

THE REVELATORY POTENTIAL OF NARRATIVE AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Margaret Myrtle Power, Ph.D

Faculty of Theology
Saint Paul University, Ottawa

Abstract

This paper undertakes an investigation of narrative on two fronts: 1) the relational dimensions of narrative and its potential for religious education and teaching is explored; and 2) the revelatory potential of narrative form is examined. Redemptive and transformative motifs undergird the overall investigation. This narrative inquiry is a reworking of a segment of a doctoral dissertation completed at Fordham University, New York, in 2006. The doctoral study is entitled “Christiane Brusselmans and Narrative in Religious Education.” In the context of the doctoral study, the narrative inquiry sheds fresh light and significance on Christiane Brusselmans as a twentieth-century narrative pedagogue whose emphasis on story and symbol stirred the religious imagination and helped light up the landscapes of catechetics and religious education, leaving a lasting mark.

AT THE *WATERSEDGE*: STEPPING INTO NARRATIVE

The deep places in our lives – places of resistance and embrace – are not ultimately reached by instruction. Those places of resistance and embrace are reached only by stories, images, metaphors and phrases that line out the world differently, apart from our fear and hurt. (Brueggemann 1989, 109)

In this paper, the metaphor of the *Watersedge* will seek to line out the world of narrative, to invite a new conversation – and to dare what Walter Brueggemann (1989) coins “a new phrase, a new picture, a free juxtaposition of matters long known” (109).

In small rural Newfoundland fishing communities in the 1950’s and 60’s, the *Watersedge* was a playground for narrative. The tiny community of O’Donnell’s,¹ situated on the coast of southeastern Newfoundland, Canada, was no exception. There, the *Watersedge* was the bridge to everything, or to what might seem like nothing at all in the worst of times. To borrow a phrase from Danny Sullivan (1995), what happened around the *Watersedge* in these remote fishing communities of Newfoundland was “no damp squib of a tale” (139).

¹ In the 1950’s and 60’s, the community of O’Donnell’s in St. Mary’s Bay was hometown for close to 500 residents, including the researcher. Situated by the sea, fishing was the major industry of the community.

“Symbols are to be lived out,” states German Martinez (2003, 21). “When we live out our ritual symbols, that is to say, when we cherish them, experience them, and open ourselves to their inexhaustible significance, our lives become transformed in the process” (Martinez 2003, 21). In this light, the *Watersedge* is employed in this paper – to help stir the waters of narrative inquiry. “Creativity does not mean creation out of nothing or at will,” Martinez asserts (21). He points out that symbols “live and die in relationship to a particular community, a concrete culture, in which symbols create themselves.” In Martinez’ words: “They are living symbols when they evoke participation by revealing to people their basic religious experience and thereby enable them to enrich their lives” (21-22).

At the beginning of his work *Sacraments of Life, Life of the Sacraments*, Leonardo Boff (1987) claims that his book “will be meaningful only to those minds and hearts that live in our world of science and technology but are of a different spirit,” a spirit that permits them “to see beyond any immediate landscape and to travel beyond any given horizon” (1). Boff relates that today that spirit lives “in the underground depths of our cultural experience”:

It is like an underground stream feeding our wells and springs, which in turn feed the surface waters. We do not see it but it is the most important thing, because it humanizes things and our relationships with them. It detects the secret meaning inscribed in them. (1)

For the people who made O’Donnell’s their home in the 1950’s and 60’s, the *Watersedge* held up a life buoy of significant encounter. Boff (1987) relates that “sacraments take shape essentially in an encounter process,” and that the language of religion and sacrament is primarily “*evocative*” (6). “It narrates an event, relates a miracle, or describes a revelatory divine breakthrough in order to evoke in human beings God’s reality, behaviour, and promise of salvation,” he maintains (6). Employing a personal example, Boff notes that if he were to stand in front of a mountain as a scientist, he could proceed to describe its history over billions of years, its physiochemical makeup, and other details appropriate to such scientific perception. “But beyond these real dimensions, there is another dimension,” states Boff:

In me the mountain evokes or calls up images of grandeur, majesty, stateliness, solidity, and eternity. It calls to mind God, who has often been called Rock. Here rock serves as a symbol for solidity, stateliness, majesty, and grandeur. It evokes these features and serves as a sacrament of them. (Boff 1987, 6)

Akin to Boff’s analogy, the *Watersedge* reached far beyond its real dimensions for the people of O’Donnell’s who worked out their daily lives by the shores of the sea and drank in the ocean’s freshness. Like the mountain, it called up images of grandeur and majesty, evoking no less than the promise of salvation in the waters of life.

Reminiscing about growing up in rural Newfoundland, Tom Dawe (1980) writes: “Now, as a poet, I can be a landwash² child again, drawing some of the pictures, telling some of the stories, scribbling some of the verses . . . just as we used to do. If you were once a landwash child, come back with me. . . . And to those of you who have never been to a landwash – come let me take you there” (2). Dawe sketches a poetic portrayal:

² In rural Newfoundland fishing communities, the word *landwash* was sometimes used interchangeably with the *watersedge*.

Our beach was a place of flounders and fishing lines, tall tales and tom-cods, sandpipers and sculpins, “cat-paws” and cods’ heads, wet feet and “white-horses,” gull-calls and ghost ships, snails and seaweeds, “charms,” cures and crab-shells, tansies and tickle-ace, devils and dogfish, auk-talk and angel-clouds, snipe-bawls and lobster-crawls . . . and thousands of other wonderful stuff. (Dawe 1980, 2)

Leonardo Boff (1987) relates that the structure of the language of sacraments is narrative because sacraments, “whether profane or sacred, arise out of a human interaction with the world and God” (5). Underscoring the importance of narrative, he emphasizes that sacraments “are essentially evocations of a past and a future that are lived in the present” (Boff, 7). Throughout his work, Boff seeks to capture “the religious richness contained in the symbolic and sacramental universe that inhabits our daily life.” Likewise, this paper seeks to “spell out the language of story and narrative” (Boff 1987, 7).

In the rural bays and coastal outports³ of Newfoundland, the language of story and narrative was spun *from* and *around* the *Watersedge*. Reflecting on his childhood experiences, Tom Dawe (1980) describes one such ocean memory: “On warm, September afternoons when the sea was deep blue under a light blue sky, we used to watch the mackerel going up the bay. We would look out from our windows and see their white spray moving against the south-west wind and flying in the sunshine” (14). In a verse entitled “Mackerel,” Dawe creates the scene:

Across the blue September sea,
A white foam flowing to the west,
They plough the sea in thousands
And cannot stop for rest. (Dawe 1980, 15)

Dawe’s lyrical composition is an example of how the verses and chants and folklore of outport Newfoundland were narratively constructed out of the experience and culture of a sea people. In his memories and reflections, Dawe unveils a wider curriculum, and like the *Watersedge*, lures us into deeper waters:

So while we sweated over our copy-books on sunny, September afternoons, we were more interested in another school – that great school of mackerel, thousands and thousands of them driving pure white spray as they broke the rolling, blue surface far beyond the raised windows of the outport schoolhouse. (Dawe 1980, 14)

RELATIONAL AND REVELATORY DIMENSIONS

The narrative inquiry that constitutes this paper finds anchorage on two fronts: 1) the study explores the relational dimensions of narrative and its potential for education and teaching; and 2) the study examines the revelatory potential of narrative form. The inquiry begins by rooting these two fronts in contemporary scholarship.

³ In Newfoundland, the words “people of the outports” or “people of the bay” were common expressions used to describe people who lived in coastal communities away from the larger town centers.

NARRATIVE METHOD AS RELATIONAL TEACHING

In *Teaching from the Heart: Theology and Educational Method*, Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore (1998) devotes a major part of her theological and educational exploration to narrative method as relational teaching (131-162). From a relational perspective, and from the discoveries she has made in her teaching and writing about narrative theology and education, Moore highlights the transformative power of narrative:

. . . how one story generates another; how sharing stories binds people together, even across ideological divides; how stories ground people in their heritage and give expression to their present situation; how stories enliven social critique; and how stories give hope for the future. (Moore 1998, 131)

Moore (1998) draws inspiration from what she describes as “that sense of being related to the world” inherently revealed in narratives. “I hope our stories will be read and told and danced and painted and sung until we know ourselves in relation to all that has been and all that is to come,” Moore declares (132).

