

# Looking Back to Lot's Wife

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The story of Lot's wife is not unknown to contemporary Canadian women novelists nor to their female protagonists. Indeed one Quebec writer, Monique Bosco, shapes an entire novel, appropriately entitled *Lot's Wife (La Femme de Loth)*,<sup>1</sup> around this biblical character. As the protagonist H  l  ne puts it, the statue of Lot's wife is "a fine image, a most telling symbol. A pillar of petrified tears." (p. 142) In another Quebec novel, *Whirlpool (L'eau est profonde)* by Diane Gigu  re, the main character Nathalie has her eyes "firmly fixed on the past": "I kept thinking of that frightful second of time in which Lot's wife chose to look back," says Nathalie. "I kept alive the memory of a person who had already been nie." (p. 55) A lengthy reflection on Lot's wife appears in Adele Wiseman's *Crackpot*, when Hoda suddenly finds special meaning in the figure:

For some reason it was that lady in the Bible that Hoda remembered now, and suddenly understood what had really happened to her. She had always felt sorry for that one, who, just for looking back, had been turned into a pillar of salt. Now she saw that when Lot's wife looked back she simply became what she had been, concentrated essence, pillar of tears. Most of the time you trail your life behind you in a constant dribble of leaking time . . . you hardly know it's there. But comes a time, unexpected and unwanted, to you of all people, when you, of all people, must

look. At least Lot's wife had had fair warning . . . . Lucky Lot's wife . . . . (p. 246)

Not all references to Lot's wife are this explicit or direct. In Marian Engel's *The Glassy Sea*, the image is evoked indirectly when the protagonist Rita states: "If I had looked any longer I should have turned into a pillar of salt." (p. 160) One might also interpret the stone angel of Margaret Laurence's 1964 novel (*The Stone Angel*) as a version of Lot's wife's statue. The stone angel of Manawaka's cemetery is there at the crucial moments in Hagar's life, establishing a link between it and the protagonist who comes to resemble the marble angel. Thus the night her favourite son dies, Hagar is "transformed to stone" (p. 243) and unable to shed a human tear. On the day of her escapade to Point Claire, Hagar sits in the bus "rigid as marble, solid and stolid to outward view." (p. 146) At the end of the novel, which is also the end of Hagar's life, the statue is still there, and like the aged Hagar, "winters or lack of care had altered her . . . . She stood askew and tilted. Her mouth was white." (p. 305) The statue of Laurence's novel emphasizes various significant moments in Hagar's life as she looks back at it from the vantage point of her ninety years.

The woman who turns to look towards her past, even in the face of impending disaster or death, is Lot's wife. And while there may be a limited number of references to this biblical



No. 29 Hilda Woolnough,  
1973, ink, 20'' x 26'' Collection Georgette Tilden.

figure, such as those mentioned, there are countless characters in the novels written by Canadian women since 1960, who turn to their past to take a second look at their childhood or adolescence and sometimes their early adulthood, as well as at the people associated with these periods of life.

Women have been accused of being able to write nothing other than romantic memories of the past—their own personal past—rather than taking up the so-called more “ambitious”, “challenging” topics such as politics, war and national history. Despite such accusations, women are still writing about their past, and what is finally becoming evident is that to do so is neither a fault nor a weakness, as the (predominately male) criticism implies, but rather a necessity. Like Lot’s wife, the female protagonists of women’s novels since the beginning of the sixties have their reasons for turning to the past. While these reasons may differ slightly from character to character, they are all linked to the same important idea underlying most women’s writing in recent years: the search for self, the quest for identity. By going back to see what or who she was as a child and adolescent, and by accepting that person, the woman protagonist can finally come to a better understanding of who she is and ultimately also accept herself as she is.

