

*In Search of Lost Mothers:
Margaret Laurence's "The Diviners"
and Elizabeth Jolley's
"Miss Peabody's Inheritance"*

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Those of us who operate from bastard territory, disinherited countries and traditions, long always for our non-existent mothers. For this reason I devilled five years — six? When did I start? how many? — in the literature of Australians and Canadians, hoping to be the one to track her down. (Engel 8)

THIS STATEMENT of longing made by the protagonist in Marian Engel's *No Clouds of Glory* establishes the feminized paradigm of post-colonial fiction within which Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* (1974) and Elizabeth Jolley's *Miss Peabody's Inheritance* (1984) may be read as "sisters under the skin," for both novels explore women writers' relation to literary and cultural traditions as they write their way out of dispossession into inheritance. Though in this paper I hope (like Sarah Bastard and Miss Peabody) to track down lost mothers by showing the relationship of these two novels to female literary traditions, it is also necessary to note the doubleness of Engel's statement. These longed-for mothers are "non-existent" — absent or dead — so that the protagonists' quest for origins becomes a highly subjective one and an effort of the creative imagination rather than a piece of historical research. The whole question of literary inheritance in the context of Commonwealth women's writing may be seen as symptomatic of a more general post-colonial dilemma about history. This is focused in the problematical relation of any national literature written in English to the parent tradition,

but it signals a deeper duality which derives from a sense of the loss of a nurturing community sustained always in tension with the urge toward independent self-definition. The effort to create a historical continuum wherein the individual feels no longer dispossessed but at home is a characteristic feature of much contemporary Commonwealth writing (Howells 11-19). Such projects involve that double vision so characteristic of post-colonial peoples which Helen Tiffin comments upon in her essay on "Commonwealth Literature and Comparative Methodology" (Tiffin).

To be a Commonwealth writer and a woman exacerbates one's sense of self-division, for women's relation to tradition is always complicated by gender as well as national issues, becoming one of longing rather than of belonging and of resistance to an imposed colonial inheritance. Margaret Laurence is a regional and historical novelist born in Canada as is her protagonist Morag Gunn in *The Diviners*, so that Morag's sense of unbelonging is very different from Elizabeth Jolley's Miss Dorothy Peabody's. Jolley is herself an immigrant to Australia, having been brought up in England in a household "half English and three quarters Viennese"; she came to Australia as an adult with her husband and three children in 1959. Her protagonist Miss Peabody only comes to Australia as a middle-aged spinster as the end of the novel to enter into her inheritance, which is a literary and imaginative one. However, from their very different angles both novels explore women's sense of not belonging in the place where they live and their eventual coming into inheritance "by adoption," which seems to complete the Commonwealth paradigm offered by Engel.

The narrative designs of both novels establish possibilities for the coexistence of dual inheritances perceived by each of the protagonists within herself as constituting her own difference in the sense of shifting identities forever elusive and multiple. The process of coming into possession of oneself for Morag, and more accurately in Miss Peabody's case of being possessed, involves rejections as well as acceptances, and the exercise of the imaginative reason till the protagonists see themselves as inheritors and finally at home. Both these novels proceed through the wilderness

to homesteads and homecomings at the end. They are both stories about women writing; both are about the problems of artistic creativity; both investigate the social and material conditions within which women's fiction is produced — in Canada, in Australia and in England; and their fragmented narratives express very divided sensibilities. Yet both show the impulse toward completion which is aesthetically necessary to the art object and psychologically necessary to the artist. There is also the central fact of vocation which remains constant under the network of contradictions for Morag Gunn as for Miss Peabody, which is their delight in the activity of writing. This has been stated very plainly by one of their literary mothers, Virginia Woolf:

One should aim, seriously, at disregarding ups and downs . . . the central fact remains stable, which is the fact of my own pleasure in the art. (Woolf, *Diary* 171)

