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Margaret Laurence, Carol Shields, Jane Urquhart, and Cynthia Flood

Abstract

Certain Canadian novels by women whose titles include the word “stone” use the motif as substance, symbol, and theme. In the hands of these writers, stone is an eloquent feminine metaphor and is at once timeless and time-defined. The paradox of this relationship is one of the defining characteristics of each work of fiction and of the connections between them, whether the narrative tells the story of exiles from history or participants in it.

Résumé

Plusieurs romans d'auteures canadiennes contiennent dans leur titre le mot « pierre » qui apparaît aussi dans le texte comme désignation de la matière, comme symbole et comme thème. Entre les mains de ces auteures la pierre devient une métaphore éloquente du féminin, à la fois intemporel et limité dans le temps. Le paradoxe de cette relation est une des caractéristiques définitives de chacune des oeuvres de fiction analysées et qui constitue aussi leur élément commun qu'il s'agisse d'une narration qui représente des exilées de l'histoire ou des personnages qui y prennent part.

In *Moments of Truth*, Lorna Sage, British biographer and critic, writes about various women writers. In her essay on Simone de Beauvoir, Sage turns her attention to statues of women. She observes: “Stone is the right stuff, because it emphasises the way woman is construed as timeless – that is, exiled from history. Myth turns you to stone, ‘the Eternal Feminine, unique and changeless’. And yet, of course, there is nothing actually fixed about woman’s meaning: she can and does embody quite opposed symbolic values.”¹ Sage’s comment resonates with readers of Canadian fiction by women when we consider a series of titles – Laurence’s *The Stone Angel*,² Shields’ *The Stone Diaries*,³ Urquhart’s *The Stone Carvers*,⁴ and Flood’s *Making a Stone of the Heart*.⁵ The pervasiveness in them of stone as substance, symbol, and theme is remarkable. In each of the novels, stone is dominant. It is the statue on the hilltop overlooking

1) Sage, 2002, 159.

2) Laurence, 1988. All quotations will refer to this edition and will be noted parenthetically in the text as SA.

3) Shields, 1993. All quotations will refer to this edition and will be noted parenthetically in the text as SD.

4) Urquhart, 2001. All quotations will refer to this edition and will be noted parenthetically in the text as SC.

5) Flood, 2002. All quotations will refer to this edition and will be noted parenthetically in the text as SH.

Manawaka; the monumental size of Mercy Stone; the commanding presence of Canada's war memorial on Vimy ridge; the fossilized embryo which has anaesthetized love. Can we fruitfully invoke Laura Sage's statement and consider the extent to which the women inscribed by these narratives are "construed as timeless" and "exiled from history"?

Although three of these novels – Laurence's, Shields', Urquhart's – either feature women as statues or feature stone monuments erected in memory of women, women in all four works are at once timeless and time-defined. History is ubiquitous in each of the novels. In *The Stone Angel*, World War I and the Great Depression of the 1930s play a prominent role. *The Stone Diaries* is divided into chapters, all of whose titles except the last are accompanied by dates that move from 1905 to 1985. *The Stone Carvers* has at its core the story of the construction of the Vimy Memorial, Canada's magnificent tribute to the dead of World War I. For its part, *Making a Stone of the Heart* relies upon a chronological structure that moves backwards from 1997 to 1900 and contains many historical events from that period.

There are apparent contrasts in the titles of these novels. Stone as solid, adamantine mineral is oxymoronic in relation to the insubstantiality of "angel"; in relation to the sprawling vitality of "diaries" and the even sharper contrast between the given name "Mercy" and the surname "Stone"; in relation to the dynamism of "carvers"; in relation to the living warmth of "heart". Oxymoron, however, is not the figure of speech most apposite to these relationships. Rather, we experience the resonant paradox of metaphor where a thing can be and cannot be simultaneously, and where reciprocation between the two possibilities – as between the temporal and the eternal – is in constant play.

