

# "Writ in Rememberance:"

## Willa Cather, Margaret Laurence, and the Prairie Past

By Susan J. Warwick

As internationally acclaimed novelists, as women writers and as creators of narratives which define the collective experience of a place and a people, the prairie midwest, its small towns, and its inhabitants, Willa Cather and Margaret Laurence stand together as sisters. Among the many bonds uniting their work, the clearest can be discerned in their common concern with the past, both individual and cultural. Willa Cather, in an interview in 1921, stated that the

*"years from eight to fifteen are the formative period in a writer's life, when he unconsciously gathers basic material. He may acquire a great many interesting and vivid impressions in his mature years, but his thematic material he acquires under fifteen years of age. Other writers will tell you this."*<sup>1</sup>

In an article written nearly fifty years after this interview took place, Margaret Laurence reiterated Cather's belief that a writer's childhood and adolescence provide the foundation for her life's work:

*For the 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. In the case of a great many writers, this exploration at some point — and perhaps at all points — involves an attempt to understand one's background and one's past, sometimes a more distant past which one has not personally experienced.*<sup>2</sup>

Although they are separated by time and by nationality, Willa Cather and Margaret Laurence reveal in their work a clear and strong affinity. This affinity has its roots in the place in which both writers spent much of their early years, the prairie

midwest and the small prairie town. For Willa Cather most of the years from eight to fifteen were spent in the town of Red Cloud, Nebraska and the countryside surrounding it. Born in 1873, in northern Virginia, Cather was nine years old when her father decided to join his parents and brother who had settled in Webster County, Nebraska several years earlier. Margaret Laurence was born in 1926 in Neepawa, Manitoba where she lived with her family until 1944 when she moved to Winnipeg. Just as Nebraska and Red Cloud are translated into the country and towns of Cather's fiction, Laurence's experience of Manitoba and Neepawa is the primary ground from which she created her fictional vision of the prairie and the town of Manawaka.

For both Cather and Laurence, the prairie is a place of beginnings, in actual experience, as well as in the visions of the prairie embodied in their fiction. Their work reveals the attempt, in Laurence's words, "to bring into acknowledged being the myths and backgrounds and places which belong to us."<sup>3</sup> The congruence and continuity between their work rests upon their shared effort to give voice to the story of the North American midwest, its growth and development, its beliefs and attitudes, its imaginative dimensions.

Clara Thomas has written that Alexandra Bergson (*O Pioneers*), Antonia Shimerda (*My Antonia*), Hagar Currie (*The Stone Angel*), and Rachel (*A Jest of God*) and Stacey Cameron (*The Fire-Dwellers*) "form a lineage and cycle of their own in North American literature."<sup>4</sup> To this lineage we can add Thea Kronborg (*The Song of the Lark*), Myra Henshawe (*My Mortal Enemy*), Marian Forrester (*A*

*Lost Lady*), Vanessa Macleod (*A Bird in the House*), and Morag Gunn (*The Diviners*). In presenting the stories of these women, Cather and Laurence have given us a rich and full record of the experience of women in the new land. Pioneers and the children of pioneers, these women in their lives reveal the challenges, struggles, triumphs and defeats involved in the settlement and growth of a new country. As well as presenting us with a sense of historical development, their lives tell us much about how the imagination has responded to the new land over five generations, to its terrain, to its social and cultural attitudes and institutions, to its religious beliefs.

In some sense, all of Cather's and Laurence's heroes and heroines are pioneers, for the pioneering spirit is not restricted to those who tame an actual wilderness. In their struggles to come to terms with a new landscape, with the legacy of the past, or with the world in the present, they are constantly involved in the origination and exploration of ways of seeing and understanding their place, and by extension, mankind's place, in time and history.

One of the most striking discoveries emerging from the comparison of their work is the extent to which they rely upon a common group of image patterns to reveal and illuminate this imaginative response and understanding. In their use of garden and wilderness image patterns, bird imagery, water and landscape imagery, house and cave imagery, Cather and Laurence display a remarkable similarity. To travel from the wild garden in which Marie and Emil share their love in Cather's *O Pioneers*, to that in which

Rachel and Nick share theirs in Laurence's *A Jest of God*, is to cover no great distance. Nor is it difficult to move from the house which Hagar cannot bear to leave for fear she will lose her very self in Laurence's *The Stone Angel*, to that St. Peters cannot relinquish for the same reason in Cather's *The Professor's House*. And the most powerful bird image in all of Laurence's fiction, that of a Great Blue Heron in *The Diviners*, finds its symbolic counterpart in the image of an eagle in Cather's *The Song of the Lark*:

*Then she saw the huge bird... A Great Blue Heron. Once populous in this part of the country. Now rarely seen.*