The “return to the past” is an integral part of a major concern of contemporary Canadian women novelists. To talk about past and present demands that special attention be paid to writing techniques; different authors, experimenting with time in their narrations, have used different techniques. Sometimes the present is suspended or frozen while the past—“time lived”—surges forward to take the central spot. Mechanical, chronological time then takes a second place to a time lived in the past, an internal duration which puts the

clock’s time into suspension and allows a reorganization of past events into another, desired order, one which is often more of a disorder. Complementing this voluntary disorder is a somewhat “incoherent” or “obscure” discourse and rather unusual imagery rooted in the protagonist’s memories and fantasies. Quebec women’s novels seem to display such traits more than those of English Canadians although, of course, exceptions can be found. In Louise Maheux-Forcier’s work, for example, the present, which is often reduced to a mere few seconds,<sup>2</sup> is frozen while the protagonist goes back to her childhood by means of a poetical reverie which recounts a childhood not so much as it was lived but as it is imagined. This return in time has no apparent order; the only organization seems to be that of a series of coincidences and inspirations influencing the protagonist.

Similarly, in Monique Bosco’s *Lot’s Wife (La Femme de Loth)*, as in Margaret Atwood’s *Lady Oracle*, the present is secondary to the past. Both Quebec and English-Canadian authors focus on the protagonist’s past life, with only passing reference to her present situation and activities.

Instead of being suspended, the present is sometimes only slowed down by frequent, regular interruptions of flashback. This technique seems to be used more in English-Canadian women’s work than in Quebec works. In such cases, present-day events catalyze departures into memory. These may well be chronological, but due to the author’s alternating between past and present, the adherence to chronology is less apparent. In Margaret Laurence’s *The Stone Angel*, for example, Hagar’s memories are chronological, but since they are interwoven with events in the present, the reader is scarcely aware of the rigidity of their sequence. The author,

however, dissatisfied with her character's "chronological" memory, decided in subsequent novels to employ different techniques allowing her to present her character's memories in random order. Thus, in *The Diviners*, "memory bank movies" and old photographs permit Morag to skip back and forth in her memory. Marian Engel uses a somewhat similar technique in her novels. In *The Honeyman Festival*, for example, the photograph of the protagonist's ex-lover, together with the evening's events, trigger off a flow of memories.

Not only does the "return to the past," which appears in so many women's novels since 1960, allow a certain experimentation with time and writing techniques, it also organises itself around several recurring concepts or themes to be found in French and English novels alike, three of which may be described as: 1) the protagonist's relations with her parents; 2) the relationship between the parents themselves and its influence on the protagonist; 3) the protagonist's love and sex relationships.

One of the first things clarified by the return to the past is the protagonist's relationship with her parents. Before she can fully determine her place in the present, she must define her position with regard to the people who shaped her past. Quite often in these novels parents represent the established order of things—the status quo—with which the protagonist is frequently in conflict and because of which she feels misunderstood and ultimately misunderstands herself.

The unnamed protagonist of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* begins to sort out her relations with her parents after arriving at the forest cabin on the island where she grew up. Having come to search for her father, reported missing

and suspected dead, she finds herself thinking about him, and about her mother, who died some years earlier, as well as about her feelings and attitudes towards these two people. While on the one hand the protagonist regrets her parents' death, on the other she is relieved for she feels that they never understood her:

They never knew, about that or why I left. Their own innocence, the reason I couldn't tell them; perilous innocence ...

They didn't teach us about evil, they didn't understand about it, how could I describe it to them? They were from another age, pre-historic, when everyone got married and had a family, children growing in the yard like sunflowers; remote as Eskimos or mastodons. (p. 144)

The parents' peculiar "innocence" places them in another era, of which each represents different values. The father is the spokesman of logic, order and rationality; he was the one who taught the protagonist and her brother their arithmetic. The mother taught them reading and writing and represents intuition and instinct. Each parent leaves his daughter an inheritance which she recovers upon returning to the cabin of her childhood. From her mother come the family photo albums which permit her to see in the pictures the evolution of her identity. From her father she gains special knowledge,<sup>3</sup> namely that one cannot impose one's own will and order on the natural order of things. To try to tame nature or the natural by logic and human rationality is to run a great risk. The father ran this risk and lost his life doing so. Understanding this helps the protagonist to comprehend better her own life and, after her experiences in the forest, she appears able to return to her life in the city with a new knowledge of her self.

