

CANADIAN WOMEN POETS AND POETIC IDENTITY:
A STUDY OF MARJORIE PICKTHALL, CONSTANCE LINDSAY SKINNER,
AND THE EARLY WORK OF DOROTHY LIVESAY

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Abstract

This study is an examination of the evolution of the female tradition during the transitional period from 1910 to 1932 which signalled the beginning of modern Canadian poetry. Selective and analytical rather than comprehensive and descriptive, it focuses on three representative poets of the period and traces the development of the female poetic self-concept as it is manifested in their work. Critical concepts are drawn from several feminist theories of poetic identity which are based on the broad premise that poetic identity is a function of cultural experience in general and literary experience in particular. Their narrow premise is that because both culture and literature are patriarchal, women poets are confronted with a definition of the poet as male. The purpose of the study is to investigate how each of the three poets reconciles the conflict between her identity as a woman and her role as poet.

Chapter I begins with a reconstruction of the life and times of Marjorie Pickthall and demonstrates the way in which her conservative middle-class upbringing and her equally conservative readers and critics delayed her development as an artist. Her struggle for poetic self-realization is traced

through her early poetry, which imitates the male Romantic poets, to her more successful later verse which exhibits the influence of female precursors.

Chapter II examines the poetry of Constance Lindsay Skinner, a transitional poet who combines Victorian diction and sentiment with the free-verse and imagism of early Modernism. It investigates her use of fictions derived from North American Indian lore as a device for integrating female experience and art and examines her ambivalence about female power and her inability to reconcile her gender with the traditionally male role of poet.

Chapter III explores the early Modernist poetry of Dorothy Livesay, who liberated the female poetic voice by identifying the conflict between the roles of woman and poet as an extension of the larger conflict between nature and culture. It examines her investigation of male-devised literary conventions and the limits of poetic language and demonstrates Livesay's indebtedness to Emily Dickinson and Marjorie Pickthall.

(350 words)

For A.P.L.

Abbreviations

- BR Lorne Pierce. Marjorie Pickthall: A Book of Remembrance. Toronto: Ryerson, 1924.
- CP Marjorie Pickthall. Collected Poems. Ed. by Arthur C. Pickthall. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1927.
- GP Dorothy Livesay. Green Pitcher. Toronto: Macmillan, 1928.
- LPC Lorne Pierce Collection. Queen's University Archives. Figures following "LPC" indicate Box and Folder number.
- MA Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar. The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1979.
- MPC Marjorie Pickthall Collection. E.J. Pratt Library. Victoria University. Figures following "MPC" indicate Box and Folder number.
- NFF Suzanne Juhasz. Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern American Poetry by Women: A New Tradition. New York: Colophon-Harper, 1976.
- SCD Constance Lindsay Skinner. Songs of the Coast Dwellers. New York: Coward-McCann, 1930.
- SP Dorothy Livesay. Signpost. Toronto: Macmillan, 1932
- TS Dorothy Livesay. Collected Poems: The Two Seasons. Toronto, Montreal and New York: McGraw Hill Ryerson, 1972.
- WWPI Margaret Homans. Women Writers and Poetic Identity: Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Bronte, and Emily Dickinson. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1980.

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Introduction

According to Louis Dudek and Michael Gnarowski, editors of The Making of Modern Poetry in Canada, the earliest evidence of a shift away from the conventions of late Victorian Romantic verse was the publication of Arthur Stringer's Open Water in 1914. In his preface to the volume, "Stringer pleaded the cause of free verse and created what must now be recognized as an early document of the struggle to free Canadian poetry from the trammels of end-rhyme, and to liberalize its methods and its substance."¹ Over the next fifteen years Canadian poetry underwent such a radical change in method and substance that critics and literary historians of subsequent decades have had difficulty establishing anything more than tentative links between the mature work of Bliss Carman, Charles Roberts, and D.C. Scott, the chief practitioners of the old tradition, and the early Modernist poetry of W.W.E. Ross, Raymond Knister, F.R. Scott, and A.J.M. Smith. E.J. Pratt may be seen as the exception: he has been called a "transitional figure" because he and Roberts share several thematic concerns.²

The work of women poets writing during this period of transition can also be seen as conforming to the conventions of either the old or the new tradition. E.K. Brown maintains that

the Romantic tradition found "a final phase of great refinement in the poetry of Marjorie Pickthall,"³ while Dorothy Livesay is generally considered the first Canadian woman poet to write in the Modern idiom. The West Coast poet Constance Lindsay Skinner, like E.J. Pratt, can be seen as a transitional figure: her first group of poems on Indian themes, published the same year as Stringer's Open Water, combines Victorian diction and sentiment with the techniques of free verse and imagism. But unlike their male counterparts, these three women exhibit an affinity with one another that goes beyond the themes which inform their work. While all three poets differ radically from one another in terms of their relationships to the traditions struggling for dominance during this turbulent period, their individual struggles to identify themselves with the role of poet are remarkably similar. Pickthall, Skinner, and Livesay are representative women poets of the period in that their poetry exemplifies the problems experienced by many Canadian women poets operating during the early decades of the twentieth century. Their careers follow one another in rapid succession, each poet demonstrating greater awareness than her predecessor of the problems involved in and the strategies required to transcend the social and literary conventions which deny women literary authority.

This rapid evolution of female poetic consciousness is perhaps not surprising, for it was not just literary conventions

which were being challenged by a new generation during the early decades of the twentieth century. The conventions which governed the social and political existence of women were also being questioned. The first wave of feminism began in Canada in about 1890, and although it got off to a slow start, it did eventually climax in the federal Women's Franchise Act of 1918. The degree to which Pickthall, Skinner, and Livesay were involved in this consciousness-raising⁴ enterprise correlates positively with the degree of female self-awareness exhibited in their work. Born in Victorian England and raised in rigidly conservative Toronto, Pickthall was initially contemptuous of women activists. But as the poetry and letters written during her last years suggest, she eventually became aware of herself as a victim of patriarchal social conventions. Skinner was not brought up in conservative Central Canada but rather at a remote trading post in northern British Columbia. She was a newspaper journalist and short-story writer in her teens, became a novelist and historian in her twenties, and a poet and essayist in her thirties. Although much of the writing from all these periods is characterized by a certain ambivalence about female power, it does suggest that she was very much aware of current feminist concerns. Livesay, the daughter of a relatively liberated father who encouraged his adolescent daughter to read women writers and attend lectures on feminism and birth control, became a feminist when she was still at high school. Her first

book of poems was published when she was just eighteen, and many of the poems contained in it are clearly generated by serious and informed consideration of "woman's place" in patriarchal culture and the woman poet's place in a patriarchal literary tradition. Not surprisingly, she identified herself far more easily with the role of poet than did her two predecessors.

For the woman poet, poetic identity is determined by her cultural experience in general and her literary experience in particular. These two orders of female experience are the subject of three feminist studies of female poetic identity. In the earliest of these studies, Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern American Poetry by Women (1976), Suzanne Juhasz points out that until recently poetry by women has been informed by the seemingly implicit contradiction in the term "woman poet." This contradiction results in a "peculiar social and psychological situation" experienced by the poet who is a woman: "To be a woman poet in our society is a double-bind situation. . . . For the words 'woman' and 'poet' denote opposite and contradictory qualities and roles." The supposedly "feminine" woman has little sense of self; she is "nurturing and giving, sensitive and committed to interpersonal relations." The poet, on the other hand, "possess[es] in abundance that primary male attribute, the ego," and puts himself before everything except his art (NFF 1-2). For the woman poet the implications of this

contradiction are profound:

The conflict between her two "selves" is an excruciating and irreconcilable civil war, when both sides are in fact the same person. If she is "woman," she must fail as "poet"; "poet" she must fail as "woman." Yet she is not two people. She is a woman whose art is a response to, results from her life.
(NFF 3)

Internalization of male devised literary criteria and standards of excellence has locked women poets into a Catch-22 situation: "If the woman poet 'writes like a man,' she denies her own experience; if she writes as a woman, her subject matter is trivial." Many early twentieth century women poets "striving for public recognition, try to live out the split demanded of them between 'woman' and 'poet'. . . . This necessitates leaving feminine experience out of art; leaving it at home in the kitchen" (NFF 4). A satisfactory way out of the double bind can be negotiated only when the opposition between the two roles ceases to function.

In a rapidly changing culture, Marjorie Pickthall came to the attention of a conservative middle-class reading public still in need of assurances that old traditions (traditional femininity as well as literary traditions) were still intact. In order to meet the expectations of her mentors and her readership, she internalized the patriarchal definition of womanhood and turned her youth and uncertain health into what may be described as a poetic of girlish naivete, frail

femininity, and otherworldliness. Only during the last few years of her career was she able to speak in the voice of her own experience. A handful of poems written toward the end of her life reveals her struggle to break out of the definitions imposed upon her and to come to terms with both her female and her poetic roles. Yet despite some notable artistic successes among these later poems, the struggle itself is doomed because she cannot fully reject the inevitability of opposition inherent in the cultural definitions of her two roles.

Unlike Pickthall, Constance Lindsay Skinner was aware from the start of her career of the need to integrate female experience and art. Her Songs of the Coast Dwellers, a cycle of Indian poems with a more or less continuous narrative line, represents a fledgling attempt to make what Juhasz calls "woman a function of poet, poet a function of woman" (NFF 4). But the strategies she uses betray her ambivalence about undertaking such a project. Under the guise of North American Indian lore she smuggles female experience out of the kitchen--and, more important, the bedroom--and into art. Even though she distances herself from her material by disguising it as Indian experience, within that Indian metaphor she does attempt to treat the subject of female sexuality with far more directness than is usually found in women's literature of the period. However, like Pickthall, Skinner cannot break the hold of the fundamental opposition between her identity as a woman and her poetic

career.

As a feminist and the daughter of a woman poet, Livesay observed at first hand the ways in which social and literary conventions deny women literary authority. Aware of the potential conflict between her poetic and her female identity, Livesay chose to turn the tension between her two roles into a source of poetic energy. Indeed, the kind of profound self-division which characterizes the work of her predecessors is in Livesay's work a subject for poetic treatment, and by focusing on it in this way she is able to work out strategies for maintaining equilibrium between the two roles by questioning the inevitability of the opposition between them. In keeping with her belief in poetry as an instrument of social change, many of the poems in her first two collections, Green Pitcher and Signpost, explore the woman poet's struggle for poetic identity as an extension of the larger problem of female identity in patriarchal culture.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's The Madwoman in the Attic (1979) is one of the most influential studies of female poetic identity. In "Toward a Feminist Poetic," the authors explore the question which opens their book: "Is a pen a metaphorical penis?" (MA 1). They demonstrate that women writers since Anne Finch in the early eighteenth century have been conscious of, anxious about, and angry over the assumption that literary

authority is a patriarchal privilege and that women who "attempt the pen," as Finch termed it, are "unnatural" in that they have appropriated the metaphorical penis. In other words, the woman who identifies with the role of poet betrays her femininity. The alternative to this "unnatural" assertion of literary authority is presented in "Infection in the Sentence: The Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship," in which Gilbert and Gubar discuss Harold Bloom's The Anxiety of Influence as a theory of patriarchal poetry:

Bloom's model of literary history is intensely (even exclusively) male, and necessarily patriarchal. . . . Bloom describe[s] literary history as the crucial warfare of fathers and sons . . . and he metaphorically defines the poetic process as a sexual encounter between a male poet and his female muse. Where, then, does the female poet fit in? (MA 47)

Because "Western literary history is overwhelmingly male--or, more accurately, patriarchal," the woman poet "must confront precursors who are almost exclusively male, and therefore significantly different from her.

