

Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God* as a Work of Simultaneous Narration

Isla Duncan

Volume 33, numéro 1, 2008

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl33_1art07

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (imprimé)

1718-7850 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Duncan, I. (2008). Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God* as a Work of Simultaneous Narration. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 33(1), 136–150.

Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God* as a Work of Simultaneous Narration

ISLA DUNCAN

ALTHOUGH THE NOVEL WON the Governor General's Award for Fiction in the year of its publication, some of the initial receptions of Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God* (1966) were surprisingly negative: Clara Thomas believes that the perspective "slides out of balance" as a result of the first-person narrator's narrow, "neurotically obsessed" consciousness (51); Robert Harlow, reviewing in *Canadian Literature*, complains of the novel's lack of "objectivity, distance, irony," and yearns "for the third person point of view and the omniscient author — old-fashioned techniques for an old-fashioned story" (72). In her 1975 essay in *The Dalhousie Review*, Leona Gom remarks on "the critical disapproval Laurence's use of the first-person present received" (238).

As Nora Stovel explains in her study *Rachel's Children: Margaret Laurence's A Jest of God* (1992), later responses to the novel are more laudatory. In particular, the reactions to how Laurence develops her central character are more positive: for example, Margaret Atwood, in the afterword to the 1988 New Canadian Library edition, describes "Rachel's inner monologue [as] a little masterpiece in itself" (214). Lars Hartveit, writing a decade later, welcomes the "subversive potentiality" in Rachel that finally enables her to make her escape from Manawaka (348), while Jill Franks, also writing in the late nineties, cautiously celebrates a "budding feminist consciousness" in Laurence's narrator that is, perhaps, easily overlooked (100). Subsequent to the essay by Leona Gom, entitled "Margaret Laurence and the First Person" (1975), there followed Barbara Powell's study of "The Conflicting Inner Voices of Rachel Cameron" (1991); "Echo and Utterance: the Voice of Rachel Cameron" (1997) by Laurie Lindberg; and, in "Speaking in Tongues" (1995), Karen Stein's reading of the novel as a Gothic narrative. One feature that each of these academic essays has in common is a concern with "the author's choice of point of view" (Gom 250).

Scholars studying Laurence's work will know that the writer was

fiercely defensive of the narrative voice that characterizes *A Jest of God*. Her justification of the self-reflexive, “in-turned” first-person narration is articulated in “Ten Years’ Sentences” (1969), when she explains that the limited perspective is congruent with the “shackledom” of Manawaka and the “tomb-like atmosphere of [Rachel’s] extended childhood” (New 21). It must have been difficult for Laurence, relying on narrative strategies that were, in 1966, thought unorthodox and unfamiliar, to tell a story she suspected would be unpalatable to many, for, as she laments to her friend Adele Wiseman, “What, in a world sense, could matter less than the unhappiness of an unmarried woman teacher in a small town?” (Lennox and Panofsky 204). She goes on to answer her own question, however, defiantly asserting “what could matter more?” (204). Writing to Wiseman in 1965, a year before the publication of *A Jest of God*, Laurence anticipates some of the adverse reader reactions, at one point suggesting that “it might appear as though parts of it were written when [she] was stoned” (202). She remains, however, undeterred, determined to abide by her own aesthetic decisions, later maintaining, “I recognize the limitations of a novel told in the first-person and the present tense, from one viewpoint only, but it couldn’t have been done any other way” (New 21).

The antipathy that Laurence’s narrative strategies generated in some quarters seems, four decades later, rather subjective and misjudged, particularly in the light of advances made by narratology. This academic discipline, which originated from structuralist literary theory in the mid sixties, is enjoying a renaissance: narrative studies have developed to encompass “a host of methodologies and perspectives — feminist, Bakhtinian, deconstructive, reader-response, psychoanalytic, historicist, rhetorical ... (psycho)linguistic” (Herman 1), furnishing scholars with a plurality of descriptive and explanatory models with which to conduct narrative analyses. Twenty years after Laurence’s premature death, her work deserves to be re-appraised and visited anew, with the help of critical and theoretical schools of thought that were nascent at the time of the novel’s publication. Concepts such as focalized perspective, diegesis and “genuine polyphony” (Bakhtin 6), concepts with meagre academic currency in Laurence’s time, are now particularly useful in readings of her Manawaka fiction.