The opening passages of the novels introduce the motif. *The Stone Angel* begins with a description that has passed into our cultural memory: "Above the town, on the hill brow, the stone angel used to stand. I wonder if she stands there yet, in memory of her who relinquished her feeble ghost as I gained my stubborn one, my mother's angel that my father bought in pride to mark her bones and proclaim his dynasty, as he fancied, forever and a day" (SA, 3). *The Stone Diaries* also begins with stone: "My mother's name was Mercy Stone Goodwill. She was only thirty years old when she took sick, a boiling hot day, standing there in her back kitchen, making a Malvern pudding for her husband's supper" (SD, 1). The narrative of *The Stone Carvers* opens with "two men [who] stand talking in the shadow of the great unfinished monument. Behind them rises a massive marble base flanked by classically sculpted groups of figures and surmounted by an enormous stone woman who is hooded and draped in the manner of a medieval mourner" (SC, 1). *Making a Stone of the Heart* begins with silence: "After Thursday 14 March 1996, Owen Jones speaks no word" (SH, 9). He stops talking because he has learned of the death of his one-time lover, Dora Dow, and knows about the publicity surrounding the presence in her body of a "stone child" (SH, 15), the child that he had assumed was his, but that, in fact, was never born.

Narrative voice has an important role in the underscoring of motif. In Laurence's novel, the first-person narrator is consistent and highly individual. The seriousness of the telling is complemented by literary and Biblical allusion; the climax that comes with Hagar's self-realization is powerful and unequivocal. Though it is treated ironically, the figure of the stone angel embodies an intensity of purpose that thoroughly parallels the earnest mood and voice of the telling. With Shields, there is a completely different tone, a sense of play that is initi-



ated by the narrator whom we assume to be Daisy, the daughter of Mercy Stone and Cuyler Goodwill. The trustworthiness of this narrative voice involves the reader's willing suspension of disbelief as the narrator begins and concludes by recounting as fact what she cannot know – a full description of events that occur prior to her birth and an account of details that follow her death. In the telling, stone is plastic rather than rigid, a reflection of the narrative voice which is playful, changeable, pliable. Cuyler, a self-taught carver, incises “cupids, mermaids, snakes, leaves, feathers, vines, bees, cattle, the curve of a rainbow, a texturing like skin” (SD, 64). The conclusion of *The Stone Angel* – “And then – “ (SA, 308) – is purposeful as the narrative itself has been. The final words of *The Stone Diaries* – “Ah, well” (SD, 361)– are casual, wry, and passive. Time in Laurence's novel is a continuum. The cemetery monument recalls the pharaohs of old and dynastic history just as Hagar's final phrase anticipates a further stage. With Shields, time is a cycle that begins with the household tasks of Mercy Goodwill and ends as Daisy “feels herself merge with, and become, finally the still body of her dead mother” (SD, 359), echoing what the narrator says early on: “...I long to bring symmetry to the various discordant elements” (SD, 23). Daisy becomes a recumbent marble effigy “and a stone pillow props up her head” (SD, 359)

The Stone Carvers has, in a sense, two voices that initiate the narrative. The introductory section puts us firmly into a historical setting “in June of 1934...in the shadow of the great unfinished monument” (SC, 1) with the “dark mountains of the coal fields of Lens [which] can be seen to the northeast” (SC, 1) and the graves to the south and the west. Part I of the novel begins by drawing attention to story-telling: “There was a story, a true if slightly embellished story, about how the Ontario village was given its name, its church, its brewery, its tavern, its gardens, its grottoes, its splendid indoor and outdoor altars...This was a legend that appealed to fewer and fewer people in the depression of the early 1930s” (SC, 5). There is, throughout the novel, a tension that brings the fact and history of the Vimy monument up against the romance both of the loss and regaining of love, and of the loss and regaining of identity.

