of her/himself throughout her/his lifetime. Thus, letters and diaries emerge as powerful and valuable autobiographical expressions.

### 1.6 Autobiographies by Writers

Life narratives by writers tend to occupy a privileged place in their genre. As there is currently an increase in life writing in general, the growth of literary autobiography may be considered a symptom of this trend. Among autobiographers, however, it is probably novelists who feel a particular need to write their own stories, since they are already professional storytellers. For them, the autobiographical, placed, as it is, at the intersection of public and private discourse, is able to fulfil diverse existential and literary functions. First, at a personal level, a life narrative necessarily implies contemplation by the author of her/his own life experience. To some extent, the narrative mode is similar to 'the time of living', as time becomes 'human' when articulated in a narrative way because chronological human time is created with the act of speaking. Thus, the fragmentary, chaotic, and simultaneous nature of experiencing life is turned into a more or less ordered entity as it is shaped into an autobiography. Besides, in a kind of writing where present perspectives mix with past perspectives autobiography provides a unique place to register changes and interpret them,

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<sup>76</sup> Willa Muir to Margaret Fay Shaw Campbell, '15.01.64', National Library of Scotland, Manuscripts Collections, Acc 8933, Box 1.

even if this interpretation is done from the perspective of a decentred and fragmented self; autobiography is freighted with reflection. Secondly, autobiography can be used by a writer as a narrative experiment, an opportunity to break through the limits of restrictive narrative patterns. Originality and innovations in form, structure, and so on, may be more freely indulged in a 'genre' without specific conventions or terminology. Thirdly, the special relationship of autobiography with 'reality', its conflicted illusion of strict referentiality and veracity, allows autobiographers to disrupt the apparently opposed literary concepts of 'truth' and 'fiction', playing with readers' assumptions about life narratives. The coexistence of life and fiction at the core of autobiography affects both the enterprise of self-analysis and the activity of literary creation:

Because each author writes in accordance with or against an already established image, the relation between author, narrator, and character, which lies at the basis of the autobiographical form is affected not only by the poetics of each writer but also by her politics. The writer's public image in turn influences the self-representation and determines the mode of self-analysis.<sup>77</sup>

Because of the complicated existence of autobiography at the intersection of fiction and life, the main issue when analysing a literary autobiography is not to what extent it increases existing knowledge about a particular writer, but how its author has selected the material included in the narrative and how that material is presented. This is to say that the most relevant meaning of an autobiography is not what facts it communicates, but what 'statement about her public persona each author makes through the autobiography'.<sup>78</sup> In the case of writers, this 'statement' could be a challenge to images already presented to the public; in the situation of women writers, it could signify an affirmation of their status as writers. In conclusion, autobiography can have various functions for the writers; it can be a

<sup>77</sup> Baisnée, *Gendered Resistance*, p.15.

<sup>78</sup> Baisnée, *Gendered Resistance*, p.15.

means of developing self-reflection, of enabling narrative experimentation, and of subverting concepts of the controversial relationship between life and fiction.

### 1.7 About This Thesis

The objective of this thesis is to examine autobiographical narratives written by three significant writers, who have been recognized beyond their countries of origin, both by the general public, and by the academic community: the Scottish Willa Muir (1890-1970), the Canadian Margaret Laurence (1926-1987), and the New Zealander Janet Frame (1924-2004). I will analyse Muir's *Belonging* (1968), Laurence's *Dance on the Earth* (published posthumously in 1989), and Frame's three-volume autobiography *To the Is-Land* (1982), *An Angel at My Table* (1984), and *The Envoy from Mirror City* (1985). I will analyse these texts in the context of the writers' literary output, comparing these autobiographies in order to discover similarities and differences in the way the authors present themselves in their narratives and how they communicate their viewpoints about their socio-historical environment and their personal conditions. I have chosen these apparently dissimilar authors because they share several features. Their autobiographical narratives are examinations of their efforts to fulfil their potential as human beings, and their vocation as writers; at the same time, all three struggle against the specific conditions of being a woman in particular places at particular times. At the beginning of their stories, they suffered not only geographical, but also political marginality: they were women from the working-class or struggling middle-class, striving to be considered as professional writers, and emerging from countries that might be felt to be under the shadows of economic and political world powers (England and the United States). During their lifetimes, they

exerted themselves to overcome prejudices about class, gender and ethnicity. They lived, moreover, through the same historical time. They experienced war and the post-war era, a time that conditioned the whole subsequent socio-political development of the Western World, and they lived through most of the twentieth century, being more or less accurate witnesses and critics of their times. It is important to remember that the object of analysis will be literary autobiographies, which belong to a kind of writing constructed in particularly ambiguous conditions. Although generally identified with the 'person' of the author, the narrator and the protagonist of life narratives do not necessarily strictly correspond with that beyond-the-text figure; the autobiographical protagonist can be 'read' from the point of view of fiction and/or from the point of view of referentiality. Therefore, in my analysis, I will consider these autobiographies as constructed similarly to works of fiction, but I will bear in mind their special relationship with 'reality'; I will try to make clear when I refer to the 'I' as author, narrator, or protagonist (but if it is not specified, it must be assumed that I refer to the 'I' character). I will neither assume the humanist unified nor the poststructuralist fragmented self, but rather a fluid self which will be studied, as far as possible, bearing in mind both extreme approaches, in order to best characterize the phenomena described in the narratives. The emphasis will be placed on the dialectical relationship between the referential self and the textual self. Although the centre of my analysis will be the various kinds of life narratives, brief references to the authors' works of fiction will be made – as I already mentioned, the literary autobiographies studied here were chosen, among other reasons, because their authors were writers of fiction. I will try to track down the original motivations of these autobiographical projects (for example, the writers'

desire to offer personal illustration of their concepts of humanity and womanhood, or the desire to record a story of personal growth). I will try to determine how the authors narrate their challenge to the identities imposed on them by convention (the roles that limited their social power and capacity to write), and how they modify their images in the present of the narration. I will examine the images of the writers communicated to the public through their autobiographies, and complement them with images derived from other sources (for example, from interviews, mass media reports, academic criticism, and other fictional and non-fictional writings of the same author). I will attend to how the writer's image is transformed in the course of writing an autobiography. My argument is that, at least in the case of the authors studied here, the process of writing an autobiography contributed to their lifetime process of searching for identity and self-definition, and their autobiographies were a way of conveying a 'statement' about existence in general and their sense of their own lives in particular. I would like to look for these fundamental 'statements' and the key elements in the construction of each of these authors' personal identities, as expressed in their autobiographies, and compare them in order to find out possible patterns. I hope my research will contribute to the study of life narratives, particularly literary autobiographies, and to the study of these authors, whose autobiographies occupy such a significant place in their entire body of works, and who have not before been studied together.

### **1.8 Methodology and Organisation**

The focus of this thesis is, as I have indicated, the construction of identity in the published life-writing of Willa Muir, Margaret Laurence and Janet Frame. I have

tried to contextualise these central texts in the writing lives of the three women and, where appropriate, to provide wider public contexts as, for example, the background of war that affected all of them. I have also invoked unpublished life-writing – specifically, relevant letters and journals of Muir and Laurence – to get some sense of what was *not* published, hence not shaped by the creative imagination. Similarly, to further understand the implications of the narrative choices made in the published life-writing, I have considered biographies of all three writers and conducted an interview with Clara Thomas, a close friend of Margaret Laurence.<sup>79</sup> In this way it has proved possible to see the emphases but also the gaps and silences that are part of the process of shaping identity in written work.

The thesis treats the writers in the chronological order of their births. But each chapter is sub-divided in ways that are intended to encourage cumulative comparisons while retaining the specificities of the individual writers. In the course of my research a number of themes and issues emerged that enabled this organisation: most notably motherhood, place and vocation. Perhaps these issues are not surprising. That women writers should find their relationships to their own mothers and their sense of themselves as mothers (or not in the case of Frame) vital to identity, is certainly what much feminist criticism would have us believe.<sup>80</sup> Much recent criticism and theory also stresses the importance of place in anyone's

<sup>79</sup> Aileen Christianson's *Moving in Circles: Willa Muir's Writings* (Edinburgh: Word Power Books, 2007) appeared just as I was finalising my thesis. But it does not contain any new biographical information.

<sup>80</sup> See, for example, Nancy Friday, *My Mother, My Self: The Daughter's Search for Identity* (London: Sheldon Press, 1979); Adrienne Rich *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Norton, 1976); and, of course, any use of Julia Kristeva's theory of the semiotic: *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980)

sense of self but especially that of the writer.<sup>81</sup> Willa Muir's idea of 'belonging' came to seem providentially supplied as an organising notion. And, of course, all writers are bound to interrogate their own vocation, its joys and its costs, as they consider their special identities. I want to insist, however, that I did not select these headings in advance and shape my thesis to fit them. These themes and issues are not part of a prefabricated grid laid down on my material: rather the material itself demanded them. It is this feeling of both fluidity and fit shape that has made the whole process of my investigation such a satisfying one.

It is also themes and issues that have conditioned my use of other published work by these writers. Thus, some of the anxieties that emerge from the way that Muir and Laurence write about motherhood in *Belonging* and *Dance on the Earth* are illuminated by a consideration of the fictional mothers of *Mrs Ritchie* and *The Diviners*; Frame's issues with place are also addressed in *A State of Siege* and *The Carpathians* and so on. Altogether the life-writing itself dictated how it should be addressed and then, as I hope to show, opened up a series of new possibilities.

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<sup>81</sup> Robert Crawford's *Identifying Poets: Self and Territory in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh U. P., 1993) deals most illuminatingly with poets' apprehension of the inextricability of place and self.



## 2. Willa Muir (1890-1970)

### Brief Chronology

- 1890 Was born in Montrose, Forfarshire (Angus).
- 1907 Started studying at St Andrews University. Studied classics (1907-10) and English and modern history (1910-11), graduating in July 1911 with first-class honours in classics.
- 1919 Married to Edwin Muir in London.
- 1920 Three years spent in Prague, Germany, Italy, and Austria.
- 1924 Began translation work (together with her husband), which provided the basis of their income.
- 1924 Three years spent in Montrose, Penn, Buckinghamshire, and Montrose again.
- 1925 'Women: an Enquiry'.
- 1927 Moved to St Tropez, then Menton.
- 1927 Returned to England and settled in Dormansland, Surrey, where son Gavin was born.
- 1929 Based at Crowborough, Sussex; then they moved to Hampstead until 1932.
- 1931 *Imagined Corners*.
- 1933 *Mrs Ritchie*.
- 1936 *Mrs Grundy in Scotland*.
- 1942 Edwin Muir began work for the British Council in Edinburgh.
- 1945 Edwin Muir was appointed director of the British Institute in Prague.
- 1949 Went to Rome, where Edwin Muir became the director of the British Institute.
- 1950 Edwin Muir became warden of Newbattle Abbey, Dalkcith (1950 to 1955)
- 1955 Move to Harvard.
- 1956 Returned to Britain; last home together with her husband at Swaffham Prior, Cambridgeshire.
- 1959 Edwin Muir died.
- 1964 moved into Kathleen Raine's basement in London.
- 1965 *Living with Ballads*.
- 1968 *Belonging* (Autobiography).
- 1969 *Laconics, Jingles and other Verses*.
- 1969 Muir moved to the British Red Cross Home, Meadowcroft, Cambridge. Finally, she moved to Dunoon to live with Edwin's niece Margaret and nephew Jim and his wife, Ivy.
- 1970 Died of heart failure at the hospital in Dunoon, Argyll, Scotland.

## 2.1 The Writer and the Translator

A postscript from Goethe:  
 'everything is there and I am nothing'.  
 For the writer this condition means torment;  
 for the translator, useful employment.  
 Jon Thiem

Willa Muir is one of the most impressive female intellectuals that Scotland has produced during the twentieth century. Many of her works, however, have been out of print for more than fifty years; others have never been published. In her autobiographical work, *Belonging*, Willa Muir says very little about her own work as a writer.<sup>82</sup> During her lifetime Muir was never fully acknowledged as a writer, never achieved a literary reputation completely independent of her husband's. She is increasingly becoming known for her work as first translator of Kafka and many other German and Czech authors. But, even when her translating work is recognised, her name is shadowed by the fame of her husband, the poet Edwin Muir. Her published works were received with relative indifference by critics and by the general public, and she was better known as 'Edwin Muir's wife'. Throughout her life, then, she was denied recognition, but she certainly deserves the literary reputation that is gradually emerging. Her published writings, together with her other manuscripts, letters, and journals, demonstrate the presence of an exceptional individual, an enigmatic and surprising character, and a powerful, groundbreaking author.

In her introduction to *Imagined Selves* (which collects Muir's published fiction and some of her non-fiction) Kirsty Allen claims that Muir's life

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<sup>82</sup> Willa Muir, *Belonging: a Memoir* (London: Hogarth Press, 1968).  
 Muir's autobiography will be referenced in the text as: *Belonging* and the page number.

'embodies the contradictions and paradoxes which suffuse her writing, lending it a sense of rich and troubled tension'.<sup>83</sup> Allen mentions Muir's passionate defence of gender equality at the same time as she was sacrificing her own autonomy to the success of her poet husband. Another issue mentioned by Allen is Muir's general discontent with and sometimes harsh criticism of Scotland, although her Scottish background informs her themes and characters. It can be argued, however, that concentrating on these paradoxes represents only one way of reading Muir's autobiography. It could be suggested that these are not really contradictions, but rather brave and thoroughly thought-out decisions, indicative of a slow process of learning, a life-long progress towards the construction of a mature, coherent, and integrated self. This chapter will consider whether there is a real contradiction between Muir's choices in life and her theoretical points of view about existence and love.

### 2.1.1 Constraints

Undoubtedly, the relative paucity of her 'creative' literary work, strikes the reader with some force in the light of the whole of Willa Muir's intellectual production. Her published creative work is quickly listed: *Imagined Corners*, *Mrs Ritchie*, *Mrs Grundy in Scotland*, *Women: An Enquiry*, 'Women in Scotland' and *Living with Ballads*.<sup>84</sup> She also published two verse pamphlets in limited editions – *Five Songs from the Auvergnat* and *Laconics, Jingles and Other Verses*.<sup>85</sup> This is not

<sup>83</sup> Kirsty Allen, 'Introduction', *Imagined Selves* by Willa Muir (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 1996), v-xiii(v).

<sup>84</sup> Willa Muir, *Imagined Selves*, ed. by Kirsty Allen (Edinburgh: Cannongate Classics, 1996). This compendium volume contains: *Imagined Corners*, *Mrs Ritchie*, *Mrs Grundy in Scotland*, *Women: An Enquiry*, and 'Women in Scotland'. All future references to these works will be to this edition. Willa Muir, *Living with Ballads* (London: Hogarth, 1965).

<sup>85</sup> Willa Muir, *Five Songs from the Auvergnat* (Warlingham, England: J.M. Shelmerdine, 1931). Willa Muir, *Laconics, Jingles and Other Verses* (London: Enitharmon Press, 1969).

an extensive output, yet her ambition was to be a writer and to be acknowledged as such – if possible, to be able to earn a living through her original literary activity: 'How do we live? Translating from the German, reading German books for publishers, doing anything that turns up. How do we want to live? On the proceeds of our own creative work. Apparently quite impossible'.<sup>86</sup> Until the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, which dried up the market for translations of German novels, the Muirs felt they had become 'a sort of translation factory'.<sup>87</sup>

The Muirs were of first importance in bringing Franz Kafka to an English-speaking audience, and although the growth of Kafka's reputation in England and America has been extensively studied, only passing attention has been given to his most important translators.<sup>88</sup> The Muirs not only translated Kafka's major writings, but also found publishers for them in England. According to Muir, her husband read an article on Kafka in the late 1920s, became interested in the author, and bought copies of his novels.<sup>89</sup> Possibly because of their experiences travelling and living in diverse places in Europe and Britain, the Muirs became increasingly aware of the individual's difficulty in finding a place in disintegrating modern society and this may have been responsible for their immediate appreciation of Kafka. The Muirs recognised Kafka's genius and translated *The Castle* because they had faith in its author; moreover, they used their influence to get the translation published by Martin Secker in 1930.<sup>90</sup> They were conscious of Kafka's strangeness for an English audience and tried to

<sup>86</sup> National Library of Scotland, Willa Muir, Letter to Marion Lochhead, 3 March 1933. MS26190/95-7 (containing biographical information to be used in an article about the writer to be published in Lochhead's literary column in *The Bulletin*)

<sup>87</sup> Edwin Muir, *An Autobiography* (London: Hogarth Press, 1954), p.222.

<sup>88</sup> See Elgin W. Mellow, 'The Development of a Criticism: Edwin Muir and Franz Kafka', *Comparative Literature*, 16, 4 (Autumn, 1964), pp.310-21.

<sup>89</sup> Mellow, 'Development of a Criticism', p.312.

<sup>90</sup> Mellow, 'Development of a Criticism', p.320.

translate the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar. Thus, in an 'Introductory Note' for *The Castle*, Edwin writes:

Perhaps the best way to approach *The Castle* is to regard it as a sort of modern *Pilgrim's Progress*, with the reservation, however, that the 'progress' of the pilgrim here will remain in question all the time. And will be itself the chief, the essential problem.<sup>91</sup>

Edwin was interested in giving to the readers 'a more clear and general notion of Kafka's intentions as an artist and thinker'.<sup>92</sup> After the translations, Edwin's criticism of Kafka helped to advance the reputation of the novelist for English-speaking audiences. Elgin W. Mellown claims that Edwin's role in the positive reception and understanding of Kafka reached beyond his primary role as translator: 'the translator was aware that his job did not end with translation; he had also to help create a public for the novelist'.<sup>93</sup> Discussing the development of Edwin Muir's ideas about Kafka, Mellown affirms: 'Muir's criticism of Kafka helps the general reader to understand the novelist, but it is also important for the insight it affords into criticism in general and into criticism of Kafka in particular'.<sup>94</sup> Unfortunately, although the first translations of Kafka and the subsequent publications of these – and almost certainly the ideas that inform Edwin's literary criticism – were at least the result of close collaboration between the Muirs, Willa has still not been sufficiently recognised for her participation in these achievements.

The Muirs undertook translations out of necessity, when in 1924 they found themselves practically bankrupt in Austria. Willa was pleased: 'I did not know why I had not thought of it before as a possible means of earning money' (*Belonging* 106). As Muir herself affirms in several places in her autobiography

<sup>91</sup> Edwin Muir, 'Introductory Note', in *The Castle*, by Franz Kafka, trans. by Edwin Muir and Willa Muir (London, M. Secker, 1930), v.

<sup>92</sup> Edwin Muir, 'Introductory Note', in *The Great Wall of China And Other Pieces*, by Franz Kafka, trans. by Edwin Muir and Willa Muir (London: Secker, 1933), vii.

<sup>93</sup> Mellown, 'Development of a Criticism', p.314.

<sup>94</sup> Mellown, 'Development of a Criticism', p.321.

and in other documents, she made the decision to postpone her literary aspirations in order to support herself and her husband – especially so that Edwin would be able to become the first-rate poet she already recognized him to be. Muir's friend Catriona Soukup maintains, 'increasingly, as the years passed, it was Willa alone who did the translations, leaving Edwin free for his own writing'.<sup>95</sup> In several passages of *Belonging*, Muir conveys the necessity and the stressful urgency of much of the work of translation, which displaced her own creative work:

From now on, it can be taken for granted that I was always translating something and any other work I did was always sandwiched between translations. [...] If there were a troublesome dead-line for a translation, and if he [Edwin] had time, he helped with it (*Belonging* 115).

Although she was undoubtedly a remarkable translator, it was evident that sometimes she toiled over translations of books she did not really like in order to allow her husband to write his poems – as Edwin himself recognized to his friend Lumir Soukup: 'Edwin had told me [Soukup] many times, that she had "slaved" over translations of books she did not really like, in order to make it possible for him to devote *his* time to writing'.<sup>96</sup> Muir herself describes how exhausting translating could be for her, when she was not motivated by the material she was working with and/or she was only doing it out of duty:

Translating [...] seemed worse than breaking stones. When one is not interested, uplifted, exhilarated by the material one is translating, so that the unconscious delights in doing the work, and the quick of oneself is responsive to the quick of the foreign writing, the labour of digesting sentences can become drearily depressing (*Belonging* 149).

It might seem surprising that the woman who wrote 'helping one another to develop our potentialities was taken for granted in my notion of what marriage meant' is the same woman who chose to postpone her own career as a writer to benefit her husband's career (*Belonging* 28). The bargain seems rather one-sided.

<sup>95</sup> Catriona Soukup, 'Willa in Wartime', *Chapman*, 71 (Winter 1992-93), 20-24 (p.24).

<sup>96</sup> Lumir Soukup, 'Belonging', *Chapman*, 71 (Winter 1992-93), 29-33 (p.33).

The demands of having to earn a living while wanting and needing to do her own creative work is not an easy burden to bear and more than once she experiences the sensation of being divided in multiple dimensions, which ultimately represent the multiple aspects of her self. There are certainly diverse 'Willas', or 'roles' the author had to fulfil; there are the wife/lover, the mother, and the intellectual (writer, translator, teacher). In a letter to Marion Lochhead – in response to Lochhead's enquiries for the series of articles she was writing for *The Bulletin* – Muir wrote that she could be described as 'half a "stickit" scholar, with scholarly and intellectual leanings, and half a temperamental woman: if I were whole-heartedly one or the other life would be much easier for me. I drive too many incompatible horses in my team'.<sup>97</sup> Nor is Muir always completely consistent: she made divergent statements at different points in her life. Some of these statements or affirmations might appear to contradict others about the relative significance she assigns to each of her various roles. For instance, on one occasion Muir affirmed that her 'best piece of work' was her son.<sup>98</sup> She also claimed that her career was 'Edwin': 'My career was Edwin. I devoted my life to Edwin and I knew what I meant to Edwin, and he knew what he meant to me. We both remained true to each other, and to ourselves as well'.<sup>99</sup> At the same time, she is honest enough to acknowledge the difficulties and inconveniences attendant upon a position that she actively looked for and consciously accepted. She frankly declares her 'envy' of Edwin's working conditions, in comparison

<sup>97</sup> National Library of Scotland, Willa Muir, Letter to Marion Lochhead, 3 March 1933. MS26190/95-7.

'Stickit': qualifying a personal designation of trade or profession, means 'that has relinquished his intended calling from want of ability or means to pursue it' (OED). Thus, Willa Muir's use of 'stickit scholar' is another indication of her feelings of having been prevented from developing her full potential.

<sup>98</sup> National Library of Scotland, Willa Muir, Letter to Marion Lochhead, 3 March 1933. MS26190/95-7.

<sup>99</sup> Soukup, 'Belonging', p.33.

with her own: 'I envied Edwin's power of sitting down immediately after breakfast to concentrate in solitude on what he wanted to do' (*Belonging* 163). These surface incongruities, however, tend to confirm Muir's characteristic mode of being, devoid of hypocrisy or pretence, faithful to her ideas even when abiding by them might mean pain or misery.

### 2.1.2 Choices and Conflicts

Muir was a very gifted woman: she had many talents and capacities, and could have directed her life in several different ways. Throughout *Belonging*, Muir narrates various episodes where she had to make decisions, and where she did not always opt for the more obvious, or safer alternative. For example, she rejected an advantageous scholarship to do postgraduate study in Italy, with the possibility of later following an academic career, because she preferred to stay with the boyfriend she thought, at the time, was her 'true love' (*Belonging* 26). Later, however, she neither hesitated to break with this same boyfriend because of his unfaithfulness, nor thought twice about throwing her engagement ring in the sea (*Belonging* 26). In spite of what she has sacrificed for him, she is not unwilling to change her mind, when she realizes that she has been mistaken about their relationship. Her seeming lack of consistency is a sign of braveness, flexibility of thought, and constant reassessment of life decisions. In other words, Muir's strong sense of individuality is expressed in the distinctive, personal way she conducts her life and, thus, her life-story can only be characterised as an active, heartfelt succession of intense choices.

Comparison between the narrator of Muir's autobiography and her younger self allows us to appreciate her intrinsic fortitude. Yet, there is no doubt



that she was not always the self-confident 'I' who narrates *Belonging*. In a journal-entry in August 1953, Muir explains how, in spite of her determination to devote herself to Edwin, she cannot help regretting not having achieved the literary reputation that she desires and, we sense, feels she deserves:

I am left without a shred of literary reputation. And I am ashamed of the fact that I feel it as a grievance. It shouldn't bother me. Reputation is a passing value, after all. [...] And I know, too, how destructive ambition is. And how it deforms what one might create. And yet, and yet, I want to be acknowledged. That is why I say: I am a mess.<sup>100</sup>

Muir's desperate words convey her perception of being split by conflict. She wants to be acknowledged, but at the same time, she is ashamed of feeling ambitious. She is confused; she does not understand herself: 'I am a mess'.<sup>101</sup>

Explanations of these contradictory emotions are probably various. A first hypothesis might point to Muir's late-Victorian upbringing which meant that she was the product of a period that was still equivocal about women's education and even more so about ambition as a desirable attribute of a well-bred woman. Thus, in *Women: An Enquiry*, Muir writes about the seemingly inescapable differences between women's and men's careers:

Women must carry their womanhood with them into all occupations. [...] Besides, a woman who tries to do a man's work [...] pays too high a price for the effort. [...] She must expend more energy than he does to achieve the same formal outlook; she must abandon the creative love for the individual which is essential for womanhood; and, because she has killed herself spiritually [...] her work is necessarily barren.<sup>102</sup>

Muir was not a great follower of received ideas but it is difficult for anyone not to internalise some current beliefs that may later be consciously rejected. Besides, Muir does additionally seem to have convinced herself that ambition is a

<sup>100</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, Journal January 1951- September 1953(20 August 1953), Box 5. MS38466/5/5.

<sup>101</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, Journal January 1951- September 1953(20 August 1953), Box 5. MS38466/5/5.

<sup>102</sup> Muir, *Women: An Enquiry*, pp. 25-26.

destructive force: 'I know, too, how destructive ambition is, and how it deforms what one might create. And yet, and yet, I want to be acknowledged'.<sup>103</sup>

A second hypothesis, however, suggests a painful inward conflict specific to Muir herself. Outwardly, she seems to be assertive and self-assured. She willingly assumed and sustained, as her prerogative and duty, the role of Edwin's protector. For example, in *Belonging*, she mentions how in 1945 she rushed to Prague in an uncomfortable converted Dakota – in spite of the British Council's opinion, that, as a mere wife, her 'presence in Prague could not be urgently required' – because she 'had got an S.O.S. from Edwin beseeching me to hurry for he needed me' (*Belonging* 212). In company, she tended to dominate the conversation; she certainly fought her husband's battles and protected his interests.<sup>104</sup> Her friend Catriona Soukup recalls how 'Edwin was perfectly content to let Willa come between himself and any adversary':

When someone made an offensive remark, Edwin would quickly glance at her, she would smile, and one could sense his relish at her reply. Willa never repeated herself, her irony was always fresh. It was uncanny, I thought, the way that she sensed an attack on Edwin was coming long before anyone else even suspected it. She was provoked by three kinds of remarks: by unfounded criticism of Edwin; by any form of male chauvinism; while anything which revealed pretentiousness or could be interpreted as showing off came a distant third.<sup>105</sup>

Moreover, Muir seemed to enjoy the struggle. Before answering, she used the preparation of a cigarette as a shield, then 'she inhaled, leaned forward, and began talking in that unmistakeable East Coast lilt. She was very direct, not rude. Emotion could make her cheeks slowly flush, and darken the normal pallor of her skin.'<sup>106</sup> Yet, Muir's perfectionism impacted on her conversational style, guarding her beliefs to the extent that minor disagreements in casual conversation were

<sup>103</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, Journal January 1951- September 1953(20 August 1953), Box 5. MS38466/5/5.

<sup>104</sup> Allen, 'Life and Work', p.198.

<sup>105</sup> Soukup, 'Willa in Wartime', p.20.

<sup>106</sup> Soukup, 'Willa in Wartime', p.21.

often converted into heated debates. Soukup remembers Muir sometimes reacting exaggeratedly to criticism: 'There were times, [...] when her reaction to certain words or opinions was perhaps more acerbic than was called for'.<sup>107</sup> Soukup remarks, however, that Muir became aggressive almost exclusively when 'provoked into protecting' her husband: 'Then her shield and rapier wit would be summoned and her laughter, sardonic, scornful, mocking, would sharpen the precise caustic words – never too many, just sufficient to stab and follow through with a final thrust'.<sup>108</sup> Yet, first impressions regarding the Muirs were equivocal:

Seeing them both together for the first time, I was impressed by Edwin's gentleness and vulnerability and of Willa's strength, in spite of her physical infirmity. Only later did I realise that in fact it was Edwin, the survivor, who was the stronger. More certain of himself than Willa, although he never raised his voice.<sup>109</sup>

In her autobiography Muir herself acknowledges Edwin's inner strength: 'despite his gentleness he was much tougher inside than I was' (*Belonging* 72). Muir's hidden weakness and insecurity were expressed by the fact that any belittlement of her self usually evoked a strong mental or emotional response in her. Later in her life, she retrospectively attributed this 'evil effect' to the fact that 'I had a great lack of underlying confidence except in matters where I had proved my competence'.<sup>110</sup> Indeed, from her earliest literary efforts, Muir admits a pervasive lack of confidence: 'I had no general self-confidence – in writing literature, at least – and was easily cast down and shaken'.<sup>111</sup> In *Belonging*, Muir narrates how she was put off finishing a play about Noah's story by Edwin's shock and complete rejection of her idea: 'I was on a new ground where I felt uncertain [...] and Edwin was more experienced in writing than I was, so that his disapproval

<sup>107</sup> Soukup, 'Willa in Wartime', p.21.

<sup>108</sup> Soukup, 'Willa in Wartime', p.22.

<sup>109</sup> Soukup, 'Willa in Wartime', p.20.

<sup>110</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, Journal January 1951- September 1953(20 August 1953), Box 5. MS38466/5/5.

<sup>111</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, Journal January 1951- September 1953(20 August 1953), Box 5. MS38466/5/5.

and my inability to understand it discouraged me profoundly' (*Belonging* 72). Almost thirty years later, she still lamented the consequences of her lack of confidence: 'when Edwin deplored my attempt in Dresden to write a Noah's Ark play in contemporary language, I gave it up: I shouldn't have given up (someone else did it, years later, successfully)'.<sup>112</sup> In February 1952, Muir finished her unpublished novel *The Usurpers*, and in her journal she registered the unstable feelings of insecurity about the value of her work that dominated her at that time: 'I think, whiles, it's very good; surprised that I could have thought it out at all; then, whiles, that it's disjointed, ill put together, lacking proportion and style'.<sup>113</sup> Yet, it is her husband's lack of interest in her work what affects Muir most. His noticeable indifference towards her literary effort depressed her and, at the same time, made her feel painful resentment:

I had a fit of black despair and resentment when I had finished it [*The Usurpers*], just because Edwin let it lie for days before reading it. I know he was tired and busy, but I had wanted him to show enthusiasm and interest; he *never said a word about it*, not even regretting that he couldn't read it, because his eyes hurt, or he had other work, or what-not. Had he regretted not reading it, had he said: I'm sorry I can't get at it yet, I should have been appeased, for I think I am reasonable. I was his apparent utter indifference that got me down; I could see how little value he attached to the *expectations* he might have of it, how little real importance he felt it would have. Perhaps he is right, thought I; this book I have been dreaming myself into, with such enthusiasm & delight, is really a very second-rate production: it won't matter to anyone. It made me suicidal for some hours until I got the better of it.<sup>114</sup>

Finally, as she could wait no more, she transformed her anger into action and corrects the manuscript by herself, without waiting for Edwin's help and approval.

I shall begin going over it myself [the manuscript]; I can't wait. If I wait, I grow resentful again, and it's not worth while letting one's vanity swell things up until one weeps with hurt pride. The only thing is to depend on myself.<sup>115</sup>

<sup>112</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, Journal January 1951- September 1953(20 August 1953), Box 5. MS38466/5/5.

<sup>113</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, Journal January 1951- September 1953(22 February 1952), Box 5. MS38466/5/5.

<sup>114</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, Journal January 1951- September 1953(22 February 1952), Box 5. MS38466/5/5 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>115</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, Journal January 1951- September 1953(22 February 1952), Box 5. MS38466/5/5.

When Edwin did finally look at the manuscript, unsurprisingly, he did not have any suggestion to offer. Muir had already repressed her understandable resentment against her husband, and easily found a justification for his lack of interest and feedback: 'I had done what he had thought needed doing'.<sup>116</sup> The refusal of a friend of hers to read the same manuscript only added to Muir's pain and sense of failure; again, she contained her resentment with difficulty, and briskly found a plausible explanation:

In a dumb way, I had hoped Flora would read the ms, but she cried that I wasn't to expect her to read handwritten stuff. Anyhow, I know she wasn't well, – a bad cold – and I didn't let resentment come up, this time, although *again* I felt how little importance other people expect to find in anything I write.<sup>117</sup>

In spite of all the bitterness she seems to repress, Muir rather contents herself with a kind of fair 'exchange'; she has Edwin's love and recognition instead of what she believes she has lost – literary reputation and success: 'I had the conviction that I had come back to life only to devote myself to Edwin [...] and that I must kill my "vanity", my ambition to write'.<sup>118</sup> She does not, after all, consider her dedication to her husband a sacrifice. A critical moment in her life, however, puts her inner force and resources under trial. After a war, a nervous breakdown, and evidence of the decline of her physical health, Muir cannot escape despair – during the Second World War, in Scotland, Muir had been 'worn with anxiety and

<sup>116</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, Journal January 1951- September 1953(22 February 1952), Box 5. MS38466/5/5.

<sup>117</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, Journal January 1951- September 1953(14 April 1952), Box 5. MS38466/5/5.

It was not the first time Muir found herself hurtfully confronted with lack of interest for her work. Years earlier, her essay 'Women: An Enquiry' had been received with unexpected coldness and indifference both by the critics and by the general public. The young Muir, however, remained optimistic and positive:

My old essay has fallen very flat. I don't think people realise its implications – perhaps because of the purposely moderate & reasonable tone. *The Nation* said it was as unexciting as boiled rice. *Time et Tide* has not reviewed it at all! I thought women's societies and associations would have been interested. However-- I shall launch bombs next time!

(National Library of Scotland, Willa Muir, Letter to F. Marian McNeill, 26 January [1926]. MS26194-98).

<sup>118</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, Journal September- November 1955(1<sup>st</sup> October 1955), Box 5. MS38466/5/6.

persistent belly-pains, later discovered to be the result of bowel ulcers', and she had finally collapsed, and been taken to the hospital (*Belonging* 207). Later she experienced the harshness of the post-war period in Central Europe (Prague) and afterwards, a politically antagonistic atmosphere in Rome, before returning to Great Britain (Newbattle Abbey). She intensely needs material for self-affirmation:

I am left without a shred of literary reputation. I am ashamed of the fact that I feel it as a grievance. It shouldn't bother me. Reputation is a passing value, after all. Yet, it is now that I feel it, now that I trying to build up my life again and overcome my disabilities.<sup>119</sup>

She convinces herself that Edwin's love is the absolute priority in her life – and more than she deserves – for if his affection is not the most important matter and/or if he doesn't love her enough, then it invalidates all her sacrifices: 'I seem to have nothing to build on, except that I am Edwin's wife and he still loves me. That is much. It is almost all, in a sense that I could need. It is more than I deserve'.<sup>120</sup> That is why any doubt about Edwin's love for her could be so devastating. Thirty years before, during their first visit to Italy in 1923, Edwin had felt the need to go back to Gerda, a woman who had confessed her love for him; when he told his wife, she reacted with a mixture of rage, grief, and resentment, but out of 'self-respect and desperation' she declared him free to go, which immediately prompted his regret and apology (*Belonging* 82). In *Belonging*, Muir tells how, at that time, the episode affected her self-confidence intensely: 'My confidence in Edwin was partly restored, my confidence in myself not very much, my confidence in the Universe not at all' (*Belonging* 84). In August 1953 Muir discussed that episode of their lives with her husband, who was considering not

<sup>119</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, Journal January 1951- September 1953(20 August 1953), Box 5. MS38466/5/5.

<sup>120</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, Journal January 1951- September 1953(20 August 1953), Box 5. MS38466/5/5.

including it in his autobiography. She found that she still 'could call up vividly the emotions of that terrible time'.<sup>121</sup> The significance Muir attributes to her husband's love explains the liveliness of the feelings evoked so many years later. Besides, Edwin's intention of leaving that part of their past together out of his autobiography probably made an additional wound on Muir's scarred soul. Kirsty Allen suggests that Muir 'found herself unable to control the fire of resentment and hurt caused by Edwin's knowing omission of many of the experiences which had shaped their relationship and her sense of self', because 'his denial of their common history was tantamount to a conscious negation of some aspects of her identity and seemed pointedly and completely to exclude her and her contributions to his creativity from his life's story'.<sup>122</sup> Edwin's selective recollection of events and feelings was painful for Muir because it ignored the meaningfulness of her self-sacrifice for her husband's life and career, and filled her with self-doubt and resentment: 'Well, churning up these past events brought up in me a surprising rash of angry feeling that I had thought long past and done with. The misery, the resentment, the irritations were all present again'.<sup>123</sup> Muir felt bitter about her husband's choices of memories, which could be considered as disloyalty. When she tried to discuss her feelings, her husband seemed to react to them with denial, but conciliatorily, and with the passive and non-conflictual disposition that characterised him, admitted his lack of 'sense':

I unpacked all the unhappiness that had made my life bitter [...] I really let them out. Edwin said, once, when we came back to the house: I don't think we should say anything more about it; but I felt that these things *should* be talked out, to prevent their festering

<sup>121</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, Journal January 1951-September 1953 (20 August 1953), Box 5. MS38466/5/5.

<sup>122</sup> Allen, 'Life and Work', p.477.

<sup>123</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, Journal January 1951-September 1953 (20 August 1953), Box 5. MS38466/5/5.

inside. Edwin finally said: 'I'm afraid, you know, that I haven't got much sense'. - Which is true of both of us.<sup>124</sup>

Yet, these rational words do not succeed in calming Willa. She even hints a veiled reproach – maybe a tepid complaint about him not having fulfilled his part of the deal: 'He [Edwin] has let my reputation sink by default [...] I was too proud to say anything; and Edwin himself felt it would be undignified to speak up, I suppose'.<sup>125</sup>

In order to overcome this uneasiness and rage she has to accept her weakness, which is not the failure of ambition in the common sense of the term, but the pride of self-belief which makes her care about it. She is immune in the end neither to criticism, nor to praise: simply, she is not better than other people. Only in recognizing and accepting her particular kind of ambition is she able to overcome despair, and to be truthful to herself: 'My intelligent Unconscious now told me that in killing, or trying to kill, my vanity I had nearly succeeded in killing myself'.<sup>126</sup> Towards the end of her life story, where the narrator of *Belonging* is situated, her strength lies in her acknowledgement of simple human weaknesses, like vanity, in herself – as well as in others around her. In October 1955, she wrote in her journal:

I began to glow with positive happiness as I decided that the U. [unconscious] was quite right, and that I must let my "vanity" flourish. All the Willas, the passionate little girl, the ambitious & vital student, the positive, hopeful & happy new wife, came back together and fused, as it were, in this glow of possible achievement.<sup>127</sup>

Ultimately, Muir's notorious self-confidence emanates from self-knowledge and self-acceptance.

<sup>124</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, Journal January 1951-September 1953(20 August 1953), Box 5. MS38466/5/5.

<sup>125</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, Journal January 1951-September 1953(20 August 1953), Box 5. MS38466/5/5.

<sup>126</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, Journal September- November 1955(1<sup>st</sup> October 1955), Box 5. MS38466/5/6.

<sup>127</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, Journal September- November 1955(1<sup>st</sup> October 1955), Box 5. MS38466/5/6.



### 2.1.3 Language, Translation and Self

Willa Muir was an outstanding translator. After more than half a century, her translations of Kafka are still in use, which is the best tribute to their remarkable quality. The translations she undertook alone and with Edwin include works by Franz Kafka, Sholem Asch, Lion Feuchtwanger, Hermann Broch, Heinrich Mann, Hans Carossa, and C. Winsloe, among others.<sup>128</sup> As I have indicated, Muir started translating out of economic need. Nevertheless, it was soon evident that she had a gift for translation. Her friend Catriona Soukup remembers: 'She gave us her translations. They were faithful to the rhythms, the lengths and the rhymes of the originals [...] It was an astonishing achievement'.<sup>129</sup> In the process of translating Muir paid the same attention to perfecting her language as in an original work of art:

Translating from a foreign language into one's mother tongue is as fatiguing as breaking stones, but there the resemblance ceases. One is not dealing with blocks of words that have to be trimmed into other shapes, one is struggling with something at once more recalcitrant and more fluid, the spirit of a language, which makes thought flow into moulds that are quite different from one's native speech.<sup>130</sup>

Clearly for Muir, translating was not only a way of earning a living. Sometimes she was so 'interested, uplifted, exhilarated' by the material she was translating, that her 'unconscious' was delighted by the work.<sup>131</sup> She found pleasure in the

<sup>128</sup> For a list of Willa Muir's translation works, see appendix 1.

Christa Winsloe (1888-1944) was a 20th century Hungarian novelist, playwright and sculptor. She moved to Vienna in the 1920s and there achieved success in 1930 with her play *Yesterday & Today*. On the strength of the play's acclaim, she moved to Weimar Berlin where a lesbian culture thrived. She was wealthy since she had married at a very young age, but the marriage had lasted only weeks, and thereafter her estranged husband paid her a generous allowance. She worked as an animal sculptor and had a wide circle of friends. She was a member of the SPD (German Socialist Party), and was openly bisexual. *Yesterday and Today* became the film *Mädchen in Uniform* (1931), for which she was the screenwriter. She moved to France in the late 1930s, fleeing the Nazis. She and a female companion were shot by four Frenchmen in a wood near Cluny in 1944. Their claim that the women were collaborators was upheld, although untenable.

<sup>129</sup> Soukup, 'Willa in Wartime', p.23.

<sup>130</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, Notebook, Box 6. MS38466/5/12.

<sup>131</sup> Muir, *Belonging*, p.149.

whole process of translating, although of the texts themselves she said: 'I enjoyed some of it'.<sup>132</sup> At the same time, Muir expresses some resentment when her work as a translator is ignored:

Even the translations I had done were no longer my own territory, for everyone assumes that Edwin did them. He is referred to as 'THE' translator. By this time he may even believe that he was [...] And the fact remains; I am a better translator than he is. The whole current of patriarchal society is set against this fact, however, and sweeps it into oblivion, simply because I did not insist on shouting aloud: 'Most of this translation, especially Kafka, has been done by ME. Edwin only helped'.<sup>133</sup>

Thus, the translations Muir did were extremely important for her; they constituted a source of pride and self-satisfaction – even if her work was not publicly recognised.

The reasons for Muir's excellence as a translator were various. In translating, she had to achieve a reliable version of the original text, but in a new code, a different language. Because of this transcodification, for Muir, translating is more than copying; it is interpreting, it is putting herself in the marginal but meaningful position of the secondary creator, a position almost as productive and frightening as the central position of the writer. Talking about her method, Muir says: 'I cannot say that we translated *Jew Süss*; what we produced was a polished rendering of it' (*Belonging* 125). The place of invention in translation is much debated. The quality of a translation will necessarily depend on the personal characteristics of the translator(s) as readers as well as writers. Edwin's translations, for example, differed notoriously from Willa's: 'I was well trained in accuracy, at least, and that was all to the good, for Edwin's interpretations tended to be wild and gay' (*Belonging* 106). Translation increased Muir's sense of her own competence – 'I was confident that I could translate, and so began doing it

<sup>132</sup> Soukup, 'Willa in Wartime', p. 24.

<sup>133</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, Journal January 1951– September 1953 (20 August 1953), Box 5. MS38466/5/5.

without *arrière-pensée*'.<sup>134</sup> Translating also alerted Muir to the difficulties and intricacies of 'languages'. According to Margaret Elphinstone, Muir finds a source of identity in languages.<sup>135</sup> Through languages, through the creative process of translating, Muir can achieve a voice of her own — many voices of her own. It is not the first time Muir has encountered negotiations with language as the centre of the dynamic of identity. For example, during her first years, in Montrose, other girls despised Muir because she did not speak their language (*Belonging* 19). Elphinstone points up Muir's feeling of 'not belonging', which is determined and established in linguistic terms: 'Expulsion means self-awareness, and the child's realization of the dislocation between self and other comes in terms of speech'.<sup>136</sup> As Muir remembers it, it is during this episode, significantly one of the few childhood episodes narrated in *Belonging*, that Muir becomes aware of 'difference' between herself and others; ultimately, she perceives her identity as a separate entity, distinguishes her self's autonomy. As Elphinstone remarks, 'conscious identity is founded upon this first shocking awareness of not belonging in the world in which she finds herself'.<sup>137</sup> In time Muir learnt to adapt herself to her environment by learning to speak a new language and she attributes her linguistic skills partly to learning to adapt during this period of alienation: 'My interest in languages was awakened at the moment when my intelligence came to the rescue of my hurt feelings and told me that I could learn to 'belong' by speaking Montrose' (*Belonging* 20). Muir remained enchanted by the exciting source of possibilities provided by languages. She felt delighted by her ignorance

<sup>134</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, Journal January 1951- September 1953 (20 August 1953), Box 5. MS38466/5/5.

<sup>135</sup> Elphinstone, Margaret, 'Willa Muir: Crossing the Genres' in *A History of Scottish Women's Writing*, ed. by Douglas Gifford and Dorothy McMillan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), pp.400-15 (p. 402).

<sup>136</sup> Elphinstone, 'Crossing', p.402.

<sup>137</sup> Elphinstone, 'Crossing', p.402.

of the Czech language: 'We could not be unaware of the lively "feel" of the air of Prague, and the fact that we did not understand it, having no clue at all to the Czech language, only challenged us more' (*Belonging* 56-57). She enjoyed the 'exhilarating' effect of understanding English again when returning to Britain (*Belonging* 111), relished her American neighbour's turns of speech (*Belonging* 100), and treasured the Orkney language she and Edwin used in their intimacy (*Belonging* 34). Muir's lifelong curiosity and interest in other peoples' languages – and through their languages, in their cultures – allows her to compare and form an opinion, and at the same time, to increase her self-knowledge. In short, languages effectively become a source of identity for Muir.

Curiously enough, this affirmation of Muir's self could be seen to be at odds with her work as translator. In one way of thinking about the work of translation, it is conjectured that translators are required to be selfless or self-effacing to the degree that they can take on the sensibility, style, and world-view of the writer they are translating. For example, speaking of the idea of the translator as a heroic figure, Jon Thiem says: 'The hero is easily recognized as the one who exudes an over-abundance of self. Our virtue as translators, on the other hand, apparently depends on a deficiency of self, on a high degree of "negative capability"'.<sup>138</sup> It is possible to hypothesize that in the case of Muir, a 'strong-willed, firm lipped, and decisive' woman, this alleged deficiency of self is more a voluntary pose, rather than a natural condition.<sup>139</sup> Muir's affirmation of her existential choice is recorded in an episode narrated by her friend Lumir Soukup.

<sup>138</sup> Jon Thiem, 'The Translator as Hero in Postmodern Fiction', *Translation and Literature*, 4.1(1995), 207-18(p.207).

<sup>139</sup> Words of Robert Bruce Lockhart, quoted in Patricia Rowland Mudge, 'A Quorum of Willas: Another Look at Willa Muir', *Chapman*, 71(Winter 1992-93), 1-17(p.1).

In 1968, towards the end of her life, Muir's answer to a Soukup's question is most indicative:

Did she never consider that Edwin was, in a way, '*primus inter pares*', and that she might be thought of as '*secunda*' [sic] in their relationship, even though we both knew this was neither true or just?  
'Does it matter?'<sup>140</sup>

Here Muir's attitude to life plays an important role in her ability as translator. Her empathy and mental flexibility, her avid curiosity about people and her interest in their lives, together with her sharp mind, high intelligence and wit make her a formidable natural translator of words, atmospheres, and characters. Probably the position where she has willingly placed herself in relation to her husband's fame and reputation enhances Muir's ability for translation. She is 'trained' in self-effacement. Thiem's words about translators peculiarly act as commentary on Muir's strategies for living as well as for working: 'Precisely our modesty, our willingness to play second fiddle, to meld into the identity of a primary creator, is often viewed as a precondition of successful translation'.<sup>141</sup>

Willa Muir's process of self-affirmation and construction of a personal identity and its relation to her role as translator may also be considered in the context of a broader postmodern phenomenon. Harold Bloom argues that the encounter with past literary achievements is habitually concomitant with a sense of inadequacy, if not creative impotence.<sup>142</sup> Bloom takes this as the general condition of the writer who is involved in a creative *agon* with his predecessors. Thiem feels the postmodern case to be acute: he argues that postmodern artists feel that they live 'in the shadow of giants, that everything worth saying has already been said, that the possibilities of originality, of primary creation, have

<sup>140</sup> Soukup, 'Belonging', p.33.

<sup>141</sup> Thiem, 'Translator as Hero', p.207.

<sup>142</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influences: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973)

seriously diminished'.<sup>143</sup> And so the necessary condition of the translator is reflected in postmodern anxiety. Muir faces the problem of the translator who would rather be the translated; she faces this problem and battles its challenges by turning the secondary position into a primary triumph. She is able to successfully construct an adequate identity, and find a unique voice, by undertaking the office of secondary creation in her role of translator. In translating, Muir demonstrates once more that she was a very independent, self-sufficient person: 'One must never, Muir said, depart from the original, but at the same time, one should not stick to it slavishly. [...] The inner ear must be the final judge'.<sup>144</sup>

Since it has taken so long for Muir's activity as translator to be valued, Allen's version of Muir as haunted by fear of anonymity, of being only the 'poet's wife' is to some extent correct, even if it was fear without resentment because she loved Edwin. It is also true that Muir's life story represents only one concrete example of how the author's ideas may be actualised. She does not advocate a single way of living, ideal for all women, but she defends the right of every woman to choose whichever way is best adapted to her genuine or authentic being as she senses it. Willa Muir champions women's right to have 'options' – not only impositions. Her choice was to facilitate Edwin's creativity, and the cost was the undermining of her career as a writer. She had to earn a living for both of them and in the labour of a translator she found a satisfactory alternative means of building up her identity. To sum up, it is possible to use Kirsty Allen's words (referring to Muir's character Elize Mütze in *Imagined Corners*) and apply them to the author herself, to say that Willa Muir 'sacrificed neither her femaleness nor her freedom to the emotional and physical hardships which have been to product

<sup>143</sup> Thiem, 'Translator as Hero', p.210.

<sup>144</sup> Soukup, 'Willa in Wartime', p.24.

of her convictions, and has consequently developed an indomitable and exquisite awareness of herself and her world'.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Allen, 'Introduction', vii-viii.

## 2.2 The Writer as Mother

If mother had only not sacrificed herself for us, how infinitely grateful I should feel to her now! What sympathy there might have been between us all! If she had but given herself a chance, how she might have helped us, and what a friend she might have been to us, and we to her!

Mona Caird

*The Daughters of Danaus* (1884)

Willa Muir mentions her son, Gavin, only infrequently and elusively in *Belonging*. Even if the reader agrees with critics who consider Muir's autobiographical work as primarily the record of the Muirs' married life, centred on their unusual partnership, it cannot pass unremarked that there are only a few sporadic references to Muir's son.<sup>146</sup> One explanation of this absence might be that Willa Muir is attempting to protect Gavin's private life from public exposure. This would account for the fact that Gavin is only included in the narration when his behaviour has direct influence on the choices and decisions of his parents. Yet, Willa Muir's opinions on the subject of motherhood can still be traced in the comments scattered through her autobiography about how she experienced the process of being a mother. Her opinions and beliefs are also, of course, traceable indirectly in her fiction, essays and other minor works, and directly in her letters. Although a number of Willa Muir's assumptions and feelings are probably culturally conditioned by the beliefs and ideologies of her time, Muir's writings altogether convey clearly and distinctly her notion of the meaning and implications of motherhood.

<sup>146</sup> Elphinstone, 'Crossing the Genres', p.401.  
Soukup, 'Belonging', p.32.



### 2.2.1 Implications of Motherhood

Willa Muir thematizes the complex concept of motherhood in three ways. First, at a political-discourse level, she defines the maternal as an essential human principle, concerned with human welfare and the alleviation of suffering. According to Muir, because of their natural capacity for empathy, women are able to discern that all human life is significant and meaningful and so, they do not feel tempted to question its value. Thus, motherhood is embedded in female respect for life and tends towards the fostering and protection of life. For Muir that women keep on living after their physical capacity to bear children has ceased is a kind of proof that 'maternity is not merely a physical function: women go on living as long as their children need them.'<sup>147</sup> Moreover, motherhood not only implies the imperative to promote and sustain the physical development of others, but also to cultivate and nurture others' psychological, spiritual, and intellectual development: it is 'women's business' – and all women are potential mothers – 'to understand the processes at work in the human soul and to help each individual to the fullest and most harmonious expression of his powers'.<sup>148</sup>

Secondly, when exploring the physical experience and the social repercussions of motherhood in a male-dominated society, Muir points to the problems she has to contend with. Metaphorically and literally, pregnancy brings about significant restraints to Muir's freedom and independence. In her autobiography, Muir recalls her experience and thoughts while she was pregnant with her son Gavin: 'I was learning what it meant to be a heavily pregnant woman. I could not run or even walk fast, but had to progress across fields with a slow, majestic gait' (*Belonging* 143). More frighteningly, she perceives her own

<sup>147</sup> Willa Muir, *Women: An Enquiry*, p.22.

<sup>148</sup> Muir, *Women: An Enquiry*, p.15

lack of control over the 'encroaching mystery of the process going on in my body', which is changing even her body image (*Belonging* 143):

I looked like a bulging fruit and my head, when I caught sight of myself in a long glass, seemed small and unimportant on top. No wonder, I thought, that women are often supposed to be mindless. 'But I am still me,' I said aloud, more than once, as I stared at the figure in the glass (*Belonging* 143).

Muir's surprise when she happens to have a glimpse of her body in the glass, could be interpreted as a kind of regression to that primary shock of awareness of differentiation and wholeness the child has when she first recognizes her image in a mirror and becomes aware of her separateness.<sup>149</sup> This time, the shock comes from Muir's effort to create a sense of a cohesive self over time in spite of the lack of coincidence between her past and present self-image. She struggles to reconstitute her self-image in spite of all the surprising changes motherhood has brought about. Hence, her vehement and audible cry of self-affirmation: 'But I am still me' (*Belonging* 143). She has to state this aloud, so that she can hear the assertion coming from outside of herself, as it were; she has to externalise the assertion to reassure herself 'she' is not an illusion and that she still exists inside this radically changed body she hardly recognizes as her own. Also relevant is Muir's remark that physical changes during pregnancy may explain the common belief that women are supposed to be mindless. Here she is expressing the popular opinion that although motherhood is clearly a creative function, it is one of a purely physical nature.<sup>150</sup> She is also articulating the old notion that women's mental capacities are impaired or at least destabilised by pregnancy. For example, in her early essay, *Women: an Enquiry*, Muir states: 'Men restrict the function of women to physical motherhood [...] Women are treated exactly as an inferior

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<sup>149</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979)

<sup>150</sup> Muir, *Women: An Enquiry*, p.5.

class with a definite function, that of child-bearing'.<sup>151</sup> Yet, at the same time, Muir is convinced that a 'woman's energy is diverted more into unconscious life' which gives her a particular power and wisdom – different from mere rational thinking.<sup>152</sup> On the few occasions when Willa Muir attempts to make purely rational decisions, disregarding her partly unconscious feelings and emotions, the outcome is bound to be a failure, or so she reports it. For example, when the doctors – further embodiments of the rational patriarchal order – plan to induce the birth of her son before the full term of the pregnancy, she agrees because she considers herself ignorant, and the result is a long, exhausting, and dangerous labour. She had decided 'to use my mind like a civilized woman', but she acknowledges: 'I should be less reasonable and to go on trusting in the unconscious' (*Belonging* 143).

Thirdly, Willa Muir links the maternal principle to human creativity at a more metaphorical or immaterial level: 'If the full content of motherhood is thus recognized, it must inevitably be recognized as a special application of the creative power of women'.<sup>153</sup> According to Muir, because of the fundamental relationship between mother and child, the physical phases of conception, gestation and birth are just the beginning of motherhood as a function.<sup>154</sup> The importance of being a mother for Muir can be estimated from the fact that although she thinks of herself as an artist, she values her literary work less than her maternal role in the upbringing of her son Gavin: 'I am finishing *Mrs Ritchie* of which I have some hopes. It is – or it will be – much better than my first novel. However, I think my best piece of work is Gavin – a large, well-made, healthy

<sup>151</sup> Muir, *Women: An Enquiry*, p.10.

<sup>152</sup> Muir, *Women: An Enquiry*, p.7.

<sup>153</sup> Muir, *Women: An Enquiry*, p.9.