Of particular interest is Moore’s (1998) emphasis on narrative as “a significant mode of human communication, and a critic and bearer of culture.” This emphasis shifts our thinking beyond the level of narrative as technique, and establishes the importance of narrative as “a potentially profound and far-reaching educational method” (132).

In her theological reflections on narrative method, Moore (1998) draws attention to important themes that persist among the work of contemporary scholars in the area of educational theory, philosophy, and theology (138). These themes include: 1) the role of imagination in the educative process; 2) narratives as an important source of imagination; 3) narrative as a source of human consciousness and social critique; 4) story as a form of indirect communication that conveys insights into the human condition; and 5) story as having the power to form and transform (138-144). Themes one and two are pursued in this paper to form the first front of inquiry. Theme four is incorporated as part of the discourse of theme two. The transformative power of story (theme five) undergirds this investigation in its entirety. The themes find a “home of meaning”⁴ (van den Hengel, 1984) on the second front of this inquiry, which advances a discourse on narrative form, and offers concrete expression in the genre of the novel.

THE REVELATORY POTENTIAL OF NARRATIVE FORM

In seeking to explore the revelatory potential of narrative form, the second front of inquiry draws heavily on the insights of philosopher Paul Ricoeur in his understanding of narrative hermeneutics. Ricoeur’s understanding of time or *temporality*, and his understanding of *human agency* receive consideration. In chapter three of *Time and Narrative* (Volume 1), entitled “Time and Narrative: Threefold Mimesis,” Ricoeur (1984) “constitutes the mediation between time and narrative” by constructing the relationship between the three mimetic modes or moments of mimesis: Mimesis₁, Mimesis₂, and Mimesis₃ (53). Ricoeur’s (1984) narrative hermeneutical formula serves as a major source of inspiration. The revelatory potential of

⁴ In 1982, theologian John van den Hengel authored a book entitled *The Home of Meaning: The Hermeneutics of the Subject of Paul Ricoeur*.

narrative form is demonstrated by drawing examples from the novel *The Diviners* (1974) by Canadian author Margaret Laurence. The examples highlight how the novel shapes and discloses redemptive themes, and thereby constitutes occasions for revelation.

FIRST FRONT OF INQUIRY

“Your vision is your home,” claims John O’Donohue (1999), pointing out that we “always take in life through the grid of thought we use” (118). O’Donohue relates that a closed vision seeks to “make a small room out of whatever it sees” (119). Pondering his Irish roots, O’Donohue maintains that “the world of Celtic spirituality never had such walls.” In his description: “It was not a world of clear boundaries; persons and things were never placed in bleak isolation from each other. Everything was connected and there was a lovely sense of the fluent flow of presences in and out of each other” (115).

Like O’Donohue’s Celtic world, the *Watersedge* evoked this same imaginative sense in the people of outport Newfoundland – a sense of ebb and flow, and salt and sea. Here, in the roll and thunder of the tides, “the world was seen as if God were just creating it; it had the fresh scent of recent arrival”⁵ (O’Donohue 2004, 144). Here, the ocean praised “the steady shore in a continual hymn of wave” (O’Donohue 1999, 98).

Taken from a popular Newfoundland song titled “Let Me Fish Off Cape St. Mary’s,”⁶ these lyrical verses echo the wildness of Newfoundland’s cultural waters:

Take me back to my western boat
Let me fish off Cape St. Mary’s
Where the hogdowns sail
And the foghorns wail
With my friends the Browns and the Clearys
Let me fish off Cape St. Mary’s

Let me feel my dory lift
To the broad Atlantic combers
Where the tide rip swirls
And the wild duck whirl
And old Neptune calls the numbers
‘Neath the wild Atlantic combers

Oh take me back to that snug green cove
Where the seas roll up their thunder
There let me rest
In the Earth’s cool breast
Where the stars shine out their wonder
And the seas roll up their thunder (Written by: Otto P. Kelland)

⁵ In his most recent work, *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace* (2004), John O’Donohue employs these words in his description of the wonders of childhood.

⁶ Situated in St. Mary’s Bay, Cape St. Mary’s is an Ecological Reserve wild bird sanctuary. Go to www.newfoundlanders.net/JoyNorman/jphotos.html for a musical sampling of the song.

These Newfoundland lyrics give voice to a curriculum that is “with end and without end” (Moran 1998, 18)⁷ – a curriculum that finds its homeland in “the inspirational and the unexpected” (O’Donohue 1999, 115).

In exploring the narrative structure of emotions, Martha Nussbaum (1997)⁸ states that we “learn emotions in the same way that we learn our beliefs – from our society” (217). She emphasizes that emotions “are not taught to us directly through propositional claims.” Rather, they are taught, “above all, through stories.” Nussbaum proposes that stories “express their structure and teach us their dynamics.” She relates that once stories are internalized, “they shape the way life feels and looks” (217). Nussbaum highlights “the connectedness of narrative to forms of human emotion and human choice,” and stresses the importance of postformalist currents of research that urge us “once again to regard narrative as a human structure” (222).

THEME ONE: IMAGINATION AND THE EDUCATIVE PROCESS

John O’Donohue (2004) states that the imagination “retains a passion for freedom,” and that there are “no rules” for it (145). Emphasizing its mysterious lure, he declares:

It never wants to stay trapped in the expected territories. The old maps never satisfy it. It wants to press ahead beyond the expected frontiers and bring back reports of regions no mapmaker has yet visited. (145)

O’Donohue points out that too often “we squander the invitations extended to us because our looking has become . . . blind” (145). In his understanding, the imagination is the eye which helps us to see. “The imagination offers revelation,” he suggests, not by blasting us with information or numbing us with description, but rather, by coaxing us “into a new situation” (147). “It returns us to our native wildness,” states O’Donohue, “to the natural and seamless fluency of our own nature” (146).

In her exploration of narrative method, Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore (1998) states that among scholars today, “imagination is being revalued as an important ingredient of education” (138). Highlighting the importance of the role of imagination in religious education, this theme focuses on the insights of Maria Harris. (138).

TEACHING AND RELIGIOUS IMAGINATION

In her work *Teaching and Religious Imagination: An Essay in the Theology of Teaching*, Maria Harris (1987) highlights the vision and grandeur that reside at the heart of teaching, and suggests that “far more attention must be given to conversation about, to dwelling in, and to sitting with the teaching act itself” (xi, xiv). Of critical importance to Harris are “the ways in which religion and imagination might be brought to bear upon teaching” (xiv). In her investigation, she brings together religion and imagination “under the rubric of religious imagination” (xiv).

To further illuminate this theme and the importance of the role of imagination in religious

⁷ In *Reshaping Religious Education: Conversations on Contemporary Practice* (1998), Moran describes education as “a reshaping of life’s forms with end and without end,” 18.

⁸ Martha Nussbaum’s essay “Narrative Emotions: Beckett’s Genealogy of Love,” which first appeared in *Ethics*, 98, 2 (January 1988), is reprinted in *Why Narrative?* (1997), edited by S. Hauerwas and L.G. Jones.

education, two key dimensions of Harris' (1987) work are considered: 1) the term *religious imagination*; and 2) the metaphor of revelation employed by Harris as an interpretative key "for understanding the nature of teaching as an act of religious imagination" (xiv).

RELIGIOUS IMAGINATION

Harris (1987) views the activity of teaching "as a religiously imaginative act" that is able "to save and to redeem" (3). She suggests that the heart of teaching is imagination. In supporting her research, she draws on the insights of philosopher Paul Ricoeur, who states that "the imagination is par excellence, the instituting and constituting of what is humanly possible; in imagining possibilities, human beings act as prophets of their own existence" (Harris, 3). Harris highlights two salient points from Ricoeur's insights: first, imagination understood this way is redemptive; second, "since every real conversion is first a revolution at the level of our directive images, we can alter our existence by changing our imaginations" (Harris, 4). In applying these points to the work of teachers, she emphasizes that teachers "can shape and reshape subject matter in order to present, to institute, and to constitute what is, has been, and might be humanly possible." For Harris, "the work of creating possibilities" is essential to the teaching role. She describes the work of teaching as that of "handing on the belief that we have within us the capacity to alter our existence" (Harris, 4).