My own “re-visiting” of *A Jest of God* is enriched by the work of,

principally, Dorrit Cohn, whose research on simultaneous narration facilitates a more detailed narratological study of Laurence's "point of view." Cohn devotes one chapter in her book, *The Distinction of Fiction* (1993), to "The Deviance of Simultaneous Narration," choosing J.M. Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) to illustrate the phenomenon. A quotation from the narrative, "I doze and wake," precedes the indicative title, providing a clue as to the kind of puzzling contradictions she believes are associated with this genre, one that she classes as "an unacknowledged category" (97). At the outset of her chapter, she states that "the axiomatic pastness of narrative," proclaimed by numerous theorists such as Rimmon-Kenan, Ricoeur, and Scholes, "needs to be variously qualified." She cites, as an example of a challenge to the orthodox pastness of narrative, the increasing trend in contemporary first-person fiction to "cast a distinctly narrative (not monologic) discourse in the present tense from first to last" (Cohn 96-97). She includes two Atwood texts, *Surfacing* (1972) and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) in her list of well-known works of fiction that are so narrated. Laurence's second Manawaka novel, *A Jest of God*, might also have been cited; indeed, I would argue that it richly exemplifies the genre. Cohn wonders how these innovative fictional forms can relate to narratological conventions, observing that the traditional justification for the use of the historical present in narrative, namely, for the purposes of enhanced vividness and immediacy, does not have the same validity when the entire narrative is consistently told in the present tense.

Cohn is careful to distinguish between the use of the first-person present in diegesis, and its function in a non-narrative fashion, that is, in interior monologue. She calls the latter phenomenon "silent mental self-address," which, according to Stanzel, "does not narrate or address a listener or reader" (Cohn 100). Cohn examines a passage from Coetzee's novel, where a nameless first-person male narrator, an escaped prisoner, describes how he tries to hide in the room of a woman he has formerly known. The paradigm begins,

As boldly as I can, but wincing despite myself, I mount the stairs.
How must I look to the world with my dingy shirt and trousers, my
bare feet, my unkempt beard? [...]

The passageway is empty, the door to the girl's room open.
(qtd. in Cohn 101)

Cohn argues that such first-person narration, consistently in the pres-

ent tense, falls between two categorizations that she calls the “historical present resolution” and the “interior monologue resolution” (102). She exposes the difficulties of classifying simultaneous narration in the context of either of these two resolutions, paying close attention to the following sentences from later in the same extract: “I doze and wake, drifting from one formless dream to another. By mid-morning it has become too hot to sleep” (qtd. in Cohn 101). The statement “I doze and wake” most strongly resists the interpretation of the passage as interior monologue, for the synchrony is disrupted; moreover, there is compression of time, in the summary sentence, that is a hallmark of diegesis.

Cohn argues that the historical present can usefully be termed the “as if” tense of narrative, for the reader understands the tense as referring to a time not entirely concurrent with the experience of narration, but certainly seeming so. The reader is expected to “de-literalize” (104) the tense, as s/he must in the Coetzee passage, for in the extract quoted immediately above, the two simple present tenses constitute “semantic incongruence” (103). The synchrony of language and event is most vividly sensed when the narrator appears to give vent to his thoughts and innermost feelings; the effect is of overhearing mental self-address. Simultaneous narration combines the mimeticism of first-person fiction, “where the narrating self refers to the past life of an experiencing self,” and the “norms of verisimilar psychological presentation that mark the tradition of *third* person realist fiction” (104; original emphasis), where the reader is miraculously granted access to a character’s consciousness.