Not only do these precursors incarnate patriarchal authority, . . . they attempt to enclose her in definitions of her person and her potential which . . . drastically conflict with her own sense of her self--that is, of her subjectivity, her autonomy, her creativity. On the one hand, therefore, the woman writer's male precursors symbolize authority; on the other hand, despite their authority, they fail to define the ways in which she experiences her own identity as a writer. . . . Thus the "anxiety of influence" that a male poet experiences is felt by a female poet as an even more primary "anxiety of authorship"--a radical fear that she cannot

create. . . . (MA 48)

The "double bind" which Juhasz identifies is expressed here in slightly different terms: the woman poet can either betray her femininity by identifying herself with the pen/penis of literary creation or accept patriarchal definitions of her self at the expense of "her subjectivity, her autonomy, her creativity." Not surprisingly, this profound identity dilemma manifests itself in women's poetry as a kind of psychological disorder:

In comparison to the "male" tradition of strong, father-son combat . . . this female anxiety of authorship is profoundly debilitating. Handed down not from one woman to another but from stern literary "fathers" of patriarchy to all their "inferiorized" female descendants, it is in many ways the germ of a dis-ease or, at any rate, a disaffection, a disturbance, a distrust, that spreads like a stain throughout the style and structure of much literature by women. . . . (MA 51)

This "dis-ease" proved fatal to much of Pickthall's and Skinner's work, and even Dorothy Livesay's poetry betrays its symptoms. For example, Pickthall, whose traditional femininity was crucial to her continued acceptance by the reading public, often resorts to literary imitation rather than literary creation. Her imitation of male poetry is evidence of her fear that she lacks creative or generative power. Indeed, the more imitative her poetry, the better her chances of avoiding charges--both internal and external--of having betrayed her femininity. Skinner's ambivalence about female creativity is

apparent in the way she treats the theme in her poetry. Most of the poems in Songs of the Coast Dwellers are dramatic monologues featuring a wide variety of male and female speakers. One of those speakers is a male poet figure whose poetic self-assertion is the model for almost all of the other male personae. Most of the female characters are engaged in acts of creativity as well, but whether they create poems or babies, cradles, and whips, their creative acts are almost invariably acts of self-destruction. Consequently and ironically, the male creative voice is more assured and authoritative, even in the mouth of the female poet. The "anxiety of authorship" and a conscious attempt to overcome it are apparent in the defensiveness of Livesay's poetry. Several of her poems are written in defiance of patriarchal language, which threatens to entrap and silence her; others are devoted to exploding the myth of male literary authority. Indeed, one of the first poetic acts of her career was a conscious rejection of the notion that the pen/penis is the only instrument of literary creation and the adoption of the womb as the symbol of female poetic creativity.

As Livesay's choice of a more appropriate symbol for literary creativity suggests, there are ways of overcoming the anxiety of authorship, and Livesay is not the only one of these three poets who devised strategies for establishing poetic identity. The subversion of male literary forms, the encoding of female experience at a subtextual level in their work, and

the active search for female precursors are among the strategies employed by Pickthall and Skinner as well as Livesay. Pickthall read and absorbed the work of Isabella Valancy Crawford and Christina Rossetti; Skinner's Indian poems belong to a genre established in Canada by Crawford and Pauline Johnson; and Livesay made a careful study of many women poets including Emily Dickinson and Marjorie Pickthall. The influence of these literary foremothers is important to all three poets if only because these female precursors "prove by example that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible" (MA 49).

Female literary experience--the experience of reading poetry written almost exclusively by men--and the question of literary "paternity" are also the subjects of Margaret Homans' Women Writers and Poetic Identity (1980). Unlike Gilbert and Gubar, however, Homans focuses exclusively on the nineteenth-century Romantic tradition. Her theory is especially useful in an examination of Pickthall's, Skinner's, and Livesay's work, for like all nature poets operating during the earliest decades of the twentieth century, they either work within or struggle against conventions established by Wordsworth, Coleridge, and other major nineteenth-century figures. Using psychoanalytic terms reminiscent of those employed by Gilbert and Gubar and by Harold Bloom, Homans explains what aspiring women nature poets find in their initial exploration of the Romantic tradition:

. . . as the most powerful feminine figure in Romantic poetry, [Mother Nature] dominates the consciousness of women entering the tradition as newcomers. She was there before them, as the mother precedes the daughters. For the male poets of the Romantic period, the poets of the past and the figures of the poet represented in their works constitute a father figure against whom the younger poet, picturing himself as son, must define himself. If the figure of the powerful poet of the past is the father, in this family romance, then the mother is surely the Mother Nature represented as the object of that poet's love. (WWPI 14)

The paradigm of Romantic poetry images the interaction between human moods and natural phenomena as a universal marriage between man and nature--a coupling which depends upon identifying nature as both otherness and female, and subjectivity as male (WWPI 19). The poet images himself as initially the child of Mother Nature; maturity means the gradual development of consciousness resulting in the ultimate separation of his identity from that of the mother. Fully differentiated from her, he now uses poetic language as a means of repossessing her. He looks upon nature as the object of love; he is transcendent, she is the agent of his transcendence (WWPI 8).

The male poet's relationship to nature and his imaging of nature as female are clearly problematic for women poets. Women are also the children of nature, but as daughters they cannot achieve gender separation from her. This identification of woman with objectified nature denies the female poet

subjectivity: "Without subjectivity," writes Homans, "women are incapable of self-representation, the fundamental of masculine creativity." Further, to be identified with nature is to be identified with unconsciousness and fatality. In order to achieve poetic identity, women "must cast off their image of themselves as objects, as the other, in the manner of daughters refusing to become what their mothers have been. The difficulty is that the image of Mother Nature is so appealing. The women poets do not want to dissociate themselves either from Nature or from nature even though they know they must" (WWPI 14)⁵.

"Eve as she is read by masculine culture is interchangeable with Mother Nature: the object of men's conversation, beautiful but amoral, the 'mother of all living' (Genesis 3:20), and best kept under control and silent" (WWPI 215). Eve also demonstrates to women "their unfitness for poetry.

Equally responsible for negative models of feminine poethood is the patriarchal tradition of Christianity, which, unlike as it is to Wordsworthian paganistic reverence for Mother Nature, fosters an analogous view of femininity. The Judaeo-Christian tradition is notoriously misogynistic. The church Fathers and later interpreters did a great deal to augment the identification of woman with sin, thereby justifying her religious and secular oppression. . . . (WWPI 29)

Eve's responsibility for the Fall makes her inferior to Adam and morally weak. More important, only Adam is given the power of naming. As the first inheritor of language he hands down his legacy to successive generations of poets: Wordsworth presumes

"'To act the God among external things'"; Coleridge "defines imagination so that the poet is the direct inheritor of God's self-asserting 'I AM'"; and Emerson, "even more powerfully than the British writers, makes the poet in the image of the Son, his speech Adamic, and poetry the inheritor of divinity" (WWPI 31). Conversely, "Eve, and women after her, have been dislocated from the ability to feel that they are speaking their own language" (WWPI 32). So, whether women look to verbally powerless Eve or unconscious Mother Nature, they find no poetic role-models.

Denied entry into the transcendent realm of consciousness and identified with non-transcendent nature and inarticulate Eve, how do women enter into the poetic tradition? How do they envisage a dualistic universe, one of whose realms is off limits to them? I would like to suggest that while neither Pickthall, Skinner, nor Livesay denies her identification with nature, each of them has her own unique way of coming to terms with Romantic convention. Pickthall vacillates between constructing an eternal space within the womb of nature as an alternative to the transcendent male realm and accepting the order as it is, exploring what it's like to be condemned to non-transcendence, inarticulateness, and fatality. Skinner attempts to escape the problematic opposition between poet and nature by adapting the convention of North American Indian poetry which images the poet as an extension of nature and nature itself as conscious, comprehending, and eternal. However, this attempt to transform

and utilize an alternate myth of nature is largely unsuccessful because Skinner cannot escape the tyranny of the European tradition. Livesay neither accepts Romantic convention at face value nor substitutes alternative conventions. Rather, because she understands the difference between literal truth and poetic convention, she is able to turn the identification of woman with nature into a metaphor for the human condition. Further, in recognizing that she is identified with culture as well as nature she rejects the oppositional cosmology and the epistemology of transcendent thought.⁵

While Pickthall, Skinner, and Livesay clearly share some important literary concerns, I have chosen to emphasize the uniqueness of their individual struggles by devoting a separate chapter to each of them. In addition to Pickthall's later work, Chapter I, "Killed into Art: The Poetry of Marjorie Pickthall," examines at some length the poet's life and times because her high profile in the literary community and the availability of biographical information make it possible to explore in some detail the effects of socialization and critical reception on the development of female poetic identity. Pickthall's poetry is examined as a model for the validating of female literary strategies, for the use of silence and the lack of authority as poetic subjects, and for the legitimizing of female experience--not just domestic experience but also the failure to achieve the

kind of experience enjoyed by men in the wider world. Chapter II, "Constance Lindsay Skinner and the Indian Fictions Genre," focuses on the genre in which Skinner wrote because, like her poetic self-concept, it is an amalgamation of the conventions of two literary traditions: European and North American Indian. The individual poems are analysed in terms of their presentation of an alternative to the European myth of nature and their revision of several Indian and European myths of women; despite their questionable success, these revised mythologies attempt to give the woman poet access to poetic power. In Chapter III, "The Task of Poetic Mediation: Dorothy Livesay's Early Poetry," I have limited my discussion to the first phase of Livesay's career because the confidence and authority that characterize her later work are a direct result of the search for poetic identity which she undertakes in these early poems; it is a search for new ways of seeing and knowing the world and for new ways of resolving the opposition between woman and poet, woman and man, nature and culture.

Until recently, the important events in literary history have been recorded in terms of those concerns which have preoccupied male poets, and the revolution in Canadian poetry which took place between 1914 and the early 1930s is no exception. Canadian literary historians have focused exclusively on prosodic experiment, modernization of diction and

imagery, and the enlargement of subject matter.⁶ In short, they have emphasized changes in conventions which dictated how poetry is written; but, as I hope the present study demonstrates, poets were also concerned with altering the conventions governing who could write it. The female energy invested in making those alterations is evidence of a definable female tradition in Canadian poetry. That tradition, which this study begins to trace, is characterized not merely by the transference of influence. The acceleration of female literary activity through successive decades of the twentieth century is a result of the existence of earlier generations of women poets who managed to write and survive. Women have now begun to take for granted their right to literary authority but only because predecessors such as Pickthall, Skinner, and the young Dorothy Livesay have made it possible for them to do so.

