

## A FEMINIST SEMIOTIC MULTIMODAL NARRATIVE STUDY OF MARGARET LAURENCE'S THE DIVINERS

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### Abstract :

The purpose of this study is to examine the phenomenon of semiotic multimodal literary narrative in Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*. The study hence provides an insightful review of the potentials of the multiplicity of the semiotic modes in feminist historiography metafiction.

The correlation between the concrete poetics, typography, layout and illustration and the textual poetics indeed allows for the combination of codes of history and gender.

### ملخص:

هدف هذا المقال هو دراسة ظاهرة تعدد الأنماط السيميائية في الرواية المعاصرة، إذ أخذت الدراسة على عاتقها الكشف عن جاليات السيميائية وأنماطها المختلفة في رواية (ذوديفانرس) للكاتبة الكندية مارغريت لورانس، فضلا عن بيان فاعلية السيميائية في المتن الروائي وعلاقته بالمعنى وإمكانيتها في إثراء النص الروائي وخص بالذكر منه التاريخي النسائي.

ولا يخفى على القارئ أن الدراسة تبنت فكرة العلاقة التوافقية بين جالية النص المرئي المتمثل ب(النسق والصورة) وجالياته الفنية التي نلمسها في ظاهرة التشفير. تسمح هذه العلاقة التوافقية بتواجد سياسات تاريخية ونسوية معا في هذا المتن الابداعي.

## Introduction

By the turn of the twentieth century, the multimodal novel came to existence and signaled the shift from literary semiotic monomodality towards multimodality. Verbal written language has whereby become only one narrativistic semiotic mode but not the only one for the process of meaning construction. The multiplicity of narrative semiotic modes is one of the aspects of Margaret Laurence's experimentalism with form in her fifth novel, *The Diviners*. It is a Canadian feminist postmodern met narrative which conjoins the female artistic autobiography and the tales of the search for ancestors, the Métis, in Canada. The current paper explores the narratorial functions of the various "concrete poetics"<sup>1</sup> in feminist novelistic narrative with a special reference to Laurence's *The Diviners*. The paper accordingly argues that the writer's literary avant-gardism results in enriching the semiotic credit of the verbal textual narrative thereby feminist and historiography codes intertwine.

### I. Semiotic Multimodal Novelistic Narrative:

Regarded as an inevitable "contemporary reality,"<sup>2</sup> an outcome of the age of cross-disciplinarily, multimodality is described as "a multipurpose toolkit, not a single purpose."<sup>3</sup> The advocates of a multimodal theory in storytelling recognize the impossibility of fiction narrativity in the absence of a linguistic foundation, yet they believe in the possibility to reinforce its codes with the integration of other modalities. One of these advocates is Marie-Laure Ryan who insists that "verbal language is the native tongue of narrative, its proper support."<sup>4</sup> Gunther Kress, another prominent proponent of semiotic multimodal narratology, points out that twentieth century semiotics is inspired by "the desire of crossing boundaries."<sup>5</sup> Dependently the plurality of semiotic modes does not undermine narrativity.

Furthermore, literary semiotic multimodality "denotes a type of novel ... that is substantially different from the traditional novel which relies totally on the written word in printed form."<sup>6</sup> Indeed the multimodal novel is identified as "a complex arrangement that combines various semiotic resources."<sup>7</sup> Taking into consideration this shift, a range of critics has proposed the re-vision of storytelling theory in order to analyze multiple semiotic modes with equal importance with the basic verbal linguistic resource in narrative. Inherently, writing requires the multiplicity of semiotic resources, having punctuation

marks and visual signs like spacing, font, size, bolding, frames, colors of words, and paragraphs as graphic resources, besides syntactic, textual and socio-semiotic resources.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, “all texts are multimodal”<sup>9</sup> and all narratives are composed of abstract and concrete aesthetics.

In this respect, Nina Nørgaard has designated three essential semiotic modes in the multimodal literary narrative: typography, layout and the photographic image. Typographically, color and shape are manipulated to act specific semiotic roles, lavishing the written passages sense and authenticity.<sup>10</sup> The way the textual narrative is laid out is thus of paramount significance for its semiotization. For instance, the generic interrelationship between prose and poetry consolidates the postmodern feminist crossing of “the boundaries of genre.”<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Gibbons asserts that multimodal literature is not divorced from the context of postmodernism.<sup>12</sup> The multimodal novel may also deploy other non-verbal resources, including visual images such as photographs and graphics, documents like handwritten letters, poems or diary entries, which meaningfully perform narratorial functions.<sup>13</sup> This paradigmatic shift in the novelistic narrative from monomodality towards multimodality, indeed, contributes to dramatize and flexibilizes contemporary narrativity.

