Margaret Laurence:  
The Shape of the Writer’s Shadow

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In Rembrandt van Rijn’s famous paintings in which he depicts the “anatomy lessons” of various doctors teaching their profession, the autopsies being performed are shown as starting with a dissection of the hand or arm. Although the paintings are masterful renditions that speak to the quick (those standing) and the dead (the unfortunate cadaver) of the human body, they arouse an image that closes on the practice of reading. It is unfortunate that we tend to treat the writer’s oeuvre as a version of cadaver, and the readers as the avid students clustered around to view the internal workings of the mysterious and beautiful body, which might still be in the throes of a soulful ascent. But rather than lament that process, I want to raise the more arcane question of where such dissection begins. Rembrandt paints as if the anatomy lesson begins at the arm, that extension of the body that we use so handily for our pointings and connections, our gestured intentions. The fact is, most of these anatomy lessons began not by an intricate introduction to one of the body’s extremities or digital limbs, but by splitting the thorax, the main trunk, wide open. But a painter will use every possible excuse to paint a body’s landscape, even a cadaver, and the “fact” of the anatomy lesson’s procedure was something that Rembrandt ignored in favour of the felicity of his painting. So perhaps the critic ought to follow his example and begin, not with the oeuvre,
but with Laurence’s writing hand, that simple five-fingered hand that cannot keep up with the spate of Morag’s words at the end of *The Diviners*.

A painter, confronted with the body and spirit of the work of Margaret Laurence now, would know that she was only trying to paint a shadow. The shape of any writer’s shadow is an uneasy eidolon, not simply determinable by that which composes the writer’s cadaver: text and life, oeuvre and memory. More evocatively, the shape of a writer’s shadow is the contradictory and uncontrollable mystery that Laurence herself attributes to the river that flows both ways, an “apparently impossible contradiction, made apparent and possible” (*The Diviners* 3). For the shape of Laurence’s shadow is a vivid enactment of the contradictory joy and terror of writing, that pliant and vanishing process that defies the scalpel of any pathologist critic, but that might begin at the hand.

The ancients believed that a person’s shadow was one of her several souls, elusive, indefinable, both lithesome and formidable. This ghostly salamander danced around the outline of the body like a reputation more than a corporeal dependent. A woman without a shadow is dangerous; it is the shadow that proves (as in tests) the life. For Laurence, the interception of the body with illumination (the cause of all shadows) was writing, the act of writing. She called it work, a simple but complex designation, her pact with the spirits of both light and darkness.

“'You working yet, Morag?’” asks Royland in *The Diviners*. She says, “He got the word right now. Once he used to ask her if she was doing any writing these days. Until he learned that the only meaning the word *work* had for her was writing, which was peculiar, considering that it was more of a free gift than work, when it was going well, and the only kind of work she enjoyed doing” (80). *The Diviners* is a novel within that framing of work, engrossed in its own act of creation, occupied by writing as a central fugue in the complex and contrapuntal act of living. Of all Laurence’s work, it might be considered the text that shadows Laurence the most, that seems to intercept the writer and her life, her dread and desire, her living profession and its issue.
The last thing I want to argue for *The Diviners* is autobiographical urgency. To the extent that all writers must obsess themselves with their process, every text negotiates a metafictional comment; such distractions become commonplace. I would argue rather that *The Diviners* does more than merely resurrect or gesture toward the presence of the writer in the text. In her investigation of a realm that is both shadow and semblance, Laurence guides the reader toward the kingdom of communion, where the world that we daily negotiate becomes the text of a culture and a country, a shadow but a shadow that reaches out a hand.