Concluding her chapter, Cohn argues that, as a distinctive and little theorized genre, simultaneous narration heralds exciting “narrative possibilities” (108). It may present the reader with sometimes enigmatic and implausible narrative situations, when, for example, the “affected synchronicity” of the storytelling appears absurdly stretched, and creates an impression that the narrator has struck “an ambulatory writing pose” (105). In its mimicry of those conventions of autobiography and confession that are associated with interior monologue, it intensifies the immediacy of self-communion, transforming the reader into both voyeur and eavesdropper; however, it allows the first-person narrator the freedom to tell a story “in an idiom that corresponds to no manner of real-world, natural discourse” (105). Freed from what Cohn calls the

“autobiographical matrix,” simultaneous narration has the option of displaying the “artificiality” (105) of third-person narrative, with its concomitant literary, and fiction-specific, artifice.

There are many occasions in *A Jest of God* where the sustained fictional present of Rachel Cameron’s narration intensifies the reading experience. In the first chapter, Laurence introduces the reader to a character whose heightened self-awareness, gaucheness, and anguished self-loathing are amply manifest: Rachel imagines that the pupils she watches chant her name (Laurence 7); she has difficulty acting naturally because she is so conscious of what she construes as her impinging presence on others (13); she is trapped in various false personas (11) and she is wont to perceive herself as alien — a freakish anachronism (18). Throughout the narrative, her carping voice comments on her own thoughts and actions, as well as on those of every character inhabiting her Manawaka world; yet Laurence alleviates the solipsism and the sanctimony of her narrator’s commentary with devices like irony, iconoclasm, and sardonic humour. After her first date with Nick Kazlik, Rachel nervously fields a telephone call from him, after which she asserts, attempting sang-froid, “I’m not worked up in the slightest. I’m quite glad he phoned, that’s all. It’s not of the slightest importance. It’s not only my hands that are shaking” (88).

Rachel recognises her weaknesses too well, and her willingness to confess them endears her to the reader. She also has the capacity for irreverence, as she demonstrates when she likens the image of Jesus, in the town’s orthodox church, to “a slightly effeminate insurance salesman who, somewhat incongruously, seems to be clad in a toga” (47). That Rachel Cameron fully understands how manipulative her mother can be is often revealed in the kind of mocking aside she makes, when she describes May Cameron’s appearance at bedtime: “She has washed her hair, I see, and coaxed it into grey lace around her head, so that although wan, she looks her best. Very touching” (79-80).

These observations are plainly constitutive of narrative, rather than “silent mental self-address” and I would suggest that they make Rachel Cameron’s account seem less self-absorbed. Far from “in-turned,” these comments portray a woman who is keenly aware of her surroundings, sharply critical of what she suspects might be hypocrisy. Indeed, so acutely conscious is she of other people’s opinions and influences upon

her that she incorporates their voices in her first-person account. At times she sounds like “the echo of [her] mother’s voice” (10), as when, describing her visit to the Regal café for some cigarettes, she notes, “I don’t smoke much any more. It is foolhardy to take chances with one’s health, after all” (60). The contrast between the first statement — personal, informal and confiding — and the second is marked. The extraposed construction and use of the formal, generic pronoun “one” make the statement sound like a prescription or a reproof delivered by a parent to a child.