Harris chooses religious language for naming the ways of imagination (19). In her view, the choice of religious language "is an act of disclosure or revelation that enables us to 'see' the religious quality of imagination, the deep and profound dimensions lying beneath its surface." She proposes that "holiness within teaching itself is more readily claimed and reclaimed, more readily released" when imagination is explored through the lens of the religious, and when that exploration invokes teaching (19-20). She offers this reflection:

If the function of language is to give form to our experience of the world, then the use of religious language to speak of imagination can help us understand the mysterious, numinous, and the mystical elements residing at the heart of the world, including the world of teaching. (Harris 1987, 19)

Of critical importance to Harris are the words and metaphors we choose "when we teach and when we teach others to teach." She upholds that the metaphors we choose shape our thinking and our knowing and "can catalyze or paralyze the capacity to perceive and receive what is there, no matter how plain or abundant the evidence" (20). Drawing support from theologian Paulo Freire's insights on the importance of semantics and words in relation to critical consciousness, Harris emphasizes that an "operating force pulses in words themselves, which can either obscure or reveal." She contends that we are rendered blind without the appropriate language – "we cannot see" (20). From this perspective, she provides further insight:

. . . words not only can paralyze, they can redeem. Paul Ricoeur assures us that people are not motivated by direct appeals to the will. People are moved by experiencing their imaginations touched by someone or something that excites them into hoping and acting. When the word is made flesh, redemption is at hand. (Harris 1987, 20)

Harris suggests that the teacher's vocation is "to give flesh to language and to make metaphor incarnate" (20).

THE METAPHOR OF REVELATION AS AN INTERPRETIVE KEY

To explore the nature of teaching as an act of religious imagination, Harris (1987) employs four metaphors which serve as interpretative keys: incarnation, revelation, the grace of power, and re-creation (41-116). Harris' second metaphor of *revelation* is examined in this section. As a starting point for this discourse, the metaphor of *incarnation* is introduced in brief.

Harris asserts that teaching is "the incarnation of subject matter," the creation of form in that "the teacher is one who embodies – gives flesh to – form" (41-42). She notes that form is not "an arbitrary organizational element." "Every artist "knows that form is not only the intention of content; it is the actual embodiment of content," she declares (42). She underscores the significance of this understanding for teaching:

If teaching is the incarnation of subject matter, then the life and death of every kind of subject in all the meaning of the term subject, is teaching's appropriate concern. Since human beings (teachers) are the primary and most compelling embodied forms, we must not deny that all people in the teaching situation, by their very presence, are teaching what it means to be human, what it means to live and die. (Harris 1987, 55)

As a second metaphor, Harris (1987) explores revelation as essential to the understanding of teaching as an activity of religious imagination (59). She proposes that "teaching is the incarnation of subject matter in such a way that it leads to the revelation of subject matter" (60). She explores teaching as "fostering the revelation of subject matter" (65). To support her work, Harris relies on two major sources of research: the insights of Gabriel Moran⁹ on the religious meaning of revelation, and the insights of Soren Kierkegaard¹⁰ on the use of indirect communication (62-75).

Revelation and Religious Meaning

Harris points out that Gabriel Moran's work on the religious meaning of revelation helps illuminate what teaching is about. Harris explains that Moran's starting point for understanding revelation as a religious or theological concept is "a divinity revealing itself to human beings who are conscious, receptive, listening, attending subjects." She emphasizes that in Moran's thinking, the revelation of this "Unspeakable Mystery" or divinity "is mediated through events or persons or communities or things or words, indeed, through an entire revelatory creation. But that through which the revelatory process occurs is not the primary focus." It plays, rather, "the essential but secondary role of mediation" (62). This understanding bears significance for the relationality of the teaching act, as Harris' further clarification unveils:

. . . revelation is a process with two main elements, but these are not the divinity and divinely revealed truths, events, or insights. Rather, the two main elements in revelation are the divinity revealing and humans listening and responding. Revelation

⁹ Three major works of Gabriel Moran that address the meaning of revelation are: *Theology of Revelation* (1966), *Catechesis of Revelation* (1966), and *The Present Revelation* (1972).

¹⁰ Harris points out that the phrase *indirect communication* is best known for its employment by Soren Kierkegaard, and because his work is fruitful for teaching, she uses his insights as a starting point for her exploration, 66.

is a *relation* between subjects, knowing subjects. Revelation is a meeting between persons. Revelation is what happens in the “in between” of personal relationships. “The reality is the relation; the meeting is the revelation.” (Harris 1987, 62)

In this understanding of revelation, Harris highlights “the primacy of relational life” as a significant implication for teaching. She also emphasizes “the multiform idea of Subject Matter suggested in the understanding of the *what* that is revealed as the Divine Mystery/human beings/universe” (63).

In Harris’ opinion, the notion of teaching “as the revealing of subject matter through the incarnation of subject matter” is sacramental – an expression of religious imagination (63). Emphasizing that revelation is “present and social,” she draws an excerpt from an earlier work co-authored with Gabriel Moran in which they explore ‘revelation and community’: “Persons reveal, and it is persons who are revealed; through being persons they reveal, and through revealing they become persons” (Harris, 62).

Indirect Communication

Harris (1987) suggests that the central route to be taken by teachers who want to foster revelation is indirect communication (66). In an attempt to arrive at a deeper understanding of teaching as religious imagination, this section is structured around three key aspects of indirect communication presented by Harris (66-73).

Drawing on the work of Soren Kierkegaard, Harris addresses the aspect of *intention* in indirect communication. She explains that in Kierkegaard’s communication theory, “when the communicator faces the hearer, the communicator’s purpose or intent must be to confront the hearer (receiver of the communication) in a way that enables the hearer to discover that a rigorous demand is set before her or him” – a demand that Kierkegaard coins an “existence possibility” (Harris, 67). Harris explains that “the hearer is asked to choose what relation she or he will have *toward* that possibility (subject matter).” Such a demand impels the hearer to choose “his or her own *subjectivity*.” The hearer makes a choice through apprehending the form presented, and appropriating the form in relationship to the self (Harris, 67).

Substituting the words *teacher* and *student* for *communicator* and *hearer*, Harris explains that the teacher’s intention is “to try to arouse the student’s capacity to make a choice” (67). She identifies why Kierkegaard refers to this capacity as ethical: first, “it is one where freedom and choice in the hearer (student) become active”; and second, “the teacher wants this capacity to become active, intends to make the learner self-active, choosing herself or himself in self-knowledge and subjectivity.” Viewed in this light, Harris maintains that the teacher’s intention is directed toward “awakening thought, creating tension, arousing ethical response, and opening a communion of subjectivity” (67-68). In Harris’ thinking, indirect communication is not merely one among many methods of teaching. She is convinced that “the kind of intention resident in indirect communication must be found in all teaching” (68). She elaborates on this point:

No matter what the subject matter, the teacher is trying to embody form in a way that helps the learner discover a relationship to that subject. The relation then issues in a demand made, a choice offered, a course of action proposed. If teaching occurs in a situation where there is radical respect for the other’s freedom and choice, the other

will quite possibly be able to discover a power within to respond to a demand, to make a choice, to initiate an action. (Harris 1987, 68)

A second aspect highlighted by Harris is *content*. In her view, intention as proposed by Kierkegaard assumes a special relationship to content (69). She explains that in a direct communication, it is relatively easy to have an image of content, whether it be facts, data, theory or some other similar information. But to stop there is to limit our vision. She reflects on the elusive nature of content:

For if our intention is to help others claim their own power (*their* existence possibilities, their subjectivity in communion) and to foster the revelation of subject matter, then beneath all such imagery teachers need to see content as essentially elusive, ambiguous, and in the realm of mystery – that about which we can never know everything. (Harris 1987, 69-70)

Harris proposes that *content* is a medium for something more, something deeper (70). In her vision, what is critical is not a delivery of “content to receivers, *but of receivers to themselves* – as essentially existing, responsible, moral, and religious subjects” (70). Soren Kierkegaard’s words support her view:

There are observations and feelings which are expressed in such a medium that they are perceived only upon being kindled by the warmth of sympathy and the flame of inspiration, just as the writing on a certain kind of paper becomes visible only when it is held up to the light. (Kierkegaard 1967, 252)

Analogous to Kierkegaard’s observation, Harris maintains that the great realities we encounter, such as death, life, birth, and suffering, do not easily lend themselves to direct utterance and are “essentially beyond discursive speech” (71). The experience of the character Sonya, in an excerpt from Canadian author Edeet Ravel’s (2005) novel *A Wall of Light*, illuminates this deeper content. In the excerpt, Sonya makes her way to the hospital to visit her ailing mother after a power outage has occurred. When she arrives, the receptionist on duty is paging through a bodybuilding magazine. The novel reads:

I signed in and made my way down the long corridor. Bleak human odors half smothered by disinfectant clung to the airless gloom, and the small square windows on the doors peered at me like glazed eyes in a heart-of-darkness jungle. I reached my mother’s room and peeked in. It was pitch black inside and smelled of urine. I left the door open so the weak light from the corridor could filter in. My mother was awake. Like a wrinkled human doll she watched me impassively.