The revival of Laurence’s avant-garde feminist novel from a semiotic multimodal narratologist perspective allows for a holistic analysis of its semiotic “formal features.”<sup>14</sup> The systemic incorporation of textual and extra-textual features indicates the writer’s sophisticated artistry in fiction storytelling indeed. Apart from the linguistic mode, this multimodal novel involves other integrated resources, mentioning varied font-types and structure as visual modes. For instance, snapshots, memorybank movie sections and signs are integrated not for the purpose of embellishment but rather to “linguicize all the signs.”<sup>15</sup>

Margaret Laurence has been conscious of the limitations of language in storytelling, in the 1970s, two decades ahead of theorizing multimodality. Her fifth novel, *The Diviners*, published in 1974, hence, through various strands, denounces the restricted propositions the linguistic resource may offer. Kress’s assertion that language fulfills one function and image fulfills another has its resonance in the protagonist’s realization that words are insufficient to depict certain situations. The “apparently” extradiegetic narrator describes the way

Morag Gunn, the female protagonist, after reading her daughter's farewell words, "sat looking at the river, which was moving quietly, its surface wrinkled or creased, each crease of water outlined by the sun." This description however is subsequently regretfully commented on: "the river wasn't wrinkled or creased at all\_ wrong words, implying something unfluid like skin, something unen-during, prey to age."<sup>16</sup> Morag Gunn who seems to be a skilled writer discovers ultimately the paralysis of the word, as a mode and a medium, to portrait the river's face. Recognition of the futility of verbal language is insufficient to cover her portrayal's flaws nonetheless.

The narrator metaphorically considers the distortion of the natural image with an inaccurate language a murderous act in the sense that "wrong words" become a blunt sword with which the river is slain. From the point of view of the protagonist herself "river-slaying" is worse than "killing a person."<sup>17</sup> These words are murderous because they are "inappropriate to verbalize a specifically visual perception."<sup>18</sup> This coincidence which displays the narrator's inaccuracy and thus incredibility when telling the story of the ancestors in reference to the river drives her to reflect: "I used to think words could do anything. Magic. Sorcery. Even Miracle. But no, only occasionally."<sup>19</sup> When writing her fifth novel, Morag Gunn has discovered the insufficiency of the linguistic resource. She recurrently hints at the duplicity of mere words to portrait certain panoramas. This met fictional character who is reconstructing history becomes aware of the fact of the need for other resources besides verbal written language for telling multiple stories. The protagonist hence returns to concrete evidence of the past, photographs, historical documents, oral tales and lyrical ballads from different perspectives.

## II. Feminist Multimodal Historiographic Metafiction:

Like her Canadian contemporary writer Alice Munro and Margaret Atwood, Margaret Laurence displays a persistent emphasis on the exploration of the politics of gender via the poetics of genre.<sup>20</sup> Her feminist avant-gardism has licensed her experimental indulgence pushing the novel beyond its natural frontiers. From a feminist perspective, the plurality of the semiotic resources is an aspect of "synaesthetic writing"<sup>21</sup> which bases on the idea of "bringing the body into the act of writing."<sup>22</sup> In an article, "Canadian Feminist Writing and American Poetry," Eugenia Sojka has given this form of writing

another name: “fémminage,” thereby poetics and politics are no longer dichotomized.<sup>23</sup> These experimental acts of writing generate from the feminist consciousness that “to choose to write in or on a particular genre is also to choose a particular mode of social, not just narrowly aesthetic interventions.”<sup>24</sup> This argument evokes the identification of modes as “sign systems that describe socially and culturally shaped semiotic resources for mapping meaning.”<sup>25</sup>

In *The Diviners*, the plurality of the semiotic modes constructs a typical feminist version of historiographic metafiction. It begins with the protagonist’s dilemma of mothering a new book and a seventeen years old daughter who is gradually growing passionate of her history. Thus the story of writing about fiction writing interweave with the story of the quest for the past. The mother struggles to write her fifth novel with a new structure, whereas, the daughter takes the adventure of moving west in search for ancestors. The grand narrative closes with the daughter’s attainment and the resolution of the historical riddles and the mother-artist’s setting her title, which seems to be “The Diviners.”