Notes

¹ Louis Dudek and Michael Gnarowski, "The Precursors (1910-1925)," The Making of Modern Poetry in Canada, ed. Dudek and Gnarowski (1967; rpt. Toronto: Ryerson, 1970), p. 3.

² As Sandra Djwa has pointed out in E.J. Pratt: The Evolutionary Vision (Toronto and Montreal: Copp Clark and McGill-Queen's, 1974), Roberts and Pratt shared an interest in the conflict between Darwinism and Christianity (12). This conflict is, however, only incidentally a literary concern; it is primarily an intellectual and spiritual issue which preoccupied many late Victorian Christians, whether they were poets or not.

³ E.K. Brown, On Canadian Poetry (1943; rpt. Ottawa: Tecumseh, 1973), p. 65.

⁴ While this term rightly belongs to the second wave of feminism, it is nevertheless appropriate to the experiences of all three poets, especially Pickthall.

⁵ Homans draws extensively on French language theory as developed by Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan, as do the French feminists Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva. The irreconcilable (or binary) opposition between female object and male subject as it is reflected in language and culture is briefly described by Cixous in "Castration or Decapitation?" (1976; rpt. in Signs 7:1 [1981], 41-55): "[The male] opposition to woman cuts endlessly across all the oppositions that order culture. It's the classic opposition, dualist and hierarchical. Man/Woman automatically means great/small, superior/inferior . . . means high or low, means Nature/History, means transformation/inertia. In fact, every theory of culture, every theory of society, the whole conglomeration of symbolic systems--everything, that is, that's spoken, everything that's organized as discourse, art, religion, the family language, everything that seizes us, everything that acts on us--it is all ordered around hierarchical oppositions that come back to the man/woman opposition, an opposition that can only be sustained

by means of a difference posed by cultural discourse as 'natural,' the difference between activity and passivity. It always works this way, and the opposition is founded in the couple. A couple posed in opposition, in tension, in conflict . . . a couple engaged in a kind of war in which death is always at work--and I keep emphasizing the importance of the opposition as couple, because all this isn't just about one word; rather everything turns on the Word: everything is the Word and only the Word" (44). (For a fuller analysis of binary oppositions as originating in the opposition of male and female, see the excerpt from Cixous' "Sorties" [1975], in New French Feminisms, ed. by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron [Amhurst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980], pp. 90-98.) Although Homans' theory proceeds from this analysis of language as inscribing binary oppositions, her conclusions about the possibility of creating a "woman's language" are not identical with those of the French feminist school. Remaining within an American context, she makes a distinction between poetry (such as Dickinson's) which does not deny female experience and poetry (such as Adrienne Rich's and Muriel Rukeyser's) which attempts to duplicate that experience. She concludes by cautioning against the latter (i.e., the literalization of poetic language), for this technique, which is an attempt to create a woman's language, denies the inherent dualism of language: "The naive wish for a literal language and the belief in poetry's capacity for the duplication of experience foster a conception of the feminine self in poetry that is, paradoxically, even more egotistical than some of the masculine paradigms from which it intends to free itself" (WWPI 217-8). Although Homans makes this statement with specific reference to American women poets, it is also appropriate as a criticism of the French feminist practice of "writing the body," another technique for creating a langage des femmes by literalizing language through the inscription of female flesh (see note 19, Chapter III, of the present study which quotes Nicole Brossard's description of "writing the body" as a process whereby language is literalized). But the most significant difference between the French theorists and Homans is the practical dimension of her work: while French language theory has remained largely self-referential, Homans utilizes it as a device for illuminating poetry (and also fiction: see her "Dreaming of Children: Literalization in Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights," The Female Gothic, ed. by Julianna E. Fleenor [Montreal: Eden Press, 1983], pp. 257-311). This practical dimension of Homans' work makes it especially useful in the present study, which is primarily analytical and only secondarily theoretical.

⁶ In "Mining the Earth's Womb" (1980; rpt. in Machina Ex Dea, ed. by Joan Rothschild [New York: Harper and Row, 1982],

pp. 99-117), Carolyn Merchant traces the myth of Mother Nature as it has evolved from early Greek and Mediterranean culture to the industrial era. Inscribed in early descriptions of the earth as a living organism and nurturing mother were ethical restraints which controlled human behaviour; human identification with rather than opposition to nature restrained destructive acts against it: "One does not readily slay a mother, dig into her entrails for gold, or mutilate her body. . ." (100). These ethical restraints were prevalent until the seventeenth century, when Francis Bacon, in keeping with new scientific and economic imperatives, turned the constraints into sanctions; what nature had yielded to man through his identification with her was now turned as a weapon against her: "Nature must be 'bound into service' and made a 'slave,' put 'in constraint' and 'moulded' by the mechanical arts" (114). "By the close of the seventeenth century, a new science of mechanics in combination with the Baconian ideal of technological mastery over Nature had helped to create the modern worldview. The core of female principles that had for centuries subtly guided human behaviour toward the earth had given way to a new ethic of exploitation. The nurturing earth mother was subdued by science and technology" (116). The three poets featured in the present study all attempt to create alternate myths of nature which can be seen as part of the larger revisionist mythmaking endeavour which characterizes the twentieth-century female collective unconscious. In "The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking" (Signs 8:1 [1982], 68-90), Alicia Ostriker examines revised mythologies in the work of several twentieth-century Canadian and American women: "What distinguishes these poets," she proposes, "is not the shared, exclusive langage des femmes desired by some [see note 4] but a vigorous and various invasion of the sanctuaries of existing language, the treasuries where our meanings for 'male' and 'female' are themselves preserved" (71). She notes that "the wave of poetic mythmaking that broke over England in the Romantic period" was in large part characterized by a defiant antirationalism (72). Indeed, Mother Nature as she appears in the work of the male Romantics can be seen in part as a nostalgic return to a pre-Baconian sensibility. "Like the Romantics, the early Moderns--Yeats, Pound, Eliot--turned to myth as a means of defying their culture's rationalism and materialism. But while the women poets . . . share a distrust for rationalism, they do not share the Modernist nostalgia for a golden age of past culture, and their mythmaking grows at least as much from a subterranean tradition of female self-projection and self-exploration as from the system building of the Romantics and Moderns" (73). In the alternate myths of nature created by Pickthall, Skinner, and Livesay, as in the work Ostriker examines, "the old stories are changed, changed utterly, by female knowledge of female experience, so that they

can no longer stand as foundations of collective male fantasy. Instead . . . they are corrections; they are . . . instructions for survival" (73). The images of nature in the work of these three poets mirror the damaged and/or triumphant psyches of their creators. The intimacy with nature--especially in Livesay's work--is derived from acknowledged similarities and differences between the human and nature and (as in the poetry Ostriker examines) "not from the patriarchal relationship of dominance and submission. . ." (87).

⁷ For example, the authoritative history of writing in Canada discusses the transition to Modern poetry in exactly these terms; see Munro Beattie, "Poetry (1935-1959)," Literary History of Canada, ed. Carl F. Klinck, 3 vols., 2nd. ed., rev. (Toronto: UTP, 1976), II, 235.

Chapter I

Killed into Art:

The Poetry of Marjorie Pickthall

Miss Margery Daw went out to dine
 In a bonnet as white as snow
 To Dollshouse Terrace, number nine,
 Where the trees stand all in a row.

They had cups and saucers of china fair,
 And cushions to rest their feet,
 And pleasant talk when the guests were there,--
 But nothing at all to eat.

- Marjorie Pickthall¹

Marjorie Pickthall sold her first manuscript to the Toronto Globe in 1899, when she was 15 years old. Her career ended abruptly in 1922, when, at the age of 39, she died in Vancouver of complications following surgery. Perhaps no other Canadian poet has enjoyed such enormous fashionable success followed by such total eclipse. Canadian critics of the early twentieth century "seized on her poems and stories as works of distinction,"² and some even hailed her as a genius and seer. "More than any other poet of this century," wrote E.K. Brown in 1943, "she was the object of a cult. . . . Unacademic critics boldly placed her among the few, the immortal names" (Brown 65). Curiously, Brown ignores the fact that unreserved praise was lavished on Pickthall by scholarly critics as well. She was

admired and encouraged by Pelham Edgar who, at the time of her death, wrote: "Her talent was strong and pure and tender, and her feeling for beauty was not more remarkable than her unrivalled gift for expressing it" (qtd. in BR 157). Archibald MacMechan wrote: "Her death means the silencing of the truest, sweetest singing voice ever heard in Canada" (qtd. in BR 47). Within eighteen months of her death no less than ten articles--all characterized by superlatives--were published in journals and magazines such as The Canadian Bookman, Dalhousie Review, and Saturday Night. In his biography, Marjorie Pickthall: A Book of Remembrance, Lorne Pierce includes ten tributes paid in verse to the memory of Marjorie Pickthall by companion poets; Pierce himself writes rhapsodically of her "Colour, Cadence, Contour and Craftsmanship" (BR 10)..

A reconstruction of Pickthall's life and times helps to explain her spectacular rise to fame, her equally spectacular plunge into obscurity, and the meaning of these events in terms of her poetic identity. She was born in the north of England in 1883, the only child of a Victorian father and a pious mother.³ According to her father, Arthur Pickthall, Marjorie had her future planned before she reached the age of six. Her first decision was to become a writer and illustrator of books.⁴ With regard to another decision, Arthur Pickthall relates the following incident:

[Marjorie] was very observant and I think she was more than most people. Her father came in to the House one day. Something had gone wrong and he was making a row about it. When he had gone out again, Marjorie asked her Mother, "Mother would you call father a good husband." Mother answered "Yes my dear, very good." Silence for some time, then, "Mother." "Yes, dear." "I don't think that I shall ever marry."
(A. Pickthall 2)

Marjorie Pickthall never wavered on either of those early decisions. Indeed, near the end of her life, in response to her physician's suggestion that, for the sake of her health, she "give up her work entirely, marry, and settle down in the ordinary way," Pickthall answered: "I cannot give up my work. . . . It is quite impossible to do so, and I have never yet met the man who will consent to my keeping on with it after marriage. . . ."5

It is ironic that such an independently-minded little girl should be brought to live in Toronto in 1889, for in the last decade of the nineteenth century the middle-class community on the Toronto-Montreal axis was one of the most conservative strongholds in the English-speaking world. Pickthall's early promise of forthrightness and independence of character began to diminish as she internalized Victorian conventions governing "woman's place," conventions which in Central Canada were honoured well into the twentieth century. For example, in terms of the accelerating women's movement, active and highly visible

suffrage campaigns were well underway in England and the United States. Elsewhere in the Commonwealth, New Zealand women were only five years away from enfranchisement; Australian women would follow in 1903. By contrast, in the late 1890s, the Toronto-based Dominion Women's Enfranchisement Association had not yet achieved national stature and its leaders were "[v]ery conscious of their weakness in a conservative community."⁶

Although the National Council of Women of Canada was founded in 1893, it was an association made up largely of philanthropic women's groups which focused their attention on what in the late twentieth century are patronizingly termed "motherhood issues." It was not until 1894 that Parliament got around to discussing the question of female franchise. "On April 6, 1894 Robert B. Dickey, a Conservative member from Nova Scotia, attempted to persuade the House to incorporate a limited form of female franchise in a suffrage bill then under consideration, but could not arouse any debate on the question."⁷ The following year, in response to a similar motion by Nicholas Flood Davin, a Conservative from the North West Territories, Sir Wilfred Laurier, Liberal Leader of the Opposition, "said he had no objection to woman suffrage if any province demonstrated that it wanted it, but his own province (Quebec) was firmly opposed and he would object to having the issue forced upon any province. . . .