The bars along the bed were not easily adjusted, and I had to struggle to bring them down. I led my mother to the carved wood chair by the side of the bed; I’d brought the chair here long ago, to replace the depressing institutional one that had come with the room. I did it for myself, of course; I wanted to cheer myself up when I came to visit. I lifted my mother’s wet flowered nightgown over her head and replaced

it with a freshly laundered one. Her small breasts were still beautiful, as smooth and round as they had been when I was little.

I changed the sheets, brought her back to the bed, and climbed in with her. We sat there, side by side, my mother propped up on pillows. I held her hand and told her about the bodybuilding magazine and the power outage, and her breathing fell into rhythm with my voice. (Ravel 2005, 233-234)

Underlying Ravel's fictional account is a third aspect of Kierkegaard's indirect communication accentuated by Harris, that of *method*. Harris relates that for Kierkegaard it is essential for the communicator to go to the "place" where the receiver is located, to take pains to find where the *other* is, and to begin there (Harris, 71). In the light of teaching, Harris highlights the importance of the teacher going to "the place where the learner is," which, as she reminds us, often involves political ramifications and "taking into account hard realities: hunger, oppression, poverty, and economic need" (Harris, 1987, 71). "A divinity beyond any we have yet imagined may reside at the core of things, waiting to be manifest," Harris states, "and old images of that divinity may need burial" (72).

THEME TWO: NARRATIVES AS AN IMPORTANT SOURCE OF IMAGINATION

In their work *The Spirituality of Imperfection: Storytelling and the Search for Meaning*, Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham (1992) state that "stories are the vehicle that moves metaphor and image into experience" (17). Emphasizing that "stories communicate what is generally invisible and ultimately inexpressible," they offer this perspective:

In seeking to understand these realities through time, stories provide a perspective that touches on the divine, allowing us to see reality in full context, as part of its larger whole. Stories invite a kind of vision that gives shape and form even to the invisible, making the images move, clothing the metaphors, throwing color into the shadows. Of all the devices available to us, stories are the surest way of touching the human spirit. (Kurtz and Ketcham 1992, 17)

AT THE WATERSEDGE: A PLACE TO STAND ON

Hans Hauge (1988) relates that when novelist Margaret Laurence in 1982 gave an address called "A Statement of Faith" to Emmanuel College in Toronto, she told her audience "she had 'requested that a solid lectern be provided' because, as she continued, 'I feel the need of something solid to lean on, physically, but also the need – not just now but every day – of something spiritual to lean on'" (122). Hauge states that novelist Margaret Atwood tells how Laurence, "while staying at Trent University, used to say, 'I can't give public speeches without a chair . . . if I stand up my knees knock together, I mean literally'" (Hauge, 122).

Like Laurence's lectern to lean on, the *Watersedge* in Newfoundland was a narrative gathering ground that literally shaped and replenished itself in front of you – at every moment – calling up "the mystery and wonder at the core of life" (Hauge, 123), what Maria Harris calls the numinous or "more than" that cloaks us with a presence no amount of argument is able to dissuade (Harris 1987, 14).

Kathleen Fischer (1983) upholds that the truth of the imagination demands participation,

that only “by fully participating in the details of the symbol can we experience the wholeness of the truth it conveys” (18). In this sense, “imaginative truth is a dwelling place” and participation in it “is able to transform us” (18).

In her essay “Why Care About Stories? A Theory of Narrative Art,” Pamela Mitchell (1991) recalls a story told by psychiatrist Robert Coles about a fifteen-year-old boy named Phil with whom Coles worked (34). Phil had polio. While in hospital, he read *Huckleberry Finn* (by Mark Twain) and *The Catcher in the Rye* (by J. D. Salinger). Neither novel “was about Phil or about polio, nor did either novel make a direct point about some hope or possibility for Phil,” Mitchell explains (34). Instead, Phil discovered in these novels “new ways of looking at himself, . . . new discoveries of his own, about himself and life” (Mitchell, 34).

In his work *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination*, Robert Coles (1989) reflects on his conversation with Phil, after Phil’s encounter with the world of Salinger’s novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, the character Holden Caulfield in the novel and Pencey Prep School:

. . . he began a lively monologue on that novel, on Holden, on Pencey Prep, on “phonies,” on what it means to be honest and decent in a world full of “phoniness.” Holden’s voice (Salinger’s) had become Phil’s; and uncannily, Holden’s dreams of escape, of rescue (to save not only himself but others), became Phil’s. The novel had, as he put it, “got” to him: lent itself to his purposes as one who was “flat out”: and as one who was wondering what in life he might “try to catch.” He lived on a city street rather than near a field of rye. He was not as utopian, anyway, as Holden. But this youth had been removed by dint of circumstances from the “regular road” (his expression) and he was trying hard to imagine where to go, how to get there. (Coles 1989, 38)

Coles recounts how Phil was taken with the novels, with “the blunt, earthy talk of Twain, and Salinger’s shrewd way of puncturing balloons” (39). “He didn’t like being paralysed; but he did like an emerging angle of vision in himself, and he was eager to tell me about it, to explain its paradoxical relationship to his misfortune,” states Coles. Phil’s words reveal what was stirring inside of him, and how the characters of Huck and Holden were bringing him to reflection – to what Gerry H. Stone coins “praxis as reflective action” (Stone 1995, 269):

I’d like to leave this hospital, and find a friend or two, and a place where we could be happy, but I don’t want to leave the whole world I know. (Coles 1989, 38)

I’ve seen a lot, lying here. I think I know more about people, including me, myself – all because I got sick and can’t walk. It’s hard to figure out, how polio can be a good thing. It’s not, but I like those books, and I keep reading them, parts of them, over and over. (Coles, 39)

Kathleen Fischer (1983) reminds us that “the imagination loosens and dissolves past images in order to recombine them in new forms for the future” (23). In this light, Phil’s words make sense. Moreover, Fischer claims that the imagination “not only shows us a possible future; it evokes the energies needed to participate in the coming of that future” (24).

In his essay “The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text,” Paul

Ricoeur (1991)¹¹ emphasizes the kind of world opened up by the depth semantics of the text (165). Ricoeur relates that “. . . what we want to understand is not something hidden behind the text, but something disclosed in front of it.” From his vantage point, understanding has to do with grasping “the proposed worlds opened up by the references of the text” (Ricoeur, 165).

As Nathan Mitchell (1977) points out: “A symbol is not an object to be manipulated through mime and memory, but an environment to be inhabited. Symbols are places to live, breathing spaces that help us discover the possibilities that life offers” (1). As such, symbols are places to stand on – like the narrative gathering ground of the *Watersedge*.

SECOND FRONT OF INQUIRY

A Piece of Twisted Driftwood

O tangled twisted driftwood
come calling home to me,
come calling when I need you
to set my anguish free.

Come calling at my doorstep
as I walk along the shore,
O tangled twisted driftwood
come calling at my door (Power, 2002)¹²

This second front of inquiry is structured around two mutually related subjects: Paul Ricoeur’s threefold mimesis and the novel as occasion for revelation. Ricoeur’s hermeneutical understanding of temporality and of human agency will be brought to light in the overall discourse that constitutes this front of inquiry. Like the driftwood at the *Watersedge* that carried a trace of the other, and a trace of one’s inherent link to the deeper tidal run of culture, this inquiry carries traces of Ricoeur’s hermeneutical world of narrative understanding – of human agency and meaningful action – in the temporal and redemptive world of the novel. The image of the ‘self as other’ is captured in the driftwood lyrics:

Just a piece of twisted driftwood
sailing in the sun
that washed upon our beaches
on a heavy tidal run

And the driftwood finds you lonely
in a place where breezes blow
and secrets stir the currents
that only you can know

¹¹ This essay was first published in *Social Research* 38 (1971): 529-62. The essay appears in James M. Edie’s (1991) edited work *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II* which is the source for this reference.