<sup>154</sup> Muir, *Women: An Enquiry*, p.9.

clever boy!'<sup>155</sup> Thus, according to Muir, the duty of the mother is to foster her child's intellect and spirit, as well as to nurture her/his body; a mother not only produces a human body: she creates a human being.<sup>156</sup> Because of her/his defencelessness and immaturity, Muir insists, the child is at the mercy of her/his mother, who can ruin or strengthen the harmony between the conscious and the unconscious which is necessary for the fulfilment of human potential.<sup>157</sup> Female creative power has its counterpart in an equal power for destruction. It is in the context of these creative/destructive female forces evidenced in motherhood that Muir affirms that the artist must possess both feminine and masculine qualities: immediate access to the intuitions of unconscious life and the ability to create conscious form.<sup>158</sup>

There are, however, two traditional notions associated with motherhood to which Willa Muir seems not to object. The author does not seem to challenge the concept of maternal instinct, which would presumably be linked to the forces of the unconscious. For example, Muir affirms that women exercise their creative power on human beings 'with the sureness of intuitive knowledge'.<sup>159</sup> The other notion that Muir appears not to question is women's socialization into motherhood. Even though, while speaking about the narrow traditional morality imposed upon women, the author complains about 'the pressure of conventional values [...] applied to girls almost from childhood', at the same time, she affirms, apparently as an incontrovertible truth, that 'it is a woman's destiny to create

<sup>155</sup> National Library of Scotland, Willa Muir, Letter to Marion Lochhead, 3 March 1933. MS26190/95-7

<sup>156</sup> Muir, *Women: An Enquiry*, p.9.

<sup>157</sup> Muir, *Women: An Enquiry*, p.9.

<sup>158</sup> Muir, *Women: An Enquiry*, p.27.

<sup>159</sup> Muir, *Women: An Enquiry*, p.15.

human beings'.<sup>160</sup> Although if human beings are to be created at all, this statement about women's destiny is true, Muir, however, does not mean that women who do not have children are fleeing from their destiny. In the same essay, the author rejects the term 'superfluous women', a term used to qualify childless and/or unmarried women, who – in societies where women's existence is justified only by producing children – are considered 'failures in life' and ridiculous nuisances.<sup>161</sup>

### 2.2.2 The Mother-Daughter Relationship

Willa Muir's relationship with her mother probably reveals the conflict between an older woman intent on socializing her daughter into patriarchy, and the younger woman's struggle for self-determination. Throughout Muir's writings there is very little information about the author's relationship with her mother, which is significant in itself, and it has interested scholars of Muir's life and work.<sup>162</sup> Kirsty Allen believes that Muir was aware of the 'barrier of fundamental misunderstanding which separated her from her mother' and that 'its existence saddened her'; according to Allen, Muir 'expressed an equivocal and ambivalent attitude to her mother: their interaction over the years was characterised by tension, suppressed emotion and frustration'.<sup>163</sup> Although there are very few references to Muir's daughter-mother relationship in *Belonging*, in most of these references the mother appears to be criticizing, disapproving, or minimizing her daughter's achievements and decisions. For example, Muir writes: 'My mother

<sup>160</sup> Muir, *Women: An Enquiry*, p.13.

<sup>161</sup> Muir, *Women: An Enquiry*, p.5.

<sup>162</sup> Kirsty Allen, 'The Life and Work of Willa Muir, 1890-1955' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of St. Andrews, 1997).

<sup>163</sup> Allen, 'Life and Work', p.29.

ignored my announcement about marrying Edwin, having probably acquired the habit of discounting anything I said' (*Belonging* 27). The mother stands for the patriarchal image of motherhood. That is why the older woman is resistant and slow to react to Muir's determination to break with pre-established patterns of behaviour: 'I had to write again and insist that I was really going to get married. This time she reacted, pleading that I must come home and be married *properly* by a minister of the Kirk' (*Belonging* 27; emphasis added). Indeed, Muir's mother probably did not understand Muir's desire to go against convention. The older woman had been socialized into a self-abnegatory mothering pattern, which mainly involved dependence on others – sometimes only emotionally, although frequently economically as well – and putting concerns about others' needs before one's own needs. Male authority and power were keystones in such a conception. Willa Muir's younger self longs for movement, freedom, independence, boundlessness, existence outside the home environment, and experience of the wider world. But at the same time, she is aware that her mother values the kind of education that her daughter has had and expects her to choose an equally well-educated husband. This is why Willa Muir doesn't expect her mother to approve of Edwin: 'I knew that she [her mother] had been disappointed at my marrying a mere clerk instead of a minister of the Kirk or a university professor' (*Belonging* 33). Yet, when the newly-wed couple visits the mother, she tends to be friendlier towards Edwin than to her own daughter: 'She was inclined to favour him rather than me, for she valued men more than women and would have been sorry for any man I married' (*Belonging* 33). The reasons the mother gives for her sympathy towards Edwin are closely associated with what she supposes are the duties of any married woman – who is also, potentially, a mother: 'He would never have a

button on his shirts, she told him, or on his trousers, or a pair of whole socks to put on his feet, poor Edwin' (*Belonging* 33). The daughter's independence does not match the mother's expectations. In the end her mother retreats to her received ideas about wifehood, forgetting her notions of upward mobility. On the contrary, it is perfectly easy to understand what her mother feels – she thinks at first that Willa is throwing herself away on a man who has not been sufficiently formally educated to make his way in the world. Marrying a doctor, a minister or a teacher is the lower-middle and upper-working class aspiration. But Willa's mother still expects that in becoming a wife, Willa will put her own career second, or even give it up. The man, then, should keep the woman but has a right to expect her to look after him in return. Then the way that she has lived her own life comes into play – clearly she will think there is a value in housewifely virtues since they are the ones she possesses herself. At the same time, we may conjecture that Willa's mother may unconsciously – or even partially consciously – really admire and even envy her independent, autonomous, and iconoclastic daughter. Yet, she is unable to say so, and therefore her attitude excludes the possibility of a mutually empowering experience of mother-daughter friendship. The young Willa Muir cannot grasp the possibility of unconscious reasons behind her mother's ambivalence towards her vision of a woman-centred womanhood. In these circumstances, understanding between the two women is rather difficult, and thus, Muir's rather sad and hopeless words about her mother's attitude make sense: 'How like my mother, I thought; she meant well but she did not understand' (*Belonging* 27).

### 2.2.3 The Mother-Son Relationship

In order to better understand Muir's maternal relationship with her son Gavin as well as her attitude towards Edwin, I find it helpful to examine Muir's personal traits. Muir was a sensitive person, she was an artist; she was attentively aware of her surroundings and reacted promptly to them; she wanted to be happy and to develop her full potential – her potential being mainly related to her intellectual capacity, as this was the only way she could overcome the limitations imposed by the difficult economic situation of her family, her social class, and her gender (*Belonging* 28). And after all, she *was* intelligent and certainly intellectually inclined. She set, however, extremely high standards for herself and for her loved ones. These standards comprehended not only ways of doing things – patterns of behaviour – but also ways of thinking and evaluating – beliefs and moral standards. Muir was constantly searching for perfection: consequently it was crucial to get things right, to avoid at all costs making an error. This attitude is reflected in the way she deals with her husband's lack of public-speaking skills before he had to give a lecture:

I persuaded him to get in a little practice at speaking out, in our sitting-room, where I sat at one end and commented on his delivery as he stood at the other. He then prepared a good script, on 'The Novel'. At that time lecturing without a script was a bee in my bonnet, but Edwin was not yet ready to do that. I went to the lecture-room with hopes of his acquitting himself well. I should sit at the very back of the hall, I told him, and he was to look for me and pitch his voice straight at me (*Belonging* 49).

This search for perfection made her intransigent and opinionated, and in daily life feelings of anger and contempt for those who disagreed with her notions of correct behaviour were difficult to keep at bay. This was the case with some of Edwin's friends:

John Holms exasperated me, with his public-school attitudes, especially to women (at any rate, to me). He and Kingsmill treated women as powers to be propitiated at times, to be despised at other times, and never as rational partners in an intelligent life. So they, or



each of them, talked exclusively to Edwin, simply leaving me out, whenever the conversation as usual came to literature, or literary men.<sup>164</sup>

In *Belonging*, Muir narrates a curious episode where she could not avoid scoring a victory over Holms:

Holms came unexpectedly up to me and in his silkiest voice said: 'I hope you don't mind my mentioning it, Willa, but how is it I never see you washing or darning Edwin's socks the way Dorothy does mine?'

I did not let even the flicker of a smile show on my face as I answered, in the patient voice of a governess instructing and inquisitive child: 'Well, you see, Edwin doesn't have horribly sweaty feet like yours and so doesn't need to wear fine woollen socks or have them washed every day.' (I knew about the sweaty feet because Dorothy had complained to me.) Holms withdrew as noiselessly as he had come (*Belonging* 87).

At the same time, Muir also despises Holms's partner, Dorothy, for being so submissive: 'I despised Dorothy in my heart for expecting nothing else than to be kept in comfort like a pet animal by some partner or other. If you could call such an association a partnership, I said to myself with disdain' (*Belonging* 91). Muir could have answered Holms straightaway declaring her beliefs opposed to women submissiveness and servility. She could have said: 'because I don't think women should wash their husband's socks'. Instead, she chooses to make fun of Holms, eluding direct confrontation. Thus, there is a kind of evasion going on along with Muir's combativeness, which could be partly attributed to the self-abnegatory pattern of womanhood into which Muir had been socialized, still coexisting with the author's conscious more liberal ideas. Her resentment for forcefully imposed male authority and power – of which Holms was a characteristic representative – was possibly mixed with guilt and doubt, and all of that, was covered by Muir's alleged disdain for Holms and Dorothy.

Self-imposed high standards, compelling her to do the correct thing are paradoxically doomed to failure, as humanness implies flaws, and given Muir's kind of aggressive defensiveness, any evidence of error in her life provoked her

<sup>164</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, Journal January 1951-September 1953 (20 August 1953), Box 5. MS38466/5/6.

anxiety, anguish, and frustration. Muir found it difficult to forgive herself for having made decisions that didn't work out, as for example her decision to move to St Andrews, where Edwin felt miserably unhappy:

I grieved. The uncharacteristic acerbity of Edwin's remarks about Scotland was a measure of the effect living in St Andrews had had on him, and I knew that I was responsible for his being in St Andrews. Neither by look nor by word did Edwin blame me, but I blamed myself (*Belonging* 195).

The devastating effects of these feelings on Muir's self-image explain those passages of her autobiography and/or her diaries where the otherwise open strong-willed and self-determined woman reveals underlying low self-esteem and painful feelings of inadequacy. Thus, when Edwin wrote eight love poems to her – which would be published in his volume *The Narrow Place* – she burst 'into a passion of tears, because I knew too well that I was only a botched version of what I was meant to be' (*Belonging* 210-11). To escape feeling vulnerable, to avoid *anxiety*, Muir needs to be in control of herself and her surroundings – and this includes her family. Lack of control can be dreadful: 'A shadow of fear touched me, lightly, but enough to make my heart sink a little. This was a new Edwin. There was much in him that I did not know' (*Belonging* 31). Knowledge seems to imply the ability to control a particular situation. Since emotionalism is associated with spontaneity and upheaval, i.e. loss of control, Muir seems to take refuge from the volatility of emotions by overvaluing *rationality*.

The importance Muir attaches to rational thinking pervades all the aspects of her life, including her maternal role. Certainly, in her writings, Muir says very little about the significance motherhood has for her in the fulfilment of her emotional needs. Most of her references to motherhood are accompanied by rational arguments, as for example her analysis of the essential nature of woman in *Women: An Enquiry*.

Yet if motherhood can be defined, rightly or wrongly, as the sole function of women, it must be a function which in some degree expresses the quality of womanhood as distinct from manhood. Even in this artificially narrowed field of activity one should be able to find some clue to the essential nature of women.<sup>165</sup>

Childbearing represents, for Muir, the exercise of a privilege denied to men. She finds it significant that motherhood is a role which can only be fulfilled by women: 'But only a woman can create human beings'.<sup>166</sup> She is convinced that although motherhood is an option: 'all women are potential mothers, and must have the necessary reserve of energy for this function whether they intend to become mothers or not'.<sup>167</sup> Therefore, Muir's experience and acceptance of motherhood in her life is equivalent to a statement of feminism.<sup>168</sup> In *Belonging*, the first reference to Muir's maternal role is to a miscarriage she suffered at the beginning of 1926, which gets only this bare mention in the memoir: 'I had a miscarriage, which left me feeling forlorn and empty, reduced in spirit as well as weak; because of our close companionship this *lapse* of mine made Edwin low-spirited too and hampered his essay-writing' (*Belonging* 122; emphasis added). Although Muir expresses some of the negative feelings that dispirited her, she clearly minimises her consequent depression, describing it as a mere 'lapse'. Later, while pregnant with Gavin, Muir observes her pregnant self with calculated rationality and conscious detachment from her emotions. She chiefly resents how little she has been taught about the whole process she is experiencing:

At school and University the formal education would have been the same had I been a he instead of a she with one exception: at the age of sixteen, I was told, along with the other girls in our class, that being females we were not to study electricity and magnetism, subjects reserved for senior boys, but would take botany or domestic hygiene instead. We all, of course, opted for botany, yet the study of flower fertilisation did not tell us much about human conception, and our being sheltered from a knowledge of electricity was not

<sup>165</sup> Muir, *Women: An Enquiry*, p.5.

<sup>166</sup> Muir, *Women: An Enquiry*, p.4.

<sup>167</sup> Muir, *Women: An Enquiry*, p.6.

<sup>168</sup> Allen, 'Life and Work', p.205.

much of a help either when we came to grow up. So it was with great ignorance that I observed my pregnancy.<sup>169</sup>

Muir's awareness of her ignorance in the matter leads her to make the *rational* decision to trust the doctors' opinion, allowing them to induce the birth some weeks early. In *Belonging* she recalls what happened when, 'in a *reasonable* frame of mind' she went to see the doctors in London:

In a matter-of-fact and utterly *reasonable* manner they frightened me. The baby's head was already so big, they said, it would be dangerous for me to let the pregnancy go on until full term. Thirty-seven was too old an age to take such a risk with a first baby. I must have birth 'induced' some weeks beforehand.

I had no counter-arguments, for the doctors appeared *rationally* certain and I knew myself ignorant. Convinced that I must be '*reasonable*', I agreed. The result was an unnaturally prolonged labour (*Belonging* 143-44; emphasis added).

For Muir, at that time, rational thinking seems to be the *sumum bonum*, justifying most of her opinions and choices – although in retrospect, she laments not having trusted her instinct, which she calls 'the unconscious' (*Belonging* 143).

Muir's record of her son's early years – the 'Marmaduke's Diary' – provides a useful insight into her relationship with Gavin.<sup>170</sup> The journal is a register of Muir's ideas and hypotheses about the psychology of childhood and the child's earliest interactions with the world: Gavin is the object of observation. Any baby, it seems, could have served the same purpose. There is no resemblance to the traditional baby book, full of sentiment and rejoicing for the baby in her/his uniqueness. The journal begins:

*Marmaduke*

*aged six weeks.*

*notes on thumb-sucking (or rather, fist sucking).*

sucking pleasantly toned, because of influx of warm milk.

baby does not differentiate among stimuli – anything put into mouth provokes reaction of sucking.

A certain tension in sucking. His fists almost automatically clench themselves lightly – when he sucks, the arms are pressed in.<sup>171</sup>

<sup>169</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, *Belonging*. Draft version. MS38466/2 and MS38466/3.

<sup>170</sup> Possibly Marmaduke would not have seemed as *outré* to Muir as to us – Marmaduke Pickthall was a translator and scholar that the Muirs probably knew.

<sup>171</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, 'Marmaduke's Diary', Box 5. MS38466/5/1.

Muir calls her baby by his name only once, in the whole record of his development during his first six months, effectively depersonalising him. Kirsty Allen finds the diary unusual 'for its scientific and unemotional objectivity and its depiction of Gavin as a phenomenon rather than a person'.<sup>172</sup> According to Allen, in the diary, 'Gavin's every action was recorded and converted into some psychological absolute; the journal betrays a vaguely fanatical fascination with his behavioural reactions to himself, his environment and his bodily functions'.<sup>173</sup> The journal includes, for example, notes on the pleasure derived from breastfeeding versus the bottle feeding, alongside information about intestinal movements and excrement, the baby's apparent lack of interest in his penis, and what she understands as the budding development of the infant's ego. The system of child-feeding chosen by Muir, the influential Truby King system, insisted upon the danger of allowing the baby to act in a dictatorial way in relation to the satisfaction of her/his own needs.<sup>174</sup> In that system, discipline and routine were the keystones. At that time, Muir only vaguely wondered about the consequences of such system for the baby, questioning whether 'feeding to timetable = emotional starvation'.<sup>175</sup> At the time of writing her autobiography, however, Muir questions her decision in the past and asks herself

<sup>172</sup> Allen, 'Life and Work', p.224.

<sup>173</sup> Allen, 'Life and Work', p.225.

<sup>174</sup> Dr Frederick Truby King, the founder of the renowned New Zealand Plunket Society, was one of the most influential experts in child-rearing during the early twentieth century. He launched a successful movement to convert mothers to breast feeding, which significantly helped to reduced infant mortality. Besides that aim, his method dictated to feed the baby by clock every four hours during the day and never during the night. Otherwise the baby would become spoiled and – according to the prevailing moral code – no use as a soldier, which was then crucial to the survival of the nation. To toughen them up, babies were to spend much of the day on their own outside in the fresh air, and should not be cuddled or comforted even when in distress. Mothers were not encouraged to play with babies, because it would excite them too much. Fathers had no role except earning money.

F. Truby King, *Feeding and Care of Baby* (London: Macmillan, 1925).

<sup>175</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, 'Marnaduke's Diaries', Box 5. MS38466/5/1.

whether I ought to have followed such a rational, mathematically spaced regimen, feeding my baby exactly every four hours, instead of letting him satisfy himself when he felt like it. Aware of how little I knew, I reasoned that I had better follow expert guidance. It did not dawn on me that the mathematical intellect may not be a good controller of natural processes which do not rigidly follow clock-time although now, when it is much too late, I have my doubts.<sup>176</sup>

It must have been very difficult for Muir, used to authority as she was, to confront her inexperience and ignorance in the unknown sphere of child-rearing. Yet here again, in following the 'expert guidance', Muir is making the same kind of mistake as when she listened to the advice of the doctors about induction. Her cautious resolution is another indication of Muir's deep self doubt and insecurity, of her need to rationalise and extensively analyse any situation before making a decision, in order to avoid the possibility of a mistake.

In her autobiography, Muir mentions her role as a mother in terms of its direct consequences on her and her husband's lives. The new parents were awed at finding themselves turned into the traditional figures of a mother and a father: 'The baby was a credit to us both. We now felt more deeply that we belonged to the human race, not only to each other: his presence made an extra resonance in the chord of daily life' (*Belonging* 144). As Gavin grows up, however, he has a disrupting effect on the daily routines of the otherwise well-organised and self-sufficient couple. For example, Muir refers to the times when Gavin would interrupt her literary work when arriving home from school (*Belonging* 162). Several times, the Muirs leave other people in charge of Gavin as the couple need to go away for 'a recuperative holiday' from their multiple responsibilities, caring for Gavin being one of them (*Belonging* 151). On occasion, Muir explains how guilty she feels when something happens to Gavin, believing she should have protected him better – for example, she leaves Gavin in charge of the nanny and

<sup>176</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, *Belonging*. Draft version. MS38466/2 and MS38466/3.

the cook in order to attend the PEN Congress in Budapest with Edwin, and on their return they find Gavin wheezing nervously because of the constant quarrelling between the two women. On another occasion Gavin is knocked down by a tanker while running away from a maid whom Muir had delegated to take him to the park, although she was aware the maid was terrorizing him with stories about Hell and Sin (*Belonging* 158; 171).

Gavin grew up a sensitive boy, easily unsettled, emotionally unstable and with a fragile mental equilibrium. His father, Edwin, describes him:

The slightest physical stimulus produces almost immediately such a strong physical response, driving the blood from his face, often actually hollowing his cheeks. Excitement can turn him green. I don't know what is to be done with a sensibility like that. On the other hand it is a strength, and goes with his enjoyment of music: on the other, it is sometimes paralysing to him.<sup>177</sup>

It is difficult to assess to what extent the peculiarities and inadequacies of the Muir's treatment and perception of their son were the direct cause of Gavin's singular temperament and character: it is generally accepted that there are multiple biological, psychological, and social factors determining someone's personality – it is not always or only 'the parents' fault'. Yet, many of Gavin's personality traits can be related to the style of parenting to which he was subjected. On the one hand, Muir's sense of what was due to herself, meant that she sometimes suppressed misgivings about Gavin's carers, when she needed, as she saw it, to be without him. But, on the other hand, Muir's overwhelming need to be in control and her perfectionism, made her act as an overprotective and possessive mother. She gave Gavin few opportunities to develop his autonomy and social skills. Thus, Gavin repeatedly found difficulty in adapting to new schools and peer groups (*Belonging* 187). Possibly her underlying insecurity made her – unconsciously – desire Gavin to be defenceless and weak so that she could model

<sup>177</sup> Edwin Muir, Letter to Alec Aitken, St Andrews, July 1938. In *Selected Letters of Edwin Muir*, ed. by Peter Butter (London: Hogarth Press, 1974), p.102-3.

him according to her ideas of perfection. Even when Gavin was old enough to do things by himself, to take his own decisions and to make his own mistakes, his mother could not avoid interfering, in a belittling manner. When in September 1953, for example, the twenty-five-year-old Gavin had to go to the Royal Academy of Music in London to sit his LRAM test as a piano performer, he did not confirm the accommodation his mother had arranged for him, with a friend of hers, until it was too late. Muir's commentary was:

Our son seems to have no common sense. He talked, vaguely, of getting a bed & breakfast hotel, somewhere, and then, if he were broke in consequence, he would hitch-hike home again! He does not realise at all what London is like. He calls us 'possessive' if we intervene in his affairs, and yet he messes himself up if he is left alone.<sup>178</sup>

Muir talks of her son here as if he were still a child or a teenager unable to organise his life without guidance from his parents. Her words are inflexibly critical. Gavin's failure to secure in advance the arrangements for his trip to London seemed to prove Muir right. She could not tolerate Gavin's attempts at independence, allowing him to learn by experience or to have a different opinion or style of doing things from hers. Gavin's passive opposition to the authority of his mother — together with the easiness with which he replaced her former plans for alternative plans of his own — probably made her feel not needed any longer, unnecessary in Gavin's life. She was losing control, so she accused her son of ineptitude, of not being grateful to her for all her past efforts to help him, and of treating her in an unfair way. At a deeper level, Muir was possibly afraid of Gavin wanting to openly rebel against her and wanting to live his life his own way. Moreover, Muir became jealous if her son showed interest and love for someone else — as for example, the immediate dislike and distrust Muir showed of Dorothy

<sup>178</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, Journal January 1951 September 1953(12 September 1953), Box 5. MS38466/5/6.



who later became Gavin's wife, and who always resented Muir's maternal possessiveness.<sup>179</sup>

Muir's excessive rationality and need to be in control of her emotions made her appear distant or even cruel towards her son, even from his earliest years, as seems to be indicated by her entries in the 'Marmaduke's Diary', or by her choice of the rigid breast feeding system, which did not adapt to the ever-changing needs of the baby.<sup>180</sup> Under that parenting style, Gavin may well have come to feel that his communication of physical and emotional needs had no influence on his parents. He seems to have given up on getting a warm, positive response from his parents, to have suppressed his own anxiety and distanced himself from others. As a consequence, Gavin probably developed a negative view of himself, as unworthy of responsiveness from those he loved most, and his appearance of emotional detachment was possibly a form of protection. For example, his reaction when he failed the LRAM performers' exam for a second time, makes his mother – who 'couldn't resist opening the envelope' containing the results, addressed to her son – complain about his restrained reaction: 'He took it "well"; that is, he did not make any demonstration and said it must have been a "close shave"'. Perhaps it would have been better had he burst into tears and let something out'.<sup>181</sup> Actually, it seems to be that Gavin had mixed feelings about close relationships; he desired to have emotionally close relationships, but he felt uncomfortable with emotional closeness, or with having to depend on them, being worried that he could be hurt, if he allowed himself to become too close to others.

<sup>179</sup> Allen, 'Life and Work', p.473.

<sup>180</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, 'Marmaduke's Diaries', Box 5. MS38466/5/1.

Truby King, *Feeding and Care*.

<sup>181</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, Journal January 1951-September 1953(30 September 1953), Box 5. MS38466/5/6.

Gavin's troublesome feelings and his mother's response to them are registered in the journal Muir kept while in Newbattle:

One night, about 3 a.m., I heard him [Gavin] stumbling outside our door, in the corridor. I leapt from bed, opened the door, and he laid his head on my shoulder and sobbed. 'I want to tell you that I love you very much, and I'm sorry I haven't been able to show it'. I was at once alarmed and exalted: something was breaking through his armour. I comforted him, cuddling, soothing, babying & then got him to bed, got in beside him and babyed him until he slept.<sup>182</sup>

Muir's describes her reaction to Gavin's honest and direct acknowledgment of suffering and guilt, using the words 'alarmed' and 'exalted'. Her declared concern about her son's emotional misery is not strong enough to conceal the fact that she appears almost delighted by her son's apology, because it seems to demonstrate — both to herself and to others — that she had been right all along. Gavin's 'armour' was 'breaking' under the pressure of his possessive, dominant mother, who subsequently 'babyed' him as he were still an infant.

And so from an early age, Gavin was obliged to negotiate parents who behaved in a contradictory manner, who were sometimes overprotective and sometimes distant, sometimes adequate and sometimes neglectful. This inconsistency possibly explains Gavin's vulnerability, his struggle to achieve independence or to be adventurous, and it made it difficult for him to cope with stress. That Gavin perceived his bond with his parents as insecure is the most likely explanation for his reaction every time he faced the possibility of separation from his parents:

Gavin has had asthmatic bronchitis: came on at Reg's party, after he played Polonaise [...] First asthma as a child of 5 while we went to PEN in Budapest (1932); second when we thought of sending him to Canada in 1940; third, now, when he feels division from us again. Soothed, encouraged, cosseted him: he is now all right: sense of division, I think, smoothed out.<sup>183</sup>

<sup>182</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, Journal January 1951-September 1953(19 August, 1953), Box 5. MS38466/5/6.

<sup>183</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, Diary 1947-January 1948(10 January, 1948), Box 5. MS38466/5/2.

Even when the young Gavin, in desperate need of sympathy and understanding, is old enough to confront his mother, he may receive her psychological theorising. Muir recorded an episode in her journal that indicates such a pattern:

He [Gavin] came & sat between us [Willa and Edwin] & cried a little. Then he became a little aggressive, later still, and begged me not to be *so possessive*. This hurt, of course, for I have been leaning over backwards for years to avoid influencing him, to avoid interfering – Oh dear! – how can one be wise? But I went to see him & told him, with urgency, that I wasn't ever trying to master him. That love is clean away from the dominant/submissive world. That I didn't think I had humiliated him or won a victory when he wept on my shoulder. That submission and victory were not in the realm of love at all. I think it made some impression. Since then he has been opener, kinder, & more 'matey'. We are now having breakfast all together in the dining room, instead of in bed.<sup>184</sup>

Muir's response to her son's emotional breakdown, her rational explanation of love as something 'clean away from the dominant/submissive world [...] That submission and victory were not in the realm of love at all', is perhaps too theoretical to do its job of consolation. The son searches for reassurance of his mother's love and receives rather reductive rationalization instead. Muir certainly 'made some impression': her son must have felt that his attempt to approach his mother was hopeless.

Muir's perfectionist standards made her inclined to pick out the flaws in others, especially those close to her; it also made it difficult for her to provide a nurturing environment in which being human and fallible is expected and understood. It must have been very difficult for Muir to accept that her son, far from being perfect, was partially deaf, socially unskilled, academically unsuccessful, and plagued by confusing emotional troubles. Besides, Muir habitually engaged in a style of conversation where heated conflict frequently developed, even about trivial matters, because of her need to achieve absolute clarity in the resolution of issues. Consequently, and to Muir's despair, her son

<sup>184</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, Journal January 1951-September 1953 (19 August, 1953), Box 5. MS38466/5/6.

Gavin developed an avoidant style of response to social interaction, where he would bail out of conversations or avoid areas of debate likely to become disputatious. According to Kirsty Allen, Muir was 'often pointedly irritated by Gavin's failure to respond to comment or conversation; and she claimed that Gavin's hardness of hearing was, in part, a consciously manufactured defensive mechanism'.<sup>185</sup>

Inevitably, as Gavin grew up, his oddity became increasingly manifest.

Kirsty Allen describes him:

He was a social misfit and was entirely unable to deal with normal human interaction or to communicate except through music. His deafness had served to alienate him further and had allowed him to construct an insurmountable barrier between himself and the world around him. It was a mysterious barrier between himself and the world around him. It was a mysterious deafness which appeared to respond to circumstances and to Gavin's will.<sup>186</sup>

Allen refers also to the effect Gavin had on his parents:

Their son had become an unknown and unknowable figure [...] who communicated with them only in frenzied and angry outbursts. His peculiarities frightened, upset and irritated them both; and they were often guilty of cruelty which possibly arose from their sense of impotence.<sup>187</sup>

The Muirs desperately wanted to help and support their son, but they felt powerless - they did not know what to do or how to react. Muir tried to interpret and understand Gavin's psychological problems, but she was often guilty of reducing his human suffering by general, theorising:

*What* can get deep enough in him to harmonise his conflicts? We do all we can by providing a loving, kind environment, but he is still on the defensive, putting up armour against a hostile world, being himself hostile in his interpretation of stray words & gestures. It is this split, this cutting-off, this projection of an invisible *line*, on one side of which all is suspect, that is the most trying element in his pattern. The line is laid down and strengthened by *ideology*. Theory about parents, about mothers, about complexes, about politics, determines and blankets what he sees of the real world, so that his whole vision is distorted. This must be partly due to ambition, to a too strong cultivation of the ego, to an urge towards assertion of himself; he asserts himself therefore in the wrong ways, by withdrawal, suspicion, rudeness, deafness. And yet there is *inside* him a

<sup>185</sup> Allen, 'Life and Work', p.471.

<sup>186</sup> Allen, 'Life and Work', p.470.

<sup>187</sup> Allen, 'Life and Work', p. 472.

fountain of affection, a childlike naïveté, a warmth and simplicity, that would make him very lovable and charming were he to let it flow out spontaneously.<sup>188</sup>

Ironically, Muir accuses her son of excessive ideologising and theorising, of not letting go his emotions spontaneously, which is the way *she* would have coped with a situation like Gavin's. Evidently, at this point, Muir is only capable of explaining Gavin's emotional withdrawal by hiding her own fears and ignorance behind psychological hypotheses – again the opinion of the experts wins over her own instinctive wisdom, because expert opinion makes her feel safer and more assured than recognising her helplessness and ignorance. Muir undoubtedly loved her son, and was concerned about his difficulties and troubles. Her own personality, at that stage of her life, however, only allowed her to respond to Gavin's needs in a way which was not the most appropriate for him, however much it demonstrates her maternal affection and care.

Muir's maternal attitude is also evident in her relationship with her husband. It is possible to say that Muir, to some extent, 'mothered' Edwin. She speaks, for example, of 'lulling' her husband to sleep:

My ability to ensure a good sleep for Edwin was one of the mysteries of our relationship. It was simply done; he laid his head on my right shoulder with my right arm around him and his right arm laid over me; that was all. Whatever nervous tensions were in him relaxed and he sank easily into healing sleep. I had of course to lie very still, but I was able to do that for hours, if need be, until many years later when arthritis hindered me. This lulling of Edwin to sleep was one of the easiest things I did for him (*Belonging* 122).

She taught her husband to swim, to play golf, to speak in public – without the Orkney accent – and on several occasions her comments on Edwin's abilities and potentialities sound indulgent and even patronizing. Her apprehensions for her husband show Muir treating him as if he were another son: 'Remembering what had happened to Gavin while we were in Budapest, I stayed at home this time. I remembered also what had happened to Edwin, but I had now no fears at all for

<sup>188</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, Journal January 1951-September 1953 (30 September 1953), Box 5. MS38466/5/6.

him' (*Belonging* 169). She clearly states, however, the indisputable pre-eminence Edwin had in her life; she claims that in the order of her priorities, her son came only *after* her dedication to her husband: 'I had the conviction that I had come to life only to devote myself to Edwin, and in a lesser way to Gavin'.<sup>189</sup> The positioning of her son in second place after her husband can be partly interpreted as a way of expressing her conviction that being a mother was just one aspect of her personality.

## 2.2.4 Motherhood in Muir's Fiction.

In Muir's fiction, mothers are presented either as unremarkable, submissive women, like Hector's dead mother in *Imagined Corners*, who is described by her sister-in-law as a 'poor spiritless thing', or as 'formidable women', notorious for their 'strength of character'.<sup>190</sup> The most striking mother in Willa Muir's fiction work is Annie Ritchie in *Mrs Ritchie*.<sup>191</sup> *Mrs Ritchie* explores the damage a disturbed mother may inflict upon her children and family. Janet Caird suggests that the 'horrific Mrs Ritchie' has her origin, at least partially, in Muir's early life experiences:

It is very probable that the child Willa, obviously outstandingly bright, would be the odd one among the children of her Montrose primary school, and might well experience a sense of not being accepted. There is a ring of truth in the description of Annie standing miserably in the playground left out of the 'chaos of flying legs and voices' as the other girls play singing games in which her sister takes a leading part. In the holidays Annie played hopscotch by herself or spent 'most of her spare time sitting kicking her legs on a wooden bench.' Could the child Willa have spent equally solitary holidays, longing for the time when she would be back in the classroom and outshine them all?<sup>192</sup>

Mrs Ritchie certainly shares some characteristics with her creator. Indeed, Mrs Ritchie could even be considered an exaggerated version of what Muir might have

<sup>189</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, Journal 1955, Box 5. MS38466/5/6.

<sup>190</sup> Muir, *Imagined Corners*, p.41; *Mrs Grundy in Scotland*, p.50.

<sup>191</sup> Muir, *Mrs Ritchie*.

<sup>192</sup> Janet Caird, 'Cakes Not Turned: Willa Muir's Published Novels', *Chapman*, 71 (Winter 1992-93), 12-19 (p.18).

become if she had been denied the possibility of exploiting her intellectual ability, and had in frustration become self-repressed, credulous and oppressive to others. In Mrs Ritchie dominance of will replaces the spirit of intellectual enquiry, and the energy which should have gone into exploration is perversely directed against it. The exaggerated righteousness, the repression of emotion and of her sexuality are the hideous consequences of misdirected energy and the, to Muir, offensive doctrines of Calvinism are available to give direction to Mrs Ritchie's obsessions. Yet in the end, Muir constructs Mrs Ritchie as a character so extreme that it is impossible for the reader to understand or emotionally connect with her. Muir takes issues that concerned her in her own life and vexes them, as it were, to nightmare. The result is a bleak indictment of the treatment of women in general and an exposure of the dangerously repressive role of Calvinism. Beth Dickson affirms that 'the gulf between Annie's naked assertion of ego and the role which society constructs for her seems unbridgeable', so she renounces individualism 'in order to gain secure, respectable status. She adopts God as her father and sees in the church [...] the institution which awards the prize of social respectability'.<sup>193</sup> Dickson claims that the protagonist of *Mrs Ritchie* is an 'anti-heroine' who shows what happened to a woman who accepted the gender roles which the early twentieth-century Scottish provincial society offered her, being consequently transformed into 'a monster'.<sup>194</sup> We must be careful, however, not to suggest that Mrs Ritchie is constructed by Muir as an exemplary character, for Annie's response to social constriction is extreme.

<sup>193</sup> Beth Dickson, "'An Ordinary Little Girl'?" Willa Muir's *Mrs Ritchie*', in *Scottish Women's Fiction, 1920s to 1960s: Journeys into Being*, ed. by Carol Anderson and Aileen Christianson (East Linton, East Lothian: Tuckwell Press, 2000), pp.97-106(p.98).

<sup>194</sup> Dickson, "'An Ordinary Little Girl'?", p.100.

The novel begins with Annie Rattray's childhood to show the limited opportunities available to the underprivileged and, in particular, underprivileged girls. Dickson describes Annie Rattray as 'a little girl from the wrong side of the tracks who grows up looking for security in respectability, willing to use her supreme powers of determination to recreate herself in society's image of womanhood'.<sup>195</sup> At school Annie's feeble self-esteem is supported by her role as the good student. Unlike her uncomplicated and unambitious elder sister, Annie is rejected in the playground. She lives a solitary life, secretly despising her own poor and helpless family, especially her frequently-unemployed, drunk father. She feels superior to all of them.

To think that he [her father] had come to the school and shamed her there before everybody! [...] She would never forgive him. Or Mary [her older sister]. To come to the school in that state, and then Mary to take his arm! All very well for Mary, who got out of everything by shouting other people down: Mary wasn't at the top of the class; Mary had little to lose: Mary was just a black.

A black, that was what she was, and her father, yes, and her mother. A fine family to be born into.<sup>196</sup>

Because Annie is forced to define herself against her family and against her fellow pupils, she must use her good girl construction to support her sense of self. This means that she is never able to enjoy being a 'good girl' for its own sake but only for the limited power it gives her. And her teacher, Mr Boyd, while sufficiently well-equipped to recognise that Annie is different from her fellow pupils and hence to encourage her to think of going to the Academy with a bursary, has no real interest in her and takes no responsibility for the hopes he raises in her. When Annie, in response to her disappointment and her sister's persecution, fails to do her homework, he is too weak to make any effort to understand her or assist her. It is a consequence of his own inadequacy that he punishes her, thus reasserting the very institutional authority that is failing Annie in the first place. Annie's twisted

<sup>195</sup> Dickson, "An Ordinary Little Girl?", p.96.

<sup>196</sup> Muir, *Mrs Ritchie*, pp.4-5.



sense of her own rectitude supports her but Muir also uses her outrage to expose the failures of the system with its children. The schoolmaster, who ought to act as a surrogate parent to protect, can only understand authority and punishment. Muir gives considerable credibility to Annie's fury:

What right had he to strike her because of a few sums? She herself was more important than all the sums in the world. He had no right to do it, even if it had been her fault that the sums were not done, and it wasn't her fault. The headmaster was wrong, perversely wrong, and it was Annie Rattray who was right in spite of everything. She was no longer dismayed; she was furious.<sup>197</sup>

When, in spite of her intelligence and academic success, she is denied the possibility of becoming a teacher, Annie is lost. Significantly, the mother's rejection of Annie's possibility of self-improvement through further education, although justified by an appeal to economic need, is rooted in established gender expectations:

The bursary wadna pay me for your keep. *You* at the Academy? It's no' even as if you were a laddie. Na, na, my leddy, the minute you're fourteen you gang to a job, or else you'll gi'e me a hand here wi' the washin' and the hoose.<sup>198</sup>

Muir strongly suggests that education might have transformed Annie but that she is permanently damaged by its being refused to her. Failed by family and by school Annie fatally turns to God in order to support her innate sense of superiority; she decides that she has been chosen by God:

Annie felt that God was looking at her, and almost in the same moment she knew that until this very evening she had been giving herself to the devil. It was the devil who had led her into humiliation. [...] God was greater than any citizen of Calderwick – greater than Mr Boyd, greater even than the Provost who had come to the school on Prize Day. And He had singled out Annie Rattray. [...] In that moment of exaltation Annie discarded her earthly father for ever, and the isolated dream that had cut her from the others at home in Mill Wynd now rose and joined to the skies.<sup>199</sup>

After that episode, the novel that has begun as a psychological portrait of the effects of disappointment and suppressed ambition in a girl with some potential, evolves into a representation of the consequences of a barren existence that seeks

<sup>197</sup> Muir, *Mrs Ritchie*, p.31.

<sup>198</sup> Muir, *Mrs Ritchie*, p.23.

<sup>199</sup> Muir, *Mrs Ritchie*, p.41.

its validation in rigid Calvinism. Annie starts dogmatically preaching morality and moral righteousness. First as a maid, 'Annie set herself to sweep and scrub and scour with a thoroughness that shamed the devil'.<sup>200</sup> Annie despises the other girl who works with her, Bet, who is irreverent towards the mistresses and even towards God, and who enjoys life and cherishes love: 'Annie turned a contemptuous shoulder to Bet as naturally as if all her life had been spent in snubbing other people, and it was with cold, disapproving, contemptuous eyes that she watched Bet Bowman'.<sup>201</sup>

Later, Annie carries her bitterness and intransigency into her new home with Johnny Ritchie. On her wedding night, for example, she is neither able to enjoy intimacy with her husband, nor capable of giving him the warm, tender answer he needs:

Now she must be vigilant; now she must keep unsleeping that wakeful eye which was open somewhere in the top of her head . . . Her heart was trembling and pounding. The devil was stirring in her bosom; but she must not give way to him, she must keep her head.<sup>202</sup>

Mrs Ritchie believes that 'the sexual act, though necessary for procreation, is devil's wile, because of its resistance to control and the inevitable abandonment involved'.<sup>203</sup> In Mrs Ritchie's mind, sexuality and power are inextricably linked with religion.

Muir gives Mrs Ritchie her own ambitions, and some of her own real ability, but then denies her even the limited successes that she had herself. What would it be like, she asks, for a girl who had no resources, yet who sensed a real superiority; where could she turn? What would happen if she turned to the worst perversions of Calvinist belief? In a number of places, Muir criticises institutions,

<sup>200</sup> Muir, *Mrs Ritchie*, p.66.

<sup>201</sup> Muir, *Mrs Ritchie*, p.65.

<sup>202</sup> Muir, *Mrs Ritchie*, p.126.

<sup>203</sup> Dickson, "An Ordinary Little Girl"?, p.101.

particularly the church in Scotland, with its Calvinist foundations, because of their contribution to the repression of people, especially women. Mrs Ritchie becomes the fictionalised embodiment of Muir's beliefs regarding the influence of the Kirk on the repressed Scottish national psyche, which are also emphatically and ironically expressed in Muir's *Mrs Grundy in Scotland*:

The austere Lowland Scottish tradition, which for each individual drew a straight line from earth to heaven terminating in the Day of Judgement, had deeply affected the official status of women. Being women, they could not help mothering their families, but if they sought to influence their children through natural affection they were held to be 'unprincipled and careless.' That is to say, if they exercised their natural faculties of sympathetic understanding, of sensitiveness to emotional needs, they were held to be interfering with the principles of religion. [...] Man was an individual reaching to the skies; woman, being more akin to the earth, a lesser individual stopping short of the skies and therefore not to be trusted, even with her own children, unless she obeyed the precepts of the Kirk.<sup>204</sup>

Mrs Ritchie, deprived of the opportunity of self-fulfilment, tries to live through her children, wishes them to satisfy her own ambition in the way she chooses. After Mrs Ritchie adopts the church as a replacement for the school as the institution which will give her social respectability and definition, she has to repress her own ego and adopt instead rigid religious observance as the external sign of her precious respectability. Mrs Ritchie's interpretation and practice of her faith is distorted by her deep need to compensate for the emptiness of her ego. She pushes her husband to acquire pre-eminence in their local church congregation as another way of establishing the high moral status of her family – and by extension her own significance as the centre of the family. Beth Dickson argues that Mrs Ritchie's

appropriation of the tenets of the faith is so corrupted by her own need that what she exhibits is in every way a denial of what she is supposed to be practising. Her duties to her husband are ways of manipulating him to become more respectable, and her care for her children is a reign of terror in which she seeks to extirpate every human desire or inclination they may have.<sup>205</sup>

<sup>204</sup> Muir, *Mrs Grundy in Scotland*, p.49.

<sup>205</sup> Dickson, "'An Ordinary Little Girl'?", p.103.

Annie's need to dominate and her unrelenting self-righteousness absorb her children's lives: 'My house will be kept in order, thought Annie, for all you say; my bairns will be dedicated to God from before their birth'.<sup>206</sup> In her treatment of Mrs Ritchie, 'Muir indicts repressive religion and a society so determined on the pursuit of righteousness that every individual must devote his or her entire life to securing that goal. She shows religion as fertile soil for psychological disturbance'.<sup>207</sup>

Mrs Ritchie is in desperate need to be *right* in her rigidly held *truths*. But Mrs Ritchie has as much trouble in crushing her own vitality as in suppressing her children's. Muir makes us aware that there is a force within Annie Ritchie that might have been harnessed for good. It is not easy for her to beat down her rising sexual feelings on her wedding night and her fear of disturbed routine is an indication of how much she fears the potential chaos of her own inner life. As well as her extreme religious observance, she also adheres to daily and weekly rituals. The menacing unpredictability of her environment is battled with perfectionism and order:

Mrs Ritchie disliked holidays, especially the summer holidays when the children were released from school. The rest of the year had its regular laws: school for the bairns, the workshop for Johnny Ritchie, and for Mrs Ritchie the recurring seasons of house-cleaning and jam-making; but in the summer holidays, fittingly called 'the break-up,' the days of the week were smashed into lawless fragments and only Sundays remained intact.<sup>208</sup>

This self-imposed systematic pattern of orderliness comprehends the character's inner life as well. Mrs Ritchie restrains her emotions lest she act in a way that she will regret. She hides her real feelings of vulnerability because they expose her to the possibility of rejection. For Mrs Ritchie happiness and other positive feelings are more dangerous than anger and fear; all emotions fill her with anxiety as they

<sup>206</sup> Muir, *Mrs Ritchie*, p.131-32.

<sup>207</sup> Dickson, "'An Ordinary Little Girl'?", p.104.

<sup>208</sup> Muir, *Mrs Ritchie*, p.157.

threaten her sense of control. Muir shows how repressed feelings explode as anger and violence towards Johnny Ritchie, John Samuel, or even towards Sarah Annie – violence which ultimately leads to the daughter's rebellion and escape. From the beginning, Mrs Ritchie's relationship with her children is painfully frustrating; when John Samuel is still a toddler, for example, he stands staring at his baby sister when she is put to her mother's breast, a habit Mrs Ritchie finds embarrassing and irritating, and so one day she pushes him into the back garden and locks him out:

John Samuel beat with his fists on the door crying: 'Let Johnsammo in! Let Johnsammo in!' and his sobbing and yelling went on unceasingly while Mrs Ritchie was coaxing milk into Sarah Annie. By the time that the baby was laid down, she too screaming, Mrs Ritchie was twittering with rage, and she took John Samuel by the ear and locked him in the coal-cellar, saying: 'You can scream there as much as you like.'<sup>209</sup>

In the character of Mrs Ritchie, Muir explores and exemplifies the damage done by repression to the 'human spirit', and the harm done by the damaged self to others.

It could be even said that Mrs Ritchie literally takes delight in being wronged, since it affords her, what she perceives as the justification for stern punishment. Thus, when Bet Reid threatens her with the 'Cruelty man' because of the daily screams of John Samuel when his mother hits him for being late from school, Mrs Ritchie reacts with secret exultation:

Mrs Ritchie's icy dignity concealed a heart palpitating with fear and exultation; the Enemy was coming more into the open; she was in for it now. She was marked out as a martyr for righteousness' sake. Let them all attack her; she would show them that she was not to be downed.

When John Samuel came home that day, not quite so late as formerly, he received the thrashing he deserved, and, indeed, expected but on top of it he got a long and searching lecture about hell and the devil. Mrs Ritchie saw, with triumph, that she was prevailing. John Samuel, sobbing broken-heartedly, promised to be good and to obey her to the letter.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> Muir, *Mrs Ritchie*, pp.140-41.

<sup>210</sup> Muir, *Mrs Ritchie*, p.146.

Later when she realises that her son does not want to follow the path she has prepared for him, she feels deeply disappointed and does not hesitate to reject him completely: 'Her son was not to be a minister. She need not worry whether he would be a credit or a discredit to her in heaven. She would never see him there at all. He would have vanished into limbo'.<sup>211</sup>

Possibly, the most obviously shocking point about Mrs Ritchie is that she is a mother but, at the same time, she possesses attributes completely opposed to the maternal. That is why she has been called 'a true monster'.<sup>212</sup> But, of course, Mrs Ritchie is powerful precisely *because* she is a mother, and exerts her destructive power over her family. Because of her mistaken conception of self-sacrifice, her misleading sense of guilt, her disastrously stern repression, and her delusorily religious morality, Mrs Ritchie ends breaking down everybody she claims to love. Annie Ritchie characterises as devilish, forces coming from the unconscious or instinctive self – as for example, sexuality – and punishes her children and husband for any natural gesture of self-expression. Mrs Ritchie embodies the negation of the creative dimension, which Muir associates with women's role as facilitators of the fullest development of individuals. Mrs Ritchie experiences no sense of emotional fulfilment from her maternal role. Her world is one of duty and rules, completely lacking in feelings and emotional warmth. Aware only of self-imposed limitations and restrictions, she cannot access any kind of interpersonal relationship, just as her clean house remains locked: 'Indeed, the house was Mrs Ritchie, and Mrs Ritchie was the house'.<sup>213</sup> Instead of developing the potential in the lives and spirits of others, Annie Ritchie destroys it, as it was destroyed in her.

<sup>211</sup> Muir, *Mrs Ritchie*, p.201.

<sup>212</sup> Caird, 'Cakes Not Turned', p.14. See also Dickson, "'An Ordinary Little Girl'?", p.97.

<sup>213</sup> Muir, *Mrs Ritchie*, p.192.

Mrs Ritchie's psychological oppression of her husband and children is in part explained by what has been done to her, by the ways in which she herself has been failed but the psychological oppression it is coupled with a streak of perverse physical cruelty which it is hard to blame on external forces. The final beating of her daughter out of bed with a hairbrush until her face is bruised is simply too crazy to merit analysis. In the end Sarah Annie runs 'for dear life' away from her mother and so does the reader.<sup>214</sup> The novel finally teeters on the edge of a wild black comedy that undermines the seriousness of its first part. Yet, Muir does make us see that, if we want good mothers, we must enlarge the opportunities for women and only once women are themselves fulfilled will they be able fully to nurture others.

To sum up, Willa Muir's attitude towards the polymorphous theme of motherhood is composed of several interconnected aspects. She recognizes maternity in its social role as an essential human principle, but at the same time, she appreciates the substantial impact maternity has on women's lives and the consequences and problems it brings about for women's personal development. Notwithstanding, Muir values the creative aspect of motherhood and the powerful influence it might exercise over human society. The exploration of the author's own relationship with her mother and with her son undoubtedly assists an understanding of Muir's complex response to the various aspects of motherhood. But it is in her fiction – and especially in the character of Annie Ritchie – that the author allows herself to express her own ambivalence towards an experience and a role, which could be felt as personally threatening and emotionally fulfilling at the same time.

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<sup>214</sup> Muir, *Mrs Ritchie*, p.273.





## 2.3 Belonging to the Universe

Between perishable body & sense of immortal self-hood, where do we stand?  
The abyss before us, but a feeling of *belonging* to the universe, & of understanding much of it:  
how can that vanish into nothingness?  
Willa Muir<sup>215</sup>

Towards the end of her life, Willa Muir wrote: 'I had discovered that if Edwin and I did not Belong together, I now Belonged nowhere' (*Belonging* 84). In this moving statement, Muir expresses both the intense feeling that linked her to her husband and the significance she attached to 'belonging'. She declares that if her relationship with Edwin were to suffer any disruption – as of course happened with Edwin's death – she would not identify herself with any other person or group. This indicates her perception that she was not a typical member of any identifiable group, as for example, the Scottish nation, the community of women, of writers, of academics, a well defined ethnic group, a social class, etc. Although she concedes that it is possible to describe herself as a member of several of these groups, she does not perceive herself as integral to any of them.

For Willa Muir 'belonging' to a group of people, a place, or a time is a complex phenomenon, constantly fluctuating and evolving, through the influence of social and personal factors. Indeed, the process of 'belonging' is crucial to Muir's concept of personal identity, and throughout the indicatively titled *Belonging* – that analytical autobiographical narrative, written late in her own life – she expresses her earnest need to 'belong'. She recognises the advantages that belonging to groups might offer towards the achievement of autonomy and self-

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<sup>215</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, Diary Prague Nov 1946-1947 (16 May 1946), Box 5. MS38466/5/2.

definition, but she stresses her lifelong effort to avoid being submerged by such groups.

### 2.3.1 Group-Identities and Muir's Sense of Self

Belonging can be considered as the informing principle throughout Muir's fictional and non-fictional works. According to Margaret Elphinstone, the issue of identity in relation to belonging is a major theme.<sup>216</sup> Elphinstone proposes that in Muir's writing 'Belonging is represented [...] in terms of an Edenic state of both Unity of Self and Union with what Muir calls "the Universe"'.<sup>217</sup> This idea is illustrated by an incident in Muir's early childhood where the sense of not belonging triggers her perception of an individual and separate self contrasted with the collective/communal force represented by other girls:

I did not feel that I belonged whole-heartedly to Montrose. Well before I was three, [...] I had discovered that I did not really belong to the Montrose way of life. My people spoke Shetland at home, so my first words were in the Norse dialect of Shetland, which was not valid outside our front door. I remembered standing in Bridge Street, where we lived, fingering my pinafore, dumb with embarrassment, while four or five older girls squealed in delighted mockery of what I had been saying and urged me to say it again (*Belonging* 5).

This episode seems to have been Muir's first experience of separation, of inner and outer division, of difference. It seems that isolated selfhood is here perceived by Muir as restrictive, and that connection to a community could prove productive and creative. One of the consequences of this experience was that it prompted her to act to modify that sense of separation: she 'adapts', learning to speak 'broad Montrose' (*Belonging* 19). It is true that she was very young then, but what is significant here is that she remembers it so much later – this is one of the few episodes of Muir's childhood mentioned in her autobiography. In another intense autobiographical experience mentioned at the beginning of *Living with Ballads*,

<sup>216</sup> Elphinstone, 'Crossing', p.400.

<sup>217</sup> Elphinstone, 'Crossing', p.400.

where Muir takes part of singing games at school, she says: 'Holding hands and dancing in a circle [...] is a primitive way of establishing a communal flow of feeling, which in turn releases imaginative energies that need to take shape'.<sup>218</sup> Here, dancing with other girls, Muir immerses herself in one of the more sustained traditions of her social group at the time, a tradition worthy of respect and that many group members willingly uphold. In these cases, belonging to a group is regarded by Muir as a source of sustenance and guidance.

Belonging to a group does not, however, entail total immersion in that group's culture and norms. Muir was aware that although integral to her own sense of self, diverging demands originating from ties to diverse groups could be emotionally claiming and they could be experienced as restricting and coercive. Although recognizing that she shares many of the characteristics of diverse groups, she is also conscious of aspects of her self that mark her difference. These conflicting dualities at the core of Muir's self may be explained by what Diana Tietjens Meyers calls *Intersectional Identity*: 'an identity drawn from diverse sources that may give rise to conflicting desires and rival allegiances, [yet] they highlight different potentialities and liabilities of such identities'.<sup>219</sup> The concept of intersectional identity is useful to describe Muir's identity because 'she refused to conform' – as her friend Catriona Soukup testifies.<sup>220</sup> Some of the contradictions Muir had to face, shaped her personality and affected her for the rest of her life. For example, she was born in Montrose, but she did not in later life feel she belonged there (*Belonging* 19). She was an academic, but she felt uneasy with the social intrigues going on in academic circles: when the Muirs were living

<sup>218</sup> Willa Muir, *Living with Ballads* (London: Hogarth, 1965), p.16.

<sup>219</sup> Diana Tietjens Meyers, *Being Yourself: Essays on Identity, Action, and Social Life* (I anham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), p.16.

<sup>220</sup> Soukup, 'Willa in Wartime', p.22.

in St Andrews they were ignored by the professors from the English Department, from whom they had expected friendly interest. Contemporary literary work was not considered literature and Edwin was despised as merely a man 'who wrote for the papers' – the Muirs were in St Andrews earning their living by writing, but they had expected to develop a closer relationship with the town intellectuals. She was also rebuffed by an old fellow-student because an association with Muir would undermine the respectable status the woman had laboriously acquired (*Belonging* 189-90). Another remarkable paradox in Muir's life is presented by her contradictory assertions about the status of women in modern society. Muir enthusiastically defended the need for gender equality, and she was a curious and active intellectual, but at the same time, she affirmed that a woman who tries to as 'be formal and abstract' as men is doomed to suffer the destruction of her spirit, and to be unproductive, as her work is necessarily unfruitful.<sup>221</sup>

Throughout her life Muir experienced a constant sense of dislocation: she was both physically and psychologically a perpetually *dis-placed* person. In her diary of 1947 she wrote: 'All emigrants are Displaced Persons. My Parents were DPs in Angus. So I grew up not fitting into Angus traditions, and was critical, resentful, unsure. Hence my recent desire to *own* a house, to belong somewhere'.<sup>222</sup> Muir's expressed desire to *own* a house signifies her longing for further completeness, as a house represents a figure for the boundaries of identity: 'the edges of the unproblematic self are the walls of the house'.<sup>223</sup> The achievement of this 'unproblematic self', however, is not easy, if indeed possible. The process implies further self-knowledge, where 'tensions between one's

<sup>221</sup> Muir, *Women: An Enquiry*, pp.25-26.

<sup>222</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, Journal 1951-53 (20 August 1953), Box 5. MS38466/5/3.

<sup>223</sup> Elphinstone, 'Crossing', p.402.

various group-identity determinants are bound to occur'.<sup>224</sup> Muir longed for a *place*, or rather, a personal position more coherent with and more truthful to her individuality. Yet, she was conscious of the difficulty of finding such place, once more searching for refuge in her relationship with Edwin: 'it is easier for a woman to find a man she can love than a home. We become nomads'.<sup>225</sup> They did become nomads, having trouble settling down for a long period of time in any given location. Throughout the years they lived successively in London, Prague, Dresden, Italy, Montrose, Buckinghamshire, Southern France, Crowborough, Hampstead, St Andrews, Edinburgh, Newbattle, the United States. Even after she achieved the home of her own at Swaffham Prior, Cambridgeshire Muir remained peripatetic. The perception of not belonging caused ambivalence and uneasiness in Muir, but it was precisely those feelings of uncertainty and resentment, and above all, her capacity for criticism which allowed her to progress in the necessary process of self-definition.