Accordingly, in order to meet the requirements of writing in the feminine and structuring the story anew, the writer has managed to merge “the linguistic, graphic and musical codes.”<sup>26</sup> The novelist uses the kind of narrativist multimodality which involves all of visuality, literality and musicality.<sup>27</sup> Literality is inherently implied within the musical and the visual. For narrativistic purposes, unusual typography, photography and layout are asterisks of visuality. Significantly, Patricia Waugh asserts that “a page is an area on which I place my signs I consider to communicate most clearly what I have to convey” deploying “typographical techniques beyond the arbitrary and constricting limits of the conventional novel.”<sup>28</sup> Typographically, variant font types, for instance, could reveal narrative voices from heterodiegetic to homodiegetic levels.<sup>29</sup>

The transition from external to internal focalization in Laurence’s narrative is visually highlighted via the italicization of particular passages. In search of some resolution to the riddles of the present, the female protagonist resorts herself to the past and begins telling a complex story which is apparently a woman’s *kunstlerroman* but implicitly involves the vexed history of the origins. The following extract, reflecting the attitude of the protagonist about the concrete signal she has from the past, illustrates a visualized dialogic shift: “Not

realizing that if she had chucked them [photographs]out, then and there, her skull would prove an envelope quite sturdy enough to retain them.” Morag subsequently makes the following personal statement: “*I’ve kept them, of course, because something in me doesn’t want to lose them, or perhaps doesn’t dare. Perhaps they’re my totems, or contain a portion of my spirit.*”<sup>30</sup> This technical transition allows the protagonist to “shadow” her inner self with italicization.<sup>31</sup>

The use of italics indeed signifies subjective holes “through which [Morag] can breathe.”<sup>32</sup> Hence there are different italicized quoted interior monologue passages. She for instance experiences a sudden shift from the “you” to the “I” position in the following passage:

But you cannot say to a child *Look, there is this man and he has seven children and a wife in the north of Scotland, and I am in love with him and I go over and make love with him whenever I possibly can.*<sup>33</sup>

Here, Morag seems to struggle the dilemma of being a single mother, torn between her duties towards her young daughter and her womanly desires towards the man she is secretly in love with. This interiorized confusion which is typically related to the female experience is typographically embodied. The writer needs to shift from a normal font-type to the italic type when the narrator-protagonist shifts from the situation of a mother to perform her femaleness as a woman with no burden in life.

Italicization is not the sole typographic mode that signals the quoted interior monologue passages though. The systemic absence of punctuation signposts also indicates Morag’s monologue. The following extract is the case:

Sometime later it is found that among the things in her dresser drawer is a novel one of the finest ever written in a long time anywhere it is published Christie buys two bottles of rye on the proceeds (*he better not*)”<sup>34</sup>


Here the lack of punctuation signals the undisruptive protagonist-writer’s grief for the loss of Christie, the great source of knowledge about history. Nevertheless, Morag proceeds to tell the private and public stories and commemorates the treasure man in her auto-fiction.


The text's weight is another typographic feature which is frequently deployed by Laurence in her experimental fiction narrative. In journalistic writing, headlines are bold-faced, whereas, in novelistic writing particular titles are overshadowed in bold. Increasing the weight of certain in-text titles increases their literary value indeed. Significantly, in his article "Towards a Semiotics of Typography," Theo van Leeuwen points out that "increased weight" inherently "increases salience" but symbolically may indicate "ideational and interpersonal meaning."<sup>35</sup> Dependently, if the italic type is used to emphasize the female protagonist's subjectivity, mothering a fatherless girl child, the bold font is adopted to overemphasize the lost past of the ancestors that is revived via different storytelling acts. Indeed, the sections which are tales told by an ideal man like Christie, or by a Métis beloved like Jules Skinner or by a genuine inheritor like Morag Gunn are given bold-faced titles. The depth of black color sheds light on the tales which tell the past from different perspectives.

As the narrative reaches certain critical climactic situations, however, the use of sole signs is self-sufficient to construct the meaning words could not. As a matter of example, a tale is told by a question mark. As a title, the tale is given its due importance, being typed in italic bold face, but not as content. It is written in the following way:

### ***Skinner's Tale of Dieppe?***<sup>36</sup>

The tale which the author favors to cover with a question sign is doubted because of its teller, Skinner. The section which is called "DOWN IN THE VALLEY? ACT II" includes a series of tales told by Skinner, recalling the heroic deeds of his ancestors; the last tale is the only one that is not textually narrated but shadowed in a question mark. The tale questions its teller who is overwhelmed with the past heroism and hence begins to romanticize the history of his ancestors. Enthusiasm and romanticism indeed are strong elements of subjectivity which is undesirable when telling history.