By virtue of free direct discourse, Laurence integrates into her narrator’s account snippets of real or imagined dialogue, creating a genuine polyphony of voices that dilutes what Robert Harlow calls Rachel Cameron’s “sorrowful moan” (74). When she fears that she is starting to speak in “that simper tone” (Laurence 8) many primary schoolteachers acquire, she imitates the notorious voice of a colleague, as salutary illustration: “Sapphire Travis does it all the time. Rachel dear, would you be a very very good girl and pour me a weeny cup of tea?” (9). Here, diegesis and re-enacted mimesis are juxtaposed without the markers of differentiation — reporting clause and inverted commas — that announce direct speech. When Laurence depicts her narrator in the act of imagining future speech events, she achieves an astonishing heterogeneity of voices. After Rachel has struck her favourite pupil, James, with a ruler, drawing blood, she confesses that she cannot lose face with an apology:

I cannot say I’m sorry. Not in front of them all, twenty-six beings, all eyes. If I do say this, how shall I appear tomorrow? Cut down, diminished, undermined, very little left. If I do not say it, though, there’s enough gossip for a month or more, to friends and fathers and lovingly listening mothers — *you know what Miss Cameron went and did?* Did she? And to James, space venturer, first man on the moon? (59)

There is diegesis; there is interior monologue, consisting of the narrator’s self-questioning and her typically self-deprecating answer; Laurence then inserts imaginary future interlocutors, gossiping Manawaka townspeople, who she expects will discuss the incident with relish. In this concentration of different discourses, Laurence obviates the reader’s possible confusion by demarcating one strand, with italics.

Rachel's awareness of herself and the effect she has on others is copiously illustrated in what she herself acknowledges is her carping voice (47), for instance when she chides herself, using her forename (47, 60). She not only comments on her voice and thoughts, but she also passes judgement on what others say and do. As the narratologist Monika Fludernik notes, sometimes, in present-tense narratives, the "commentary is ... indistinguishable from reportative narrative" (*Towards* 254) and such blurring is certainly found in *A Jest of God*. The extract below relates to the time immediately after the narrator has made love with Nick Kaslik at his house:

"I could at least make some coffee for you," he says at last. "I'm a hell of a host." Host. It seems an unusual word under the circumstances. We dress and go back down to the living-room, and when the coffee is ready we sit down together within the mammoth half-moon chesterfield. Now I can't think of anything to say. He talks so easily, when he wants, yet he does not seem bothered by silence. I'm the opsite. (111)

After the direct speech, the narrator at once retrieves the last word spoken, commenting on what she believes is its inappropriateness in the context. After a piece of straightforward, rather bland reportage, the narrator comments reflectively on her reticence, which, she opines, is in direct contrast to her companion's social ease. Passages in which narrative commentary and reportage are juxtaposed are common in Laurence's novel, and they demonstrate how flexible and unstable the genre of simultaneous narration can be.

The exciting narrative possibilities of this genre may, as I suggested earlier, cause interpretive problems for the reader. Fludernik writes that, in addition to the lack of summary in simultaneous narration, there is also a tendency towards the recounting of narrative situations that are impossible to envisage. The reader may have difficulty imagining a source for the narrative, a time "during which the protagonist could realistically be construed to indite (orally or in writing) the narrative of events as they occur to him [*sic*]" (*Towards* 253). Cohn similarly accepts that the reader may wonder about the origin of the narrative source, thinking, perhaps, that the narrator conducts "a non-stop oral diary" (105).

In terms of narrative situation, there are passages in *A Jest of God* that might be construed as implausible. On the other hand, it can be argued that they serve to further illustrate and confirm the narrator's troubled, agitated frame of mind. When Rachel goes to visit Calla, after her revelatory encounter with the "comic prophet, dwarf seer" Hector Jonas (131), she delivers a captious commentary on her friend, and also on the contents of her living-room; the descriptions are so meticulous and so extensive, that, as pieces of simultaneous narration, they appear to disrupt the affected synchronicity between language and event. The narrator's sweep takes in Calla's garish clothes, leaden hair, clanking jewellery and "grimy" feet, encased in "royal-blue toe-thong sandals" (136), before it passes critically over the clutter in the living room. The recounting of detail as minute as the inscription on a sugar spoon and the lettering on a cushion cover simulates the precision of some image-processing machine. But when one remembers that Laurence is chronicling her heroine's "intensely personal dilemma" (Lennox and Panofsky 204), then the frenetic, obsessive desultoriness of Rachel's commentary seems justified.