Turning now to my concern with how Laurence and Jolley recuperate their literary inheritance as women, the first thing to be noted is that neither of them has an exclusive preoccupation with any single tradition; neither the British nor the indigenous tradition is privileged, for as inheritors they are eclectic in their choices. Laurence acknowledges Virginia Woolf and works within the English literary tradition of modernism at the same time as her protagonist holds imaginary conversations with the nineteenth-century Canadian pioneer and writer Catherine Parr Traill. One of Morag's novels-within-the-novel is a feminist revision of Shakespeare's "Tempest" while another is based on the legends surrounding the Sutherland Highlanders' immigration to the Canadian prairies. Though Morag does not use the Métis legends in her own fiction, they are written into the novel through the songs of Jules Tonnerre, the father of her daughter. There are also multiple inheritances signalled in Jolley's intricately structured novel: Miss Peabody as a child in England has been reared on Hans Andersen, Dickens, the Brontës, Hawthorne and Defoe; and Miss Arabella Thorne, the Australian headmistress of Diana Hopewell's novel-within-the-novel, is a devotee of European culture represented by Wagner, Goethe, Shakespeare and Wilde. These male images of creative power and glamour surely repre-

sent the displacement of Miss Thorne's own aspirations to be part of a patriarchal tradition which she can enter only in fantasy. However, the most significant literary inheritance in Jolley's novel is the one insistently signalled but not stated, which is Australian and female. Diana Hopewell's mythmaking about the Outback owes a great deal to Miles Franklin, just as the school-girl story which is the unfinished novel inherited by Miss Peabody has echoes of Henry Handel Richardson's *The Getting of Wisdom* and Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. Arguably Miss Peabody's coming into her imaginative inheritance of Australianness writes in Jolley's own story of coming into her adopted Australian literary inheritance. It is evident that *The Diviners* and *Miss Peabody's Inheritance* share similar preoccupations in their search for lost mothers, though their protagonists proceed very differently in their quests. Whereas Morag's search for her inheritance is closely bound up with her search for her own identity through writing her way into Canadian literary tradition, Miss Peabody's search culminates in shedding her own identity and taking over the persona and voice of her "lost mother" in another country.

Morag Gunn in *The Diviners* has a strong sense of prairie history which finds its parallel with Laurence's own. It was Laurence who wrote in *Heart of a Stranger*:

My writing has been my own attempt to come to terms with the past. I see this process as the gradual one of freeing oneself from the stultifying aspect of the past, while at the same time beginning to see its true value. (5)

In the course of this novel Morag tracks back through the wilderness of memory and legend in order to find her own identity and her own place in present time, gaining in the process a recognition of the literary and cultural traditions which have made her what she is. Everybody is an inheritor, and Laurence's fiction asks important questions about the relationship of individuals to their community and its history which leads beyond individuality back into the past and forward into the future. Her narrative interweaves the many voices of the Canadian multi-ethnic inheritance focused through Morag's home town of Manawaka in Manitoba. Her inherited Scottish legends in the voices of Christie

Logan and of Ossian (in translation) and Jules Tonnerre's Métis legends (also in translation) are all told to her daughter who becomes the inheritor of both traditions. Out of this colonial inheritance of tales of dispossession, how to find one's true home and one's lost mothers? Morag is literally an orphan brought up on the margins of Manawaka by the town scavenger, and she only comes to recognize her inheritance as she reimagines it through her writing, "convinced that fiction was more true than fact. Or that fact was in fact fiction" (25). It is a long journey for Morag to the point where she realizes in Scotland that her birthright is in Canada, "the country where I was born" (384), and she comes home — not to the prairies but to Ontario:

Land. A river. Log house nearly a century old, built by great pioneering couple, Simon and Sarah Cooper. History. Ancestors. (414)

Laurence explores the imaginative dimensions of this quest for home and inheritance in her conversation with another prairie writer, Robert Kroetsch:

Whether or not I ever lived in the prairies again was really unimportant. . . . The return is not necessarily in the physical sense, but it really is a coming back in the mind, a coming to some kind of terms with your roots and your ancestors, and, if you like, with your gods. (Kroetsch 46-47)

If Canadian place and Canadian ancestors are important to Morag, so too are her literary mothers, one of whom is English and the other Canadian. As a woman writing in a room of her own about herself, Morag investigates what it feels like to be the subject of one's own fiction. The whole question of women finding a language to write about ourselves is central to the female literary tradition, and *The Diviners* focuses on this. It offers one particular solution in the kind of narrative Morag tells: a fragmented one containing many versions of herself, mixing literary modes with its memory-bank movies, its snapshots, its extracts from newspapers and letters and novels. Her novel is a conflation of experience "flowing both ways" like the river outside her house. It is a modernist novel of the kind that Virginia Woolf wrote and she is, I believe, one of Morag's lost literary mothers. It is in her consideration of subjectivity in fiction that Laurence comes

closest to writing like Woolf. *The Diviners*, like *To the Lighthouse*, is about “subject and object and the nature of reality”; it registers the instability of our perceptions using water imagery like Woolf’s novel, and it makes similar imaginative efforts to reconcile contradiction into a final moment of created order. Morag’s creativity out of chaos resembles the domestic efforts of Mrs. Ramsay and artistic efforts of Lily Briscoe; indeed, Morag’s setting down her title at the end has its parallel in Lily’s painting: “I have had my vision” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 237). From Woolf, Morag inherits a mode of perception and a narrative method for rendering the fluidity of consciousness, yet her reference to that literary mother also spells out differences:

A woman if she is to write, Virginia Woolf once said (or words to that effect) must have a room of her own. The garret bit never appealed to Morag unduly, but by God it is at least a room of her own. The only trouble is she feels too tired and lousy most evenings to do any writing at all. (293-94)

Acknowledging her inheritance of modernism (this quotation is followed immediately by the memory-bank movie title, “Portrait of the Artist as a Pregnant Skivvy”), Morag defines her own identity as she refashions those fictional techniques to accommodate the multiple stories of the Canadian prairie that she needs to tell.

Morag’s other acknowledged literary predecessors are Susanna Moodie and Catherine Parr Traill who came to Upper Canada in the 1830s to settle in the very part of Ontario where she now lives. Traill’s voice is heard in the imaginary conversations that Morag holds with her ghost in the kitchen, advising and admonishing in the language of her *Canadian Settlers’ Guide* (1855):

In cases of emergency, it is folly to fold one’s hands and sit down to bewail in abject terror. It is better to be up and doing. Morag: Thank you, Mrs Traill. (97)¹

Yet finally Morag rejects this nineteenth-century view of Canadian immigrant experience as inappropriate to her needs in the mid-twentieth century, for Mrs. Traill was after all a British colonist determined to impose her Victorian ideas of order on the wilderness whereas Morag is already at home and her vocation is that of a writer not a settler. She decides to “quit worrying

about not being either an old or a new pioneer” and to recognize the ways in which she herself has “worked damn hard” (406).

The multiple voices of her lost mothers and fathers from history, literary and oral tradition are recalled and rearranged in Morag’s narrative, which is a kind of elegy for “the lost languages, forever lurking somewhere inside the ventricles of the hearts who had lost them” (244). As she sifts her way through the accumulated voices and objects from the past, Morag finds her own voice as a novelist, realizing that history only becomes real by adoption: “The myths are my reality. Something like that” (390). To become an inheritor she has had to reinvent her lost ancestors, finding her place within tradition and revising it to suit her own needs:

Shakespeare did know just about everything. I know it’s presumptuous of me to try to put this into some different and contemporary framework and relevance, but I can’t help it. Well, hell, maybe it’s not so presumptuous at that. (330)