Early in *The Diviners*, Morag talks about the terrible duplicity of words, what they can and cannot do: "*I used to think words could do anything. Magic. Sorcery. Even miracle. But no, only occasionally*" (4). Morag Gunn lives on words, with words, through words, editing herself as we watch and read, voyeurs—or anatomy students—while she fumbles with her tools: "How could that colour be caught in words?" (4). "The river was the colour of liquid bronze this morning, the sun catching it. Could that be right? No. Who had ever seen liquid bronze? Not Morag, certainly. Probably no one could catch the river’s colour with paints, much less words. A daft profession. Wordsmith. Liar, more likely. Weaving fabrications. Yet, with typical ambiguity, convinced that fiction was more true than fact. Or that fact was in fact fiction" (21). Fact is in fact fiction. Transparent as Morag’s interpretation of her “daft profession” seems to be, this early and pointed paragraph shadows the entire novel, and the entire corpus of Laurence’s work. A wry self-deprecation, it is also a warning. Coming as it does on the heels of the early morning phone call from the aspiring writer who wants to know how to get started, meaning how to get *published*—a medical student who has not yet had an anatomy lesson—it gives notice to the entire chimerical smoke and mirrors gang of both critics and writers that a writer’s shadow is far less fetching than inspiration and its divine delights, far more demanding than getting to know someone in the publishing industry. Morag tells the woman, “*I worked like hell, if you really want to know. I’ve told you. There’s no secret*” (20).

In ancient times one could give one’s soul to a god by dedicating one’s shadow to him. In the course of *The Diviners* it
becomes clear that the dedicatory shadow that Morag Gunn has offered comprises both the writing that the writer is entangled with and the pedestrian work of that writing, its combined drudgery and exhilaration. That readers and critics persist in what might sometimes be comparable to such phone call interventions of Laurence and her work is a disturbing residue of the extent to which the writer as cadaver is encoded in our iconic degustations. We would rather the autopsied body, pinned to the dissecting table, than the shifting and Protean shadow of the writing act itself. Throughout The Diviners Laurence uses Morag Gunn to address and to deconstruct the terrible shadow cast by writing, the shadow of living with writing, writing as a living, the communion of the writing act.

The shape of the writer's shadow in The Diviners moves across the spectrum of what the writer's soul must negotiate. "We're not in the business of immortality," said Laurence at the great 1978 Calgary Conference on the Canadian Novel, when the list of the hundred most important Canadian novels was topped by The Stone Angel. "Lucky me," says Morag, early in The Diviners. "I've got my work to take my mind off my life. At forty-seven that's not such a terrible state of affairs. If I hadn't been a writer, I might've been a first-rate mess at this point. Don't knock the trade" (4). But the trade—an expression with an ironic reference to prostitution—is not so easy to mediate. It is dogged by the shadow of ancient alchemical doubt, a paradox that Morag and her textualization embody in both action and character. The shadows that Morag must negotiate are more than the shadows of those people and events that she invents whole or half cloth out of their existence, like her dead parents. "They remain shadows. Two sepia shadows on an old snapshot, two barely moving shadows in my head, shadows whose few remaining words and acts I have invented. Perhaps I only want their forgiveness for having forgotten them" (15). Invention and forgiveness are the contradictory gestures of Laurence's writing shadow, negations and yet affirmations of the process, the act giving life to spirit. Earlier we are told that Morag keeps the shadow snapshots "not for what they show but for what is hidden in them" (6). Just so does the writing make of absence a presence, just so is divination the central metaphor of a narrative that concerns itself with searching more than with finding. Whether it is the
writer poking through the refuse of the nuisance grounds, or trying to recuperate the unmatriculated shadow of the Gunn chieftainship, *The Diviners* shadows the persistent conjunction of filth and beauty, its ancestry and offspring.

Further, there is present in *The Diviners* a firm sense of art's shadow, both pre- and post-figuration of life, whether that life belongs to the woman who is for a short time the wife of Brooke Skelton, the dreamed and then articulated professor-prince, or to the strangely affirming appearance of snake dancer and stripper Fan Brady when Morag moves to Vancouver. "Morag is fascinated [with Fan]. Does fiction prophesy life? Is she looking at Lilac Stonehouse from *Spear of Innocence*? Fan Brady, though, hasn't got Lilac's naïveté. Fan is tough in spirit, wiry and wary in the soul. She is not really like Lilac at all, of course. She is almost the opposite. And yet, looking at Fan now is almost like looking at some distorted and older but still recognizable mirror-image of Lilac. There is a sense in which Fan *has* that same terrifying innocence, expressed in different ways" (254). This writerly recognition is greater than a simple equation of Laurence suggesting that life imitates art, or the cadaver equals the living body. It is, set within the construction zone of the novel being written, a warning. In looking at Laurence, are we looking at Morag Gunn from *The Diviners*? Or should we be wary of the confusion of writing act and what is written, the shadow of the one commingled with the other?