*Then it spotted the boat, and took to flight. A slow unhurried takeoff, the vast wings spreading, the slender elongated legs gracefully folding up under the creature's body. Like a pterodactyl, like an angel, like something out of the world's dawn. Ancient-seeming, unaware of the planet's rocketing changes...<sup>5</sup>*

*Suddenly an eagle, tawny and of great size, sailed over the cleft in which she lay, across the arch of sky... Thea sprang to her feet as if she had been thrown up from the rock by volcanic action. She stood rigid on the edge of the stone shelf, straining her eyes after that strong, tawny flight. O eagle of eagles! Endeavour, achievement, desire, glorious striving of human art! From a cleft in the heart of the world she saluted it... It had come all the way; when men lived in caves, it was there. A vanished race; but along the trails, in the stream, under the spreading cactus, there still glittered in the sun the bits of their frail clay vessels, fragments of their desire.<sup>6</sup>*

Both Morag and Thea believe, at a certain point in their lives, that they can leave the past behind. Yet Morag and Thea carry their pasts with them always, and it is their eventual acceptance and affirmation of this fact that grant them whatever personal and artistic fulfillment they achieve. And the sight of a bird in flight is one of the central moments in this process. Both descriptions begin in a very literal fashion, but as they develop the bird is transformed into an imaginative embodiment of eternity and of all that is mysterious in the universe and in art. "Like a pterodactyl, like something out of the world's dawn," "from a cleft in the heart

of the world," the heron and the eagle re-establish for Morag and Thea a link with history and eternity.

Throughout Cather's and Laurence's work countless other instances of their creation of like images and symbols can be discovered. What is most significant about the discovery of these shared images is that they appear in works which also share a strong and insistent belief that the understanding of the past, both personal and collective, is necessary for the establishment of a true identity for individuals and countries alike. All of their works reveal a clear emphasis upon the 're-membering' of the past, an emphasis which is apparent on both the level of form and that of content. By recollecting the past, Cather's and Laurence's heroes, heroines, and narrators engage themselves in the process of rooting ancestors and the self in a new land. This process is, in one sense, a search for order, for a pattern in the movement of time and history.

Both Cather and Laurence in their fiction endeavoured to articulate the historical background of their regions, of their *patria*. It is in this sense that their work can be viewed as cultural history, as the story of the development of the prairie midwest. Both suggest, through their characters, that the past is an integral part of the present. But it is important to recognize that their sense of the nature of this integration is quite different. In general terms, Cather's view of the relation between past and present is based on the ideas of contrast, closure, and repetition. Cather's heroes and heroines see the past, in most instances, as static, and in some sense, as finite or complete. Most frequently, this past which is now over, closed, is seen as an ideal time, preferable to present time. Thus, her characters return through memory to the past in order to recover an ideal world. In Laurence's work, the recovery of the past in memory places less stress on the idea of repetition, and more upon that of alteration. As well, the idea of closure is replaced by that of continuity. For Laurence's heroines, the past is always being re-invented, not simply recreated. While Laurence's characters, like Cather's, are engaged in the reclamation of the past, their 're-seeing' of it involves more than seeing it 'again.' It is ultimately a process of revision, of simultaneously seeing again *and* seeing anew.

For Cather's heroes and heroines the order of history is fundamentally cyclical. As Jim Burden says at the end of *My Antonia*: "I had the sense of coming home

to myself, and of having found out what a little circle man's experience is." In Cather's most optimistic works, the circle of history, personal or collective, is rounded. At the top of the circle, in figurative terms, is an ideal world and time, and it is to this position that the hero or heroine eventually returns, in memory at least. Laurence's heroines regard the order of time and history in a radically different manner. For them, the order of time and history is essentially linear and forward moving. While they acknowledge that the past illuminates the present and the future, "Look ahead into the past, and back into the future," they also recognize that the direction of time is forward, not cyclical. The unknown future is a new time and a new history, not an old time regained or restored.

For Cather, art was the realm in which time could be suspended, and a return made to an ideal world. In the world of art the past can be made part of an everlasting present, and time and history can be transcended, overcome. The order of art is seen, by Cather, as a fixed one, and within it the ideal world can be rendered statically present and continuous. If the dominant image associated with Cather's sense of time and history is the circle, that associated with Laurence's is best described as a pilgrimage, a journey to a future life. Her work discloses a view of the order of time and history which is fundamentally Biblical, specifically New Testament, in design. As Northrop Frye argues, "the Bible thinks in terms of a future metamorphosis of nature in an upward direction."<sup>7</sup> Implicit throughout Laurence's work is this sense of history as forward and upward movement. Within this framework, art is essentially a vehicle, not an end in itself. In one sense, it is an instrument by which human society can be united in time and in spirit. Within the Bible it is language which brings things into existence. "God said, Let there be light; and there was light." In the realm of human activity language is essentially re-creative, "a transforming of the chaos within our ordinary experience of nature."<sup>8</sup> For Laurence it provides a path which can be followed on the way towards grace.