Only through her imaginative effort of storytelling can connections with the past be forged by a process of acceptance, rejection, revision. This is what it means to be a subject — a subjective self — feeling at home in a place and a literary tradition which Morag has made her own:

Morag returned to the house, to write the remaining private and fictional words, and to set down her title. (453)

Morag’s confidence in setting down her title contrasts with the more ambiguous achievement of Miss Peabody, for unlike Morag she has not yet written a novel and she is not in her own house or even in her own country. Instead as a visitor to Australia, Miss Peabody is about to take up writing somebody else’s unfinished novel and she is still searching for a title. The last paragraph of Elizabeth Jolley’s novel reads:

Miss Flourish would be sure to know where it was possible to get a typewriter. Miss Peabody, though she made abysmal typing errors, knew she could type well enough. All she really needed to enter into her inheritance was a title. (157)

There are two women writing in this novel which is structured on the correspondence between Miss Dorothy Peabody, a lonely

filing clerk "on the wrong side of fifty" (12) who lives in Surrey, and an elderly invalid novelist in Australia named Diana Hopewell. It is a novel about fiction making and the secret life of fantasy, but unlike *The Diviners* it probes more deeply into the process of reading novels than of writing them. As a comic novel it pushes to extremes some of the stereotypes associated with women's literary creativity, and significantly for an Australian novel it inverts one important female stereotype, for its protagonist crosses the water in the opposite direction from most women in Australian fiction, moving not away from Australia for her creative fulfilment but toward it. It is Miss Peabody in England who feels disinherited and her search for a lost mother is an index of her own gendered sense of unbelonging. It is she who writes first to the Australian novelist telling her how "the loneliness and harshness of the Australian countryside fitted so exactly with my own feelings" (5). To her surprise, Diana Hopewell replies, and so begins Miss Peabody's secret life of reading and writing. "The nights belonged to the novelist" is the first sentence in the book and one reiterated throughout, for it is only then that Miss Peabody is freed from her drab life of female duty into the life of fantasy through her reading of Diana Hopewell's novel in letter instalments.

Through the correspondence a literary friendship develops into the most important emotional relationship in the lives of the two women. "I am in love with your handwriting" (6), Diana flamboyantly writes in her different coloured inks, and Miss Peabody replies with painful earnestness:

Oh Diana, she wrote, I am your Friend, and I read every word you write many times. I love your writing . . . she put down her pen. (69)

For them both, writing and reading fiction means escape from diminished reality into a shared life of fantasy shimmering with (im)possibilities as they nourish each other's imaginations in an oddly symbiotic way. In this narrative with its complex patterning of correspondences where characters from Diana's novel-within-the-novel double with characters from the realistic fiction, their relationship might be seen as a case of *Love at Second Sight*, the title of Diana's earlier novella about "two utterly abject

women, both postmenopausal, who have a brief and unexciting love affair" (47). There are certainly lesbian overtones in the correspondence and in the novel in progress which forms the substance of Diana's letters, though within the dimensions of this fantastic relationship there is no space for disappointment. The two women never meet, but instead Miss Peabody "lived for the evenings and the time spent with the novelist's letters and the composing of her own replies" (98).

It is this double activity in which Miss Peabody engages which distinguishes her from uncritical female novel readers. Though her comic confusions between the categories of fiction and real life may be as naïve as Jane Austen's girlish readers in *Northanger Abbey*, her imaginative participation in the act of reading transforms her reader response from an interpretative to a creative one. She is actually serving her apprenticeship as a novelist through writing letters to Diana, inventing the persona of the female novelist as powerful liberated woman and sharing through her questions and suggestions in the creation of the novel's plot. In this playfully self-reflexive fiction the novelist comments in a kind of self-confessional on the necessity for the reader's imaginative participation in the artifice of fiction making:

So much depends in the writing of a novel on the impact of the imagination on someone else. A great deal depends too on the fiction which is mounted on truth... the writer creates the imagined land from fragments of the real thing. (136)

