

**THE POWER OF THE MIND AND THE HAND: MARGARET
LAURENCE'S *EXCHANGE OF LETTERS WITH*
*ADELE WISEMAN AND OTHERS.***

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Significant joys involving great writers and their world match the excitement and energy of working with communication through letters with gifted correspondents. Margaret Laurence, Canada's great literary matriarch is not an exception to this. In her letters there is a detailed leap of voice, tone and a lively give-and-take passionate conversation between two souls. The view of the auto-biographer or biographer is vague and only their poetic selection of life can be clearly seen portrayed in their letters. This is certainly evident in the 450 letters in the Laurence-Wiseman correspondence and the 300 letters in the Laurence-Purdy correspondence.

Besides Wiseman, Laurence had also had correspondence with Al Purdy and some others great personalities related to both literary and non literary field. The letters of Laurence have paved the way for a study of her in relation to Canada, Canadian women, Canadian identity and Multiculturalism that have stretched their strong roots in Canada. Letter writers have a very good creative sense. Laurence and Wiseman have proved it through their correspondence.

Laurence is always identified by the reader with the African and Manawakan works that have added feathers to her cap. Her speaking voice through the memoir was very visible to Clara. In writing and then dictating of her memoir, Laurence made some worthy and conscious decisions. She decided to direct her memoir to a broad readership. She wanted her memoir to serve as a public document addressing the social and political issues like peace, environment, position of Canadian women and censorship. The voice of her memoir, *Dance on the Earth* helps us to substantiate the above fact. *Dance on the Earth* begins with her strong public voice and throughout Laurence is the persona who is the protagonist of the memoir. The spatial metaphor of the title and its provenance as an old shaker hymn are both suggestive of the links between life writing and drama as those affinities explored by Evelyn Hinz. 'Dance' relates to the art of writing letters and 'earth', dwelling place. Hinz calls this as the "life myth" and proves that it is implicitly articulated in the autobiography and the memoir.

Clara Thomas has written about Margaret Laurence's search for a perfect form for *Dance on The Earth* and about her delight in locating the female-centered celebration of four women who played a vital role and meant the most to her life: her mother; her step mother, who was also her aunt, her mother-in law and her daughter.

Margaret Laurence, a writer who speaks in her letters is similar to the person we encounter in *Dance on the Earth*. The person seems to be intense, warm, gutsy and possessed by a good sense of humor. Several critic friends of Laurence identify her with this person.

As necessary her memoirs and letters have a selection of what is told and how it is told. The memoir has a narrative shaping of a life seen retrospectively and seen as a whole. In the letters there are also moments when one encounters a self-consciousness that goes beyond and beneath the ephemera of ordinary, day-to-day life. There is always an embryonic, emergent and triumphant sense and power of the writer's mind.

Letters have a beneficial role in the personal and professional life of Laurence. It proves an ordinary embedment of the theme that fills her communication and her works. Margaret Laurence lived outside Canada for a good part of her writing career. She was isolated from her own culture and geography as a Canadian. To her, letters became the only tool to keep in touch with her family and friends. It also served as a means of adapting herself to a strange environment. This strange environment passed a new world before her eyes and challenged her to practice her writer's craft. These early descriptions were composed as set pieces and they reflect the setting as described in the Manawakan cycle. Laurence in 1951 has described it in a letter to Wiseman.

The letters from 1950s are remarkable in their charting of the artistic and personal growth of Laurence. Her letters are full of moments of youthful enthusiasm. Five months after the arrival of Laurence and her family in Somaliland, Margaret in her letters stressed that her real ambition was to understand Somali stories and poems and later she reported that she had written several stories set in an east African colony. In the same letter, she wrote at length about translating Somali poetry and stories:

I've translated exactly, but of course the process of putting it into more or less literary English lies in the choice of words . . . there are, I discover, an awful lot of synonyms in English. But the difficulties will be obvious from a few examples: in one love poem, the word "place" occurs, but in the Somali, a special word is used, which means "place" and also means "the grace of God," implying that the place referred to was highly blessed or particularly fortunate in some way. I've translated that by including the second meaning . . . "a place of Allah's kindly grace" . . . which is really what it means although only one word is used in Somali. (September 4, 1951)

