This is the use of memory:
For liberation . . .

T.S. Eliot, 'Little Gidding', *Four Quartets*

Margaret Laurence is usually regarded as a 'regional' writer concerned with Canadian history and myth. It is true that her writing gives voice to what she has called Canada’s ‘cultural being’, ‘roots’, and ‘myths’;¹ and *The Diviners*, the last novel of the five-volume Manawaka series which occupied a decade (1964–74) of her career, associates personal quest with the search for Canadian past.² But in *The Diviners* Laurence writes against wider and older traditions, reworking epic quest and Shakespearian romance in a re-vision of a central myth of our culture, that of the ‘fortunate fall’, and proposing an alternative conception of ‘paradise’ and ‘the artist’. Laurence also defines herself against Modernists James Joyce and T. S. Eliot, drawing on *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* for her portrait of the artist as a young woman, and on *The Wasteland*, which similarly draws on Shakespeare’s *Tempest* (and for the same reasons Laurence does) for its concern with the uses of the past.

*The Diviners* also has affinities with feminist quest novels published in the early 1970s. Between 1972 and 1974 were published Erica Jong’s *Fear of Flying*, Gail Godwin’s *Odd Woman*, Margaret Drabble’s *Realms of Gold*, Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*, Lisa Alther’s *Kinflicks*, Dorothy Bryant’s *Ella Price’s Journal* – and *The Diviners*. These novels follow a pattern, even a formula: woman seeks ‘freedom’ from conventional roles, looks to her past for answers about the present, speculates about the cultural and literary
tradition that has formed her, and seeks a plot different from the marriage or death that are her customary ends. The search for ‘something new’ had been explored and developed, in the preceding decade, by Doris Lessing: in *The Golden Notebook* (1963) Anna Wulf seeks new forms in her fiction and in her role; and in *The Children of Violence* (1952–69), Martha ‘Quest’ seeks ‘something new’ against ‘the nightmare repetition’ of the past – a nightmare which is represented by Martha’s mother, Mrs Quest. Indeed, bad mothers are everywhere in this fiction, symbol of the past the protagonist is trying to avoid.

Morag Gunn, protagonist of *The Diviners*, is a writer who – like the protagonists of Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook*, Drabble’s *The Waterfall*, Jong’s *Fear of Flying* and Atwood’s *Lady Oracle* – uses her fiction to make her way in the world and to make sense of the world: as Morag says, ‘If I hadn’t been a writer I’d have been a first class mess.’ Like these protagonists, Morag is also a reader, though what she reads is not nineteenth-century fiction centring on love and marriage, but Shakespeare, Milton and Donne (she reads *Paradise Lost* in her first semester at college (D, p. 178) and asks questions about Donne like those being asked by feminist critics in the early seventies: ‘“Supposing the lady had been able to write poetry – I mean, you wonder what she might have said of him”’ (p. 191). Whereas the protagonists of Drabble, Jong and Godwin develop their expectations of life from novels by Austen, Eliot and the Brontës, Morag reads – and Laurence writes against – works which centre on male figures, concern male experience and are at the heart of a male-defined and male-dominated canon. *The Tempest*, with its one bland and conventional female character, and *Portrait*, which registers women only as idealisations or sexual objects, seem odd and unlikely models for the development of a strong female protagonist. The epic quest, which concerns a young man’s search for his father as part of his search for himself, seems similarly inapplicable; for, as Mary Ann Ferguson suggests, since women ‘must assume their husband’s name’ as well as their husband’s home, and ‘identification with the father can only interfere with development’. But Laurence shows Morag engaged in a quest for the father and shows her maturing from an identification with ‘Prospero’s Child’ (the name of a novel Morag writes) into the powers of Prospero himself. Yet, far from accepting the values of these works, Laurence critiques them: her artist as ‘diviner’ suggests an alternative to Joyce’s ‘artificer’ and her