Such recognition of the importance of reader response finds its echo in Margaret Atwood's remark, "It is my contention that the process of reading is part of the process of writing, the necessary completion without which writing can hardly be said to exist" (Atwood 345). What Atwood does not envisage is that one of her readers might take over writing one of her novels, though that is precisely what Miss Peabody does when she inherits the mantle of the novelist. Diana's novel about lesbian schoolmistresses and adolescent schoolgirls is plainly the sublimation of her own frustrated passions and ambitions. Her novel has its place in the tradition of women's sentimental fiction from the eighteenth century onwards, where within the framework of literary conventions women have managed to write about their own for-

bidden female feelings. Indeed the Hopewell genre is wittily satirized by the title of her first novel which Miss Peabody read and on which she founded her romantic vision of Australia, full of "beautiful young schoolgirls and their strange and wild riding lessons" (5). That novel was called *Angels on Horseback*, and though Miss Peabody as an English reader finds it so moving and sad any Australian would smirk, for "angels on horseback" is the name of a traditional Australian savoury made with prunes wrapped in bacon. (Perhaps this title signals Diana's deep preoccupation with food which is shared by Miss Thorne in the present unnamed novel?)

The vision of the Australian outback with its paddocks and droughts and sky harbours between tall trees ("Taller I suspect than your English trees," [8]) owes a great deal to the evocation of the bush in *My Brilliant Career*, as does Diana's invention of herself as a self-sufficient horse-riding woman not unlike "the artist as wild colonial girl" in Miles Franklin's novel (Gardner). This fantasy image is embellished by her gift to Miss Peabody of a large parcel containing "two dozen jars of honey from my bees" and three sheepskins: "I've had them dyed black, red and purple, good little bedside rugs. No worries now about the gifts. Hey? Honey very good for an invalid ma? Do you good too" (72). This generous gesture is discovered at the end to be part of the Australian mythmaking too, when Miss Peabody's friend and goddess is revealed to have been an invalid in a nursing home for years, a situation not unlike that of Miss Peabody's real mother.

The Australian bush myth runs in counterpoint with the fiction of the portly headmistress Miss Arabella Thorne, who every long vacation rushes away from the cultural desert of Australia toward "the music and the art and the culture of Europe" (24). Clearly Diana's novel is a hybridized descendant of the dualistic tradition in Australian fiction which Carole Ferrier has described:

At the beginning of the twentieth century there were, very broadly speaking, two alternative traditions within the framework of which writers could operate. Either they could draw on the tradition of 'European', often 'psychological', novels (as did Henry Handel Richardson, with *Maurice Guest*) or they could

use the chronicles of bush and pioneer life (as did Prichard, with *The Pioneers*). (Ferrier 7)

With her hankering after a lost European metropolitan culture symbolized by male figures long since dead who undergo annual revivals like the Wagner Festival in Munich or the Oscar Wilde matinee performances in London in a "once handsome theatre," Miss Thorne might be seen as an old-fashioned romantic. She can also be seen as a comically debased figure of the decadent 1890s, with her homosexual proclivities and her hypersensitivity to moods and moments. Yet she is always foiled in her clumsy attempts to initiate young women into the beauties of European culture as in her efforts to convert transcendent moments to didactic purposes aimed at improving the sensibilities of her Australian schoolgirls. (As an interesting footnote on Miss Thorne's delight in Wilde, we might recall the eccentric Australian poet and novelist Eve Langley who identified so closely with Wilde that she changed her name by deed poll. After her death, suitcases found in her hut in the Blue Mountains had labels with "Eve Langley" on one side and "Oscar Wilde" on the other) (Thwaite).

