Canada in Quest:
Margaret Laurence’s Journey Back Home

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)

In this paper I am going to deal with Margaret Laurence’s exploration of memory and place. In her novels the journey, understood as exploration, shapes a fictional and non-fictional narrative strategy, particularly as a form of understanding of an individual in movement, that is to say, changing, defining and redefining oneself in interaction with the other, even questioning the mere self. T.S. Eliot’s words can be applied to Margaret Laurence’s journey and exploration throughout the world: Canada, Africa, England and Canada again. After her incessant real and metaphorical literary travels, she arrived both in fiction and in real life, to Neepawa (Manawaka) in her fiction, her hometown, the place she had known for the first time. In Margaret Laurence’s novels the multitude of characters are none the less linked by time and space. They are connected by the same circumstances, and these bring Hagar, Rachel, Stacey, Vanessa and Morag, protagonists of the five novels which constitute the Manawaka Cycle, back to their roots and the old “house” of their childhood and, at the same time, away on to their destinies. It is only there, alone with their memories, that the protagonists will finally come to an understanding of the past, present and future. Action is appropriate to place: journeys and visits, above all, where the destination is already known. Laurence’s locations in real life: Canada, Africa, Europe and Canada are rescued in her fiction, so the notion of place is inextricably linked with the concept of memory, both as signifiers of the blend between fiction and reality. As Laurence said: “The return is not necessarily in the physical sense, but it really is a coming back in the mind, a coming to some kind of terms with your roots and your ancestors and, if you like, with your gods” (Thomas 1975, 78).

For Margaret Laurence, the writing of the stories was a journey back in time and memory, to exorcize the intimidating ghost of her grandfather and to
sublimate her youthful bitterness toward him by the process of art, until all bitterness was burnt away and the old man became part of her and Canada’s past. In *A Bird in the House* Grandfather Connor stands not only for Laurence’s Grandfather, but also for all the proud, tough, puritanical pioneers who were Canada’s “upright men”. Coming to terms with her Scottish past, with those “generations of my father’s family,” would require a rethinking of the true roots she claimed were firmly planted in Canada. Those Canadian roots came from somewhere and, in the case of her Canadian-born father, came rather recently – just as did the names of Manitoba towns and Winnipeg streets that Margaret recognized in the Highlands. Uprooted Scottish emigrants brought with them roots to be planted in the new soil, along the banks of the Red and Assiniboine rivers. They knew their roots and whence they came from.

When Michel Fabre asked Margaret Laurence if she had planned the Manawaka cycle as a whole, and if the Scottish plaid pin which had been used in *The Stone Angel*, the first novel of the series, used again in the last novel *The Diviners* was a symbol to close the Manawaka cycle, Laurence answered:

> When I wrote *The Stone Angel* I did not have any idea that I would write *The Diviners*, nor even that I would write another book out of the fictional town of Manawaka; I absolutely did not know. I had started writing *The Diviners* when one day it suddenly came to me that the exchange is what would have happened to Hagar’s plaid pin and Lazarus’ knife. And it felt like a revelation. And I thought to myself, “So that’s what has happened to it?” just as though it really had happened (*A Place*, 201).

When Laurence wrote *The Stone Angel* she didn’t intend to write a series of novels. After this first book she wrote four more, including the short story volume, *A Bird in the House*, which is the second of the cycle. Once she had finished *A Jest of God*, the third one, published in 1966, Laurence thought that this novel was the end of Manawaka and her journey back to place and self; but Manawaka had not disappeared from her books, and Laurence realized that they formed a series of novels. She recognized the unity of them, not only because they had the same geographical setting, but also for the amazing interrelation of their characters. It seemed as if Margaret Laurence had designed a predetermined plan to place them as pieces of a puzzle.
Clara Thomas in The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence (1975) recognizes that many Canadian writers have continued with characters or places from one novel to another, among them Hugh MacLennan, Mordecai Richler, Roch Carrier and Mazo de la Roche. Many others, including some who are not Canadian, have used a small city as a frame, so many that they would make up a big entry under the concept of “Small Town”: Elgin, Mariposa, Horizon, Deptford, Salterton, Crocus and Jubilee would be the most important names. In addition to Sara Jeannette Duncan, Stephen Leacock, Sinclair Ross, Robertson Davies, W.O. Mitchell, and Alice Munro, authors of the places just mentioned, small towns are associated with many Canadian and other contemporary authors like James Reaney, David Lewis, and Harry Bolyde, or some previous ones, like George Eliot, Adeline Teskey or Patrick Slater. But no town in Canadian literature has been so consistently and extensively extolled as the Manawaka of Margaret Laurence. As Clara Thomas states:

Through five works of fiction, it has grown as a vividly realized, microcosmic world, acting as a setting for the dilemmas of its unique individuals and also exercising its own powerful dynamic on them. Manawaka is also specifically, historically, and geographically authentic, dense with objects and true to its place and its development through time. […] Our literature is thick with their representations, memorial to their centrality in Canada’s history and to the remarkable power of their efforts, bad and good, upon our people (Thomas 1975, 174).

Canadian literature is rich in cities or towns, central pillars of its history, which are also the cause and effect of positive and negative consequences. In the feeling of its citizens, the city was the center of all social growth, the starting point of a wider world and, inevitably for many, a deadlock. In the novels of the Manawaka cycle, Laurence gives us glimpses of the ambivalence of human experience in a town. No Canadian writer has doubts, and neither has Laurence, about the power and influence of the collective personality of the city on its inhabitants, the heroes or victims of it.

The world built by Margaret Laurence in Manawaka belongs to women and men in general, but their peculiarities are Canadian. Placed in a small western town, her characters go to the outer world, but they carry Manawaka inside them, their limitations and inhibitions, and also their sense of roots, of their ancestors and of a past time which is still alive, not only in their
achievements, but also in their tragic errors: a yesterday rooted geographically and socially in a fixed point, alive in the memory of many Canadians.

The voices of the city speak a Canadian language, adapted to the demands of the characters, retaining their idiomatic phrases and their diction figures and, overall, its irony. Mordecai Richler is known for a type of “survival humour” similar to Hagar’s voice mocking herself and by that sense of humour which is Stacey’s salvation:

Pour on the Chanel Number Five. Drench yourself in it, woman. Go on. Mac and Buckle will spring to their feet. Gad! They will exclaim. Who is this apparition of delight? Who is this refugee queen from the Perfumed Garden? In a pig’s eye, they will (Laurence 1988a, 49).

The example mentioned above shows the great sense of humour, which is essential not to succumb in this world, full of misfortunes, because it helps to keep painful events at a distance and not to take oneself seriously. The Canadian “natives” from Ireland and Scotland see themselves reflected in these features and Laurence has rescued them.

Manawaka is an inspiration for the location of the novels. Riding Mountain is Galloping Mountain, Clear Lake is Diamond Lake, and Manawaka’s river is the Wachakwa. The town is not, strictly speaking, a prairie town, because it is surrounded by trees: “Most of the country surrounding Neepawa was covered with scrub when the first settlers arrived. There were many poplar bluffs and along the waterways there were heavier stands of timber” (McKenzie, 19). Manawaka is the supply center for the agricultural area well cultivated and rich, except during the thirty years of drought. As was described in The Stone Angel, crops never failed completely in the area and as Vanessa ironically states, it wasn’t due to the inhabitants’ special charisma:

The Depression did not get better, as everyone had been saying it would. It got worse, and so did the drought. That part of the prairies where we lived was never dustbowl country. The farms around Manawaka never had a total crop failure, and afterwards, when the drought was over, people used to remark on this fact proudly as though it had been due to some virtue or special status. […] But although Manawaka never knew the worst, what it knew was bad enough (Laurence 1989, 128).
When we read the five novels of the Manawaka series, the town of Neepawa can be located on the map. Its geography is precise and consistent and there are already many places which stand out. Doherty’s stalls, Jarrett’s bakery, and the Queen Victoria Hotel are references necessary for the novels, and other places, such as Currie’s shop or Cameron’s funeral parlour, are essential for the action in most of the books. River Street goes down south, to the river Wachakwa and to the north, to the CPR railway, and Main Street cuts across it. The Camerons live in Japonica Street, and Rachel, coming back home from school, turns at River Street:

I turn at River Street and walk past the quiet dark brick houses, too big for the remaining occupants, built by somebody’s grandfathers who did well long ago out of a brickworks or the first butcher shop. Long ago meaning half a century. Nothing is old here but it looks old. The timber houses age fast, and even the brick looks worn down after fifty years of blizzard winters and blistering summers (Laurence 1987, 10-11).