The account of the visit to Calla's rooms exemplifies the kind of narration that linguists call "negative modality," wherein what is being reported is expressed in terms of uncertainty, via, for example, qualifying adverbs, and "various verbs of speculative condition" (Toolan 72). The paragraph immediately preceding the description reads: "My hand is still on the doorbell, and now I realize it *must have been* ringing for some time. I'd *almost* forgotten where I was" (136; emphasis added). The narrator goes on to allude to how Calla places a guiding hand on her friend's shoulder "as anyone *might*," making both women conscious of "this *half-gesture* which *probably* wasn't intended as *anything at all*" (136; emphasis added). Here, Laurence conveys not only her narrator's loss of self-control, but also the extent of her neurosis. For Rachel's emotional state has been heightened, firstly, by Jonas's revelations about her father, and secondly, by her anxieties about the constancy of Kaslik's commitment to her. The subsequent description of the shambolic Calla and her equally chaotic room, introduced by lexemes that express "negative modality," renders the account like "the product of a narrator who is not in confident proprietorial control of the story they are telling" (Toolan 72). Thus, one could argue that the apparent narrative implausibility is more positively construed as the writer's consistency in characterization.

Another occasion when the simultaneity of the narrative situation stretches credibility is when the narrator recounts her sexual experience with Nick Kaslik. However, Laurence partially overcomes the potential awkwardness of this inditing by presenting most of the experience(s) in direct speech (96-98, 109-10, 153-54); sections of diegesis sometimes appear cumbersome, overly abstract to the point of euphemism: “Now there is only the swiftness of him, the heaviness of him on me, and at the final moment he does not cry out like before” (110). Some moments of self-analysis are so vague as to be cryptic, as in: “and then this tender cruelty, always known him but never before to me” (153). In such instances, the narrative situation is difficult, perhaps even inadvisable to imagine. Barbara Hehner, writing in “River of Now and Then” (1977) suggests that Laurence’s portrayal of the couple’s intimacy is sometimes impaired by “the jarring falseness” (45) of “Nick’s Jacob-like revelations” which “are not only boring but unconvincing” (55).

Hehner acknowledges, however, the strength of the writer’s sustained first-person, present-tense narrative, which, she observes, “produces a *tour de force* recreation of a troubled and often divided mind” (43). The narrative teems with instances of Rachel Cameron’s conflicts and contradictions: in both her commentary on others and in her silent self-address she regularly cancels out one assertion with another. While admiring and envying Calla’s talent for unabashed ostentation, she adds, in the very next clause, that “it appals me as well” (53). When urged by her friend to accompany her to the Tabernacle, Rachel instantly regrets her acquiescence, declaring “I can’t go. I can’t not go” (34). Her awareness of her own vacillation and ambivalence makes Rachel’s self-address all the more painful to witness, so that the reader wishes she would heed her exasperated reaction to her mother’s coy deceits: “If only once she’d say what she means” (73), a wish that surely illustrates Laurence’s command of irony.

The writer’s ability to sustain the impression of simultaneity — calling to mind what Cohn aptly calls a narrator’s “ambulatory pose” — is illustrated with particular clarity when Rachel Cameron describes her and her mother’s expedition to the church. Laurence makes use of certain syntactic structures and lexical combinations in order to enhance the effect of synchronicity. The sentence “Here we are” (47), which marks their arrival and initiates the descriptive account, is, in pragmatics, termed a presentative, a deictic expression functioning in a gestural

way, as though the speaker/narrator were physically monitoring a speech event (Levinson 65). The repeated present tenses are predominantly instantaneous:

Mr MacElfrish's voice is as smooth and mellifluous as always, and he is careful not to say anything which might be upsetting. His sermon deals with Gratitude. He says we are fortunate to be living here, in plenty and we ought not to take our blessings for granted. Who is likely to quibble with that? (47)