¹² These lyrics were composed by the researcher and reflect her upbringing in coastal Newfoundland. The driftwood serves as a symbol for ‘the self as other’ along the *Watersedge*.

In your deep and misty waters
when the flow is fierce and strong
the driftwood keeps you steady
and carries you along

You hold on to this driftwood
and it holds on to you
as you float into the inlets
that are sheltered safe from view

O tangled twisted driftwood
come calling home to me,
come calling when I need you
to set my anguish free.

Come calling at my doorstep
as I walk along the shore,
O tangled twisted driftwood
come calling at my door.

Bend down to catch the driftwood
that lands upon your door.

In an essay entitled “The Religious Educator as Story-Teller: Suggestions from Paul Ricoeur’s Work,” Heinz Streib (1998) proposes that religious education should follow a hermeneutics of fiction, what he describes as “education in perception, in seeing, and in hearing, a school of fictionality and imaginative variation, and a school of responsiveness, remembering, and solidarity” (314). Underscoring the importance of the role of fictionality in religious education, Heinz writes:

Fictionality means to realize the “difference,” to realize the “it-could-be-otherwise” in order to play imaginatively with new worlds. Responsiveness means not only to be aware of the otherness of the other, but, as we can say with Ricoeur, learning to see oneself as another. (Streib 1998, 314)

In his essay “Paul Ricoeur’s *Oneself As Another* and Practical Theology,” John van den Hengel (1994) points out that in Ricoeur’s thinking the two major themes of a practical theology are “the human self and human action” (459). Van den Hengel asks: “What happens to human action and suffering in a time when the human subject seems to have lost its confidence in determining what is to be done?” He explains that for this reason “the concern of a practical theology has become the question of selfhood in all its obviousness.” He emphasizes that, for Ricoeur, “the cultural crisis is not a crisis of methods but a crisis of the self-identity of the human” (458-459).

HUMAN AGENCY

Richard Kierney (1988) emphasizes that Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of imagination “looks

beyond the first-order reference to empirical reality – which ordinary language discourse normally lays claim to – to a second-order reference to an horizon of possible worlds” (5). He points out that Ricoeur’s approach concentrates on “the capacity of world-disclosure yielded by texts.” Its main concern is “with the worlds which these authors and texts open up” (5-6).

Kierney explains that an “understanding of the possible worlds opened up by the poetic imagination also permits a new understanding of ourselves as beings-in-the-world.” But, for Ricoeur, as Kierney notes, “the hermeneutic circle precludes any short cut to immediate self-understanding” (6). He underscores Ricoeur’s notion of “the long detour” (Ricoeur 1983, 83):

The human subject can only come to know itself through the hermeneutic detour of interpreting signs – that is, by deciphering the meanings contained in myths, symbols and dreams produced by the human imagination. The shortest route from the self to itself is through the images of others. (Kierney 1988, 6)

Kierney emphasizes that by projecting new worlds, the hermeneutic imagination provides us with “projects of *action*,” and is therefore “not confined to circles of *interpretation*.” Here, “imagination has a projective function which pertains to the very dynamism of action” (6).

The metaphors, symbols or narratives produced by imagination all provide us with “imaginative variations” of the world, thereby offering us the freedom to conceive of the world in new ways and to undertake forms of action which might lead to its transformation. (Kierney 1988, 6)

Karl Simms (2003) relates that, for Ricoeur, in the case of plot, understanding is

grasping the operation that unifies into one whole and complete action the miscellany constituted by the circumstances, ends and means, initiatives and interactions, the reversals of fortune, and all the unintended consequences issuing from human action. (80)

Simms highlights two aspects of narrative that are key for Ricoeur. First, “it involves *mimesis* in the sense of its representing human reality in some way.” Second, “the kind of reality that narrative is mimetic of is human *action*.” Simms suggests that Ricoeur’s ultimate goal “is to discover the kind of human truth that scientific propositions cannot reach” – that the aim of Ricoeur’s work on narrative is “understanding human action through understanding *mimesis*” (80). To demonstrate “that time becomes human to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative” is, according to Simms, at the core of Ricoeur’s narrative analyses. In other words,

we understand our own lives – our own selves and our own places in the world – by interpreting our lives as if they were narratives, or, more precisely, through the work of interpreting our lives we turn them into narratives, and life understood as narrative constitutes self-understanding. (Simms, 80)

TIME

In his exploration of the notion of time as it functions in Ricoeur's theory, Simms (2003) presents three salient points. First, he draws attention to the theory of time put forth by St. Augustine in the fourth century. He explains that the theory begins by underlining "the gaps in the understanding of time resulting from the Aristotelian theory":

if time is a series of 'nows', then whenever I say now, the time of that now has already gone: whenever I try to isolate the present, it is already in the past. The perception of time – or, more particularly, of the *present* time – always lags behind the present time, the 'now'. The paradox is that the word 'now', which refers to the present, can never actually refer to the present, since as soon as the word is uttered, it is in the past. This is not just a problem with the word 'now', but is a problem about how the 'present' is perceived: on the one hand, we want to say that the present is always present, but on the other hand, as soon as we try to isolate it as present, it's gone – it's in the past. (81)

Simms points out that this leads to a paradox "whereby the present does not exist, if by 'exist' we mean that we can say of it, it *is*." He explains that in this understanding of time, the same can be said of the past and of the future: "the future does not exist, because it has not happened yet; the past does not exist because it is not happening *now*; and *now* does not exist because it is never *now*."

As a second point, Simms highlights Augustine's solution to this paradox: the notion of the 'threefold present.' In this notion, "the past and the future exist in the mind, through memory on the one hand and expectation on the other. He summarizes Augustine's formula: "To conceive of the past and of the future, the mind must be stretched – *distended* – and Augustine's neat formula is that the lack of extension of the present is overcome by the *distension* of the mind." Moreover, Simms suggests that "Augustine's stroke of genius was to declare that time is produced by the movement of the mind," bearing in mind that for Augustine "there was no distinction between the 'mind' and the 'soul'" (Simms 2003, 82-83).

Third, Simms emphasizes that Augustine's theory of time is the model Ricoeur adopts in describing the time on which narrative depends – *human* time and *human* meaning. In presenting mimesis as a threefold process, Ricoeur goes further (84).

THREEFOLD MIMESIS

Karl Simms (2003) explains that Ricoeur adopts Aristotle's definition of mimesis: "it is not (as it is in Plato) an imitation of nature, but an imitation of an action":

This is why mimesis is intimately connected with *muthos* (emplotment), since emplotment orders not events, but actions, and conversely characters within narratives would have no motive to act were it not for the causal connections that emplotment provides. Plato's model of mimesis may be appropriate to painting or sculpture, but poets and authors open up the world of 'as if', and it is Aristotle's definition of mimesis, as involving *muthos*, which allows this: it 'produces the "literariness" of the work of literature', and 'opens the space for fiction'. (Simms 2003, 83-84)

Simms explains that Ricoeur goes further than Aristotle in seeing mimesis as a threefold

process which he titles 'Mimesis₁', 'Mimesis₂' and 'Mimesis₃' respectively. Moreover, Simms emphasizes that each of the three aspects of mimesis "corresponds to each of the aspects of the 'threefold present' that constitutes time in Augustine's theory (84).

Mimesis₁: In *Time and Narrative*, Paul Ricoeur (1984) states that "if it is true that plot is an imitation of action, some preliminary competence is required: the capacity for identifying action in general by means of its structural features. A semantics of action makes explicit this competence" (Ricoeur 1984, 54). Karl Simms relates that what Ricoeur means by Mimesis₁ or prefiguration is that "'some preliminary competence' of what human action consists of 'is required' in order to comprehend a plot." He explains:

For example, we need to be able to identify who the *agent* (the person performing the action) is, and we need to be able to guess what this person is capable of doing; in fact, in approaching a plot we are already asking such questions as these questions because we have what Ricoeur (1983:55) calls 'practical understanding', that is, we know how people behave in the real world based upon our day-to-day experience within it. (84)

Simms points out that for Ricoeur, narrative composition "is anchored in our practical understanding" (84). For example, Ricoeur (1984) asks: "What then is the relation of our narrative understanding to this practical understanding?" His response is twofold: "It is a relation of presupposition and of transformation" (Ricoeur, 55).