Muir's response to contradiction and uncertainty is a proof of her resilience and unusual competence in reaching autonomy. On the one hand, when she knew herself capable of a specific skill, she found the activity of practicing that skill, absorbing, enjoyable, and satisfying, and this reinforced her confidence and security. Remembering when she first discovered she could translate as a way of earning money, she said: 'I had proved my competence. [...] Having done so much translation with success at the university, I was confident that I could translate'.<sup>226</sup> On the other hand, in discovering a limitation or a fault, she was not impeded by frustration, but considered it rather as a vitalizing challenge, dealing

<sup>224</sup> Meyers, *Being Yourself*, p.36.

<sup>225</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, Diary Prague Nov 1946-47(5 February 1947), Box 5. MS38466/5/2.

<sup>226</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, Journal 1951-53(20 August 1953), Box 5. MS38466/5/6.

with any limitation with a firm sense of humour. An illustration of this frame of mind is the maxim Muir taught her friends, the Soukups, when she became more and more crippled by arthritis, almost always in pain: 'Never walk if you can stand; never stand if you can sit; never sit if you can lie down?'<sup>227</sup> Many examples of her constructive and cheerful stance can be found in Muir's fiction and non-fiction, but one of the best expressions of her active and optimistic attitude towards conflict and adversity comes from her autobiography:

To Belong to the Universe did not mean lying back in tears and making no effort; it meant rather that when you wanted to do something, to follow a 'hunch', you could be certain that it would be worth doing, that your 'hunch' corresponded somehow to the run of the Universe (*Belonging* 31-32).

At the same time as redefining her self, Muir sensed that more or less drastic processes of cultural transformation were required to secure her new identity-defining achievements. And so to catalyze needed cultural change, she used her writing. For example, after describing how she felt about some of the socio-economic and cultural problems affecting Scotland in *Mrs Grundy in Scotland*, Muir declares: 'if it [the book] will help Scotland to make a new consciousness for itself, I shall not have written in vain'.<sup>228</sup> *Mrs Grundy in Scotland* conveys her opinions about the contradictions and paradoxes she detected in Scotland. In *Women: An Enquiry*, Muir discusses the ambiguous situation of women in the patriarchal society of the time.<sup>229</sup> Muir coped with ambivalent positions and unresolved tensions creatively, transforming them into valuable sources for the examination of notions of authenticity in her writing.

Thus, the fact of existing at the border of determined groups, or belonging to divergent or even opposed groups, allows Muir to distance herself from

<sup>227</sup> Soukup, 'Willa in Wartime', p.22

<sup>228</sup> Willa Muir, *Mrs Grundy in Scotland*, p.85.

<sup>229</sup> Willa Muir, *Women: An Enquiry*.

identity-defining norms, traditions, and concepts associated with those groups. In this way she is able to detect inappropriate or negative aspects of group-identities, and constructively criticize and challenge them. For Muir, feelings of alienation and detachment serve to initiate a dynamic negotiation of identity construction. It is precisely the ambivalence and unresolved tension among the identity constituents derived from belonging to diverse groups, which allow her to advance in self-knowledge, in the achievement of autonomy, and in the construction of her personal identity.

### **2.3.2 Relationship between the Self and Its Environment**

Muir is aware of the need to resolve inner tensions among the conflicting constituents of her identity; her autobiography shows how improved self-knowledge can work towards the desired unity of self. But at the same time, she is aware of the difficulties that arise from the outer, fluid relationship between the self and its environment. Muir's concept of belonging could be characterized as involving a delicate balance between Unity of Self and Union with the Universe. In other words, the basis of Muir's concept of belonging is neither an individualistic theory of personality, nor a thorough dissolution of personal identity in its environment. Muir describes her perception of relatedness with the environment as a 'floating "experience"', always charged with 'joyousness': 'The feeling came upon me like a tide floating me out and up into the wide greening sky – into the Universe, I told myself. That was the secret name I gave it: Belonging to the Universe' (*Belonging* 14). 'Belonging to the Universe' unifies Muir's self not only with nature, but also with her human environment – this is to say with the diverse groups influencing her subjectivity in the process of

constituting her intersectional identity. Having found a certain balance seems to be rewarding and a source of peace of mind for Muir, as it is for Elizabeth Shand in *Imagined Corners*: Elizabeth, thinking about her relationship with the people around her, concludes that 'the centre of one's being, apparently, was both tranquil and inclusive'.<sup>230</sup> On the other hand, Annie Ritchie in *Mrs Ritchie* embodies the opposite position. Mrs Ritchie's inner repression, division, and separation is mirrored by her attitude towards her physical environment – she fiercely locks her house, avoiding any external influence – and towards other human beings: she detaches herself from love and life. As Elphinstone points out, 'the fundamental temptation that Annie has resisted is the temptation to belong – to be one with other humans and the world she inhabits'.<sup>231</sup> In between Elizabeth Shand's exhilarating optimism and Annie Ritchie's stern, bitter inflexibility, the balance the author achieves for herself can probably be found.

Muir yearns to discover the *place* where she may belong wholeheartedly, but at the same time, she acknowledges the problems of achieving her desired Union with the Universe – problems inherent in the human condition: 'I felt that I Belonged to the Universe, yet I believed that the human mind, because of its inborn limitations, could not grasp the mystery of the Universe I belonged to' (*Belonging* 45). Further obstacles to Muir's achievement of a complete sense of belonging are presented by her perception of Scotland's situation and her own relationship with her native country. She regards Scotland as existing in an in-between stage – that is, having the potential to be something much better, but caught, perhaps temporarily, in a form of political and intellectual immobility. Muir responds ambivalently with a mixture of familiarity with and distance from

<sup>230</sup> Willa Muir, *Imagined Corners*, p.242.

<sup>231</sup> Elphinstone, 'Crossing', p.410.



her motherland. A letter written by Muir's husband after their return from Austria in 1924 expresses the dominant feelings of the couple at the time: 'Scotland has been a sad disappointment to us after all the longing we had for it, so shut in, unresponsive, acridly resolved not to open out and live'.<sup>232</sup> Even many years later, Muir remembered her past feelings of disillusionment and resentment:

I think the whole of Scotland is a locked area for me, and I had better keep out of it. While I was in Newbattle I kept telling myself and others that it was an 'enclave', that it wasn't it at all like Lowland Scotland, that it was a 'good' eight miles from Edinburgh. [...] But instead of Newbattle spreading soundness over Scotland, the reverse happened: Lowland Scotland infected Newbattle. Edwin became so unhappy [...] that the peace & serenity of our enclave were invaded.

I see now that I rather insisted on the 'enclave' because I shrank from Lowland Scotland, as one shrinks from having a wound grazed. So I had better keep away from it.<sup>233</sup>

Scottish national identity is perceived by Muir as constructed under the shadow of the larger power of England. Muir suggests that repression is one of the outstanding characteristics of the Scottish national psyche, and that it is in part generated by Scotland's association with its larger, dominant neighbour. Muir discovers repression at all levels of what she feels is an intensely stratified society. She tries, for example, to explain women's repression partially as a consequence of Scotland's place in the British Empire:

In Britain we should have to cope with a more or less unconscious inheritance of militant patriarchal feeling, not so aggressive or publicly acknowledged as in the nineteenth century, not so stark and arrogant as in the Middle East, and the Far East, but pervasive enough to raise in British boys and men the expectation and desire of becoming dominant males and as a corollary to depress girls and women into being subservient females (*Belonging* 136).

Repression in the Scottish religious tradition is also a prominent issue: 'Perhaps the Scottish Kirk brought people closer together on Sundays, but even on Sundays they were censorious' (*Belonging* 192). 'Scotland', she writes in her journal, 'is deformed by commercialism and Calvinism helps to keep the deformation

<sup>232</sup> P.H. Butter, ed., *Selected Letters of Edwin Muir* (London: Hogarth, 1974), p.41.

<sup>233</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, Journal September-November 1955, Box 5. MS38466/5/6.

rigid'.<sup>234</sup> Muir discovers the narrowness of Scottish religious practices compared with those of Catholic countries:

For us, brought up in the narrowness of Scottish Sabbatarianism, it was a revelation of how the whole fullness of life can be taken as pleasing to God, deep religious devotion being entirely compatible with high enjoyment on swings and roundabouts (*Belonging* 94).

Muir detects repression even at the linguistic level, explaining that the 'devaluation of the Scottish Language' after the reformation when 'English became the Sunday language for serious thought and reflection while Scots was the language of everyday domestic sentiment, not a whole language, but only part of one' (*Belonging* 195). Undoubtedly, the devaluation of Scots as a literary language has deep and complex socio-political and historical reasons. In *The Paradox of Scottish Culture: The Eighteenth-Century Experience*, David Daiches writes:

From the late sixteenth century on, Scottish literary language was increasingly challenged by English. The Reformation, the Union of the Crowns in 1603, the political and religious situation in the seventeenth century, and finally the Union of 1707, all had their effect in helping to make Scottish writers turn to English as their medium even though they continued to speak in Scots.<sup>235</sup>

According to Daiches, this repression of Scots gave rise to a 'dissociation of sensibility' in Scotland, as the Scots began to think and write in standard English, although they continued talking and feeling in Scots, which made their English rather formal and their Scots somewhat sentimental.<sup>236</sup> It is worth considering here that, at the time the Muirs were writing, there was of course a fierce debate in progress about the use of Scots for literary purposes, a debate that is still going on. Christopher Grieve – Hugh MacDiarmid – and F. G. Scott were part of this debate and they 'had generated between them a heat of enthusiasm for Scotland and what

<sup>234</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, Journal 1951-53 (first page), Box 5. MS38466/5/3.

<sup>235</sup> David Daiches, *The Paradox of Scottish Culture* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp.19-20.

<sup>236</sup> Daiches, *The Paradox*, p.21.

they called the "Scottish Renaissance" (*Belonging* 115). In *Belonging*, Muir mentions how 'Grieve and Scott were involved in a bold but desperate effort to make Scottish vernacular central to Scotsmen' (*Belonging* 116). Edwin, however, defended a position quite opposite to theirs. According to his wife, Edwin 'had already adopted English as his language and preferred to graft his poetry on to the great tree of English literature'; Edwin felt that Scottish vernacular 'could not now be anything but marginal' (*Belonging* 115-16). He firmly believed that 'the prerequisite of an autonomous literature is a homogeneous language', and that 'every genuine literature [...] requires as its condition a means of expression capable of dealing with everything the mind can think or the imagination conceive', but as the Scotsmen felt in one language and thought in another, this linguistic division meant that the Scottish consciousness was divided.<sup>237</sup> Therefore, he doubted that Scots would ever be used again as an independent language capable of fulfilling all the purposes of poetry and prose.<sup>238</sup> Moreover, he thought that it was improbable that Scotland could create a national literature unless that literature was written in English.<sup>239</sup> In 'A Note on the Scottish Ballads', he wrote:

Because the current of English is even at this day so much younger, poorer and more artificial in Scotland than in England, it is improbable that Scotland will produce any writer of English of the first rank, or at least that she will do so until her tradition of English is as common, as unforced and unschooled as if it were her native tongue.<sup>240</sup>

He valued Grieve's efforts, but regarded them as not very effective:

Hugh M'Diarmid has recently tried to revive it by impregnating it [Scottish poetry] with all contemporary influences of Europe one after the other, and thus galvanize it into life by a series of violent shocks. In carrying out this experiment he has written some remarkable poetry; but he has left Scottish verse very much where it was before. For major forms of poetry rise from a collision between emotion and intellect on a plane where both meet on equal terms; and it can never come into existence where the poet

<sup>237</sup> Edwin Muir, *Scott and Scotland: The Predicament of the Scottish Writer* (London: Routledge, 1936), pp.19-21.

<sup>238</sup> Edwin Muir, 'Literature in Scotland', *Spectator* 25 May 1934, p.823.

<sup>239</sup> Muir, *Scott and Scotland*, pp.178.

<sup>240</sup> Edwin Muir, 'A Note on the Scottish Ballads', in *Latitudes* (London: Andrew Melrose, 1924), pp.12-30(p.15).

feels in one language and thinks in another, even though he should subsequently translate his thoughts into the language of his feelings.<sup>241</sup>

The Muirs, thus, remained convinced that 'Scots dialect poetry represents Scotland in bits and patches, and doing that it is no doubt a faithful enough image of the present divided state of Scotland'.<sup>242</sup> In her autobiography, Muir recalls how, 'when Christopher, true to Border feeling, blamed the 'Eng-lish' for the whole of Scotland backwardness in arts, Edwin only smiled kindly as if at a little boy squaring up to a bogey' (*Belonging* 116).

The effect of forms of oppression on Scotland is examined in all Muir's fictional and non-fictional works. The protagonist of *Mrs Ritchie* is an incarnation of the terrible and implacable aspects of Calderwick, the town of *Imagined Corners*, whose inhabitants live stifled by its rigid and narrow modes of thought.<sup>243</sup> *Mrs Grundy in Scotland* – a work which has been described as 'an undiscovered gem of Scottish historical thinking',<sup>244</sup> – is also an analysis of morality and social conventions in Scotland: 'Mrs Grundy is the emblem of repressed nationality'.<sup>245</sup> Muir's essays *Women: An Enquiry* and 'Women in Scotland' further confirm her position on Scottish repression.<sup>246</sup> Muir was unusual in her contribution to public debate through her writings, because, as Margery Palmer McCulloch points out, the social perception of women's role during the years of 'The Scottish Renaissance' was a domestic one and, therefore, they did not take a public part in the literary and social/political debates of the time.<sup>247</sup> Muir admitted she was 'more concerned to present an illumination to life in

<sup>241</sup> Muir, *Scott and Scotland*, pp.21-22.

<sup>242</sup> Muir, *Scott and Scotland*, p.179.

<sup>243</sup> Caird, 'Cakes Not Turned', p.18.

<sup>244</sup> Allen, 'Introduction', vii.

<sup>245</sup> Caird, 'Cakes Not Turned', p.414.

<sup>246</sup> Willa Muir, *Women: An Enquiry*, and 'Women in Scotland'.

<sup>247</sup> Margery Palmer McCulloch, 'Introduction', in *Modernism and Nationalism: Literature and Society in Scotland 1918-1939*, ed by Margery Palmer McCulloch (Glasgow: The Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2004), xiii-xviii (xvi-xvii).

Scotland than a reformation of it. Anyone who has really felt the thoughts I expressed [...] will be all the fitter to reform Scotland, but it is indirect, not direct propaganda that literature provides'.<sup>248</sup> Muir believed that the purpose of a novel was 'to move people in some way' and she used this power to illustrate her point.<sup>249</sup> Elphinstone sees all the women in Muir's *oeuvre* as repressing the unconscious self because they inhabit an 'inner world which is a microcosm of a massive struggle centred upon the meaning of self, gender and society. This struggle is the inevitable consequence of Belonging, or rigidly repressing the impulse to Belong, in Scotland, and in the Universe'.<sup>250</sup>

### 2.3.3 The Perception of an Outsider

Defining the boundaries of Muir's spiritual and physical land is a complex matter. She travelled extensively both inside and outside Scotland, but wherever she was and whatever roles she had, she always kept herself in a kind of marginal position. Her identity as both insider and outsider placed Muir in the privileged position of participant observer. Being an outsider allowed her to appreciate 'the contrast' and the 'differences' in her 'immediate surroundings' and feel the 'wonder' of them.<sup>251</sup> Thus, during a visit to Orkney, with Edwin, she comments on their diverse perception of the islands, explaining it by her position as an outsider: 'I wasn't born and reared in Orkney as Edwin was, so I come to it as an outsider, seeing it with a slightly different eye'.<sup>252</sup> Besides, Muir's constant nomadism

<sup>248</sup> National Library of Scotland, Willa Muir, Letter to F. Marian McNeill, 21 July 1931. MS26195, 24.

<sup>249</sup> National Library of Scotland, Willa Muir, Letter to F. Marian McNeill, 21 July 1931. MS26195, 24.

<sup>250</sup> Elphinstone, 'Crossing', p.414.

<sup>251</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, Notebook, Box 6. MS38466/6/13.

<sup>252</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, Notebook, Box 6. MS38466/6/13.

probably contributed to her natural critical bent. In July 1931, *The Glasgow Herald* reviewer of *Imagined Corners* wrote:

Mrs Muir, although a Scot by birth, by temperament, and, we imagine, by inclination, possesses the inestimable advantage of having, [...] both in body and in spirit, resided long enough and far enough away from her native land to be able to view its virtues and its vices with a serene detachment.<sup>253</sup>

Nevertheless, the 'inestimable advantage' mentioned by the reviewer implies also certain disadvantages: it presupposes distance on the part of the observer. In *Lucky Poet*, Hugh MacDiarmid, who favours a universal perspective, used the phrase 'on seeing Scotland whole'.<sup>254</sup> Yet, really to see Scotland whole, the observer – in this case, Muir – must be totally outside Scotland, which makes it more difficult to distinguish the plurality Scotland entails. Even MacDiarmid acknowledges the paradoxical nature of his own statement: 'I have written about seeing Scotland whole, but it is one of the seeming paradoxes of my work that in my own practice I am mainly concerned with the odd fact, the exceptional instance, the elusive and out-of-the way information'.<sup>255</sup> 'Seeing Scotland whole' also implies seeing Scotland as a separate entity, perhaps ignoring the proposition that 'no nation can exist in and of itself but rather defines itself, in relation to other cultures'.<sup>256</sup> Muir's awareness and understanding of her homeland did, however, appear to allow her to appreciate what it had in common with other countries, and what its people shared with the people of other countries. In *Belonging*, Muir often shows herself open to foreign people and cultures: 'we began to learn the only practical method of discovering Prague, through our foot-soles, through our skins, through our noses as much as through our eyes' (*Belonging* 56); 'the remarkable thing was that in these exotic surroundings [Forte

<sup>253</sup> 'Reviews Section', *The Glasgow Herald*, 2 July 1931, p.4.

<sup>254</sup> Hugh MacDiarmid, *Lucky Poet* (London, Methuen, 1943), pp.218-311.

<sup>255</sup> MacDiarmid, *Lucky Poet*, p.307.

<sup>256</sup> Kirsti Wishart, 'R B Cunningham Graham: Between the Kailyard and the Empire, *Scottlands*, 5.1 (1998), 93-104 (p. 94).

dei Marmi, Italy] we did lead a placid day-to-day life. Exotic, to us, the setting was [...] Yet, we soon took it all for granted' (*Belonging* 88); 'we were discovering Vienna and, despite noticing some obvious signs of misery here and there, appreciating what we discovered' (*Belonging* 98).

Although Muir sometimes feels estranged from her Scottish surroundings, which she perceives as oppressive and alienating, her self-conscious position with regard to Scottish cultural identity, allows her to distinguish a national identity that remains fluid rather than fixed, plural rather than homogeneous: 'There seemed to be no community to which people felt they all belonged in spite of differences' (*Belonging* 192). On one hand, Muir recognises that this multiplicity has its negative side: 'This fragmentation bore out Edwin's conclusion that Scotland lacked a unifying centre' (*Belonging* 192). Actually, Edwin was convinced of the negative consequences of Scotland's divided state regarding its national cultural identity, as he makes it clear in *Scott and Scotland: The Predicament of the Scottish Writer*:

It is of living importance to Scotland that it should maintain and be able to assert its identity; it cannot do so unless it feels itself a unity; and it cannot feel itself a unity on a plane which has a right to human respect unless it can create an autonomous literature.<sup>257</sup>

Edwin thought that 'a nation without a central organ to give it unity, a merely discarnate nation such as Scotland, is far more defenceless against the mechanical and purely materialistic forces of civilisation than any integral group could be' and he envisaged change in the form of a nationalism that embraced tradition at the same time that it demanded diversity.<sup>258</sup> On the other hand, these characteristics of Scottish nationhood – fluidity and plurality – can, as Muir understands them, be assets, which are hopeful for Scotland's future. They are

<sup>257</sup> Muir, *Scott and Scotland*, p. 182.

<sup>258</sup> Muir, 'The Functionlessness of Scotland', *Free Man*, 2.2, 11 February 1933, p.6.

part of an adaptable national identity. Muir's Scotland is 'a nation [that] would survive the disappearance of any State' – suggesting that after all, there are some things that all Scots share.<sup>259</sup> The important difference that exists between state and national identity makes crucial the distinction between political and cultural national identity. The idea of a pre-political, cultural national identity is highly problematic, but it could be said that a 'nation is not only a political entity', but a 'system of cultural representation', which 'produces meanings'.<sup>260</sup> Thus, the concept of nationality 'refers to a decision people make to depict themselves or others symbolically as bearers of a certain cultural identity'.<sup>261</sup> Muir suggests that Scots are just waiting to be enlightened, and it is possible to generalise from Scotswomen to all the people in her country: 'for they need to be shown where they stand, and I suspect that they are waiting for a lead'.<sup>262</sup> Furthermore, Muir felt that through her writing she was contributing to the construction of a Scottish national identity:

You needn't look for Nationalism with a big N [in her writing] None the less, I think I shall be 'doing my bit' for Scotland. Some people can talk and fight and work politically: probably I *could* do one of the three quite well; but what I want to do more than anything else is to write a great book, and if I succeed I shall have served Scotland too.<sup>263</sup>

### 2.3.4 Belonging to the Universe

Muir seems to define her notion of 'belonging' in direct opposition to death. In a journal entry dated 16 June 1946, Muir affirms: 'Human beings naturally fear the mystery of their life – death on one side, personality with its feeling of *belonging*

<sup>259</sup> Muir, *Women in Scotland*, p.4

<sup>260</sup> Stuart Hall, 'The Question of Cultural Identity', in *Modernity and Its Futures*, ed. by Stuart Hall, David Held, and Tony McGrew (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), p.197.

<sup>261</sup> Anthony P. Cohen, 'Culture as Identity: An Anthropologist's View', in *New Literary History*, 24.1 (Winter 1993), 195-210 (p.196; Cohen is speaking of ethnicity here, but I think that this conceptualisation could be extended to nationality).

<sup>262</sup> Muir, *Women in Scotland*, p.4.

<sup>263</sup> National Library of Scotland, Willa Muir, letter to F. Marian McNeill, 21 July 1931. MS26195-24.



to the universe on the other'.<sup>264</sup> She intuitively perceives that 'personality', 'with its feeling of *belonging*', is fluid, mutable, thus, the antithesis of death. Then, when Muir alludes to personality, with its implied unity of the self, she is referring not to a static, finished construct, but rather to a dynamic process of continuous creation. Every thought and action contributes towards the process of constructing this authentic self and so all her actions are in harmony with her own subjectivity and thus, she is able to feel wholeheartedly autonomous. This is not to say that Muir always appeared self-confident or invulnerable; on the contrary, as I have shown, she was often uncertain of herself and full of contradictions: 'Willa [...] described herself -- correctly -- as a "soft-centred" creature. She had to overcome this with aggressiveness which she consciously cultivated'.<sup>265</sup> She could be fierce and show terrible strength, even aggression, when necessary, as for example, when someone unjustifiably criticized her husband or -- more significantly for an understanding of her process of identity construction -- when 'somebody made her feel a non-person', a kind of equivalent to non-existence or death.<sup>266</sup> In opposing the feeling of belonging to fears of death, Muir is indirectly acknowledging that the completely authentic self, because of its dynamic nature, is impossible to capture, to fix -- and any concept of national identity is, similarly, a never-ending process that only stops at the end of life. Nonetheless, she is not embittered by this impossibility, but on the contrary, she recognizes the importance of the process and remains sociable, independent of others' opinions (although she also learns from others' experiences), critical, and, above all, she enjoys life.

<sup>264</sup> St Andrews Library, Willa Muir Archives, Willa Muir, Diary Prague Nov 1946-1947(15 June 1946), Box 5, MS38466/5/2.

<sup>265</sup> Soukup, 'Willa in Wartime', p.20.

<sup>266</sup> Soukup, 'Willa in Wartime', pp.20-22.

### 3. Margaret Laurence (1926-1987)

#### Brief Chronology

- 1926 Born in Neepawa, Manitoba
- 1944 Attended Winnipeg's United College (now the University of Winnipeg), pursuing an honours English degree.
- 1947 Graduated from United College.
- 1947 Married John Fergus Laurence. His job took them to England (1949), to the British protectorate of Somaliland (1950-1952) and to Ghana (1952-1957).
- 1952 Daughter Jocelyn was born.
- 1954 *A Tree for Poverty*.
- 1955 Son David was born.
- 1960 *This Side Jordan*.
- 1962 She separated from her husband and moved to London, England for a year. She then moved to Elm Cottage (Penn, Buckinghamshire) where she lived for more than ten years, although she visited Canada often.
- 1963 *The Tomorrow-Tamer*.
- 1963 *The Prophet's Camel Bell*.
- 1964 *The Stone Angel*.
- 1966 *A Jest of God*.
- 1968 *Long Drums and Cannons: Nigerian Dramatists and Novelists 1952-1966*.
- 1969 *The Fire-Dwellers*.
- 1969 Her divorce became final.
- 1970 Moved to Lakefield, Ontario. She also bought a cabin on the Otonabee River near Peterborough.
- 1970 *A Bird in the House*.
- 1970 *Jason's Quest*.
- 1974 *The Diviners*.
- 1976 *Heart of a Stranger*.
- 1979 *Six Darn Cows*.
- 1980 *The Olden Days Coat*.
- 1982 *A Christmas Birthday Story*.
- 1987 Died in Lakefield, Ontario, suffering lung cancer.
- 1989 *Dance on the Earth: A Memoir* (Autobiography).

### 3.1 Motherhood as Gift and Trap

I didn't want to write the entire story of my life [...]  
I wanted to write more about my feelings about mothers  
Margaret Laurence  
*Dance on the Earth*

When Margaret Laurence first decided to write her memoirs, she soon realized that the usual chronological pattern of life writing would not suit her purpose. She did not want to tell a story but to write about her feelings and life views, and she perceived this desire as an urgent necessity.<sup>267</sup> Yet, her desire to write her memoirs was perhaps compromised from the start by her unwillingness to be completely open: 'from the start I recognized that there were areas I wasn't prepared even to try to set down' (*Dance* 7). When the final formula for her autobiography emerged, the figures of 'her mothers' as she calls them – her biological mother, her stepmother (her aunt Margaret), and her mother-in-law – were given a central place: they appear in the section headings, create the structure, proportion the themes and topics, shape the metaphors and fashion the whole narration as a kind of allegory. In this chapter I will consider why motherhood is so pivotal in *Dance on the Earth*, why it constitutes such a fundamental issue for Margaret Laurence.

#### 3.1.1 In Need of Self-affirmation as a Mother

Although not all choices are fully conscious, it seems likely that authors select issues they know, or sense, remain unresolved, issues that represent unfinished business that calls out to be settled before the end of their lives. Core

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<sup>267</sup> Margaret Laurence, *Dance on the Earth: A Memoir* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1989), p.7.  
Laurence's autobiography will be referenced in the text as: *Dance* and page number.

autobiographical themes can be identified in the three writers I am concerned with: in the case of Janet Frame, the difficulties she encountered in fulfilling her vocation as a writer; for Willa Muir the significance of her relationship with her husband; and for Margaret Laurence the question of motherhood. But, of course, these central concerns are not exclusive concerns: all three write about their struggles to be recognized as writers and women, and motherhood inevitably concerns all three, even though only two of them were themselves mothers. Margaret Laurence indicates that for her to become the kind of person she wanted to be, developing the three areas was a must; in Laurence's words, 'I had just wanted everything – husband, children, work. Was this too much?' (*Dance* 160).

Laurence, nevertheless, specifically chooses motherhood as her main concern. Her choice could be considered as a sort of self-affirmation as a mother, as apparently this is the dimension of her personhood she feels most insecure about. Throughout her life, she had been confirmed as a sexually capable woman by her husband and lovers, and as a successful writer by the publication of her work and its reception by critics and the reading public. In her autobiography, however, Laurence betrays the sense of having short-changed her children and her mothers and, in a sense, herself for not having developed her motherhood as she wished. Apparently, she believes she has not been a good mother even though she has brought up two 'wonderful kids' without special problems or particular difficulties to deal with. She cannot avoid comparing her own life with the extraordinary example set by *her mothers*. She is not only interested in these women – her mothers – in their role as mothers, but also in how much they had to set aside in order to be *good mothers*: 'In their struggle to proclaim their lives, to be their own persons, they must have gone through pain that I can only guess at'

(*Dance* 8). Her mother-in-law, for example, had been a published author, who had had to choose between pursuing a career as a writer and leaving her husband, or staying at home to support him and to bring up their children. She had 'stayed, of course. Her decision was very much a product of her background, a background that demanded she choose what she felt to be the most difficult and morally right course' (*Dance* 129). In *Dance on the Earth*, Laurence speaks proudly of this talented and courageous woman:

Her writing had to be, in practical sense, secondary to her husband and children. She [belonged to] a generation where a woman's primary role was a homemaker, not a writer. Nonetheless, if her writing was an activity that could only occupy the corners of her life, she was a woman with a vocation (*Dance* 128).

Therefore, measuring up her life with her mothers' lives Laurence feels she did not sacrifice as much as she might have done in order to be a good mother. Laurence's unavoidably logical conclusion, then, is that she has not been good enough as a mother. Thus, in Laurence's life story, the vital dilemma faced by women artists, discussed by Patricia Meyers Spacks, seems to be highly relevant:

The best alternative to being good is being gifted. If women less readily than men are forgiven their sins for their talents, if women suffer greater conflicts in making the initial commitment to self-expression rather than self-abnegation, it remains true that the woman artist, like her male counterpart (although usually at greater cost), can insist on her right to be 'special'.<sup>268</sup>

Laurence knows that she has the right to express herself. She must write, and she feels that the pressure of her vocation distracts her from her *proper* duty towards children and husband, so, she is guilt-ridden by her sense of failed duty: 'I [...] do really want to be freed [...] from this enormous guilt for not having being his [Jack's] kind of wife'.<sup>269</sup> Yet, at the same time she resents her own feelings of inadequacy as unfair:

<sup>268</sup> Patricia Meyers Spacks, *The Female Imagination: A Literary and Psychological Investigation of Women's Writing* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1976), p.318.

<sup>269</sup> Letter to Adele Wiseman, 25 May 1969. In Margaret Laurence and Adele Wiseman, *Selected Letters of Margaret Laurence and Adele Wiseman*, ed. by John Lennox and Ruth Panofsky (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), p.299.

It is still enormously difficult for a woman to have both a marriage and a family, and a profession. I often become angry when I think of this injustice, of having to choose between the talent that was born in you, your lover/husband, and your children. What a terrible choice society has always forced upon women. For most women throughout history, there was in fact no choice (*Dance* 38).

The author acknowledges guilt throughout her autobiography, but if we read between the lines we may feel that there are also further unacknowledged feelings of guilt, or even worries of which she is not fully conscious. She not only admits having felt guilty about choices she made, but she also painfully castigates herself through her self-destructive attitudes towards her person and her work, her literary career, in, for example, her abuse of alcohol and tobacco, and her dangerous use of tranquilizers and diet pills. She is, apparently, partially conscious of the fact that her substance abuse is strongly related to her pervasive and conflicting sense of guilt; in a letter to her friend Adele Wiseman, Laurence explains: 'the outer and inner were in constant conflict, and the result of that was the bottle, never before such a bad problem'.<sup>270</sup> Besides, she does not seem fully aware that her numerous statements about her priorities, about putting children, family, and people in general before her writing, are contradicted or at least complicated by a number of the actions, thoughts and decisions she mentions in her memoir. She affirms:

My chief difficulty, however, was splitting my heart and my time between my children and my work. When the crunch came, of course, the children were always infinitely more important. I could never work when one of my kids was sick. Real people are more important than writing. Life is always more important than Art (*Dance* 166).

Art, however, strongly influenced the way her life was lived. Some decisions she had to make because of her art cause distress to her family and herself, as for example when she moves to London, leaving Jack and uprooting her kids, in order to develop her career as a writer, or when she leaves her children in England while she goes to Canada as a writer in residence at the University of Toronto (*Dance*

<sup>270</sup> Letter to Adele Wiseman, 25 May 1969. In Laurence and Wiseman, *Selected Letters*, p.301.

158; 190). Rationally, Laurence admits her right to develop her intellect/career and sexuality, but half-consciously she has to struggle with powerful internalized forces, derived from the culture she was brought up in, which identify femaleness with motherhood. She recognizes that she has been 'brainwashed by society', being forced to accept values, attitudes, and patterns of behaviour which are incompatible with her deeper aspirations (*Dance* 5). Evidence perhaps of that struggle in Laurence's adult life is her curious decision to send the only manuscript of the novel, for which she claims she had separated from her husband, by ship to England, instead of carrying it with her; of course, that behaviour brings consequent anguish and remorse –until the manuscript arrives and the possibility of losing it is dismissed (*Dance* 159). It seems to be a kind of self-punishment for dedicating so much effort to writing a book, sacrificing the time and energy that should have been dedicated to the needs of her family. In other words, she is uneasy about the deep-rooted notion of motherhood annulling sexual and intellectual realms, the feeling that being a mother somehow excludes other possibilities. At the same time, she is also aware that, in fact, she *has* exercised her sexuality and intelligence. The result is the surfacing of Laurence's submerged rebelliousness, which induces mixed feelings of inferiority – she cannot be a superwoman – and of self-confidence in her own way of doing things.<sup>271</sup>

### 3.1.2 Her Mother's Daughter

Laurence experiences further inner conflict created by the need to separate the positions of a mother, who *feels*, and a daughter, who *thinks*. Undoubtedly,

<sup>271</sup> Angelika Maeser discusses how the protagonist of *The Diviners*, Morag Gunn, undergoes a process similar to Laurence's experience. See: Angelika Maeser, 'Finding the Mother: The Individuation of Laurence's Heroines', *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 27 (1980), 151-66 (p.163).

Margaret Laurence does think – more than that, she is an intellectual and a successful writer – but in order to be so, she feels she has been obliged not only to deny her body, but also to neglect her ‘duty’ as a mother, who, according to the cultural model, has to exist to serve others, to support more acceptably active members of the family; the mother must be a model of love and life, but not of sexuality and independence. In the fictionalized version of her own childhood, *A Bird in the House*, Laurence makes Vanessa aware of the constricted lives of the women around her, who have accepted traditional female roles. For example, Vanessa overhears a conversation between her mother and her aunt Edna, where they reveal their feelings of entrapment:

‘It’s just that it would be wonderful if you could get *out*.’  
 ‘What about you?’ Aunt Edna said. ‘How are you going to get out?’  
 ‘It’s different for me,’ my mother replied in a low voice. ‘I’ve had those years with Ewen. I have Vanessa and Roddie. Maybe I can’t get out. But they will.’<sup>272</sup>

This overheard conversation is significant because it makes the young Vanessa responsible for the realization of her mother’s frustrated aspirations and dreams; it authorizes Vanessa to look for alternative ways of living, different from the models she has observed. Laurence here fictionalises her own awareness that she could not altogether escape the cultural traps that vocation and motherhood seem inevitably to involve. She does, however, attempt to negotiate a path through them. But not without experiencing uneasiness, uncertainty, frustration, distress, and of course, guilt: ‘Guilt and fear can do strange things to the mind and the body. I questioned my right to write, even though I knew I had to do it’ (*Dance* 159-60).

Laurence’s main achievement in *Dance on the Earth* is to speak from both daughter *and* mother positions. Compared with the daughter’s, the mother’s

<sup>272</sup> Margaret Laurence, *A Bird in the House* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970), p.186.



position is a more difficult place to be in, if one wants to be heard. Kristi Siegel explains how motherhood might involve a mind/body cultural trap: 'while it is unfortunate [...] that women have often felt the need to choose between their minds and their bodies, since we are always *both*, a mother might not even have *this* choice'.<sup>273</sup> According to Siegel, a mother is characterized by her physical presence, identified with her body; the maternal body cannot be denied. During and after pregnancy the cessation of menstrual blood, the 'swelling up', the fluids of childbirth, the flow of milk, and the drop and aging of the body, are changes occurring spontaneously in response to the hormonal changes in the body. Such changes are beyond intellectual control: a body does not think. It is a short, although illegitimate step from this to 'mothers do not think'. A woman who thinks – and writes – Siegel argues, always does it from the position of a daughter: 'the mother provides the body that the daughter may safely dissect and desire while keeping her own representation carefully entrenched in cultural space'.<sup>274</sup> In that same cultural space, the craft of the writer has been described as 'bodiless, consisting solely of words'; yet, a woman who writes is a 'woman writer', although the expression 'man writer' is simply not used.<sup>275</sup> Much has been said about the elusive literary 'female voice', which in fact always implies 'voices', but the fact remains that the prevailing representation of cultural and social orders, the symbolic form of reality in art, is male-gendered. Laurence deeply regretted this 'downgrading of women in every field':

Birth and mothering have scarcely been subjects at all [of novels, histories, poetry, films, painting, and sculpture], or at least not recognized and honoured subjects of art and history and philosophy, until comparatively recent times [...] This is scarcely surprising

<sup>273</sup> Kristi Siegel, *Women's Autobiographies, Culture, Feminism*, American University Studies: Series 27 Feminist Studies Vol.6 (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), p.142.

<sup>274</sup> Siegel, *Women's*, p.143.

<sup>275</sup> Joyce Carol Oates, 'The (Woman) Writer', in *Faith of a (Woman) Writer*, ed. by Alice Kessler-Harris and William McBrien (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), pp.5-11.

in a world in which communications and the arts have been dominated by men and herstory either ignored, condescended to, or forgotten.<sup>276</sup>

In this patriarchally-conditioned culture, Sidonie Smith claims that when the daughter 'appropriates the story and speaking posture of the representative man, she silences that part of herself that identifies her as a daughter of her mother'.<sup>277</sup> In Laurence's case, she felt compelled to write from two contradictory positions: the daughter who loves and respects her own mothers, and the daughter who rejects everything they stand for. As a writer, Laurence elaborates her deep intuition of contemporary women's conflicts: women long to emulate their mothers' qualities, but in order to achieve professional success they must reject most of their mothers' deepest values and conceptions.

Appropriating the speaking posture of autobiographical culture, Laurence undoubtedly speaks from the point of view of the daughter. She also, however, courageously assumes the possible reversal of the roles; she authorises, as it were, both positions: 'I write as a child *and* as a mother' (*Dance* 10). Laurence has already introduced this duality in her fiction. Rachel in *A Jest of God*, after acquiring self-assurance and autonomy, assumes the direction of her own life (while looking after her aging mother). She triumphantly declares: 'I am the mother now'.<sup>278</sup> In *Dance on the Earth* the situation is, however, complicated by Laurence's status as author: she writes as mother in part because she is considering her mother as diminished, as a small child who now has to be protected and taken care of: 'Sometimes I think of her as my long-lost child' (*Dance* 7); in part she is showing that once she has become a mother herself, she understands her own mother better (*Dance*, 169); but principally, she is

<sup>276</sup> Laurence, *Dance*, p.4.

<sup>277</sup> Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of the Self-Representation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p.53.

<sup>278</sup> Margaret Laurence, *A Jest of God* (London: Macmillan, 1966), pp.184; 196.

appropriating the mother for authority, she is situating *the mother* in the active position of thinking, speaking, desiring and deciding, the position from which she is writing. For example, when a male reviewer of *This Side Jordan* complained about having to tolerate once again 'the obligatory birth scene in novels written by women', Laurence's reaction was definite and self-affirmative: 'unwittingly, that dolt helped me begin a kind of self-liberation in the area of writing. I was furious. [...] My novels are not exactly dotted with birth scenes, but after that I never hesitated to write about birth, and I never did so again except from the viewpoint of the mother' (*Dance* 6). Laurence writing from the point of view of the mother places the mother in the dominant position. And this is a position she then willingly passes onto her daughter when she trusts Jocelyn with the editing of her memoirs. Therefore, by speaking herself as a mother, Margaret Laurence refuses to situate mothers only in the position of object; she refuses to collude with patriarchy.

### 3.1.3 Continuity of Existence

Laurence calls her life narrative a 'memoir', perhaps to avoid the assumptions of traditional autobiography. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson indicate, 'in contemporary parlance autobiography and memoir are used interchangeably. But distinctions are relevant'.<sup>279</sup> Lee Quimby explains that

whereas autobiography promotes an 'I' that shares with confessional discourse an assumed interiority and an ethical mandate to examine that interiority, memoirs promote an 'I' that is explicitly constituted in the reports of the utterances and proceedings of others. The 'I' or subjectivity produced in memoirs is externalized and [...] dialogical.<sup>280</sup>

<sup>279</sup> Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds. *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), p.198.

<sup>280</sup> Lee Quimby, 'The subject of Memoirs: *The Woman Warrior's* Technology of Ideographic Selfhood', in *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*, ed. by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), pp.297-320(p.299).

Thus, Laurence's autobiography considers and includes her ancestors and her descendants, their opinions, their prejudices, and their attitudes to life and suffering; the narrative I constructs a self image according to her interactions with them. Laurence's autobiography makes her life story a link between generations: 'Mother. The first cry of life, perhaps, and the last. So it is that I write this book, for my mothers and for my children' (*Dance* 10). Laurence's naming of *Dance on the Earth* as a 'memoir' turns out to have meaningful implications for how we read it. Memoirs have been called 'fashionably postmodern', since they hesitate to define boundaries.<sup>281</sup> It refers to externalization – sharing, giving and receiving – rather than interiority or internal forces, and to fluidity and diffusion of limits between those two dimensions. It is in this flowing that individuals can be part of a whole and belong to one another, hence the choice of 'dance' for her title: 'Women, as well as men, in all ages and all places, have danced on the earth, danced the life dance'.<sup>282</sup> Laurence, who is near to her own end, values the continuity of existence, and motherhood becomes the key condition for this continuity.

### 3.1.4 Motherhood in Laurence's Fiction

In *Dance on the Earth* Laurence establishes for her 'self' the position of mother among women that she had already explored in her fiction. Arguably, then, her memoir is the supplement of her fiction, the addition in which it achieves its full meaning; thus her fiction explains her memoir and vice versa. Laurence's works show the strong connections existing between women of all generations, where the bonds between women are crucially constructed around motherhood. In

<sup>281</sup> Nancy K. Miller, *Bequest and Betrayal: Memoirs of a Parent's Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.43.

<sup>282</sup> Laurence, *Dance*, p.17.

Laurence's novels generally relationships between the protagonists and motherly figures/models move in a hopeful direction. In *The Stone Angel*, the strong character of Hagar is not only motherless, but also deprived of any positive motherly influence.<sup>283</sup> As a result, she identifies with her father; she is very much *her father's daughter* and this affects her relationships with other women.<sup>284</sup> She rejects any traditionally feminine characteristic as weakness and mercilessly despises other women: Bram's daughters Jess and Gladys are 'fat as cows',<sup>285</sup> Doris 'resembles a broody hen',<sup>286</sup> the women at the hospital are described as dwarfs, measly little creatures, either just skin and bone or a mountain of flesh.<sup>287</sup> Hagar has no daughter, only two sons, and her relationship with both of them is disrupted by her unyielding pride and her rigorous and unsparing way of treating others and herself. She is an agent in the death of her beloved son John, because of her opposition to his relationship with Lottie Driesser's daughter. Her elder son, Marvin, feels that he has always been unwanted and rejected by his mother, not being able to compete with his preferred brother. It is only at the end of Hagar's life, and thanks to the surrogate mothering effect of other characters – the women in the hospital where Hagar goes to die, and even Hagar's daughter-in-law, Doris – that the protagonist is able to reconcile herself with the long lost feminine motherly principle inside her. Hagar's last experience of integration and discovery of the mother within herself is her expression of genuine maternal solicitude for a young girl in the hospital; she has learned to be a comforter.<sup>288</sup> As she struggles to bring a bed-pan to her fellow-sufferer she reflects: 'And now I wonder if I've

<sup>283</sup> Margaret Laurence, *The Stone Angel* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart-Bantam, 1980)

<sup>284</sup> Laurence, *Stone Angel*, p.7.

<sup>285</sup> Laurence, *Stone Angel*, p.49.

<sup>286</sup> Laurence, *Stone Angel*, p.24.

<sup>287</sup> Laurence, *Stone Angel*, pp.230-32.

<sup>288</sup> Macser, 'Finding the Mother', p.154.

done it for her or for myself. No matter. I'm here, and carrying what she needs'.<sup>289</sup> She acknowledges what she has denied to herself during her whole life, a painfully missed part of her self that, when found, allows Hagar to forgive herself and others. It is Hagar's moment of truth, of acceptance, and of mature understanding: 'This knowing comes upon me so forcefully, so shatteringly, and with such a bitterness as I have never felt before. I must always, always, have wanted that -- simply to rejoice. How is it I never could?'<sup>290</sup> Her reconciliation with womanhood makes Hagar feel complete, and thus, she is capable of effectively acting as a soothing mother to her son Marvin, before it is too late: 'It's in my mind to ask his pardon, but that's not what he wants from me. "You've not been cranky, Marvin. You've been good to me, always. A better son than John"''.<sup>291</sup>

Rachel, the protagonist of *A Jest of God* also suffers because of her lack of a motherly figure. Although not motherless, Rachel has a mother who is inadequate in her maternal role. Mrs Cameron, Rachel's mother, is a manipulative woman, who has assumed a self-protective victim position. Her emotional life is frozen and dominated by 'appearances'. Living with such a mother has inhibited Rachel's emotional development. She has been treated as a teenager all her life, although she is already in her mid-thirties, and her sexuality has been undermined. When Rachel runs naked downstairs to answer the telephone, her mother's comment conveys disapproval and rejection of her daughter's body: 'Mother is standing in the kitchen doorway, watching me, distaste in her face, and then I realize I haven't got a towel around me. "Really, Rachel, that doesn't look very

<sup>289</sup> Laurence, *Stone Angel*, p.269.

<sup>290</sup> Laurence, *Stone Angel*, p.261.

<sup>291</sup> Laurence, *Stone Angel*, p.272.

nice".<sup>292</sup> Rachel has no children of her own, but she lives motherhood vicariously, loving and protecting the schoolchildren she teaches: 'It may be that my children will always be temporary, never to be held. But so are everyone's'.<sup>293</sup> When she convinces herself that she is pregnant, she faces the prospect with ambiguous feelings of longing and rejection, but when the doctor informs her that, in fact, she has a tumour in her womb, she cannot help regretting the end of possibility:

Something collapsed, some edifice. No – not so much that, not a breaking, nothing so violent. A gate closed, quite quietly, and when I tried to open it again, it wouldn't. There wasn't any way around it. No way in, not there, not any more. Visa cancelled. I don't know why. The gate just shut. I once used to try to stop myself going there, but now when I tried to get in, I couldn't. I needed to and wanted to, but I couldn't.<sup>294</sup>

But in facing the responsibility that potential maternity implies, Rachel discovers the strength that lies inside her and she stops being dependant on her mother's directions and judgements. She is no longer afraid to assume control of her own life; to take care of her mother as if Mrs Cameron were now a child, and to leave Manawaka.<sup>295</sup> She realizes that change is the only force that will break her chains and remove her fears; courageously she decides to confront whatever life brings her. Rachel, who never enjoyed real maternal acceptance and love, becomes herself a mother of sorts and, in doing so, finds within the nurturing characteristics she formerly lacked, yet desperately needed to achieve a sense of self-completion.

Stacey, the protagonist of *The Fire Dwellers* is Rachel's sister. Although they share a mother, Stacey has managed to become more extroverted than her sister; she has been able to escape Manawaka, and distance herself from her mother, by marrying young and moving into a big city, where she lives with her family. Nevertheless, Stacey has not been less affected than her sister by the lack

<sup>292</sup> Margaret Laurence, *A Jest of God* (London: Macmillan, 1966), p.140.

<sup>293</sup> Laurence, *Jest of God*, p.201.

<sup>294</sup> Laurence, *Jest of God*, p.183.

<sup>295</sup> Laurence, *Jest of God*, p.184.

of an adequate motherly figure. She feels guilty and insecure about her own role as a mother. Her youngest daughter, Jen, who is slow in speaking, causing much concern to her mother, is another version of Stacey herself, unable to articulate her conflict. Stacey struggles to understand the origin of her distress and doubt. She remembers being diminished and rejected by her mother: 'Stacey, Stacey, vanity isn't becoming. The soft persistent mew from upstairs, the voice that never tired of saying how others ought to be and never were'.<sup>296</sup> Stacey sees herself and others imprisoned in destructive structures but she does not know how to articulate her dilemma or how to escape from her situation; and so she turns her creative energy against herself: alcohol, tranquilizers, endless pointless activities to achieve the lifestyle shown in magazines and advertising media, night school classes and, ultimately, a love affair. The symbol of her claustrophobic form of existence is her neighbour Tess's goldfish bowl. Unlike Hagar and Rachel, Stacey is in touch with the mother inside herself, but her despair comes from the recognition that the maternal principle has no voice in the system.<sup>297</sup> Now, she has to come to terms with her own experience of motherhood and must be able to mother her daughter Katie in an appropriate way, not making the same mistakes as her mother:

It scares me all the same. I don't know what to tell Katie. I have the feeling that there isn't much use, at this point, in telling her anything. She's on her own, so help her. So help her. At least my mother had the consolation of believing herself to be unquestionably right about everything. Or so I've always thought. Maybe she didn't either.<sup>298</sup>

Katie is an understanding, intelligent adolescent, capable of assuming responsibility when needed; she is also developing mothering ability, and supports her mother when necessary. Stacey is able to see this bond that unites them, and recognizes that she in a sense shares the gift, and the burden, of motherhood with

<sup>296</sup> Margaret Laurence, *The Fire Dwellers* (London: Macmillan, 1969), p.14.

<sup>297</sup> Maeser, 'Finding the Mother', p.158.

<sup>298</sup> Laurence, *Fire Dwellers*, p.258.



her daughter: 'One day she will have to take over as the mother, and she's beginning to sense it. No wonder it frightens her. It damn near terrifies me, the whole business, even after all these years'.<sup>299</sup> They are two women made equal by motherhood, actual and potential. Stacey is able to articulate the positive aspects of motherhood thanks to her relationship with her daughter; she stops fearing and resisting the maternal and, thus, she achieves a better understanding of herself. Towards the end of the narration Stacey's improved self-knowledge helps her to accept change and conflict, to find meaning for her life in the terrible world where she dwells:

— I was wrong to think of the trap as the four walls. It's the world. The truth is that I haven't been Stacey Cameron for one hell of a long time now. Although in some ways I'll always be her, because that's how I started out.<sup>300</sup>

*The Diviners* has the clearest appearance of being an autobiographical novel, partly, of course, because Laurence chooses a writer as her heroine. Morag Gunn is a successful and well-known writer who has an eighteen-year-old daughter, Pique. At the beginning of the narrative Morag is consumed with anxiety because of the trip her daughter has begun, both at a physical level – to Manawaka, where her ancestors, the white colonizers of the prairies, lived, and to Galloping Mountain, the land of her other ancestors, the Métis Tonnerres – and at a metaphorical level – to adulthood. As a mother, Morag learns to accept the feminine principle in her adult daughter, acknowledging, at the same time, her own mortality:

Would Pique's life be better or worse than Morag's?  
*Mine hasn't been so bad. Been? Time running out. Is that what is really going on, now, with her? Pique, harbinger of my death, continuer of life.*<sup>301</sup>

<sup>299</sup> Laurence, *Fire Dwellers*, p.233.

<sup>300</sup> Laurence, *Fire Dwellers*, p.259.

<sup>301</sup> Margaret Laurence, *The Diviners* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), p.239.

As the narrative proceeds Morag discovers that her relationship with Pique is fundamental to her whole being. She has surrendered part of her self in creating the future, her daughter. In the same way, Morag, as an artist, postpones her life in order to write. Morag's story exemplifies, as Helen Buss says, that the female artist 'must find the mother within herself to become a whole woman, and she must be a whole woman to be an artist'.<sup>302</sup> Thus, for Morag Gunn – as for Margaret Laurence – motherhood is placed at the origin of any creative force, including that of the artist. By acknowledging this vital truth, Morag reaches a sense of wholeness, completion, and internal peace, recognizing, at the same time, that her daughter is at the beginning of her own process of discovery, in the eternal cycle, endlessly performed by mothers and daughters through the ages:

The hurts unwillingly afflicted upon Pique by her mother, by circumstances – Morag has agonized over these often enough, almost as though, if she imagined them sufficiently, they would prove to have been unreal after all. But they were not unreal. Yet Pique was not assigning any blame – that was not what it was about. And Pique's journey, although at this point it might feel to her unique, was not unique'.<sup>303</sup>

*The Diviners*, then, comes closest to fictionalising the dilemmas that Laurence explicitly discusses in her memoir. Much of Laurence's fiction engages with motherhood, as I have indicated, and, indeed, she first intended to write *Dance on the Earth* as a work of fiction. But it seems to be the unique characteristics of the autobiographical memoir that made her exert herself for a last effort in which she revisits the same issue of motherhood in a genre that announces a different relationship to life events. What characteristics do I have in mind? A tentative answer to this question must deal with the potential problems of exploring motherhood in autobiographies. On the one hand, according to most of its definitions, autobiography places the private realm in the public sphere. For

<sup>302</sup> Helen Buss, *Mother and Daughter Relationships in the Manawaka Works of Margaret Laurence*, English Literary Studies: Monograph Series, 34 (Victoria, B.C.: University of Victoria, 1985), p.64.

<sup>303</sup> Laurence, *The Diviners*, p.360.

example, Nancy K. Miller remarks that a 'memoir is fashionably postmodern, since it hesitates to define the boundaries between private and public, subject and object'.<sup>304</sup> On the other hand, motherhood works almost exclusively in the private sphere. Siegel claims that since motherhood constitutes such a crucial part of that private sphere, 'women's autobiography [...] is characterized by its inability to silence the maternal'.<sup>305</sup> Autobiography is then a unique method and instrument where motherhood cannot but become visible. That is to say, when women write autobiography, motherhood is inescapably present whether or not it is explicitly addressed. In writing her autobiography, Margaret Laurence is in effect foregrounding the part of herself that identifies her with her mothers, and doing so, she is able to speak of herself more freely, yet more precisely.

### 3.1.5 An Individual Who Matters

A month after Laurence had finished the first draft of her memoirs she was diagnosed as having terminal cancer. And so, as she worked on this draft she knew she was dying. Her daughter describes her determination to continue her work in spite of physical and mental difficulties:

The nurses set a typing table and she sat on the edge of the bed, tubes coming out of the incision in her chest, and launched herself into the second draft. But much to her annoyance, she tired quickly. Writing is physically hard work. It's also psychically exhausting. She was all too aware of just how much she had to do and how little time and energy she might have to accomplish it.<sup>306</sup>

There are several explanations of her persistence. In the first place writing an autobiography represents a way of reinstating the 'I' of the author, somewhat lost in the creative process of writing fiction. When Laurence describes the process of writing *The Stone Angel*, she writes as if she were a mere medium for the story of

<sup>304</sup> Miller, *Bequest and Betrayal*, p.43.

<sup>305</sup> Siegel, *Women's*, p.15.

<sup>306</sup> Jocelyn Laurence, 'Preface', in *Dance on the Earth: A Memoir* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1989), xi-xv (xii).

Hagar, rather than her creator: 'The novel poured forth. It was as if the old woman was actually there, telling me her life story, and it was my responsibility to put it down as faithfully as I could' (*Dance* 156). Writing her memoir restores the self, lost in the creative process: it is the confirmation of her ownership of a 'self' as a unity with a presence in the real world – mother, woman and writer. In the second place, her memoir expresses her desire to leave a 'legacy' beyond her literary work (*Dance* 222). She is able to use the memoir to clarify topics and themes already treated in her fictional and non-fictional work, to make a clear statement about points she felt she had not clarified: 'Still, there are areas in my mind and my memory that I have not been able to write about fictionally' (*Dance* 6). In the third place, *Dance on the Earth* might be said to represent Margaret Laurence's claim to a place in history which is not defined only by her fiction and essays. She is a 'self', leaving a 'legacy', a self who 'matters' in the fluid and continuous stream of human time and history which runs through ancestors and their descendants, through mothers and daughters. The title of Laurence's autobiography and the allegory that runs through the narrative refer to the 'dance of life' in which women of all generations are connected to one another and rejoice in living and transmitting life (*Dance* 225). Thus, the last words of her autobiographical narrative are significant: 'My own dance of life has not much longer to last. It will continue in my children, and perhaps for a while in my books. It has been varied, sometimes anguished, always interesting [...] May the dance go on' (*Dance* 222).

### 3.1.6 Rebellion, Identification, and Final Individuation

There is, however, something missing in Laurence's representation of motherhood. Not surprisingly, it is difficult to find any open expression of anger against the author's mothers in *Dance on the Earth*. Yet, at the same time, there is a strong undercurrent of feelings towards them, not so evidently narrated: 'I thought she [her mother] was trying to fit me into the mould of social acceptability' (*Dance* 80). Given the idealized embodiments of wifely and maternal perfection that Laurence's mothers appear to be, we can deduce that young Margaret's desire for something else, her longing to be different, her tendency to go against her mothers' model, was really a hard experience and felt somehow painfully wrong for her. It would be entirely understandable if Laurence had felt anger and resentment towards the mothers who are in a way the cause of such ambiguous psychological pain. Interestingly, in Laurence's memoir it is possible to distinguish three developmental phases in the protagonist's emotional progress. Although she acknowledges all the positive qualities of her mothers, the numerous difficulties and adverse circumstances they had to struggle against, and their admirable lives, the first intention of the young Margaret is not to repeat her mothers' lives. She passes through a phase of *rebellion*. But subsequently, in a second phase, the young adult Margaret catches herself repeating the patterns internalized from her mothers and the environment that surrounded them. She manifests the same fears, accepts equivalent passive roles, repeats child-raising schema, and most significantly, she looks for identity in marriage and motherhood, leaving her literary career in a discrete second place: 'We were young, we were in love, we had a beautiful child, and we had a lot of pure enjoyment in life itself. I was writing, but I didn't talk about it too much' (*Dance* 144). The wife and

mother have silenced the writer. This could be called a phase of *identification*. In order to survive this way, it is necessary for Margaret to ignore or minimize the conflict areas of her relationship with her Mum, such as sexuality or independence. For example, Margaret cannot avoid feeling 'upset' and 'offended' when her mother gives her a book to prepare her for adult sexual life instead of discussing the topic directly with her (*Dance* 105). And as far as independence and personal autonomy are concerned, we may assume that even while she was still young, Margaret must have been conscious that her Mum, the audacious 'Marg' who had loved teaching, had had a successful career in Calgary, and had undergone an adventurous one-year trip to the Bermudas against her father's will, had finally stayed in Neepawa to look after her dead sister's daughter and husband; she never returned to teaching (*Dance* 48).