The act of writing requires faith above all else, as Morag's experience in *The Diviners* makes clear. And the works written are manifestations of that faith, steps towards God's grace. Art does not remove us from time and history in Laurence's view, but rather aids us in our progress towards that moment when time and space will be transcended, when all things will be made new.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by E.K. Brown, *Willa Cather: A Critical Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1953), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Laurence, *Heart of a Stranger* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Laurence, "Interview with Robert Kroetsch," *Creation* (Toronto:

New Press, 1970), p. 56.

<sup>4</sup> Clara Thomas, "Proud Lineage: Willa Cather and Margaret Laurence," *Canadian Review of American Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Spring 1971), p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Laurence, *The Diviners* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), p. 292.

<sup>6</sup> Willa Cather, *The Song of the Lark* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943), pp. 398-99.

<sup>7</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (Toronto: Academic Press, 1982), p. 34.

<sup>8</sup> Frye, p. 112.

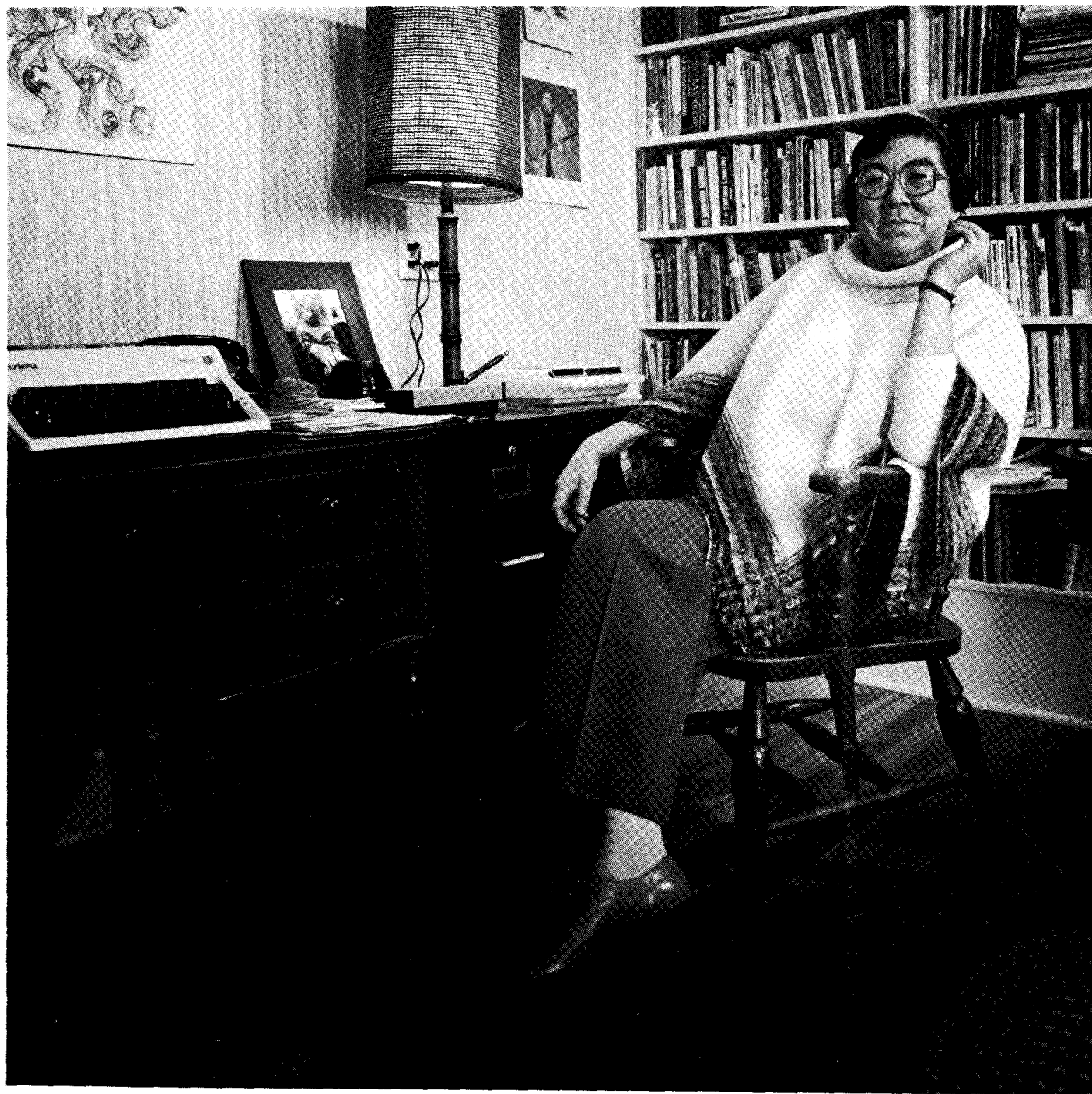


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