The instantaneous present, the tense associated with sports commentary, occurs "where the verb refers to a single action begun and completed approximately at the moment of speech" and serves to convey the impression of simultaneity, giving the utterance "a somewhat theatrical quality" (Quirk et al. 180-81). Rachel Cameron consistently strives after such a quality in her narration, admitting at the outset, "I dramatize myself. I always did" (10). The predilection for drama is evident in the narrator's mischievous imagining of what might happen were the Reverend to veer from his customary smooth routine, if he "should suddenly lose his mind and speak of God with anguish or joy, or out of some need should pray with fierce humility" (10). Here, tropes of hyperbole, antithesis, and oxymoron achieve a rhetorical flourish, as the narrator constructs an image contrasting absurdly with the safe and predictable blandness of the Presbyterian minister.

There are, in *A Jest of God*, many other instances of affected synchronicity, where the reader could justifiably imagine the narrator's speaking as she acts. In the scene where Rachel is depicted clumsily using her mother's antiquated contraceptive device, the simultaneous narration works to convey the impression of an anxious, squeamish woman who, suffering from filial guilt, must remonstrate with herself before she can do the deed: "There. I've got to the bathroom and she hasn't awakened. It's all right. Quiet, Rachel. It's nothing. It doesn't matter ... Oh God — quick — I can't help it — don't let her awaken and hear" (123). Here, the desultoriness of thought and action is conveyed by fragmented sentence construction, ellipsis, and parenthesis.

Laurence's dexterity with syntax and punctuation is symptomatic of the high degree of literariness that distinguishes her fiction. George Bowering, in the oft-quoted essay "That Fool of a Fear: Notes on *A Jest of God*," attests to the "seriousness of the work as literature" (174). In his book, *Investigating English Discourse* (1997), the British linguist Ronald

Carter poses the intriguing question, “Is There a Literary Language?” — to which he provides an extensive reply, arguing that the phenomenon, the prose of literary fiction, is best understood in terms of a continuum, “a cline of literariness in language use with some uses . . . being marked as more literary than others” (128). Among the criteria for specifying literariness, he proposes re-registration; interaction of different linguistic levels; and the patterning of schemes. Laurence’s novel amply fulfils such criteria.

The novel’s epigraph, consisting of an excerpt from Carl Sandburg’s poem “The Losers,” constitutes the first example of a genre other than prose fiction, and it prefigures many other re-registrations in the work: incorporated into the narrative are children’s rhymes, biblical references, literary allusions, hymns, and popular songs. These serve various purposes: the quotation from Sandburg foreshadows the motifs of entombment and escape that are central to an understanding of Rachel Cameron’s development; the many allusions to cultural artefacts are testament to the fictive character’s sensibility. I earlier discussed the contributions that irony and contrast make to Laurence’s characterisation: these devices also illustrate the semantic richness of the work, making the reader consider, for example, the comic inappropriateness of the forename “May” for a woman whose impulse is to negate and discourage; the lexical inventiveness exemplified through the narrative, in “torrenting” (12), “unwarm” (17), “meadowlarking” (45), “freegulls” and “parchment-faced with embarrassment” (209). And exactly how many *jests* does Rachel ponder over at the conclusion? One of the most memorable examples of Laurence’s skill with patterning can be found in the last two paragraphs:

I will be different. I will remain the same. . . . I will rage in my insomnia like a prophetess. I will take care to remember a vitamin pill each morning with my breakfast. I will be afraid. Sometimes I will feel light-hearted, sometimes light-headed. I may sing aloud, even in the dark. I will ask myself if I am going mad, but if I do, I won’t know it.