The voice and structure of *Making a Stone of the Heart* are instrumental in enhancing the sense of dislocation. The story is told principally by two kinds of voices: the third-person narrator and individual characters speaking in the first person. Organized in inverse chronological order, the narrative traces the roots of unhappiness and moves back in time to a conclusion marked by its indeterminacy. The novel takes as its metaphor the rare medical anomaly known as “lithopedion” (SH, 176, 177), the calcified remnant of an extra-uterine pregnancy. The metamorphosis from life to death, from flesh to stone embodies the psychological dislocation that permeates the story.

The motif of stone underscores the extent to which transformation in these narratives is or is not possible. Stone angels can weep as Hagar finally does in the cannery for her lost son and self-discovery is possible even in the closing days of life. Daisy Goodwill Flett “finally sees herself” becoming stone, “her living cells replaced by the insentience of mineral deposit” (SD, 358). “It grows harder and colder, and will soon take over altogether. Next week. Tomorrow. Tonight” (SD, 360). The metamorphosis in the romance pattern of descent and rebirth is central to the structure of *The Stone Carvers* and most evident in the loss and recovery of their identity by both Klara and her brother Tilman. It is also present in the imaginative transformation of stone. Instead of sepulchres, the stone tunnels excavated by soldiers under Vimy

Ridge are a source of life, “a river system they had yet to name” (SC, 356, 282). Transformative parody is further present in a role reversal – the depiction of the chef Recouvrir as “a kind of glorious Father Nature” (SC, 327). Transformation is testimony to the fact that lives can change. Within the romance structure, the novel ends elegiacally with lament and consolation. Lament is contained in the anticipation of the day “when there is no one left to climb the tower, pull the rope, ring the bell of the magnificent, improbable church. Names carved in stone become soft and unrecognizable under the assault of acid rain. No one knows any more what the allegorical figures represent. No one cares” (SC, 378). Consolation, however, reposes in the organic qualities of the monument: “A clear flash of silver or alabaster in daytime, lit by a rich inner fire, or reflected moonlight at night, they disperse light and strength and consolation long after the noise of the battle has ended, and all of the warriors have gone home” (SC, 390). In Urquhart’s narrative, stone is symbolic of humankind and of the impulse toward timeless commemoration.

Flood’s lithopedion is expressive of the novel’s epigraph which is taken from Yeats’ poem “Easter 1916”: “Too long a sacrifice/Can make a stone of the heart.” Dora Dow, the protagonist of Flood’s novel, carries her unborn child for more than sixty years until the time of her death. It is the embodiment of her attachment to her own unhappiness and sense of grievance. The stone motif is consistent throughout Flood’s novel. In the opening pages, a young girl speculates about an ancient Venus figure: “Stone bag. Hag of stone...Stone cellulite...Stone women. Pears. Turnips. With stone babies inside, ugh” (SH, 14) Dora’s husband describes her as having “a stone for a heart” (SH, 154). He adds, “Everything a woman could want, Dora had, but she threw us all away. She only kept a stone” (SH, 155). Metamorphosis to stone is expressive of numbers of characters, both female and male. Dora has chosen not to live a whole life and the consequences petrify her relationships with those around her and she never speaks for herself. She is Yeats’ silent stone “in the midst of all.”

In each novel, the relationship between the mineral and the vegetable is significant. In *The Stone Angel*, the coarse couchgrass is a reprimand to the pretensions of the cemetery angels. In escaping to Shadow Point, Hagar encounters a green world. There she is finally able to speak words of comfort to her long-dead son. In *The Stone Diaries*, Cuyler’s stone monument to Mercy, the miniature pyramid that he constructs in his retirement, the rock of the Orkney Isles, and Daisy’s image of herself as stone are juxtaposed to Clarentine’s Flett’s flowers, to Daisy’s prowess in her garden, to her career as Mrs. Green Thumb, and to the “Flowers” – the foursome composed of Daisy, Lily, Myrtle, and Glad – who are Daisy’s friends during her retirement years in Florida. *The Stone Carvers* makes a creative connection between wood and stone – the vegetable and the mineral – as the skills required to work in one medium prepare for the skills required by the other. Klara’s grandfather attempts to pass down his skills at woodcarving to his grandchildren. Jacob gives Klara a boulder to be kept near her wood-carving hand. When Klara’s lover is killed in the First World War, she recalls “what her grandfather had told her about the likeness of medieval knights in full armour being drawn with a chisel on their marble burial slabs” (SC, 161). The stone tunnels under Vimy Ridge are like roots that nurture the creation and growth of the memorial. In *Making a Stone of the Heart*, in contrast to stone that her life becomes, Dora’s adulterous liaison with her lover Owen takes place in a fresh green world: “Around