Had Laurence continued to ignore the contradictions in her position, this would have retarded the processes of growing up, separating, and finding an independent identity. So, in a third phase of *separation/individuation* she needs to observe her precise feelings and examine their origins: 'I was so uncertain by then about my triple role as wife, mother, and writer. My sense of being torn apart [...] was severe' (*Dance* 128). As the result of her honest encounter with her own interiority, she makes drastic changes: she leaves her husband (*Dance* 158), changes the way she has been raising her children (*Dance* 158), and comes to regard writing as a professional occupation and a way of earning a living: 'What helped me change my priorities was that my writing, as well as being my vocation, had become a source of income' (*Dance* 170). When Laurence finally decides that her life has reached a turning point where her priorities must be re-examined, she experiences conflicting emotions: her desire to be a perfect mother, deriving from

her superego internalised from her mothers, makes her feel tremendous guilt for not being like her mothers, but at the same time her aggression – in the positive sense of such force – compels her to confirm her selfhood. The doubts and insecurities, that had undermined her self-confidence, now press her to develop a better opinion of herself. And so she did, as a moving paragraph in a letter to Clara Thomas, written towards the end of Laurence's life, suggests:

I am so damn vulnerable because of my kids. And yet – oh Clara, who would trade places? [with her friend, the writer Percy James, who had not been for a long time in a position where he could be vulnerable because of other person] *That* kind of freedom, who needs? Not me. I would rather suffer the threats which any involvement entails – to be married and go through the pain which that may mean, and to have kids and *care* about them. I sometimes [...] think how bloody *lucky* I've been, in my life, to have been so involved, for worse but also for better.<sup>307</sup>

In the context of Laurence's complex emotional development, it would have been natural and very possible for her to feel some resentment towards the mothers who, in a sense, lied to her about what life was all about: 'I thought I could do everything. Mum knew, as I did not, that there would be a price' (*Dance* 109). But even if Margaret Laurence consciously recognized all her innermost psychological conflicts – which is more than most people do – communicating them to a public, putting them into published words, is a further step. It seems likely that the missing parts of Margaret Laurence's emotional life, as it is perceived in her autobiography, are too private and are, thus, deliberately omitted by the author: 'I knew I didn't want to write the entire story of my life, for numerous reasons, one of them being that it *is* mine' (*Dance* 7). Yet this refusal to be completely open somewhat compromises the project. Her tendency to present her mothers and her feelings about them in the most blameless light works to make *Dance on the Earth* sometimes rather weak, opaque, and vague, completely different from Margaret Laurence's deep, witty, and lively fiction, or her open-

<sup>307</sup> Letter to Clara Thomas, 29 November 1972. York University, Toronto, Clara Thomas Archives, Margaret Laurence, Call Number 1981-005/001(03).

mindful and fearless non-fiction. Her mothers remain mothers, when the reader perhaps wishes them to become characters. Perhaps, in a sense, she is committing the same sin she accused Virginia Woolf of: omitting 'ordinariness, dirt, earth, blood, yelling' (*Dance* 130). Laurence's idealized portrayal of her mothers and her omission of her anger and any other negative feelings towards them moves her narrative away from 'reality'; it makes it difficult to believe in the coherence of a presumably referential story with such perfect mothers, especially when our everyday experience tells us about the improbability of such perfection. Undoubtedly, Laurence's is an unstable, changeable, and life-long pathway of re-affirmation of her gendered identity, where motherhood and sexuality are the main components. But if we think of the fiction and the memoir as complementary, rather than contradictory, we achieve a fuller picture of daughter, mother and writer.



### 3.2 The Dynamic Concept of Place

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.

T.S. Eliot  
*Little Gidding*

Laurence spends much of her autobiography charting her search for her proper place before finally conceding that she has in a deep sense known all along where that place was. And so, the concept of 'place' is characterized by a delicate balance between search and underlying awareness. In *Dance on the Earth*, 'movement' and 'circularity' are key concepts, always present in the narration at both *individual* and *social* levels. Moreover, movement applies not only to *geographical* change but also to *spiritual/mental* progression. The dynamic nature of Laurence's concept of place and its significance for the construction of personal identity will be explored in this chapter.

#### 3.2.1 Escape, Search, and Return

The term 'place' in Laurence's work has complex connotations, and allusions to 'place' in her work in general are frequent (as for example in the title of her essay 'A Place to Stand on').<sup>308</sup> The meaning of 'place' for Laurence encompasses not only physical space, but also position or situation (in time or history). Place is one of the determinants of Laurence's identity; of the Canadian prairies she says:

This is where my world began [...] a world which formed me, and continues to do so, even while I fought it [...] a world which gave me my own life work to do, because it was here that I learned the sight of my own particular eyes.<sup>309</sup>

<sup>308</sup> Margaret Laurence, 'A Place to Stand on', in *A Place to Stand on*, ed. by George Woodcock (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1983), pp.15-19.

<sup>309</sup> Margaret Laurence, *Heart of a Stranger* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), p.219.

Laurence's concept of 'place' is not static; it involves evolution and change, a search in motion, a cycle. Certainly, Laurence made numerous actual trips or journeys, and she frequently refers to geographical changes in her autobiography. Nora Foster Stovel says Laurence had the 'heart of a traveller'.<sup>310</sup> Her memoir is full of references to vehicles (bicycles, trains) and journeys, real or imaginary – the young Margaret used to paint bread boards with imaginary scenes of journeys to exotic countries and write fictional travel journals (*Dance* 61-62). Laurence's numerous journeys covered three continents and took place over most of her lifetime (Canada, Somaliland, Ghana, England, Egypt, Suez, Greece, Scotland, and finally Canada again); flying and sailing were intrinsic parts of her existence (as shown by her collection of essays *Heart of a Stranger*). Laurence, however, refers to travel not only as physical displacement, but also as psychological pilgrimage. In an unpublished preface to *Heart of a Stranger* she explains: 'By travel I mean both those voyages which are outer and those voyages which are inner'.<sup>311</sup> As well as actual journeys, Laurence undertakes a spiritual quest, a psychological journey towards 'inner freedom and existential maturity'.<sup>312</sup> She sees her psychological journey, back to her roots and forward to change, evolution, and growth, as at the core of all human experience and hence at the heart of her writing.<sup>313</sup>

The first stage of Laurence's journey is an *escape*. Young Margaret is more than eager to flee her early environment: 'When I was eighteen I couldn't

<sup>310</sup> Nora Foster Stovel, 'Heart of a Traveller: Margaret Laurence's Life Journey', *English Studies in Canada*, 28(2002), 169-94(p.169).

<sup>311</sup> Nora Foster Stovel, "'A Town of the Mind": Margaret Laurence's Mythical Microcosm of Manawaka', *Great Plain Quarterly*, 19.3(1999), 191-202(p.171).

<sup>312</sup> Patricia Morley, *Margaret Laurence: The Long Journey Home* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991), p.7.

<sup>313</sup> See: Morley, *Long Journey*, p. 15.

wait to get out of that town [Neepawa], away from the prairies'.<sup>314</sup> She wants to escape from the house she shares with her Mum and her little brother; her home is felt as a refuge, a secure realm, the location of maternal warmth, but it is also a place where arbitrary demands are made (for example, by her aging grandfather). It is a woman's kingdom, a world inhabited by strong, independent-minded, talented, intelligent and fostering women – Marg and her spinster sisters, Ruby and Vem – but nevertheless, a male-oriented, limiting world (*Dance* 7).<sup>315</sup> Her Mum 'had no choice'; she had to remain there, trapped by poverty and duty (*Dance* 63). The young Margaret Laurence also plans to escape from her town, which represents the power of spatial-social strictures. She describes her hometown as a microcosm where 'all seeds of man's freedom and captivity' are found.<sup>316</sup> The 'positions' of its inhabitants are determined by social-economic and ethical attributes, and by physical referents – people belong to the right or wrong side of the railway/town.<sup>317</sup> Thus, after she fails in her attempt to join the naval service during the Second World War, she finally departs for college: the 'doors to the world were opening' (*Dance* 89-90). Wes McAmmond, Laurence's teacher at high school, recalls young Peggy Wemyss's feelings at that time: 'She was tied down. She was at home in a community. Everybody knew who she was. [...] She couldn't take liberties. She could not have fun! I think she was quite glad when she got going to Winnipeg'.<sup>318</sup> In order to get out of Neepawa, Laurence must travel across southern Manitoba; she recognizes she has 'ambiguous feelings about the prairies':

<sup>314</sup> Margaret Laurence, *Heart of a Stranger* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), p.217.

<sup>315</sup> Powers, *Alien Heart*, p.25.

<sup>316</sup> Laurence, *Heart*, p.243.

<sup>317</sup> Laurence, *Heart*, p.216.

<sup>318</sup> Greta M. Coger's interview of 25 July 1984 with McAmmond, confirmed by Lyall Powers' interview, summer 1989 in Winnipeg. Quoted in Lyall Powers, *Alien Heart: The Life and Work of Margaret Laurence* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2003), p.49.

I wanted then to get out of the small town and go far away, and yet I felt the protectiveness of that atmosphere too. I felt the loneliness and the isolation of the land itself, and yet I always considered southern Manitoba to be very beautiful, and I still do.<sup>319</sup>

The beauty of the prairies, however, cannot conceal from her their risks, the vicissitudes of the natural world that render existence there perilous, and that affect her soul deeply: 'The land still draws me more than other lands [which] do not have the power to move me in the same way as [...] that part of southern Ontario'.<sup>320</sup> For Laurence, leaving behind the vastness of such landscapes means physical and temporal as well as emotional distance from her former life, rooted as it was in the prairies. She makes an escape, or better a series of escapes, from the dominion of a fixed environment in pursuit of a rootless existence.

The second stage of Laurence's journey is a *search*. She feels the need for fulfilment but she has not yet discovered where to look for it. Her journey of discovery is closely connected with creativity, as can be observed in some of her first literary attempts, her imaginary travel journals, 'a highly uninformed but jubilantly imaginative journal of Captain John Ball and his voyages to exotic lands, complete with maps made by me of strange, mythical places' (*Dance* 61). Later in college where she adopts the stereotype of the inspired poet:

It was the fashion for aspiring poets to nip over to *The Manitoban* office, sit down at a typewriter, and dash off a poem on the spur of the moment, which was then offered and frequently accepted in that week's issue of paper. I worked every spare moment in my room for a couple of weeks, composing, rewriting, and shaping a poem, fortunately now lost to history. I then tripped merrily over to *The Manitoban* and proceeded to type out this poem from memory. One of the staff read it, gave me a slightly surprised glance, and said, 'Gee, that's not bad.' It was sent to be typeset at once (*Dance* 96-97).

Finding this pose unsatisfying, she looks for emancipation and fulfilment in marriage. Laurence's friend Lyall Powers affirms that for Peggy, the young college student, 'Jack Laurence seemed to embody most, if not all, of the features of the ideal escape that Peggy was seeking and, in fact, to push the horizons of her

<sup>319</sup> Laurence, 'A Place', p.17.

<sup>320</sup> Laurence, *Heart*, p.218.

young life even further than she had dreamed possible'.<sup>321</sup> Laurence pursues then the conventional career of a devoted bride, housewife and mother. She then feels the need to escape from the risk of being identified *only* with those positions, and this time her means of escape is definitely her writing. She feels the need to write, even if it is inconvenient, unvalued, tiring, and difficult. She does not really have time to write: she must wait until her children are asleep, she has to conceal her work from the community in which they live, her husband has a patronizing attitude towards her writing, and she feels herself that she has no claim to be a professional writer (*Dance* 152; 157). But she perseveres. When she finally leaves her husband, she does so in the hope of finding a literary community to belong to, a fellowship, which could support her creativity: 'I had to [...] go to London, England, where I imagined, wrongly as it turned out, there would be a literary community that would receive me with open arms and I would at last have the company of other writers, members of my tribe' (*Dance* 157-58). Further multiple trips to exotic, far-off lands, to imaginary and actual realms, replenish her life. At each stop on her way, she absorbs experiences, she learns about other human beings, and remarkably, also about herself. Discovering the place where she belongs is, Laurence finds, paradoxically, easier in foreign lands than in the place where she was born. In her experiences abroad, she perceives and appreciates the significance of being a stranger and, as she puts it, 'one can never be a stranger in one's own land – it is precisely this fact which makes it so difficult to live

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<sup>321</sup> Powells, *Alien Heart*, p.76.

It was not the first time Laurence sought to escape through marriage. In the Summer holidays of 1945, just before the end of World War II, when her RAF ex-boyfriend Derek had gone back home, Laurence wrote to her university roommate, Helen Warkentin: 'I wish now that I'd married Derek before he left. I would be in England now, & it would somehow be better' (Letter to Helen Warkentin [Summer 1945], York University, Toronto, Clara Thomas Archives, Margaret Laurence, Call Number 2004-040/001).

there'.<sup>322</sup> When in unfamiliar lands, the traveller experiences the same phenomenon of existential isolation writ large; her feeling of being 'out-of-the-way' is exaggerated by the strangeness of the unknown nature (landscape, weather) and culture (customs and traditions, language). Without recognizable context, Laurence's own existential process becomes the only point of reference and is, therefore, more deeply analyzed. Any attempt at defining the environment, which excludes the observer, becomes also an attempt to define Laurence's own identity: 'The strangest glimpses you may have of any creature in distant lands will be those you catch of yourself'.<sup>323</sup> Geographical and temporal distance from Laurence's origins enable her to observe her self from a fresh viewpoint: 'my experience of other countries probably taught me more about myself and even my own land [...] living away from home gives a new perspective on home'.<sup>324</sup>

Africa certainly taught Laurence to look at herself. Clara Thomas confirms that Laurence's experience in Africa was a crucial 'catalyst':

The whole experience in Africa did that very thing [making her aware of differences] for her [...] Every time she spoke to anybody or did everything, it wakened up the distance between the cultures and the importance of the culture she was in, and it gave her a great feeling of not only its importance but its stature and the worth of other people. It destroyed for ever any theory she might have grown up with about white people in the Western world being on top.<sup>325</sup>

In Africa, Laurence is constantly reminded of her *strangeness* and, like her character, Miranda Kestoe, in *This Side Jordan*, she tries to understand and befriend the native Africans, but soon recognizes her naïveté. Laurence gives Miranda a different background but makes her share her own determining and potentially debilitating relationship to it. Miranda, the daughter of an Anglican clergyman, thinks she has 'broken away from her class' but, like her creator, she

<sup>322</sup> Margaret Laurence, *The Prophet's Camel Bell* (London: Macmillan, 1963), p.237.

<sup>323</sup> Laurence, *Prophet's*, pp.1-2.

<sup>324</sup> Laurence, *Heart*, p.11.

<sup>325</sup> Interview with Clara Thomas, Toronto, 30 May 2006 (See appendix 2).

hasn't really; she 'is influenced by her background much more than she realizes'.<sup>326</sup> Similarly, when Laurence travels to Scotland, the land she used to identify as the place of her ancestors, she anticipates a feeling of deep emotional closeness to the old country. She encounters disappointment instead: 'I felt absolutely no connection with the actual Scotland, and yet I half expected and even hoped to discover some feeling of ancestry there, something that would convey to me a special personal meaning'.<sup>327</sup> Laurence realizes that, in spite of having been raised in a mist of Scottish traditions, the Scotland she had envisaged during her childhood had been a fantasy. To her old friend Jack Borland, she wrote:

I love it ... Scotland has a fascination for me, because it is the ancestral roots, but I am coming to the conclusion that what really matters for like myself is not the real Scotland but the fact that we were brought up with myths of a country which wasn't real, the fantasy Scotland, the paradise .. *and we in dreams behold the Hebrides* .. in dreams is right.<sup>328</sup>

Complicating furthermore Laurence's recognition of ancestral identity and roots, is the fact that when she was born, there were no Canadians, as the British Statute of Westminster gave autonomy to the Dominion of Canada only when she was five years old. Thus, Canada was not the traditional place of her people, but her relationship to Scotland goes back to 'a more distant past which one has not personally experienced'.<sup>329</sup> In Scotland, Laurence recognized names of places and people, landscapes, and even faces, but they seemed unreal there, because for Laurence they were Canadian names or scenery:

<sup>326</sup> Letter to Adele Wiseman, 31 July 1956. In Laurence and Wiseman, *Selected Letters*, p.97.

<sup>327</sup> Margaret Laurence, 'Road from the Isles', in *Heart of a Stranger* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), pp.145-57(p.147).

<sup>328</sup> Letter to Jack Borland, 11 February 1969. In Powers, *Alien Heart*, p.347-48. Laurence quotes from 'Canadian Boat Song' by John Galt (1779-1839), *Blackwood's Magazine*, 1829: 'From the sheiling on the misty island /Mountains divide us, and the waste of seas, /Yet still the blood is strong, the heart is highland, /And we in dreams behold the Hebrides.'

<sup>329</sup> Margaret Laurence, 'A Place to Stand on', in *Heart of a Stranger* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), pp.13-18(p.13).

All these names meant something to me. Glengarry – this is Glengarry, Ontario; it is *The Man from Glengarry* by Ralph Connor. Sutherland, Bannerman, Ross, Selkirk, Kildonan – to me, these names are the names of the places I grew up among, the names of Manitoba towns and the names of Winnipeg's streets. [...] The Highlands of Scotland struck a chord in me because they reminded me of Clear Lake in Manitoba.<sup>330</sup>

Scottishness – real or invented – had to be present, in order to be superseded, for Laurence to become Canadian. During her life pilgrimage, Laurence becomes aware of her difference and learns to identify herself with the place that gives meaning to her life, where she feels she belongs, her first home:

There is another kind of history, the kind that has the most power over us in unsuspected ways, the names or tunes or trees that can recall a thousand images, and this almost-family history can be related only to one's first home.<sup>331</sup>

Finally, she recognizes that her roots are after all entangled with the hearts and souls of Canadian people, and that these roots are not to be found by journeying to places different from Canada. She feels the need of 'a foothold in Canada' because her 'true roots were in Canada' (*Dance* 196).<sup>332</sup> She uses her newly achieved knowledge to build her lively fiction and a strong sense of identity for herself. Hers is a life-long struggle for an existential locus.

After years of searching for a place, a position for her real self, Laurence acknowledges that the only truthful place for her to stand is on her 'heartland' (*Dance* 275).<sup>333</sup> Thus, a third stage of her life-long pilgrimage is a *return* to the one place where her being is physically and psychologically rooted. Her life's journey literally ends where it started: an ex-funeral parlour in a small Canadian prairie town (*Dance* 210). In fact, Laurence describes her whole life as 'a long journey back home'.<sup>334</sup> The question here is whether this return to her point of departure is really possible. At the point of her return she is different from the former self who left the prairies many years before; she has new roles in her

<sup>330</sup> Laurence, 'Road', p.155-56.

<sup>331</sup> Laurence, 'Road', p.156-57.

<sup>332</sup> Laurence *Heart*, p.219.

<sup>333</sup> Laurence, *Heart*, p.161.

<sup>334</sup> Laurence, *Heart*, p.12.



community as a recognized writer, and she has now a mature self with diverse thoughts – and emotions – and different strategies for processing them. The place of her childhood is different as well: it has changed independently from her memories. New kinds of interactions between Laurence and her community necessarily arise, as, for example, in some fundamentalist attacks on her work (*Dance* 214-16). However, in a mental and emotional sense as well as a physical one, for Laurence return is possible:

The most loved place, for me [...] has changed throughout the years, as I and my circumstances have changed. I haven't really lost any of the best places from the past, though. I may no longer inhabit them, but they inhabit me, positions of memory, presences in the mind.<sup>335</sup>

Because of the dynamic relationships between the positions she has occupied, they remain vital and open to be revisited. Having destroyed significant misconceptions, as for example her former ideas about her Scottish roots and her illusion of a better literary community somewhere else, she knows now the place she must return to, the place where she belongs, the place where the journey started, the land where she was born.<sup>336</sup>

### 3.2.2 The Meaning of Home

Laurence regrets both the Post-colonial and the Neo-colonial ideologies affecting her country, which she considers to be 'under the huge shadows of these dominating figures, Uncle Sam and Britannia'.<sup>337</sup> Laurence is aware of the need for Canada to define a national identity separate from its past as British colony and its present as a cultural colony of the United States. Because of that, she thinks it is especially important for Canadians to acknowledge and embody their place. Throughout her work, and especially in *The Diviners*, Laurence seems to

<sup>335</sup> Laurence, *Heart*, p.187.

<sup>336</sup> Laurence, *Dance*, pp.77; 164; Laurence *Heart*, p.145.

<sup>337</sup> Laurence, *Heart*, p.217.

suggest that if the descendants of settlers and indigenous people recognize that they share a history of suffering and a collective imperialist past, they can establish a new community based on respect for the land they also share. Morag's daughter, Pique asks: "'Home?'" (What means home?).<sup>338</sup> Pique's very existence embodies the answer to that question; she is a natural symbol where opposites are reconciled. As Powers brilliantly puts it:

'Home' is where the distant past and the personal, visitable past join with the present to achieve a kind of simultaneity, and where ancestors and progenitors – wherever they are – cohabit in the present with one's parents and friends. Those apparently impossible contradictions are made possible via the tales or legends or myths that keep the distant past and its inhabitants alive and with us, not as mere statistics but true individuals enlivened, vivified, and displaying still the 'glory' of their actuality.<sup>339</sup>

Canada searches for myths of its own, and similarly Laurence pursues her personal myths (*Dance* 77). Canada appears to have a subaltern status to Britain and America, and in the personal realm Laurence experiences herself as belonging to a further marginalized group in Canada, Canadian women – 'a colony within a colony'.<sup>340</sup>

In her fiction, Laurence attempts to rewrite the position of Canadian women. In *The Diviners*, Morag marries Brooke Skelton because his Britishness attracts her; he is a Professor of English literature, who has been brought up in India; he, in one sense, represents the culture and tradition of the Empire. Brooke feels attracted by Morag's lack of a past and convinces her that she also lacks a cultural tradition: she is virgin territory to colonize. Brooke disparages/depreciates Morag's literary endeavours and patronizes her as if she were a child. When Morag becomes a successful writer – publishing under her maiden name – she

<sup>338</sup> Laurence, *The Diviners*, p.319.

Pique has Scottish and Métis ancestors, she has received the tales of her ancestors from her mother, and although she had attended school in England, she feels at home in Canada.

<sup>339</sup> Powers, *Alien Heart*, p.380.

<sup>340</sup> Debra Dudek, 'Poetic Redress: Her Body, Her House in *The Fire-Dwellers*', *Great Plains Quarterly*, 19.3(1999), 181-90(p.181).

uses her newly discovered strength to leave the pernicious influence of Brooke and re-connect herself with the land of her past and the people who have shared her experience of the land. When she establishes her relationship with the Métis Jules Tonnerre, she feels it as 'some debt or answer to the past, some severing of inner chains which have kept her bound and separated from the past of herself'.<sup>341</sup> Morag learns 'how dangerous it is to be a Canadian character in a British novel or a woman in a man's narrative'.<sup>342</sup> In this way Laurence explores the connection between kinds of subordination. Laurence is deeply and painfully aware of women's position of double dispossession, subjugated under colonial and patriarchal authority (*Dance* 8-9). To sum up, Laurence's escape is from predefined constraining roles as postcolonial subject and as woman. As Theodore F. Sheckels explains, 'certain subject positions for women, for men, and for nations are authorized within [dominant] discourse. Laurence [...] challenges it because the dominance of these positions stands in the way of identity and fulfilment'.<sup>343</sup>

### 3.2.3 Dispossession and Sense of Belonging

Dispossession, a consequence of colonization, is a major concern for Laurence. In Somaliland, Laurence was able to identify similarities between Somali people and the Canadian Métis, who fought against British colonial rule:

Both were communities of basically tribal and nomadic people (the camel herders of Somaliland; the Métis buffalo hunters of the Canadian prairies) faced with imperialist and

<sup>341</sup> Laurence, *The Diviners*, p.222.

<sup>342</sup> Neil ten Kortenaar, 'The Trick of Divining a Postcolonial Canadian Identity: Margaret Laurence Between Race and Nation', *Canadian Literature* 149(1996), 11-33(p.26).

<sup>343</sup> Theodore F. Sheckels, *The Island Motif in the Fiction of L.M. Montgomery, Margaret Laurence, Margaret Atwood, and Other Canadian Novelists*, Studies on Themes and Motifs in Literature, 68(New York: Peter Lang, 2003), p.63.

colonialist powers which possessed only one superior quality, namely superior means of slaughter, and which intended to take over the people's land and administration thereof.<sup>344</sup>

Later, Laurence associates and compares the fate of those dispossessed people with the Highland Scots, who emigrated to Canada, victims of the Highland Clearances. Laurence describes the 'Highland clan system' as 'similar to tribal systems anywhere' and imagines that 'the outcast Highlanders must have arrived in Canada as a people bereft, a people who had been wounded psychically in ways they could not possibly have comprehended'.<sup>345</sup> Former dispossessed immigrants (Scots, Irish), new dispossessed people (Indian, Métis), culturally dispossessed Canadians, and socially dispossessed women, seem to Laurence to share the hopeless feeling of belonging to nowhere.

'Belonging' is a key concept for understanding Laurence's life-long search for place. Perhaps the answer to the intriguing question of why Laurence is so concerned with finding her 'place' in life – and it could be hypothesized that the process is the same for most people whether they openly acknowledge it or not – is to be found in the essential loneliness of human existence: it is impossible to interchange with anyone else the precise act of being and experiencing this being. The only private, singular, and irreducible quality of an 'I', 'existing', is not communicable, in the sense that it cannot be shared. This unique feeling of solitude, when acknowledged, is not only unpleasant, but it is also the source of existential doubt, pain, and anguish. Laurence says she has her 'own private world' which she 'hopes will ultimately relate to the outer world which we all share', and her way of struggling against the kind of suffering inherent in existing

<sup>344</sup> Margaret Laurence, 'The Poem and the Spear', in *Heart of a Stranger* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), pp.44-76(p.74).

<sup>345</sup> Margaret Laurence, 'Road from the Isles', in *Heart of a Stranger* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), pp.145-57(pp.147-48).

as a subject, is to try to belong to somewhere.<sup>346</sup> As the term indicates, belonging to a place means to be connected with it; it means to establish bonds, contact with an object external to one's own self, with an 'other'.<sup>347</sup>

Thus, belonging to a place implies that people from that place are as important as – or, in some cases, indeed, even more significant than – the physical environment. Laurence underlines the pre-eminence of people over land when she discusses the two aspects of a place: 'First, the physical presence of the place itself – its geography, its appearance. Second, the people. For me, the second aspect of environment is the most important'.<sup>348</sup> In accordance with this wider meaning of place for her, the author turns from the traditional concept of place as material space, to people as the principal means of locating one's place in life – and not only living people, but also ancestors (*Dance* 8-9). Thus people share, at least, some of the events and emotions present in Laurence's own existence and so, constitute a way out of isolation.

### 3.2.4 'Ancestral Feeling'

Laurence's view of her position in time and her relationship with her ancestors provides further links between the concepts of 'place' and 'self'. Although Laurence's perennial longing to find a definite 'place' for her 'self' contrasts with the 'transitoriness' inherent in any 'home' and any 'human existence', it is precisely the temporal dimension of Laurence's position, her place in History, that

<sup>346</sup> Margaret Laurence, 'A Place to Stand on', in *A Place to Stand on*, ed. by George Woodcock (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1983), pp.15-19(p.16).

<sup>347</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. by John Simpson and others. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Online. Available: [http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry\\_wordlist/findword?query\\_type=word&queryword=belonging&find.x=59&find.y=130](http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry_wordlist/findword?query_type=word&queryword=belonging&find.x=59&find.y=130), 24 August 2006.

<sup>348</sup> Laurence, 'A Place', p.17.

represents 'permanence' for her (as opposed to that transitoriness). And it is people who connect Laurence's inner being with her historical existence:

History, as history, is moving when one catches a momentary sense of it [...] because the humans who lived before oneself are suddenly endowed with flesh and bones, and because man's incredible ability to survive both the outer and the inner damage seems to me to be heartening wherever it occurs.<sup>349</sup>

People – living people and people from the past – share her flaws and weaknesses, but also her strength, tenacity and vitality. It is people who give her the power to survive and who confer a sense of continuity. Probably this understanding of the individual's historical place explains the great importance Laurence attributes to *myths* and ancestors: 'I care about the ancestral past very much, but in a kind of mythical way'.<sup>350</sup> She acknowledges the intrinsic creativity of human beings and the capacity of myths to convey true knowledge, but she is also aware of the differences between myths and reality: in a cancelled conclusion to *Heart of a Stranger* she declares 'I have always been fascinated by the ways in which man is a myth-making animal and our myths express essential truth about us'.<sup>351</sup> On the other hand, she knows the potentially misleading effect some myths might have on an individual's search for identity. She narrates her discovery of how Canadian people – herself included – have kept 'the myth of Scotland' alive, a mythical place not to be found in any actual geographical space but in the hearts of those same Canadians: 'gradually I began to perceive that I was no more Scots than I was Siamese'.<sup>352</sup> The Highlands, when she finally visits them, only 'struck a chord' because they remind her of Canada; thus, she concludes that although her family came in the distant past from Scotland and Ireland, in a sense, that no

<sup>349</sup> Laurence, *Heart*, p.156.

<sup>350</sup> Laurence, *Heart*, p.157.

<sup>351</sup> Stovel, 'Heart of a Traveller', p.175.

<sup>352</sup> Laurence, *Heart*, p.147.

longer mattered very much, because her true roots are in Canada.<sup>353</sup> Laurence becomes aware that what she shares with her contemporary Canadians is more than the same physical space. Laurence feels that although 'the history that one can feel personally encompasses only a very few generations', she has a place in human history because 'the ancestors, in the end, become everyone's ancestors'.<sup>354</sup> In a letter to her friend Al Purdy Laurence clearly expresses what 'ancestral feeling' – that comes across so clearly in *The Diviners* – means for her:

In some way, after a certain time, the ancestors are everyone's ancestors – mine, in some ways, are not only the Scots but also the Métis; I was born in a land which they had inhabited, shaped and invested with their ghosts [...] We *are* haunted by more than our deaths.<sup>355</sup>

She seems to suggest that, in History, an individual's story acquires meaning and significance, as it is unique and personal, but also connected with 'others':

This is where my world began. A world which includes the ancestors – both my own and other people's ancestors who become mine. A world which formed me, and continues to do so, even while I fought it in some of its aspects, and continue to do so. A world which gave me my own lifework to do, because it was here that I learned the sight of my particular eyes.<sup>356</sup>

Therefore, Laurence's place – like her self – is circumscribed by its circumstances, although simultaneously freed from this constraint by its connection with the endless historical line of past lives.

### 3.2.5 Place as Manawaka

Laurence explores these processes in her fiction. In her fiction, particularly her Canadian fiction, Laurence creates heroines who have to come to terms not only with their own immediate pasts, but also with the struggles of their ancestors in the land where they are now living and where their roots begin. They want to free

<sup>353</sup> Laurence, *Heart*, p.219.

<sup>354</sup> Laurence, *Heart*, p.157.

<sup>355</sup> Letter to Al Purdy, 12 June 1974. In Margaret Laurence and Al Purdy, *Margaret Laurence-Al Purdy: A Friendship in Letters, Selected Correspondence*, ed. by John Lennox (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1993), p.317.

<sup>356</sup> Laurence, *Heart*, p.219.

themselves from their ancestors' overwhelming influences, but as their stories progress, they learn to appreciate their true value. The protagonist of *The Stone Angel*, Hagar Currie Shipley, who is closest historically to the Canadian pioneering experience, has mixed feelings about her father's generation of settlers. She sees her father as authoritarian and afraid of showing emotion; yet, she admires the fact that he survived the wilderness of the prairies and contributed to the foundation of their town.<sup>357</sup> Jason Currie is evidently based on Laurence's grandfather Simpson, that tough old man who had the indomitable quality of the pioneers. In the present of the narration of *The Stone Angel* Hagar is ninety years old and 'rampant with memory'.<sup>358</sup> She dwells on the past not because she is unable to live in the present, but because she senses that her time is short and she tries to discover and understand how she became who she is. Discussing the composition of *The Stone Angel* Laurence expresses her need to deal with her 'people's real past', to explore her own real past, and to recognize that her roots had begun with the first people who lived in Manitoba: 'I had had to begin approaching my background and my past through my grandparents' generation, the generation of pioneers of Scot-Presbyterian origin, who had been among the first to people the town I called Manawaka'.<sup>359</sup>

In *The Diviners* Morag Gunn looks desperately for her ancestors: 'they are inside me, flowing unknown in my blood and moving unrecognized in my skull'.<sup>360</sup> Since she is orphaned in childhood, her foster father's stories are all that she has to satisfy her instinctive longing for an ancestral past: "Christie, tell me about Piper Gunn" [...] "All right, then, listen and I will tell you the first tale of

<sup>357</sup> Laurence, *Stone Angel*, pp.5; 7; 42.

<sup>358</sup> Laurence, *Stone Angel*, p.3.

<sup>359</sup> Laurence, 'A Place', p.15.

<sup>360</sup> Laurence, *The Diviners*, p.15.



your ancestor'''<sup>361</sup> Later, she travels to Scotland to find more about her family history. She realizes, however, that her real past is in the country of her childhood, where she grew up, and where her memories live:

'It's deep land here, all right,' Morag says. 'But it's not mine, except a long long way back. I always thought it was the land of my ancestors, but it's not.'

'What is, then?'

'Christie's real country. Where I was born'.<sup>362</sup>

Morag's daughter, Pique, who represents Morag's continuation into the future, starts her own pilgrimage in order to discover and understand the ancestry of her mixed European and Indian blood. Morag is conscious of the perils and obstacles of her daughter's journey, but she also knows she must let Pique go:

'Pique, I hope —'

What? That Pique wasn't taking on more than she could cope with? That she wasn't making an error of judgement in going at all? Nonsense. Who could enter anything with a guarantee? Let her go. This time, it had to be possible and was.

'I hope everything goes well for you, Pique'.<sup>363</sup>

Thus, Pique is allowed to be free to write her own life story. At the end of *The Diviners* Pique is making her own songs about herself, creating her own myths. In fact, the actual 'diviners' are the story-tellers, those who are able to create identities for themselves and for others to share; Christie Logan, Lazarus Tonnerre, Morag the novelist, Pique the songwriter, among others, are the mythmakers whose deliberate distortions of history make personal and communal stories alive. That is the reason why Morag, after having learnt the place of distant ancestors in her identity, declares: 'The myths are my reality'.<sup>364</sup>

In *The Diviners* the simple physicality of the act of digging — a divined well, for example — is a metaphor for memory. As in archaeology, excavating a site means digging for its past; it implies looking for that past, discovering and facing it. It entails acceptance of such discoveries and integration of new findings

<sup>361</sup> Laurence, *The Diviners*, p.39-40.

<sup>362</sup> Laurence, *The Diviners*, p.319.

<sup>363</sup> Laurence, *The Diviners*, p.359.

<sup>364</sup> Laurence, *The Diviners*, p.319.

into the pre-existent body of knowledge. Digging the soil where one lives works to make the physical and the temporal dimensions of place converge. The fact of recovering remains of past inhabitants, testimonies of their lives, links us to the past, not only rationally, but also emotionally. The objective findings of the search matter less, however, than the interpretation of them. The final myths about ancestors are inspired by the needs of the living: Morag Gunn existed before her foster father's stories gave her meaning.<sup>365</sup> Moreover, the purpose of digging a well – finding water – makes it an essential activity for survival. Yet, not everybody can be a diviner, and those who have the *gift* must search for water, interpret memory, create myths for others to live.

In Laurence's writings, a sense of benign freedom and necessary continuity are found in the land itself, in nature, beyond the boundaries of the well-known small town and outside the limits of the menacing big city. Laurence's protagonists show respect for and love of nature. Vanessa admires the beauty of the countryside, overcomes her instinctive fear of the unknown, and envies her cousin's knowledge of it:

The hayfield lay beside the lake. It was my first view of the water which had spawned saurian giants so long ago. Chris drove the hayrack through the fields of high coarse grass and on down almost to the lake's edge, where there was no shore but only the green rushes like floating meadows in which the water birds nested. Beyond the undulating reeds the open lake stretched, deep, green-grey, out and out, beyond sight. No human word could be applied.<sup>366</sup>

Rachel associates her more delicate feelings and intimate experiences with the nature around her. For example, when she makes love with Nick, which is her first time, she notices: 'The darkening sky is hugely blue, gashed with rose, blood, flame pouring from the volcano or wound or flower of the lowering sun. The

<sup>365</sup> Kortenaar, 'Trick', p.27.

<sup>366</sup> Laurence, *Bird in the House*, p.147.

wavering green, the sea of grass, piercingly bright.'<sup>367</sup> Stacey, in a moment of crisis in her life, escapes from the city to the seashore, where, connected to nature, she is able to find her lost vitality, sensuality, and sense of freedom. Nature seems to echo her emotions:

Out deeper, the water is more rough, breaking in wind-stirred crests. No night clouds, and the sky is as black as the water, but shot through with stars which one instant look close, earth-related, lights provided for us, small almost cosy nightlights to keep us from the dark, and the next instant look like themselves and alien, inconceivably far, giant and burning, not even hostile or anything identifiable, only different. Stacey smokes and lets the silence exist around her. The sounds are only the underlying steady ones of the water and wind, and the occasional pierce of waterbirds.<sup>368</sup>

In Hagar's memory, the beauty of the land where she lived her youth is still alive. She recalls the strength and generosity of nature in its seasonal change. She recalls the day of her marriage:

It was spring that day, a different spring from this one. The poplar bluffs had budded with sticky leaves, and the frogs had come back to the sloughs and sang like choruses of angels with sore throats, and the marsh marigolds were opening like shavings of sun on the brown river where the tadpoles danced and the bloodsuckers lay slimy and low, waiting for the boys' feet.<sup>369</sup>

Morag lives by a river, which is an ever-present reminder of the cycle of life, of fertility, and death:

Across the river, the clumps of willow bent silver-green down to the water, and behind them the great maples and oaks stirred a little, their giant dark green tranquillity disturbed only slightly by the wind. There were more dead elms this year, dry bones, the grey skeletons of trees. Soon there would be no elms left.<sup>370</sup>

There is no landscape in Laurence's works more significant, however, than the town of Manawaka itself, a powerful, mythical place, able to cross national boundaries and to reach universal experience. In *Heart of a Stranger* Laurence explains her use of the particular to signify the universal: 'Writing for me, has to be set firmly in some soil, some place, some outer and inner territory which might

<sup>367</sup> Laurence, *Jest of God*, p.85.

<sup>368</sup> Laurence, *Fire Dwellers*, p.17

<sup>369</sup> Laurence, *Stone Angel*, p.43.

<sup>370</sup> Laurence, *The Diviners*, p.4.

be described in anthropological terms as "cultural background".<sup>371</sup> Thus, Manawaka symbolises a universal 'town of the mind'.<sup>372</sup> Obviously, to create Manawaka, Laurence has taken elements of her own birthplace, Neepawa, a place 'where everyone seemed to know everyone's business (or they think they did) and the moralistic attitude was prominent. Racial prejudice flourished, hypocrisy was vibrantly alive, cultural and religious bigotry festered; in a word, the establishment WASP mentality was pervasive'.<sup>373</sup> In several ways, Manawaka is like many Canadian prairie towns and its physical, psychological, and social landscape is indeed akin to hundreds, if not thousands, of small towns all over the world. The relationship between the town and its inhabitants is rather ambiguous; there is hate for Manawaka, but there is love too. For all Laurence's heroines, Manawaka will be always an internalized part of themselves. Rachel Cameron fears to be swallowed by the town, becoming another feature of the landscape. After the summer when she finds the inner strength to take the necessary steps to actively define her own identity, she decides to move to Vancouver. As she leaves, however, she carries her past with her, in the form of her mother.<sup>374</sup> Hagar Shipley has moved to Vancouver long before Rachel, also searching for independence and self-definition, escaping from the dominant figures of her father and her husband. Yet, at the end of her life, she is still haunted by the ghosts of Manawaka: 'Nothing can take away those years'.<sup>375</sup> Stacey Cameron, after accepting herself for what she is, recognises that the town of her childhood – and its people – is the main influence that has shaped her self: 'The past doesn't ever seem to be

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<sup>371</sup> Laurence, *Heart*, pp.17-18.

<sup>372</sup> Laurence, *Heart*, p.15.

<sup>373</sup> Powers, *Alien Heart*, p.48.

<sup>374</sup> Laurence, *Jest of God*, pp.191-202.

<sup>375</sup> Laurence, *Stone Angel*, p.261.

over'.<sup>376</sup> Vanessa MacLeod leaves Manawaka when she goes to college. She feels trapped in Manawaka and believes that if she stays there, she will be condemned to a life like her mother's and many other women in her family and in the town. Yet, even in Laurence's last stories, the adult Vanessa realizes that she cannot forget Manawaka, because the town 'provides her with both the vision and material that shape her art'.<sup>377</sup> She admits her indissoluble tie with the town: 'That house in Manawaka [...] I carry with me'.<sup>378</sup> Morag Gunn also re-examines her memories and their meaning. Throughout her life she has successfully undergone a search for her past in order to understand her present, and as the book ends, she has left Manawaka behind, but at the same time, she is perfectly conscious of her need of a spiritual return: 'Yet the town inhabits her, as once she inhabited it'.<sup>379</sup> In Laurence's fiction, then, Manawaka, and the way its inhabitants behave as a consequence of the influence of their town, represents the universalization of the human experience of socialization, the continuous succession of ancestors and descendants, and the cyclical quality of human time, emphasizing the circular nature of life as a 'long journey back home'.<sup>380</sup>

#### 4.2.6 Movement and Stability

Laurence discovers her need for both 'rootlessness' and 'rootedness'. She expresses her efforts to stand outside her own land in order to make herself a rootless stranger: 'I was thinking of Canada, my home and native land, as a foreign country and myself as the biblical Ruth, "in tears amid the alien corn"'

<sup>376</sup> Laurence, *Fire Dwellers*, p.258.

<sup>377</sup> Cathy Davidson, 'Geography as Psychology in the Writings of Margaret Laurence', in *Regionalism and the Female Imagination: A Collection of Essays*, ed. by Emily Toth (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1985), pp.129-37(p.135).

<sup>378</sup> Laurence, *Bird in the House*, p.3.

<sup>379</sup> Laurence, *The Diviners*, p.185.

<sup>380</sup> Laurence, *Heart*, p.12.

(*Dance* 179). But at the same time, she acknowledges the strong rootedness of her being: 'I did not know that I would carry the land and the town [Canada and Neepawa] all my life within my skull'.<sup>381</sup> Laurence's apparently ambiguous position can be explained as deriving from her condition as an artist. According to Sheckles, 'the artist must be connected to a place, and that place will provide the artist with both subject matter and sense of identity. Conversely, the artist needs distance from that place'.<sup>382</sup> It is the rootless quality of Laurence's life that allows her to be capable of 'risking that peculiar voyage of exploration which constitutes a novel'.<sup>383</sup> and, at the same time, her roots are the source of her creativity and sense of identity: 'I felt I had written myself out of that prairie town'.<sup>384</sup> And at all times Laurence considers her fiction as a further way of exploration. As she puts it: 'the whole process of fiction is a mysterious one, and a writer, however experienced, remains in some ways a perpetual amateur, or perhaps a perpetual traveller, an explorer of those inner territories, those strange lands of the heart and spirit'.<sup>385</sup> She is aware that her fictional exploration of a sense of being is sometimes more effective than her experience of life events in the process of building an identity: 'in fiction I knew exactly where to go, but in life I didn't, as yet'.<sup>386</sup> Laurence's rootless exploration allows her to become closer to her self and to rediscover her roots; physical travel provides her with distance and perspective; but the reflective effort of artistic activity allows her further exploration of ever-changing material, intellectual, and emotional realms:

For a writer, one way of discovering oneself, of changing from the patterns of childhood and adolescence to those of adulthood, is through the exploration inherent in the writing itself [...] This exploration [...] involves an attempt to understand one's background and

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<sup>381</sup> Laurence, *Heart*, p.217.

<sup>382</sup> Sheckles, *Island Motif*, p.50.

<sup>383</sup> Laurence, 'A Place', p.89.

<sup>384</sup> Laurence, 'A Place', p.19.

<sup>385</sup> Laurence, *Heart*, p.12.

<sup>386</sup> Laurence, *Heart*, p.145.

one's past, sometimes even a more distant past which one has not personally experienced.<sup>387</sup>

And finally those apparently contradictory concepts of movement and stability constantly appear in Laurence's autobiography, which is her last narrative of her search for her own place. After her life-long experience – including the writing of her memoirs – she comes to terms with her renewed knowledge about herself: her heritage, her capacity for love (maternal and sexual), and her creativity. She learns about socio-cultural positions (spatial and temporal), change and mobility, the value of fictional exploration of selfhood, her sense of belonging, and her roots. Once she discovers her 'real' Self, she feels free to inhabit the 'place' where that Self can exist in plenitude. At the end of the cyclical process of escape, search, and return, Laurence acknowledges the 'necessity of coming closer to home, closer to myself' (*Dance* 198).

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<sup>387</sup> Laurence, 'A Place', p.15.

### 3.3 The Craft of the Writer: Vulnerability and Power

A writer may be beleaguered by any number of chimeras,  
but only the (woman) writer is beleaguered by her own essential identity.

Joyce Carol Oates  
'The (Woman) Writer'

Margaret Laurence describes her feelings during a period when her writing is going well as 'being in a state of grace'.<sup>388</sup> In an interview she gave to her friend the Very Reverend Lois Wilson, Laurence affirms: 'I think of grace not as something deserved – because who could deserve God's grace? – but just given. Sometimes I think many writers and artists, whether they define it that way or not, do have the feeling of something given'.<sup>389</sup> In this semi-religious description she conveys the joy – and the agony – of creating, and the belief that what she wants to create is worth doing. She regards the ability to write as a gift, but not an unproblematic one. Conflicts between Laurence's role as a writer and other previously internalized roles keep her trying to maintain her idealism in spite of persistent pessimism. In this way she swings precariously between euphoria and despair, but always recurs to her saving sense of humour. It took her, we gather, many years to develop enough confidence to venture into the uncertain territories of selfhood as a writer, and her decision had some painful consequences. But the results nourished, profoundly and lastingly, her sense of self. The object of this chapter is to analyse Margaret Laurence's sense of herself as a writer, the conditions she experienced and the dilemmas she had to face in order to become a writer, the consequences of her decisions for her mental health, interpersonal

<sup>388</sup> Helen Lucas, 'A Creative Life', *Canadian Women's Studies* = *Les cahiers de la Femme*, 1.3 (Spring 1979), 26-27(p.27).

<sup>389</sup> Lois Wilson, 'Why Pick on Margaret Laurence?', *The United Church Observer*, February 1980, p.10.



relationships, and the formation of her public persona as a recognized, successful writer.

### 3.3.1 Being an Outsider

In her autobiography, Margaret Laurence appears to be caught in a socio-cultural trap. On the one hand there is what is expected from a citizen of her time, who happens to be a woman, a wife, a mother, and, on the other is what she instinctively feels it is right for *her* to be and this must include her literary career. Given the pressures that she suffers, it is unusually courageous first to discover, and secondly to pursue what she senses is her destiny: that is to identify her potential as a writer and to seek the means to fulfil that potential. It is probably true that at the beginning of her life she was not completely aware of the consequences of her struggle for a writing career and the high price she would have to pay in order to protect that career, but she considers the fulfilment of this creative part of her self as an absolute must: 'this was my vocation and I had to do it' (*Dance* 158).

Laurence perceives herself – and has probably always been perceived by others – as an outsider. She was 'distinctly a loner', as her teacher in grade seven, Wes McAmmond, remembered half a century later.<sup>390</sup> From an early age she is aware that, although on the surface she looks like other girls, somehow she also feels close to other, more unconventional lives. She identifies with historical outcasts like Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont;<sup>391</sup> her column at her high school

<sup>390</sup> Lyall Powers, *Alien Heart: The Life and Work of Margaret Laurence* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2003), p.32.

<sup>391</sup> Laurence, *Dance*, p.77.

*Louis Riel* was a 19<sup>th</sup> century leader of the Métis people in their resistance against the Canadian government in the Canadian Northwest. By 1869, civilization had still not been established west of the Ontario border. Between Canada and the Pacific Ocean was a vast

newspaper and her role as editor of it make her appear as an onlooker, observing and evaluating the bustle of others (*Dance* 78). Her biographer, James King describes her as somehow detached from her classmates and childhood friends:

Temperamentally, Peggy was different from even her closest friends. [...] Her growing awareness of herself as a writer – as an observer of lives of others and thus someone who searches those lives for fodder – (an occupation she never tried to conceal) was further demarcation.<sup>392</sup>

When, at the beginning of her married life, she travels to Africa, she identifies herself with 'the other', the colonized people from Somaliland and the Gold Coast, rather than with white memsahibs like herself – rather a sentimental and wishful way of thinking, as she realizes later in her life. Laurence's later relationship with the writer George Lamming – who was of African descent and born in Barbados – can be interpreted as a rebellious act of identifying herself with someone who visibly belonged to a minority, standing by the 'outsider' against the 'norm'. Towards the end of her life, she wrote: 'I don't think I feel myself alienated from society any more or any less than I always have [...] I don't feel at ease with the

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territory called Rupert's Land. The Canadian government had plans to have this extensive territory placed under their administration and parcelled off to White settlers. In the eastern portion of this land, which is now known as Manitoba, there was a predominantly half-breed settlement called Red River. This community developed because Anglophone and Francophone settlers had started mixing with the local Native population. The Francophone half-breeds, known as Métis, were numerous and held together by a collective sense of alienation from both Native and White communities. In 1869, Riel founded the Comité National des Métis to protect his people's rights, and helped stage the Red River Uprising for which he was exiled to the United States. Entreated by Métis settlers, he eventually returned to set up a provisional government and, as the self-declared prophet of his people, became embroiled in the 1885 rebellion. His military head was *Gabriel Dumont*. When the Canadian government finally responded with military force the rebellion was quickly crushed and, on May 15, shortly after the fall of Batoche, Riel surrendered to Canadian forces and was taken to Regina to stand trial for treason. His subsequent execution aroused bitterness and debate. The formerly widespread perception of Louis Riel as an insane traitor, especially outside the Métis and French Canadian community, has weakened considerably in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Many now view Riel as a hero who stood up for his people in the face of a racist government, and some who question his sanity still view him as an essentially honourable figure. Alternately described as visionary and madman, victim and villain, he remained a controversial figure in death as in life. With the perspective of time, Louis Riel has come to be seen as a combination of martyr and hero in the eyes of many Canadians.

(The Northwest Resistance 1885. A database of materials held by the University of Saskatchewan Libraries and the University Archives. Online. Available: <http://library2.usask.ca/northwest/background/rieli.htm>. 10 October 2006).

<sup>392</sup> James King, *The Life of Margaret Laurence* (Toronto: Vintage, 1998.), p.43.

present Establishment, but I never did, almost as far back as I recall'.<sup>393</sup> Unsurprisingly, Laurence's novels are full of characters – not only protagonists – who are social outcasts or who perceive themselves as different, separated from those who surround them, and alone in their way of appreciating/experiencing life. Margaret Laurence's fictional and autobiographical work reveals her own sense of being an outsider, of being different from the rest, of being alone: she writes out of her existential loneliness, suffering, and strength.

### 3.3.2 Emotional Awareness and Self-assertion

The process of Laurence's becoming a professional writer is marked by conflict and uncertainty, evolving through three overlapping periods. In the first stage she is still *unaware* of the extent to which her self has been suppressed and constrained. It is only a matter of time before she starts questioning some of her previous assumptions. For example, she is at first unaware of her need for Jack as a paternal figure to compensate for her early parental loss. Her trust in his judgment is unlimited and her dependence on him is not confined to everyday life decisions, but includes dependence on his opinion of her literary attempts. She is certain that Jack's intellect is superior to her own, feeling deeply affected by his negative criticism of her writing: 'He didn't think I was a novelist and nothing much happened in *THE STONE ANGEL*'.<sup>394</sup> We may surmise that Jack's notions of narrative were rather traditional like his notions of marriage. She tries to accommodate her life and her writing to Jack's traditional notions, where the wife's life must be secondary to the husband's: 'Jack [...] was a man of his age,

<sup>393</sup> Letter to Sandy Cameron, 24 March 1970. York University, Toronto, Clara Thomas Archives, Margaret Laurence, Call Number 2005-049 1001(01).

<sup>394</sup> Letter to Al Purdy, 5 February 1970 (capital letters as in the original). In Laurence and Purdy, *A Friendship in Letters*, p.170.

one who was not ashamed of demanding that his wife's life be centred on his. For Jack, this was the only type of marriage that was acceptable'.<sup>395</sup> But she cannot avoid feeling suffocated, trapped, and a failure. Laurence admits to her friend Nadine Jones that she cannot 'live up to her own image of herself' and, she is certain, she cannot 'measure up to Jack's expectations'.<sup>396</sup> In spite of her progressive uneasiness, she still thinks it possible to be 'normal' and write; and she understands as 'normal' a life 'in which one sought to do what everyone expect[s] and thus not to alarm aunts, mother-in-law, etc.'. <sup>397</sup> The source of her dissatisfaction is not at this stage fully identified and her main defence is denial. For example, she does not speak of her writing activity, apparently in order to avoid spoiling her 'pure enjoyment in life itself' (*Dance* 144); she hides her literary labour from her neighbours in order to avoid feeling more 'uncomfortable' than she already is among them – because her opinions are hostile to the colonial regime (*Dance* 152-53). In fact, she is tormented by agonizing *fear of success*, the expression of her fear of alienation which accompanied her 'sense of difference'. <sup>398</sup> Progressively, her repressed unhappiness and her rising ambition become so strong that she cannot ignore them any longer.

A further definite step for Laurence is to accept the need for *change* and *re-adjustment*. She starts to identify the sources of her unhappiness. She realizes

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<sup>395</sup> King, *Life*, p.240.

<sup>396</sup> King, *Life*, p.156.

<sup>397</sup> King, *Life*, p.178.

<sup>398</sup> Patricia Meyers Spacks, *The Female Imagination: A Literary and Psychological Investigation of Women's Writing* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1976).

See also:

M.S. Horner, 'Towards an Understanding of Achievement-Related Conflicts in Women', *Journal of Social Issues*, 28(2), 157-175.

Jennifer Engle, "Fear of Success" Revisited: A Replication of Matina Horner's Study 30 Years Later' (Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL, April 21-25, 2003).

that many roles and situations she thought acceptable, or even desirable, because they were 'normal', are wrong for her developing literary self; those roles no longer suit her conception of purposeful and satisfying life. Laurence, however, is not yet entirely prepared to confront her own transformation: 'everything must be all right if it is moving along so normally on the surface'.<sup>399</sup> But too many conflicting elements have been discovered and liberated, and so Laurence's psychological defences face a hard challenge. As Joyce Carol Oates states, when writing about women writers, 'to pretend that one is not what one is, in the flesh, in the historical flesh, is naïve; to brush lightly aside the evidence of being despised is symptomatic of that interesting variation of hysteria called denial'.<sup>400</sup> So, Laurence's second period of self-development is also plagued by denial, but more significantly, by flashes of recognition: 'I am at the moment trying to face up to, to assimilate, and do something about what I *really* think and feel, not what I am supposed to think and feel'.<sup>401</sup> She is filled with anxiety, shame, doubt, and surprise, while undergoing a long process of self-discovery.

In the process of self-assertion and of uncovering her own value, a further source of suffering for Laurence is the need to separate from her husband. His rejection of her writing can be interpreted as a symbolic rejection of herself as the writer she has come to be (*Dance* 158). It was, however, a more complex decision than it is suggested in Laurence's autobiography. According to her biographer, James King, Laurence never stopped loving Jack, but in spite of several attempts to reconcile their diverse life styles, vocations, and aims, their separation was unavoidable. In a letter to Clara Thomas in December 1967, Laurence discusses the process of her separation in the following terms: 'It has been pretty painful to

<sup>399</sup> King, *Life*, p.178.

<sup>400</sup> Oates, 'The (Woman) Writer', p.10.