Resorting to the well-worn theme that casting a ballot would remove women from their proper sphere, [Quebec's Guillaume] Amyot solemnly averred that women are "the point of connection between earth and Heaven. They assume something of the angel. . . . Let us leave them their moral purity, their bashfulness, their sweetness, which gave them in our minds so much charm. It ill becomes the community to change her sex and to degrade her by the exercise of the franchise." In a final blast he produced this gem: "You make men of women and you depoetize them." After three days of debate, Davin's motion was lost by a vote of 105 to 47. (Cleverdon 111)

Clearly the members of the House of Commons shared Guillaume Amyot's anxiety about the possible "depoetization" of women as a result of female suffrage. Indeed, it would seem that the majority of Canadian men and women were satisfied with his classic definition of womanhood (to which I shall return) and with traditional notions of the female role. For, as the editor of the Canadian Annual Review wrote in 1912, "it must be said that the discussion in Canada was, in comparison [to England] weak upon both sides of the subject" (qtd. in Cleverdon 112).

However, it was not Canada as a whole but Ontario, Quebec, and the Maritimes that were weak upon both sides of the women's suffrage question. Women on the Prairies had far less trouble than did Ontario women in persuading their legislatures to consider bills which would make women eligible to vote in provincial elections. Despite the fact that in 1916, women in Manitoba, Alberta, and Saskatchewan "seemed virtually assured of success in the spring sessions of their legislatures," Premier

William K. Hearst of Ontario was not only against a bill extending suffrage to women in provincial elections, he was against even debating the issue in the legislature (Cleverdon 40). Fortunately for Ontario women, however, Hearst uncharacteristically and swiftly capitulated in 1917. He was almost certainly under pressure from a federal government in need of all the Ontario votes it could get: the additional votes anticipated from wives of Conservative voters in Ontario were needed to offset those sections of the country which were expected to vote against the Conservatives in the approaching federal election (Cleverdon 43). Although women's suffrage was assured in the Ontario Elections and Franchise Acts which were rushed through in April 1917, Ontario was almost as reluctant as Quebec to extend political rights to women. In 1919, with provincial elections looming ominously ahead, it was only political expediency that got bills passed which would make women eligible for both the provincial assembly and municipal office (Cleverdon 44-5). In short, political equality was achieved in spite of the social status of women, not because of it.

As the success of Guillaume Amyot's address to the House of Commons suggests, Canadian men were reluctant to give up their illusions about the angelic nature of women. Many women, too, were reluctant to "depoetize" themselves for fear of losing what

little power they already had: the power to charm men with what Amyot saw as "their moral purity, their bashfulness, [and] their sweetness." Without that power--or perceived power--the limited control they had over their own lives was lost to them. Their survival was dependent upon their ability to learn the art of charming men, and when they were successful they trained their daughters in the same arts. As Gilbert and Gubar point out, this female education has a long history and many useful textbooks:

[F]rom the eighteenth century on, conduct books for ladies had proliferated, enjoining young girls to submissiveness, modesty, selflessness; reminding all women that they should be angelic. There is a long and crowded road from The Book of Curtesye (1477) to the columns of "Dear Abby," but social historians have fully explored its part in the creation of those "eternal feminine" virtues of modesty, gracefulness, purity, delicacy, civility, compliancy, reticence, chastity, affability, politeness. . . . (MW 23).

It was not enough to act the part of an angel, a woman also had to look like one:

[T]he aesthetic cult of ladylike fragility and delicate beauty--no doubt associated with the moral cult of the angel-woman--obliged "genteel" women to "kill" themselves . . . into art objects: slim, pale, passive beings whose "charms" eerily recall the snowy, porcelain immobility of the dead. Tight-lacing, fasting, vinegar-drinking, and similar cosmetic or dietary excesses were all parts of a physical regimen that helped women either to feign morbid weakness or actually to "decline" into real illness. . . . (MA 25)

Given the results of this arduous female process of killing

oneself into art, it is hardly surprising that men like Amyot perceived women in terms of poetry. But poor health was not the only price exacted for this poetic transformation:

Whether she becomes an objet d'art or a saint, however, it is the surrender of her self--of her personal comfort, her personal desires, or both--that is the beautiful angel-woman's key act, while it is precisely this sacrifice which dooms her both to death and to heaven. For to be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead. (MA 25)

The cultivation of femininity is a suicidal act, for the surrender of the self, of personal desires and comforts is a death-in-life existence. Therefore, to "depoetize" women--to disassociate them from angels and art objects--would be not only to disillusion men but also to release women back into life.

As the movement for the depoetization of Canadian women accelerated, so did the counter-movement for the continued cultivation of women as angels and art objects. This anti-feminism was, of course, only one facet of delayed Victorianism in Canada, and the so-called Romantic "feminine" verse which was to prove so irritating to early Modernists such as F.R. Scott⁸ probably owes much to the literary establishment's anti-feminist sensibilities. This anti-feminism worked in the favour of "feminine" women with modest talent and not so modest literary aspirations, for male editors, publishers, and critics, like most Victorian men, were not always able to differentiate between the woman poet and the art she created in her own image.

Like their threatened political representatives in Ottawa, these men did what they could--perhaps unwittingly--to prevent the depoetization of women: as a cursory glance at the periodical literature of the period will reveal, they published and favourably reviewed poetry by women which exhibited--to echo Gilbert and Gubar--"those 'eternal feminine' virtues of modesty, gracefulness, purity, delicacy, civility, compliancy, reticence, chastity, affability, politeness. . . ."

This, then, in terms of gender attitudes and the state of the female tradition in Canadian poetry, was the political and literary environment in which Marjorie Pickthall was raised. Educated at the Church of England day school and the prestigious Bishop Strachan's School for Girls, she became a product of her rigidly conservative environment. The private journal she kept throughout her adolescence and the letters she soon began to exchange with her intimate friend Helen Coleman, niece of the poet Helena Coleman, strongly suggest that she cultivated traditional "femininity" in the form of self-depreciation, delicate sensibilities, conventional Christian piety, and self-diminutization--all of which was enhanced by her extreme shyness. These qualities are reflected in the poetry she produced during the early years of her career and, as the critical response to her work suggests, had much to do with her reception by the literary establishment.

Pickthall left school in 1900, the same year in which she won her third literary prize in the annual Mail and Empire story and poem contest, an achievement which attracted the attention of several critics and reviewers and catapulted her into a full-time literary career. Within a short time she was a regular contributor to the University Magazine, Atlantic Monthly, Century, Scribner's, McClure's, Harper's, and others. Given the quality of the work she produced in this period, the wide critical acclaim she received was premature. But there were important reasons for this critical overreaction which can be directly related to the state of literary affairs in Canada at the turn of the century.

The year Marjorie Pickthall came to the attention of the critical establishment, the Victorian Romantic tradition was already in need of fresh talent. By the turn of the century Lampman had died, Carman, Roberts, and D.C. Scott were settling into middle-age, Crawford, who had never really enjoyed the attention she deserved, was long dead, and her Collected Poems, edited by John Garvin, would not appear until 1905. Pauline Johnson, also middle-aged, was spending most of her time on tour in the West, and as a result her literary output had slowed down considerably; her collected poems, Flint and Feather, would not appear until 1912, a year before her death. William Henry Drummond, eight years Johnson's senior, and Tom MacInnes were

successful poets but their work was not in the mainstream of the established tradition. A host of senior minor poets, largely imitators of the "Confederation" group, were filling the pages of newspapers and magazines with pleasing but mediocre verse: among these were Wilfred Campbell, Isabel Ecclestone Mackay, Francis Sherman, Helena Coleman, F.G. Scott, Sarah Ann Curzon, Mrs. J.F. Harrison ("Seranus"), and Agnes Ethelwyn Wetherald.

The Victorian Romantic tradition, whose critics and practitioners were located chiefly in Toronto and Montreal, had clearly reached a plateau. By the beginning of the second decade of the twentieth century, poets, patrons, and critics of the Eastern literary establishment were beginning to feel uneasy about the future of Canadian poetry, and this was reflected in the current periodical literature. The two Toronto magazines which had played such an important role in the nurturing of the late nineteenth-century tradition--Rose-Belford's Canadian Monthly and The Week--were no longer in existence. Their role had been taken over in 1893 by The Canadian Magazine. Along with Saturday Night, it carried on, albeit with less success, the important function of literary review and commentary; like its predecessors, it was essentially conservative and nationalist. Among the poets, critics, and reviewers associated with it were J.D. Logan and D.G. French, authors of Highways of Canadian Literature (1924), the poets Alfred Gordon and Duncan Campbell Scott, Elizabeth Roberts MacDonald, cousin of Charles

Roberts, and critic Wilson MacDonald.

The Canadian Magazine reflects the stagnation of Canadian writing during the first two decades of the twentieth century. A vague sense of unease on the part of its contributors accelerates as the century progresses. J.D. Logan's essay, "A Decade of Canadian Poetry," which appeared in 1913, expresses his fear of a decline in literary standards and the possible relocating of poetic activity on the West Coast. Logan, whose tone and comments on the phillistinism of Canadian culture suggest that he considers himself a Canadian Matthew Arnold, attempts to analyse the characteristics and the causes of this decline in the preceding decade. The article is primarily an attack on what he labels the "Vaudeville School" of Canadian poetry of which the West Coast poet Robert Service is the chief representative. Logan fears that unless a "Second Renaissance" in Canadian poetry occurs, poetry in Canada "will remain, as it has become within the last decade, a deluge of vulgarity and an abomination."⁹ In Logan's opinion, the poems of Service, R.J.C. Stead, and their numerous imitators, "far from being examples of genuine originality in invention of poetic themes and of a really new art, exemplify the total absence of art, and, far from being 'real' poetry, are totally devoid of the chaste speech, lovely imagery, dulcet music, and exquisite emotion which constitute true poetry" (350). In addition to Canadian phillistinism, one of the chief reasons for this is:

. . . the shifting of the centre of poetic inspiration in Canada from the more cultured and aesthetically experienced East to the inchoate and unsettled West, where indeed inspirational poetic influences are new, pervasive, and obsessing, but where the canons of versification inevitably have been applied either crudely or carelessly. . . . (346)

Despite this unfortunate situation, "Canadians may take due comfort from the fact that . . . there exist in Canada some finer spirits, both men and women, but chiefly women, who are writing poetry which in fancy, music, and spiritual appeal is quite the equal of the best so-called minor contemporary poetry of England and of the United States"; he cites as examples five Toronto poets, including Marjorie Pickthall, whose first volume of poems, The Drift of Pinions, was to appear shortly (346-7). Nevertheless, it is not the work of these poets which is attracting the reading public: evidence of this is suggested by a publisher's statement to the effect that 200,000 copies of Service's two volumes of poetry were sold in Canada within a period of five years. What Logan fails to consider is that perhaps much of the attraction to Service and similar poets is not necessarily a lapse in public taste but a rejection of the outworn British-based tradition and a desire for something fresh and distinctively Canadian in origin.