Dora sprang this year's grass, shooting up through clumps of last year's, long and brown-grey, that lay flat from the sleeping weight of the deer that still wandered about Cedar Cove and into the gardens of Highlands to nibble rosebuds and early lettuce. In this green room, she and he were invisible" (SH, 233-34).

Lorna Sage's evocation of stone implicitly embraces history and eternity, time and the timeless. I have argued that in the novels under consideration, stone cannot be divorced from history. Laurence's stone angel suffers the ravages of time and is presented as one of God's jests on the desire to stand apart or be exiled from history. The timelines of the novel's structure underscore how we cannot – and our artifice cannot – escape the force of history. Shields' impulse toward social comedy invites her to play with history creating an ambiguity that is consistent with what a narrator can and cannot know, the issue with which her novel began. The play with history in *The Stone Diaries* is most evident where "real life" breaks in and Shields uses photos of her own family as surrogates for Daisy's relations. Shields is relying on the reader to enter more fully into the sense of play that sees stone and flowers as complementary and malleable like the life celebrated in her novel. And to see not one diary, but diaries with their multiple possibilities. The romance structure of *The Stone Carvers* comes closer in spirit to Sage's comment. The pattern of quest, loss of identity, descent, and the regaining of identity is archetypal and allegorical in the way that the figures of the Vimy Memorial are intended to be. The metamorphosis in Klara's mind of the memorial from a monument of stone with sepulchral tunnels underneath to an organic creation fed by roots is a visionary and redemptive metaphor that transforms the mineral into the organic. However, it is Klara, the female carver, who chisels the particularity of history into the stone face of the torch-bearer, changing the generic timeless face into that of a time-bound individual – her long-dead lover. *Making a Stone of the Heart*, it seems to me, comes closest to the spirit of Sage's statement. Its regressive temporal structure and the fragmentation of time circle around the stone child that Dora claims is "all I have" (SH, 214). Accepting and protecting her medical condition is Dora's attempt, however futile, to exile herself from her husband, her family, her friends – in short, from history. More than any of the other protagonists, Dora chooses stone. The quotation from Yeats' "Easter 1916" which serves as the novel's epigraph recalls both the stone that was rolled away and the novel's bitter, ironic version of the miraculous transformation that Easter represents – "changed utterly... Transformed utterly"⁶. In *The Stone Angel*, *The Stone Diaries*, and *The Stone Carvers*, metamorphosis, however limited, is possible. *Making a Stone of the Heart*, however, is different and much closer in spirit to the ironic birth of "a terrible beauty" commemorated in Yeats' poem. Yet, for each of the four novels, as the poet observes, "The stone's in the midst of all."

At the conclusion of her Empson lectures, Margaret Atwood discusses how, with Gilgamesh as prototype, "All writers must go from now to once upon a time" (178), down to the place of the dead, and back again. Atwood continues, "As the best authorities have it, easy to go there, but hard to come back and you must write it all down on a stone. Finally, if you are lucky and if the right reader comes along, the stone will speak. It alone will remain in the world to tell the story" (180).

6) Yeats, 1968, 1579-80.

The strength of stone as symbol and substance is not specific to Canadian writers, but its presence as a motif in modern Canadian fiction by women is remarkable. In a sense, the protagonist of each novel is shaped by stone, by what it represents in terms of substance, strength, art, and time. Timeless or time-defined; exiled from history or part of it, stone not only endures, but speaks eloquently and paradoxically of and for these fictional women and their authors.

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