Another sign recurrently appears to tell the story thousand words could not. While examining a hunting knife, the scrupulous child discovers this track: <sup>37</sup> on its handle about which she eagerly asks Christie. The answer is nonetheless postponed to the ending pages of the penultimate section. Again the same sign manifests in different conditions when Morag becomes a middle-aged mother whose

daughter's father, Jules Tonnere, is dying. In those last moments, the father desires to offer his girl, the inheritor, the knife with the hallmark of the ancestors. Morag who has always thought the thing belongs to her ultimately solves the riddle of the sign. As a skilled wordsmith, she decodes the sign  as an inverted "T," the initial letter of Tonnere.<sup>38</sup> Someday in the far past, the knife belonged to Lazarus the grandfather then was passed to Skinner the father and is now the daughter's property. Directed towards the left side, the horizontal "T" signifies the origins of the Métis: the west. The narrative indeed opens with the daughter's journey towards the west, to get "gathered with [her] ancestors,"<sup>39</sup> and ends with the mother's approval to the quest. Thus the female inheritor takes the knife and the train that were "moving west."<sup>40</sup>

From the perspective of semiotic multimodal narratology, varied layout is another visual device which has narratorial functions. The innovative inclusion of the sections of memorybank movies and snapshots, functioning "like the colons in punctuation" in evading responsibility and simultaneously opening to interpretation,<sup>41</sup> instead of normative narrative discourse contributes to the variation of the novel's layout. These concrete mini-structures coalesce to form the grand narrative's literal framework. Particularly, as the narrative follows the shadow of a girl child towards sexual and artistic maturity, colloquialism and other oral techniques strongly manifest via such forms as tales, script conversations, lists, lyrics within memorybank movies. The two sections being called "*Once Upon a Time There Was*" and "*The Nuisance Grounds*" are evidently best examples.

Moreover, in Laurence's *The Diviners*, the story of a woman artist and her daughter's journey of the quest for the origins and the history of Canada form one grand narrative thereby the protagonist is always female. Arguably, since the story of Canada concerns all the Canadians, all of the characters become participants in the act of narrativizing. Morag's story, however, has only one mouth to tell and one pen to write. The acts of recalling the narrator's past and of recovering the history are paralleled.

In certain situations visual blanks stand as a language that embeds aural silence. The spatial extent of sentences contributes indeed to the "semiotization" of the narrative.<sup>42</sup> This kind of experimentation



appears in a quoted interior monologue where Morag wonderingly recalls her experience as a young woman shopkeeper:

little girls' party dresses very cute with full skirts and embroidery

dirndl skirts with bright orange and blue flowers printed blouses with lace ruffles at the neck

AND

oh

the most adorable red dressmaker suit size 14.<sup>43</sup>

While the uninterrupted flow of thoughts is indicated by the total absence of punctuation marks, silence is signaled by the visual blank space. This narrated interior discourse is arranged in an unfrequented structure which serves to defamiliarize the technique itself.

Furthermore, black pages, fully filled ones, signal the writer's structural deviation from the conventional layout for historiography constructions. This "visual density" denotes "the density of meaning" as the narrator seeks obsessively to exploit all the tools to convey a focused meaning.<sup>44</sup> For interpersonal and historical ends, Morag is a narrator-presenter who narrates the story and "searches, retrieves, and 'collects' documents and sources and eventually presents them to the reader" thereby the process of narrativizing includes both "showing and presentation."<sup>45</sup> As a matter of fact, historical stories of the Métis and the Scots are enclosed in almost full-inscribed pages. Memorybank movies that are socio-historically constructed are overloaded with lists, conversational scripts which seem to be alien to fiction, folk tales and songs, all assimilated into the feminine narrative discourse. Here are three instances in which the writer extracts from real historical documented resources: contents of *The 60<sup>th</sup> Canadian Field Artillery Battery Book*, a reference to *The Canadian Settlers' Guide*, 1855, and a casualty list from *the Winnipeg Free Press*.<sup>46</sup>

Illustration is another semiotic visual technique which Laurence deploys for the construction of history. *The Diviners* ends with a section called "The Album," including songs and ballades presented phonographically. From a semiotic narratologist perspective, this phonographic presentation of the Album section which is composed of the songs of Skinner Tonnerre and his daughter Piquette is significantly

rich: employing layout and typography and image at once. It may supply the narrative with essential clues that the musical keys open. The integration of the Album indeed signifies “that there is more to be said than any book can contain, a gesture consistent with Laurence’s desire,” featuring *The Diviners* as “a phonofiction.”<sup>47</sup>

The phonographic Album seems to be an indicator of the narrative’s systemic incompleteness and the author’s distrust of textuality. The ballads embed historical codes: the Jules Skinner Tonnere’s song entails his ancestral *heroic* history whereas Pique’s allegorical ballad embeds the impact of gender in the construction of history. The fact that the Album, as the entire novel, ends with the daughter’s song signifies how the “future is marked by song and the feminine.”<sup>48</sup> The story culminates with Morag’s writing “her private and fictional words,”<sup>49</sup> and with her daughter’s historical song.