Crude and careless western poets and a culturally bankrupt reading public, Logan claims, are not the solely blame for the "the decentralisation of literary taste and standards in Canada.

For this the cultured are to be blamed. The lexicon, the school, and the university have established fixed canons of good diction, proper grammar, correct spelling, coherent sentential structure, and literary appreciation. But . . . the cultured people of Canada have done nothing towards establishing a literary organ or some kind of national institution for the sublimation of literary taste and the centralising of literary authority.

Canada needs . . . the founding of a National Academy of Letters, having functions similar to L'Académie Française (which, by the way, was originally an association of poets. . .). (352)

The Canadian Authors' Association may have been founded in part to reestablish the East as the centre of "literary authority," but in 1913 the formation of that would-be Académie Canadienne was still eight years in the future.¹⁰ Logan resigns himself to "a Second Renaissance in Canadian poetry . . . [which] will have its origin in the West, . ." although he hopes that his "constructive criticism" of the western poetry produced so far will "impress on the rising generation of Canadian poets in the West the necessity of cultivating the aesthetic and artistic conscience. . ." (352).

This article elicited a number of responses from the literary establishment, several of which, along with Logan's ungracious rebuttal, were printed in the very next issue of The Canadian Magazine.¹¹ Archibald MacMechan was in "hearty accord" (580), Arthur Stringer congratulated Logan on "a splendid study" (581), A.E.S. Smythe, a published poet, found little to be said "in defense against Dr. Logan's indictment" (586), and Donald

French, editor of The Sunday World, recommended all of Logan's "illuminating and thought provoking essays now being published in The Canadian Magazine" to all students of literature (586). Responses by those of lesser literary stature expressed more sympathy--or at least cautioned patience--with current tastes in Canadian poetry. Taken all together, these responses echo Logan's nervousness about the future of Canadian poetry. By 1917 Logan was unconvincingly announcing the "Second Renaissance of Canadian Nativistic Poetry" among whose twenty listed practitioners Marjorie Pickthall was "sui generis."¹²

While The Canadian Magazine was the primary magazine outlet for literature, review, and commentary, Acta Victoriana was the major scholarly journal. Although it did not appear in Acta Victoriana until 1915, J.D. Robins' "Backgrounds of Future Canadian Poetry"¹³ was written in the same year and in a similarly apprehensive mood as was Logan's "A Decade of Canadian Poetry." Robins' anxiety about the future of Canadian poetry is apparent in the prescriptiveness of this article. His target audience is clearly the practising poets of the day, and his message is that they should move beyond mere description of Canada's landscape. His prescription for an ailing tradition is an infusion of new themes, drawn chiefly from European history and Nordic mythology. Aware that he risks sounding as if he wants poets to abandon the cause of literary nationalism, Robins

is careful to explain that these suggested new literary sources are already a legitimate part of Canadian cultural heritage. He also suggests that poets explore classical Greek and Biblical themes: "Almost the only excursions into classical fields," Robins complains, "have taken the form of some excellent academic exercises on Greek themes. An exception must certainly be made in the case of one of our younger writers, Miss Marjorie Pickthall, whose exquisite interpretations of Biblical themes are so successful as to confirm us in forgetting that they are fundamentally exotic" (34). Pickthall is the only Canadian poet Robins puts forward as a model in this article, and he does so at the risk of appearing to abandon the Canadian for the "exotic."

Logan and Robins are only two of several literary commentators who found no fault with Marjorie Pickthall's poetry. Archibald MacMechan thought her "incapable of uttering a false note";¹⁴ Alfred Gordon insisted that many of the poems contained in her first collection were "unsurpassed by any other work in the language";¹⁵ and Pelham Edgar felt that it was "very difficult to say what faults, if any, there are" in her poetry.¹⁶ This singling out of Pickthall is understandable, for unlike the ageing Confederation group and their contemporary imitators, Pickthall was young; she was also a Torontonion, and most important, she was within the mainstream of an already

established Canadian tradition. Many of her models were the best of the nineteenth-century British poets. Moreover, she demonstrated great thematic affinity with D.C. Scott, successfully incorporated many of Lampman's nature images, and recalled the best of Carman in the intense musicality of her verse.¹⁷ Furthermore, the Christian overtones of her verse appealed to the many clergymen and other church affiliates who constituted the core of the Canadian literary establishment. But what Marjorie Pickthall did best for the men who advanced her career, promoted her image, and published her books--powerful men such as Pelham Edgar, Andrew MacPhail, and Lorne Pierce--was to postpone a little longer the day when they would have to face the fact that the Golden Age of Victorian Romantic poetry in Canada was over.

The image of Marjorie Pickthall which her readers and critics abstracted from her verse was undoubtedly soothing to those who feared the depoetization of women. Indeed, so rhapsodic were the flights indulged in by her literary commentators that they succeeded in turning the poet herself into a literary creation--in effect, killing her into art. Marjorie Pickthall was proof that "femininity" was alive and well in Canada in spite of suffragists' attempts to "make men of women." In the flood of critical response to her work which climaxed in Lorne Pierce's biography in 1924, it is clear that for her admirers Pickthall did indeed assume "something of the

angel." She was seen as a Christian mystic, and her love of the language and mythology of the Bible was interpreted as a submission to Christian doctrine and a humble acceptance of her place in its scheme of things. The opening sentence of J.D. Logan's Marjorie Pickthall: Her Poetic Genius and Art is typical: "Whenever I have thought of Marjorie Pickthall, the person, I have re-imagined the kneeling, praying Christ in the Garden of Gethsemene, and I have fancied that I heard, from her lips, the agony of Christ's prayer. . . ." ¹⁸ What passes for analysis of her work is rhetoric which reads as nervous assurances of the poet's "moral purity," "bashfulness," and "sweetness." These three "feminine" attributes which so charmed Amyot and his generation of men were clearly still demanded of women during the early decades of the twentieth century. Pickthall delivered these qualities, and as a result assured her immediate survival as a practising woman poet; she did this so consistently that she also won recognition as the foremost poet of her generation.

Having determined on a literary career at the age of six, Pickthall responded to success by publishing prolifically. By the time she was twenty-three, in addition to her many contributions to children's magazines, she had published thirty-one poems, twenty short stories, and three children's novels. It is unclear whether her extreme shyness was entirely genuine

or partly a strategy for securing the solitude she needed in order to produce such a large volume of work; at any rate, it was a quality her critics delighted in, for it contributed to her image as the ideal "little woman" of Canadian letters. The naive quality of her work also contributed to her childlike image. Her early fame had gratified her adolescent ego and had brought her the approval which teenage girls--especially those brought up with traditional notions of female inferiority--crave so excessively. Perhaps it was this need for constant approval which encouraged even the adult Pickthall to continue producing the kind of work which had won critical approval for the young girl. She continued to write children's literature, and even some of the work she was writing for a more mature readership exhibited adolescent qualities. Not surprisingly, it was this material which attracted her critics and mentors and helped to establish the sentimentalized image of her as the naive and girlish poetess with a suitably feminine lack of professionalism.

In spite of her explosion onto the literary scene, the financial rewards were not sufficient to allow Pickthall to leave home,¹⁹ but given her mother's always precarious health, Pickthall was probably content to carry on with her busy literary career from under her parents' roof. As in many Victorian mother-daughter relationships,²⁰ it seems that Pickthall never fully separated her identity from that of her

mother. In addition to "Mothersweet" and "Motherduckie," Pickthall also called her beloved parent and principal muse "Motheree," no doubt to rhyme with "Marjorie." It is also possible that Marjorie's persistent ill health, which manifested itself in vague attacks of nerves, heat, headache, biliousness, neuralgia, colds, spasms, fatigue, and "collywobbles,"²¹ was in part an extension of her mother's life-long invalidism. Her almost obsessive devotion to Lizzie Pickthall is also evidenced by the fact that many of Marjorie's literary productions, from her earliest childhood work to her later published novels and volumes of poetry, were dedicated to her mother.

Lizzie Pickthall's death in 1910 was, not surprisingly, a major turning-point in Pickthall's life. Whether it was a need for a mother replacement, an aversion to living alone with her father, a refusal to put up with another of those Toronto winters which played such havoc with her health, or a combination of all three, Pickthall began a search for more lucrative employment, which would provide her with the means to leave home. Within four months of her mother's death, Pickthall was working as assistant in the Victoria College Library which was conveniently located across the street from the duplex on Charles Street where she and her father now lived. Eighteen months later she was able to purchase a steamship ticket to England. During her year and a half at Victoria College her literary output was negligible but, encouraged by Helena

Coleman, Pelham Edgar, and Andrew MacPhail, she collected the poems for her first book, The Drift of Pinions, which would appear in March of 1913. In December of 1912, she sailed for England. She spent a few months in London at the home of her mother's relatives, and in the fall of 1913, she and her cousin, Edith "Didie" Whillier, rented a cottage at Bowerchalke, near Salisbury. Here, in "Chalke Cottage," Marjorie wrote the novel Little Hearts, which would be published in 1915, and prepared her second collection of poems, The Lamp of Poor Souls, which would appear a year later.

War broke out in 1914, and in 1915 Pickthall decided to join the war effort. She underwent rigorous training as an auto mechanic and ambulance driver, did heavy manual labour on a government agricultural project, and damaged her eyesight reading maps in the London Meteorological Office. She spent the hungry spring and summer of 1917 at Chalke Cottage, where, because of wartime shortages, she and a friend cultivated a garden which produced most of their food. Although physically exhausted as a result of these wartime activities, she spent the rest of the war writing and publishing in several British and North American magazines. During the post-war period she completed several short stories and drafts of her novel The Bridge and her play The Woodcarver's Wife.

