In Italo Calvino’s novel, *Invisible Cities*, alternating with the discourses of Marco Polo and Kublai Khan are descriptions of the cities which the Venetian had visited, both within the empire of the great Tartar and its neighbouring realms. Displayed like pieces of jade, delicately chiselled and beautifully translucent, these cities tease the mind with a rich variety of meanings. They are ‘women, past moments, doctrines, jokes, things’. The sites where past and present are juxtaposed or overlap, they are memory and its capacity to preserve, order and remake as well as to deceive and stultify. They are different ways of talking about the art of fiction.

Compared with Polo’s exotic inventions, Margaret Laurence’s Manawaka is a modest ‘town of the mind’. And yet, in their originating impulse, certain affinities may be observed. First, there is the desire to draw near to the past and, through the workings of memory, to locate it in a familiar place. According to Marco Polo, ‘Every time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice’ (p. 69). Similarly Manawaka, we are told, contains ‘elements of Neepawa’, the small prairie town in which Laurence grew up, ‘especially in some of the descriptions of places, such as the cemetery on the hill or the Wachakwa valley through which ran the small brown river which was the river of my childhood’. Secondly, there is the concomitant struggle for a distancing view that will set the intimacies of place within broader perspectives. To this end, just as Polo was persuaded that his sojourns in strange cities had led to a better understanding of ‘the surroundings of home’, so Laurence – a traveller herself – has laid special emphasis upon journeys which acted as correctives to her previously ‘prejudiced and distorted’ feelings about the town she had known as a child and an adolescent. Manawaka may contain elements of
Neepawa but it is not Neepawa. Venice is no more than an image 'implicit' in Polo's cities.

If Manawaka is an emblem of a past retrieved, it also represents a way of envisaging the past markedly different from Polo's cities. Looking back in 1970 to her early years, that is, after she had spent some time abroad in Africa and England and had published all but the last of her Manawaka novels, it seemed to Laurence

I wanted then to get out of the small town and go far away, and yet I felt the protectiveness of that atmosphere, too. I felt the loneliness and isolation of the land itself, and yet I always considered southern Manitoba to be very beautiful, and I still do. I doubt if I will ever live there again, but those poplar bluffs and the blackness of that soil and the way in which the sky is open from one side of the horizon to the other – these are things I carry inside my skull for as long as I live, with the vividness of recall that only our first home can really have for us.

This is memory transformed into vision, encompassing within its reach and fulness a heightened arrangement of landscape and an equilibrium of contradictory responses. Its echoes going back to Romantic literature, it is 'still' with the ambiguities Romantic poets loaded the term, such as 'abstention from activity' and 'continuing action', 'dead', 'ideal', 'always'. It stands in contrast to that 'labile' relationship explicated by Marco Polo in Calvino's novel:

what he sought [in his travels] was always something lying ahead, and even if it was a matter of the past it was a past that changed gradually as he advanced on his journey, because the traveller's past changes according to the route he has followed: not the immediate past, that is, to which each day that goes by adds a day but the more remote past. Arriving at each new city, the traveller finds again a past of his that he did not know he had: the foreignness of what you no longer are and no longer possess lies in wait for you in foreign, unpossessed places. (p. 25)

In the passage above, time has no sooner been localised as place than what seems to be familiar ground becomes transformed anew into alien space. As 'he' shades into 'you' so what has seemed to be stable points of view begin to shift and the 'traveller' is at