Margaret Laurence concluded the letter with the inclusion of her translation of several "belwo," or short lyric poems. She used her correspondence with Wiseman to discuss and even experiment with her early translations. The letters also reveal the early depth and strength of Laurence's commitment to her writing. She showed great interest in sharing her findings and writing experiences with her friends through letter correspondence. Her letters picture a strong sense of the mind that she possessed related to her writing career. In a letter to Wiseman regarding Somali writing she reveals the early depth of her commitment to writing:

I spend most of each day at my typewriter, either writing notes on what's been happening, or things I've seen of Somali life, or things I've found out about Somali beliefs and culture; or else I am working at the Somali poems and stories . . . I've collected quite a few, but of course can only get them slowly and painstakingly, through English-speaking Somalis, and thus miss a good deal. . . also I may never even hear some of the best stories, as they naturally don't know what I want to hear, and just tell me any stories that happen to arise naturally out of what has been happening or what we've been talking about. The rest of the time I spend writing stories. I've only done four so far . . . it takes a lot of time . . . so much more than one thinks it's going. (November 9, 1951)

To Margaret Laurence, the 1950s were wonderful years. She was happy in her marriage with Jack Laurence, had children and had a wonderful opportunity to travel and live in different parts of Africa. Her *A Tree for Poverty* published during this period encouraged her to travel beyond limits as a writer. Her letters also exposed her preoccupation with and her insecurity about the quality of her work. As she lived far from any real literary community she was hindered from discussing her thoughts and ambition with others. At this moment her husband Jack acted as a considerably reliable person and gave her his best as a literary judge. In a correspondence to Wiseman on this experience, she describes her early stories as "the only good things I've ever written in prose, except for odd passages here and there. But I mean as a whole. Jack thinks so, too. Adele, it really is the first time I've ever written anything that he thought was good, as a whole. There have been odd bits in the novel that he liked, and his criticism was always very helpful, but this time it was different" (September 4, 1951).

Laurence experienced an ambivalent combination of gratitude and malaise in her writerly relationship with her husband. Jack was the only soul who asked and offered his opinion, advice and suggestions in her period of isolation. Jack's encouragement helped her in developing confidence as a writer and Jack played his part in preparing her for inevitable future stages. Laurence was grateful for his interest and listened to his criticism but in later stages she became less and less content with her compliance. As years went on, malaise turned gradually into restiveness and then into rebellion. Then she insisted on the integrity of her own creative instincts, even at the price of her marriage. This behavior of Laurence towards Jack was inevitable and its culmination marked the water-shed of her life. Laurence and Wiseman through their letters communicated both their difficulties in the publication of their first novel *This Side Jordan* and *The Sacrifice* respectively. Wiseman wrote that her novel was accepted by Macmillan and Viking for publication in September and Laurence's to be published in England in October. As Laurence began revising the draft of the novel she wrote Wiseman, "I'm sorry to bore you with all this, but you're the only person I know who will understand" (July 10, 1956). This shows her emerging sense of her own creative autonomy and describes the need to get her novel off to the publisher.

Laurence lifelong friendship with Wiseman is also marked by a measure of deference, and Laurence had early stood in admiration of Wiseman's single-minded dedication to writing her first novel. By publishing her *The Sacrifice* to immediate and resounding kudos,

Wiseman became the senior writer and that was the position that she implicitly occupied from then on in their friendship. After the Manawaka works appeared in steady succession, Laurence's writing was carried to unprecedented prominence. This made her feel protective of Wiseman which reinforced a sense of deference that served as a part of their friendship till the end. The Laurences' return to Canada in 1957 was a blow to Laurence. She had a shock, exacerbated by the death of her stepmother from cancer. In the following years her circumscribed world as wife and mother became more and more confining; she felt defiant and angry rather than diffident in the rejection of her stories. She felt progressively more confident about her writing. The publication of *This Side Jordan* was a milestone and her next project "Old lady" novel, as she called it, was a paramount success.

