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THE STONE ANGEL : TIME AND RESPONSIBILITY

As Hagar Shipley reviews and reassesses her life, she finds her judgment challenged by the confusion of ninety years of experience. She is confused not only by the distortions of egotism and senility, but by the contradictions of living and changing through time. She wishes to make sense of an entire life-time, to sum up and judge her ninety years of existence. To do so, she must examine and reconcile the diverse aspects of her long life. What she seeks, finally, is self-justification in the face of death. The story opens at the Currie family grave and closes when Hagar dies: like a condemned man at the point of death, Hagar's life flashes before her, demanding justification.

The Stone Angel illustrates Margaret Laurence's concern with the temporality of experience, that is, with human experience insofar as it is conditioned and complicated by the flow of time. Hagar's emotional and moral problems also prove to be temporal problems which are resolved only when she manages to see beyond the strict logic of time. In *The Tomorrow-Tamer and Other Stories*, Africa is shown balanced uneasily between a traditional past and a Europeanized future. The stories focus on the time of transition when political independence is achieved, when the old ways confront the new, when Africans must learn to reassess their past and "tame" or determine their future. In *A Jest of God* and *The Fire-Dwellers*, Rachel and Stacey Cameron are also presented at moments of self-scrutiny when they face the problem of positioning themselves in time. Both are haunted by the past, displeased with the present and uncertain of the future. Rachel, who is trapped in the familiar routine of small-town life, explores her condition by recalling her youth—and so comparing what she was with what she has become—and by dreaming of escape. Her thoughts wander between the

school where she teaches and the funeral parlour where she lives, between youth and death, the two limits of her life between which she feels so uncomfortable. Stacey is trapped in the routine of marriage and her aim, like Hagar's, is to "sort out and understand [her] life" (*The Fire-Dwellers*, p. 177)¹ through the continual probing of memory; but because her life is more eventful than her sister's, she finds it more difficult to assess. She feels the weight of greater experience:

Come, come, Stacey. Act your age. That's precisely what I'm doing, God, if you really want to know. Too much mental baggage. Too damn much, at this point. More more more than I want. Things keep spilling out of the suitcases, taking me by surprise, bewildering me as I stand on the platform. (*The Fire-Dwellers*, p. 37)

Hagar is even more heavily laden with memories and regrets. Because her experience is richer and because death for her is not a distant prospect (as for Rachel) or a vague threat (as for Stacey who fears drowning and traffic accidents), but a pressing fact, *The Stone Angel* is a more complete study than the other two novels. In effect, Hagar puts her life on trial and faces a sterner judgment than the other two women.

Through memory, Hagar relives her life in order to understand and come to terms with it. What these terms are and Hagar's struggle to accept them are, in this analysis, what the novel is about. As she remembers, she sees that in the course of a life-time one is many things—girl, daughter, wife, mother, old woman. At the time of occurrence, these stages of life seem distinct and unrelated. Leaving Bram and Manawaka, Hagar feels that she becomes a different person; she abandons her past self:

To move to a new place—that's the greatest excitement. For a while you believe you carry nothing with you—all is canceled from before, or cauterized, and you begin again and nothing will go wrong this time. (155)

An individual grows, changes, starts out afresh, living "one day at a time" (153) with little thought to past or future; yet, paradoxically, he remains the same person. Now in retrospect, Hagar must sum herself up, tie her life together. She must reconcile the different periods in her life in order to find coherence and hence meaning in it. Before she can judge she must first identify herself in order to see what has endured through her life and what has determined its unexpected changes. It is an irony of the book that Hagar is so forceful a personality that the

reader sees who and what she is before she herself does, even though she narrates her own story. We recognize the nature, the value and the danger of her proud spirit before she does.