God’s mercy on reluctant jesters. God’s grace on fools. God’s pity on God. (209)

Here Laurence employs several schemes. The device of anaphora in the repeated modal verb phrases conveys her narrator’s determined optimism; the phonological and morphological homology of “light-hearted”

and “light-headed” creates a jaunty rhythm compatible with such optimism. Contrasting and adversative statements reveal Rachel Cameron, finally, as ambivalent, for she appears assertive yet diffident, capable of turbulent emotion but also mindful of decorum. This remarkable passage would, with amended lineation, resemble poetry, particularly when one considers the lyricism of the final puzzling reflections on God. On the cline of literariness of which Carter writes, such language can be considered highly literary; indeed, it illustrates the “artificiality” which, Cohn argues, frees simultaneous narration from the matrix of autobiographical and confessional writing.

Another reason, perhaps, why the conclusion of *A Jest of God* is so memorable is that its narrative momentum is, for the most part, carried by verbs expressing future time. These finite verb phrases have hitherto featured infrequently in the narrative, and, in such profusion, they proclaim the narrator’s newly acquired purposefulness. Had the narrative not been presented consistently in the present, this variation in tense, aspect, and modality would not appear, stylistically, so marked.

Because the instantaneous present is the predominant tense in *A Jest of God*, it loses its *highlighting* impact, as a syntactic structure associated, in narrative fiction, with vividness, immediacy, suspense. The past tense, by virtue of its rarity, assumes far greater importance in Rachel Cameron’s account, emerging fully in Chapter Eleven, after the narrator has undergone the operation to remove a benign tumour. It is at this point that she reflects on past events, and her choices for the future. The sudden appearance of the past tense is doubly effective, for it provides Laurence with the vehicle for narrative summary, and it marks a striking departure from the concentrated “presentness” of the previous ten chapters. The tense change is crucial to Laurence’s design in characterization: it shows her narrator in a more thoughtful, wiser frame of mind, ready to accept that she must “quit sending out [her] swaddled embryo wishes for nothing to happen” (193).

Laurence acknowledged that there were “limitations” in an “inturned novel [told] from one viewpoint only” but was adamant that “it couldn’t have been done any other way” (New 21). I have argued in this essay that the *nature* of the narration merits fuller exploration; at the time Laurence was writing, the form was uncommon, had few precedents, and had not attracted the attention of either practitioners or theorists (Gom 236). As Dorrit Cohn points out in *The Distinction of Fiction*, “the global first-person/present tense form remains narratologically in

limbo: neglected (if not denied) in theory, mis- or un-identified in practice" (101). A work of simultaneous narration like *A Jest of God* is truly deviant because it enters new narrative territory, conforming to but also transgressing the conventions of interior monologue and confessional writing, two genres it closely resembles.

While simultaneous narration may now be more common in fiction, at the time of Laurence's writing it constituted "a radical departure from natural modes of storytelling," extending "readerly privilege," and enabling the experience of "a fictional persona's consciousness immediately" (Fludernik, "New Wine" 625, 626). There were, in the mid-sixties, several factors which make Laurence's narrative innovation seem all the more remarkable: the choices of setting, theme, and protagonist in *A Jest of God* were, by her own admission, unpromising; her status as writer of national repute was not yet assured; furthermore, the approaches of psychoanalytic and feminist narratology, disciplines that would later provide lenses through which her work could be viewed, were in their infancy. The use of the historical present, or narrative present, as it is more commonly known, is now more common in fiction. Fludernik notes that "from paragraphs and then entire chapters the present tense moves to usurp the place of the preterite as the basic narrative tense," hailing Coetzee as a skilful exponent; like Cohn, she cites Atwood's *Surfacing* as an example of how the narrative present "can be employed with great psychological validity" (Fludernik, "Historical" 88). What differentiates Laurence's achievement from that of Atwood in *Surfacing* (1972), and indeed in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), is that the author of *A Jest of God* sustains the simultaneous narration for most of her novel, and does so with much greater attention to the "affected synchronicity" earlier discussed. Only Part One of *Surfacing* is narrated predominantly in the present, while Offred's narration in *The Handmaid's Tale* switches continually from past to present, as she reflects, comments, or remembers.