Throughout *The Diviners*, the use of italics, itself shadow print, acts as shadow text to the primary narrative. In our critical dissections, titles of novels—a declaration of fiction—are always indicated by italics. The conjunction here is not accidental. The determination of fiction within fiction, the struggle of story within story, of writer with her shadow, is articulated not only by those italics, but by the multiple interruptions of snapshots, memorybank movies, conversations with Catharine Parr Traill, and, not least, the persistent *coitus interruptus* of the male figures in the novel, who become themselves shadows of absence. Despite a penetrating awareness of patriarchy, there is no ever-present father in Laurence's work: this is a woman writing, working, alone. As Morag says to A-Okay when Jules phones to ask about Pique, "My daughter's
father...As I’ve told you, never having had an ever-present father myself, I managed to deny her one, too. Although not wittingly, I wasn’t very witting in those days, I guess” (49). Again, the creative act of motherhood (the invention of Pique as much as the invention of the novel in which Pique is a character) is embedded in shadow. When Morag first becomes aware of Jules Tonnerre, it is as a “shadow” (58). Her admission that she was “not very witting in those days” is only too close to the punning declaration that she was not very writing in those days. Witting and writing become themselves refractive measures of the text and context of articulated experience and its desire, and those two are conjoined by the strange pool of a spreading shadow.

And wittingly writing, The Diviners casts a prophesying shadow of national Canada that is brilliantly inclusive, culturally, psychically, and spatially: from Manitoba to Toronto to Vancouver, to England and Scotland, and then back to Ontario; from small-town to city to rural setting; from orphan to wife to mother to writer; from aboriginal to settler in their conjunction. The shape of Laurence’s shadow is the shape of this country, desperate in its desire to speak a presence, but uncertain, conflicted, and ultimately italicized, an act of the imagination and an act of faith more than a general autopsy. “Morag sat at the table in the kitchen, with a notebook in front of her and a ballpoint pen in her hand. Not writing. Looking at the river. Getting started each morning was monstrous, an almost impossible exercise of will, in which finally the will was never enough, and it had to be begun on faith” (137). “I'll write,” Morag promises Christie when she leaves Manawaka; and although her letters home are sporadic, she keeps her promise. An act of faith, to write Canada in Canada, to write a woman writing, for these are all shadows of shadows, vulnerable souls that must be preserved from accident.

In her willingness to fulfil that lettered promise, “All right, I'll write,” Laurence shows the way to a legacy, a position from which to invent this multiple and multiplicitous framing of experience and its failures in the pre-fab construction known as Canada. Very early, when Morag has written her first poem, and shown it to the minister’s wife, Mrs. McKee, she realizes that there is no way that once shown, you can “unshow” (66) your writing. Once a
shadow is cast, it will follow its caster. At the same time, in that ubiquitously quoted moment of “Morag returned to the house, to write the remaining private and fictional words, and to set down her title” (370), there is still the shadow of Christie’s fictional “real country” (319), where Morag was born, and of which Christie says—and here is the warning we must be careful to heed—“you don’t want to believe everything them books say, for the good christ’s sake. We believe what we know’” (67).