The tone of her letters suggests that she was unhappy during the two post-war years she remained in England. To a

certain degree, her wartime experience had matured her; she now had a stronger sense of herself as a woman, and she was beginning to realize that there was more to womanhood than the "femininity" she had been encouraged to cultivate all her life. The following passage from a letter to Helen Coleman, dated 29 December, 1919 is revealing:

We're at a funny age just now, & a funny stage of the world. I suppose being a "pale inadequate old maid" is rough luck on all of us, though I can't imagine how you & Isabel & Marykins [Helen's sisters] have achieved it. To me, the trying part is being a woman at all. I've come to the ultimate conclusion that I'm a misfit of the worst kind, in spite of a superficial femininity--Emotions with a foreknowledge of impermanence, a daring mind with only the tongue as an outlet, a greed for experience plus a slavery to convention,--what the deuce are you to make of that?--as a woman? As a man, you could go ahead & stir things up fine. (MPC 2:20)

Pickthall's sense of displacement in a male-oriented world is a familiar characteristic of women undergoing the initial stages of female self-awareness. Her observations on singlehood as "rough luck" are obviously an empathetic response to Helen's dissatisfaction with being a "pale inadequate old maid"; the "trying part" for Marjorie is not her marital status, but rather, something much more fundamental and unalterable. She had discovered that if you are a woman, "the truth" will not necessarily "make you free," but rather, only make you aware of how unattainable freedom is. Her dawning female consciousness was leading her to the realization that she had been living her

life vicariously through her art. Lorne Pierce later recognized in her fiction an envy of male power:

Her multiplying stories were full of perilous quests and hazardous journeys, of undertakings that required incredible resources to withstand fatigue, hunger and despair. She wrote of men who could take the world in their strong hands and rebuild it alone and according to their will.²²

Although Pierce believes that it is primarily robust male health which the frail Pickthall longs for, his remarks are nevertheless instructive. These stories were the "outlet" through which she attempted to exercise her "daring mind"--articulate her daringly "unfeminine" demand for freedom--and satisfy her "greed for experience." In contrast to her own passive femininity, these male personae actively exercised the force of their masculine will upon the world around them.

Her progress with the books she was working on during the period in which she made this revealing statement reflect her developing consciousness of herself as a woman trapped in gender conventions. In the same letter she admits to being "awfully bored" with The Bridge. This is hardly surprising, given that it is filled with traditional gender stereotypes. In retrospect, Pierce had to admit that The Bridge "was not great, not even good. . . . The plot did not hold together, the motivation was weak, and the characters inclined to be misty" ("Memorial Address" 13). The Woodcarver's Wife on the other hand seethes with Pickthall's anger both at the system which had

entrapped her and at herself for her complicity in agreeing to her own oppression. When she completed the first draft of the manuscript she posted it to her father with a subtle caution: "D-- [her cousin Didie] is the only one who has yet seen it--& it has rather made her gasp. It has rather made me gasp too, being entirely unexpected."²³ Arthur Pickthall was convinced that his daughter "thought more of this [play] than anything that she had written" (A. Pickthall 7).

Pickthall was also becoming disenchanted with literary life in England. She wrote to her father in 1920 with reference to her literary and social life that "it is a drawback to be a woman [who is] known to do anything with her brains." She felt that in Canada there was not "the same dread of intellect or enthusiasm" in women.²⁴ Given the way in which she had been promoted and cultivated in Canada since the age of fifteen, it is hardly surprising that she thought of Canada as being somehow more enlightened with respect to the aspirations of literary women.

In response to Helen Coleman's urgings that she return to Canada, Pickthall declined, answering: "I don't know when I'll see Canada again. If I ever do it would only be to go to B.C."²⁵ But whatever her indifference to Canada, she was beginning to feel less and less at home in England, and in the spring of 1920 she sailed for home. After spending only a week with her father in Toronto,²⁶ she proceeded, as planned, to the

West Coast. She spent the summer with Isabel Ecclestone Mackay in Vancouver and in the Mackays' vacation home at Boundary Bay. While on one of her hikes through the surrounding countryside she spotted a deserted eight-by-ten-foot structure in the middle of a hayfield which she later learned had once been a cookshack. She immediately hunted down the owner, negotiated a \$1 per week rental agreement, and moved in her typewriter. After spending the following winter in Victoria, where she had rented a house, she returned to the Mackays' at Boundary Bay. On 11 May, 1921 she wrote to Helena Coleman:

I just had to part with some teeth . . . so I have been living the life of a hermit, and haven't seen any one for weeks, but Arthur Stringer, who came to tea at the shack. He said, "What is a tooth between artists?" (MPC 2:21)

Twenty years later, in 1941, the Toronto writer Arthur Stringer happened upon a copy of Pierce's Book of Remembrance in which the above passage from Marjorie's letter is reprinted. In a mood of nostalgia Stringer wrote down what he could recall of that visit and padded out what he could not with the help of Pierce's book. He published his reminiscence in Saturday Night, under the title "Wild Poets I've Known."²⁷ His Marjorie Pickthall is not very wild, to be sure. Like the critics of the earlier generation, Stringer was taken with Marjorie Pickthall's nineteenth-century charm:

She was more blonde and English-looking, more slender and girlish, than I had expected. Yet there was a certain primness there, a guarded restraint that may have been reducible to a missing bicuspid or perhaps an afterglow of propriety from her librarian days at Victoria College. I had been told she had a sense of humor. . . . But I caught no glimpse of frivolity from Marjorie that day. She impressed me, in fact, as possessing an almost bird-like fastidiousness of manner. The last poetess I had talked to was addicted to Greek sandals and Kentucky bourbon and in a voice husky with too much cigarette smoking interlarded her defense of free verse with even more revolutionary arguments about free love. But Marjorie wasn't like that. She was as spirituelle as her poetry. Spirituelle, at least, to the eye. For as she sat in the slanting sunlight she impressed me as quite as beautiful as anything she had ever written. There are plenty of women who can write poems. It's only once in a blue moon you bump into a woman who is a poem.

Even as late as the 1940s it would seem, men were still enchanted by the notion of woman as art object. However, by this time, the "depoetized" creature who threatened to overturn the poem-in-petticoats had arrived on the scene in the form of Stringer's fag-puffing, bourbon-swilling "poetess."

However, unlike the critics of a generation earlier, Stringer did not refuse to realize that Marjorie's resemblance to an art work was, as he writes, apparent only "to the eye." Indeed, at the heart of his article is his delight in what he saw as the contradictions in Marjorie Pickthall's personality:

But did the two poets discuss those nobler and higher things? They did not. . . .
 . . . Marjorie wanted information as to how and when book royalties should be paid, and how you were to know if a publisher were holding out on you, and if he had any right to base those royalties on the

wholesale and not the retail list-price of a given book. She agreed there was no joy like the joy of one's first sale, . . . "Oh, the feeling of handling money," observed the hungry-eyed poetess, "one has earned oneself!" . . .

. . . She once more interrogated me about publishers and rates, and how long a short story should be, and why people always wanted happy endings, and if editors weren't sheep, and what length of time one of them should be allowed to hold a manuscript before making up his muttoney mind about it. . . . [I]f she could keep on placing three or four stories a year it would keep the wolf from the door and give her peace of mind to write the sort of poetry she wanted to write.

No doubt with Pierce's book still fresh in his mind or, more likely, at his elbow, Stringer writes:

Those people who have tried to pin wings on Marjorie Pickthall because she wrote winged words won't, I know, altogether like this lifting of the veil. But even Emerson had to pay for his stove-wood. And artists must eat. The two artists involved in this chronicle, at any rate, sat there talking shop, sordid shop, until the shadows grew long. It was about as spiritual, on the whole, as the smoking-room conflag of two old market-worn commercial travellers. We might have been a couple of penurious old street-peddlers exchanging tips on trade-routes and watch-dogs and the universal unfairness of the town police.

Implicit here is the suggestion that Pickthall had the power to overturn some of the most cherished male notions of femininity. But despite Stringer's ambivalence about this pragmatic Canadian writer in the guise of a diaphanous Victorian Romantic poetess, his portrait of Marjorie is like a breath of fresh air after the parodies created by the Pierces, the MacMechans, and the Logans of twenty years earlier.²⁸ While it is true that Stringer has created another kind of fiction here, his honesty about doing so

prevents us from being too misled by it.

The summer of Stringer's visit was a busy one for Pickthall. In spite of her by now rapidly failing health she satisfied at least some of her recently recognized "greed for experience" by making excursions into rural British Columbia. She made a nine-day boat trip up the west coast of Vancouver Island, spent the month of August at Clo-oose, rowed up the Nitinat River with friends, and made a six-hour hike along a log trail through the forest. These activities aggravated her mecurical blood-pressure; nevertheless she undertook a 500-mile motor trip through the interior of Vancouver Island, covering a hundred miles a day, much of it over unpaved roads.

Pickthall spent her last winter trying to recover from her strenuous summer activities; by now her ailments included neuralgia and gynecological complaints. The Bridge had been serialized the previous year and was now being published in book form, but her novel "The Beaten Man" was not going well. She did not live to finish it. During these last months of her life she shuttled back and forth between nursing homes and the Mackay residence in Vancouver. Finally, she underwent surgery at Vancouver General Hospital on 7 April, 1922. Eleven days later she died of an embolism. Fittingly, her body was returned to Toronto where, on 26 April, she was buried next to the mother she had so loved.

* * *

Literary historians--Desmond Pacey, for example²⁹--who have considered the work of Marjorie Pickthall have been cursory in their appraisals: too often they begin by cataloguing her many literary influences and end by dismissing her work as too derivative to merit closer analysis. It is true that Pickthall's list of models is a long one; her poetic lineage extends backwards through the Celtic revivalists, the Pre-Raphaelites, the early Victorian poets, to the Romantics. Because of this Roy Daniells has described Pickthall as "at too many removes from the original sources of strength."³⁰ More accurately, what she is at too many removes from is the kind of personal experience that informs the poetry of this long line of male models. The history of her career is the story of a quest through a literary landscape in search of experience and a poetic voice; although from time to time she caught illuminating glimpses of her elusive grail, she herself felt the quest was unsuccessful. Shortly before her death she said that "nothing of any interest has ever happened to me during my literary career. . . . My life, in the main, has been very uneventful."³¹ Like her alter-ego Marjery Dawe, whose poem serves as the epigraph to this chapter, Marjorie Pickthall attended the impoverished banquet of delayed Victorian life and

came away hungry.

Pickthall was an observer of, rather than a participator in, the kind of experiences about which she wrote. Indeed, from time to time she wrote poems which reveal the gap between poet and subject. "A Western Window" provides a persistent image for this sense of alienation:

My window looks to the west, and the garden beneath is
 set
 With wall flowers yellow and brown, sweet william, and
 mignonette.

My window looks to the west, and rich is the inblown
 breeze
 From basil and eglantine and the blossoming locust
 trees.

My window looks to the west, and ever the long day
 through
 The lowermost panes are green, and the upper most
 panes are blue. (CP 78, ll. 1-6)

Less fortunate than Tennyson's Lady of Shalott, who was engaged in artistic activity in her tower room, Pickthall's persona is entirely passive; the materials required for her poetic weavings are all on the opposite side of the glass. The slow passage of time suggested by the phrase "long day" helps to emphasize her inactivity. The glass itself is like a tapestry of green and blue, but it is a tapestry created not by the poet but rather by nature, from which the poet is isolated.

The poet's sense of her physical entrapment behind the glass intensifies as night falls and she begins to observe human activity:

But as soon as sun has set, and the wearying day has
 died,
 The winds come up from the west, with the sound of the
 ebbing tide.

.....

And the ships that follow the stars to the rim of the
 outer seas,
 Call loud to the listening land and the land calls
 back to these.

.....

And the ships gone out on the tide with their strong
 white sails unfurl'd,
 O, they carry my heart with them to the utmost edge o'
 the world.

.....