The heroine of Andrée Maillet's two novels,

*Lettres au Surhomme* and *Le Miroir de Salomé*, defines her relations with her parents in a series of letters to her ex-lover. Although she has reached adulthood, Salomé must still deal with her childhood illusion of parental perfection, especially where her father is concerned. Mr. Camaraire is a domineering man who does as he wishes, making no effort to please anyone at all, a man who defines all women alike as "fragile females." Salomé comes to realize that her father, who has so greatly influenced her life, is but an aging man on the road to alcoholism; with all his foibles he is, in fact, a rather pitiful man. Dissolving her illusions about her father, facing the facts, prepares Salomé to do the same where her own life and person is concerned. She makes the final break with her lover and plans to pursue her education and career abroad.

When her marriage starts breaking up, Joanne, protagonist of a short novel by Marian Engel (*Joanne*), spends a lot of time thinking about the past and about her parent's breakup years before. Although she was young at the time, she does not forget the day her mother walked out: "I remember straggling down that dirt road with her after they'd had a terrifying fight, and he got his rifle out. 'That's the last time, Walter,' she said." (p. 24) While Joanne often refers to her mother, she rarely mentions her father, simply because, as she explains, "it's hard to know what to say about someone who's sour by nature. He had a hard life, but other men came out of the same tube of history smiling." (p. 4) Thinking, remembering, Joanne gets the odd feeling that she's "rolled the calendar back" and is reliving her mother's life forty years later. (p. 78) While this does not take away the pain of her own marriage breakdown, it does help her to understand, and like her mother, Joanne will survive and even prosper after the crisis caused by her husband leaving.

The woman is often seen to be the stronger partner of the married couple in Marian Engel's work. Already in the author's first novel, *Sarah Bastard's Notebook*, the mother is presented as:

. . . a big and not gentle personality . . . but a gentle mother; the opposite of my father, whose sternness was put on . . . Mother was us, and underneath all she believed in—love, mercy, magic—she had a toughness and a fear. (p. 123)

She was our love and our hate . . . She was all poetry, magic, power and strength. You could light candles to her and make incantations. Now we have all expiated her, like a sin. (p. 124)

If Sarah's mother was poetry, magic, power and strength, her father was industry, self-discipline, determination and virtue. (pp. 20-21) The novel opens with Mr. Porlock's funeral and Sarah's decision to free herself of a lifestyle developed within the framework of parental values, and to lead a life allowing her to explore her true nature.

Rethinking the past and one's relationships with parents can, as in Sarah's case, lead to choosing an entirely new lifestyle. But it can also lead to the simple acceptance of one's past and parents, as in the case of another of Marian Engel's heroines, Minn Burge of *The Honeyman Festival*. All her life Minn has made a conscious effort to be different from her authoritarian and very organized mother, deliberately leading a disorganized and somewhat submissive life. She is therefore quite surprised to realize, during the evening's reflection recounted in the novel, that she is, in fact, very similar to her mother, that deep down inside she likes a neat house, an orderly routine and so forth. After having denied her

true nature for so many years, Minn can at last let herself be and even develop the character traits she shares with her mother: authority, self-respect and self-control.

Like Minn Burge, Del Jordan of Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women* spends a long time rejecting her mother whom she considered, as a child, to be too "different":

She was so different, that was all, so brisk and hopeful . . . Suddenly, I could not bear anything about her—the tone of her voice, the reckless hurrying way she moved, her lively absurd gestures . . . and most of all her innocence, her way of not knowing when people were laughing, of thinking she could get away with this. (pp. 67-68)

Embarrassed by her mother's individuality, Del consciously represses any resemblance to her, until she is older and then, reminiscing about her past, Del admits her mother's "heritage" to her, and even profits from Mrs. Jordan's spirit of independence, self-sufficiency and integrity to succeed in her own life as an independent woman writer.