Hagar stands proudly alone throughout her life, a condition which intensifies her problem. Other people can come to terms with the passing of time through their relations with others, particularly with their families. Family affections offer a continuity and value to life. Jason Currie and Bram Shipley both seek to found a "dynasty" which will give them a kind of "immortality" or self-assertion in the face of change and death. Jason especially wishes to preserve and perpetuate "forever and a day" (3) the traditions of the Currie "clan", and he disowns Hagar because he feels her marriage dishonours their ancestry. Similarly, Hagar realizes, Bram wants a son "to leave the place to" because "he wanted his dynasty no less than my father had." (101) But Hagar stands alone and cannot establish herself through personal relations or family ties. She fears human contact and cannot declare openly her feelings for her husband. She is estranged from her father; her brothers die; her husband and favourite son die. Only Marvin is left, but at his birth she had thought: "I almost felt as though Marvin weren't my son." (62) As her family disintegrates, she clings to her possessions, to those objects which must replace people in binding her fragmented life together. Gazing at her house in Vancouver, she thinks:

My shreds and remnants of years are scattered through it visibly in lamps and vases, the needle-point fire bench, the heavy oak chair from the Shipley place, the china cabinet and walnut sideboard from my father's house...I couldn't leave them. If I am not somehow contained in them and in this house, something of all change caught and fixed here, eternal enough for my purposes, then I do not know where I am to be found at all. (36)

These objects are heirlooms sparking Hagar's memory. They link her with the "shreds" of her past and give a sense of stability to her life. But, she discovers, objects are not enough, and without them the stability is lost. She is faced with the Nursing Home and the loss of her possessions; she is faced with death; and then, as she has said: "I do not know where I am to be found at all."

Hagar wishes to "find" herself. The form of *The Stone Angel*, alternating between past and present through a chronological succession of flashbacks, reveals her dilemma. She must, first of all, examine the causal development of her life to see how its different stages are related

and therefore how it can be understood as a whole. This she does by reviewing her life from birth to the very point of death. But causality in human affairs quickly merges with the more important concept of responsibility, which implies human participation and authority in the course of time. Causality involves a mechanical linking of circumstance through cause and effect, but responsibility involves human control. It implies that a person is the author of a sequence of events, that his choices, intentions and efforts are decisive factors, that his actions in the present determine the course of the future. Much of Hagar's meditation is devoted to ascribing, eluding and finally accepting responsibility for the disastrous changes in her life and—an important extension of responsibility—in the lives of her husband and children. She discovers that with responsibility come certain powers and certain dangers. A responsible person is free in that he is the master of his fate: he is in control of his life and determines its course. In a sense, he controls time since his future is in his own hands; he can make of it what he will; he is not the slave of chance or circumstance. Freedom is especially important to Hagar who is too proud and self-centered to submit to the direction of others, whether father or husband or son. But a free person is also responsible for his own errors and for the disruption he brings into the lives of others. Hagar's marriage to Bram becomes a contest of wills in which her will proves the stronger, and she must take blame for the change in him: "In ten years he had changed, put away the laughter he once wore and replaced it with a shabbier garment." (113) Hagar finds that she can only assert her own freedom by recognizing her own guilt because the two are complementary. She had controlled the lives of Bram and John but refused to accept her contribution to their deaths. She had claimed freedom for herself while denying responsibility for others. Finally, she confronts this contradiction which had made her, like the stone angel, "doubly blind" (3):

Pride was my wilderness, and the demon that led me there was fear. I was alone, never anything else, and never free, for I carried my chains within me, and they spread out from me and shackled all I touched. Oh, my two, my dead. Dead by your own hands or by mine? (292)

Responsibility, freedom and guilt are three of the terms by reference to which Hagar must judge her life. Through her confrontation with guilt, she cross-examines herself, arguing as both defendant and prosecutor:

Every last one of them has gone away and left me. I never left them. It was the other way around, I swear it. (164)

Stupid girl. She knows nothing. Why won't she praise him a little? She's so sharp with him. He'll become fed up in a minute. I long to warn her—watch out, watch out, you'll lose him. (188)

But Hagar's case is complicated by the fact that time does not fall so easily under human control and, consequently, her life does not fall so neatly into formulas. Her efforts to apportion blame and thereby define her own position tend to break down because the more she examines events the more confused they become. So many circumstances contribute to any one event, the causal chain stretches so far into the past, and any action can bring such unforeseen results, that it is impossible to isolate one guilty party or one determining factor. This is a lesson Hagar learns from Murray Lees when he tries to account for the fire which killed his son while he and his wife were attending a religious revival meeting:

"I can't figure out whose fault it could have been," he says. "My granddad's, for being a Bible puncher in the first place? Mother's, for making me prefer hellfire to lavender talcum? Lou's, for insisting nothing could happen to him? Mine, for not saying right out, long before, that I might as well not go, for all the good it was doing me?"