And the winds come up from the west, and they murmur
 and croon to me
 The song of the old dead dreams and the death of the
 dreams to be. (ll. 7-18)

Like most of Pickthall's less successful pieces, this poem ends in death. But this death symbolizes the kind of death-in-life experienced by women whose entrapment in gender conventions is at odds with an active imagination. There is a strong suggestion here of self-alienation, a separation of mind and body. While the poet's "heart" travels "to the utmost edge o' the world" with men who sail in "ships that follow the stars," she herself remains trapped behind the glass. This self-alienation is also suggested in the geographical remoteness of poet from persona: the poem was written in Toronto, where western windows do not face the sea; clearly it was inspired by

a British model. As the final lines suggest, the "winds" of poetic inspiration, returning from that "utmost edge o' the world," bring with them insight into the conditions of this persona's life: her entrapment robs her of both past and future.

Pickthall compensated for what she felt was an uneventful life by enlarging her literary experience, and it is that experience which informs her poetry. The literature which influenced her verse can be divided into three groups: the work of her male predecessors, the Bible, and the poetry of a few nineteenth-century women poets. Chief among her male models were "Fiona MacLeod" (William Sharp), W.B. Yeats, John Masefield, Algernon Swinburne, and D.G. Rossetti. Much of the most obviously imitative of Pickthall's poetry is modelled on the work of Yeats and Masefield. The cadences of the Song of Songs and Ecclesiasties are apparent in Pickthall's sacred verse but the Bible also provided her with characters and themes through which she explored woman's place in the Christian universe.) Pickthall also read the poetry of Katherine Tynan, Alice Meynell, and Louise Guiney but it was Isabella Valancy Crawford and Christina Rossetti who influenced the group of poems which are the most revealing in terms of Pickthall's struggle for poetic identity.

The following passage from Lorne Pierce's biography of Pickthall suggests that she was aware of the relationship between her literary experience and the development of her own

poetic voice:

Her father recalls that upon one occasion, having prepared material for the Courier, she handed it to him to read. He returned it to her with the jocular remark that it seemed hardly fair to draw so largely upon Fiona McLeod. She at once repudiated the suggestion. It was not Fiona McLeod's work, but her own.

During this time her style was undergoing steady and radical change. Anxious to create a style of her own, her tenacious memory frequently did her the disservice of recalling too readily and precisely the thought and style of those writers she most admired. Joseph Conrad stood to her a master craftsman. She was almost afraid to read him lest her own individuality would be overshadowed. "I would give a year of my life to have written that," she once remarked to a friend, pointing to a paragraph in "Lord Jim." (BR 58)

Although this passage concerns Pickthall's fiction rather than her poetry, it is nevertheless suggestive. It would appear that Pickthall's biological and literary fathers--sometimes in conflict with one another--dictated the standards upon which she attempted to model her style. Interestingly, Pierce uses the words "Anxious" and "afraid" to describe her relationship with the male writers she admired. She apparently not only suffered the "anxiety of authorship," she was also acutely aware that she suffered. It is this conscious awareness of the danger of imitation that makes Pickthall's most derivative verse paradoxically unique, for it may be seen as a dramatization of the self-alienation process.

Given that, as Gilbert and Gubar explain, "the pen has been defined as not just accidentally but essentially a male 'tool,'

and therefore not only inappropriate but actually alien to women" (8), it is hardly surprising that much of Marjorie Pickthall's poetry is imitative of her male models. For imitation is the most obvious evidence of a woman poet's fear that she lacks creative or generative literary power. Further, imitation is far less threatening to her "femininity" because the pen/penis of literary creativity remains with the male poets she imitates. But for Pickthall, avoiding the dangers of "unfeminine" originality meant accepting the equally dangerous self-erasure inherent in the process of imitation. Poems like "The Hearer," "Armored," and many others recount again and again her experience of entering into an alien poetic and ultimately succumbing to its power. The images of death or disappearance which conclude these poems almost always signal the death or disappearance from the poem of Pickthall's poetic voice.

*Pickthall was attracted to the work of Masefield and Yeats as a moth is to a flame; this cliched simile is nonetheless an apt one, for the most recurrent image in Pickthall's poetry is the moth. It is a muse figure which, in her imitative verse, often signals the immolation of her poetic identity in the destructive flame of male influence. The insubstantiality of the moth is also in keeping with the pale imitation and deficient substance which characterize her Masefieldian and Yeatsian poems. And even where the image of the moth is absent, its spirit is present. Wherever the poet/persona/central figure

of a poem drowns in a Masefieldian sea or vanishes into a Yeatsian faeryland the spirit of the delicate and fragile moth is evoked.

"Do you know Masefield well?" Pickthall wrote to her father a year before her death; "He always seems nearer to me as a writer than any one else, and I'm proud to think it even to myself."³² Her pride (to change the immolation metaphor somewhat) is that of the Christian martyr whose courage at the stake is made possible through his identification with the suffering Christ on His Cross. Pickthall sacrificed her style to Masefield's by identifying too closely with him. This is exemplified by her poem entitled "The Hearer":

"Sing of the things we know and love."
 But the singer made reply,
 "There are greater lands to tell you of
 And stars to steer you by."

So he sang of worlds austere and strange,
 Of seas so wildly wide
 That only the journeying swan might range
 The marches of the tide.

Men heard the thunder and the rain,
 The tempest in his song,
 They turned to their hearth fires again
 And thought the night too long.

And only one man dared to hear
 The deeds that singer told;
 Against the stars he swung his spear
 And died ere he was old. (CP 166)

"Sea-Fever," the Masefield poem on which "The Hearer" is modelled, is a magical combination of music and meaning in which

the persona describes the sea's irresistible call to the experienced sailor. As Pickthall's title suggests, "worlds austere and strange" and "seas so wildly wide" are not the things of experience, but rather, fatal tales to be overheard. And to overhear, rather than to experience, results in early death. The Masefield poem, like Pickthall's, also ends in death, but death is a "quiet sleep and a sweet dream"--a reward earned by an aged sailor for a full life on the seas. Like the "one man who dared to hear," Pickthall overhears her literary father, and the result is dangerous to her poetry. So intimidated is she by the singer/poet Masefield that any potential originality she may possess is, by the plagiarized fourth line of her poem, obliterated by the overriding voice of Masefield. Or, to echo Pickthall's metaphor, no matter how forcefully she swings her poetic "spear" at the "star" by which she steers this poem, she cannot remove his overbearing presence. "Sea-Fever" is, to paraphrase Gilbert and Gubar, a contagious dis-ease, a germ that has spread like a stain through this poem and caused its untimely death.

"Dis-ease" in its other sense--to be ill at ease--is apparent in Pickthall's Masefieldian poem, "My Father He Was a Fisherman," in which the persona, on her way to join her father in his watery grave, defends herself against charges spoken by a second voice in the poem:

"The tides go up and the tides go down,
 But what do you know of the sea?"
 Her voice, i' the long grey streets o' the town,
 Is singing to me. (CP 80)

Like the persona in this poem, Pickthall knows little of the sea from first-hand experience. And like this poem, "Pieter Marinus," "Ebb-Tide," "The Sea's Adventurer," among others, all end in death by drowning, as if they were inspired by Pickthall's willingness to drown in the sea of Masfield's influence.

The futile search for first-hand knowledge in second-hand experience led Pickthall through Yeats' early Celtic verse. Like Yeats, who projected himself into the poet figures Fergus and Cuchulain, Pickthall had her Celtic spokesmen; among them is the speaker in "The Old Harper," who wanders through an increasingly hostile landscape of Celtic references only to bargain away his art for a grave--an apt metaphor for the process of poetic imitation. A similar disappearance beyond the realm of art is dramatized in "Armored," a poem which attracted the delighted attention of Yeats himself.³³ It is closely modelled on his "The Stolen Child," which is a tale of abduction by the faeries into the dim country of the legendary Celtic past. Pickthall, however, substitutes a female figure for Yeats' male child. Her poem reads like the story of the poet's own abduction into the land of Yeats' verse. Here is the last

half of the poem:

One white moth her guide shall be,
 She shall follow where he flies,
 Patiently, with dream-lit eyes;
 Past the thyme and savoury,
 Past the mystic asphodel,
 For the voices in her ear
 Call her softly, call her clear,--

"Armored!"

Into valleys strange and dim,
 All unseen and all unknown,
 Fleetly shall she follow him.
 Fairy-led, alone.
 She shall hear within the brake
 Elfin crickets pipe and sing,
 While the elfin spiders make
 Sendal for her furnishing,
 Red as pimpernel.
 She shall see the dreams go by,
 Silver-pinioned, through the sky;
 Where she wanders none may tell,
 But the voices come and go,
 Calling sweetly, calling low,

"Armored!"

(CP 173, ll. 19-25)

The presence of the moth as guide is significant, for unlike Yeats' muses, who always guide the poet into poetic inspiration, this insubstantial muse leads Armored away from it. In keeping with the Yeats poem, this is a journey beyond "thyme"/time, beyond the Celtic "myst-"/mist, and into the mythic "Past." But unlike Yeats' travels into the past, which are journeys into the realm of poetic imagination, or "dream," Armored's wanderings move her beyond that realm to a place where she can only "see the dreams go by." The soft, clear elfin voices which call Armored into a realm beyond both the real and the imaginative

world are not dissimilar to the poetic voices that spoke to Pickthall from the pages of the male models she studied so assiduously. Each journey into an alien poetic led her farther and farther from the potential source of her own poetic voice and into the oblivion of Masefield's sea or Yeats' Faeryland.

Given the multiplicity of poetic associations with which Yeats invested the image of the rose, it seems appropriate that Pickthall should make the symbol of the rose the unconscious focus of her creative anxieties. In its opposition of war and death, her "O Silver Rose" recalls Yeats' "The Rose of Battle" and "The Rose of Peace":

The dark hour turns so slowly and so sweet,
The last still hour soft-fallen from the stars.
To-morrow I may kneel and touch thy feet,
O Rose of all Shiraz.

Lay wide thine amorous lattice to the south,
O Silver Rose, when roses breathe thy name,
And thou at dawn shalt feel upon thy mouth
The kiss I dared not claim.

Discrowned, dishonoured, reft of pride and power,
From the red battle where they hailed me lord,
O Silver Rose, O sweet Pomegranate Flower,
I turn me to their sword.

Life hath so held me to an empty part,
Life hath so snared me, bound and made me blind.
To-morrow I may rest upon thy heart,
For death shall prove more kind. (CP 127)

The vanity of earthly life is the theme of this poem, which is a prelude to death, spoken by a defeated and discredited warrior

king who is meditating upon Christ as symbolized by the Silver Rose. But the defeat depicted here is not defeat by enemy troops: this king is "Discrowned" by the very kingdom from which his crown derives. His crime is hubris: snared and blinded by earthly fame and glory, he has betrayed those who once "hailed [him] lord" and must now turn himself "to their sword." The poem also recalls Yeats' "The Rose Upon the Rood of Time" in that, like Pickthall's warrior king, Yeats' speaker invokes the rose as the symbol of a transcendent ideal. Yeats' rose is the rose of poetry, which he calls upon as a kind of muse figure to inspire him to his bardic duties. Like Yeats' poem, Pickthall's also alludes to poetry. The "Rose of all Shiraz" evokes the Persian city of Shiraz, famed not merely as the city of poets but, more important, as the gravesite of Persia's greatest poets. In seeking his final resting-place among dead poets, the shamed and dishonoured speaker of Pickthall's poem identifies himself with them.

