

COMPTE RENDUS, BIBLIOGRAPHIES, INFORMATIONS.

THE DIVINING OF MARGARET LAURENCE : — A Review of *The Diviners* by Margaret Laurence, *The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence* by Clara Thomas, and *Three Voices* by Joan Hind-Smith.

par Gwendolyn DAVIES

In Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*, the protagonist, Morag Gunn, wryly comments on the misleading way in which publishers advertise her novels. For the readers of *The Diviners*, her fictional remarks serve as an ironic footnote to the May, 1975, launching of the novel in paperback. Dressed in a low-cut costume, Morag Gunn poses on the jacket of the book against a background more reminiscent of nineteenth-century Scotland than of twentieth-century western Canada. Across the cover, the publisher's blurb shouts : « Rich, powerful, fascinating — the novel of an independent woman and her urgent need for love. »

No more misleading an introduction could be given to this latest and most important of Margaret Laurence's novels. Rich in social, cultural, and historical insights into the Canadian consciousness and its roots, *The Diviners* pulls together the various aspects of Manawaka and prairie society Margaret Laurence has been exploring since the publication of *The Stone Angel* in 1964. This manifests itself not only in cross-references to the events and characters of *The Stone Angel*, *A Jest of God*, *The Fire-Dwellers*, and *A Bird in the House*, but also in the in-depth exploration of Manawaka and its roots through the memory and consciousness of Morag Gunn. Raised on the « wrong side of the tracks », Morag brings to the Manawaka cycle a very different social outlook than do the middle-class protagonists of Laurence's other novels. Pride, touchiness, perception, and misperception are concomitants of her position, yet she does share with the other protagonists a strong desire to escape the puritanism and parochialism of the town. By the end of the novel, she has succeeded more startlingly than have Rachel, Hagar, and Stacey in reaching a compromise with herself and her past, but to do so she has accepted the fact that « the whole town was inside my head, for as long as I live. » (353)

Morag has also come to terms with her ancestry more

so than have the heroines of the other novels, for eventually she accepts the fact that her fierce pride in her Scottish background is rooted more in the realm of legend and imagination than in the Sutherland hills she once thought of as her wellspring. Whereas in *The Stone Angel* Hagar Shipley's Scottish heritage is a crippling source of social pride and puritanical inhibition, for Morag Gunn the tales of Piper Gunn and his people eventually become part of the «word» and «mind» magic that are her mainstays as a writer. Thus, the conclusion of *The Diviners* is in many respects more satisfying than are the endings of the other Manawaka novels, for there are fewer ambivalences than one finds in the final statements of Hagar, Stacey, and Rachel. Thinking at the end of *The Diviners* of her daughter, Morag realizes that Pique is searching for her self on a road that Morag has already travelled, and that she must be left to follow her own journey as her mother has followed hers. Contemplating her artistic life, she realizes that she will never know whether or not her «magic word tricks» have worked or not, but it is the act of process, «the necessary doing of the thing», that has mattered. Looking back on the events of her lifetime, she can announce in sardonic but proud tones :

And yet in my way I've worked damn hard,
and I haven't done all I would've liked
to do, but I haven't folded up like a
paper fan, either. (406)

Pride, irony, toughness, passion, imagination, and sensitivity —all coalesce at the end of the novel to leave the reader with the memory of a warm and courageous woman who has made peace with her demons and has ultimately made them work for her.

In expanding her fictional Manawaka world by telling Morag's story, Laurence has also extended her range in literary technique. As in her earlier fiction, the consciousness of her novel is still that of a female protagonist. However, it is a consciousness given a multi-dimensional quality by the voiced intrusion of other characters; by interior dialogues between Morag and the dead Canadian pioneer, Catherine Parr Traill; by ballads which span time and space; by Christie Logan's Scottish tales in the oral tradition; and by the continual interplay of «snapshots» and «memory bank movies» with Morag's immediate interior voice and Laurence's authorial one. Moreover, an intricate five-part structure intensifies the pace of the novel, each section pro-

elling the reader more and more into «time present» as Morag moves toward a resolution of her conflicts. The result is a sense of controlled confusion in the novel as Morag's mind moves restlessly over past, present, and future. At the end, she has «divined» much about her past and its relationship to the present and the future, and her ruminations on her «portion of grace» bring echoes of Eliot in *Little Gidding* :

This is the use of memory :
For liberation —no less of love, but expanding
Of love beyond desire, and so liberation
From the future as well as the past.