The 1962 summer was a turning point in Laurence's life and confluence of forces precipitated the crisis: *The Prophet's Camel Bell* was accepted by Macmillan for publication. At this time Jack Laurence was offered a job in Pakistan. As their custom Jack read it and suggested wholesale revision. This created a sort of misunderstanding between them. As a result, they decided on a trial separation, Margaret decided to take her children to England and make her career as a professional writer there, while Jack decided to go to Pakistan. The letters written during this time reflect her anguish. For the first time she characterized her life as "kind of delayed adolescence, at the advanced age of 36, and it is really now or never" (August 29, 1962).

After her stay in England for nearly a year, she initiated another rite of passage and took a new name Margaret instead of Peg or Peggy as she had signed her name thus far in letters to Wiseman and others. She was aware of the importance of these words and gestures. This indirectly indicated a sign of change, growth and empowerment. The letters that she had written after her move to England were full of personal and professional apprehensions, reflecting her children's well-being and her own sense of enormous chance that she was taking at her own risk.

During her first years in England, she was not ready for any sort of friendship with Al Purdy. She lost much of her difference and deference. If Wiseman served as her alter ego, Purdy was in a sense her counter-ego, goading her, refusing to indulge her, and always reminding her of the accents of home. Though his attention had overwhelmed her ten years earlier, only after her placing her feet strongly in England his presence acted as a spur. She prepared herself for the stimulation and challenges of this friendship and replied so early and volubly to Purdy.

Laurence's years in Africa had shown her how little she knew about the world and the way her Canadian background appeared during that period, limited and parochial. Africa gave her cultural and creative awakening. Her first Canadian novel, *The Stone Angel*, made her an expatriate once again and propelled her to England where she came home emotionally and psychologically as a Canadian and, to her it was possible only because of Purdy. As two strong minded and forceful individuals, Laurence and Purdy became close friends because their primary form of communication was epistolary, they easily identified and respected their differences as much as their common ground and this empathy is palpable in their

letters, where circumstance and issues made them by degrees mostly sympathetic and sometimes edgy. Correspondence also allowed them to balance nuance and candour in a way that was more difficult in person.

Laurence's references to Gerard Manley Hopkins in different letters to Purdy make the links of rhythm and phrasing between Hopkin's *The Windhover* and Morag's description of the great blue heron intriguing. Clara Thomas also has noted the similarities between Purdy's "Joe Barr" and Laurence's Christie Logan of *The Diviners*. The last stage of Laurence's professionalization in the world of letters was the impact of her correspondence with Purdy. From Purdy, Laurence learnt to keep friends' letters and copies of her own. Purdy's sense of himself as a writer made Laurence emulate the same in practice.

The correspondence that Laurence had developed with other writers and great personalities made her a woman of substance and principle. It gave her a unique identity and made her contribute substantially to the process of making her a national icon. Laurence's role assumed high moral grounds and paved way for others to recognize her importance. Her letters to Adele Wiseman and others cover nearly five decades and reflected the stages and events of her lifetime. Her correspondence continued until her death. Her strong willpower and success as a writer is purely dependent on her exchange of letters with Adele Wiseman and others.

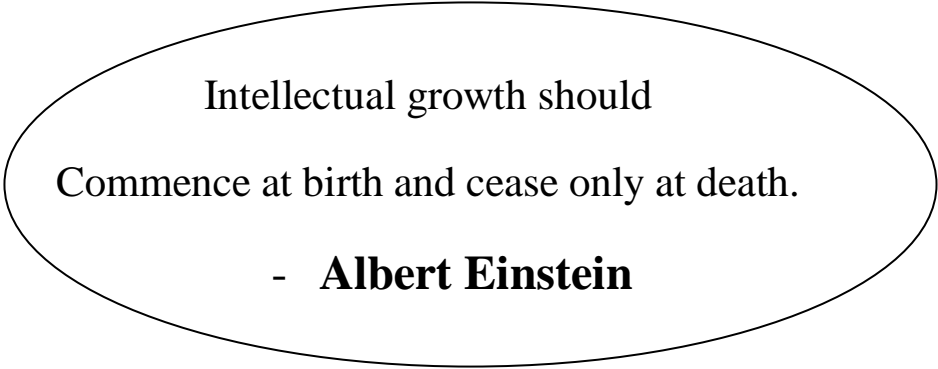
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Intellectual growth should
Commence at birth and cease only at death.

- **Albert Einstein**