<sup>401</sup> King, *Life*, p.178.

get to this point, as the conventional ideas of marriage go much deeper than anyone ever suspects, but it seems like a kind of progress to me'.<sup>402</sup> In her autobiography, Laurence mentions the reasons for their separation in a civilised and ladylike manner: 'We both had a strong sense of our own vocations but they led us into different areas' (*Dance* 158). James King claims, however, that round about the time of her divorce, Laurence started drinking heavily on a daily basis and, when drunk, lamented her failures as a parent, her difficulties with writing, and her loss of Jack, 'the only man I ever loved'.<sup>403</sup> That she is unwilling, however, to leave Jack out of her sentimental and sexual life for ever, is made clear in several episodes; for example, according to King, when the Laurences finally sign the divorce papers – an event precipitated by Jack falling in love with someone else – the author locks herself in her bathroom and takes an undetermined number of tranquilizers while her children and a couple of friends try to persuade her to come out.<sup>404</sup> Nevertheless, the decision of her divorce is crucial to her evolution from being dependant to being an autonomous person and a professional writer, as she acknowledges in a letter to her friend Al Purdy:

It took me a long time when I first came to England to build up a self-image of a person who was a professional writer, not a housewife [...] Then we [Jack and Margaret Laurence] decided to try again, I had to try all over again to return to self-image of housewife, while actually the outer and inner were in considerable conflict [...] Then, last week [after the divorce], another psychic change necessary. Back to self-image of professional writer [...] Actually, that being [...] the Real Me. Which I always knew.<sup>405</sup>

Laurence's third state of psychological transformation is presented as one of emotional *authenticity*. The author has changed, matured, acquiring a more honest, authentic, decisive, empowered and purposeful sense of self. She is finally free to liberate repressed conflicts (as for example, her early parental loss) and to

<sup>402</sup> York University, Toronto, Clara Thomas Archives, Margaret Laurence, Letter to Clara Thomas, 9 December 1967, Call Number 1984-002/01(04).

<sup>403</sup> King, *Life*, p.273.

<sup>404</sup> King, *Life*, p.275.

<sup>405</sup> King, *Life*, p.267.

face her 'real' self (both the 'good' and the 'bad' sides of it). Although not exempt from anguish and doubt, this 'new' Margaret Laurence is wilder and more disrespectful to others than she had ever been before. There is no longer any urgency to prove anything. She just is, and does, and lives. Illustrations of this new way of behaving are her brutal honesty with her publisher, Jack McClelland, or her openness about her sexual affairs.<sup>406</sup> She describes a date with the Sudanese ambassador:

Very nice to meet a man to whom sex isn't a battlefield in which he has to prove himself by a display of superior strength, as with so many North American men, but rather a matter of very accomplished pleasure.<sup>407</sup>

All the incongruities, paradoxes, and ambiguities of this third state, are more authentic than her former self, full of denial. The mature Margaret Laurence acknowledges the realities and impossibilities of her life, together with the diffuseness and multiplicity of existence in general. She admits her sadness for past mistakes and her present solitude. In *Dance on the Earth*, Laurence refers with wild honesty to her feelings of loneliness and separateness (*Dance* 170). At a basic level, her loved ones – particularly her husband, but also her children, as shown by James King's biography – are unable to follow her in her difficult life-path; they find it very hard to accept her as she is now, with her tobacco and alcohol addictions, and her unstable character, plagued by surprising uncontrolled reactions. In fact, her multiple substance abuse could be interpreted as symptomatic, and not a primary cause, of existential anguish – although drinking, at least, very quickly comes to reinforce the very symptoms that it is designed to alleviate. At a deeper level, her despair arises from her realization of the absolute loneliness of existence. As King expresses, 'she dwelt in a solitary space into

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<sup>406</sup> King, *Life*, p.227.

<sup>407</sup> Letter to Adèle Wiseman, 29 May 1966. Quoted in Powers, *Alien Heart*, p.275.

which no one else could enter'.<sup>408</sup> This desperate solitude could perhaps be identified as the origin of her obvious drive to belong, to connect herself with some person or some place: 'It would be unbearable if there wasn't anyone [else]'.<sup>409</sup> To sum up, Margaret Laurence, in becoming a professional writer, also becomes strong enough to acknowledge her weaknesses.

### 3.3.3 The Writer(s) in Fiction

As with the issue of motherhood, Laurence fictionalises these processes. Some of Laurence's fictional protagonists are writers and they also struggle to find their true identities. In *A Bird in the House*, Vanessa MacLeod exhibits early signs of becoming a good writer. The novel in its coverage of Vanessa's formative years and emotional and intellectual education possesses the qualities of a *Künstlerroman* and Vanessa can be described as a portrait of the artist as a young girl. Speaking about the narrative development in the 'typical artist-novel', Maurice Beebe points out that a 'quest for self is the dominant theme of the artist-novel, and because the self is almost always in conflict with society, a closely related theme is the opposition of art to life. The artist-as-a-hero is usually therefore the artist-as-exile'.<sup>410</sup> The artist as a hero, Beebe proceeds, is forced to reject the demands of 'God, home, and country', until 'nothing is left but his true self and his consecration as artist'.<sup>411</sup> In *A Bird in the House* the narrative voice is that of the young girl, grown up, who has become a writer. Undoubtedly, Vanessa has an artistic temperament; she is sensitive and capable of abstracting herself from the world around her. However, Vanessa does not rebel against society in

<sup>408</sup> King, *Life*, p.347.

<sup>409</sup> King, *Life*, p.122.

<sup>410</sup> Maurice Beebe, *Ivory Towers and Sacred Founts: The Artist as Hero in Fiction from Goethe to Joyce* (New York: New York University Press, 1964), p.6.

<sup>411</sup> Beebe, *Ivory Towers*, p.6.



the dramatic manner characteristic of the typical male portrait-of-the-artist novels. Indeed, she has been encouraged to write, and her family – especially her mother – supports her when she decides to go to university. Her ascertainment of her ‘true self’ lies more in discovery and acceptance than in rejection and confrontation, and at the end of the narration she has evolved into an independent, fully integrated female artist.<sup>412</sup> The young Vanessa wishes an active role in defining her life, as do the heroines of her stories: there is a double kind of self-reflexivity in this fiction. The protagonist uses her youthful energy and her art to develop her growing awareness; she regards herself as a ‘professional listener’ and although she does not always fully understand what is said, she lets herself be ‘guided instead by the feel of the words’.<sup>413</sup> Vanessa’s progress as a writer, from a precocious age, reflects her ever-expanding comprehension of life and her efforts to face reality. At the same time, the fictionalized portrait of the evolution of an artist’s mind increases our grasp of its author’s inner development. In other words, as Powers affirms, ‘what Margaret discovered that her Vanessa had learned aids our understanding of all her heroines, and of Margaret herself’.<sup>414</sup> Laurence wrote her Vanessa MacLeod stories over more than a decade, finally publishing them as the collection, *A Bird in the House*. During this period she also wrote and published another three Manawaka books. The first story, ‘The Sound of Singing’, was published the year before the publication of *The Stone Angel* (1964), and the last one, a year after *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969). *A Bird in the House*, in its final form, was published in 1970. Overall it constitutes a literary reshaping of a number of Laurence’s own crucial life experiences, experiences mainly undergone

<sup>412</sup> See: Rosalie Murphy Brown, ‘Artist and Woman: Young Lives in Laurence and Munro’, *North Dakota Quarterly*, 52.3 (1984), 196-211.

<sup>413</sup> Laurence, *A Bird in the House*, p.11; 37.

<sup>414</sup> Powers, *Alien Heart*, p.328.

during her adolescence. The writing of these stories, then, went on concurrently with the writing of the first three Manawaka novels, and it is possible to hypothesize that they functioned as a kind of safety valve to release the intensity of her feelings: thus 'feelings of personal identification and agony that surged up while writing about a prairie setting were deflected from the major works in progress'.<sup>415</sup> Laurence admits the liberating role of her work in general. Her writing frees her and enables her to shape and evaluate her experience:

My writing, then, has been my own attempt to come to terms with the past. I see this process as the gradual one of freeing oneself from the stultifying aspects of the past, while at the same time beginning to see its value.<sup>416</sup>

Laurence endows Vanessa with a sense of the significance she herself ascribes to writing. Like her creator, in exploring and establishing the meaning of her life, the young Vanessa refuses to allow self-deception; instead, she writes to free herself. In writing her stories, Vanessa 'defines her own womanhood by describing its shaping influences'.<sup>417</sup>

Morag Gunn, the forty-seven-year-old protagonist of *The Diviners*, is also a writer and being a writer is an integral part of her identity, as important as being a woman and/or being a mother. Morag is a writer by destiny – her urge to write has been very strong from her childhood – and her life and work are inseparable. The process of becoming a professional writer, however, has not been easy for her. *The Diviners* uses Morag's memories to show how, from an early stage, she has had to rebel and fight against convention; she has also had to overcome the sense of vulnerability that publishing her work causes:

<sup>415</sup> George Woodcock, 'The Human Elements: Margaret Laurence's Fiction', in *The Human Elements: Critical Essays*, ed. by David Helwig (Toronto: Oberon Press, 1978), pp.134-161(p.150).

<sup>416</sup> Margaret Laurence, 'A Place to Stand on', in *A Place to Stand on*, ed. by George Woodcock (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1983), pp.15-19(p.18).

<sup>417</sup> Buss, *Mother and Daughter*, p.63.

She has known for some time what she has to do, but never given the knowledge to any other person or thought that any person might suspect. Now it is as though a strong hand has been laid on her shoulders. Strong and friendly. But merciless.<sup>418</sup>

Morag has had to defend her need to write and her work from the destructive criticism of her ex-husband Brooke: 'I know you know a lot about novels. But I know something, as well. Different from reading and teaching'.<sup>419</sup> Yet, after considering all the difficulties and obstacles she has had to overcome, Morag realizes that the process of writing has been utterly rewarding: 'Only when the process is completed does she see that it has been like exercising muscles never before used, stiff and painful at first, and then later, filled with knowledge that this part of herself is really there'.<sup>420</sup> Morag's struggle to write is intimately bound up with her struggle to free herself from the roles that her husband Brooke casts her in. He complains about her housewifely failures, although he rather cheaply makes them a symptom of her wider failure to love him properly:

Don't you think I've held back, many times, coming home and finding you sitting there at the typewriter as though hypnotized, and no dinner in sight? Well, that's trivial— what I really mean is, no welcome in sight?<sup>421</sup>

Even in their reconciliation he patronises her, treating her like a child. But when she is faced with the need to defend her work against editorial criticism she finds a new strength which Laurence tellingly represents as the development of her whole self, intellectual and physical:

Morag realizes, with some surprise, that she is able to defend her own work. Also, it is a relief to be able to discuss it, no holds barred, with no personal emotional connotations in the argument. Only when the process is completed does she see that it has been like exercising muscles never before used, stiff and painful at first, and then later, filled with the knowledge that this part of herself really is there.<sup>422</sup>

But ironically her struggle with her husband involves her physical self as actual and not metaphorical. When he condescendingly suggests that since she now

<sup>418</sup> Laurence, *The Diviners*, pp.99-100.

<sup>419</sup> Laurence, *The Diviners*, p.213.

<sup>420</sup> Laurence, *The Diviners*, p.212.

<sup>421</sup> Laurence, *The Diviners*, p.211.

<sup>422</sup> Laurence, *The Diviners*, p.212.

knows so much about novels, she might like to 'take over my English 450 course in the Contemporary Novel', Morag hurls a peacock-blue Italian glass bowl against the fireplace.<sup>423</sup> Its shattering prefigures the break-up of the marriage. Of course, Laurence didn't have to put up with a superior academic for a husband but we sense some of her own marital frustrations in that shattered bowl. Laurence also gives Morag her own feelings of intense kinship for outcasts and loners, here the outcast Métis, Jules Tonnerre, and the Highland painter, Dan McRaith. She gives her, too, her own dreams of belonging to a literary community: 'she had come here [London] in the first place partly because of a fantasy – Morag getting to know dozens of other writers, with whom she would have everything in common'.<sup>424</sup>

Towards the autumn of her life – it is autumn outside, by the river, too Morag's work is going well; she feels, however, that her talent as an artist, as a writer, has been a gift – the same kind of gift as the miraculous ability of Royland to divine water – and it will have to be passed on to future generations of writers, in order to keep it alive: 'the gift, or portion of grace, or whatever it was, was finally withdrawn, to be given to someone else'.<sup>425</sup> Morag's gift has been to be an interpreter of memories, and to be able to pour them into words; she is certain that even if this gift abandons her, its meaning will stay as an integral part of her identity. Thus, at the end of *The Diviners*, 'Morag returned to the house, to write the remaining private and fictional words, and to set down the title'.<sup>426</sup>

Margaret Laurence started working in *The Diviners* at the beginning of the 70s. She had just signed the divorce papers in December 1969, and after an initial

<sup>423</sup> Laurence, *The Diviners*, p.213.

<sup>424</sup> Laurence, *The Diviners*, p.294.

<sup>425</sup> Laurence, *The Diviners*, p.167.

<sup>426</sup> Laurence, *The Diviners*, p.370.

painful, and necessary period of adjustment, Laurence observed that life was markedly better since (and obviously because of) her divorce.<sup>427</sup> In a letter to her friend Adele Wiseman, she wrote: 'the relation with Jack was pretty much of strain for quite a few years and it isn't now'.<sup>428</sup> Laurence had found and bought a cottage by the Otonabee River – where she would write most of *The Diviners* – and was very enthusiastic about the prospect of repairing and refurbishing it. Her literary work had been recognized, she was a well-known successful author and she was busy attending numerous conferences in various universities and other institutions; she could count on a certain amount of financial security as well. Finally, in 1971, after months of working on the material for a new novel, of planning and forcing ideas into shape, she surrendered herself to the flow of her creativity and started to write the *right* novel:

It has begun, I think, I pray. Not anything like what I thought it was going to be. I don't even know where the hell it's going, except in general sort of way, but even then it could all change. For the first damn time since I finished *The Fire-Dwellers* [...] I don't mind getting up in the mornings. [...] I really don't know what's going to happen next, and can hardly wait to find out.<sup>429</sup>

According to Powers, the character and quality of the new novel, had been defining themselves in Laurence's 'unconscious mind since the daft old lady of *The Stone Angel* began demanding Margaret's attention, and were furthered by features of her experience during the 1960s, which Margaret recognized partially – or not at all – as they occurred'.<sup>430</sup> Like many of Laurence's previous works, *The Diviners* is highly autobiographical: 'This novel is very autobiog [sic] and yet not at all in many ways [...] But the interaction of life and fiction (or poetry) seems to spook me quite a bit, all the same'.<sup>431</sup> This time, however, there were not

<sup>427</sup> Powers, *Alien Heart*, p.361.

<sup>428</sup> Letter to Adele Wiseman, 16 August 1970. Quoted in Powers, *Alien Heart*, p.361.

<sup>429</sup> Letter to Al Purdy, 30 April 1971. In Laurence and Purdy, *A Friendship*, p.220.

<sup>430</sup> Powers, *Alien Heart*, p.368.

<sup>431</sup> Letter to Adele Wiseman, 7 April 1972. Quoted in Powers, *Alien Heart*, p.474.

only similarities between fictional and real-life characters, but also Laurence thought the way those similarities occurred was mysteriously strange and frightening:

Yeh, being a product of one's own writing. I *know* I am, partly. Reciprocating current is exactly right. I create the novels and the novels create me. Spooky? Yes. Sometimes seem prophetic, too, the novels – in various ways as tho I partly drew from my own experience in order to write them, and on the other hand, partly acted out in my own life what I'd already written about, although in some different form – but related.<sup>432</sup>

And Laurence apologized to her friend Adele because

The main character's best friend [...] talks awfully like you, I regret to say. I mean, she does and she doesn't. She *isn't* you, I need hardly say – but any fool who knows both of us would never believe I didn't base the character on you. ADELE, I'M SORRY!!! I NEVER MEANT TO! It happened.<sup>433</sup>

The character of Brooke Skelton, Morag's husband resembles Laurence's husband Jack. The writer's feelings about it are ambiguous: 'it bothers me about the guy Morag marries – I swear to God he is not Jack; he really is much different in every way, but of course some of the underneath emotional things are the same'.<sup>434</sup> Among those emotional issues she mentions is Jack's – and Brooke's – inability to support his wife in her literary career. In *Dance on the Earth* Laurence narrates her emotional response to Jack's difficulties to accept her vocation:

When I wrote the first draft of *The Stone Angel*, Jack wanted to read it. I didn't want him to. I think I knew his response would be pivotal in our marriage [...] I allowed him to read it in the end and he didn't like it much, but for me it was the most important book I had written, a book on which I had to stake the rest of my life. Strange reason for breaking up a marriage: a novel (*Dance* 158).

Additionally, there were further uncanny connections that grabbed Laurence's attention. For example, when Morag's daughter Pique splits up with her boyfriend Gordon, Morag wonders: 'So, did I pass *that* on? I mean – what if she can't have

<sup>432</sup> Letter to Al Purdy, 17 October 1973. In Laurence and Purdy, *A Friendship*, p.295.

<sup>433</sup> Letter to Adele Wiseman, 13 January 1972. In Margaret Laurence and Adele Wiseman, *Selected Letters of Margaret Laurence and Adele Wiseman*, ed. by John Lennox and Ruth Panofsky (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), p.319.

<sup>434</sup> Letter to Adele Wiseman, 13 January 1972. In Laurence and Wiseman, *Selected Letters*, p.319.

any kind of lasting relationship?'<sup>435</sup> A few weeks after Laurence had written that scene, her daughter Jocelyn split up with her partner Peter and an appalled Laurence wrote to Adele Weisman:

Real problem – Joc and Peter seem to be splitting up. [...] And I am wondering what kind of inability to establish stable relationships I have passed on to her.  
p.s. a month before this happened, in the novel, I was writing about Morag's daughter just having broken up with her boyfriend, and M worrying that she had passed on the inability to form a stable relationship. This scares the bejesus out of me. Of course life is full of spookiness, but need it get this close?<sup>436</sup>

Powers refers another spooky occurrence in the making of *The Diviners*. After finishing the first draft of the novel, Laurence was talking to her friend Jean Cole, who was doing research on her family history, and suddenly discovered that in fact there was a historic figure, who was a piper, and whose name was Gunn.<sup>437</sup>

Powers provides a simple explanation for these two anticipatory scenes. According to Powers, it is probable that Laurence had unconsciously worried about Jocelyn and her several boyfriends for some time and had represented such concerns in her fiction before consciously realizing them in her actual life.<sup>438</sup>

Similarly, the name of Piper Gunn could be explained by Laurence's previous knowledge of the clan Gunn of the Parish of Kildonan in Sutherland – the first to be evicted as a result of the Highland Clearances, a fact certainly known by Laurence because of her reading before her visit to Scotland in 1965.<sup>439</sup> Certainly the most striking biographical parallel is that between Morag Gunn and Margaret Laurence. Once more the borderline between life and fiction is complicated. Laurence wrote to Adele Wiseman: 'The main character, Morag, is not me, but alas is a writer about my age and certainly talks in one of my voices'.<sup>440</sup>

<sup>435</sup> Laurence, *The Diviners*, p.173.

<sup>436</sup> Letter to Adele Wiseman, 7 April 1972. Quoted in Powers, *Alien Heart*, p. 374.

<sup>437</sup> Powers, *Alien Heart*, pp.374-75.

<sup>438</sup> Powers, *Alien Heart*, p.375.

<sup>439</sup> Powers, *Alien Heart*, p.375.

<sup>440</sup> Letter to Adele Wiseman, 13 January 1972. In Laurence and Wiseman, *Selected Letters*, p.319.

Significantly, Laurence's 'voices' provide a striking image of the autobiographical dilemma faced by the author in creating meaningful parallels in her writing:

People talking inside my head. [...] The people are both the writer and not the writer. You could make some shrewd guesses about the main character in this novel [...] and you would be both right and not right [...] The division between fiction and so-called reality in my life seems an awfully uncertain one.<sup>441</sup>

### 3.3.4 Empowerment and Vulnerability

Writing, and being a writer, is, then, clearly fundamental to Margaret Laurence in her search for identity. Her friend and critic Clara Thomas affirms that 'Margaret was a born writer; she had to write. [...] And every character was a facet of herself; all those women, Hagar, Stacey, Rachel, and Vanessa, and Morag'.<sup>442</sup>

Interviewed by her friend, the Very Reverend Lois Wilson, Laurence claims:

Almost all serious writers experience a sense of vocation. When young writers say, 'Do you think I should be a writer?', I say if you don't *have* to be, then don't do it. It's something that you feel as a sense of vocation; you simply cannot imagine yourself doing anything else. And you have that deep sense of lifetime commitment to it.<sup>443</sup>

Laurence writes because she is compelled to do so. Moreover, Laurence's writings were obviously helpful to her in her quest for self-knowledge. In practising the craft of the writer, the author tends to look inside herself, trying to comprehend her inner configuration, in order to create her fictional characters. This process brings her in turn better self-knowledge. Thus, the craft of the writer necessarily entails conscious mirroring and self-reflection. Speaking of *The Diviners*, Laurence recognizes this: 'I guess I worked out a lot of inner terrors through that novel'.<sup>444</sup> However, there is also emotional hardship and tension in the process of writing itself. Laurence alludes to the 'almost impossible stresses of

<sup>441</sup> Letter to Al Purdy, 7 September 1971 (note in the letter of 3 September 1971). In Laurence and Purdy, *A Friendship*, p.230.

<sup>442</sup> Interview with Clara Thomas, Toronto, 30 May 2006 (see appendix 2).

<sup>443</sup> Wilson, 'Why Pick on Margaret Laurence?', p.10.

<sup>444</sup> King, *Life*, p.330.



novel writing'.<sup>445</sup> The author, then, is exposed to forces tending both to reassure and to threaten her psychological integrity. But on balance being a writer heightens Laurence's sense of identity; it endows her with self-assurance, *empowers* her and makes her able to redefine herself.

As part of that process of self-redefinition Laurence changed her name when she was accepted by a literary agent: 'I've changed my name to Margaret [...] it was Peggy I hated, so I have killed her off'.<sup>446</sup> She begins to think of herself as a strong person. On the other hand, the process of writing exposes this new independent and powerful woman to renewed conflicts. She has sacrificed so much in order to become a professional writer that the idea of failure in her life-project can be terrifying:

If one is writing and more or less gambling one's whole existence on it and cheating family of one's time and care and putting into it very nearly the whole of identity and it turns to be no good – what will you say then?<sup>447</sup>

It is not only the outward, evident uncertainties of the profession of a writer that menace Laurence's emotional stability, but it is precisely the fact of having committed 'nearly the whole of identity' to the craft of writing.<sup>448</sup> While she is writing, she goes back to her own life experience to create her fictions and so she is obliged to analyse, judge, value, recognize, and accept joyful and painful memories; in this way she discovers, or rather unveils, repressed emotional material. She prepares, arranges and constructs her novels and characters out of her own unsolved conflicts. Thus, as painful self-scrutiny is essential to her writing, creativity and freedom may themselves become burdensome:

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<sup>445</sup> King, *Life*, p.297.

<sup>446</sup> King, *Life*, p.148.

<sup>447</sup> King, *Life*, p.138.

<sup>448</sup> King, *Life*, p.138.

to make [one]self more vulnerable in the writing [...] that is necessary [...] I don't think it matters a damn whether the fiction is partly autobiographical or not -- it is still necessary to lay one's life on the line more than one really feels inclined to do.<sup>449</sup>

In the process of writing her novels, Laurence's weaknesses become exposed and her inner contradictions and inconsistencies are in a sense put on show. Laurence resents the resultant *vulnerability*, and she has diverse strategies for fighting it, trying to protect herself. For example, she creates a small fortress of manuscripts and books in her desk at Massey College, behind which she observes others.<sup>450</sup> It is not a coincidence that, as her biographer comments, Laurence finds her speaking and writing voices at the same time as she becomes heavily dependent on tobacco and liquor; these psychoactive substances represent a further defence against becoming too conscious of her own troubled being.<sup>451</sup> Thus, writing constitutes a double-edged weapon for Margaret Laurence, keeping her sense of identity constantly wavering between power and vulnerability.

### 3.3.5 Harshness in a Pioneer's Life

It is beyond question that being a writer is fundamental to Margaret Laurence's personality – or at least to the behaviour determined by such personality as it appears in the thoughts, decisions, and actions, mentioned in her autobiography. Being 'labelled' a 'professional writer' itself acts like a psychoactive 'drug', allowing her to release her desires, justifying and legitimising them. Laurence describes herself as introverted, with high expectations about her future, decidedly ambitious, and thirsty for new experiences, but above all, a loner. In the first place, the craft of the writer, an intrinsically lonely one, produces much of the *isolation* Laurence profoundly feels, and her detachment from even her loved ones.

<sup>449</sup> King, *Life*, p.284.

<sup>450</sup> King, *Life*, p.284.

<sup>451</sup> King, *Life*, p.121.

Sometimes, she appears 'discouraged about the discrepancy between what she wanted to say and what she is able to put into words'.<sup>452</sup> She craves quietness and silence to create, but at the same time, longs for communication and communion with other human beings:

If only I had more time to be here alone. Lots of friends [...] to come [...] and want to see them. But. Split mind. In a sense, don't want to see anybody. However, if I were able to be alone for six months, say, with meals dropped by helicopter, I would go out of my mind, I know. It seems to me that writing a novel is some kind of struggle of opposites . . . I get so goddamn lonely and hassled I really need to talk with friends; on the other hand, I can only work when I have [...] no one around and not too great a feeling of things and people pressuring me.<sup>453</sup>

Laurence's isolation enhances her autonomy and independence. Secondly, being a recognised writer gives her 'permission' to pursue unexplored pathways, unconventional domestic arrangements, different ways of raising her children, and freedom to travel and have love affairs. As she says, when moving to England to develop her career, she feels free.<sup>454</sup> In the third place, her activity as a writer itself, explains some of Laurence's manners and actions. All the necessary reflection about herself and others, her need to be original and creative, and constantly to see reality from diverse points of view, along with her consciousness of all that she has left behind or sacrificed in order to be a writer, of all that she has put into her professional career, implies a tremendous and constant effort on Laurence's part, and partially explains her constant need to re-confirm that what she is doing is worth doing. In addition, King believes, the bitter and tiring sensation of facing divisive conflicts once more – for example, enduring the bias against women writers in the literary environment – explains, if not justifies, her being brutally honest, arbitrary, eccentric, or even rude (*Dance* 171).

<sup>452</sup> King, *Life*, p.142.

<sup>453</sup> Letter to Al Purdy, 7 September 1971 (note in letter of 3 September 1971). In Laurence and Purdy, *A Friendship*, p.229.

<sup>454</sup> King, *Life*, p.167.

Laurence's sense of bias against women writers is in no way delusory. Since her college years, when she was working in some of her earlier literary efforts, she had been affected by the dominant cultural attitudes towards women. Remembering that when she first submitted stories and poems to her university student paper, she had written with a male first-person narrative voice and had used a male pseudonym, she says: 'Writing by women [...] was generally regarded by critics and reviewers [...] with at best an amused tolerance, at worst a dismissive shrug. It still makes me angry how thoroughly I had been brainwashed by society' (*Dance* 5). She laments: 'how long, how regrettably long, it took me to find my true voice as a woman writer' (*Dance* 5). Yet, Laurence writes optimistically about the transformative effect of self-discovery and self-assurance: 'I rapidly learned to put off domestic jobs, even though my conditioning ran completely against this' (*Dance* 169). Later, when she had already made writing her career and she is a well known professional writer, she perceives how embedded cultural beliefs create particular problems for women writers bringing up families alone:

I suppose many male writers and artists who are married with children take for granted a mother for those children who is not herself a writer or an artist and who is always there, not only to look after the children but to look after the comfort of the man himself (*Dance* 166).

For Laurence, it is perhaps a further source of resentment that this does not result in a greater respect for the woman but results instead in their being felt to be threatening or worse becoming invisible:

Male writers seem to have a kind of glamour attached to them while the reverse is usually true of female writers. Far from having an aura of glamour, we are positively threatening. And if we happen to have a couple of children, we simply become invisible as women (*Dance* 171).

The author is, however, confident and determined; she believes in women writers' strength and capacity to modify the disadvantaged position they have forcefully

occupied for too long. Discussing, for example, the characterization of women writers as being 'conditioned not to participate in the machinery of a culture', Laurence remains optimistic: 'I do not think this conditioning, [...] would prove a stumbling block for most women writers' (*Dance* 235).<sup>455</sup> Laurence has faith in the legitimacy of the craft to which she has dedicated herself, and in spite of all difficulties she remains hopeful: 'I like to think that in some ways my generation of women novelists may have helped younger women writers to speak with women's voices' (*Dance* 6).

### 3.3.6 Liberating the Image of the Writer

Curiously, the figure of Margaret Laurence given to the readers by the author herself in her autobiography and the one given by King's biography are in many cases opposed. In *Dance on the Earth*, Laurence portrays herself as a controlled, reasonable person, seldom appearing as selfish, but on the contrary, always considering the needs of others. She seems to be dominated by others (by her aunts or by her husband), sexually inexperienced, and not concerned about her physical appearance. She reacts firmly against suicide and avoids mentioning her addiction to alcohol and tobacco, or her use of tranquilizers and diet pills (*Dance* 163). Ultimately, she appears as deeply optimistic and self-sacrificing for others (even during her last years), and overall, victimized. In *The Life of Margaret Laurence*, she is described as a person with a personality that tends to provoke conflicts. There are suggestions that she acts in an uncontrolled, unstable, and impulsive manner. She gives way to outbursts of bad temper and her mood constantly fluctuates between optimism and despair, the last state called by her

<sup>455</sup> Comment appeared in an article by Ann Silversides, published by the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, 13 July 1984. Quoted in Laurence, *Dance*, p. 235.

'Celtic gloom'.<sup>456</sup> She also displays impulsive, erratic behaviour that her children found unsettling and she can be noisily aggressive.<sup>457</sup> In spite of numerous indications of low self-esteem, she seems to be also self-centred and anxious to be the centre of attention.<sup>458</sup> In King's version of her, Laurence appears manipulative, with an endless need to be in control. She is sexually active, and consequently, concerned with her clothes, her hair, and her weight. The biographer documents Laurence's suicidal thoughts and even suicidal acts, as well as her abuse of alcohol, tobacco, tranquilizers, and diet pills.<sup>459</sup> She seems to be a pessimistic and bitter person.

Of course, accounts of Laurence's personality will be as numerous as the people who knew her and, apart from the autobiography, a number of different accounts of her are available. The aspects of her self that Laurence allowed her friends and acquaintances to see, are naturally controlled by the sorts of relationships she had – or felt she had – with them and by other surrounding circumstances. The explicit and underlying aims of her biographers also come into play. King's biography seems willing to expose some of the most unpleasant characteristics of Laurence's personality; conversely, Laurence's own account in *Dance on the Earth* could be accused of bias in selecting only her most positive and worthy aspects – of course, that is her prerogative. In between these two sometimes contradictory narratives, Lyall Powers' work, *Alien Heart: The Life and Work of Margaret Laurence*, seemingly presents a more balanced version of the writer's temperament. Powers had been a dear friend of Margaret Laurence since they both studied at United College; he was also a Laurence scholar. His

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<sup>456</sup> King, *Life*, pp. 155; 176.

<sup>457</sup> King, *Life*, p.247.

<sup>458</sup> King, *Life*, p.282.

<sup>459</sup> King, *Life*, pp.298; 275; 117; 121; 139; 159; 166-67; 176; 191; 200; 210; 273; 275; 334-35; 347; 376.

portrait of Laurence and his examination of her life and work is not only carefully researched, and well written, but it is also an affectionate, sensitive account, with revealing and detailed description of the background and context he knew so well. Besides, his analysis of the intersections between Laurence's life and writing is subtle and perceptive. In *Alien Heart*, Laurence appears to be sensible, prudent and of sound judgment, although sometimes impulsive, even rash; a generous and loving mother and friend who could also be selfish and inconsiderate when she felt overwhelmed by circumstances; an individual inclined to acquiesce in others' desires and needs, but at the same time strong-willed and tenacious in the decisions and goals she set for herself and her loved ones; a sensuous woman, feeling comfortable with and enjoying her sexuality, most of the time discreet, but without a stable partner who could satisfy her passionate and sensual nature, which made her take risks and engage herself in brief love affairs; a feminine and image-conscious person, struggling to put up with the changes in her appearance caused by ageing, her life-style, and her numerous worries and concerns; a fierce defender of life, rationally forced by circumstances and by her consideration for others to opt for suicide as a valid choice. To sum up, the existence of dissimilar even contradictory versions of Laurence may be regarded as liberating rather than confusing since these versions present readers with a number of exciting possibilities. The 'texts' of Margaret Laurence are thus enriched by the variety of readings available from moderate to extreme and this applies both to fictional and non-fictional works.

But the question of which version of Margaret Laurence's 'character' is closer to the actual blood-and-flesh person will not be answered easily. It is probably best, however, to consider all characterizations as semi-fictional

constructions of a subject, emphasizing specific chosen points, and minimizing others, intentionally hiding some elements, and uncovering new, unknown, or insufficiently examined dimensions of the writer's complex personality. It is, of course, the diversity and contradictoriness of these versions of Laurence that make her a subject worth examining. The apparently incompatible roles of writer *and* woman *and* mother must then be looked at from various different perspectives and we may find that the truth lies in the conflicts rather than in their resolution.

There is additionally a gap between Margaret Laurence's personality, as it is projected through the public image of the pleasant, shy woman, and the nature of the heroines of her fiction. However, that gap tends to disappear if *Dance on the Earth* and some of her biographies are considered. Throughout these narratives, Laurence's life story shows the author's development from a conventional woman of her times to an assertive woman writer, with a family life, and a public image, leading the way for other woman writers. In the process she faces dilemmas and tries to solve conflicts between her multiple roles, showing fortitude, firmness of purpose, and tenacity. This is not to say that she does not have to endure weaknesses and doubts, but what is more significant is that her writing and the fact of being a writer help her to clarify her life-purpose and, thus, to overcome difficulties. The development of her sense of identity results in a unique and resilient self, and she did after all become one of the foremost Canadian woman novelists of her time and thus opened the doors for many others.



#### 4. Janet Frame (1924-2004)

##### Brief Chronology

- 1924 Born in Dunedin, in the South Island of New Zealand.
- 1943 Enrolled at Dunedin Teachers' College, studying English, French and psychology at the adjacent University of Otago.
- 1945 Admitted at Seacliff Mental Hospital, where doctors incorrectly diagnosed her as suffering from schizophrenia.
- 1951 While a patient, she published her first book, a collection of short stories titled *The Lagoon and Other Stories*, which won the Hubert Church Memorial Award. That award led her doctors to cancel the leucotomy they had scheduled to perform on her.
- 1954 Frank Sargeson invited her to live in an old army hut in the garden of his residence in north Auckland (1954-1955).
- 1956 Left New Zealand; for seven years she lived in London, with sojourns in Ibiza and Andorra.
- 1957 Doctors at the Maudsley Hospital in south London, pronounced her sane.
- 1957 *Owls Do Cry*.
- 1961 *Faces in the Water*.
- 1962 *The Edge of the Alphabet*.
- 1963 Returned to New Zealand. In subsequent years travelled to North America and Europe. In the last years of her life, Frame settled in Dunedin.
- 1963 *Scented Gardens for the Blind*.
- 1963 *The Adaptable Man*.
- 1963 *The Rainbirds*.
- 1963 *The Reservoir: Stories and Sketches*.
- 1963 *Snowman Snowman: Fables and Fantasies*.
- 1966 *A State of Siege*.
- 1966 *The Reservoir and Other Stories*.
- 1967 *The Pocket Mirror*.
- 1969 *Mona Minim and the Smell of the Sun*.
- 1970 *Intensive Care*.
- 1972 *Daughter Buffalo*.
- 1979 *Living in the Maniototo*.
- 1982 *To the Is-Land* (Autobiography, volume 1).
- 1983 *You Are Now Entering the Human Heart*.
- 1984 *An Angel at My Table* (Autobiography, volume 2).
- 1985 *The Envoy from Mirror City* (Autobiography, volume 3).
- 1989 *The Carpathians*.
- 1989 *Janet Frame: An Autobiography* (Autobiography, volumes 1-3).
- 2004 Died at Dunedin hospital, aged 79, from acute myeloid leukaemia.

## 4.1 A Place for the Self

Whata ngarongaro te tangata,  
Toitu te whenua  
(People fade away,  
But the land endures)

Maori whakatauki (saying)

### ISLAND:

The third and fourth generations  
Begin to speak differently,  
Suffering mutations,  
Cannot help identity;  
Nation's their only sign  
Meaning man and brother.

Allen Curnow  
'Island and Time'  
*Collected Poems*

Janet Frame is perhaps New Zealand's most famous modern writer. Her work has been acclaimed in many countries and translated into several languages. Yet, although some of her writing is on the face of it relatively simple, much of it causes problems for its readers. P.D. Evans, almost ruefully admits that:

No one approaches Janet Frame's writing for an evening of light entertainment. The atmosphere of her work is almost unrelievedly dark; its texture thick with imagery and allusion; its plots full of deceptions engineered to trick the reader; its significance half-stated and often obscure, as if the process of writing has not fully released the impulses which have brought it about.<sup>460</sup>

Frame's narratives are, then, recognised as difficult to read, with considerable potential for misunderstanding; her language, not complicated in itself, creates mysterious poetic effects. The spectrum of theoretical approaches that has been applied to her work is wide, and may in part be a consequence of the 'difficulty' of her writing. There are readings of Frame's narratives attempting to analyse her work under the rubric of modernism, postmodernism, and using the

<sup>460</sup> P.D. Evans, "'Farthest from the Heart'": The Autobiographical Parables of Janet Frame', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 27.1 (Spring 1981), 33-35 (p.31).

methods of psychoanalysis, postcolonial theory and feminism, among many others. Frame's work is undoubtedly powerful: whether or not liked, it never fails to produce a strong, emotional and intellectual response from its readers. With the publication of her three-volume autobiography in the 1980s and a film based on it, Frame's fame and recognition and the readership of her books in New Zealand and abroad increased significantly.<sup>461</sup> The author, however, continued to live as a recluse, rejecting interviews and invitations to events in her honour. Her life style – as reported by the few friends who had the privilege of visiting her at her home in New Zealand's South Island – was austere and simple up until her death on January 2004. This manner of living was not, however, easily achieved. Frame had felt her need to live in *the way* she wanted, *where* she wanted, relatively early in her life, but the achievement of her autonomy and the consolidation of a situation in life in which she felt comfortable and happy, came at the end of a difficult, long, and dangerous process, and involved a high psychological and material cost. In this chapter, I will examine and discuss the processes of Frame's quest for her own unique place in life, at a geographical level as a 'New Zealander', at a physical and sociological level as an 'embodied social being', and at an individual and personal level as an 'artist'.

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<sup>461</sup> *An Angel at my Table*. Dir. Jane Campion. New Line Cinema Corporation. 1992, 1989.

Janet Frame's three-volume autobiography comprehends:

- Janet Frame, *To the Is-Land* (London: The Women's Press in association with Hutchinson Group N.Z., 1983, 1982). Published in Great Britain by The Women's Press, 1983.
- Janet Frame, *An Angel at my Table* (Auckland: Hutchinson, 1984). Published in Great Britain by The Women's Press, 1984.
- Janet Frame, *The Envoy from Mirror City* (Auckland: Hutchinson, 1985). Published in Great Britain by The Women's Press, 1985.

All further references to Frame's autobiographies will be to the following edition:

*Janet Frame: The Complete Autobiography* (London: Women's Press, 1998).

The three volumes will be referenced in the text as: *Is-Land*, *Angel*, or *Envoy*, with the page number.

#### 4.1.1 A Homeless Daughter of the Empire

Throughout her work, Janet Frame is consistently concerned with the relationship between self and place. New Zealand appears in most of Frame's writings – even in those narratives where the action is located elsewhere – and it also appears, of course, in her autobiography. Jan Cronin suggests that Frame's engagement with New Zealand as a 'place' is an engagement with more than a concrete spatial representation: Frame's literary representation of New Zealand is ultimately put at the service of an interpretative quest for meaning. According to Cronin Frame's concept of 'place' is not conceived exclusively in 'the sociopolitical ways the social-realist, cultural nationalist and postcolonial traditions would variously construe it. Instead, Frame can be seen to subordinate the concrete to the abstract by using place to enact philosophical pursuits'.<sup>462</sup> Thus, it can be said that Frame's approach to 'place' constitutes a privileged instrument of metaphysical exploration, and the theme of 'New Zealandness' in relation to personal and national identity is part of the broader search for existential significance, purpose, and underlying truth which persists through all her fictional and non-fictional work.

Born in 1924, Frame grew up in the era of the 'Cultural Cringe', when artists from New Zealand and Australia, still under the influence of former settlers' mentality, felt a sort of provincial melancholy for, and cultural dependence on Great Britain.<sup>463</sup> At the same time, they were beginning to look for

<sup>462</sup> Jan Cronin, "Encircling 'Tubes of Being': New Zealand as Hypothetical Site in Janet Frame's *A State of Siege* (1966)", *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 23.2(2005), 79-91(p.79).

<sup>463</sup> The term *Cultural Cringe* was coined after the Second World War by the Melbourne critic and social commentator A.A. Phillips, and defined in an influential and highly controversial 1950 essay of the same name. It explored ingrained feelings of inferiority that local intellectuals and artists struggled against. The implications of these insights potentially applied to all former colonial nations, and the essay is now recognized as a cornerstone in the development of postcolonial theory. A.A. Phillips, *A.A. Phillips on the Cultural Cringe* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 2006).

an identity more consistent with the actual circumstances of their home countries and trying to develop a weightier cultural nationalism. Frame experienced the negative power of this cultural subservience during her adolescence and young womanhood. Her parents called Britain 'home', kept numerous British traditions, and proudly spoke of their Scottish spiritual inheritance.

Dad, sometimes striding up and down in the snow (he insisted that you had to stride up and down while you played the bagpipes), played his bagpipes tunes – 'The Cock o' the North' or 'The Flowers of the Forest' or others from his book of bagpipe music (*Is-Land* 17).

In the various towns where the family lived, the streets, the schools, the public buildings, were designed on British models – present or past. In Oamaru, for example, the main town of the Otago Peninsula, where the Frame family finally established their home, the principal streets were named after English and Scottish rivers – Thames, Severn, Humber, Ouse, Tyne, Dee, Clyde, Tay. Its public buildings were built in classical and renaissance styles – the most imposing, the Bank of Otago building, inspired by Edinburgh's Commercial Bank of Scotland.<sup>464</sup> At school, Janet felt the pervasive English paradigm in the form and content of her education. She absorbed, and later resented, the exclusively British texts of her literature courses.

Much of the school journal dealt with celebrations of the British Empire, with articles and photographs of the royal family, chiefly the two little princesses, Elizabeth and Margaret Rose. There was a description, too, of their life-size dolls' house, with photographs. In contrast to the factual prose of the school journal and the praise of the Empire, the king, the governor general, the Anzacs at Gallipoli, Robert Falcon Scott at the South Pole, the poems were full of mystery and wonder, with Walter de la Mare and John Drinkwater, Christina Rossetti, as the editor's first choices followed by Alfred Noyes and John Maschfield, to give the rollicking touch. One poem that I liked at once was 'Meg Merrilees' (*Is-Land* 34).

But it was not long before Frame became aware of the strangeness of this material and began to miss literary models capable of expressing her first-hand experiences at home, in her country. She longed for works that represented her world, with the

<sup>464</sup> The building is now the Oamaru branch of the National Bank of New Zealand.

flowers, fruits and animals she had seen and touched, with landscape and light she could recognize, and, more importantly, with her people's own, unaffected, and – for her – more meaningful words: 'None of our English studies even supposed that a New Zealand writer or New Zealand existed' (*Is-Land* 128). In her autobiography, Frame shares her experience of being raised as a 'colonial', of being educated on the assumption that what happens locally is second hand and second rate, an imitation.<sup>465</sup> She expresses her sense of vacuum, her need to belong to a place with its own well-defined, accepted, and valued characteristics, not only an invisible marginal territory developed under the shadow of another country, which was the model of everything good.

Youth was for Frame an extremely difficult period; she constantly felt at a disadvantage, because she was a woman in a man's world, because of her socioeconomic status, and also because of her own extreme personality traits. Her severe shyness and her feelings of unworthiness led her to acquiesce in others' expectations:

We're all so proud you're going to be a teacher.

[...]

I stood smiling my shy smile which was more close-lipped than usual because my front teeth were now in the last stages of decay, as the Social Security Health System did not allow for dentistry beyond primary school, and my family had no spare money to pay for dentists (*Angel* 152).

On top of this several misfortunes added to her feelings of insecurity and inadequacy, and left indelible marks – the most painful were, undoubtedly, the first signs of her brother Bruddie's epilepsy and the death by drowning of her two sisters, Myrtle and Isabel.<sup>466</sup>

Frame's autobiography, then, reflects on her position as a white woman, developing in the colonial culture of New Zealand and it examines the

<sup>465</sup> See Mark Williams, *Leaving the Highway: Six Contemporary New Zealand Novelists* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1990), p.45.

<sup>466</sup> Frame, *Angel*, pp. 38; 86; 209.

relationships between gender, race, and the position of the postcolonial subject. For example, when Frame discusses her relationship while she is in London with Nigel, a law student from Nigeria, she reflects on their common entrapment in colonial status: 'We were both "colonials" with similar education – heavy doses of British Empire, English history, products, rivers, cities, kings – and literature' (*Envoy* 312). She feels, however, that their positions are slightly different, since the different racial origins confer diverse characteristics on their present self-images. She identifies herself with the dominant race, bringing herself to an equivocal assimilation with 'the English'; he supposedly identifies himself with the dominated groups: 'I was favoured, however, in having my ancestors placed among the good, the strong, the brave, the friendly, in the position of the patronising disposers, the blessed givers' (*Envoy* 312). When on its way to England her boat stopped at a Caribbean port, her instinctive reaction towards the inhabitants of the town also illustrates the degree to which she had internalized the prejudices of the colonial mentality: "'Maoris are very mechanically minded", a lecturer at Training College had told us, a class of Pakehas. Now, faced with Afro-Americans and Indians I dismissed from my mind the comparison with teams of slaves' (*Envoy* 296). Frame deals with the identification of New Zealand people with Britain as 'the mother country', narrating how the white New Zealanders – Pakeha – were accustomed to consider themselves British and to look with disdain on anything indigenous to New Zealand as inferior.

Frame's autobiography records also the post-war-era as New Zealand's period of crisis, when its traditional forms of self-representation and self-understanding began to collapse, and the nation took the initial steps in constructing a 'new sense of national identity in terms not governed by the old

security of colonial relationships'.<sup>467</sup> She problematizes the notion of a postcolonial 'authentic' identity for the descendants of the New Zealand settlers. It is problematic because they face a situation of double displacement: they cannot completely identify with the British because they have grown apart, developing great differences, nor can they claim 'originary' Maori identity.<sup>468</sup> The New Zealanders' sense of origin at that time was, Alan Lawson suggests, of being

caught between two First Worlds, two origins of authority and authenticity: the originating world of Europe, the imperium, as source of the second World's principal cultural authority; and that other First World, that of the First Nations, whose authority the settlers not only effaced and replaced but also desired.<sup>469</sup>

In Frame's narrative, being a colonial means having grown up with a permanent sense of being in the wrong place because, as a pakeha New Zealander, she feels 'at home' neither in New Zealand nor in Britain. Janet's father, before her overseas trip to England, comments with pride: 'So, you're going home' (*Angel* 285). Significantly, Frame describes her father's conversations with 'Auntie Polly and Uncle Vere and the other relations: "I heard him repeat several times, "Janet's going home, you know." I found myself acquiring a prestige [...] I was now the "niece who is going overseas, home"' (*Angel* 285). When she is compelled to return to New Zealand after her father's death, she says 'I was about to go home to New Zealand' (*Envoy* 415). This consciousness of always standing in relation to somewhere else is what Williams calls 'the old problem of New Zealand anxiety about "elsewhere"'.<sup>470</sup> This attitude is illustrated in Frame's *Living in the Maniototo*, where the inhabitants of the New Zealand suburb, Blenheim, feel

<sup>467</sup> Williams, *Leaving the Highway*, p.39.

<sup>468</sup> The term 'authentic' here is used in a broad sense – recognizing that according to postmodern theory, 'authenticity' is always illusory – meaning identity positions based in elements/identifiers present before colonization and assumed in some cases by postcolonial subjects as useful political strategies.

<sup>469</sup> Alan Lawson, 'Postcolonial Theory and "Settler" Subject', *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 56 (1995), 20-36 (p. 29).

<sup>470</sup> Williams, *Leaving the Highway*, p.45.



'obliged to refer their own experience to that of the richer, more original, and more authentic experience elsewhere'.<sup>471</sup> The streets in Blenheim -- the 'new young suburb named after a British "famous victory"' -- 'are named after British lords and their country seats, and battles of wars recent and long ago', although there is one street dedicated 'to a ballet dancer who "made good" in another country'; in Blenheim the 'children are restless, with a sense of loss, as if they had truly been children of the native forest', but 'if you, a stranger, stay in Blenheim, you stay in a motel' because you are there only on your way to 'your "real" destination'; its 'largest, most impressive building is not a cathedral, a community hall, concert hall or theatre, but a shopping mall planned by those who believe that the commercial architecture of North America is suitable for Blenheim: built for a climate of blizzards, intense heat, meager daylight filtered through smog'.<sup>472</sup> The inhabitants of Blenheim epitomize the former colonials' conviction of living, unfortunately, in a marginal position, where they are deprived of any truly valuable experience. Even when Frame goes to the Maudsley Hospital in London in order to confirm or discard her New Zealand doctors' diagnosis of schizophrenia, her attitude is that of a colonial; she recognizes that she expects too much from the doctors in England, but at the same time, she is able to criticize that attitude:

I supposed that this famous Institute of Psychiatry would have few of the shortcomings of New Zealand hospitals, that it would have many doctors trained to make thorough diagnoses after learning all the facts of each case; also that, unlike in New Zealand, the 'case' would have a chance to speak, to be known at first hand. I expected much (*Envoy* 373).

She assumes that the doctors in England are better than in New Zealand; she expects to be interviewed, tested, and examined, and she is prepared to consider

<sup>471</sup> Williams, *Leaving the Highway*, p.45.

<sup>472</sup> Janet Frame, *Living in the Maniototo* (Auckland: The Women's Press in association with Hutchinson Group (NZ), 1981), pp.21-23.

their diagnosis as conclusive because she has been raised in the belief that wisdom and knowledge in the heart of the former English Empire surpasses that of its marginal territories. Frame's faith in the superiority of English psychiatrists had been subtly, but consistently formed by the historical relationship between New Zealand and Britain. Although the tone of 'I expected much' suggests that her faith is finally not vindicated, Frame is lucky to find in the doctor she is assigned to – a young American – someone who appears to be 'in contrast to the serious sober Englishmen who stared, frowned, half-smiled, and uttered only "M-m, I see"' (*Envoy* 374). In other words, those intimidating English doctors appear as the embodiment of the patriarchal authority of the colonizer over the colonized subject/other. Probably partially due to the young doctor's personal characteristics, Frame is able to establish an appropriate therapist-patient relationship, with the final result that the panel of psychiatrists give the opinion that she is not, and never has been schizophrenic.<sup>473</sup> Tonya Blowers's contention that, 'throughout the three volumes of Frame's autobiographies, home/place is a crucial signifier of belonging, closely associated with a sense of self and identity' is easy to justify.<sup>474</sup> Equally, it is possible to say that the decisive turning point in Frame's journey to selfhood and identity is her experience of factual England, which allows her to confront difference, to become conscious of her belonging to New Zealand and of her roots as a New Zealander. She had anticipated much pleasure in visiting in London those places whose haunting names she had learnt during her childhood and adolescence – Crystal Palace, Ponders End, Piccadilly Circus, High Wycombe – but instead she encounters 'a cluster of dreary-looking buildings set

<sup>473</sup> Michael King, *Wrestling with the Angel: A Life of Janet Frame* (Viking: Auckland, 2000), p.186.

<sup>474</sup> Tonya Blowers, 'To the Is-Land: Self and Place in Autobiography', *Australian-Canadian Studies: A Journal for the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 18.1-2 (2000), 51-64(p.56).

in a waste of concrete and brick and full of people who appeared to be pale, worried and smaller in build than most New Zealanders' (*Envoy* 374). When the postcolonial Frame actually 'returns' to the motherland, she understands the illusions in her image of Britain and of her relation to it, caused by the distorted colonial memory that dominated New Zealand at the time. Hugh Roberts explains the deep ambivalence in the postcolonials' distorted mental representation of the centre, that image of Britain the young Janet had certainly internalized: 'the "original" would never be quite what was imagined, leaving the colonial to choose between allegiance to an unreal 'original', a real but inauthentic and the real but error-ridden "copy"'.<sup>475</sup>

#### 4.1.2 The Search for a Native Identity

In that context, perhaps the most significant contribution of Frame to the construction of a renewed identity in New Zealand was to thematize the notion of non-Maori New Zealanders as kindred to the Maori people – the notion of the 'white native'.<sup>476</sup> In her autobiography, Frame's experience illustrates the New Zealand settlers' futile search for authentic belonging. She vacillates between two sites of identity; she feels not only the compulsion to think of herself as British, but also the need to claim Maori/native indigeneity. The notion, however, of one's origin located in a British 'elsewhere' is portrayed by Frame as an increasingly less attractive means of authentication. Instead, she turns to the familiar attraction

<sup>475</sup> Hugh Roberts, 'Can Identity Be Helped?: *Landfall*, Chaos, and the Creation of a New Zealand National Literature', *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 14(1996), 24-60(p.38).

This dilemma is similar to the postmodern predicament where the 'original' has disappeared, where an 'ideal' original has only ever existed as an imaginary construction.

<sup>476</sup> See Bruce Harding, 'The Nativization of Feeling: Motifs of Bonding to the Past and to the Land in Janet Frame's *A State of Siege* (1966) and in *The Carpathians* (1988)', *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 18/19(2000/1), 114-138.

of her home country, with its vibrant natural surroundings and its mythic atmosphere, which potently reverberates in Frame's artistic soul:

Looking down at London I could sense the accumulation of artistic weavings, and feel that there could be a time when the carpet became a web or a shroud and other times a warm blanket or shawl: the prospect for burial by entrapment or warmth was close. How different it appeared to be in New Zealand where the place names and the landscape, the trees, the sea and the sky still echoed with their first voice while the earliest works of art uttered their response, in primary dialogue with the Gods (*Envoy* 308).

Terry Goldie postulates a 'Theory of Indigenization', defined as the process adopted by 'whites in Canada, New Zealand and Australia' in 'their need to become "native", to belong here', to 'become indigenous'.<sup>477</sup> Thus, in Frame's work, it is possible to discover how the former colonials in New Zealand transposed 'the desire for "home" from the lost European origin to the world immediately to hand and [sought] to identify with Maori religious beliefs and with the indigenous features of the country'; they tried to appropriate Maori culture as 'a decorative sign of difference which displays to the world [...] the peculiar tone of New Zealand life'; they endeavoured, to 'overcome the Pakeha sense of homelessness' and become 'genuinely "native" New Zealanders'.<sup>478</sup> Frame scorns and satirises the stupidity of Pakehas who are so desperate to show superficial and ostensible credentials of indigeneity that they furiously attempt anything:

[They] were now trying to falsify genealogical tables so that they might be able to trace an obscure relative who was a Maori! They could just as well and happily have found that their great-great-grandfather was a boiling mud-pool or a piece of glacier or a spray of kowhai or pohutukawa blossom!<sup>479</sup>

Yet, Frame's work demonstrates that it is possible to consider white New Zealanders' identification with Maori myths and legends neither as a 'bogus assertion of identity', nor 'as self-deluding and self-interested as the official

<sup>477</sup> Terry Goldie, *Fear and Temptation: The Image of the Indigene in Canada, Australia and New Zealand Literatures* (Montreal & London: McGill-Queen's UP, 1989), p.33.

<sup>478</sup> Williams, *Leaving The Highway*, pp.13; 18-19.

<sup>479</sup> Janet Frame, *At the Edge of the Alphabet*, p.124.

rhetoric of benevolent assimilation', as some theorists have suggested it to be.<sup>480</sup> To some extent, Frame identifies herself with attempts to appropriate 'Maoriness' because she believes that even New Zealanders of European descent, like herself, can gain 'real' imaginative access to the secret contained in indigenous myths of origin. For example, of her first view of the river Clutha, she writes:

From my first sight of the river I felt it to be part of my life. [...] I now came face to face with the Clutha, a being that persisted through all the pressure of rock, stone, earth and sun, living as an element of freedom but not isolated, linked to heaven and light by the slender rainbow that shimmered above its waters. I felt the river was an ally, that it would speak for me (*Angel* 166).

In fact, on 22 May 1958, Frame informed her friends Frank Sargeson and John Money that she had changed her name by deed poll to Janet Clutha, a tribute to the river that connected her so powerfully with her natural and cultural environment; Clutha is also the Gaelic name for the Scottish river Clyde, in whose valley her father's parents had been born.<sup>481</sup> In her fiction, characters like Toby Withers in *The Edge of the Alphabet*, Mattina Brocon in *The Carpathians*, and Malfred Signal in *A State of Siege*, are examples of the author's belief in the feasibility of nativization of feeling as a valid foundation for white New Zealanders' process of 'authentication'.<sup>482</sup>

Frame's belief in the process of nativization of feeling as a valid foundation for the development of a sense of belonging is an assumption that works in two ways. At the same time that Pakeha people feel the need to appropriate indigenous Maori presence, Maori people face also particular kinds of difficulties in their search for existential authenticity. They have to struggle against a curiously static view of Maori culture. Joan Metge warns us:

<sup>480</sup> Williams, *Leaving The Highway*, pp.39-40.

<sup>481</sup> King, *Wrestling with the Angel*, p.191.

<sup>482</sup> Janet Frame, *A State of Siege* (Christchurch: Pegasus Press, 1967).

Janet Frame, *At the Edge of the Alphabet* (Christchurch: Pegasus Press, 1962).