Why does he go on like this? I've heard enough.

"No one's to blame." (234)

In a similar situation when John is killed by a train, Hagar cannot say who is to blame: she had conspired to have Arlene sent away because she knew Arlene was living with John; John got drunk and accepted a bet with Lazarus Tonnerre to drive a truck across the trestle bridge; John had played similar games as a child; the train was an unscheduled freight bringing food for people on relief. Amid this combination of circumstances, Hagar can only tell herself: "No one's fault. Where do causes start, how far back?" (240)

The causal and moral analysis leads to confusion, but in response to this confusion Hagar's admirable qualities become apparent and her strong sense of herself proves a virtue. One possible refuge from her dilemma is fatalism. In response to the unpredictability of life, a person may adopt the role of passive victim, declaring himself unable to understand or foresee or control the complications of circumstance. He submits himself to the flow of events which, through a logic or illogic beyond his comprehension, follow their own chaotic (in one view) or

divine (in another) course. This may be used as an abdication of responsibility: man can not be held responsible for the actions of fate or guilty of the unforeseeable outcome of an episode to which he contributed so little, so blindly. But Hagar has so strong a sense of herself and of her active participation in life and such an abhorrence of personal weakness that she cannot accept a passive or submissive role. This she demonstrates by refusing to play the role of her mother—"that meek Woman" (25) whom she associates with weakness and frailty—to comfort her brother Dan when he is dying. Later when she analyses her life, when no individual can be blamed for an event, when consequences defy expectation, still she insists on her own independent authority. Her final act is to refuse assistance and take a glass of water into her own hands. Hagar is a battler. Even when faced with the irrevocable she refuses to be fatalistic because of her pride and because she refuses to see herself as helpless:

I can't change what's happened to me in my life, or make what's not occurred take place. But I can't say I like it, or accept it, or believe it's for the best. I don't and never shall, not even if I'm damned for it. (160)

Hagar fights the inevitable even, as the epigraph from Dylan Thomas indicates ("Rage, rage against the dying of the light"), when it is her own death.

Therefore, although Hagar's pride is a wilderness because it isolates her from human contact, it also proves a basis for moral awareness. By insisting on self-sufficiency, she forces herself to confront her own guilt. By insisting on human responsibility, she asserts a desire for justice. Justice, like responsibility, resolves the chaos of experience and the confusion of causality into a human order. It offers a moral continuity through time, a linking of events whereby responsibility is assessed and punishment follows crime. Justice makes life fall into recognizable patterns which are a source of meaning, value and stability. In putting herself on trial, Hagar seeks a moral justification for the course of her life and of life in general. She never finds an absolute justice, of course, just as she never finds a clear causality; but her proud, sometimes despairing rejection of fatalism makes her an admirable person:

It's not Marvin's fault. It's no one's fault, the soft disgusting egg, the shrunken world, the voices that wail like mourners through the night. Why is it always so hard to find the proper one to blame? Why do I always want to find the one? As though it really helped. (264)

It is important to note that Hagar does not conduct a deliberate, orderly self-analysis. She is often unreasonable; her mind wanders from memory to memory; her judgment is clouded by old age. She is not a lawyer constructing a case, but a dying woman wondering at the life she is about to leave. The logic of freedom, guilt and justice outlined above is for her a matter of direct feeling, not of rational calculation. Her guilt especially is not something she argues herself into accepting, but an uncomfortable, undefined feeling which she cannot ignore because it emerges at key moments to challenge her. Thus, immediately after recalling Bram's death when she refused to cry, she awakens at the cannery, looks for something to drink and finds herself thinking:

I can't drink sea-water—isn't it meant to be poisonous? Certainly. *Water water everywhere nor any drop to drink.* That's my predicament. What albatross did I slay, for mercy's sake? Well, well, we'll see—come on, old mariner, up and out of your smelly bunk and we'll see what can be found. (186)