According to Ricoeur, Mimesis₁ is "the preunderstanding of narrative," states Simms. He points out that Ricoeur presents "three ways in which we have a *preunderstanding* that we bring to narrative in interpreting it, or that a writer must have in order to compose it": *semantic* understanding; *symbolic* understanding and *temporal* understanding (84). In Ricoeur's words: "To imitate or represent action is first to preunderstand what human action is, in its semantics, its symbolic system, its temporality" (Ricoeur 1984, 64).

Mimesis₂: Paul Ricoeur (1984) states that Mimesis₂ or configuration "opens the kingdom of the *as if*" (64). He explains that by placing Mimesis₂ between an earlier and a later stage of mimesis in general, he seeks "to understand better its mediating function between what precedes fiction and what follows it" (64). Because of "the dynamic character of this configuring operation," Ricoeur prefers the term "emplotment to that of plot and ordering to that of system" (65). He identifies three ways in which "plot is mediating." First, "emplotment is the operation that draws a configuration out of a simple succession." Second, it allows extension. Third, its temporal characteristics "allow us to call plot, by means of generalization, a synthesis of heterogeneous" (65-66).

Reflecting on Ricoeur's notion of Mimesis₂, Simms emphasizes that it opens "the kingdom of fiction." It is a work of *configuration*, or of *muthos*, of emplotment which "organizes the various elements of a narrative into 'an intelligible whole.'" He notes that "it is the 'thought' of the story, that which stops us asking 'But so what?'" Here, the incidents "must be *related* in some way." He explains that for Ricoeur, "'agents, goals, means, interactions, circumstances, unexpected results' are all brought together by emplotment."

As with Mimesis₁, Simms highlights the *temporal* dimension to emplotment. Paul

Ricoeur states that “the configuration of the plot imposes ‘the sense of an ending’¹³ . . . on the indefinite succession of incidents” (67). Reflecting on the temporal dimension, Simms explains that “meaning attaches to a story because it is going somewhere, and it is from the end-point of a story that the story and its meaning can be seen as a whole.” The temporal dimension is the bridge or link between Mimesis₁ and Mimesis₂. Simms explains:

In Mimesis₁, we have a preunderstanding that a character might be expected to act in a certain way in a certain situation; in Mimesis₂ we can see whether or not the character did act in that way, and the reasons for their choice in terms of their contributions to the whole story. But we as readers can only do this by looking back over the story from the end-point. Narrative as a whole has an advantage over the characters within it, and over real-life people such as ourselves, precisely in that it can be re-read in this way. If Mimesis₂ grasps together the elements of the plot, then the reader is implicated in this grasping-together; the reader must also perform a work of reading in order to make this happen. (Simms, 85)

Mimesis₃ “marks the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader; the intersection, therefore, of the world configured by the poem and the world wherein real action occurs and unfolds its specific temporality,” states Ricoeur (1984, 71). Simms relates that it is “the *application* of the world of the text to the real world. . . . There is a *point* to reading or hearing a narrative that reaches out beyond the narrative itself,” to human life (85-86).

Overall, Simms stresses that emplotment is the most important of the three components of mimesis because, according to Ricoeur, emplotment “opens the space for fiction” and “produces the ‘literariness’ of the work of literature” (86). In *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur (1984) articulates his formula: “We are following . . . the destiny of a prefigured time that becomes a refigured time through the mediation of a configured time” (54). Emplotment is “what enables us to understand narrative as narrative, and as mimetic of the real world; it enables us to see the actions depicted in a narrative as human actions” (Simms, 86).

THE NOVEL AS OCCASION FOR REVELATION

This final section is demonstrative in its approach in that it seeks to give concrete expression to what undergirds Paul Ricoeur’s threefold mimesis: narrative as occasion for revelation. The redemptive motifs that mark the novel *The Diviners* (1974) are sought out to demonstrate the revelatory potential of narrative.

In an interview with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in 1974, shortly after the publication of *The Diviners*, Margaret Laurence was asked why she chose this title for her novel. She replied, “For me, writing . . . is a kind of form of divining. As a writer, you try to catch the vibrations of your characters. You feel your way into the character’s head. It is almost as though the book were there somewhere and you were trying to reach it. . . .” (CBC Radio Interview, May, 1974).¹⁴ This final section embarks on a similar search – a search to find the deep redemptive currents that flow in and out of *The Diviners*.

¹³Here, Ricoeur acknowledges Frank Kermode’s work *The Sense of an Ending* (1966).

¹⁴ Interview can be accessed at CBC Archives: Interviews with Margaret Laurence. This interview was broadcast on May 19, 1974, reporter Robert Fulford.

SNAPSHOTS OF *THE DIVINERS*

THE RIVER OF NOW AND THEN

“*The Diviners*,” says Paul Hjartarson (1988), “opens with a contradiction, ‘an apparently impossible contradiction’: ‘The river,’ the narrator declares, ‘flowed both ways’” (43). The image lingers in the mind, because throughout *The Diviners* “the river becomes a figure for the dynamic and apparently contradictory process” by which the protagonist of the novel, the forty-seven-year-old writer, Morag Gunn,

appears on the one hand, to shape and give meaning to the life story she tells and, on the other, to be entirely shaped, to be herself composed by the stories told. (Hjartarson, 43)

Hence, the river that flows both ways becomes the redemptive process by which Morag “both designates herself and is designated as a speaking subject, speaks herself and is spoken as a woman situated aslant the patriarchal discourses of her day. This apparently contradictory process holds our attention as much as the river does Morag.” It is the River of Now and Then, “a river less of time than of narrative.” It marks the title of the opening section of the novel. “It is,” as Hjartarson declares, “the narrative, the NOW and THEN, of *The Diviners* itself” (44).

Hildegard Kuester (1994) points to the river as the dominant symbol in *The Diviners* (85). The title of the first part, ‘River of Now and Then,’ “connotes primarily the concept of time in the novel, as in the stock metaphorical expression ‘river of time,’” she relates (84). Furthermore, she stresses that the treatment of time is of “paramount importance” to Laurence, as a major constitutive element in narrative structure (84-85).

Hjartarson (1988) highlights a misconception that has at times informed the reception of Laurence’s novel. “Faced with the ‘apparently impossible contradiction,’ readers sometimes conclude that rivers, after all, flow just one way, and thus, view the central motif of the novel and of Morag’s self-exploration as ‘the inability to escape the past.’” Hjartarson suggests that such a reading tells only half the story:

[It] acknowledges the importance of the past in determining Morag’s present life but it ignores the role of the present in shaping Morag’s understanding of her past. What is more, it assumes that Morag’s past is not only inescapable but immutable. Morag knows better – for she has learned that the past and with it, self-knowledge is the story we tell. (44)

As the character Morag reflects early in the novel: “A popular misconception is that we can’t change the past – everyone is constantly changing their own past, recalling it, revising it” (Laurence 1974, 70). To privilege the narrative of Morag’s past, “to view Morag in terms of that ‘inescapable past,’ is to conceive her largely as a product of that past,” Hjartarson proposes. Accentuating the narrative of Morag’s present, he writes:

To privilege the NOW narrative is to view Morag in terms of her present life, to conceive her in the process of understanding herself. The one views self as product; the other, as process. Laurence insists on both. “The river flow[s] both ways.” Past

events in *The Diviners* are narrated in the present tense; present events, in the past tense. (Hjartarson, 46)

Furthermore, Hjartarson notes that Laurence offers us two perspectives on her protagonist. “We see Morag from the inside; we share her thoughts, experience her feelings; we witness her coming to terms with her life; we see her in the act of writing, of giving significant shape to that life.” At the same time, we see Morag from the outside. Here, Hjartarson highlights Laurence’s use of the third person, pushing us to view Morag “from a distance.” From this vantage point, we see her “shaped by her experiences; we see her not composing her life-story but composed by it, a product of the forces acting on her and subject to the patriarchal discourses of her day” (46-47). In these ways among others, traces of temporality flow through the world of *The Diviners* and mark its course.