Many years before the era of "extreme narration"¹ and the sophisticated literary linguistics required to explicate and describe its various manifestations, Laurence's decision to write what she called her "tour de force" in the first-person and in the present tense (Lennox and Panofsky 204) seems a particularly courageous and innovative one.

NOTES

¹ Forms of “extreme narration” are the subjects of a recent book on narrative, *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction* (2006), by Brian Richardson, in which various experimental narrative voices are examined. Among the chapters in the book are studies of multi-person narration, second-person narration, and “we” narration.

WORKS CITED

- Atwood, Margaret. Afterword. *Laurence*, Jest 211-15.
- . *The Handmaid's Tale*. Toronto: McClelland, 1985.
- . *Surfacing*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Ed. and Trans. Caryl Emerson. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984.
- Bowering, George. “That Fool of a Fear: Notes on ‘A Jest of God.’” New, ed., 161-76.
- Carter, Ronald. *Investigating English Discourse*. London: Routledge, 1997.
- Coetzee, J.M. *Waiting for the Barbarians*. 1980. London: King Penguin, 1982.
- Cohn, Dorrit. *The Distinction of Fiction*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999.
- Fludernik, Monika. “The Historical Present in English Literature: An Oral Pattern and its Literary Adaptation.” *Language and Literature* 17 (1992): 77-107.
- . “New Wine in Old Bottles? Voice, Focalization, and New Writing.” *New Literary History* 32 (2001): 619-638.
- . *Towards a “Natural” Narratology*. London: Routledge, 1996.
- Franks, Jill. “Jesting Within: Voices of Irony and Parody as Expressions of Feminism.” Riegel, ed., 99-119.
- Gom, Leona M. “Margaret Laurence and The First Person.” *The Dalhousie Review* 55 (1975): 236-51.
- Harlow, Robert. “Lack of Distance.” *Canadian Literature* 31 (1967): 71-75.
- Hartveit, Lars. “The Jester-Mask in Margaret Laurence’s *A Jest of God* and *The Fire-Dwellers*.” *English Studies in Amsterdam* 78.4 (1997): 342-54.
- Hegner, Barbara. “River of Now and Then: Margaret Laurence’s Narratives.” *Canadian Literature* 74 (1977): 40-57.
- Herman, David, ed. *Narratologies*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1999.
- Laurence, Margaret. *A Jest of God*. 1966. Toronto: McClelland, 1988.
- . “Ten Years’ Sentences.” New, ed., 17-23.
- Lennox, John, and Ruth Panofsky. *Selected Letters of Margaret Laurence and Adele Wiseman*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1997.
- Levinson, Stephen C. *Pragmatics*. 1983. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994.
- Lindberg, Laurie. “Echo and Utterance: The Voice of Rachel Cameron.” *Margaret Laurence Review* 6-7 (1997): 36-46.
- New, William, ed. *Margaret Laurence*. Critical Views on Canadian Writers. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1977.
- Powell, Barbara. “The Conflicting Inner Voices of Rachel Cameron.” *Studies in Canadian Literature* 16.1 (1991): 22-35.
- Quirk, Randolph, Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech, and Jan Svartnik. *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. London: Longman, 1985.
- Richardson, Brian. *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2006.

- Riegel, Christian, ed. *Challenging Territory: The Writing of Margaret Laurence*. Edmonton: U of Alberta P, 1997.
- Stein, Karen. "Speaking in Tongues: Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God* as Gothic Narrative." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 20.2 (1995): 74-95.
- Stovel, Nora. *Rachel's Children: Margaret Laurence's A Jest of God*. Toronto: ECW, 1992.
- Thomas, Clara. *Margaret Laurence*. Canadian Writers 3. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969.
- Toolan, Michael. *Narrative: A Critical Linguistic Introduction*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2001.