By associating her thirst with the shame and punishment of Coleridge's ancient mariner, Hagar's latent sense of guilt makes itself felt. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of this image with the memory of Bram's death links her present state of mind with her past action, indicating an emotional continuity through time which she herself does not yet recognize. Her conscience or subconscious has supplied a felt coherence to her life where causal analysis has failed. As her realization grows, the play of images becomes more elaborate and the blending of times becomes more complete. She then sits on a log outside the cannery, and another association of ideas develops her preoccupation with justice and guilt. She imaginatively transforms the actual scene into a courtroom:

My log is covered with moss—I pluck at it, and an enormous piece comes away in my hand. It's long and curly as hair, a green wig suitable for some judicial owl holding court over the thieving jays or scavenging beetles. Beside me grows a shelf of fungus, the velvety underside a mushroom color, and when I touch it, it takes and retains my fingerprint. From the ground nearby sprouts a scarlet-tipped Indian paintbrush—that's for the scribe. Now we need only summon the sparrows as jurors, but they'd condemn me quick as a wink, no doubt. (192)

Here, she accuses herself more openly, but still without recognizing the cause of her guilt. The fanciful trial and condemnation prepare her for her most bitter memory—the death of her son John—in which past and

present are skilfully blended by having Hagar involuntarily recite the episode aloud to Murray Lees. What at first is read as just another flashback, a memory of something hidden in the past, is brought openly into the present. Hagar confronts her past most forcefully here, and finally sheds the tears she held back at the funerals of Bram and John.

These tears indicate that it is on the level of feeling and responsiveness to other people and not on the level of logic that Hagar discovers a painful coherence in her life. Consequently, her disclosure to Murray Lees prepares her for closer relations with Elva Jardine, Sandra Wong and, finally, Marvin. It is on the same level that she finds some means of resolving the contradictions of temporal experience. She finds that although she cannot readily trace a line of causality or responsibility in her life; although she cannot establish her own innocence or guilt; although she cannot find the freedom or justice she desires; although the course of her life seems to defy comprehension—despite all this, she can still grant and ask pardon of another person. For Hagar this is an important discovery. Forgiveness does not sort out the confusion of experience, but accepts that confusion and makes it livable. It is a human appeal made in recognition of human weakness, a reconciliation of people with each other and with circumstance. Forgiveness suggests a concurrence or harmony with others and with life. In *A Jest of God* when Rachel is at the point of greatest despair, she watches three old men in a bar and suddenly thinks:

If I went in there now, unbidden, young to them, strange in my white raincoat, and said *Forgive me*, they would think I had lost my mind. (*A Jest of God*, p. 194)

Faced with the bewilderment of her dilemma, she can only ask people to accept her as she is, imperfect and confused. This is not a difficult attitude for Rachel to adopt since she goes through life doubting herself and apologizing to others. But it is a difficult position for Hagar who fears all signs of weakness, who refuses to humble herself and so make herself vulnerable.

As a girl, Hagar makes no apologies for herself and sets herself boldly against first her father and then her husband. Years later, when she is more experienced and more confused by life, she overhears Marvin making a final apology to his dying father, a final request for understanding and acceptance. She wishes but is unable to make a similar appeal:

Looking down at him, a part of me could never stand him, what he'd been, and yet that moment I'd willingly have called him back from where he'd gone, to say even once what Marvin had said, and with as much bewilderment, not knowing who to fault for the way the years had turned. (183)

The puzzling logic of time and responsibility ("who to fault for the way the years had turned") can be transcended and accepted through pardon; but again Hagar's pride, which is her strength and her weakness, prevents her from acting openly. Only after considering her past, exchanging stories with Murray Lees and communing with him over the deaths of their children can she ask or grant pardon. Lees summons Marvin and Doris to the cannery despite his promise not to betray Hagar.

He holds my eyes. He won't let them go. Then I see, to my surprise, that he is waiting for me to pardon him. I'm about to say the words—*I know, I know, you really couldn't help it—it wasn't your fault...* Impulsively, hardly knowing what I'm doing, I reach out and touch his wrist.

"I didn't mean to speak crossly. I—I'm sorry about your boy."

Having spoken so, I feel lightened and eased. He looks surprised and shaken, yet somehow restored.