STORIES TOLD AGAINST THE SILENCE – AGAINST THE LOSS

The beginning of *The Diviners* is structured around two experiences of loss. The novel opens on the morning Morag awakens to find that her only child, her eighteen-year-old daughter, Pique, has left home:

The river flowed both ways. The current moved from north to south, but the wind usually came from the south, rippling the bronze-green water in the opposite direction. . . . The dawn mist had lifted, and the morning air was filled with swallows . . . Morag watched, trying to avoid thought, but this ploy was not successful. . . . “Pique had gone away. She must have left during the night. She had left a note on the kitchen table . . .” (Laurence 1974, 11)

The loss of Pique prompts Morag to seek out her “photographs from the past.” In so doing, the emplotment of *The Diviners* begins to unfold – for in looking at the snapshots, Morag opens for us the doorway to her world.

Something about Pique’s going, apart from the actual departure itself, was unresolved in Morag’s mind. . . . Morag rose, searched the house, finally found what she was looking for. (Laurence, 13)

“I keep these snapshots not for what they show but for what is hidden in them,” [Morag declares]. (Laurence, 14)

The memories, we quickly realize, are “hidden” not in the photographs but in Morag’s mind, states Hjartarson (47). Moreover, Morag herself declares that her “memories” are “invented,” that is, “that they are stories she began composing as a child” (Hjartarson, 47). About the memories of the second snapshot, she says:

All this is crazy, of course, and quite untrue. Or maybe true and maybe not. I am remembering myself composing this interpretation, in Christie and Prin’s house. (Laurence, 16)

Hjartarson proposes that the effect of these thoughts “is to foreground not the memory

itself but the act of composition, the process by which, over the years, Morag has articulated her past and conceived herself through story.” Hence, at the beginning of the novel, we witness Morag “less in the act of recalling her past than in the [redemptive] process of composing it; what is more, we are made aware that she has been engaged in that activity since childhood” (48).

He points out that the loss Morag feels at Pique’s unexpected departure leads her “to recall, and in recalling, to relive the most traumatic loss she has suffered,” the death of her parents when she was five years old. “Whereas the memories she associates with the snapshots are ‘totally invented,’ the death of her parents, she notes, ‘is somewhat ironically . . . the first memory she can trust.’ But, then, she adds” (48):

I can’t trust it completely, either, partly because I recognize anomalies in it, ways of expressing the remembering, ways which aren’t those of a five-year-old, as though I were older in that memory (and the words bigger) than in some subsequent ones when I was six or seven, . . . What really happened in the upstairs bedroom? (Laurence, 22)

Hjartarson points out that Morag’s account of her parents’ death is presented as a “Memorybank Movie,” the first such “movie” in the novel. To underline its fictional nature – that it is indeed a story – the Memorybank Movie is titled “Once Upon a Time There Was” (48). “Although Morag acknowledges that her memory of her parents’ death is a story she has composed, as much fiction as fact, her recollection of it moves her to tears,” Hjartarson states. Relying on Morag’s words, he adds:

“Now I am crying, for God’s sake,” she declares in exasperation, “and I don’t even know how much of that memory really happened and how much of it I embroidered later on” [Laurence, 26]. Finally, however, Morag acknowledges that her questions about what “really happened” are “meaningless” because she recognizes that the past and with it, subjectivity, is inaccessible other than as narrative, as a story we tell. (Hjartarson, 48-49)

He proposes that Laurence “locates the self in story and the need to tell stories in the experience of loss” in the novel (49). Morag does grieve – both for her absent daughter and for her dead parents – he relates, and, like her younger self, she tells stories against the silence. Of her parents, Morag declares, “I remember their death, but not their lives. Yet they’re inside me, flowing unknown in my blood, and moving unrecognized in my skull” (Laurence, 27).

Although Morag remembers her parents’ death and not their lives, “they inhabit her and shape her existence,” states Hjartarson:

They exist as characters in the stories the older Morag tells herself, much as the child did, to deny the absence, to overcome the loss, to people the silence; and these stories structure her life, as they did that of her younger self, and determine who she is (50).

Relying on Morag’s words, Hildegard Kuester (1994) states that here again is the “flowing of time” and the interrelation and interdependence between past, present, and future.

“Bereft of parents, Morag is also denied an ancestry, denied a place in the discourse of the past,” states Hjartarson. The character Christie Logan, Morag’s adoptive father, tells Morag the tales of her ancestors, “of Piper Gunn ‘and his woman Morag’ [Morag’s namesake], to open a space for her, to situate her in that discourse.” In bed at night, Morag “tells herself” over and over the “Tale of Piper Gunn’s Woman.” As Hjartarson notes:

Having listened to Christie’s stories, having heard herself named, Morag can, in turn name herself, insert herself in story, become herself the teller: “*Once long ago there was a beautiful woman name of Morag...*” [61]. The story-telling empowers Morag both as a woman and as a speaking subject. “*I have the power,*” the Morag in her tale [to herself] declares, “*and the second sight and the good eye and the strength of conviction*” [61]. (Hjartarson, 51)

Hjartarson explains that “Nowhere is the relation of story-telling, loss and subjectivity made more apparent than the account, in the THEN narrative, of how Christie comes to tell Morag his ‘First Tale of Piper Gunn’:

That account, itself retrospective, is contained in a Memorybank Movie titled “Christie with Spirits.” Christie has been drinking, and when “the spirits start to get gloomy in him,” nine-year-old Morag asks him to share a story about Piper Gunn. (50)

In the words of *The Diviners*:

Christie sighs and pours another drink. He sits there, thinking. Soon he will begin. Morag knows what it says in the book [*The Clan and Tartans of Scotland*] under the name Gunn. It isn’t fair but it must be true because it is right there in the book. . . . “All right, then, listen and I will tell you the first tale of your ancestor.” (Laurence, 58)

Helen M. Buss (1988) claims that Christie’s tales of Piper Gunn “are the ground on which Morag builds her ‘scribbler’ full of stories of Piper Gunn’s woman, and thus begins her life as a writer.” She relates that by giving Morag a love of language, “particularly oral language, Christie profoundly affects Morag’s life.” Buss explains by way of example:

For example, when Morag finally works up the nerve to cut her ties with Brooke Skelton [her husband and previous English professor] it is Christie’s language she uses to do it. After finally telling Brooke the “everlasting Christly truth” about their unhealthy relationship, she realizes she has spoken in Christie’s words and thinks: “I do not know the sound of my own voice. Not yet, anyhow” [Laurence, 277]. And from this point on the young writer, Morag, goes on most deliberately to find her “own voice” in both life and her work. (Buss, 160-161)

Walter E. Swayze (1988) states that Laurence repeatedly said that Christie Logan’s name “is not accidental, and his function is unmistakable.” Swayze offers this reflection:

As John the Baptist said to Christ, “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world!” (KJV John 1:29), Christie takes away the garbage of Manawaka and keeps the nuisance grounds. His vigorous cataloguing of the garbage and his interpretation of the lives and values of the community in his divination are both . . . well known [in Canadian literature]. Like the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53:3, “He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not” (KJV). And yet it is Christie who provides the fostering care for the orphan Morag, and who by his intimate knowledge of people gives her the knowledge that is to make her a writer, and by his rhapsodic Ossianic tales of Piper Gunn tells her who she is, where she comes from, what values she inherits. (Swayze, 13)

Swayze states that Christie’s death and burial are “among the tenderest and most triumphant scenes in literature” (13). At Christie’s bedside before he died, there is something Morag “must say. She wonders if she can discover the words. ‘Christie – I used to fight a lot with you, Christie, but you’ve been my father to me.’ ‘Well – I’m blessed,’ Christie Logan says” (Laurence, 420), his words slurred and whispered.

Hildegard Kuester (1994) relates that besides drawing a parallel between the character Royland (the Diviner in the novel) and Morag’s writing, the narrator extends this comparison to Christie, “who can ‘read’ the garbage he collects. Christie is defined as a scavenger, which at first sight seems to have no relation to divining. Yet by the narrative technique of juxtaposition the two contrary activities are linked.” He cites these words in the novel:

“Would there be a special corner of heaven, then, for scavengers and diviners? Which was Morag, if either, or were they the same thing?” (Kuester, 89-90)

By extending her concept of divining to Christie, “the existence of this ‘underdog’ perspective,” and the vantage point of “the other side of the tracks” is acknowledged, given voice and integrated into Laurence’s fiction (Kuester, 89-90).