Janet Frame, *The Carpathians* (London: Bloomsbury, 1988).

Not only Pakeha but many Maori people unthinkingly identify Maori culture with the culture of the eighteenth century Maori, ignoring the changes that have occurred since then. As a result, they tend to identify as Maori culture only those aspects that derive from the pre-European past (even though these have undergone transformations), judging others as departures from the true Maori way or even failing to see them as Maori at all. This is unfair and misleading.<sup>483</sup>

To some extent, contemporary Maori people are as alien to empowering myths of belonging as the Pakeha population is.

In spite of her mother's upbringing in close proximity to Maori people in Marlborough, Frame acknowledges her own lack of familiarity with Maori language and culture – which explains the sometimes odd use of 'maorified' neologisms in Frame's fiction.<sup>484</sup> Yet, in Frame's writing Maori culture is neither absorbed, controlled by westernized narratives, nor there is exaltation of the Maori as 'the people of the land' with exclusive access to memory and awareness of origins. Thus, where Keri Hulme in *The Bone People* finds the New Zealand landscape charged with spiritual ancestral presence, Frame strongly suggests that it is culture that invests nature with significance.<sup>485</sup> In asserting the importance of culture, Frame is giving a crucial role to imagination in the creation of a nativist myth of belonging. Bruce Harding argues that Frame's work establishes a 'critical role for the imagination as an agent of humanness and species survival right across the globe (one potent implication of which is an "argument" in favour of nativist myths of belonging regardless of the ethnic cast/caste of people)'.<sup>486</sup> In a universalizing gesture Frame extends that belief to the whole of humankind: this 'nativization' of feeling seems to be for every woman and man 'an alternative notion of power as insight and grounding' by means of which we accept our

<sup>483</sup> Joan Metge, *Te Kohao o Te Ngira – Culture and Learning: Education for a Multicultural Society* (Wellington, N.Z.: Learning Media/Ministry of Education, 1990), p.9.

<sup>484</sup> Frame's mother had had a step-grandmother who was Maori, so Lottie had grown up surrounded by Maori language and traditions (King, *Wrestling*, p.14).

<sup>485</sup> Keri Hulme, *The Bone People* (Wellington, N.Z.: Spiral, 1983).  
Williams, *Leaving the Highway*, p.53.

<sup>486</sup> Harding, 'Nativization of Feeling', p.115.

general rootedness in nature and in our ancestry and our particular personal pasts.<sup>487</sup> Frame seems to consider this desire for connectedness with nature and the past, and ultimately with 'place', as a universal human attribute and she makes the creative imagination the definitive means of achieving this unity. Ultimately, Frame's sense of belonging relates personal identity to the broader concept of human experience. Her relationship with the landscape of the country where her earliest memories came alive, and where her existence is contextualized in the stories of her ancestors, determines the conditions of her psychological and physical existence – as it probably does for each of us: 'I was claiming the features of the land as "part of my life"' (*Angel* 166).

#### 4.1.3 Restrictive Environments

Frame perceives limitations in her physical and social surroundings. Spatial references, which stand for confinement or lack of freedom, abound. The mental hospitals, the classroom, the boarding house, Four Garden Terrace's house, are places that – like lockers ('the only "home" for the students being their lockers in the locker room where possessions and not people could be housed') – turn the people who inhabit them into 'possessions' (*Angel* 156). On the contrary the Island, the railway hut, Willowglen, Oamaru, are associated with nature, becoming emblems or touchstones of liberty. For example, Willowglen, the house Frame's parents bought in Oamaru, represents a marginal space, existing on the edge of society. It has 'belonged in turn to derelict families' so poor that they had survived

on beef and pork bones and specked fruit, getting their clothes in sugar bags from the "relief dépôt". If you needed to go to the dépôt, you were at the end of the world; people

<sup>487</sup> Carol P. Christ, *Deep Diving and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1980), xiv.

said you were stupid and a waste of time and you'd never learn and you infected others (*Angel* 177).

Willowglen, with its rotten, collapsed wooden floors, its fireplaces filled with debris from the chimney, and its borer-ridden ceiling, subsists in an uncertain balance between remaining assembled in position and falling down back to the ground, but it has also beautiful summers, full of dreams (*Angel* 177-81). In spite of the feelings of desolation it inspires in Frame, it is also a refuge for her, a place where she enjoys freedom, and a site of resistance. Merli and Torney emphasise this paradox: 'like the family home, Janet's body is defiant and contradictory, subject to injury, decay, madness and death, but also resistant and productive. Both provide a space within society where dissidence can begin'.<sup>488</sup> Thus, Frame's experience of dwelling, literally, on the border of 'normal' society, can be considered a mirror image of her living her psychic life 'on the edge'.

Frame resists being inscribed in a society that justifies, promotes, and maintains personal identity by limiting it by communal labels. She shows how she has experienced the falsehood of all those labeled positions: she has struggled to survive as the bright student, the perfect boarder, the 'no-trouble-at-all-girl', the teacher, the mental patient, the writer, the working-class young white New Zealand woman. At first, she accepted these externally imposed 'roles' and tried to fulfil their requirements, behaving according to established stereotypes. For example, as a student she is successful because she represses her creativity, originality, and difference, and behaves in the appropriate and approved ways. Frame writes that her teachers only saw an 'uncomplicated schoolgirl which I was not (I the shy, poetic, timid, obedient)' (*Is-Land* 136). In the same way, as a

<sup>488</sup> Merli and Torney, 'Dangerous Margins', p.68.



boarder, she is perfect, causing 'no-trouble-at-all'; because shyness stops her from complaining, she tolerates instead, hunger and inconvenience.

In my anxiety to be thought the perfect boarder, from the beginning of my stay I had explained to Auntie Isy that I ate very little, that I was vegetarian (I had been studying Buddhism), and would be content to have my small meal on the sink-bench in the scullery, and when Auntie Isy reminded me that I was welcome to eat in the dining room, I, excessively timid, made the excuse that I liked to study while I ate. [...] So I was often hungry. I'd grab delicious scraps of boiled corned beef, set aside as being 'too stringy', from Auntie Isy's plate among the pile of dirty dishes. And I bought the Caramello chocolate, a shilling a bar, to eat in my room (*Angel*, 156-57).

As a teacher she is considered adequate if she performs her role the way she had been taught, hiding any circumstance that might disturb the rigid educational rules. Fearing being 'inspected', she 'devised' a form of keeping discipline: she attracted the unconditional attention of her students

by inventing a serial story which I could continue whenever I heard the steps of authority approaching along the corridor, so that a visit by the headmaster to a class sitting rapt with attention (the content of the story ensured a rapt audience), might 'prove' my ability as a teacher with the result that I would 'pass' my 'C' Certificate at the end of the year (*Angel* 184).

She feels she can fill the role of a writer only if she writes constantly – even if she is just typing the same sentence over and over again – or if she has a bohemian social life – like the group of artists in Parliament Hill Fields.

They talked late into the night while I listened with wonder to their hopes and dreams of exhibition, performance, publication, for not all were poets [...] I lay marvelling at the poetic dreams and the apparent confidence of those who seemed to become poets and painters simply by the spell of utterance: 'I'm a poet, I'm a painter.' [...] Those without formal work while they pursued their chosen career, earned money [...] as models in the art classes, and found much of their food by visiting the free sample arcades of the Oxford Street and Knightsbridge stores where they munched crackers and caviar and tasted various pâtés and cheeses while no one dared turn them away as they might be eccentric millionaires in disguise (*Envoy* 317-18).

She performs the role of a mental patient to perfection because she reads in her psychology text book the symptoms and signs she supposedly has to present, before enacting them in front of the psychologist who is examining her, but she hides her actual feelings and suffering.

I had [...] a disease interesting enough [...] to ensure, provided I maintained the correct symptoms [...] the continued audience of John Forrest. I was playing a game, half in earnest, to win the attention of a likeable young man whose interest was psychology and art; yet in spite of my pretence at hallucinations and visions I was growing increasingly

fearful of the likeness between some of my true feelings and those thought of as belonging to sufferers from schizophrenia. [...] I was never withdrawn from the 'real' world, however, although I was convincingly able to 'use' this symptom when the occasion required (*Angel* 201-02).

The author becomes, eventually, conscious that playing a role/multiple roles not only does not contribute to her self-development, implying as it does a diminution of rather than a contribution to her personality, but it also unavoidably leads her to self-destruction: 'the wastage of being other than myself could lead to the nothingness I had formerly experienced' (*Envoy* 383). Frame becomes also aware of the dangers of interpreting pre-established roles:

I knew I had played that role before – as a child at home, at school, at university and college: the keeper of the rules, the 'good' person delivered from evil, never led into temptation. Where then the praise had given me a feeling of syrupy self-complacency, now it gave little satisfaction for in the arithmetic of my thirty-two years it was now a subtraction from rather than an addition to my self-esteem (*Envoy* 343).

Trapped by shyness and poverty – and later by the psychiatric diagnosis of schizophrenia – she feels she has no means of escape. The life of provincial New Zealand increases Frame's sense of awkwardness and isolation, and this situation is reflected in the way she describes New Zealand society in her autobiography. As Williams puts it, 'Frame's New Zealand is the country of a mind made claustrophobic by the malady of punitive righteousness'.<sup>489</sup>

#### 4.1.4 Living in the Body

The sense of belonging, whether to a community, a nation, or the wider world converges with the individual self's sense of belonging in Frame's notion of the *body*. In her writing the body forms the link between the supra-personal and the personal states of being; it is the privileged site of the self. Therefore, the identification of the narrator's body with the landscape of New Zealand in

<sup>489</sup> Mark Williams, 'Janet Frame (1924-2004)', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 39.2(2004), 121-124(p.122).

Frame's autobiography is to be expected, and this identification is evidently related to her claim of indigeneity. Frame establishes a connection between her personal process of maturing, and New Zealand's piety, its economy, and the war that in part defines her birthland's relationship with Britain:

I recall the seriousness and the fervor of my singing, the (then innocently) sexual languor of the many hymns steeped in blood, such hymns being favourites with girls, most of whom in the past year or two had acquired a new relationship to blood, made strange by the repeated reference to the spilling of blood in wartime, and the everlasting preoccupation with blood in a country that based its economy on the killing and eating of farm animals (*Is-Land* 125).

These striking images of blood present in all spheres of colonial life uncover a distinct economic imperative behind the ubiquitous colonial rhetoric. Even the references to her concerns with her decaying teeth are related by Frame to the colonial experience: 'The general opinion in New Zealand then was that natural teeth were best removed anyway; it was a kind of colonial squandering, like the needless uprooting of forests' (*Angel* 202). The *normalizing* dental treatment the author suffers – the extraction of her teeth – stands for the colonizers' rape of the environment, the illegitimate appropriation of the place, the result of the complicity between patriarchal and imperial forces against the rebellious, uncontrollable *other*. There is, in addition, an unequivocal relationship between Frame's story and New Zealand's national history. The historical context determines the ideological framework where the author's identity develops, and her body constitutes a physical marker of this process:

When I was to celebrate my twenty-first birthday, my coming of age, the War was suddenly over, having pursued me through all the years of my official adolescence, as part of the development of my body and mind, almost an ingredient of my blood, leaving its trace everywhere, even in my hair and my (picked or bitten) fingernails (*Angel* 187).

Simon Petch, in 'Speaking for Herselves: The Autobiographical Voices of Janet Frame', stresses the importance of the relationship between Frame's personal story and New Zealand's history: 'If the First World War establishes the

patriarchal and imperial context from which Frame's identity and values emerge, the site of the Second World War was her own mind and body'.<sup>490</sup> Moreover, according to Blowers, Frame's autobiography is an example of 'a sense of self that might be related to, or put in an illuminating juxtaposition with, the historically problematic sense of national identity of New Zealand'.<sup>491</sup> Thus, in Frame's autobiography, the identification of the narrator's body with New Zealand's landscape and history is a further way of representing her sometimes alienating quest for autonomy and liberation from culturally defined identities.

Much has been said about the treatment of the 'human body' in Frame's work, where the disintegrating body works as a metaphor for destruction and decrepitude, an expression of decay in a culture which is unable to regenerate itself, a reminder of mortality and the extinction of the self. In Frame's autobiography, then, the decay of the body functions as a metaphor for more general cultural corruption and decadence; social institutions insist on asserting control over individuals, setting boundaries and classifying citizens: 'I understood how institutions thrive on accuracy of moral edicts and judgments which must be made as plain as the credit and debit of those who use the institutions' (*Envoy* 302). Yet, human bodies remain stubbornly beyond institutional control or anybody's control – they are not even under their owners' control. For example, Frame's brother, Bruddie, is unable to stop his epileptic seizures; Uncle George and Aunty Maggie are devoured by cancers; and Janet's body itself is out of control when she experiences her 'twitches and ties': 'Everybody could observe my twitches and ties and the funny faces I pulled and the more I tried to stop, the harder it became. "Just look at her, look at her, she's got St Vitus Dance," Dad

<sup>490</sup> Simon Petch, 'Speaking for Herselves: The Autobiographical Voices of Janet Frame', *Southerly*, 54.4(1995), 44-58(p.46).

<sup>491</sup> Blowers, 'Self and Place in Autobiography', p.51.

would mock' (*Is-Land* 63). In the same way, behind the surface individuals present to society, lies disintegration, corruption, and chaos, and apparently stable social values turn out to be as relative and transitory as the decaying bodies of men and women. The 'elderly women' in the boarding house, where Frame worked as housemaid-waitress-nurse, 'who lived bedridden' with skin that 'hung in folds like chicken skin with bumps where feathers might once have happened' and 'drooping buttocks' suggest the unimportance in the end of the social rules they have lived by (*Envoy* 199). Among them, Auntie Han's sister, who 'had a mouth and lips prepared to register instant disapproval', epitomizes a society prompt to stigmatize any individual who transgresses its norms (*Angel* 199-200). The curious young Frame endeavours to decipher what she is sure exists beyond the immediate, the helpless misery of these people obsessed by and confined in their bodies, as for example, when she reflects about what she would find under her dying Uncle's bedclothes: 'I wandered what dreadful sight was concealed' (*Angel* 153). Yet, the strongest image Frame uses to represent the hidden, putrefying side of society is her narration of the bodily degradation of the mentally ill. The description of the community in the psychiatric hospitals, and of her own condition when there, represents for Frame the most absolute degradation of the body and the self: 'I was thin, with sores, and a discharging ear; everyone in Park House had sores or infected limbs and, in spite of weekly combing with kerosene some had lice' (*Angel* 216). The body, constantly under the threat of dissolution, is presented by Frame as a precarious site for the survival of the self.

This fear of the dissolution of the body is expressed in the autobiography, however, within a narrative that insists on the firm presence of a bodily narrator and this is unsurprising since the body functions as the dwelling place of the self.

Whatever happens *to* the body and *in* the body is a hint of the processes the 'I' is undergoing: the peculiar attribute of *being* is the ineluctability of existing within a body.

Throughout Frame's autobiography her physical, bodily limitations become a means of figuring her internal world, which is also threatened, of course, by social impositions. During her adolescence and young womanhood, Frame feels trapped within her body: her developing breasts, too tightly encased by her school uniform, her decaying teeth, her body size, her plainness, her frizzy ginger hair. The developing self-image of the young Frame is made to feel powerless in the face of judgments of her external physical appearance, especially if they are made by people she loves:

My memory of myself contains now myself [...] developing the 'view' that others might have, and because I was my body and its functions [...] I saw myself as powerlessly in harness. Added to that view was my sisters' opinion of my 'figure' [...] and although my opinion was important, I submitted readily to the general view (*Is-Land* 116).

Judgments from appearances even reach the inner sphere of her maturing personality: '[Miss Farnie] said to the class, "Jean's so shy," I seized this (already given by Jessie C., the music teacher) as a welcome, poetic attribute and made shyness a part of my "personality"' (*Is-Land* 116). Although the young Frame is perturbed by the use of 'that identity-destroying third person, "She's shy"', these judgments 'pleased, confused, and frightened [her] with an intrusion of opinion and expectation'; she is tremendously afraid of not fulfilling other people's expectations (*Is-Land* 108). Besides, society insists on providing Frame with a 'normal' body – a non body – a body that she feels does not correspond with her inner self. Therefore, she 'resists', and sometimes escapes from, a leucotomized brain, straightened hair, corsets or girdles, and other non-natural prescriptions for her body, which constitute threats to her self-affirmation. Her bodily

characteristics are conspicuous external markers of the 'difference', which makes her feel set apart from other people, and conversely makes other people feel the need to control her disorderly body:

My Frizzy tangle of red hair, which seemed to alarm everyone the way it naturally grew up instead of down, causing people to keep asking, 'Why don't you straighten it? Why don't you comb it flat, *make it stay flat*, put oil on it or something, *no one* else has hair like yours' (*Is-Land* 111).

The explanation of such urgency to 'normalize' Frame's physical appearance may be found in the body's role in the formation of social boundaries. According to Mary Douglas, disruptive individuals who fail to fit into culturally constructed categories are 'in a marginal state', 'left out in the patterning of society [...] placeless, becoming 'both vulnerable and dangerous'.<sup>492</sup> Carol Merli and Kay Torney suggest that disorderly individuals, like Frame, are 'vulnerable' because they are 'outside a system that orders, controls and contains', but at the same time 'dangerous' because 'this transitional state confirms on them an autonomy and potency that challenges the constraints of social and cultural order'.<sup>493</sup> The fascination of Janet Frame's autobiography is probably that it 'traces the path of one of these disorderly individuals from vulnerability and collapse, culminating in her incarceration in the 'back ward' of a psychiatric hospital, to integration and control, her conquest of the literary worlds of New Zealand and London'.<sup>494</sup> Its attraction derives from Frame's adventurous journey into disordered regions of the mind, beyond the confines of society, and from the fact that when the narrator comes back from these inaccessible regions, she brings with her a power not available to those who have stayed in control of themselves: 'Those who do return living to the world, bring inevitably a unique point of view that is a nightmare, a

<sup>492</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966), p.96.

<sup>493</sup> Carol Merli and Kay Torney, 'Dangerous Margins: The Body and Art in Janet Frame's Autobiographies', in *Women's Studies*, 27(1997), 63-83(p.65).

<sup>494</sup> Merli and Torney, 'Dangerous Margins', p.65.

treasure, and a life-long possession; at times I think it must be the best view in the world' (*Angel* 214).

The body, of course, provides undeniable evidence of femininity. Frame experiences her condition as a woman, sometimes, in an embarrassing way. She carries her sanitary towels 'to throw among the tombstones in the Southern Cemetery at the top of the street', instead of giving them to her aunt to be put in the domestic fireplace, or disposing of them, as prescribed at university, for incineration (*Angel* 156). Significantly, she chooses to destroy these signs of female corporality by 'symbolically burying them in the cemetery'.<sup>195</sup> She feels pressed to deny the material dimension of her body, especially her gendered body, in order to live as she genuinely wants to live, and in order to become a writer. Her feelings when she was living in an army hut at Frank Sargeson's house, illustrate this overwhelming pressure:

My life [...] was for me a celibate life, a priestly life devoted to writing, in which I flourished, but because my make-up is not entirely priestly I felt the sadness of having moved to another asylum where the desire was that my body should be of another gender. The price I paid [...] was the realization of the nothingness of my body. [...] In exchange for this lack of self-esteem as a woman, I gained my life as I had wanted it to be (*Angel* 250).

Nevertheless, Frame's resistance to recognizing herself as a sexual being, is not simply directed at her body as a marker of femininity, but towards femininity as an outward imposition, where women are compared to disposable goods, deprived of distinct individual identities: 'A line of women waiting for the men to ask them to dance [...] the shiny noses being blotted with a powder puff' (*Angel* 233). At first, the young Janet tries to conform, to make others happy, and to respond to their demands; her 'cooperativeness', however, seems to be greatly influenced by the pattern of behaviour she had interiorized during her lengthy periods of

<sup>195</sup> Suzette Henke, *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing* (New York: St. Martin Press, 1998), p.86.



institutionalization: 'After years of being in the command of others, with threat of punishment by solitary confinement or "treatment" if I disobeyed or, to use the official term, "became unco-operative", I was willing to accept any suggestions' (*Angel* 231). When the women who worked with her declared: 'your hair, your clothes, they're awful. And your lipstick's the wrong colour. [...] And why don't you get your hair straightened? It would be much better, straightened', she tries to change her external appearance and 'the other waitresses were pleased. "Now you're one of us", they said' (*Angel* 231). But she is not able to feel pleasure in such transformation. When she goes to her first dance, she feels out of place and has the sense of acting a false part. Surrendering to the demands of society means for Frame acquiring a 'cosmetic' image. Frame rejects artificially constructed femininity that circumscribes the body and hence the self.

The strong corporeality of her narrative strategies and the constant presence of the body in Frame's autobiography constitute a response to the strategy of self-effacement the author had to adopt for many years in order to survive in a society that tried to obliterate those, especially girls and women who seemed too dangerously and individualistically present in their bodies, who dared openly, physically to display their uniqueness and whose way of living deviated from socially accepted patterns. Frame's sister, Myrtle, wears trousers and 'did it in the plannies'; she is beautiful, 'fearless, adventurous, rebellious, a rule breaker' and, in spite of her Dad's opposition, befriends Mrs. P., whose reputation is 'unsavoury', and who gives her cigarettes, and teaches her improper songs (*Island* 45; 59; 112). Myrtle is an example of sexualized rebelliousness. It is not surprising, then, to read that she was often punished and threatened:

Dad was cruelest to Myrtle, who was rebellious, daring, openly disobedient, always under the threat of being sent to the industrial school at Caversham, whereas I who wanted only

to be 'good' and approved of, was timidly obedient except where I could deceive with a certainty of not being caught (*Is-Land* 85).

In Frame's autobiography, Myrtle is presented mainly through her bodily characteristics, and probably that is why her ghostly image in a photograph, where her body appears translucent, frightens her family so much:

Mother gave a gasp of horror when she saw that in one of the photographs Myrtle appeared to be transparent; all except Myrtle had taken flesh and blood photographs. It made her feel afraid, Mother said everything coming at once, the death of Grandma Godfrey, the beautiful Rakaia river, snow-fed, flashing green and blue, the southern Alps with their Autumn snow, the epidemic that filled the country with sadness and dread, and the sight of the victims who'd escaped paralysis, walking about with their leg irons to support them; all combined to bring to the surface the buried fear that Myrtle might die at any time (*Is-Land* 113-14).

She is so energetically physical that the transparency of her image in the photograph seems unavoidably to prefigure the dissolution of her body, an uncanny premonition of death.<sup>496</sup> Ironically, Frame, whose strategy for survival has been the erasure of the self, with her compliant smile hiding her dangerous corporeality, outlived her sister: 'In order to survive I had to conceal my "I", what I really felt, thought and dreamed about. I had moved from the second person plural to a shadowy "I", almost nothingness, like a no-woman's land' (*Angel* 161). The significant presence of the body throughout Frame's autobiography, and in particular her gesture in having her studio photograph taken after her time in the psychiatric wards, represents her tenacious refusal to give in to the fragmentation and disappearance of her body and her life:

The photograph was urgent, a reinstating of myself as a person, a proof that I did exist. [...] The finished portrait showed a healthy young woman with obvious false teeth, a smirking smile and a Godfrey chin. It was a fresh photo, of substance. Well, I was alive again (*Angel* 240-41).

<sup>496</sup> After the summer of 1937, when that picture was taken, Frame's eldest sister, Myrtle, died by drowning at Oamaru public baths. Ten years later, Frame's younger sister Isabel died the same way at Picton Harbour. Both sisters were experienced swimmers and it has been suggested that their deaths were caused by congenital heart problems. Many years later, Frame's niece Pamela, the daughter of Frame's youngest sister, June, had to be operated on because of a congenital heart malformation (King, *Wrestling*, pp.38-41; 88-89; 211).

#### 4.1.5 A Place for the Self

Remarkably, in relation to her conception of embodied existence, a more positive metaphysical signification in Frame's descriptions of bodily decrepitude and destruction can be argued. For Frame, faced with the reality of self-extinction, the disappearance of the body opens a route for ontological exploration and for the search for her own *place*. The first volume of her autobiography begins with a short, obscure and puzzling chapter:

From the first place liquid darkness, within the second place of air and light, I set down the following record with its mixture of facts and truths and memories of truths and its direction always towards the Third Place, where the starting point is myth (*ss-I and 7*).

Frame's autobiography seems to be concerned with the problematic process of recording memory within the material world of 'air and light', with its inescapable consequence of self-embodiment. Yet, she is conscious of 'the contingent and constructed nature of the embodied state itself'.<sup>497</sup> The embodied self is constantly threatened by the invasion of others. The forced removal of her teeth, the efforts to subdue her rebellious and outlandish hair, the numerous ECT treatments she receives, and even the threat of a proposed leucotomy are examples of social intrusion into the privacy of Frame's body in repeated attempts to render it completely compliant and docile. Delrez puts the issue as follows: 'the theme of the body is relevant to Frame's concern with the imponderables of identity' because in her writings 'the body is often perceived as a too-easily-jumpable barrier, the skin as "not [...] very efficient hedge" between people'.<sup>498</sup> The porousness of the body's limits, however, suggests that there may be an advantage in allowing a certain amount of flow between the self and the non-self; and this in

<sup>497</sup> Merli and Torney, 'Dangerous Margins', p.65.

<sup>498</sup> Marc Delrez, 'Forbidding Bodies: Avatars of the Physical in the Work of Janet Frame', *World Literature Written in English*, 38.2(2000), 70-79(p.73).

Janet Frame, *The Adaptable Man* (New York: George Braziller, 1994), p.72.

turn may lead to valuable intuitions of totality, to a sense of wholeness, of universal belonging, and may permit the author to overcome the immobilizing limitations of isolated selfhood. In Frame's autobiography the narrator becomes conscious of her participation in larger-than-individual life and death forces, and of her connection with other living beings: 'I was now vividly aware of myself as a person on earth, feeling kinship with other creatures and full of joy at the sights and sounds about me and drunk with the anticipation of play' (*Is-Land* 44). The narrator develops a sense of personal transcendence, which culminates with ultimate belonging and integration with the land of her birth: she moves towards

a more whole way of thinking [...] about spiritual insights arising from connection to the body and nature, [allowing her] to imagine forms of understanding in which the body plays a part, and to begin to conceptualize a view of human freedom in which limitation by nature, death and finitude is accepted.<sup>499</sup>

Frame's autobiography seems to suggest that the better place for *being*, while dwelling in the 'second place of air and light', can be found in a delicate balance, somewhere in between the conflict of 'denying the reality of the body and being totally absorbed by the body'.<sup>500</sup> According to Delrez, in Frame's writings 'bodies are approached as transient dwelling-places which are connected to each other but also to a sense of an ultimate destination'.<sup>501</sup> Therefore, Frame's collapsing of the body prepares the way for a further 'dwelling-place' for the self, the mythical 'Third Place', which seems to be felt as superior, more permanent, and more plentiful than the current embodied existence in the material, immediate world (*Is-Land* 7).

Frame's quest for a *place* for her self is not limited to her geographical location or her embodied situation, but it takes her further ahead, towards a

<sup>499</sup> Christ, *Deep Diving and Surfacing*, p.130 (the author is writing in a different context here).

<sup>500</sup> Merli and Torney, 'Dangerous Margins', p.80.

<sup>501</sup> Delrez, 'Forbidding Bodies', p.76.

spiritual land where her inner being can exist in freedom and in harmony with her own expectations and desires. For Frame, access to that place is crucial and means a significant step forward in her journey to self-affirmation. Such a lifelong need of a private *place* is anticipated in the first pages of *To the Is-Land* by the description of Frame's joyful finding of her own secret place during her childhood: 'I was overcome by a delicious feeling of discovery, of gratitude, of possession. I knew that this place was entirely *mine*' (*Is-Land* 14). Furthermore, the preeminence the author gives to place in relation to selfhood is indicated throughout her autobiography by the use of the term 'Is-Land', which allows her to represent both self and place simultaneously. In 'To the Is-Land: Self and Place in Autobiography', Blowers analyses the complex signification of Frame's idiosyncratic spelling of 'Island' as the *place* where identity ('I'), physical space ('island'), and being in time ('is') concur.<sup>502</sup> Besides, in the context of an autobiography, the Is-Land – the Land of the I/Is or where the 'I' lives – acquires further relevance and point. For example, the narrator's description of her birth emphasizes the significance of each individual existence in the context of communal existence and its history: 'As each member of the family was born, each in a sense with memories on loan, began to supply the individual furnishings of each Was-Land, each Is-Land, and the hopes and dreams of the Future' (*Is-Land* 10). Yet, from childhood Frame found it problematic to establish the place of her being among others. She goes through 'all the worries of the world' because of her 'inability to find a place in the Is-Land that existed by absorbing, faster and faster, each tomorrow' (*Angel* 191). In spite of having 'tried many aspects of "being"', the young Frame still does 'not quite know [her] direction',

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<sup>502</sup> Blowers, 'Self and Place in Autobiography', p.51.

and, therefore, feels 'an adolescent homelessness of self' (*Is-Land* 109). And she is aware of her distinctive characteristics, which make her 'different' from others:

The idea of 'difference', given to me by others in a time when I did not know myself and was hesitant in finding out, for I was not an introspective person, was reinforced by Miss Gibson's [one of her teachers] remark to Isabel, 'You Frame girls think you're so different from everybody else', I came to accept the difference, although in our world of school, to be different was to be peculiar, a little 'mad' (*Is-Land* 109).

Her difference causes her trouble because it is a disadvantage, if she wants to fit into 'normal' everyday life, and she relates the difficulty to her secret desire to be an artist and to possess imaginative creativity:

I wanted an imagination that would inhabit a world of fact, descend like a shining light upon the ordinary life of Eden Street, and not force me to exist in 'elsewhere'. [...] I refused to accept that if I were to fulfill my secret ambition to be a poet, I should spend my imaginative life among the nightingales instead of among the wax-eyes and the fantails. I wanted my life to be 'the other world' (*Is-Land* 101).

Frame appears anxious to find a way in which art can be lived in the material world and her inability to find such way makes her feel inadequate and isolated: she considers herself placeless. She writes that she was aware of 'not feeling myself to have a "place" in the world, and being unwilling to accept that I existed in any place' (*Angel* 231). Frame is, above all, aware of the existence of two *realities* – this /outer world and that /inner world – and she believes that what can connect both of these realities is the possession of poetic imagination. She discovers her own capacity to access and enter the world of imagination, her Mirror City, carrying with her the experience of living in the material world, and using it as the raw material of art. Therefore, as I will discuss further in the next chapter, Frame's quest for *place* seems to reach its culmination in the domain of artistic creativity, which embraces all aspects of her existence – including her relationship with her body and with New Zealand: 'There had never been any question of my not being able to exist in the "real world" unless that existence also deprived me of my "own world", the journeys to and from Mirror City'

(*Envoy* 384). In summary, according to Merli and Torney, in her autobiography, Frame's 'struggle to find a "place" [...] is finally resolved [...] and the unstable world of margins, including the fragile world of the body and physical place, is centered and stabilized in the image of Mirror City'.<sup>503</sup>

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<sup>503</sup> Merli and Torney, 'Dangerous Margins', p.81.

## 4.2 The Writer's Vocation

'Really, if you want to write, you have to be desperate. [...] The thing which prompts you to sit down and write must be something which haunts you'  
 Janet Frame  
 Interview with Elizabeth Alley

Janet Frame spent several years of her life institutionalized in mental hospitals, but during those years she recalls having considered herself 'rich beyond calculations [...] for my companions, carried about with me in a little rose-embroidered bag, were Shakespeare and a translation of Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*.'<sup>504</sup> The importance of literature in Frame's life is outstanding. Frame's survival as an individual owes a great deal to her unique relationship with the creative imagination. In Frame's autobiography, therefore, 'the struggle to claim an artistic vocation moves to the forefront' of the narrative.<sup>505</sup> In the midst of poverty, illness, and death, the author never loses her faith in the empowering force of literary creation, and this allows her to transform suffering and adversity into poetic achievement. Frame's career as writer is significantly affected by her socioeconomic status, her gender, and nationality, and also greatly, by her experience of mental illness and psychiatric treatment. This chapter discusses how words, books, poetic creation, constitute more than just a refuge or a escape for the author, rather her life and sanity are *literally* and repeatedly rescued and saved by literature; it analyses how her search for, and subsequent gaining of her

<sup>504</sup> Janet Frame, 'Memory and a Pocketful of Words', *The Times Literary Supplement* 3240, 4 June 1964, p.487.

<sup>505</sup> Susan Hubert, *Questions of Power: The Politics of Women's Madness Narratives* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2002), p.122.



subject-position as an artist constitutes for Frame a site of resistance and extraordinary survival rather than a ground for victimization.

#### 4.2.1 The Magic of Words

Words had their own magic for the young Frame. Surrounded by material deprivation, her discovery of words enriches the world in which she is developing. She explains how in her home 'there was much coming and going and talking and laughing, with words travelling like the wind along invisible wires, words full of meaning and importance' (*Is-Land* 13). She describes herself as being, from earliest childhood, surprised and amazed by the forms of words, their musicality, and the contradictions between their apparent, immediate meaning, and their frequently antithetical, unrevealed signification. Words like 'gored', 'Island', 'decide', 'destination', 'adventure', 'skirting boards', 'wainscot', 'rattan', 'permanent', and all her collection of 'poetic words' ('stars', 'grey', 'soft', 'deep', 'shadowy', 'little', 'flowers', 'dreams'), as well as all the 'unsavoury words' ('bugger', 'O.K. chief', 'bitch', 'bastard'), are full of contradictions and incongruities, but also potential energy for transgression. Words make people react in ways that sometimes surprise the little girl. After her friend Poppy had taught her the word 'fuck', she uses it at home and the results are not what she had expected:

Anxious as ever to share the day's events, I said casually at the tea table that evening 'Myrtle and Ted did it in the plannies this afternoon.'

'Did what?' Dad asked.

'Fucked, of course,' I said, quite unaware that I had said anything startling; I was merely recounting the day's events.

There was a sudden sweep of horror that touched everyone at the table, and Dad crashed his fist down, making the tea things (and us) jump (*Is-Land* 45).

Words can hide meanings which are not immediately apparent in, or which are even contradictory to the way they are conventionally used in everyday language.

That revelation is a source of consternation for the young Frame: 'the prospect of a word's lack of truth gave me a feeling of shock' (*Is-Land* 48). An example of the amazement that discovery produces in Frame is the use, by the women of her family, of the word 'permanent':

Auntie Maggie was talking in an ordinary way about people who had permanent waves, and who'd had *second* permanent waves. I knew the meaning of *permanent*. I had supposed that a permanent wave meant just that [...] If *permanent* was *everlasting*, like forever, like the stiffly petalled flowers in the bed jars upon graves, then how could a permanent wave wear out? (*Is-Land* 48).

The young Frame seems to be impressed because 'no one seemed to care that "permanent wave" was not the "truth"' (*Is-Land* 48). She senses that this peculiar use of words for communicative purposes cannot function without consequences:

The word *permanent*, then, had its own kind of revenge on those who misused it, for the Bible said that nothing was permanent, and everything came and went – the seasons, the animals [...], the people (*Is-Land* 49).

Words are magical instruments that promise endless meanings. Frame appropriates each of these enchanted words, and with her fresh and original analyses and associations exposes a more a lack of awareness and reflection about the power of language in those around her.

Words are a gift, but also a menace because of their hidden, potentially dangerous, connotations. On more than one occasion Frame feels betrayed by words. In *To the Is-land*, Frame tells how her first visit to the dentist marked the end of her infancy and her 'introduction to a threatening world of contradictions where spoken and written words assumed a special power' (*Is-Land* 22). The nurse had said, gently, 'Smell the pretty pink towel', and unsuspecting, the young Frame obeyed, realizing too late, as she felt herself going to sleep, that she had been deceived:

I have never forgotten that deception and my amazed disbelief that I could have been so betrayed, that the words 'Smell the pretty pink towel,' without any hint of anything fearful happening, had been uses to lure me into a kind of trap, that they had not *really* meant. [...] How could a few kind words mean so much harm? (*Is-Land* 23).

Language may also be treacherously banal: Frame feels betrayed by words when she perceives that language is being used in conventional, formulaic ways, depriving words of real meaning. For example, about the letter of sympathy she receives from John Money (Forrest) after her sister's death, she says: 'I remember the complete letter for the shock of its language and my inability to accept the formal conventional expressions of sympathy [...] I felt betrayed by my own adopted world of language' (*Angel* 210). She rejects profusely used, customary, set phraseology, as empty expressions, lacking in actual communicative signification. Frame suggests that the use of language in this manner is a kind of death, because it transforms words into inert things and brings about only silence (*Angel* 209-10). Knowledge about words is, therefore, a valuable tool, a useful weapon, a precious possession. Her discoveries make her avid for further knowledge: 'We were all hungry for words' (*Is-Land* 67). Her linguistic craving is extraordinarily expressed in her joy in the idea of words written with an icing set on Christmas and New Year cakes: 'Words and phrases that could be eaten!' (*Is-Land* 77). Sometimes, Frame effectively uses her newly acquired knowledge about the ambiguity of language to allow her to play with words for her convenience/advantage. When facing the ethical dilemma of eating or not eating Aunt Isy's cherished chocolates she rationalises: 'I was very happy to use language to conceal the moral problem. "Yes, let's test them." After all, testing was different. If the boxes did contain chocolates *testing* would not be *eating*' (*Angel* 171). She also uses the arbitrariness of linguistic signs, which will fascinate her all her life, as a way of expressing her wit and sense of humour: 'My first day in Paris is remembered for tears I shed trying to make myself understood, and for realising [...] that bread is indeed *pain*' (*Envoy* 322). Knowledge of words

is a source of unexpected power, not only power to conceal, but also power to express ideas which are true to experience as she knows it, 'full of colour and beauty, but also of the sense of death'.<sup>506</sup>

#### 4.2.2 Everyday Life and the World of Literature

Her parents encouraged Frame in her passion for words and literature. They stimulated reading and writing through their example, their appreciation and enjoyment of books and word-related activities. Her father, fond of crosswords and detective novels, was more concerned with the external form of words (*Is-Land* 77). Her mother had the rare capacity to transform every ordinary object into a source of wonder, mystery, and hope. In *To the Is-land*, Frame describes how her mother encouraged her children to observe the world from an artist's perspective:

When mother talked of the present, however, bringing her sense of wondrous contemplation to the ordinary world we knew, we listened, feeling the mystery and the magic. She had only to say of any commonplace object, 'Look, kiddies, a stone' to fill that stone with a wonder as if it were a holy object (*Is-Land* 9).

Her mother's fondness for literature and her poetic inclination also contributed to the development of the young Frame's intellect, perceptiveness, and artistic potential:

We played and picnicked and told stories, following the example of Mother, who also composed poems and stories while we waited for the billy to boil over the manuka fire. [...] The poems that Mother recited to us on those picnics were prompted by the surroundings – the lighthouse at Waipapa, the aurora australis in the sky. 'Look, the southern lights, kiddies.'

*The lighthouse on the rocky shore  
The seagulls' lonely cry  
And day departing leaves behind  
God's pictures in the sky.*  
(*Is-Land* 15)

<sup>506</sup> C.K. Stead, *Kin of Place: Essays on 20 New Zealand Writers* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2002), p.265.

This sense of awe and excitement is complemented by Frame's discovery of books: 'My excitement was tremendous – the new books, their colour, their smell' (*Is-Land* 88). The new library subscription, won by Frame as a prize for academic achievement, was a family affair:

I found a Western for Dad and a Dickens for Mum, who had no time to read it but who touched it and opened it and flipped the pages and read out striking descriptions, saying, 'How wonderful, kiddies, Charles Dickens, born in poverty, growing up to be a great writer' (*Is-Land* 70).

Frame soon became an avid reader, 'realizing that to have an adventure, I did not need to travel in the lost Lizzie Ford, getting sick on the way, to beaches and rivers – I could experience an adventure by reading a book' (*Is-Land* 33).

Repeatedly during her difficult adolescence, Frame finds consolation in literature: 'I have often wondered in which world I might have lived my "real" life had not the world of literature been given to me' (*Is-Land* 120). When she feels devastated by the death of her elder sister Myrtle, she faces the psychological impact of her loss trying to find comfort in the poetry she has read at school:

To my amazement, I discovered that many of the poets knew about Myrtle's death and how strange it was without her. [...] The poets of *Mount Helicon* were writing the story of my feelings. I could scarcely believe their depth of understanding. [...] What amazing knowledge of the poets who could see through my own life, who could be appearing to write poems of people in Oamaru (*Is-Land* 88-89).

The experience of such overwhelming mourning is, however, too real and painful to be voiced in the self-conscious, constrained, and stiff, meta-language that the young Frame finds in nineteenth-century elegy:

In the poetry lessons her name was often mentioned, 'Yet once more ye laurels and once more ye Myrtles . . .', written of a drowning too . . . and hearing the name in class sent such piercing shock through me that I clenched my toes and gripped my hands on the lid of my desk to stop myself from bursting into tears. Somehow, Myrtle's death did not really 'qualify'; it was too much within me and part of me, and I could not look at it and say *dreamily, poetically*, 'Ah, there's a tragedy' (*Is-Land* 93).

Years later, the tragedy repeats itself when Frame's sister Isabel drowns in circumstances similar to those of Myrtle's death: 'This new blow like a double lightning strike burned away our thinking and feeling' (*Angel* 207). Once again,

Frame seeks comfort in the literature she knows, this time not in romantic poetry, but in modernist works. She finds echoes of her perception of the world as hostile in Eliot's *The Waste Land* and in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (Angel 208). Her readings take her to a 'dreamlike reality', without solving 'the dark shaft of absence' that afflicts her spirit (Angel 208). Her sorrow at the bereavement is so deep that Frame feels lonely and isolated, and painfully perceives the necessity of finding further modes of expression for her inner life. As Henke puts it, 'bereft of a literary genre to give voice to her grief', Frame senses the need to search for 'a tougher, more realistic prose vehicle to express her melancholy and mitigate her perilous sense of isolation'.<sup>507</sup>

Frame becomes, however, rapidly aware that what she feels and thinks about literature and imagination flooding every aspect of her life is in open contradiction to her existence in the *real* world: 'If only I had the world of poetry, openly, unashamedly, without having to hide it in secrecy within myself!' (Angel 191). Everyday language and events seem to be *not* poetic – according to her idea of what poetry is – and she finds herself facing the need to remove herself from this world in an attempt to live *poetically*. The young Frame, however, knows that what she wants is rather 'an imagination that would inhabit a world of fact', so that she is not forced 'to exist elsewhere' (*Is-Land* 101). She refuses to accept that in order to be a poet she should spend her life in the 'other world':

It was my insistence on bringing this world home, rather than vanishing within it, that increased my desire to write, for how else could I anchor that world within this everyday world where I hadn't the slightest doubt that I belonged? (*Is-Land* 120).

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<sup>507</sup> Suzette Henke, *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing* (New York: St. Martin Press, 1998), p.84.

Throughout her autobiography, the complex process of recognition of 'the artist's freedom to be both in the world and out of it' is of tremendous significance for Frame's construction of her personal identity as a writer.<sup>508</sup>

#### 4.2.3 The Continuity of the Literary Imagination

But the writer is first and last also a reader. Writing about her favourite books, she says: 'I found myself returning to them again and again'.<sup>509</sup> Frame's earliest reading tended towards the nostalgic and the tragic; she says that while many readers are introduced to literature through nursery books, she

was lured in through the gateway of doom by the poems and ballads my mother used to recite to us, where the United Kingdom was portrayed as a land of storms, tidal waves; lonely moors, misty highlands; the ghosts of star-crossed lovers, the murdered and the drowned.<sup>510</sup>

Later, she chose to read writers who dwell in what she calls 'the city of tragedy':

I visited Beowulf, Marlowe, Shakespeare [...] the metaphysical and Romantic poets, the novelists – Swift, the Brontës, Hardy; modern writers – Joyce, Yeats, Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Hopkins, Dylan Thomas.<sup>511</sup>

Frame completes 'the list of the past' with some 'new names' like William Golding, Hugh MacDiarmid, Arthur Hugh Clough, among others.<sup>512</sup> She discovered also a 'foreign territory' with an 'English boarding house where the translators lived', as 'so many of [her] favourite books were not written originally in English'; these 'foreign' writers she appreciated and enjoyed so much include Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Ibsen, Dante, and Kafka (whom she must have read, of course, in the Muirs' translation).<sup>513</sup>

<sup>508</sup> Merli and Torney, 'Dangerous Margins', p.81.

<sup>509</sup> Janet Frame, 'Memory and a Pocketful of Words', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 4 June 1964, p.487.

<sup>510</sup> Frame, 'Memory and a Pocketful of Words', p.487.

<sup>511</sup> Frame, 'Memory and a Pocketful of Words', p.487.

<sup>512</sup> Frame, 'Memory and a Pocketful of Words', p.487.

<sup>513</sup> Frame, 'Memory and a Pocketful of Words', p.487.

Unsurprisingly, it is with female writers that Frame most identifies: she acknowledges her kinship with Emily Brontë and Virginia Woolf in her autobiography and in some of her, also autobiographical, essays. Frame and her sisters drew a parallel between their lives and the lives of the Brontës:

With a background of poverty, drunkenness, attempted murder and near-madness, it was inevitable that we should feel close to the Brontës, once we had read their books and knew the story of their lives. My younger sister (who later died when she was twenty) was assigned the role of Emily; I, more practical and less outwardly passionate became Charlotte, while my youngest sister, shy, overshadowed in many ways by our 'glory', became Anne.<sup>514</sup>

Each of the Frame sisters set to work on novels, and when Janet was not making poems on her way to milk the cows, she was writing her diary, where characters from Dostoyevsky, Daudet, Hardy and other writers used to appear.<sup>515</sup> Jeanne Delbaere-Garant suggests that the comparison between Emily Brontë, Virginia Woolf, and Janet Frame 'reveals a continuity between romanticism, modernism, and post-modernism, which is not always recognized by contemporary critics':

The romantic overvaluation of the self led the modernists to adopt a more sceptical view towards it after the first World War; this scepticism culminated in the post-modernist conviction that the inflated ego had been the cause of all evils and should be pulled to pieces to bring about a radical transformation of human consciousness.<sup>516</sup>

Delbaere-Garant points out that, as well as sharing their preoccupation with the nature of the individual self, Frame shares a number of other characteristics with Emily Brontë and Virginia Woolf: a sense of a visionary world that is in conflict with the pressures of the social world, a resultant sense of self-incompleteness and a need to heal in their work what they perceive as an essentially divided world. Like Brontë and Woolf, Frame discovered how writing could overcome restrictions and limitations, transforming and expanding her world. That transformative quality of language underpins Frame's later prose which,

<sup>514</sup> Janet Frame, 'Beginnings', *Landfall*, 19.1 (March 1965), 40-47 (p.44).

<sup>515</sup> Frame, 'Beginnings', pp.44-45.

<sup>516</sup> Jeanne Delbaere-Garant, 'The Divided Worlds of Emily Brontë, Virginia Woolf and Janet Frame', *English Studies*, 60.6 (December 1979), 699-711 (p.708).



Delbaere-Garant says, 'turns the old world upside down, places treasure in the rubbish dump, poetry in silence, vision in the madhouse'.<sup>517</sup> For Delbaere-Garant, Frame's works are full of the resonances of other writers' works:

Janet Frame's novels are full of echoes; silent shades glide through them, vaguely recognizable, beckoning to us for a while before making way for others. These 'presences' testify to the continuity of the imagination through the centuries and contrast with the standardized unimaginative crowds of the contemporary mass culture.<sup>518</sup>

Patrick Evans considers that for Frame, literary texts constitute 'not simply a world, but *the* world, embracing all possible acts and emotions and eventualities'.<sup>519</sup> Yet, Evans also argues that for Frame 'the world of literature is a source of comparisons, generally speaking, but not a source of inspiration'.<sup>520</sup> According to Evans, Frame's readings of other writers' works 'simply provide confirmation and illustration of her own ideas'.<sup>521</sup> Frame, however, makes a distinction between the enjoyment of a literary work as a reader, and the relationship writers have with previous texts. Frame believes that for writers who are also readers, there must be an added element of creative tension inherent in their occupation, which must make them wary about the way they react to literary texts, in how they receive and process them:

It may be well for a reader to enter the world of literature, to stay there, going from favourite city to favourite city, taking a full share of the good things; it is not well for a writer. To visit the land – yes; again and again; but not to stay, not to set up house within a favourite gateway where the view of the 'world' provided by Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Shakespeare, may combine to give a lifetime of spectator pleasure.<sup>522</sup>

In Frame's view, a writer cannot remain satisfied with what her reading presents to her; the nature of her craft compels her to consider those texts as raw material for further creation. Julia Kristeva has affirmed that intertextuality 'situates the text within history and society, which are then seen as texts read by the writer, and

<sup>517</sup> Delbaere-Garant, 'The Divided Worlds', p.705.

<sup>518</sup> Delbaere-Garant, 'The Divided Worlds', p.707.

<sup>519</sup> Patrick Evans, *Janet Frame* (Boston: Twayne, 1977), p.32.

<sup>520</sup> Evans, *Janet Frame*, p.32.

<sup>521</sup> Evans, *Janet Frame*, p.33.

<sup>522</sup> Frame, 'Memory and a Pocketful of Words', p.487.

into which he inserts himself by rewriting them'.<sup>523</sup> Frame also asserts the creative right of the writer to *rewrite* previous texts: 'The books received [...] tend to shed their material as a plane in danger sheds its fuel, to arrive as a vivid (sometimes charred) shape of language. It is the shape, the words that make the shape, that I care most about'.<sup>524</sup> According to Frame, the writer 'tries to take one by one from the abacus or alphabet the numbers or words to make the shape best suited to the time, the place and the dream'.<sup>525</sup> The writer must not be satisfied with 'the view of the "world" provided' by other writers, however brilliant and inspirational they are. For Frame the aesthetic and intellectual pleasure of reading does not provide any pre-conceived structure or permanent company for the writer's own voyage of discovery and creation: 'A writer must go alone through the gateway entered or arrived at, out into the other "world", with no luggage but memory and a pocketful of words'.<sup>526</sup> In this way, Frame anticipates Harold Bloom's theory in *The Anxiety of Influence*, where, drawing on psychoanalytic ideas and deconstructive methods, he offers a theory of poetic writing as creative misreading:

We need to stop thinking of any poet as an autonomous ego, however solipsistic the strongest of poets may be. Every poet is a being caught up in dialectical relationship (transference, repetition, error, communication) with another poet or poets.<sup>527</sup>

#### 4.2.4 Searching for a Refuge

As narrator of her autobiography Frame shows herself very much aware of the barriers she has to overcome in order to succeed in her desire to be a writer in a 'society [that] still censures certain choices made by women, including the choice

<sup>523</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), p.65.

<sup>524</sup> Frame, 'Memory and a Pocketful of Words', p.487.

<sup>525</sup> Frame, 'Memory and a Pocketful of Words', p.487.

<sup>526</sup> Frame, 'Memory and a Pocketful of Words', p.487.

<sup>527</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p.91.

to write'.<sup>528</sup> Social barriers to Frame's actualizing her artistic vocation include the economic situation of her family and her lack of a privileged education. The authoritarianism and the pressure to conformity in New Zealand society make Frame feel suffocated, although she retains her inner resistance by writing privately about her determination: 'They think I'm going to be a schoolteacher, but I'm going to be a *poet*', she writes in her diary (*Is-Land* 132). Later, during her training as a teacher, when faced with the final examination for her teaching qualification, she simply walks away from the classroom, unable to continue her performance in front of her examiner: 'I said to the inspector, "Will you excuse me a moment, please?" "Certainly Miss Frame." I walked out of the room and out of the school, knowing I would never return' (*Angel* 187). As Frame, as authoriser of her autobiography, constructs this passage, this curious exit and her consequent withdrawal from school life, is attributed to her extreme shyness, but it is not difficult to recognize that Frame's younger self seems to be actually enacting – probably partly consciously – what her unconscious commands her to do, what her *true* self desires and deserves. Once again, Frame's enormous drive to live on her own terms triumphs over outside impositions. But this ability to triumph is not limitless: when her desire to be a writer seems to be frustrated for ever and she has to face the need to return to her teaching job, she attempts suicide, which results in her first hospitalization in a mental ward:

What, *in all the world*, could I do to earn my living and still live as myself, as I knew myself to be. Temporary masks, I knew; had their place, everyone was wearing them, they were the human rage; but not masks cemented in place until the wearer could not breathe and was eventually suffocated.

On Saturday evening I tidied my room, arranged my possessions, and swallowing a packet of Aspros, I lay down in bed to die, certain that I would die. My desperation was extreme (*Angel* 188).

<sup>528</sup> Susan Ash, 'The Absolute, Distanced Image: Janet Frame's Autobiography', *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 11(1993), 21-40(p.37).

Without resources to express her intense inner life, Frame finds no solution other than retreating into self-protective isolation: 'I was in hiding. I was grieving' (*Angel* 211). When she is to be discharged from hospital, she finds herself in a state of alarm about her future, and refuses to go home with her mother, to a place which represents renunciation and submissiveness. She is sent then to Seacliff Hospital, where chronic psychotic patients were sent, and there, she is diagnosed as schizophrenic. After being discharged from that mental hospital, Frame describes how her only consolation was her weekly 'talks' with her former psychology lecturer John Forrest (John Money in real life) and because of her need for that consolation, she 'built up a formidable schizophrenic repertoire', reading case histories of schizophrenic patients in the Public Library, and then enacting their symptoms as her own at Forrest's office; Frame emphasizes 'the young handsome' psychologist's 'newness and eagerness to practice psychology and his apparent willingness to believe everything [she] said' (*Angel* 201). During this period, Frame was writing both stories and poems; the stories would later be published as *The Lagoon and Other Stories*. When Forrest heard that his patient was writing stories and poems, he suggested that she should give them to him to keep, probably as a complement to his clinical observations, although Frame confesses that she 'kept "pure schizophrenia" for the poems, where it was most at home' (*Angel* 201). Frame describes her relationship with Forrest as a strong influence in her decision to adopt the role of madwoman. Diane Caney argues that John Forrest 'almost coaxed the young woman into believing that madness and genius were inseparable and that schizophrenia was an asset to the serious poet'.<sup>529</sup> It was John Forrest who 'made a remark which was to direct [Frame's]

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<sup>529</sup> Diane Caney, 'Janet Frame and *The Tempest*', *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 11(1993), 152-71(p.157).

behaviour and reason for many years': "When I think of you," he said, "I think of Van Gogh, of Hugo Wolf . . .'" (*Angel* 201). Desperate, without seeing an alternative, Frame is willing to consider herself a mental patient suffering from schizophrenia as a possible way of thinking of herself as an artist, connected in this way with creative geniuses:

Once again turning to books for my information, discovered that Hugo Wolf 'd. insane', and that Van Gogh 'shot himself in despair at his condition'. I read that Schumann, too, 'suffered serious deterioration in mental health'. All three were named as *schizophrenic*, with their artistic ability apparently the pearl of their schizophrenia. Great artists, visionaries . . . (*Angel* 201).

Discussing the strategies that Frame adopts to tell her own truths about her life, a life that had already been mythicised, Gina Mercer remarks how Frame presents herself as effectively without real choices: 'for a creative woman at this time there was really nothing available apart from the construct of madwoman/genius'.<sup>530</sup> Frame describes how she performed her schizophrenia as a suitable justification for seeking emotional shelter. She decides to make use of 'the world of the mad' in order to survive: 'to *suit* the occasion, I wore my schizophrenic fancy dress' (*Angel* 198; 203). Frame's strategy, however, proved to be a dangerous one, full of unanticipated repercussions. 'In a desperate bid to maintain her sense of self and difference', writes Mercer, Frame 'adopted this construct only to find herself locked into it, with little opportunity for escape'.<sup>531</sup> Frame's desire to be a poet, ironically contributes to her hospitalization and her powerful relationship with words is used by the doctors who treat her, as a clinical sign, supporting their diagnosis of mental illness. For example, in a letter to her sister June, Frame

<sup>530</sup> Gina Mercer, 'A Simple Every Glass: The Autobiographies of Janet Frame', *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 11(1993), 41-48(p.43).

In trying to understand this representation of the autobiographical protagonist as a woman without real choices, it has to be considered, however, that when writing her autobiography, Frame is revealing herself, from a retrospective point of view. In selecting and deciding the profile of herself offered to the readers she is exercising a powerful authorial choice.

<sup>531</sup> Mercer, 'A Simple Everyday Glass', p.43.

describes the gorse as having a 'peanut-buttery smell' and this description is interpreted by the doctor who reads the letters as an example of language use characteristic of schizophrenic patients (*Angel* 213). She was, she says, quoting from Virginia Woolf but the diagnosis of schizophrenia now coloured everything else.