For several protagonists of Canadian women's novels since 1960, a return to the past means reconciliation with an imposing mother, or, less frequently, father-figure. But the woman must also reconcile herself to the couple presented by her father and mother together. This parental couple acts as the first model of a human love relationship, and as such, is susceptible to influencing her own love relations outside the family circle. Thus it is not only the relationship between the protagonist and her parents which plays a role in the return to the past, but also that between the parents themselves.

Before her father's death, Rachel Cameron's

parents led parallel lives (*A Jest of God* Margaret Laurence); by the time Rachel was born they had even stopped talking to each other. As a proper self-respecting lady, Mrs. Cameron lives in the "right" part of town, dresses correctly, goes to church regularly (although for social reasons more than for religious ones); in short, she represents her milieu and all its false, hypocritical values. Given Mrs. Cameron's nature, it is not surprising that she so strongly disapproved of her husband's behaviour. Among other things, Rachel's father did not go to church. But worst of all, he drank. It is not until she is an adult, when she is thinking about her parents and their relations, that Rachel begins to see them as they really were:

Once when I was quite young, she said to me, "Whatever people may say of it, your father is a kind man—you must believe that Rachel." Until that moment it had never occurred to me that he might not be thought a kind man. No wonder he never fought back. Her weapons were invisible. (p. 40)

Mrs. Cameron uses these same invisible weapons in her relation with her daughter, subtly interfering with Rachel's activities by asking seemingly innocent but very leading questions that are an attempt to control Rachel's life. When Rachel at last gets a clear view of what her mother is doing, she takes a stand and determines to lead her own life, according to her own true nature.

In her novel *A Population of One*, novelist Constance Beresford-Howe presents a couple strikingly similar to the Camerons of Laurence's *A Jest of God*. According to protagonist Willy Doyle's memory, her parents lived in silence, never speaking to one another directly, preferring to send messages through their

daughter. Like Mr. Cameron, Willy's father drank to excess, much to his wife's disgust. At age thirty, Willy still has nightmares about the scenes between her parents:

. . . dreams made of long chains of remembered words, pictures, faces, silences, from those closed years. My father drunkenly singing. . . . Mother's . . . mouth pressed into a tight and final line. These things twist and hold me yet, on some nights. (p. 24)

Willy has only to recall her parents' life together and her childhood with them to remember why her "Project" is so important: ". . . years and years of it [silence] when I lived with them in that Rosedale house, filled with the silence of glass under tension. . . . And that is why 'vivre un peu' is so important to me; why The Project is more than just a joke." (p. 7) Like Rachel Cameron, Willy Doyle has spent her life taking care of her elderly mother, but when Mrs. Doyle dies, Willy finds herself free to live the life she has been postponing for too long.

The relations between parents, then, can influence the protagonist as she realizes when looking back over her life. If the heroine of Monique Bosco's *Un Amour maladroit* knows nothing other than a "clumsy love", is it not at least partially because she never witnessed love between her parents, her father having abandoned her mother when she was a child? Do Willy Doyle and Rachel Cameron not have to understand their parents' relationships before freeing themselves from maternal chains? But the parent-protagonist question is not the sole subject to consider with regard to the return to the past in contemporary Canadian women's novels. There is also the first "love" and, occasionally, the first sexual experiences.

Many protagonists seem to be especially af-

ected by their first love affair either as a teenager or even, sometimes, as a child. Louise Maheux-Forcier's characters, for example, are marked for life by a childhood love, which, far from being a mere "puppy love," is a truly passionate affair, one which they cannot forget even as adults and which they set about analysing while reminiscing about the past. In *Amadou* Nathalie recalls her love for Anne which, in *L'Île joyeuse*, Isabelle remembers Julien and, in *Une Forêt pour Zoé*, Thérèse talks of her love for Zoé. Louise Maheux-Forcier writes candidly of a love still rarely dealt with in English-Canadian women's novels, namely homosexual love. Relatively few authors in English Canada have taken the matter in hand<sup>4</sup>. There is the suggestion of lesbianism in Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God* although the author does not make any explicit comments. In Marian Engel's *The Honeyman Festival* Minn makes a passing reference to lesbianism in connection with one of Balzac's stories, *The Girl with the Golden Eyes*. Among Quebec women writers, besides Louise Maheux-Forcier, there is Marie-Claire Blais who treats the topic especially in her most recent novel *Les Nuits de l'Underground*, and Michelle Guérin who makes a timid attempt in *Le Sentier de la louve*.