On the other hand, Miss Peabody's vision of rural Australia is just as romanticized as the Australian vision of Europe. It is an imagined landscape as different as possible from the urban pavements of London and Weybridge that define Miss Peabody's daily life. Again we may return to *My Brilliant Career* and Susan Gardner's comments on the appeal of landscape in colonial women's fiction:

Nature is the site of potential erotic gratification and religious and mystical vision. . . . *My Brilliant Career* and its poignant thematic companion *Childhood at Brindabella* take place in an Australia recognisably like, emotionally and symbolically if in no precise geographic sense, other landscapes where women have depicted themselves coming to awareness of their potential.

(Gardner 41)

It is precisely this female sensibility toward landscape as an image of psychic freedom which Miss Peabody shares with Diana Hope-well in her dreams of Australia. It is part of the wry comedy that this dream of open spaces has been and will be celebrated within

the walls of a nursing home. Both Diana's Europe and Miss Peabody's Australia are shown to be places of the mind only but nonetheless real for that, as one of Diana's characters remarks:

"She says she has a view of the Vatican. . . . But you know, Edge, she might have it all wrong. She's probably gazing piously at the meat works or some other useful but hideous place."

"I suppose if she thinks it's the Vatican, that's enough."

(152)

There is a great deal of self-reflexive commentary on the relationship between fiction and real life in this novel, though the emphasis falls on the powers of the imagination. Miss Peabody travels to Australia to visit Diana only to find that she is dead:

"She was in the middle of a sentence when she died," the matron of the nursing home said.

"Your letters gave her a great deal of pleasure." (145)

Though at first Miss Peabody is overwhelmed with grief, she is consoled as she reads Diana's last unfinished letter. It stops in mid-sentence: "There is always the realisation that . . ." (156). As epiphany hovers, Miss Peabody knows that her own imaginative involvement in the narrative necessitates that she finish telling the story herself:

There were enormous possibilities. She had only to look at her bulging handbag. There was no one at all to tell things to. No one knew all that was contained in her handbag. (157)

So, with that Wildean echo, Miss Peabody lays claim to her fantastic inheritance "by adoption" as she feels herself transformed from novel reader to novel writer. Rejecting her dead real mother for her dead literary mother she "put Kingston Avenue out of her mind completely" (157). There is of course the possibility that Miss Peabody's dreams of literary creation are as fantastic as old Miss Harley's in *Mr Scobie's Riddle* (1983), and that her ventriloquist's act in assuming Diana's voice is the final stage in her subjective journey to self-alienation and madness. Not unlike Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Jolley's narrative traces the consequences of a woman's life of emotional deprivation to the point where her own identity disintegrates into signs on pieces of paper, though this comic

version takes the form of the post-colonial search for lost mothers and the longing to feel at home.

Miss Peabody's Inheritance like *The Diviners* leads back to the recognition of literary artifice, and we might recall the paragraph in the scholarly journal that a young man lends Miss Thorne on her plane trip back to Australia:

The discussion falls on the concept of structuralist reading and the exposure of the artistic process as being an achievement, on semantic levels, of harmonious surfaces built on insoluble conflicts, for example, the lexical, the grammatical and syntactic levels, with an ideological solution to the contradictions in the mode of discourse, the angle of narration and symbolic structure of a culture . . . (151)

These two novels as they juggle "modes of discourse," "angles of narration" and "symbolic structures" create their own aesthetic orders which hold "insoluble conflicts" in suspension. Both recognize that the subjective self is unstable, reality is contradictory, and that literary inheritance is elusive and multiple, and yet all may be contained within the structure of the work of art. Both novels end not in wilderness but with a homecoming for their narrators. Morag Gunn and Miss Peabody are no longer dispossessed, for by imaginative effort they have tracked down their lost mothers:

My Hope Is Constant In Thee. It sounds like a voice from the past. Whose voice, though? Does it matter? It does not matter. What matters is that the voice is there, and that she has heard these words which have been given to her. And will not deny what has been given. *Gainsay Who Dare*.

(Laurence, *Diviners* 433)

NOTE

- ¹ See Godard on female intertextual encounters.

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