#### 4.2.5 Psychiatric Treatment and its Effect on Creativity

Psychiatric treatment limits Frame's creative potential, inhibiting her spontaneity, stifling her imagination, actually preventing her writing: 'My only writing was in letters to my sister and my parents and brother, and these were always censored and sometimes not mailed' (*Angel* 213). In Frame's ward at the hospital 'there was no reading matter' and the few books she could get were sometimes confiscated (*Angel* 222). When she tries to assert herself and retrieve her typewriter to write, she is dismissed by the staff as 'intractable'.<sup>532</sup> She becomes reduced to employing herself in menial occupations, learning to make baskets, to fill toothpaste tubes with toothpaste, or to weave French lace (*Angel* 223). The members of the staff in the mental hospitals enforce the status quo and aim for social conformity, trying to force Frame into the soothing uniformity of *normality*: 'everyone felt that it was better for me to be "normal" and not have fancy intellectual notions about being a writer, that it was better for me to be out of hospital, working at an ordinary occupation, mixing with others' (*Angel* 222). Clearly, the sensitive young Frame, with her fragile self-esteem, suffered immensely under those restrictive circumstances: 'Sometimes, when I began to say what I *really* felt, using a simile or metaphor, an image, I saw the

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<sup>532</sup> King, *Wrestling*, p.105.

embarrassment in my listener's eyes -- here was the mad person speaking' (*Angel* 215). All these restrictions must have substantially interfered with her psychological development and her self-image, and they were also in direct conflict with her ability to practice the subversive function of her imagination -- as one of the main roles of imagination is to bring about personal and social transformation. In relation to this transformative role of imagination, Adrienne Rich argues that:

If the imagination is to transcend and transform experience it has to question, to challenge, to conceive the alternatives, perhaps to the very life you are living at the moment. You have to be free to play around with the notion that day might be night, love might be hate; nothing can be too sacred for the imagination to turn into its opposite or to call experimentally by another name.<sup>533</sup>

Given Frame's artistic temperament, those restrictions on the use of her imagination must have had profound, agonizing, and far-reaching implications. Everybody -- her family, the people who used to work or/and study with her, the doctors and staff at the mental hospitals, and also her fellow patients -- accepted the diagnosis of schizophrenia as undeniable and definite and regarded her desire to be a writer as part of her psychopathology: 'All I had left was my desire to be a writer, to explore thoughts and images which were frowned on as being bizarre, and my ambition, thought to be suspect, perhaps a delusion' (*Angel* 213). Her conviction about the imperative of vocation remained immovable in spite of all her own doubts and all the assaults on her self-esteem:

What I have described in Istina Mavet [the protagonist of *Faces in the Water*] is my sense of hopelessness as the months passed, my fear of having to endure that constant state of physical capture where I was indeed at the mercy of those who made judgments and decisions without even talking at length to me or trying to know me or even submitting me to the standard tests which are available to psychiatrists. The state could be defined as forced submission to custodial capture (*Angel* 221).

<sup>533</sup> Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (W.W. Norton: New York, 1979), p.43.

Besides such horror, there was also the terrifying knowledge that the 'enjoyment of writing' and the 'desire to write' may actually have 'little correlation with talent', a recognition that haunted her:

Might I not after all, be deluding myself like other patients I had seen in hospital, one I particular, a harmless young woman who quietly sat in the admission ward day after day writing her "book" because she wanted to be a writer, and her book, on examination, revealing pages and pages of penciled 0-0-0-0-0-0-0' (*Angel* 224).

All she had left, was her inner life, a secret refuge, a site of resistance, off limits to everyone else, and hence invulnerable to the most ferocious attacks, as in the series of ECT. Therefore, frightened and lonely, she 'retreated to an inward state' – which was interpreted by the doctors as a further sign of the severity of her mental condition:

I don't care where I go or what happens to me for I am sane, I am terribly sane, so much so that it looks to other people like insanity [...] I do not feel that I shall lose any freedom there [at Scacliff Mental Hospital] for I have discovered that my freedom is within me and nothing can destroy it, and I remember Pierre in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, how he was a prisoner and looked out of the window and laughed and laughed because the world was inside him, his own.<sup>534</sup>

But it was Frame's literary ability that saved her in the end: 'It was my writing that at last came to my rescue. It is little wonder that I value writing as a way of life when it actually saved my life' (*Angel* 221). Her mother had been persuaded to sign the permission for her daughter to undergo a leucotomy (*Angel* 221). The staff at the hospital was convinced that the operation was the best procedure for Frame, and that it would allow her to leave the hospital 'in no time' in order to live a *normal* life outside:

'We had one patient who was here for years until she had a leucotomy. And now she's selling hats in a hat shop. I saw her just the other day, selling hats, as normal as anyone. Wouldn't you like to be normal?' (*Angel* 222).

Frame, however, senses that the procedure means the absolute, definitive effacement of her real self: 'I listened also with a feeling that my erasure was being completed' (*Angel* 222). Just before the date scheduled for the brain surgery,

<sup>534</sup> Letter from Janet Frame to John Money, 10 October 1948. Quoted in: King, *Wrestling*, p.100.



Doctor Geoffrey Blake-Palmer, now in charge of Frame's case, tells her that her *The Lagoon and Other Stories* has won the 'Hubert Church Award for the best prose' (*Angel* 223). This comes as a surprise to Frame who has not had access to the newspaper that announces her success. Frame's hospital notes for 4 March 1952 register that the patient 'has just had a book of short stories' published, 'in which she displays good verbal ability and a keen perceptiveness of the finer shades of emotional experience in a childish and immature sort of way'.<sup>535</sup> Blake-Palmer decides after all that she 'should stay as you are. I don't want you changed [...] And no leucotomy' (*Angel* 222-23). Thus, a literary prize constitutes the first ray of hope Frame receives in the depths of her physical and spiritual incarceration. Frame begins then, a long journey from ostensible madness, where she has been socially constructed as a schizophrenic subject, to a virtual reconstruction and redefinition of the self.

#### 4.2.6 Identity after Madness

Her experience in the realms of madness and the consequent psychiatric treatment left Frame 'being and feeling nothing and nobody' (*Angel* 224). The controlled absence of extensive descriptions of those years in her autobiography may, however, be considered as a form of presence, representing the significance of this period of emotional desperation in Frame's life. Henke claims that the brief autobiographic record of Frame's institutionalized years leaves 'an elliptical black hole at the centre of her life narrative' that precisely, 'suggests the spectral presence of a decentred, disempowered, and suffering subject'.<sup>536</sup> After her release from hospital, Frame, handicapped subject but amazing survivor, begins to

<sup>535</sup> Janet Frame hospital notes, 4 March 1952. Quoted in: King, *Wrestling*, p.106.

<sup>536</sup> Henke, *Shattered Subjects*, p.93.

search for a way to redeem the prolonged 'wastage of being other than [her]self' (*Envoy* 383). She begins a long pilgrimage to identify and secure a place where her inner self belongs, and she has to make a real effort to create a healthier relationship with other people, because the years she had spent assuming the role of schizophrenic subject have left her without effective social skills. She simply doesn't know how to act and function appropriately outside mental hospitals. Once again, she distressingly senses her 'difference', but she is not quite sure if she wants to fit in by adapting her appearance and behaviour to normal standards. She decides to try new experiences: she buys make-up and new clothes, following the advice of the women who work with her; she attends a dance for the first time; she has the opportunity to travel abroad, where she meets an American artist, with whom she has a brief affair. The shadow of the diagnosis of schizophrenia is, however, always present, giving a colouring of uncertainty to her life. And so she decides to exorcise the ghost that haunts her and enters the Maudsley in London as a voluntary patient: 'How could I regain my confidence when I had never been able to tell "my side" of the story? I knew it was time for me to find out "the truth"' (*Envoy* 369). When it is confirmed that she had never suffered schizophrenia and that the problems she is experiencing are mostly a direct result of her stay in mental hospitals, her reaction is ambiguous:

In the midst of the agony and terror of the acceptance I found the unexpected warmth, comfort, protection: how I had longed to be rid of the opinion [the 'expert' opinion that she suffered from schizophrenia] but was unwilling to part with it. [...] I always had it by for emergency, to put on quickly, for shelter from the cruel world. And now it was gone, not destroyed by me and my constant pleading for the 'truth' allied to an unwillingness to lose so useful a protection, but banished officially by experts: I could never again turn to it for help (*Envoy* 375).

Although the Maudsley doctors' judgment that she is sane, confirms her own beliefs, it also takes away the identity that had become a retreat for her, a sanctuary where she had allowed herself to be rebellious and 'different', without

having to justify her attitude or behaviour in front of others. Her 'madness' had been a place where she had been able to keep her aspiration to be a writer against all odds, where she could express herself freely, using 'a simile or metaphor, an image', where she had worked and played with words and images without fear of being regarded as bizarre and eccentric, because as a mad person, she was not expected to conform to models of propriety and normality (*Angel* 215). Frame had not only used 'her schizophrenia' as an excuse when she could not cope with a given situation, but also she had used it as a means of avoiding the conflicts attendant on her identity as a writer in a society biased against her gender, socioeconomic status, educational background, and above all, against her originality of thought, her freedom to criticise, and her idiosyncratic mode of expression. Without the protective shell of a psychiatric diagnosis she even began to doubt her central sustaining core, the sense of her 'difference', and the reality of her talent:

Perhaps I was not 'really' a writer? My doubts returned. Perhaps the desire to journey back and forth from that Mirror City was merely an abnormality after all? Oh why had they robbed me of my schizophrenia which had been the answer to all my misgivings about myself? (*Envoy* 381).

Under the guidance of the psychiatrist in charge of her case, Dr Cawley, Frame becomes more confident and self-assured, being able to recognize 'that I genuinely needed to write, that it was a way of life for me' (*Envoy* 384). According to Frame, Dr Cawley's view is that his patient's ideal life is to 'live alone and write while resisting if I wished this, the demands of others to "join in"' (*Envoy* 384). More importantly, Dr Cawley encourages Frame to write in order to heal the effects of her long stays in New Zealand hospitals and to give her a clearer view of her future (*Envoy* 384). Frame finally discovers that *her writing* is the alternative to madness she has been seeking: 'No longer, I hoped, dependant

on my "schizophrenia" for comfort and attention and help, but with myself as myself, I again began my writing career' (*Envoy* 385).

#### 4.2.7 A Unique Mode of Expression

Frame must then find an enabling discourse, a mode of expression capable of representing her complex inner world. In the long process of developing her writing she has to confront disapproval and criticism for not conforming to pre-established conventions, and she had already encountered criticism for non-conformity. When in the fourth grade at school, for example, she writes a poem as homework, she has to face her sister Myrtle's criticism of her refusal of standard poetic language:

the writing of that first poem sparked my first argument over writing as an art, for when I read my poem to Myrtle, she insisted that the words 'touch the sky' should be 'tint the sky':

*When the sun goes down and the night draws nigh  
And the evening shadows touch the sky [...]*

I disagreed with Myrtle, who insisted that there were words and phrases you had to use, and when you were writing about evening shadows, you always said 'tint', just as you said that stars 'shone' or 'twinkled' and waves 'lapped' and the wind 'roared'. In spite of Myrtle's insistence, I preferred 'touch' to 'tint', but in deference to her obvious wisdom and wider knowledge I changed the world to 'tint' when I took my poem to school. But later, when I wrote it in my notebook, I reverted to 'touch the sky', having my own way (*Is-Land* 65-66).

Frame learns to use writing as a means of resistance. Later in high school, where 'anything that made one's appearance different from others was a cause for alarm and worry', she confesses: 'My choice of reading was my area of rebellion against the dominance of the Group' (*Is-Land* 90; 101). She continued writing, sensing the approval of her parents, especially her mother, who had always mourned the frustration of her own literary career. Frame writes that her mother's 'overwhelming might-have-been was *publication* of a book':

She [her mother] once sent a collection of her poems to Stockwells, England, which advertised regularly in New Zealand newspapers and magazines, and her joy at having the poems accepted for publication was lessened only by the knowledge that she couldn't afford the sum of the money they quoted for publication, and although she resigned

herself to never having the money, she could say proudly now and again, 'I've had a book of poems accepted for publication by Stockwells, Ilfracombe, England' (*Is-Land* 76).<sup>537</sup>

Frame writes of the passionate intensity of her youth with which she regarded her writing: 'I want to write and write and imagine. I can imagine and imagine. God kill me if I cannot write ... I want to make something beautiful [...] something that affects me as the earth — her trees and stars affect me'.<sup>538</sup>

#### 4.2.8 The Gift of Imagination

At the centre of her newly discovered power to symbolize her internal world, her own literary language, Frame finds the force of Imagination:

At the time of my life when I was learning that life is a presentation of many feasts from which one is often fearful of being turned away, I found the feast of imagination spread almost in loving fashion, in great kindness and abundance (*Angel* 164).

It is difficult to overestimate the importance that imagination has for Frame. Frame's commitment is to the power of imagination, which she sees as 'a glittering noble word never failing to create its own inner light' (*Angel* 163). She values literary creation as a way of exploring the imagination, which she calls a *Mirror City* — a favourite metaphor of hers and the title and central theme of the third volume of her autobiography. When the young Frame discovers literature, her craving for words becomes focused in one word which characterises for her, the main poetic attribute: 'My life had been for many years in the power of words. It was driven now by a constant search and need for what was, after all, "only a word" — imagination' (*Is-Land* 113). Literature and imagination supply her with an inexhaustible alternative world, interdependent with the real world: 'confirming for me once again the closeness, the harmony, and not the separation of literature [...] and life' (*Is-Land* 130). Because of that closeness to life,

<sup>537</sup> Nor could the mother afford to copyright a song of hers that had won first prize in an Australasian competition.

<sup>538</sup> Janet Frame, 1940 Diaries. Quoted in: King, *Wrestling*, p.47.

literature, specifically poetry, gives her joyful feelings about existence, but also uncovers the ugliness and poverty of reality, and the frustration caused by the lack of opportunity to develop potential. The narrator refers to her feelings of waste when her friends take unfulfilling jobs: Poppy takes 'commercial' and Shirley works in a shop. Frame compares them to the protagonist of the poem 'Old Grey Squirrel', who dreams of a life at sea and finishes working in an office 'slowly "dying inside"' (*Is-Land* 79; 99). When Frame is tormented by 'the continuing nightmare of war and certain nightmares at home, [her suffering is] alleviated once again by [...] reading and writing poetry' (*Is-Land* 124). Each time, she feels at a loss in a new position, a foreigner in a strange land, language, and especially literature, comes to rescue and comfort her. For example, when she witnesses the poverty of her Spanish companions in Ibiza, forced to collect small, hard, pitted fruits that had fallen in the road, words do the trick and she constructs a proverb that transformed the situation of her friends into one of advantage and joy: 'I constructed for myself a proverb that, in the way of proverbs, would try to solve everything: the olives that fall to the side of the dusty road are the tastiest, the most treasured. Words again came to the rescue' (*Envoy* 334). Frame's proverb is a consolatory fiction, if only for her. Literature helps Frame to endure the exigencies of the real world, including its sordid aspects, providing a sense of belonging: 'how much closer may one be to belonging when one is within both the real city and the Mirror City' (*Envoy* 362). Frame counts on the marvellous presence of the Mirror City in her life, and the possibility of constant journeys to and from that city. Frame develops a notion of the self as multiple, one of its principal functions being to act as an Envoy who journeys into the world of the Imagination and brings its treasures back into the world of every day: 'There had

never been any question of my not being able to exist in the "real world" unless that existence also deprived me of my "own world", the journeys to and from Mirror City, either by the Envoy who is forever present, or by myself' (*Envoy*, 384). In *The Envoy from Mirror City* Frame discusses how these multiple selves co-operate to create the finished work of art:

The self must be the container of the treasures of Mirror City, the Envoy as it were, and when the time comes to arrange and list those treasures for shaping into words, the self must be the worker, the bearer of the burden, the chooser, placer and polisher. And when the work is finished and nothingness must be endured, the self may take a holiday, if only to reweave the used container that awaits the next visit to Mirror City (*Envoy* 405).

For Frame, the self is first Envoy, then craftsman and worker using words to fashion the treasures from the Mirror City of the Imagination. Frame believes that it is precisely the Envoy who imagines, undergoing the journey of artistic development, and carrying the burden of having to live in the realms of imagination:

Writing a novel is not merely going on a shopping expedition across the border to an unreal land: it is hours and years spent in the factories, the streets, the cathedrals of the imagination, learning the unique functioning of Mirror City, its skies and space, its own planetary system, without stopping to think that one may become homeless in the world, and bankrupt, abandoned by the Envoy (*Envoy* 406).

Frame states that the poet/writer must try not to think about the possibility of being abandoned by the Envoy; this suggests that at any moment she may be gripped by a kind of Coleridgean fear of losing her poetic imagination, of losing the ability to enter Mirror City in order to transform the experience of 'this' world into art. Frame's notion of the Envoy has shifting implications and applications. Sometimes, the author seems to make the Envoy itself the Imagination: 'Like the shadows in Plato's cave, our lives and the world contain mirror cities revealed to us by our imagination, the Envoy' (*Envoy* 300). Frame's autobiography is, then, the best place to observe how she conceives the working of the self/envoy/imagination. In *The Envoy from Mirror City*, Frame describes her

efforts to imagine, recollect and recreate experience: 'In writing this autobiography I have been returning to each year of my life to collect the treasures of my experience, and I have set them down in their own home, their own place' (*Envoy* 433-34). Alan Tinkler connects Frame's life narrative with the author's whole creative enterprise, placing imagination at its centre. According to Tinkler, Frame's autobiography 'attempts to elucidate, not to justify, her creative project. [...] Frame's project was sharing her imagination – to capture what is at the edge of the alphabet in writing'.<sup>539</sup> In other words, through imagination Frame first rejects the old idea of the single self and the linguistic rigidity which goes along with this idea, trying instead to reach a territory at 'the edge of the alphabet', on the brink of silence, because 'in the turbulence of a regimented world, silence has become a positive value, madness is felt to be preferable to conformity', and because beyond that silence, Frame believes that something miraculous may be found.<sup>540</sup> As Delbaere-Garant puts it: 'there may be a new birth and a new language'.<sup>541</sup> Like Wallace Stevens, Frame believes that the imagination although mysterious, possesses its own in quantifiable logic: 'The imagination is a miracle of logic, and [...] its exquisite divinations are calculations beyond analyses'.<sup>542</sup> Imagination is for Frame a magical, yet precise and powerful instrument in the promotion and extension of the self. Consequently, imagination is must be the key to literary creation.

<sup>539</sup> Alan Tinkler, 'Janet Frame (Biography)', *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 24.2 (Summer 2004), 89-124 (p.90). Online. Available: Expanded Academic ASAP. Thompson Gale. <http://find.galegroup.com/itx/infomark.do?&contentSet=IAC-Documents&type=retrieve&tabID=T002&prodId=EAIM&docId=A120780388&source=gale&gale&srcprod=EAIM&userGroupName=glasuni&version=1.0>. 22 November 2006.

<sup>540</sup> Delbaere-Garant, 'Divided Worlds', p.710.

<sup>541</sup> Delbaere-Garant, 'Divided Worlds', p.710.

<sup>542</sup> Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960), p.154.



#### 4.2.9 The Materiality of Writing: Absence and Presence.

Paradoxically, the material process of literary creation, the actual writing of her books, is a part of Frame's life which is absent from her autobiography. In *An Angel at My Table*, the reader is suddenly confronted with the information that a book by Frame has won a literary prize, and that this saves her from undergoing brain surgery which could have changed her for ever. Before this, however, there is no reference to Frame in the actual process of writing the stories; *The Lagoon and Other Stories* seems to appear inexplicably and effortlessly from nowhere. Although Frame mentions the publication of the stories, she never discusses the detail of either publication or reception. Frame writes about the difficulties she has in writing at all – she recounts the material deprivation which frequently prevented her from having an appropriate place to write or even adequate materials; she describes the extreme conditions at the mental hospitals, where she was not permitted to write – sometimes not even letters to her family – but she doesn't take the reader through the processes of writing and correcting. From time to time, Frame mentions hostility to or incomprehension about writing as an occupation. For example, Patrick Reilly, one of her acquaintances in London, is convinced that artists do no work, that they only hang around, and that their morals are dubious; he is unable to recognise Frame's occupation as legitimate:

I reminded him that I was a writer.  
 'You're different. When you come back from Spain to live in London, you'll be getting a real job.'  
 'Oh?'  
 'Yes. Peek Frean's are always looking for workers. Or you could be a shorthand typist' (*Envoy* 318-19).

Frame, however, never refers directly in her autobiography to the way she performs her craft as a writer, the actual creative process. The significance of these silences on the activity of composition seems to be peculiarly relevant in the

context of a literary autobiography. As Pierre Macherey affirms, what is not said in a book, silence, is a source of expression in itself, which shapes all speech in that book. According to Macherey, 'the silence of a book is not a lack to be remedied, and inadequacy to be made up for. It is not a temporary silence that could be finally abolished. We must distinguish the necessity of this silence'.<sup>543</sup> Thus, the silence on the creative writing process in Frame's autobiography may be revelatory and, therefore, worth exploring.

One explanation may be found in the construction process of the autobiography itself. Frame's autobiography is the creation of an author who is already very much in control of her craft, who has been producing sophisticated fiction. A possible explanation of Frame's evasion of direct description of the writing process is that Frame wishes to retain the sense of the processes of the imagination as near miraculous; she does not want to break the spell by intruding the mundanity of process. From the point of view of narrative strategy in presenting her providential escape from brain surgery, it is also possible that Frame decided that surprise would be more effective. At the same time, she possibly does not want to burden the reader with the demands and vicissitudes of her creative endeavours. Frame is very much aware of all the material circumstances against the act of writing that constantly surrounds her. In her essay 'Beginnings', Frame updates Virginia Woolf's description of such circumstances, which affect all writers: "Dogs will bark; people will interrupt; money must be made; health will break down." (The reference of the first has extended: people will play radios, televisions; traffic will change gear, jets will fly overhead).<sup>544</sup>

<sup>543</sup> Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. by Geoff Wall (London: Routledge, 1978), p.84.

<sup>544</sup> Frame, 'Beginnings', p.47.

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Penguin, 2004), p.60.

Yet, in her autobiography, Frame minimizes the descriptions of those mundane circumstances and other material, concrete difficulties of her craft as a writer. Frame's legitimate aim, seems to be to construct a readable and amusing narrative, showing the part of her story she is interested and willing to share with her readers, keeping in mind that, after all, as Mercer affirms, 'all autobiographies are fictions, constructs, partial truths'.<sup>545</sup>

A second explanation of Frame's silence on the topic of her writing activity might be found in her profound need to counteract the myth of the author existing out of this world, which had been growing around her – partially fuelled by her reluctance to give interviews or attend social events, and her preference for a reclusive way of life. And so she avoids the references to the actual processes of her writing lest the energy-consuming and time-consuming effect of her craft appear other-worldly, or even mysterious, when it is in fact surrounded by everyday needs, acts, and rituals common to all, regardless of their vocations or occupations. In an interview with Elizabeth Alley, Frame affirms: 'It's the writing that's important. Not the talking about it'.<sup>546</sup> In that same interview, Frame continues to say: 'In *To the Is-Land* I wrote the story of my life. My story, and this is me which comes out. There is pain, things happen, but whatever comes out is ordinary me without fiction or characters'.<sup>547</sup> Yet, an extremely complex author, Frame could be described as anything but 'ordinary'. Ken Bragan believes that Frame survived adversity, madness, and grief because she was able to go through a process of restoration and healing thanks to her ability to preserve intact 'the inner space that she so carefully cultivated during her solitary years of adolescent

<sup>545</sup> Mercer, 'A Simple Everyday Glass', p.42.

<sup>546</sup> Elizabeth Alley, "'An Honest Record": An Interview with Janet Frame', *Landfall*, 45.2 (June 1991), 154-59 (p.154).

<sup>547</sup> Elizabeth Alley, 'An Honest Record', p.157.

and student'.<sup>548</sup> Bragan neatly summarises Frame's self-creation: 'hovering on the interface between fact and fiction, between the world of reality and the world of the imagination', Frame is able to 'remain detached yet also, at the same time, to see right into the nature of things'; Frame is 'not simply an author of fiction but also the fiction of an author'.<sup>549</sup> In her autobiography, then, Frame *creates* a new 'I', quite different from her former image as a madwoman/genius. Frame confronts the construct of madwoman/genius and replaces it with its opposite, a smiling, unthreatening, humble woman. Mercer analyses how in her autobiography Frame uses this particularly potent strategy in order to counter the myths surrounding her and 'writes herself as an ordinary, clean-living, homely, shy woman; one whose false teeth don't fit too well, but she's got a lovely smile and a good sense of humour'.<sup>550</sup>

#### 4.2.10 Tensions between Sociability and Reclusiveness

Frame's portrayal of her 'ordinary' self is not as straightforward a representation as it at first appears. Frame finds herself in an ambivalent position: as an artist, she needs 'humanity', while, at the same time, she must find a place outside society in order to transcend 'this world', and to be able to express her sense of a deeper reality. She confronts the needs and compromises that are involved in her voluntary immersion in her social self. In *The Envoy from Mirror City* Frame describes how her other self, the 'envoy', creates a special 'place' for her outside society, within the community of universal art: 'My homecoming [to her family home, Willowglen] was as sad and desolate as I knew it would be, yet I relished

<sup>548</sup> Ken Bragan, 'Survival after the Cold Touch of Death: The Resurrection Theme in the Writing of Janet Frame', *JNZL*, 11(1993), 132-43(p.132).

<sup>549</sup> Bragan, 'Survival', p.142.

<sup>550</sup> Mercer, 'A Simple Everyday Glass', p.43.

its importance to the Envoy from Mirror City, that watching self, who was already waiting to guide me to my fictional home' (*Envoy* 428). When she is sorting out her family's papers, after her father's death, she has a sudden realisation that there was no surviving family to include her; she recalls: 'I suddenly felt lonely, an outsider in my family' (*Envoy* 429). Frame realizes that in spite of the limiting expectations of her family and friends, without them there is no-one in whom to mirror herself. In recognizing her need for social involvement, she recognizes her shared humanity, her participation in the very society she criticizes.

In spite of her awareness of her need for social involvement, Frame is also conscious of the imperative for isolation as essential to the actual writing process. She suffers because of the ambivalence she feels towards the options of being sociable or being reclusive, and she explores this conflict in her fiction. For example, the protagonist of *A State of Siege*, the painter Malfred Signal, has left her former life in a quest for the essence of her identity as a New Zealander which she wishes then to represent in her paintings. Malfred thinks that she has to be alone to find the new way of seeing she is looking for. Yet, once all her former attachments to other people have been severed, Malfred finds herself struggling against her situation:

For someone, Malfred told herself, who has retired to contemplate the natural scene, I'm going to extraordinary lengths to make sure I'm in touch with people. Post Office. Police. Doctor. Telephone.  
She did not pursue the matter.<sup>551</sup>

Discussing Malfred as an example of the asocial artist, Ruth Brown affirms that although the rest of humanity has previously been seen as a threat to Malfred as an artist, encircling her territory and trying to invade it, in the end, 'the forces besieging Malfred might be seen as her social being trying to re-affirm itself: she

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<sup>551</sup> Frame, *State of Siege*, p.59.

has found that she needs the support of other bodies'.<sup>552</sup> Malfred's final discovery of her need of others and the discomfort of her existence as an asocial artist is echoed in the words of Mavis Furness Barwell Halleton, the protagonist of *Living in the Maniototo*. Mavis is a writer who is convinced that in order 'to write you have to be at the terrible point of loss, and stay there, wanting to write, wanting in, not out. Certainly, it's a rat and mouse life'.<sup>553</sup> And as she later observes: 'there are so many people going the other way'.<sup>554</sup> Choosing a pathway diverse, or even sometimes opposed to the way most of the people live, has certainly its costs. In her autobiographical essay 'Beginnings', Frame refers to the personal costs of having 'freedom to write':

Freedom to write is a very narrow freedom among the many personal imprisonments suffered by those who want to write, yet it is the master key, and is a writer has determination enough to turn the key (heedless of the desires and warnings of those who don't understand or who fear (rightly) the consequences of this outrageous daylight robbery of the imagination) they may be able to put his dreamed works into words.<sup>555</sup>

Frame believes that achieving freedom to write is crucial, even if it means solitude and detachment from others. She explains how and why she decides to choose isolation as essential to the actual writing process. She constantly experiences a struggle between living and writing, and consequently interrogates herself about what kind of experience she has had, and how it contributes to her living and creating self. Returning from a stay in Ibiza and Andorra she asks herself what she has gained from it:

What work had I to show, I wondered, for my time in Ibiza and Andorra? I quote Albert Camus for I cannot express it so well myself, '*Living* is slightly the opposite of *expressing*. If I am to believe the great Tuscan Masters, it means bearing triple witness, in silence, flames and immobility' (*Envoy* 363; emphasis added).

<sup>552</sup> Ruth Brown, 'A State of Siege: The Sociable Frame', *JNZL*, 11(1993), 49-58(p.55).

<sup>553</sup> Janet Frame, *Living in the Maniototo* (London: The Women Press in association with Hutchinson Group, 1981), p.72.

<sup>554</sup> Frame, *Living in the Maniototo*, p.73.

<sup>555</sup> Frame, 'Beginnings', p.47.

The human being in Frame, the part of her which does the 'living', needs the contact with 'others', but the artist, the part of her which 'expresses', needs isolation because it gives her the opportunity to rearrange her memories creatively without uncalled-for interruptions:

I could journey like a seasoned traveller to the Mirror City, observing (not always consciously), listening, remembering and forgetting. The only graveyard in Mirror City is the graveyard of memories that are resurrected, reclothed with reflection and change, their essence untouched (*Envoy* 416).

For Frame, finding a place in that world, means that everyday demands and superficial expectations will not interfere with her task of expressing. The intrusion of the act of living into Frame's world of art has to be controlled so that it does not become a threat to her creative freedom and memory. In other words, routine living may kill Frame's ability to express. Yet, not living would imply the disappearance of the expressing part of her self as well as the social. Because she is a writer, Frame must not be completely detached from 'living': the artist must keep herself 'in touch with natural processes of life' and death, so that she will be able to express her perception of a 'deeper sense of reality', but her 'intuitive sense of life' constantly risks being effaced by the closeness of demanding relatives and overcome by routine and triviality.<sup>556</sup> And this need to keep the writer apart is perhaps the last explanation for the absence of detail about the process of composition: to provide such detail would be to let the reader into that private, inviolate space.

#### 4.2.11 New Zealand as Literary Homeland

Undoubtedly, Frame's career as writer was significantly affected by her nationality. In this section I will not discuss New Zealand as the geographical

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<sup>556</sup> Bragan, 'Survival', p.138-40.

place where Frame grew up and lived most of her life, which has been examined in chapter 4.1, but I will now consider the significance of New Zealand as the literary environment in which she wrote and published most of her books and the impact of New Zealand literary tradition – or rather the scarcity of it – in her work.

Throughout her autobiography, one aspect of ‘reality’ Frame has to contend with is New Zealand’s self-conception as a materially prosperous but culturally impoverished nation. During the 1950s, the years when Frame was starting her literary career, the idea of New Zealand as a country dominated by unimaginative materialism, joyless conformity, and spiritual deadness prevailed among most intellectuals, and especially among writers. At school, Frame’s reading had been mainly of works by British authors. Her English studies never referred to a New Zealand writer or even to New Zealand; it was as if her home country did not exist (*Is-Land* 128). New Zealand was an unnoticed, territory in Western literature. Although she was an avid reader, it was difficult for the young Frame to find literary allusions she could identify with: ‘There was such a creation as New Zealand literature; I [...] was scarcely aware of it. Few people spoke of it, as if it were a shameful disease’ (*Angel* 192). Frame ‘read of other places, other worlds with a mantle of invisibility cast upon [her] own world’ (*Envoy* 312). Her birth country, the place where she lived, the land she called home, did not appear in books, so it could not be considered a literary place. The tastes, smells, sights, and sounds of her land seemed not worth representing in the greatest literary works. Frame began to think that in order to be a poet she had to spend her imaginative life ‘among the nightingales instead of among the wax-eyes and the fantails’ (*Is-Land* 101). Where the young Frame longed for her place, for her own ‘surroundings’, ‘all [she] could do was populate them with characters and



dreams from the poetic world of another hemisphere' (*Angel* 192). At the same time, however, she was conscious that she wanted her literary creation to be in touch with the landscape she inhabited, she wanted a world of imagination that descended 'like shining light' upon the place she occupied:

I wanted the light to shine upon the pigeons of Glen Street, the plum trees in our garden, the two japonica bushes (one red, one yellow), our pine plantations and gully, our summer house, our lives, and our home, the world of Oamaru, the kingdom by the sea (*Is-Land* 101).

The imposition of the British literary tradition and the lack of respect for New Zealand writing – if considered at all, it was only as a tributary of the English mainstream – must have had a strong impact on the self-esteem and self-assurance of the would-be writer. Like many other post-colonial writers, Frame faces peculiar problems in constructing her literary identity. Gillian Whitlock, in *The Intimate Empire: Reading Women's Autobiography*, affirms that 'colonialism impacts at the point where the very sense of the possibilities of self-definition are constituted,' and autobiographical writing, Whitlock continues, 'bears the traces of its origins in specific historical relations of power, rule and domination'.<sup>557</sup> In her autobiography Frame explains how on two occasions she sent poems for publication, identifying herself as a woman just arrived from the Pacific Islands or from the West Indies. The publishers rejected them, claiming that they did not meet the standard of English required. Frame suggests that the reason why she assumed the identities of different colonial subjects is because she was not ready to disclose her own New Zealand coloniality; she feels 'inadequate in [her] New Zealand-ness':

They [the poems] were also a reflection then of a New Zealander's search for identity beyond her own country where being thought 'more English than the English' was felt more insulting than praiseworthy. In a sense my literary lie was an escape from a national lie than left a colonial New Zealander overseas without any real identity (*Envoy* 308).

<sup>557</sup> Gillian Whitlock, *The Intimate Empire: Reading Women's Autobiography* (London: Cassell, 2000), p.5.

When the publisher's excuse about the insufficiency of the language makes it clear that the real reason for rejection is centrist prejudice against a colonial/marginal position, the rejection is less painful for Frame because it is not openly directed against her own identity, but against a quite similar, but actually different one. But even once she is a published author, Frame is still painfully conscious of British literary hegemony. When she attends a dinner party in London the guests, all unpublished authors and unexhibited artists, are stunned when she remarks that she has published a book. Yet, Frame thinks it necessary to explain that her books have been published 'only in New Zealand': 'anxious to represent myself honestly in case there should be a misapprehension, I repeat that my book had been published "only in New Zealand", while the novel would be available "only in New Zealand"' (*Envoy* 317). Frame is still over-conscious of the predominant feeling in New Zealand at the time, that 'it was publication in England that counted, in England that reputations were made'.<sup>558</sup> Many years later, when she had become a writer of international reputation, she still has to contend with the biased appreciation of New Zealand artists in their own country. When after seven years of absence she decides to return to her birth-country, she finds that

the publication overseas and in New Zealand of several books had built a reputation known as an *overseas reputation* and therefore valued apparently more than a reputation *within New Zealand* — the reputation of excellent writers living in New Zealand was usually qualified by the phrase *known within New Zealand only* (*Envoy* 422).

She has to face the questioning of perplexed compatriots who do not understand her desire to come back home: 'Had I not lived and worked *overseas*? I had not my books been noticed *overseas*? Why, I was asked, as if there were no possible reason, should I want to return to New Zealand?' (*Envoy* 422).

<sup>558</sup> Charles Brasch, *Indirections: A Memoir 1909-1947* (Wellington: Oxford University Press, 1980), p.258.

It is not long, however, before Frame discovers the richness and potential of New Zealand literature. Frame describes 1945 as a crucial year in her life in part because of the publication of *Beyond the Palisade*, poems by a young university student, James K. Baxter, *A Book of New Zealand Verse*, edited by Allen Curnow, and a collection of stories edited by Frank Sargeson, *Speaking for Ourselves*.<sup>559</sup> From descriptions of, and references to New Zealand names and places in these books, Frame learns about her

land having its share of time and not having to borrow from a northern Shakespearian wallet. I could read, too, about the past, and absences, and objects which only we could experience, and substances haunting in their unique influence on our lives (*Angel* 192).

Frame feels dazzled by her encounter with a literature where she feels she has a place: 'The stories, too, overwhelmed me by the fact of their belonging. It was almost a feeling of having been an orphan who discovers that her parents are alive and living in the most desirable home – pages of prose and poetry' (*Angel* 193). While Frame shares the New Zealand problem of embracing or rejecting the English literary tradition, she understands the significance of tradition as a source of the self. She acknowledges that New Zealand writers need to connect with the past so as better to understand their creative individuality. She values the past and its influence on the construction of her present and future. For Frame, 'once upon a time' is a phrase that constitutes a 'key to the city', 'an entrance through the past to the present and the future with stones pinched like flowers from the wayside as the traveller moves to and from the City' (*Envoy* 357). The past is the foundation upon which present and future are built, according to Frame, 'the future accumulates like weight upon the past' (*Angel* 149). She values the past and its significance and influence in the construction of her present and future. Yet,

<sup>559</sup> James K. Baxter, *Beyond the Palisade: Poems* (Christchurch, N.Z.: Caxton Press, 1944). Allen Curnow, ed., *A Book of New Zealand Verse, 1923-45* (Christchurch, N.Z.: Caxton Press, 1945). Frank Sargeson, ed., *Speaking for Ourselves* (Christchurch, N.Z.: Caxton Press, 1945).

Frame also fears the oppression of tradition – especially if it has been imported from distant, foreign territories and imposed on local New Zealand traditions – as a threat to autonomy, a dangerous distraction, which makes it more difficult to access accurate knowledge of the self. The author believes that ‘in every cross-cultural encounter there is a dominance, a submission, a merging, or a resistance. The “older” culture tends to win, if it has more literacy and the weapons of literacy’.<sup>560</sup> Frame experiences the change of her New Zealand words, her own language, in the British and American publications of her works, a change which, according to the author, often destroyed both the meaning and the rhythm of her sentences.<sup>561</sup> Even New Zealand publishers try to replace Maori words with the nearest English version, as for example from *tangi* to *funeral*. Frame argues that ‘this absorption, even within one’s own country, of another culture means a form of imprisonment for able-bodied words which languish and could die exiled from literature, never having the opportunity to work within it and enrich it’.<sup>562</sup> In ‘Departures and Returns’, Frame alludes to that cultural deprivation New Zealand has suffered because of its unbalanced relationship with Great Britain. She mentions a conversation with a writer friend to illustrate her feelings of loss for her unappreciated national cultural groundings:

‘Why don’t you stay at home like Jane Austen?’ he asks, adding the old commonplace, ‘you can travel to foreign lands without moving from your own backyard.’ [...] He is right, of course. But I have no backyard. I have lost it in a cross-cultural encounter, both of space and time.<sup>563</sup>

Frame advocates transforming what first appears a disadvantage into an advantage for the cultural development of her nation. She portrays New Zealanders as potential developers of their own identity, articulators of their own voice. She

<sup>560</sup> Janet Frame, ‘Departures and Returns’, in *Writers in East-West Encounter: New Cultural Bearings*, ed. by Guy Amirthanayagam (London: McMillan, 1982), 85-95(p.91).

<sup>561</sup> Frame, ‘Departures and Returns’, p.92

<sup>562</sup> Frame, ‘Departures and Returns’, p.92.

<sup>563</sup> Frame, ‘Departures and Returns’, p.91.

rediscovers New Zealand as a new territory for map makers, a place where artists encounter the quality, freshness, and power of a unique culture, shaped by its people – Maori and Pakeha – and by its nature: 'New Zealand where the place names and the landscape, the trees, the sea and the sky still echoed with their first voice while the earliest works of art uttered their response, in a primary dialogue with Gods' (*Envoy* 308). Frame's New Zealand is 'a new country with not so many layers of mapmakers', still in an age of exploration and discovery, which offers her nearly unlimited freedom to design the maps of imagination that will guide and inspire later artists:

Living in New Zealand, would be for me, like living in an age of mythmakers with a freedom of imagination among all the artists because it is possible to begin at the beginning and to know the unformed places and to help to form them, to be a mapmaker for those who will follow nourished by this generation's layers of the death (*Envoy* 415).

In that delicate balance between literary influences and originality, between the tendency to follow English tradition on the one hand, and the need to innovate on the other, Frame emerges as a genuine, resourceful, fearless creator, who opens a great number of doors, generating new opportunities for herself and for many New Zealand writers of her own and later times. Frame not only demonstrates that the conception of New Zealand as a nation lacking a spiritual and cultural heritage is a deceitful, false way of seeing her country – and she did so in an age when that conception was the accepted, mainstream point of view – but she also situates New Zealand in a new advantageous position for artistic creation. She dismisses the fraudulent notion of another 'real centre' located elsewhere, and situates New Zealand at the 'centre of meaning' for literature, and art in general.

Life itself represents an integral aesthetic experience for Frame. As a poet, she possesses the special power of 'imagination', the secret key to reach 'Mirror City', crucial medium in the process of finding a form of communication capable

of rendering the wholeness of human experience. She has been endowed with the 'magic of words' and the 'power of silences', which are simultaneously and purposefully created by her skilful performance of her craft as a writer:

The writer (if there is such person as 'the writer') may find herself spending a lifetime looking into the mists of a distant childhood, or becoming a travel writer who describes the scene, then leaves it, pocketing the uprooted vegetation, erasing the sea and the sky without hearing the cries of a world that has been torn itself into the fictional world, from people whose very skin is left hanging in the centuries-old trees; the unmistakable cry of a homeland truthfully described and transformed (*Envoy* 416).

'That world' represents for Frame an absolute world where words are able to metamorphose and renew both time and space; both 'the mists of a distant childhood' and the landscape and territory recognized by the writer in her life journey are transformed in the fictional mode. Her homeland and the cultural heritage of the people who have inhabited it for centuries is also 'described and transformed' by 'imagination'. Vital experience, performed madness, and her capacity for poetical transfiguration of memories and words allow Frame to achieve her subject-position as writer, her private place of survival, resistance, expression, and freedom.

### 4.3 In Search of Loneliness

‘This is my last interview.  
It is very difficult to have people calling. I don’t have people calling.  
To write you must be with yourself and your thoughts.’

Janet Frame  
Interview with Susan Chenery  
*The Australian Magazine*, 7 August 1994

During the winter of 1976 Janet Frame’s grand-niece, Josie, was diagnosed as ‘probably autistic’.<sup>564</sup> In a letter to her friend Bill Brown, Frame told him that the doctors had asked Josie’s mother, Frame’s niece Pamela, if there were any ‘eccentric solitary people in the family’; Frame’s brief comment to Bill was: ‘enough said’.<sup>565</sup> With her characteristic sense of humour, Frame is signalling her awareness of the image the wider public may have of her. Yet, Frame’s attitude towards socializing and close personal relationships was far from having the detachment or other pathological characteristics associated with autism: it was an exercise in balancing the claims of the self and of the surrounding world, in which Frame always attended to what was happening around her, absorbing experiences, and examining human interactions. This chapter explores Frame’s most significant interpersonal relationships to attain a better understanding of the writer’s singular personality. Frame always resisted the attempts of outsiders to document her life, but in her autobiographical narrative, she modified her customary strategy of withdrawal so as to become the focus of her own writing, creating a considered version of herself and of her interactions with others. I will show how in her autobiography Frame shares her most intimate personal relationships, but does so with a mixture of cautious evasion and artful creation.

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<sup>564</sup> King, *Wrestling*, p.409.

<sup>565</sup> King, *Wrestling*, p.409.

### 4.3.1 Family Relationships

Family is a central topic in Frame's autobiography and it is the nucleus out of which the young Frame's interpersonal skills emerge. In one sense, *To the Is-land* represents the book of the family, narrated by the voice of the daughter. In the first volume of Frame's autobiography, however, the practice of collective history alternates with a personal account of familial relationships. Frame sometimes uses a communal voice to record the experience of social discrimination, experienced by the narrator and her family. Thus, in *To the Is-Land* the narrator's discourse alternates the individual 'I' with the collective 'we':

I thought of the world as [...] a place where we lived alone with the weather; with our mother and father working all day and singing and playing the accordion and the bagpipes in the evening while we children played from waking till sleeping (*Is-Land* 18; emphasis added).

At the beginning of Frame's autobiography the family remains strongly united against hardships such as cold weather and poverty, living in relative isolation in the small towns where their father was successively employed:

In spite of the misery of Inside, the times around the kitchen stove were cosy, and bathing in the round, tin bath in front of the stove – rub a dub dub three men in a tub – was always pleasant. And Mother, as was to become her habit, helped to lighten our (and no doubt her) misery by pointing out the beauty of the snow and telling us stories of the snow and the rain and Jack Frost, who was 'after our finger and toes' (*Is-Land* 17).

Yet, 'we' does not always represent the whole family. As Frame grows up, the narrator uses diverse personal pronouns to convey the splitting of her family into small sometimes divergent groups: parents and children, brother and sisters, older girls and younger girls. For example, when speaking from the point of view of the sisters, the previously inclusive 'we', meaning all the siblings, is transformed into the voice of the girls only: 'In our endless games we were reluctant to let Bruddie play with us' (*Is-Land* 62). With the diagnosis of Bruddie's illness as epilepsy Frame explains how their 'lives changed suddenly' (*Is-Land* 39). Not knowing how to react or what to do, and plagued by a pervasive feeling of guilt – the first



fit had appeared after Frame had hit her brother's head with a lump of coal — Frame perceives her home, formerly a refuge from the outside world, as sad and dangerous, and she feels that she is being deprived of the secure place in which she had previously felt she belonged:

There had usually been somewhere within the family to find a 'place' however cramped; now there seemed to be no place; a cloud of unreality and disbelief filled our home, and some of the resulting penetrating rain had the composition of real tears (*Is-Land* 39).

The family members develop diverse attitudes towards Bruddie: Frame's father believes that Bruddie 'could stop his fits if he wanted to', her mother nurses him and overprotects him, and the girls fear him (*Is-Land* 55). Frame is too perceptive to miss the changes going on in the home:

I felt able to observe more clearly the present changes in our home since Myrtle's death, the new fearfulness shown by my father, not in keeping with his usual forcefulness and dominance of the household. [...] Instead, he began to concentrate his anger and disappointment upon our brother (*Is-Land* 91-92).

Analysing Frame's autobiography as a novel of formation, Valérie Baisnée believes that sickness and death — Myrtle's death — result in lasting divisions in the family. According to Baisnée, the Frame household goes through a critical situation and their members do not know how to resolve it:

In a household where parental authority is collapsing, each member of the family seems to be retreating into his or her own world. The mother and the daughters have poetry while the father projects his feelings of anger on to Bruddie.<sup>566</sup>

As the years pass, the relationships between the various members of the family only deteriorate and the parents become less significant in the lives of the children until, just before Frame leaves home: 'Our parents had receded from our lives. We discussed school affairs with them, asked them for money for this and that, and either were given it or not. We were impatient with their ignorance of school subjects' (*Is-Land* 129).

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<sup>566</sup> Baisnée, *Gendered Resistance*, p.109.

### 4.3.2 Mother-Daughter Relationship

In this context of collective identification of the sisters, it is difficult to isolate the mother-daughter relationship between Frame and her mother. Yet, from the beginning of the narration there is an element of tension between Lottie Frame and her daughter. At first Frame's father seems less important to her than her mother. She gives the details of her father's work on the railways in a rather matter of fact manner; analysis of his psychology is generally absent. Her portrayal of her mother on the other hand, is almost lyrical: Frame presents her as a poet: 'Mother, fond of poetry and reading, writing and reciting it, communicated to us that same feeling about the world of the written and spoken word' (*Is-Land* 9). Unlike her father, her mother comes from a literate family, closer to middle-class culture, used to the appreciation of the arts, and although the Frames belong to the working class because of the father's occupation, her mother does not see any contradiction between being poor and loving poetry, and she passes her literary vision to her daughters:

My mother had come from a home where there were many books to one where there were few; in a way, her marriage was a migration; she retained passages of prose and poetry and recited them as if they were vivid memories of a homeland she would never see again.<sup>567</sup>

According to Baisnée the 'unresolved aspects' of the mother's personality, derive 'from the dialectic of her materiality and her spirituality'; Lottie has to endure a painful split of her own self: her poetic achievements have not been acknowledged, and she has devoted her life entirely to her family, being forced to escape into another world, trying to fulfil her existence in more spiritual realms.<sup>568</sup> Lottie has on the face of it sacrificed herself for her family, living her daily life immersed in domesticity. But Frame cannot finally value her mother's way of life

<sup>567</sup> Frame, 'Beginnings', p.43

<sup>568</sup> Baisnée, *Gendered Resistance*, p. 109.

— because the maternal role is all that is left of Lottie's identity for the young Frame to relate to — and it is not a role that she feels her mother filled very satisfactorily as far as she was concerned. Luce Irigaray claims that it is difficult for a mother to be valued as individual by her daughter because motherhood is identified with a function rather than with a person. Irigaray asks:

So what is a mother? Someone who makes the stereotypical gesture she is told to make, who has no personal language and who has no identity. But how, as daughters, can we have a personal relationship with or construct a personal identity in relation to someone who is no more than a function?<sup>569</sup>

But Lottie neither performed the function of mother satisfactorily nor revealed sufficiently consistently another self to whom her daughter could relate. In *To the Is-Land*, because motherhood comes first for Lottie, she has had to conceal her 'real' life elsewhere, in poetry, in religion and/or in the memory of her past. From the daughter's point of view, the mother exists 'like an unreal person with her real self washed away' (*Is-Land* 8). So, the mother's individual identity remains painfully inaccessible to her daughter: 'Perhaps we were jealous of the space that another world and another time occupied in our mother's life' (*Is-Land* 8). There are, however, more concrete and tangible reasons to be resentful or even angry, with a mother who devotes all her time to her epileptic son, turning away from her daughters who obviously need her:

Mother, resisting fiercely the advice of the doctor to put Bruddie in an institution, nursed him while we girls tried to survive on our own with the occasional help of Dad, who now combed the tangles out of my frizzy hair each morning and supervised our cleaning of our bedroom (*Is-Land* 39).

As part of this resentment, Frame contrasts the attitude of her mother to the possibility of institutionalizing her son, with the ease with which she signs the papers for her daughter to go to Seacliff:

<sup>569</sup> Luce Irigaray, *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. by Margaret Whitford (Cambridge, M.A.: Basil Blackwell, 1991), p.50.

I thought of the horror in my Mother's voice when, years ago, the doctors had suggested that Bruddie should go there [Seacliff], and Mother had replied, 'never. Never. No child of mine will ever go to that place.' But I was a child of hers, wasn't I? Wasn't I? And she had signed papers to send me there. I felt uneasy, trying to divide out portions of family love to discover how much was mine (*Angel* 197).

Later, Frame feels rejected again when her mother talks to her married daughter, June, about childbirth and married life, complicit with her in a way that seems to exclude Janet:

I, as the acknowledged misfit in the family, felt the humiliation of seeing my mother talking intimately with my sister about marriage and bed and birth, where she had never dared to discuss these with me [...] I would feel like a child excluded from her mother's attention (*Angel* 217).

At the end of her mother's life, however, Frame laments the absence of closeness to her mother and the now perpetual impossibility of accessing her mother's inner life: 'The strong feeling haunted me that Mother never lived in her real "place", that her real world had been her life within' (*Angel* 226). When young and healthy, Lottie had 'reserved' her strength and attention 'for matters of the heart and spirit, for poetry', rather than using it to get closer to her daughter(s) and now Frame finds it difficult to bear her mother's helplessness: "'Janet, can you thread the needle for me?'" and with an inside fury at this sign of her helplessness, I took the needle, not gently, and threaded it with the lightning accuracy of my twenty-ninth year' (*Angel* 226). The daughter who has always felt rejected by a mother who never was there for her, never supported her, and never took adequate care of her, now feels the unfairness of having to help the mother who in practical terms abandoned her. Moreover, in the gesture of asking her daughter to thread a needle, the mother, who has chosen and in some ways represents the traditional feminine role, is asking the daughter to come back to that world from which the daughter has struggled so desperately to escape:

The attentive habits of my parents saddened, pleased, and infuriated me, leaving me with a feeling of helplessness — what could I do for them? I could see the pattern of their past lives slowly emerging, like a script written with invisible ink and now be? made visible to me, warmed by the fire kindled simply by my growing up. [...] All my awakening

longing was directed towards being uprooted, quickly, without leaving behind a cluster of nerve endings, broken threads in danger of being renewed (*Angel* 186).

At a deeper level, however, it is possible to hypothesize that both women share a profound rejection of traditional feminine values. The mother had looked for refuge from the duty of fulfilling the role of the perfect housekeeper, in books and poetry – Lottie had always resented the comment of her sisters in law about her being ‘a bad household manager’, but she would not modify the way she took care of her home (*Angel* 257). She used her dreamlike existence in poetry to escape from the position she seemed submissively to accept or even enjoy. At the same time, her dedication to her son, to the detriment of her four daughters, suggests disregard for the girls – neglect that might well be interpreted by them as arising directly from their being girls. At the same time Frame as daughter has always wanted to live a life as different from that of her mother as possible, identifying the maternal role, as she does, with suffocation and imprisonment:

Within her prison of toil, self-imposed (for we felt ourselves to be grown up and were willing to help, partly to erase our now uncomfortable memories of Mother's role as an everlasting servant), Mother looked out at her dream-place [a place to sit under the shadow of the pines ‘down on the flat’ of the valley], near in reality, but seemingly removed from her in her prison (*Angel* 180).

Like the mother, the daughter also aspires to live her poetic life, but openly and in plenitude. Such similitudes – rejection of the traditional feminine role and poetic inclinations – could have become a point of identification between Janet and her mother, they could have become the basis for the development of a renewed way of relating, which might have brought them closer. Sadly, before her mother's death, Frame realizes that such closeness will be never possible: ‘I knew, also that I would never be close to her, for my past and my future life were barriers against the intimacy that grows between mother and daughter’ (*Angel* 226). Yet, in *To the Is-Land*, ‘the mother represents ultimately the source of the daughter's poetic

inspiration'.<sup>570</sup> Irigaray argues that it is necessary for a daughter to annihilate the mother in order to become closer to the father and thus, enter the symbolic order.<sup>571</sup> This argument implies the idea of a certain rivalry between the mother and the daughter, which appears 'transparent in meaning' in Frame's autobiography:

If I baked bread or small cakes or cooked one of my 'specialties', mother immediately baked 'her' bread, 'her' cakes, and 'her' specialty, attempting a kitchen counterpoint so transparent in meaning that I found it endearing and depressing, and withdrew my own floury melody (*Angel* 257).

Tension and rivalry result in the mother being challenged and silenced, so that the daughter may pursue and fulfil her literary vocation:

Aware now that Mother had turned increasingly to poetry for shelter, as I was doing, I with an unfeelingness based on misery of feeling, challenged the worth of some of her beloved poets, aware that my criticism left her flushed and unhappy while I felt savage joy at her distress. I had begun to hate her habit of waiting hand and foot, martyrlike, upon her family. [...] I now felt the guilt of it, and hated her for being the instrument of that guilt. Her invisible life spent on the distant plane of religion and poetry, her complete peacefulness, angered me just as I knew it angered my father, who sometimes tried to taunt her to show anger or accepted selfishness or any unsaintly feeling that might bring disapproval from the Christ she tried so hard to please (*Is-Land* 129).

Frame's bitter commentary on 'the Christ' her mother 'tried so hard to please' shows her resentment of her mother's escape into religion. Frame's relationship with her mother is, above all, a relationship centred on conflict, but partly because they belong to different generations, Frame is able to express the anger her mother internalises. The young Frame could never identify herself with her mother and the values her mother stood for, so the adult Frame has problems repudiating the 'other-worldly' mother she feels she will never really get to know. And so their relationship is situated midway between rejection of the mother's social and spiritual values and use of the mother's poetic resources and literary background. It fluctuates between love and gratitude for the maternal figure, who introduced

<sup>570</sup> Baisnée, *Gendered Resistance*, p. 111.

<sup>571</sup> Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. by Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (London: The Athlone Press, 1993), pp. 101-102. Trans. of *Ethique de la Différence Sexuelle* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1984).

her into the world of poetry, and who – Frame is certain of it – sacrificed so much, and the determination to not repeating her self-destructive pattern.

### 4.3.3 Interpersonal Interactions and the Configuration of the Self.

This section offers an overview of Frame's psychological traits, in an attempt to explain something of the reserve that characterizes the autobiography.

Frame's inability to trust others and to form deep reciprocal relationships, affected not only her emotional health, but also her worldview. It probably had its origin in her earliest experiences, as her autobiographical story seems to show. Various 'caregivers' she acquired throughout her life, repeatedly failed to keep up permanent, consistent relationships with her, frequently showing a complete lack of awareness of her needs: her mother, absorbed by poetry and her devotion to her epileptic son ignored her daughter; her eldest sister, who had become a role model and a source of comfort and companionship for Frame, was tragically drowned – as years later was her sister Isabel; her father was most of the time an absent figure; her psychologist first, and her psychiatrist later, left her when she had already established fragile, but significant, bonds with them. Instead of being encouraged and supported, she was often tactlessly ridiculed in front of others. On one occasion, for example, she was pitilessly mocked for imitating a sheep – mockery that would later become a routine:

'Show us.'

Suddenly shy, with everyone staring, and sensing the ridicule I refuse; then, in a wave of (unconscious) generosity, unaware that I was creating an occasion that would be used for years to come, I said, 'I'll show Dad.' I went to Dad, and shelving my face with my hand, I imitated the sheep's expression. Throughout my childhood Dad would say, 'Show us how the sheep looked at you,' and while the others giggled, I performed my 'routine' (*Island* 24).

She felt humiliated and helpless, but tolerating this mockery was, at least, a way of obtaining some of the attention she craved for – even if it was only attention of

a negative kind. This craving for attention, stifled by shame, can be observed in Karl Stead's comment on the adult Frame's 'dislike of being the subject of attention and dislike of not being it'.<sup>572</sup> Because of episodes like this, she was never able completely to resolve the normal social shame everybody faces in interpersonal relationships. Early neglect and maltreatment taught the Frame that adults are not trustworthy; through their examples, she 'was learning a measure of deceit' (*Is-Land* 23). She detected 'a certain wariness, a cynicism about the ways of people and of my family, and an ability to deceive, [that] flowered fully' (*Is-Land* 24). Thus, mistrust came to define Frame's perspective.