In the Manawaka series there are five main interrelated family relationships including other four generations: the Curries and Shipleys; the Camerons and Kazliks; the Connors and MacLeods; the Gunns and Logans and the Tonnerres. There are other characters like Henry Pearl and Luke McVitie, Doctor Tappen and Lachlan McLachlan, Lottie Simons and Eva and Vernon Winkler among them. These characters appear briefly, but their roles are full of vitality. The interval of time goes from the beginning of 1880, Hagar’s girlhood, to the novel’s present (1970’s); Pique Tonnerre is the fourth generation after her great-grandfather Jules Tonnerre; Stephen Shipley, Hagar’s grandson, is the fourth generation after Jason Currie. In The Diviners the story of the inhabitants of the town goes further back. They arrived from Scotland’s Highlands before the Western Settlement, and their points of reference are several battles: Culloden, Bourlon Wood, Batoche, and Dieppe.

Manawaka is a moving and imaginary town, full of realism, history, personality, and personal experiences. These experiences are so real that we often think they are taking place in our own town. We can identify with its social structure, as well as with its streets and buildings. Through the stories of its inhabitants we can connect with the present and the past of the Canadians, their aspirations and failures. Manawaka reveals constantly the inexorable passage of time and the stillness of its inhabitants, victims and prisoners of the institutions created by them for their wellbeing and survival and which now turn on them:
Self-consciousness organizes itself around the particular memory of a clan and ancestors, while at the same time looking toward future descendants. The traditions of the family and clan had to be passed down from father to son. Thus every family had its own archive, in which written documents on all links in the clan were kept (A Place, 183).

The Tonnerres, social outcasts, were characters that Laurence had not foreseen, but they appear in all her novels, specially in two of them, The Stone Angel and The Diviners. These are characters that impose themselves on the author. When she wrote The Stone Angel Laurence hadn’t planned that Lazarus Tonnerre would appear in other novels, but if she had known she couldn’t have chosen a more appropriate name for him than Lazarus, raised from the dead.

A recurrent topic on which Laurence focused her attention to impose some values is closely related to The Stone Angel (1964) because the problem is women’s lack of power, their tendency to accept patriarchal definitions of themselves, their personal dissatisfaction combined with their insecurity and an aggressiveness for a long time contained. This different type of colonialism, a gender one, turns the topics of freedom and survival into something particularly hard for women. Luce Irigaray insists on the necessity of balancing women’s power with that of men’s, giving or returning some cultural values to women (Irigaray, 10). Laurence observed this feminine condition first in Somalia and then in Canada; she is a feminist writer in the sense that she explores empathically, though critically, the search for responsibilities and opportunities by women in the twentieth-century Canada.

Freedom, survival, colonialism and the difficult situation of women were all topics that the author had to write in an appropriate literary way. She showed little interest in the most radical and subversive experiments, and adopted conventions already established by novelists like Henry James:

The reader is required to focus his attention not upon the mere “fable” but, increasingly, upon the manner of presentation, the point of view – which is not the simplest and clearest but deliberately the most arduous, the richest in overtones of meaning (Baugh, 1550).

Laurence’s objective, like Henry James’s, was to penetrate into the mind of her protagonists, see through their eyes, and treat them like real characters,
not like fictional characters, in spite of the fact that Henry James’s characters belong to a different social class than Laurence’s. Margaret Laurence created Hagar, Rachel, Stacey, Morag and all the other people of her Manawaka world out of a gigantic complexity, reaching back from her own place and time through four generations of men and women in a Canadian western town. All the strands of her ancestral past have interwoven with her own life and the power of her own gift impelling her to write her people down, to liberate them from her imagination to the pages of her fiction. She quoted Al Purdy’s lines: “But they had their being once and left a place to stand on” as the epigraph to The Diviners, and the conviction they express forms one of the strongest strands in the fabric of her fiction.

Works Cited