"It's all right—I knew you never meant it," he says. "And—thanks, about the other. That goes for me too." (252-253)

This is not a lofty granting of pardon; Hagar is no longer regal and aloof. It is a tentative (she touches his wrist) but sincere exchange, the first human contact she has made in years. Through it, she starts to emerge from her wilderness and share experiences with others. She is befriended by Elva Jardine who advises her, comforts her and addresses her directly by name—something only Bram had dared do. She endures great pain to help Sandra Wong and shares a joke with her. She sends her ring, a prized possession, to her granddaughter Tina. Finally she confronts Marvin, her only remaining son whom she has opposed for years. She confesses her fear to him and holds his hand—two kinds of contact she has always avoided—and realizes: "I...can only release myself by releasing him."

It's in my mind to ask his pardon, but that's not what he wants from me.

"You've not been cranky, Marvin. You've been good to me, always. A better son than John." (304)

Hagar acknowledges the kinship she had denied at Marvin's birth. She considers this "lie—yet not a lie, for it was spoken at least and at last

with what may perhaps be a kind of love," (307) and her "joke" with Sandra Wong to be the only "truly free" acts she has achieved in ninety years. She has finally found a kind of love, of freedom, of justice in her life.

Before Hagar dies, she considers and rejects another kind of pardon offering a more complete resolution of her temporal problems. This is the pardon of divine mercy which reaches beyond the temporal to the eternal where it resolves human confusion in a divine order. Throughout the book Hagar is tempted by the idea of mercy but persistently unwilling to accept it. She finds comfort in recalling and singing hymns. She refers knowledgeably to the Bible (although without recognizing her own resemblance to Abraham's second wife, Agar). She stopped attending Church after her marriage, but now in her old age "when time has folded in like a paper fan" (90) wonders if she shouldn't have kept on going. One effect of the religious references is to extend the range and implication of Hagar's meditations:

Doris pours more tea. We are comfortable. Marvin is hairy in shirtsleeves, elbows on the table. High day or holiday or Judgment Day—no difference to Marvin. He would have put his elbows on the table if he'd been an apostle at the Last Supper. (34)

Hagar's judgment of herself becomes a kind of Last Judgment, an ultimate self-accounting before God, at the point of death. Similarly, her desire for peace and stability after a tumultuous life suggests a desire for salvation.

"Unto the hills around do I lift up
My longing eyes.
O whence for me shall my salvation come,
From whence arise?
From GOD the LORD doth come my certain aid,
From GOD the LORD, who heaven and earth hath made." (16)

God is seldom far from Hagar's thoughts, but she tends to see Him as an adversary, another challenge to her proud authority. In her exchanges with the clergyman, Mr. Troy, she rejects conventional religion with its promise of a heaven which strikes her a "a gigantic chunk of costume jewellery." (120) She cannot accept the possibility of divine mercy because she regards the death of her husband and son as a loss too heavy to be redeemed by the comfortable reassurance of religion:

"God's infinite Mercy—you believe in that, don't you?"

I blurt a reply without thinking.

"What's so merciful about Him, I'd like to know?"

We regard one another from a vast distance, Mr. Troy and I.

"What could possibly make you say that?" he asks.

Pry and pry—what does he want of me? I'm tired out.

I can't fence with him.

"I had a son," I say, "and lost him."

"You're not alone," says Mr. Troy.

"That's where you're wrong," I reply. (120-121)

It weighs so heavily upon me, this unknown loss. The dead's flame is blown out and evermore shall be so. No mercy in heaven. (249-250)

Once again, Hagar is too proud, too self-sufficient and too afraid of showing weakness to adopt the posture of humility and weakness necessary for prayer. She can finally offer and ask for forgiveness from other human beings; but she cannot beg for God's forgiveness.

In *A Jest of God* when Rachel is at the point of greatest despair, she finds herself praying for help from a God in whom she hardly believes. But Hagar is incapable of such self-abasement. She stands up to God just as she stood up to Fate:

Ought I to appeal? It's the done thing. *Our Father*—no. I want to part of that. All I can think is—*Bless me or not, Lord, just as You please, for I'll not beg.* (307)

NOTES

1. Quotations from: *The Fire-Dwellers*, McClelland & Stewart, Toronto & Montreal, 1969.
A Jest of God, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1966.
The Stone Angel, McClelland & Stewart, Toronto & Montreal, 1964.