Musicality is another semiotic resource that is deployed in synaesthetic writing. *The Diviners* is overloaded with such musicating devices<sup>50</sup> as consonance, assonance and repetition. There are two cases, included within the same page, where the writer dexterously utilizes the visual for the service of the musical. For instance, the following passage captures the female narrator-focalizer’s interior monologue: “What like? Like only itself, maybe, the Wachakwa River, in places only a creek. *Crick*. Some people say it like that. Different people say things differently. Eva says *crick*.”<sup>51</sup> The effect of the former word is increased with italicizing the latter. The aural quality of the sign “creek,” wanted for making meaning here, which is mispronounced and misspelled as “*crick*” is attained via free association, opening the sign to interpretation. This case where the spelling of the word is visually highlighted to create a musical effect gives hints about the linguistic diversity of the Wachakwa people.

The second instance occurs when the word is musicated by being divided into rhythmic patterns, phonologically written as: “Eerie.*Eerie*. What a word. Ee-ee-rie.”<sup>52</sup> The emphasis on the effect of plunging down into the ravine on Morag who is overwhelmed with fits of mad adventure is marked with the musical repetition of the adjective “eerie.” Delving into the ravine symbolizes the female protagonist’s adventurous search for the ancestors in the far past.

Furthermore, the narrator's systemic wordplay creates a unique rhythmic composition. As a matter of example, Morag the middle-aged mother reflects, "The thing now was not to interfere, not to enter fear."<sup>53</sup> Evading any undesirable resultant feeling, she opts for not making any comment on the ultimate deadly sickness of Jules, her daughter's biological father. The composition of a specific musical pattern manifests in another position, making sense of the parents-daughter relationship. The rhythmic repetition of the word "shadows" in the following passage: "*They [her parents] remain shadows. Two sepia shadows on an old snapshot, two barely moving shadows in my head, shadows whose few remaining words and acts I have invented,*"<sup>54</sup> seems to perform the narratorial function of stressing Morag's quest for their forgiveness for forgetting them. The passage embeds an internal rhyme which is composed out of well-tight repetition resisting any discursive gap.

Repetition can also be an indicator of colloquialism and childish discourse. As it has been stated above, *The Diviners* traces the growth of a female literary artist from childhood towards maturity. The language of the narrator when recounting her early past appears less formal thereby repetition is one of the aspects of this informality. The narrator's description of one of the characters in her early life is the best example. Adopting a heterodiegetic position, she recalls: "Vernon is younger than Morag. He is a drip. Also, his nose drips dripsdrips all the time."<sup>55</sup> As a noun, "drip" is deployed once and first to signify the age and size of the child, but as a verb it is repeated thrice so as to stress the continuous act of the dripping of Vernon's nose. Whether being a girl child or an adult woman, the use of rhythm is effective to make sense when telling the story. Musicality and visuality thus corporate to create certain effects that enhance the act of narrativizing a multilayered story in the feminine.

## Conclusion:

Once constructing her final narrative *The Diviners*, the last episode of the Manawaka cycle, in 1974, Margaret Laurence thought of creating a different product with a difficult structure to decipher, without being conscious that the complex thing is a multimodal novel. Codes of gender and history are merged to form a typical feminist historiographic metafiction. The narrative which is supervised by a

middle-aged woman artist, via serial memorybank movies, and personal snapshots, branches out to resolve certain riddles of the history of ancestors who lived by the Wachakwa River. Besides the textual platform, varied typographic, unusual layout and incidental photographic asterisks are superimposed on the book, so as to contribute to the coherence of the narrative. Visuality, musicality and literality combine in order to chronicle the growth of the history of Canada and the “herstory” of Morag Gunn in a polysemous so-called “textual” narrative. Be it writing fiction or singing popular songs or documenting history, the female element is strongly involved. As a consequence, this flexibility and openness empower the novelistic narrativeto survive in spite of literary and theoretical phallocentrism.

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