We believe what we know. Despite interventions into the mysterious body, despite our confidence that the abstract is explainable and our shadows will always follow us, we believe what we know. In such quiet profundities hides the shadow of Margaret Laurence. It is only too easy, in our reappraising fervour, our anatomy lesson, to isolate Laurence as a product of her time and place, gender and race, a mainstream moment in and of herself shadowless. But if we see her doubt and faith in their pluralities, her writing shadow prescribes a space from which to question the various repressions and subversions and dissatisfactions of the literary world that are now finding words to speak and space within which to say those words. Laurence’s literary force is not that of one who garners followers or mentors disciples. Rather, her influence can be felt as a subtle tonal inspiration, through her confirmation of the act of writing, its honest work, its willingness to grapple with the personal and the profound both. Her writing casts a moving shadow, a shadow that insists on writing as a process, an act of discovery. There are writers who create words and characters and situations that are stone, frozen and directed even before they begin to occupy their text. Laurence permits her words to reveal their own body, their own slow process of discovery and disintegration, fallible, sometimes tentative, often torn between the conundrums of fact and fiction, a dissection that begins at the quick intelligence of the hand rather than the corpus trunk. Laurence refuses to solve the puzzle of the anatomy lesson, instead offering to her readers and critics the quiet sidereal questioning of the artist at work. Despite her disclaimer of immortality, Laurence’s shadow will not depart from us. Having cast it, she is probably where Plutarch claims the blessed ones are, happy forever, “in a state neither needing food nor casting shadow.”
Let me conclude with a story, apocryphal, for I was not present at this event, although I heard it from one of the main participants, Marian Engel, who deserves a reappraisal of her own. Engel was at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, and a professor, who was teaching *The Diviners* in a graduate class on Canadian literature, asked her to attend the class, for writerly input, I suppose. She did, and in the course of it was treated to the usual pull-apart of a group of, albeit young, critics, who can find a good many things wrong with even the most sacred of texts. They are, after all, witnesses to an anatomy lesson, and the cadaver is unlikely to remain whole. Marian told me the story this way.

"I sat there," she said, "and I got madder and madder. They were reading the novel carefully, but they were deliberately ignoring what had gone into the making of that novel. Anyway," she sighed, "I was furious, and I did something unforgivable. Actually, it was both fictional and factual. That morning, the frame of my glasses had broken. I had managed to mend the frame with glue, but I knew that it wasn’t very permanent. Anyway, I sat there, listening to people who had never even written a bloody short story, tearing this book apart, and I couldn’t stand it anymore. I threw my glasses against the wall, where they broke quite spectacularly, and I shouted, ‘Do you have any idea how long it took just to type this novel?’ I wanted to remind them how much work it is just to put that many words together, to make them into a story’s shadow."

If Marian had told that story to Margaret Laurence, Laurence would have laughed and given Marian the advice that Morag Gunn figures out her first day of school, after Eva Winkler has an accident, defecates in the classroom, Morag thinks to herself, the way to survive is to “Hang onto your shit and never let them know you are scared” (42). Your shit or your shadow text a complementarity within the slowly decomposing corpus, while above the body hang the inquisitive faces of the anatomists, eager vivisectionists who believe themselves apprentices of mercy.

So, there is the anatomy lesson, the writer and her oeuvre spread out against the sky like a patient etherized upon a table. But that is another story, or song, different in intent, for in the end, Laurence offers not abstractions, but her capable hand, its
knotted knuckles and tributaries of veins, for our inspection. Death sets upon all, leaves the body in a place without a shadow; the anatomists hover. In the face of such exposure, down to the very sinews and nerves of the pragmatic limb, Morag Gunn remembers Catharine Parr Traill, her practical advice. "In cases of emergency, it is folly to fold one’s hands and sit down to bewail in abject terror: it is better to be up and doing" (332). The Diviners is the anatomy lesson of a writer wrestling with her shadow, worse than Jacob’s angel, more daunting than the demons of the night, drink and loneliness, terror and the taunting of dissection. The Diviners is a novel written by a woman with writer’s cramp, her hand, laid bare, in pain, but written nevertheless, extant, standing firmly in the sunlight to cast whatever shadow will be cast. The shape of a writer’s shadow is the shape of work, endless, uneasy, engrossing work. Any evaluation of Laurence—and she has left herself willingly for our anatomy lesson—must have the courage to cast that shadow both ways, for she worked not only for herself, but for us.
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