Homosexual love is not the only "forbidden" love reviewed in Canadian women's novels since 1960. There is also incestuous love as it is found in Suzanne Paradis' *Emmanuelle en noir* and in Anne Hébert's *Les Enfants du sabbat*. More common, however, is the love for a person who is already married and therefore, in principle, not free for the relationship. In Monique Bosco's *Lot's Wife (La Femme de Loth)*, Hélène has a ten-year affair with a married man which ends in failure. Salomé Camaraille's "Love" in the two novels by Andrée Maillet is a married man as well. In Diane Giguère's *Whirlpool (L'eau est profonde)*, Nathalie has an affair with her friend Floren-

ce's husband. Similarly, in Marian Engel's book *Sarah Bastard's Notebook*, Sarah is involved with her sister's husband while, in *The Glassy Sea*, Rita has a fling with her friend's husband. All these women are dissatisfied with their relationships; none seem to have profited from the example of their parents' relationship, allowing themselves to slip into similar unhappy arrangements. Happy love affairs are rare in Canadian women's novels, as the return to the past in the works reveals. Sad ones are much more common, lending themselves better, of course, to the sort of reminiscing that makes novel material. Love and relationships in general, then, play an important role in the protagonist's past, having exerted an influence on both her childhood and adolescence.

Childhood and adolescence are themselves two subjects of reflection. Childhood in particular has an important place in many books; in Louise Maheux-Forcier's work, childhood is, as the author herself puts it, an "obsession." For other writers as well childhood and adolescence are key topics. One might well affirm that had Monique Bosco's characters not grown up in solitude and on the fringe of society, they might have known something other than a "clumsy love"; the same could be said of Diane Giguère's characters. Both Del Jordan's and Morag Gunn's childhoods (in *Lives of Girls and Women* and *The Diviners* respectively) in small villages become factors in their later lives as writers. Joan Foster's and Hoda's childhood obesity (in *Lady Oracle* and *Crackpot*) has a direct influence on their adult lives. Pauline's and Pandora's socio-economic position as children (in *Manuscrits de Pauline Archange* by Marie-Claire Blais and *Pandora* by Sylvia Fraser) prompt them to seek in writing and education a means to realize themselves as individuals.

To say that childhood is an important factor

in an individual's life is not new. What is important, however, is that the protagonist herself recognize the fact and she does this by recalling and analysing her past. For a moment the protagonist of the contemporary Canadian women's novel becomes Lot's wife, immobilized before the past. But whereas the biblical woman seems to be punished for her backward glance, the novelists' women seem to benefit from turning to the past. Doing so helps the protagonist to understand her different relationships and to free herself from unfavourable influences inhibiting her efforts to identify and assume her true self. The Lot's wife motif becomes the link between the major idea of the search for self underlying much of women's writing today, and the recurring concept of the return to the past found in Canadian women's novels since 1960.

#### NOTES

1. English translations of French novels have been used when possible and in these cases the original French title appears in brackets. Page references also appear parenthetically within the text and refer to the editions used and listed at the end of the paper.
2. In her first novel, *Amadou*, the present is stripped down to the single sentence: "Je l'ai tué": "I've murdered him", which appears once at the beginning of each of the three chapters, as well as at the beginning of the Epilogue.
3. "He [the protagonist's father] was an intruder; the cabin, the fences, the fires and paths were violations; now his own fence excludes him, as logic excludes love. He wants it ended, the borders abolished, he wants the forest to flow back into the places his mind cleared: reparation." (p. 186)
4. Novelist Jane Rule is a notable exception.

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