Frame's early experiences of neglect and abuse contributed to the development of a distorted view of herself, others, and relationships in general, which led to her chronic feelings of being unloved and unlovable, and to her overwhelming feelings of shame, of wanting to hide and not be seen. Frame felt ashamed of her appearance and lack of social skills, but after being declared officially a mental patient – and for many years after she was proved not to be schizophrenic – she had to carry the additional burden of having spent periods of time in mental hospitals and having being diagnosed with a mental illness. Feelings of self-doubt and a tendency to undervalue her own merit coloured her reactions and emotions for the rest of her life, and made it very difficult for her to ask for help when she needed it:

I, sensing the impossibility of being able to explain my plight, I, standing there (mouth closed), a blooming young woman of twenty-two with no obvious disabilities, again turned on my 'schizophrenia' at full flow: it had become my only way of arousing interest in those whose help I believed that I needed. Nevertheless, it was several weeks before I could say that my urgent problem was my decaying teeth (*Angel* 213).

Sometimes, Frame appears rather manipulative or sneaky – as in the episode of her rejection of Baxter at Money's office – but inside, she is filled with anxiety,

<sup>572</sup> C. K. Stead, Letter to Frank Sargeson. Quoted in C. K. Stead, 'Janet Frame, Janet Clutha and Karl Waikato', p.225.



fear, grief, loss, and a vague sense of being bad, defective, and unlovable (*Angel* 237). Not surprisingly, and related to this anxiety, Frame is extremely sensitive to rejection, adapting her behaviour and appearance in order to be accepted. She also finds it difficult to discuss angry or hurt feelings and this makes her secretive. Although she feels anger relatively intensely, she is unlikely actually to confront those who were the cause of her anger. Frame also had trouble tolerating correction or criticism: her response to Sargeson's comments on the story she had just written and shown to him is an example (*Angel* 248-49). Her intense reactions to negative reviews of her books are further evidence. All these characteristics made Frame an extremely difficult person to deal with. Even the idiosyncratic way she sometimes had with food may have derived from psychological difficulties. For example, she used to steal food from the leftovers at her Aunt Isy's kitchen and to hoard cookies and chocolate bars in the chest of drawers in her bedroom (*Angel* 156-57). This behaviour is possibly a consequence of Frame's early lack of a protective figure to care and provide for her. Her long periods in hospital only intensified and worsened these difficulties:

Experiences in hospital when I was once dragged by the hair to sit at the table, although I was greatly afraid of eating in the huge crowded room, watched over by the Matron and her staff, waiting for orders to make any move, and feeling the tension as the knives were collected and the long counting began – these had made me reluctant to eat in company. Usually I ate alone, thus making myself what I least wanted to seem – an oddity (*Angel* 245).

Frame felt somewhat uncomfortable getting close to others. She wanted emotionally close relationships, but she found it difficult to trust others completely, or to depend on them. She had mixed feelings about close relationships. On one hand, she desired to have emotionally close relationships; on the other hand, she tended to feel uncomfortable with emotional closeness:

The realization is brought home to me that even after six or seven years in this country [England] the only people I know closely enough to tell are my two stalwarts [Cawley

and Dawson]. It's one of the times when I wish I'd been more brave [...] and moved towards people instead of always away from them.<sup>573</sup>

Sometimes she worried that she would be hurt if she allowed herself to become too close to others, and her fear could be so paralyzing that she was unable to act:

I have had certain frightening experiences, with my past rising up to meet me, and myself living on two levels of time [... When] I began teaching I could not go to the staffroom for morning tea [...] and I was given to believe that my not attending was a major crime [...] The other day when [Dr Dalziel] popped her kindly head in the door to tell me that they had coffee at eleven each morning, I felt my blood and my innards draining away through my body, through my feet and into the floor. There was and is no compulsion to attend [...] But the compulsion has become my own [and] *I hate to be beaten by fear.*<sup>574</sup>

Because of her extreme sensitivity, she was repeatedly hurt by others who often did not intend any such thing. Her social detachment and isolation was her way of protecting herself from the fear of being hurt again. She did not trust other people, and because of her negative view of herself, she felt that she didn't deserve their friendship. As a consequence, she rarely looked for intimacy, and frequently suppressed or hid her feelings. As a defence Frame had learnt to detach herself from a hurtful world and to search for refuge in the world of writing. Yet, she was highly intelligent and perceptive, and as the years passed, she became more in touch with her inner conflicts, knowing herself better, trying to counteract her self-destructive impulses, and learning to stand up for her opinions and desires. The results were surprisingly positive and encouraging, because becoming closer to people also modified her attitude towards her environment and life in general: 'I have found such warmth in this country [USA...] Or should it be that [here] I find myself capable of loving people?'<sup>575</sup> Frame's appetite for immediate socializing remained limited, however. Her solitary literary spirit preferred a secluded and even an ascetic existence: 'I think a writer needs to lead a solitary

<sup>573</sup> Letter from Janet Frame to Constance Malleon, 23/07/63. Quoted in King, *Wrestling*, p.250.

<sup>574</sup> Letter from Janet Frame to John Money, 6/02/65. Quoted in King, *Wrestling*, p.287 (emphasis added).

<sup>575</sup> Letter from Janet Frame to Bill Brown, undated (December 1971). Quoted in King, *Wrestling*, p.365.

life, [...] You have to be in isolation to do your work. After you've done your work, well that's another matter; the work is the response'.<sup>576</sup>

#### 4.3.4 The Autobiographical Purpose

Withdrawal and self-effacement are in obvious opposition to the exposure of one's own self that the autobiographical project implies. Given that Frame always resisted the attempts of outsiders to document her life, she clearly had significant and powerful reasons for writing an autobiography. Frame was aware that, as a novelist, she would always be subjected, by the critics and readers in general, to the unavoidable 'blurring of the fine distinction between the writer's work and the writer's life', an inevitable phenomenon after she began to publish.<sup>577</sup> So, she wanted her version of the story of her life to be heard: 'I wanted to have my say about my life because I have been rather disconcerted by some details which have been incorrect'.<sup>578</sup> She affirms that in writing her autobiography she intended to clarify the complicated interface between invention and fact:

I wanted to write my story [...] It is possible to correct some things which have been taken as fact and are not fact. My fiction is genuinely fiction. And I do invent things. [...] *To the Is-Land* was the first time I'd written the true story. For instance, *Faces in the Water* was autobiographical in the sense that everything happened, but the central character was invented.<sup>579</sup>

In her three-volume autobiographical narrative, Frame gives herself a definite and authoritative voice: 'with the autobiography it was the desire really to make myself a first person. For many years I was a third person – as children are. "They", "she" ... and as probably the oppressed minority has become, "they"'.<sup>580</sup>

Frame succeeds in creating an autobiographical voice which is difficult to ignore

<sup>576</sup> Alley, 'An Honest Record', p.157.

<sup>577</sup> Alley, 'An Honest Record', p.158.

<sup>578</sup> Alley, 'An Honest Record', p.161.

<sup>579</sup> Alley, 'An Honest Record', p.155.

<sup>580</sup> Alley, 'An Honest Record', p.155.

because it combines self-effacement and self-assertion. As Mercer puts it, she gives 'herself a well-modulated, clear and polite voice; one which is intent on appearing to create as little trouble as possible, while at the same time determines to reclaim Frame's life and stories'.<sup>581</sup> Actually, Frame's autobiographical narratives have been described as 'her least troubling works', partly because of their seemingly straightforward narrative voice.<sup>582</sup> A number of critics, however, observe that the apparent simplicity of the voice may be deceitful. Keith Garebian finds Frame's autobiographical 'watching self [...] too censorial', seeming, therefore, to hide a more complex real self.<sup>583</sup> Peter Simpson goes further in suggesting something like duplicity in the narrative voice: 'the author of this ostensible guileless and straightforward autobiographical narrative is also [an] arch prestidigitator [...] This is but the latest in a long sequence of masks of the self'.<sup>584</sup> Patrick Evans finds the very simplicity of the prose of Frame's autobiography far from artless; Frame writes an intense and vivid prose that perhaps works too hard to convince the reader that the events she describes have really taken place.<sup>585</sup> In general, critics are conscious of enigmas and ambiguities in the attitude of the narrator of Frame's life narrative. Evans identifies a real emotional split:

On the one hand there is a deep awareness of the need to belong, a desire for attachment and authenticity, a yearning that goes right through the book. On the other hand, there is a remorseless self effacement at work, a constant attaching of negatives and absences to the persona constructed in the narrative.<sup>586</sup>

<sup>581</sup> Mercer, 'A Simple Everyday Glass', p.44.

<sup>582</sup> Mercer, 'A Simple Every Glass', p.44.

<sup>583</sup> Keith Garebian, 'In the Aftermath of Empire', *Canadian Forum* (April 1989), 25-33 (p.32).

<sup>584</sup> Peter Simpson, 'Speaking for Herself: Review of *An Angel at My Table*', *Australian Book Review* (August 1984), pp.10-12.

<sup>585</sup> Patrick Evans, 'The Muse as Rough Beast: The Autobiography of Janet Frame', *Untold* 6(Spring 1986), pp. 1-10 (p.7).

<sup>586</sup> Patrick Evans, 'The Case of the Disappearing Author', *JNZL*, 11(1993), pp.11-20 (p.15).

The explanation for these tensions, even contradictions, may be found in that complex interface between invention and fact with which I began. In opposition to her claims to have written her 'true story', Frame confessed in a subsequent interview that she always regards the boundaries between the genres of fiction and autobiography as fluid:

I am always in fictional mode, and autobiography is found fiction. I look at everything from the point of view of fiction, and so it wasn't a change to be writing autobiography except the autobiography was more restrictive because it was based in fact, and I wanted to make *an honest record of my life*. But I was still bound by the choice of words and the shaping of the book, and that is *similar to when one is writing fiction*.<sup>587</sup>

Frame makes a distinction between 'the processes of fiction', and 'putting it all down as it happens' – which seems to exclude the autobiographer's shaping vision and the essential autobiographical reflective interaction between past and present (*Envoy* 405). Yet, at the same time, Frame makes clear that in writing her autobiography she recovers memories and recreates them with reflection and change, but leaves their essence untouched. According to Frame, 'a truthful autobiography tries to record the essence', but it does not exclude 'the renewal and change [which] are part of the material of fiction' (*Envoy* 416). Besides, she establishes different kinds of truth in autobiography: 'the truth is always painful to extract and express whether it be the truth of a fact or fiction' (*Envoy* 174). The transformative effect of the autobiographer's craft explores and puts into words the exclusiveness of the autobiographical time. For example, Frame's

earliest memory [is of] something that could not have happened: a tall woman wearing a clothes peg on her nose peered into the bedroom from a small window high in the wall and, looking down at me in my wooden cot, said sharply, 'You're a nosey-parker' (*Is-Land* 13).

The way Frame depicts the varied interpersonal relationships in her life throughout her autobiography, sometimes in a quite different way from her friends' and acquaintances' perception of them; and her decision sometimes to

<sup>587</sup> Alley, 'An Honest Record', p.155 (emphasis added).

change the names of her friends is another example of how she fictionalizes her life. And so the fictional quality of her autobiography is not after all at odds with Frame's declared intention of setting down 'an honest record'.<sup>588</sup> What Frame chooses not to include in her autobiography is as important as what she chooses to write down – and as important as the reasons why she considers these omissions necessary. The 'absences' and the censorship detected by the critics can be seen as purposeful rather than unintentionally revealing. What the author is committing to paper in her autobiography is her version of her world and her own personal identity within that world. Even in telling her life story, the writer is at work, transfiguring experience by means of artistic creation. For Frame, the 'present' is the time and place of the autobiography, but it leads to the construction of 'myth' in a foreseen, near future: 'I set down the following record with its mixture of facts and truths and memories of truths and its direction always toward the Third Place, where the starting point is myth' (*Is-Land* 7). Simon Petch argues that 'myth' is a charged term in Frame's autobiography, indicating 'a mode of perception or a way of knowing which is creative and transforming'.<sup>589</sup> According to Petch, 'myth-making' is an imaginative process that is central to Frame's writing of herself: 'What she calls 'my place' is a place of memory and imagination, a *locus* of which she is herself the *genius*, a hoard of secret identity through which she transcends her social being'.<sup>590</sup> Thus, beneath the apparent simplicity of a skillfully-crafted, straightforward narrative, the author is actually taking control of her story, which is ultimately nothing but a 'mixture of facts and truths and memories of truths', whose final result is the autobiographical

<sup>588</sup> Alley, 'An Honest Record', p.155.

<sup>589</sup> Simon Petch, 'Janet Frame and the Languages of Autobiography', *Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada*, 5(Spring 1991), 58-71(p. 61).

<sup>590</sup> Petch, 'Janet Frame and the Languages of Autobiography', pp.61-62.

protagonist's personal identity. Frame makes use of the transformative power of her literary creation in order to have 'her say', actively participating in the configuration of her world, and assuming her own process of subject formation. In writing her autobiography, Frame wants to speak to the world, to respond to what has been said about herself -- to establish the distinction between invention and fact -- but at the same time, she wants to speak for her self, 'to anchor identity for her self', interpreting, giving meaning to her life, in order to reassure the stability of her identity.<sup>591</sup> In doing so, 'her life becomes "hers" again, available to us but in her terms, possessed once more in a complex imaginary verbal net of her own devising'.<sup>592</sup>

The words of her psychiatrist and long-time friend, Dr Cawley, summarize exceptionally well Frame's tormented genius in its relations with the outside world, including, of course, her interpersonal relationships:

She was a highly intelligent, sensitive, and artistically creative person with desires and abilities for verbal expression of ideas and associations [...] Her long periods in hospital had been occasioned, and prolonged, by what could be regarded as the negative side of her exquisite sensitiveness. She had become overwhelmed by a word in which harshness and cruelty, indifference and loneliness, appeared to threaten the splendours of the human spirit -- splendours of which her deep awareness was itself searchingly painful.<sup>593</sup>

That same 'exquisite sensitiveness' forced Frame to find a refuge in the world of literature and allowed her to convey through her writing a vivid sense that reality itself is a fiction, and one's grasp on it is 'no more than preposterous pretence and pretension'.<sup>594</sup> Her friend and biographer, Michael King, describes Frame's life during her last years as most alive when, via the internet, she could rediscover the world without the burden of social contact.<sup>595</sup> Frame was, undoubtedly, a very

<sup>591</sup> Ash, 'The Absolute, Distanced Image', p.25.

<sup>592</sup> Evans, 'The Muse as Rough Beast', p.7.

<sup>593</sup> Robert Cawley, 'Janet Frame's Contribution to the Education of a Psychiatrist', in *The Inward Sun: Celebrating the Life and Work of Janet Frame*, ed by Elizabeth Alley (Wellington: Daphne Brassell, 1994), p.8.

<sup>594</sup> King, *Wrestling*, p.518.

<sup>595</sup> King, *Wrestling*, p.519.

complex and withdrawn individual, and any attempt to understand her person and her life will have to remain in the territory of the restricted information she chose to leave behind, including her literary autobiography which simultaneously gives and withholds.



## 5. Conclusion

Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are [...]  
 We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of  
 individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries.  
 Michel Foucault  
*The Subject and Power*

The three autobiographies studied in this thesis are literary autobiographies written by well-known authors: Muir's *Belonging* (1968), Laurence's *Dance on the Earth* (published posthumously in 1989), and Frame's three-volume autobiography *To the Is-Land* (1982), *An Angel at My Table* (1984), and *The Envoy from Mirror City* (1985). One of the significant functions of these autobiographies is to register and explain a literary vocation. All of them interrogate the notion of female authorship, the origins of which are placed in childhood and adolescence. All three authors examine their position of marginality and insecurity within a patriarchal order, but in devising their autobiographies, these writers are neither simply representing, nor reflecting their lives, rather they are creating 'fictions', and in this way, expressing their beliefs and concerns about the relationship between the woman writer's position within a patriarchal order and the writing of an autobiography. The conception of subjectivity that emerges from the autobiographical writings of these women writers is inextricably intertwined with their consciousness of self-exposure. Their autobiographical narratives are a means of conveying a 'statement' about existence in general, and about their sense of their own lives in particular. I have, then, in my analysis of these autobiographies tried to consider both the general and the particular aims, tried to show the nature and the function of the

autobiographical discourse both in the construction of personal identity and of a view of life.

There are important reasons for bringing together and connecting these three writers from such geographically separated parts of the world. The three writers studied here became established writers before the post second world war women's movement professionalised its focus on the work of women writers, and they continued writing afterwards. At the same time, they were interested in discovering idiosyncratic national voices, as well as finding space for their respective countries on the map of world literature; they considered that ethnic and native voices were ready to come to the fore. Thus, to some degree, in their writing, cultural marginality mitigated the harshness and loneliness of their struggle against dominant masculine traditions, and encouraged correspondence between national and female identity formation. Their contribution to the development of their respective countries' characteristic literary voices is unusually powerful for women writers and, especially in the case of Laurence and Frame, they have already been confirmed as major writers. Each of these writers' autobiographies illustrates a personal struggle with the influences of the British Empire and an increasing self-consciousness about nationality – all of them, for example, lived in London towards the beginning of their careers. These three writers lived through approximately the same historical period and were, therefore influenced by the same worldwide catastrophes. They created interesting, although problematic, interactions between their personal lives and their writing, especially their autobiographies, and studying them all together underlines the broad influence of women writers in a time that had much to do with making our present what it is.

In their autobiographies my three writers extensively show their concern with female identity: they explore the meaning and implications of motherhood, consider the importance of women's sexuality, examine the significance of interpersonal relationships – with other women and with men -- and reveal their experiences of exclusion from institutions and from social power. While these autobiographical narratives could be considered as related to the identifiable tradition of the *Künstlerroman*, they diverge from male accounts in dealing directly with female experience and in illustrating the restrictive effects of forms of patriarchal society on the development of female subjectivity.

As well as metaphysical issues of life and death, and their representation in a narrative form, these autobiographies are concerned with political issues, that is, how each protagonist resisted ideological subjection. Their writing gave these women writers a means to deprecate what they considered inappropriate and unacceptable limitations of their potentialities and desires: they effectively used their craft as writers as a weapon for transgression. In each case gender was seen to affect the politics of education; and so the opportunities and expectations that were open to them as girls were restricted by their sex. In their respective autobiographies, all these writers deal with the educational inequalities faced by women of their time with irony and some bitterness. Class was, however, to some extent a determinant of education; education offered, in theory, opportunities for girls to improve their lives, but these opportunities were evidently restricted by factors of class or by financial strictures.

It has emerged from my thesis that when these writers deal with family structures, they almost always represent the traditional family critically. All of them recognize that, among institutions, the family is the most influential site of

ideological authority, even subjection; it is also the most difficult to resist. On the one hand, the nurturing role of the family is clearly emphasized. The intimacy of early childhood creates a myth of paradise, as opposed to the 'fall' represented by adolescence with all its negative and positive changes. On the other hand, family in these three worlds is the main place of struggle against and resistance to a more generalized social subjection that aims at producing docile subjects. I have tried to show that for these women family cannot simply be conceived of as a private sphere protected from wider social power relationships.

All three writers deal with a certain ambivalence in the construction and interpretation of the concept of 'home'. The term 'home' can stand for the modest actual space of the family home, but also for the recognized region of upbringing, whether rural, small-town or urban, and even for the larger idea of country. All these representations of 'home' have the power to confine, overwhelm or destroy: they repeatedly signify entrapment. Yet home, especially in the more extensive senses of region or nation, is also loved. Although they traveled widely and absorbed the sights and sounds of the cities that, variously transformed, became part of their fictional world, all of them returned often in imagination to the towns where they had spent their childhood, transposing them into the most significant spaces of their fiction. For Muir, Montrose became Calderwick, for Laurence, Neepawa became the town of Manawaka, and for Frame, Oamaru was the town of Waimaru. In these writers' autobiographies all the protagonists are drawn by memories of their home towns – the same places that greatly constricted them in their youth – and finally decide to return to them, or to equivalent spaces, in order to end their lives and their literary careers among the landscapes and the people that first inspired them.

The question of nationhood remained at the forefront of the literary concerns of all three writers. Their autobiographies reveal a persistent consciousness of local and national identity, as the protagonists manage to negotiate spaces for their opinions while surrounded by intrusive 'authorized' versions of their respective national identities. Noticeably, all these writers exhibit Scottish influences, and have indeed Scottish ancestry, whether born in Scotland, like Muir — who in spite of being a stern critic of her birth-country, was deeply inspired by Scottish matters and themes — or because of the legacy of emigration by Scots to their countries, as in the cases of Laurence's Canada and Frame's New Zealand. All three writers, however, ascertain the need to counteract popular, inauthentic, mythic, images of Scotland. From the strong sense of self that they ultimately achieved, they succeeded in avoiding the reproduction of the hegemonic standpoint of their societies, and thus, they were able to introduce and consolidate in their lives a challenging alternative to the prevailing versions of nationhood in their respective countries.

None of the life writing studied here fulfils the characteristics traditionally ascribed to autobiographies, especially, as I have indicated in the Introduction, of those written before the late-nineteenth century. They do not present a full, factual account of the author's outer life from childhood to age. Muir's autobiography is describable as a narrative of her life with her husband; Laurence's *Dance on the Earth* doesn't offer a clear chronological account of her life — she repeats, superimposes or treats in different sections the same events as they relate to more than one of her 'mothers'. Frame's autobiography functions as three semi-autonomous volumes which have to be re-read, as it were, to establish the links between them — in her end is her beginning, we might say. These autobiographies

certainly do not conform to conventional rules or assumptions about the narrative representation of the self.

All three writers clearly express their conviction that autobiography is not necessarily transparent and based on fact. I have tried to demonstrate that their life writing is conducted in spite of their sense of the impossibility of fixing and identifying a textual self. Even in apparently straightforward narrations, such as some chapters of Muir's autobiography, it is possible to sense that underneath the humorous and mischievous, or thoughtful and insightful surface of the text, the self of its author seems to be so fundamentally elusive and unsubstantial, that although the materiality of the text gives some clues to its reality, the self is always too complex to be reduced to writing. Yet, since these are professional writers, they strongly feel that the attempt must be made.

Additionally, a characteristic shared by all these autobiographies is a certain degree of authorial justification of the purpose behind the writing of an autobiographical narrative. The representation of the self in these written texts aspires to satisfy the intimate needs and desires of their authors as much as it seeks to impress readers and critics. Significantly, in their narratives, the three authors choose to present their readers with rather carefully delineated selves. In other words, they discern strategies for self-disclosure consisting in a compromise between the self and other, unavoidably involving concealment, artfulness, and imaginative creation. Besides, they are conscious of being written in a specific place and time, and thus, they intend to assert the social, political, and moral dimensions in which those selves and texts are shaped. They are aware of the meaning of the process of writing as a continuous process of self-invention and self-integration, one that can never be fully completed, but they bravely attempt to

liberate this fluid identity – already unstable and under threat of annihilation by society and culture – from the complete nothingness brought about by the certainty of death.

The elusive selves uncovered in these autobiographies are, of course, in search not only of more genuine concepts of personal identity in general, but also of female identity, in particular. The intrinsic characteristics of these authors, their pervasive status as outsiders, their constant involvement with marginality, and their concomitant capacity for identifying themselves with the 'other', make them extraordinary exponents of alternative forms of self-representation – as all of them are looking for a way of subsisting in a difficult socio-politic order that seems to reject the most essential attributes of their identities. Features found by contemporary scholars in women's autobiographical writings from all times, such as fragmentation, discontinuity, duality, and textual self-consciousness are all present in Muir's, Laurence's, and Frame's autobiographical narratives.<sup>596</sup> Furthermore, in their representations of female selfhood these autobiographers are crucially concerned with their connection to significant others, and thus, their definition of personal identity implies alterity. In their relationship with their familial, social, political, and even linguistic environment, the protagonists find reflected images of themselves. What is more, the sense of self in the cases all these authors is connected to significant individuals who marked their development as women. It is unsurprising, then, that in relation to their elemental bonds to significant others these authors perceive their sense of self as plural: they

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<sup>596</sup> Janice Morgan has affirmed that 'the by-now canonical features of contemporary self-representational writing – fragmentation, discontinuity, duality, and above all, a pervasive textual self-consciousness – have, in fact, frequently been present in women's autobiographical writing all along'. Janice Morgan, 'Subject to Subject/Voice to Voice: Twentieth-Century Autobiographical Fiction by Women Writers', in *Redefining Autobiography in Twentieth-Century Woman's Fiction: An Essay Collection*, ed. by Janice Morgan and Colette T. Hall (New York: Garland, 1991), pp. 3–19 (p. 7).

are conscious of their multiple roles which, because of societal restrictions and pressures on the ambitions of women, are repeatedly in contradiction and tension with one another.

Relationships to others, in each of these autobiographies, take on different meanings, according to the nature of these significant others. Close friends, for example, act as objects of desire, sometimes representing what the protagonists, in different stages of their lives, experience as desirable for themselves. At the same time, they act as counter-images to the protagonist's selves. For example, in some cases the writers report how their friends are devoured by the social roles imposed on them, incapable of resisting social expectations or simply unable to visualize a different destiny for themselves. Their social fates, however, are generally used by the protagonists to demonstrate, not their own extraordinary qualities, but rather how hard it is to oppose convention.

I have tried to show how in these autobiographies the most powerful and, and at the same time, the most ambiguous relationship that emerges in the life of a woman – and particularly, in the cases of these women writers – is the mother/daughter relationship. Each writer recognizes the impact of the figure of her mother on her development at different stages. The mothers' nurturing roles, their moral influence, their physical presences, are all celebrated by the narratives. The spirituality of the mother may exert considerable influence on the daughter, affecting her intellectual and psychological growth. The significance of the maternal figure is even more eloquent, if the place of these writers in the literature of their respective countries is considered. Probably crucial is the fact that they were writers who not only helped to form the literary cultures of their respective countries, but also that they were truly female pioneers in the literary field,



establishing themselves as writers before the contemporary women's movement focused attention on women writers – and they continued writing during the time of further development of it. Consequently, since they lacked literary foremothers, they had to create their own reference points and thus, they gave impulse and encouragement to new generations of women writers. The weight of 'motherhood' as a topic in the autobiographies of these three authors can be interpreted as a way of overcoming their isolation and their need for literary foremothers.

I have found that in these autobiographies the protagonists' self development actually does not simply manifest itself as a 'search for an identity', a notion which would imply the existence of a pre-established identity, waiting to be discovered. The authors' self developmental process can be more accurately described as a process of dis-identification from institutions and their ideologies, taking place in a specific historical context. To paraphrase Foucault, the achievement of every protagonist here is 'to refuse what they are not'.<sup>597</sup> Dis-identification itself, however, brings a feeling of dereliction. For all the protagonists their 'place' is situated in the margins of society. Yet, Muir, Laurence, and Frame were not afraid to leave behind models which did not satisfy them, even when those models were safe, influential, and meaningful ones. Although they had to face continuous anxiety and suffering, these authors were brave enough to discover and explore new alternative ways of being, to encounter new forms of subjectivity to inhabit. Thus, in their autobiographical narratives, their 'search for identity' is transformed into a 'search for a space to occupy'. Their life-time quest for an 'existential place' – in the widest sense of the term

<sup>597</sup> Michel Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', in *Power*, ed. by James D. Faubion, *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, vol 3 (London: Penguin, 1994), pp.326-48 (p.336).

place – seems to be located deep, underneath their search for ‘personal identity’. In other words, the question for these authors is not who to be, but, where and how to live. In all these autobiographies, the notion of ‘finding a place’ has become a metaphor for the ‘self’. That is why the concept of ‘belonging’ is so central to all these narratives. Muir makes ‘belonging’ the motif of her narrative, and Laurence made of her ‘dance on the earth’ the symbol of purposeful life in our dwelling place as human beings. Yet, of the three autobiographies studied here, it is in Frame’s narrative that the notion of ‘place’ as a metaphor for identity is most totally developed. The notion of place in Frame’s autobiography includes the natural world (‘my place’), the social world (the protagonist’s social position of marginality) and the imaginative world (‘the land of Ardenue’ and, of course, Frame’s acknowledged destination, ‘Mirror City’). The author’s differentiation between ‘This world’ and ‘That world’ leads us to understand that, for Frame, the imaginative world finally includes all the other places, and that a place for the self is the foundation of an integrated personal identity.

In the course of my research I have tried to create dialogues among these three writers’ autobiographies, and I discovered, as I have indicated in the ‘Methodology and Organization’ section of my Introduction that these three women writers had much more in common than I had initially thought. I have chosen the chapter titles and subheadings to highlight the themes which persistently recurred in the three autobiographies – although the authors were apparently so dissimilar in their origins, their tastes, their priorities, and their goals in life. In analysing these writers’ lives, and finding these recurrent themes, I have established certain paradigms, which it would be useful to take forward to further studies, to discover if they are shared by other contemporary female

authors from similar and divergent backgrounds – as for example, Latin American writers – and if so, how are they expressed in their fictional writings and/or autobiographies. It would also be interesting to examine how these paradigms have changed throughout the twentieth century – things have evidently changed since the time when these writers started to write. It will surely be thought-provoking to analyse and observe how these same paradigms become modified in the future, how these paradigms will evolve and adapt themselves to new challenges during the years to come in the twenty-first century.

## Appendix 1

## Willa Muir's Translations

## 1. Translations by Willa Muir and Edwin Muir.

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Feuchtwanger, Lion, *The Ugly Duchess: A Historical Romance* (London: Martin Secker, 1927). *Die hässliche Herzogin*, 1923.

Feuchtwanger, Lion, *Two Anglo-Saxon Plays: 'The Oil Islands', 'Warren Hastings'* (London: Martin Secker, 1929), the latter written in collaboration with Bertolt Brecht. *Die Petroleuminseln, Kalkutta, 4. mai*, 1927.

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- Lothar, Ernst, *The Mills of God* (London: Martin Secker, 1935). *Die Mühle der Gerechtigkeit*, 1935
- Asch, Sholem, *Motke, the Thief* (London: Gollancz, 1935). *Motke Ganev*, 1917
- Broch, Hermann, *The Unknown Quantity* (New York: Viking Press, 1935). *Unbekannte Grösse*, 1935.
- Asch, Sholem, *The Calf of Paper* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1936). Original Yiddish title not found.
- Kuehnelt-Leddihn, Erik von, *Night Over the East* (New York: Sheed and Ward Inc., 1936). *Über dem Osten Nacht*. 1936
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## Appendix 2

### Interview with Professor Clara Thomas

(15 Lewes Crescent, Toronto, Ontario, Canada)

May 22, 2006

**How did you meet Margaret Laurence and how did your relationship evolve?**

I agreed to that little book, which I did, and it was published in 1968.<sup>598</sup> In 69 I was over in England, and I went to see Margaret, and this was the first time we saw each other. Yes, at her own cottage, and we had lunch, and we discovered we had lots in common, liked each other immediately, and she was coming over [to Canada] in August - this was in May - and I asked her to come here [15 Lewes Crescent] and stay until she moved into the house she had rented from an academic.

So, that happened, and she came here. We met her at the airport, lugging the heaviest suitcase I'd ever seen, and we came back here on a hot night late August, and we sat, out there in the patio, and had drinks, and Margaret had some of the Scotch, which she loved, and that was the first time we [Clara Thomas and her husband, Morley] knew she loved Scotch! And we talked and laughed until the man next door opened the window and yelled over: 'Stop that! It's the middle of the night! Get to bed!'

She stayed here -- she and Morley went over to see the house she had rented. John [her son] was not in Queen's yet, he was still in high school, and he loved to listen to us talk, which we would do for hours. She'd sit over there, I'd sit here, John liked to sit with his feet up on the coffee table. And, so that became a real sight around here, our older son, Steve, was already away, anyway. So, from then on, she was here all that winter; she sat with *The Globe* (the newspaper), she had a map, drew a circle around the part of Ontario where she wanted to get a cottage, at Peterborough on the Ottonabee, and went to see it and bought the cottage, and moved in. When she moved in, we went up there. And all that happened in that winter, 69-70. She was moved in by the spring of 70. She was already working then on *The Diviners* - and very excited about it. Well, then she went back to England to be with the kids. Now, for that year she was over here, a couple called Sandy and Ian Cameron were in charge of the kids.

**Some of Margaret Laurence's letters to the Camerons are in the Archives at York University, I understand.**

Did you look at their letters? Yes? I hope you are going to have more time in the Archives. I don't know really what's in McMaster, but all that is at York was Margaret's present, and it took her a long, long time to get her nerve up to give it away. She only began to think about it because she noticed in her correspondence with her friend Al Purdy that sometimes he sent her a letter that obviously had a carbon double and she asked and he said: Yes! Of course! I did a copy of everything I sent them! [Purdy did a carbon copy of all his correspondence, which he later deposited as archival material; influenced by her friend's idea, Laurence decided to do the same] So on, his papers are all at Queen's, I think. Margaret

<sup>598</sup> The book Professor Thomas mentions here, actually published in 1969, is: Clara Thomas, *Margaret Laurence* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969).

finally came to it. She spent all her life very worried about money, even when she was making her best money from her audience. So, she knew that York would love to have the papers. The first ones went in on the late seventies. I have a record, I'm not sure about the accrual, but there were two or three deposits.

The second mayor thing is of course, the journals that she kept. And she started that when she was sixty, just after her sixtieth birthday party. Because I persuaded her that she should do it, and a friend of both of us, Joan Johnson, of Glenfield, to give her first journal, while we all were at the party over there, with the clowns [Apparently, Clara Thomas persuaded Joan Johnson to give Laurence the first notebook of her diary on the occasion of Laurence's sixtieth birthday party]. Now, go and have a look down these things. **(Clara Thomas indicated some framed pictures over a side table; among them, there was a picture of Margaret Laurence with a bunch of balloons, at her 60<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration)** Morley took that picture. It is in an issue of *Canadian Woman Studies*. Anyway, by the time she started the journal she was at the very, very edge of her final illness. Very shortly after that party she had to go to the hospital and was diagnosed. The whole of her journals are written under that cloud, and they are very down, and they are also very much planned, because she knew what was going to happen. So, I personally wished that they wouldn't have been given to King, because his biography is horrible.<sup>599</sup> He was after making money. And he said things to the press like: 'well, once I knew she took her own life I knew I had a bestseller.' You know, that kind of things! Not a nice man, at all. And a man with a very strong fictional streak. So, that biography is not reliable, at all. The biography by Lyall Powers is a very good one.<sup>600</sup>

**And what do you think about the letters Laurence wrote to her friend Helen Warkentin in 1945?**

Oh, those are wonderful! I've been fighting to get these published as a little book. Have you seen the little book by Paul Socken, the letters of Gabrielle Roy and Margaret Laurence?<sup>601</sup> It was only published a few months ago. Now, I've been pushing a lot in order to have the Warkentin letters published in that way. You know, If you read them you realize that back then [1945], she was thinking of the character who became Royland in *The Diviners*, you remember that, when she writes Helen telling her if she wants to see her latest imaginary friend and she told her about this man who came out to explore and to stay in Manitoba, he is there and he off travels. It's fantastic.

**There seems to be a significant persistence of themes throughout Laurence's life.**

You see, that's an enormous point of interest for biographers. *The Diviners* was published in 1973. Back in 1945, that character, who became Royland, who is the diviner, was already in her mind, and very well formed. That is a piece of autobiographical information that very few people will know, yet. That specific one. Because yet very few people has seen those Warkentin letters. Oh, they are wonderful.

<sup>599</sup> James King, *The Life of Margaret Laurence* (Toronto: Vintage, 1998.)

<sup>600</sup> Lyall Powers, *Alien Heart: The Life and Work of Margaret Laurence* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2003)

<sup>601</sup> Margaret Laurence and Gabrielle Roy, *Intimate Strangers: The Letters of Margaret Laurence & Gabrielle Roy*, ed by Paul Socken (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2004)



**Through all Laurence's recurring topics the joy of living, her sense of humour, are remarkable.**

Oh! We laughed so much, and that was something we found that very, very afternoon, the first afternoon at Elm Cottage, that we both laughed at the same things and we loved to laugh.

Irony is almost impossible to talk about, you know, you really have to show it. And you show it by examples from her work. There is no point in talking and trying to analyse it because it really can't be done in words. And people either have it or they don't. Now, for instance, in general, younger students, they don't understand irony, and they hate sarcasm. It's a universal trait I think, to develop an understanding and appreciation of irony as you get a bit older, but some people have normally more than others, and Margaret and I certainly shared a lot of that.

**Laurence's understanding and appreciation of life is certainly shown in *Dance on the Earth*.**

She was extremely happy when she started to write that and even happier when she found its title. She wrote the book for her daughter and her friends, for all women, young and old women, to some extent. It was a very benign picture, as you know, a very kindly picture, as you know, she was all of these things, but mixed in with them, there were lots of other traits which she doesn't allow to come out. There is much in *Dance on the Earth* she doesn't recognize, she doesn't want to recognize, she didn't want to be bothered in her essence with recognizing that part of her, or she wasn't willing because it hurt her.

She never, ever, ever, gave away how very difficult Jack Laurence had been. Jack Laurence was one of these people of English background who had been in the war over in Burma. There weren't many Canadians in that situation. And he was a part of the British military tradition over there, which included a whole ethos which was, in many ways, foreign to us. Not better, not worse, just foreign, military British. And he impressed Margaret enormously from the time she first knew him, which was right after United College. He was older, he was ten years older, and somehow, Margaret was always looking for a father figure, somebody to hold up and sort of idolize. And he served that purpose. One of the first things that Morley and I noticed about Margaret when she was staying with us was that she was afraid of men. She related far more easily to women, always, than to men. Although she had a lot of men friends. I think in her grandfather. She had been an impressionable and vulnerable young teenager when they had to board with her grandfather and of course he was an old, old man and in certain ways he was used to go his own ways as you appreciate in *A Bird in the House*. Those [the stories collected in *A Bird in the House*] were separate short stories and they [the publishers] wanted to put them together into a book. And they wanted to call it a novel and she would not do that, so it came out as short stories, but it is the most autobiographical of all her work. The peculiar grandfather as she knew him is true.

Margaret used to say, when she was older and understood more, that she saw a lot of her grandfather Simpson in herself. Well, in terms of keeping on, and doing and doing, yes, but a lot of his crustiness wasn't there. She was very social and a sociable person, and a lover of people. Now, he was a stereotypical old Canadian patriarch, he ran the family, he had supported them, he had a wife who

supported him, and that was her job, and he ran the family and expected everyone to accept his own way. Not in a humorous way at all.

Somebody like Jack Laurence would drive me crazy. He had a kind of condescension and his ideas were the best and he didn't accept other people's ideas. He was very difficult. When they came back, after Africa, he never got the respect here that he would over there, I mean it was the whole thing in a colonial situation, and that really was very difficult for him. I'm giving Jack a very bad name, but it's just comparing her attitude to him and my own. It [their relationship] lasted over twenty years. She used to say he was still 'the only man I would ever nurse if something bad happened to him'.

So she was very much affected by Jack and she usually ended up doing what the major man in her life desired, but when it came to her writing, she wouldn't do that, because as she often said, she had to go on with the old woman. In other words, her writing simply took over, she realised. She believed in what Hagar [the protagonist of *The Stone Angel*] generated in many readers; they said: 'I never could stand my grandmother; I don't believe I ever even understood the slightest of her remarks until I read about Hagar'. It was a wonderful opening door for a lot of people.

**That lack of support for her writing career from her husband must have made her feel rather lonely.**

Writing is a very lonely profession. By the time she was a little kid she would shut herself away in that room where she had the little desk her father had made, and which she loved so much, and she was writing. She was always writing, in her mind, as well as whatever else she was doing. You know, in those little letters how she describes herself, alone in the backyard, fantastic, just fantastic!

She lost her father and her mother at a very early age. Particularly her father, she didn't remember her father at all. And her feelings about her mother were a sentimental remembering, which was very strong, but her memories of her father were very limited and his death had a terrific impact. So, she had an underpinning of loneliness herself, in herself.

**Margaret Laurence must have been aware of the parts of her self she was leaving out of her autobiography.**

She was aware. This was to me something very moving. When Margaret first accessed documents to York, she wanted me to read all of them, everything that was there. So I did. And one thing that was there was her copy of *Paradise Lost*, a grey worn copy that had been used and read and re-read. From a very early age she was very affected by things of the spirit. Now, there's going to be a biography, written in a series, *Short Biographies of Woman*, by a woman called Noelle Boughton. It captures the spiritual side. It will be out later this year.<sup>602</sup>

I think her way of thinking was a straight line. I think she always retained a great sense of spirituality, but I think she had various stages and levels of enthusiasm about the way it came out. Now, at the last, she was very much influenced by a woman who had been to United College with her, Lois Wilson, who became the first woman moderator of the United Church, who visited her a lot and in the very last month this was. Lois is a very strongly spiritual woman, and that is true, but much more orthodox in her beliefs than Margaret.

<sup>602</sup> Noelle Boughton, Margaret Laurence, *A Gift of Grace: A Spiritual Biography* (Toronto: Women's Press, 2006).

Margaret was very suggestible. She did not think she was, but she was. But by suggestible I mean open minded, she, in her last month, she became very devoted again to the church. Which she wasn't many years. She wasn't a disbeliever, but she wasn't particularly devoted; and she evolved. She had taught Unitarian Summer School, but that was long time ago, when they were in Vancouver. Later, she became very involved with the church again, and that was fine, that was very good for her, very benign. With all her disappointment of not being able to write another novel, she was starved of any confidence. She wrote a lot of pages. It was about the Ukrainians, Nick Klastik, and Fundamentalism. She was deeply hurt about that, when they tried to ban her books, twice. That was very bad. And the novel settled around that mistaken kind of fundamentalism.

She enjoyed every word she had written down [for *Dance on the Earth*, the novel], but she struggled, as we all do to write any thing that matters to us. As she would say, some times when she was writing *The Diviners*, 'all I have to do is to write down what they say', and other days she couldn't write at all. She wrote a lot of letters about it to me too.

**She supported the expression of a kind of spirituality which takes into account the feminine part of us.**

Oh! That's much overdone in *Dance on the Earth*, that 'Crucified Woman'.<sup>603</sup> Margaret really, she was so hurt and again, she was very suggestible, and this woman knocked to her with her work, with that sculpture and Margaret was most anxious to do anything she could. That has been most overdone. In the general, in her life, that intense feminism, as expressed by 'Crucified Woman', that did not really exist.

**There were, apparently, many different things that mattered to Laurence.**

Margaret was an activist. She really was. She explains that very well in *Dance on the Earth*. She said 'I'm not a rebel but I'm an activist. I'm after good causes.' And she always spent a lot of time on that. She was doing a lot. On one level she knew she wasn't writing another novel, because she said repeatedly, while she was doing *The Diviners*, and after that: 'this is my last'. I wasn't a bit surprised.

One of her basic struggles in the very act of writing was optimism. For any writer, if you have the urge to write something down, and you haven't given up that hope, that's the big thing.

It was a great thing at the end of her life that she was on good terms with both children and one of the great things was Jocelyn typing up the manuscript of *Dance on the Earth*, and David and his wife, coming to live with her, to live here. They were both looking after her. And we were there and Jack was too (Jocelyn had kept in touch with the father).

**Her experience while in Africa seems to have been determining for Laurence.**

The African experience was very important. And she never lost her deep, deep affection for those writers, and for those peoples. That is something that she loved

<sup>603</sup> Almut Lutkenhaus's sculpture 'Crucified Woman', a stylized female nude with arms outstretched in cruciform that Laurence mentions in her autobiography. The sculpture may have inspired her poem 'Old Women's Song' and the title for both her unfinished novel and published memoir. Laurence relates the feminist principle expressed by the sculpture to the spiritual element of her memoir, in which she emphasizes the importance of 'the female principle as being part of the Holy Spirit' (*Dance* 14).

always and she used to say that she would be, if she had the choice of careers, she would like to be an anthropologist. Comparing religions, she was always very interested in, and of course she had very little chance of that at the United College of her day or certainly in her upbringing at her home. So, her African experience opened up that; and that was one of the greatest crashes with Jack, who didn't understand.

**What do you think was the reason why Laurence wrote and published most of her books about Canada when she was living abroad?**

In general, it happens all over. It happens to our great writers; they spent years and years abroad. And they usually went to the States and then they come back and they are lonely in Canada. But even now it's a very small place [Canada], we live in a very small pond. If you are an academic you know that very well. If you write reviews, as I do, for books in Canada a great deal, you know that the whole other literary community is going to be reading them, and you do care about it because they are your colleagues. It's just a small community. There's a good book about our publishing history, it's called *The Impossible*. It's always desperately hard publishing here.

**It reminds me of Janet Frame, who had to go abroad in order to fulfil her dream of becoming a professional writer.**

There is nobody, absolutely nobody in the whole world in my opinion who had to struggle for identity like Janet Frame. Margaret always knew her identity, very solidly. And in spite of the Depression, in spite of the loss of her parents, and so on, she was a very privileged child. She grew up in a small town, Neepawa, very like Manawaka, and there's a definite hierarchy there. And her father was a professional; he was a lawyer, which was at the top of the scale. And even in the years of the Depression, when people simply didn't have holidays, they had a cottage by the lake. Very much privileged. She never thought of herself like that, but she really was. And going to Uni. Very few parents could afford to send their kids.

**May 30, 2006**

**In your own autobiography you say: 'Margaret Laurence was a temperamentally needy person'. What did you mean by that?<sup>604</sup>**

She needed a lot of reassurance, from people she trusted, all her life. Some people do and some people don't, and Margaret was needy in that sense. It was after she made the decision and took the children to England and left Jack, that she thought that Jack had been her mentor, whom she had trusted, her confidant for everything. She had put him on a pedestal and suddenly he was not there. And ever after she needed a lot of reassurance.

**She was able, however to develop a strong sense of self.**

I've had done a list of the agents who helped to develop her identity: in the first place, the family context, and Neepawa, where she was born, and all that; and then, among other things, her mother, rather her step-mother and her grandfather. The grandfather was very important. Then these 1945 letters, they display

<sup>604</sup> Clara Thomas, *Chapters in a Lucky Life* (Ottawa: Borealis Press, 1999).

elements what came out so many years later. So much was already there, and they are really a part of her identity. And then, I think, you must give Adele [Wiseman] and her family, as much importance as they deserve, because that was very, very important to Margaret. And of course, they were Jewish, and they were marginal people. And Adele's mother and father, Margaret really revered Adele's mother and they had to both to work very hard, and of course, there were things that Jewish people were subjected to. Next will come Africa, and Africa was the real after catalyst. You can think about, like a recipe, you're baking a cake, you can get all there, but it by itself will stay there for ever, unless you put it in the oven to heat them. And Africa did that to Margaret; it was a catalyst and made active all these things that had been building up in Margaret all these years. I think, I really think, that is the story of her identity.

**Africa seems to have awakened Laurence's ability to perceive differences between both diverse cultures and individuals.**

The whole experience in Africa did that very thing [making her aware of differences] for her, every day. Every time she spoke to anybody or did everything, it wakened up the distance between the cultures and the importance of the culture she was in, and it gave her a great feeling of not only its importance but its stature and the worth of other people. It destroyed for ever any theory she might have grown up with about white people in the Western world being on top. That was done with after Africa.

She was the kind of child who noticed things. Things went into her deeply and they were there to be used years and years later. That's why I don't think you can overestimate the effect that Africa had on her. It was enormously important.

**What do you think is the drive behind Laurence's writings?**

Well, basically it was always spiritual, wasn't it? It was the growth of the inner person in spirit. I would say that was the basic drive of every novel. But don't overdo that, because I think that in Margaret total life, in her book *Dance on the Earth*, in terms of her whole life, I think it is a bit overdone and certainly the Crucified Woman, that is certainly overdone in there.

She knew herself. Margaret was a born writer, she had to write. But, she wasn't absorbed by plots; she was not particularly interested in that. And every character was a facet of herself; all those women, Hagar, Stacey, Rachel, and Vanessa, and Morag. She kept going back to her roots, you see. She was using her roots all the time in the town of Manawaka. I don't think you can separate that from her writing. It's always back to the fact that she was a writer. As a very young woman, she had to write. And when she would stay here to see us, she could come back here (this was her room) after we stopped talking and I'd gone up to bed, Morley'd gone up to bed, Margaret came down here to go to bed, but she very often wrote first, just things we had been talking about. She had to write. That was her way of dealing with everything in life, by putting words on the page.

**Considering the thematic structure of Laurence's autobiography, why do you think she gives 'motherhood' such an important place?**

Out of her experience when she was writing *Dance on the Earth*, she did a lot more thinking about her background, and family, and her mum, and her dead mother, and her father, and so on, than she had actually done in her busy life, and that makes sense. She had more time too and she was in that kind of mood and she

wanted to write this book for her daughters, and her friends, and to honour mothers, and so on. But to you have to beware of taking it too much, because it was at the very end of her life. Her important work had been done before.

Margaret was very suggestible. Now, her basic core of values, personality, and everything, were the same; if I had met her as she was in 1945, we would have become the same kind of friends. But a lot of other things changed according to her age and her circumstances, and so on, and her circumstances when she wrote *Dance on the Earth* were such as to encourage her to write in that way because that was who she was writing for.

**In his biography of Margaret Laurence, Michael King describes and gives great attention to Laurence's self-destructive attitudes.**<sup>605</sup>

By the time Margaret went away to college, by the time she wrote those letters [Warkentin letters], she was fairly heavy smoker. Very, very young she started to smoke. And I think her mum smoked too. Of course everybody did it then. But Margaret more than most people, but not more than most people of her age. To think of people who didn't smoke at that day is a real problem. Very few people didn't smoke. And during the war, of course, it was favoured; the military gave their men cigarettes, and the Red Cross provided cigarettes, everybody. Now, by the time she married Jack, she was a very heavy smoker, and he was too. While they were in Africa, they started to party during sunset and Jack was very much into that. And Margaret was, of course, into that style of life too. Margaret and Jack started making wine. They became habitual drinkers at a time when if we bought one bottle a year, was more than enough. He was into that culture, after his experience at the British Army, as I said. It did become an addiction.

**And what about the alleged suicide attempts that King mentions in her book?** She was staying with us [at that time], she went from our place back to England to appear in court about the divorce and then when she came back Morley and I met her at the airport and she was with us all the time. King is completely unreliable. He came up to York to see me and he put me off completely, smooth, and he thinks he is God's gift to women, you know, charming. I'm too old to be charmed. But, anyway, he said: 'of course you agree that Margaret Laurence needs a biography'. This was shortly after she died and I didn't like his attitude at all.

She did like Scotch and she had long since grown accustomed to use alcohol as a sort of cushioning if she was upset, but that's the way everybody uses it. If I drink a bottle of beer I can feel myself relaxed. She had got used to that, as she hadn't as a girl, except she did start smoking young, but it was when she met Jack that it became part of her life and you know, we were the war time generation and the war affected us in every way, every single way.

**She seems to have been quite anxious; I mean there are indications in her autobiography and in yours about her generalized anxiety, her fears of cars, of traffic, of the subway, and so on.**

I don't know where that happened to her. We never did find that out. And she had other friends here who felt the same way. She was terrified of traffic, she would sit in the car being driven, her hands would be like this, white knuckles. She had, I think – my theory is that it happened to her in Ghana. You know in the African

<sup>605</sup> King, *The Life of Margaret Laurence*.

countries; at that time, they were just tasting freedom from colonialism. There were huge amounts of people. We are not used to that. I know people who went to India as tourists and became sick and had to come home; just the mass of people – too much. I think that all happened then. Certainly not when she was back in England, but I think it did happen when she was in Africa. She wouldn't go in the subway.

For example, the first time we went to Jamaica and Morley hired a car, I said to myself, and I said to him too: 'This is it – we are not going to drive here, at all. Because, in those third world countries it is not only people who are on the road or on the streets, there's no separation between the roads and the streets and also all the animals are there, horses, and dogs, you know, and it's just horrendous. We went to Jamaica every year for years and after that I wouldn't hire a car. When we went off – we stayed at the University of West Indies own campus – when we went off campus we would get a cab. And one day we were being entertained, as a matter of fact, by the Canadian ambassador, and they sent a car for us, and the driver was high! On ganja, they call marijuana ganja. And it's very commonly used. I know Jamaican friends who grew up with that, with marijuana! If they were a bit sick, their mothers would give them marijuana, and they felt better.

So, that African experience in more ways than one was extremely important for her. When she bought the Lakefield house she had a taxi handy and that was what she depended on to go shopping. And she was very sensible, you know, because you spend a lot if you run a car. What she would have spent in a car she spent on a taxi.

**What do you think about her feelings of guilt about not having been a good mother?**

In our culture I don't believe that you ever, in our generation, in our culture, I do not believe that you ever are satisfied with your performance as a mother. I'm constantly warning you about spending too much time on that one topic. I think she did.

She was very, very complex. But the various facets of Margaret's self had been explored in her novels, in those central characters. Rachel, for instance, who was so repressed, and so timid about things, a lot like Margaret when young, but it was all there, inside, as you know from the 1945 letters. They're facets, but they were not the whole person by any means. But these are the things that writers do. For instance, when she and Jack were in Somalia, she had to be doing something and she started doing those translations, which turned into *A Tree for Poverty*. At her age and at that stage, that was an amazing thing for her to attempt. In an utterly alien culture, in another language, which she did not know, and Margaret was not good at languages, no way! She was not a linguist, but she was going to do it somehow. And she, as you know, she sat in, and she had a man who helped her with the translations. It was an amazing achievement for her then, and different from anything written in Somalia. And she is still held in very high regard in Somaliland.

**Toronto, May 2006.**

## Appendix 3

### Archives Consulted

#### Willa Muir

##### 1. National Library of Scotland, Manuscripts Collections

###### 1.1 Willa Muir

Reference Number: GB233/MS.19675-19702

Date: 1959-1964

Description: Notebooks and Manuscripts of Willa Muir. They include notes and drafts for *Living with Ballads*, drafts and manuscripts for *Belonging*, verses, jottings, a short story, and miscellaneous notes.

###### 1.2 Edwin and Willa Muir

Reference Number: GB233/MS.19703

Date: 1932-1970

Extent: 225 ff.

Description: Single items and small collections of letters and verses of the Muirs. They include letters of Willa Muir to Tom Scott on literary and personal matters; and a series of letters from both Muirs to Kathleen Baine.

##### 2. University of St Andrews

Papers of Willa Muir

Reference: GB 227 ms38466

Dates of Creation: 1858-1980

Extent: 9 boxes

Scope and Content: The collection consists of manuscript writings, notebooks, miscellaneous papers and correspondence. It is representative of Willa Muir's working and private life with items dating from her time at university, through her career and marriage to Edwin Muir, and including her administration of Edwin's published and unpublished work after his death.

##### 3. Orkney Archives

###### 3.1 J Mary Bosdet: Edwin and Willa Muir Papers

Reference Number: GB241/D56



Date: 1949-1982

Extent: 0.26 Linear Metres

Description: Correspondence, chiefly from Willa Muir to Mary Bosdet, from Cambridge, Chelsea and Dunoon; miscellaneous items, including photographs, concerning Edwin and Willa Muir, 1947-1965; books by or about the Muirs, some containing inscriptions, letters or press cuttings, 1923-1983.

### **3.2 Edwin Muir and Willa Muir Letters**

Reference Number: GB241/D1/245

Date: 1948-1972

Extent: 0.01 Linear Metres

Description: Letters to Patricia Swale from Edwin Muir and Willa Muir, 1948-1951.

## **Margaret Laurence**

### **1. York University, Toronto, Canada**

Margaret Laurence Fonds

Collection Number: F0341

Dates: 1953-1987

Extent: 2.0 m of textual records

260 photographs and other graphic material (posters, drawings, etc.)

35 sound recordings

6 moving image recordings

Scope and Content: The fonds consists of Margaret Laurence's records pertaining to her activities as a writer and to her personal life. The fonds includes correspondence, financial records, manuscripts, printed material, personal files, graphic materials, sound recordings and moving image records.

### **2. McMaster University, Hamilton, Canada**

Margaret Laurence Fonds

Dates: 1949-1997; predominant 1962-1987

Extent: 94 cm of textual records

1 audio cassette

1 audio disc

1 audio reel

Scope and content: The fonds (or deposit) consists mainly of book manuscripts, including *The Stone Angel* (1964), *A Jest of God* (1966), *Long Drums and Cannons* (1966), *The Fire Dwellers* (1969), *A Bird in the House* (1970), *The Diviners* (1974) and *Heart of a Stranger* (1976). The audio cassette record and reel-to-reel tape are songs from *The Diviners*. There are ten accruals, arranged into the following series: manuscripts, reviews, other printed material, short stories, a scrapbook and poster, journals, correspondence, publications, research files, typescripts of *Dance on the Earth*, typescript of a speech, a short account, 'The Christmas Story', letters to Lois Wilson, including Laurence's instructions for her own funeral service and burial. The fonds is supplemented by books from Laurence's library, pertaining to Africa, which have been catalogued for Research Collections. Researchers must sign an application form in order to access restricted items in certain accruals.

## Janet Frame

### 1. Janet Frame Literary Trust, Dunedin, New Zealand

The Janet Frame Literary Trust is a charitable trust that was founded by Janet Frame in 1999. When she died in 2004 she bequeathed her copyright to the Trust and directed that the ongoing royalties and income from her literary estate be used to give financial grants to New Zealand writers of poetry and imaginative fiction. The Trust owns Janet Frame's copyright, oversees publishing and permissions, administers the Janet Frame Literary Award and advises on access to Janet Frame's archives. The Janet Frame Papers are held in The Hocken Collections Archives and Manuscripts Section at the University of Otago; access to them prior 29 January 2019 requires the written permission of Janet Frame's Estate. At the time when I was researching in New Zealand, the Janet Frame papers were not available.

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