Towards the latter part of *The Diviners*, Morag, while in Scotland, makes a decision not to visit Sutherland, “where her people came from” (Laurence, 415):

“I thought I would have to go. But I guess I don’t, after all.”

“Why would that be?”

“I don’t know that I can explain. It has to do with Christie. The myths are my reality. Something like that . . . It’s a deep land here, all right,” Morag says. “But it’s not mine, except a long long way back. I always thought it was the land of my ancestors, but it is not.”

“What is it, then?”

“Christie’s real country. Where I was born.” (Laurence, 415)

Hjartarson (1988) suggests that with these words “Morag locates her past, locates her self, in the world of stories. ‘The myths’ are her ‘reality’: they structure her life; they are the means by which she designates herself and is designated as a subject” (56).

THE SOUND OF THE VOICELESS

In Laurence's novel, Morag's adoptive mother, Prin – short for princess – is “a figure for silence, for women written by the discourse of patriarchal narratives” (Hjartarson, 51). A major section of *The Diviners* entitled “The Halls of Sion” takes its name from Prin's favourite hymn. “Singing that hymn – about ‘the halls of Sion’ forever occupied by ‘the Prince’ – at Prin's funeral leads Morag to question the implied narrative of her marriage to Brooke and her own role as ‘princess.’” Here, in this place, as the young woman who brought Morag up is lying dead, Hjartarson turns to the novel to highlight the thoughts in Morag's mind: *Help me, God; I'm frightened of myself*. He emphasizes that “it is shortly after Prin's funeral that Morag truly begins to stand up to Brooke, to find her own voice, and to feel confident in her own abilities as a novelist” (Hjartarson, 51-52). Keith Louis Foulton (1988) highlights a key example from *The Diviners*:

Brooke reads Morag's first book about a young writer and observes that she “... is non-verbal, that is she talks a lot, but she can't communicate very well.” [266]

Morag responds,

“I know that. I know. That was part of the problem.”

“I also wonder,” Brooke says, flicking pages, “if the main character – Lilac – expresses anything which we haven't known before?” [266]

Morag's response is silent, but determined:

“No. She doesn't. But she says it. That is what is different.” [266] (Foulton, 103-104)

IN THE COMFORT OF THE OTHER

According to Hjartarson (1988), “the narrative of Morag's visit to her dying lover [Jules], Pique's father, is the central event of *The Diviners* because it recalls and enables Morag to re-conceive and complete the earlier narrative” of being barred from seeing her own parents' death when she was five years old. Relying in part on the words of the novel, he portrays the scene:

In the narrative of Jules' death, the five-year-old, now forty-seven, in effect, climbs the stairs and opens the door to the bedroom. . . .

The night was wearing on. Finally Morag got up and turned out the light. Kicked off her shoes and lay down beside him, both of them clad, lying silently, connected only by their hands. [Laurence, 471]

Then Jules turned to her and put his arms around her, and she put her arms around him. The brief sound in the darkness was the sound of a man crying the knowledge of his death. [Laurence, 471] (Hjartarson, 59-60)

At the novel's end, we walk with Morag across the grass to the river, where the waters are ruffled in the opposite direction and seem to flow both ways. And we hear the words: “Look ahead into the past, and back into the future, until the silence” (Laurence, 477) – the voice of imagination in time.

SOURCES CONSULTED

- Boff, Leonardo. 1987. *Sacraments of Life, Life of the Sacraments*. Washington, DC: The Pastoral Press.
- Brueggemann, Walter. 1989. *Finally Comes the Poet*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
- Buss, Helen M. 1988. Margaret Laurence and the Autobiographical Impulse. In *Crossing the River: Essays in Honour of Margaret Laurence*, ed. Kristjana Gunnars, 147-168. Winnipeg, Manitoba: Turnstone Press
- Coles, Robert. 1989. *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Dawe, Tom. 1980. *Landwash Days*. St. John's, Newfoundland: Newfoundland Book Publishers Limited.
- Fischer, Kathleen R. 1983. *The Inner Rainbow: The Imagination in Christian Life*. Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press.
- Fulton, Kieth Louise. 1988. Feminism and Humanism: Margaret Laurence and the "Crisis of the Imagination". In *Crossing the River: Essays in Honour of Margaret Laurence*, ed. Kristjana Gunnars, 99-120. Winnipeg, Manitoba: Turnstone Press.
- Harris, Maria. 1987. *Teaching & Religious Imagination: An Essay in the Theology of Teaching*. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, Publishers.
- _____. & Gabriel Moran. 1998. *Reshaping Religious Education*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press.
- Hauge, Hans. 1988. The New Religion of Margaret Laurence. In *Crossing the River: Essays in Honour of Margaret Laurence*, ed. Kristjana Gunnars, 121-132. Winnipeg, Manitoba: Turnstone Press.
- Hjartarson, Paul. 1988. "Christie's Real Country. Where I Was Born": Story-Telling, Loss and Subjectivity in I. In *Crossing the River: Essays in Honour of Margaret Laurence*, ed. Kristjana Gunnars, 43-64. Winnipeg, Manitoba: Turnstone Press.
- Kearney, Richard. 1989. Paul Ricoeur and the Hermeneutic Imagination. In *The Narrative Path: The Later Works of Paul Ricoeur*, ed. T. Peter Kemp and David Rasmussen, 1-31. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Kierkegaard, Soren. 1967. *Journals and Papers*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. 1 (618).
- Kuester, Hildegard. 1994. *The Crafting of Chaos: Narrative Structure in Margaret Laurence's The Stone Angel and The Diviners*. Atlanta, GA: Rodopi.
- Kurtz, Ernest & Katherine Ketcham. 1992. *The Spirituality of Imperfection: Storytelling and the Search for Meaning*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Laurence, Margaret. 1974. *The Diviners*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart.
- _____. 1974. Interview by Robert Fulford. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) Archives. Toronto, Ontario, May 19.
- Martinez, German. 2003. *Signs of Freedom: Theology of the Christian Sacraments*. New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.
- Mitchell, Nathan D. 1977. Symbols Are Actions, Not Objects. *Living Worship*. 13(2). 1.
- Mitchell, Pamela. 1991. Why Care About Stories? A Theory of Narrative Art. *Religious Education*. 86(1): 30-43.
- Moore, Mary Elizabeth Mullino. 1998. *Teaching from the Heart: Theology and Educational Method*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International.

- Nussbaum, Martha. 1997. Narrative Emotions: Beckett's Genealogy of Love. In *Readings in Narrative Theology: Why Narrative?* eds. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, 216-250. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers. Martha Nussbaum's essay "Narrative Emotions: Beckett's Genealogy of Love" first appeared in *Ethics*, 98, 2 (January 1988).
- O'Donohue, John. 2004. *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc.
- _____. 1999. *Eternal Echoes: Celtic Reflections on Our Yearning to Belong*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc.
- Ravel, Edeet. 2005. *A Wall of Light*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 1991. The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text. In *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, ed. James M. Edie, 144-167. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press. This essay first published in *Social Research* 38 (1971): 529-62.
- _____. 1984. *Time and Narrative, Volume 1*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Simms, Karl. 2003. *Paul Ricoeur*. New York: Routledge.
- Stone, Jerry H. 1995. Narrative Theology and Religious Education. In *Theologies of Religious Education*, ed. Randolph Crump Miller, 255-285. Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press.
- Streib, Heinz. 1988. The Religious Educator As Story-Teller: Suggestions from Paul Ricoeur's Work. *Religious Education*, 93 (3): 314-331.
- Sullivan, Danny. 1995. 'To such as these the Kingdom of heaven belongs': Children's Spirituality and Our Contemporary World. In *The Candles Are Still Burning: Directions in Sacrament and Spirituality*, eds. M. Grey, A. Heaton, & D. Sullivan, 137-146. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press.
- Swayez, Walter E. 1988. Introduction/Knowing through Writing: The Pilgrimage of Margaret Laurence. In *Crossing the River: Essays in Honour of Margaret Laurence*, ed. Kristjana Gunnars, 3-24. Winnipeg, Manitoba: Turnstone Press.
- van den Hengel, John. 1982. *The Home of Meaning: The Hermeneutics of the Subject of Paul Ricoeur*. Washington, DC: University Press of America.
- _____. 1994. Paul Ricoeur's *Oneself as Another* and Practical Theology. *Theological Studies*, 55: 458-480.