The pattern of personal and historical quest explored in *The Diviners* forms the basis of much of the discussion of the novel in Clara Thomas' recent book, *The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence*. Coming just as Mrs Laurence has announced the completion of the Manawaka cycle, *The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence* is a timely assessment of the novels and their place in contemporary Canadian literature. Professor Thomas provides a close textual reading of the books, expanding her 1969 monograph on Laurence into a more complete analysis of the social and historical side of the works. As well, she devotes a considerable portion of her discussion to a study of style in the novels, seeing in *The Diviners* the culmination of a structural pattern first used by Laurence in some of *The Tomorrow-Tamer* stories (1963). For her, *The Diviners* marks the social and thematic completion of the Manawaka cycle, but *The Diviners* also appears to Professor Thomas to be an important statement on the relationship of the artistic imagination to the cultural milieu in which it has developed :

Bound up in the story of Morag's life is the story of a writer's struggle to be born and to grow, an explicit and diverse exploration of one woman's experience of the craft of fiction in our time and in our society. Implicit in Morag's story is also the explanation and the insistent ratification for the whole enterprise of fiction —as an essential illumination of individual experience and a fleshing out of history into wholeness, from the life of an individual to a complex of lives and events and then to an entire culture, its myths, and legends. (130-131)

Sensitive as she is to the artistic dilemma explored in the novel, Professor Thomas does not ignore the emphasis in *The Diviners* on individual and communal history. Morag finds in her Scottish roots a fund of stories to feed the creative imagination, but *The Diviners*

does not fail to reveal the puritanism and narrowness that Manawaka's Scottish forebears have heavy-handedly bequeathed to the town. The Scottish impact on Canada is to this day a much-discussed issue, and in exploring it in fictional terms in the Manawaka cycle, Margaret Laurence is speaking to a receptive audience. It is not only the Scottish heritage in Canada that is explored through Morag's story, however. Brooke Skelton, Morag's husband, is a brittle, sophisticated Englishman who brings to their marriage a legacy of colonial India, a British public school education, and a class-conscious upbringing. In treating him, Mrs. Laurence often comes close to stereotyping, and the dialogue and pacing of the Brooke-Morag story is one of the more unsatisfactory parts of the novel. Such flaws are discussed diplomatically by Professor Thomas, but there is little to cavil with in Laurence's presentation of Jules Tonnerre, Morag's lover. Here, Margaret Laurence has created a convincing male figure indeed, and as with the Brooke narrative, the Jules Tonnerre one opens new avenues whereby the author can explore Canadian roots.

A Métis still imbued with the spirit of Louis Riel and the Battle of Batoche, Jules Tonnerre provides bitter comment in the novel on white-Métis relations in Canada. While the viewpoint seems too representative or overly-simplified at times, it is saved from didacticism by the skilful way in which Laurence has revealed conflict through character inter-action. It is this kind of skill in presentation that Professor Thomas recognizes and pays tribute to in detailed sections of her study.

While Professor Thomas' *The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence* is a useful addition to any library of Canadian literature, Joan Hind-Smith's *Three Voices* inspires a more qualified response. Essentially a biographical study, *Three Voices* proposes to examine Margaret Laurence, Gabrielle Roy, and Frederick Philip Grove. The tenuous link between these three novelists is their prairie background and their racial diversity, but *Three Voices* pays little attention to the comparative aspects of these writers and their works. Mrs. Hind-Smith's approach to the novels of Margaret Laurence, for example, is to trace the plot movement of each book, adding appropriate comments on the relationship of the novel's events to the personal life of the author. While this may appeal to the curiosity of the general reading public, it does little to expand the literary horizons of the same. Moreover, Mrs. Hind-Smith tends toward the dramatic in her study, the result being that she projects herself into the minds

of the characters about whom she is writing. This makes entertaining reading when one enters the consciousness of someone like Mohamed, Margaret Laurence's houseboy in Somaliland, but it does tend to undermine the validity of the book as reliable biography. In short, the book does not purport to be more than «three lives», and one must be prepared to accept it with that circumscription. It means, however, that the study exists for a rather limited audience, and it has an appeal for only those students who want to round off their critical impressions with a more detailed knowledge of the personal circumstances in which Laurence, Roy, or Grove developed. The circumstances are not always a reliable barometer to the writers' art, however, and Margaret Laurence, Clara Thomas, and Morag Gunn consistently argue that the writer's identity must be divorced from that of his subject matter. Thus, a final impression that one takes away from a reading of these three books —unintentionally from *Three Voices*, and intentionally from *The Diviners* and *The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence*— is that it is the writer's word, and not his world, that is to be our «divining rod».

NOTES

- (1) **The Diviners**, by Margaret Laurence. Toronto : Bantam Books, 1975. 467p.; paper 1.95.

The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence by Clara Thomas. Toronto McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1975. 212p.; 10.00.

Three Voices, by Joan Hind-Smith. Toronto : Clarke, Irwin & Company Limited, 1975. 235p. ; 7.50.