It is entirely possible that the "Discrowned" speaker of "O Silver Rose" is on some level a discredited poet, discrowned of his laurels, and that Pickthall's anxiety about her own credibility has crept into the subtext of this poem. As the passage from Pierce's biography quoted above clearly states, she was made aware of her tendency to imitate the style of other writers and was so anxious about it that she feared reading the writers she admired. Perhaps she felt that the extent of her

dependence on other poets was not in keeping with what was expected of her as a leading poet of her day. Imitation is, of course, a valid starting-point for an apprentice poet but ideally, by the time a poet has earned critical acclaim she has abandoned her dependence on her models and established a voice of her own. In Pickthall's case, however, critical recognition was premature and had the effect of postponing the day when she would begin to take the necessary risks involved in working out her own poetic. When she entered the literary scene at the age of fifteen, she had no way of knowing what the literati had in store for her, nor could she have been aware that in terms of life experience she was not equipped to meet the demands of a supposedly discerning reading public. Thrust upon the unprepared and unsuspecting adolescent poet was the role of deliverer of a literary tradition in extremis. It was a fate she would come to loathe.

By the time Pickthall was twenty-five years old the happy excitement of early recognition had degenerated into anxiety about her rapidly growing celebrity. Her letters of the period reflect this anxiety and her inability to identify with her public image. As she wrote to Helen Coleman at the end of 1908, "Don't keep reminding me I'm a poet. . . . I very seldom feel equal to living up to my own Immortal Verse."³⁴ Irony is apparent in her capitalization of "Immortal Verse," and that irony is in keeping with Pickthall's growing tendency to devalue

her own work. A few months later, in 1909, the year in which "O Silver Rose" was published, she wrote to Helen again:

. . . I attended your Auntie's [literary gathering] some time ago, and disgraced myself by refusing to act up to my poetry. . . . It's a great shock to Miss Coleman to find me and my verse so different, but I think she is getting used to it. . . .³⁵

Clearly Pickthall was plagued with anxieties about disappointing the mentors who pushed and prodded her into the literary limelight. And probably it is not overstating the case to say that she feared exposure as a literary imposter and that she unconsciously articulated that fear through the dishonoured warrior of "O Silver Rose." Like the speaker of that poem Pickthall had been dazzled and seduced by her early triumphs, which had temporarily blinded her to the realization that she was unprepared to meet the expectations of her art. Now, at the age of twenty-five, she, like her warrior, is convinced that life holds her "to an empty part."

By the time Pickthall was thirty-seven, the anxiety expressed in "O Silver Rose" had degenerated into unhappiness:

Called to a way too high for me, I lean
Out from my narrow window o'er the street,
And know the fields I cannot see are green,
And guess the songs I cannot hear are sweet.

Break up the vision round me, Lord, and thrust
Me from Thy side, unhoused without the bars,
For all my heart is hungry for the dust
And all my soul is weary of the stars.

I would seek out a little roof instead,

A little lamp to make my darkness brave.
 "For though she heal a multitude," Love said,
 "Herself she cannot save." (CP 143)

Appropriately, she titled this poem "The Chosen." It is a successful poem because, unlike the fatally imitative work of earlier years, it expresses first-hand knowledge: it is an expression of Pickthall's experience of limited experience. This is supported by the image of the poet as nun, wedded to her Lord and trapped behind the bars of her convent window. In an attempt to meet the expectations of her readership in general and her mentors in particular, she studied the "fields" and "songs" of life as they appeared in the work of her literary forefathers, guessed at the greenness and sweetness of that life, and imitated it in her own verse. From her dizzying perch above the lesser poets of the day, she administered short-term healing to a dying tradition but had no remedy for her own ailing poetic: "I've got a kind of passionate distaste for my own work lately," she admitted to Helena Coleman the year in which "The Chosen" was written.³⁶ The mood which informs the poem is in keeping with the sentiment she had expressed two years earlier, when she confessed to Helen Coleman her "greed for experience" and her "slavery to convention": "what the deuce are you to make of that?--as a woman?" she had raged; "As a man you could go ahead & stir things up fine." Lacking the male power to "stir things up fine," the speaker in "The Chosen" calls upon the Source of all power. The God she invokes is the

ultimate patriarch, the dispenser of power not only to the oppressive culture in which she lives--a culture as narrow as a nun's convent walls--but, more specifically, to her male models and mentors to whom Pickthall must be grateful for the dubious honour of being "The Chosen." Given that by definition she has no access to that all-pervasive power, it is hardly surprising that she is "hungry for the dust" and "weary of the stars" of a meaningless celebrity. The concept of poet as nun only serves to intensify this sense of the unlived life, for it is not just a meaningless celebrity but also a meaningless celibacy which she must endure as the bride of a chaste Heavenly Bridegroom.

The Bible was as important an influence on Pickthall as was the work of her male predecessors. Many of her sacred poems, most of which imitate the rhetoric of the Bible, fail because language remains identified with the Bible; as The Word of God and the inheritance of Adam alone, it renders the poet mute. Indeed, it might even be said that God--or, more specifically, the patriarchal God of Christianity--was one of Pickthall's stern literary forefathers. Pickthall's middle-class conservative readership was especially appreciative of her sacred verse, and its steady flow from her pen elicited a steady flow of accolades in return. It was important to the literary establishment that its First Lady of Canadian letters be a

Christian--and preferably a Protestant. Both Lorne Pierce and J.D. Logan agonized over the possibility that Pickthall was neither. Although the majority of her sacred verse was, to their relief, conventional in Christian sentiment, it was her attraction to paganism that distressed these men.³⁷

The recurring Roman Catholic presence of the Virgin Mary in Pickthall's verse was another reason why establishing her Protestantism proved such a strenuous critical activity. But Pickthall had her very good reasons for gravitating toward the Mother of Christ. These reasons are apparent in "A Mother in Egypt." This poem is based on Exodus XI, which relates an episode in the on-going power struggle between Pharaoh and the God of Moses. Moses reports that God has spoken to him, saying:

About midnight will I go out into the midst of Egypt; and all the firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh that sitteth upon the throne, even unto the firstborn of the maid-servant that is behind the mill. . . . (Exodus XI:4-5)

Pickthall quotes this passage as the epigraph to her poem, which is in the form of a dramatic monologue spoken by one of the maid-servants of the mill. It is significant that Pickthall chooses to retell this story from the point of view of a poor and powerless female victim of the struggle between two oppressive patriarchal forces warring for total supremacy. Ironically, God scores a triumph on behalf of the dispossessed children of Israel at the expense of a woman who, by virtue of

her gender, her humble status as a servant, and the slaughter of her only child, is trebly dispossessed.

The maid-servant's monologue takes place the morning after the night in which God carries out his slaughter of the firstborns. The Egyptian mother, half-mad with grief, holds her dead infant in her arms and recreates her experience of the previous night's horrors:

Something I saw of the broad, dim wings half folding
 The passionless brow.
 Something I saw of the sword the shadowy hands were
 holding,--
 What matters it now?
 I held you close, dear face, as I knelt and harkened
 To the wind that cried last night like a soul in sin,
 When the broad, bright stars dropped down and the soft
 sky darkened,
 And the Presence moved therein.

I have heard men speak in the market-place of the
 city,
 Low voiced, in a breath,
 Of a god who is stronger than ours, and who knows not
 changing nor pity,
 Whose anger is death.
 Nothing I know of the lords of the outland races,
 But Amun is gentle and Hathor the Mother is mild,
 And who would descend from the light of the peaceful
 places
 To war on a child?

.....

Do the gods smile downward and love him and give him
 their care?
 Guard him well, O ye gods, till I come; lest the wrath
 of that Other
 Should reach to him there! (CP 114-5, ll. 18-49)

As the evocation of the gentleness of the god Amun and the mildness of Hathor the Mother goddess suggests, a contrast is

being made here between a woman-centred spirituality and a violent patriarchal "Presence"--that wrathful "Other"--who makes "war on a child." Clearly Pickthall had some awareness of the way in which the Judeo-Christian tradition oppresses women and negates the female principle.³⁸ Given this awareness it is hardly surprising that elsewhere in her sacred verse the focus is often on the Virgin Mary who, as the gentlest of all mothers, is a startling contrast to this most violent of all fathers.

More important than the religious commentary in "A Mother in Egypt"--commentary which is more or less conscious on the part of the poet--is its political significance in terms of the patriarchal privilege of creativity. As a dramatic monologue, the poem enacts the poetic process by investing the silent with speech--in this case the silent and silenced maid-servant of the mill. Her biological creativity, the only creativity allowed her in patriarchy, has been thwarted by The Word of God as spoken to Moses. Given interiority--or, more accurately, subjectivity--by the poet, she is allowed another kind of creativity. Her speaking out is not only a creative act; it is a political act of protest against the linguistic hegemony of the Bible. Pickthall may or may not be aware of what she is doing in this regard but the fact that she has chosen this insignificant and mute Biblical figure and treated her in this way says much about her struggle to acquire poetic speech.

Among Pickthall's female influences were Isabella Valancy Crawford and Christina Rossetti. She had much in common with them. Like Pickthall, their religious faith had been both a refuge from a hostile world and a space too narrow to permit full growth. Like Pickthall also, Crawford and Rossetti had chosen literary careers over marriage, and they had suffered death-in-life entrapment in gender conventions and domestic spaces. Not surprisingly, in her absorption of these female influences Pickthall suffered fewer lethal side-effects than she did in her encounters with her male models. Indeed, some of her most interesting work bears the unmistakable stamp of Rossetti and Crawford.

The most obvious similarity between Crawford and Pickthall is in their Christian philosophy: for both poets "Love" is the animating force in the universe. Both personify love but these personifications are not always the direct equivalent of Christ, although "Love the crucified" is a much more familiar image in Pickthall's work than in Crawford's. For Crawford, the synonymy of sacred and profane love conjoins spirituality and sexuality, whereas there are far fewer sexual overtones in Pickthall's poetry. For Pickthall, earthly love is largely non-sexual; the love-objects in her poetry are, more often than not, female, and earthly love for her is homo-emotional rather than erotic. Nevertheless, Crawford's yonic lily as a female sexual

image³⁹ appears from time to time in Pickthall's work but in a much more diffused form, as in this image from her love poem, "The Indian Dancer":

The summer silence of the wood
Was a gold cup for love to fill. (CP 15)

The love bower is another poetic image common to Pickthall's and Crawford's work. It is also a favourite device of the Pre-Raphaelite poets, a source Pickthall also used for this image. For example, the love bower runs like a leitmotiv through D.G. Rossetti's sonnet sequence, The House of Life. In those poems, the bower intact is a secure space within nature which offers the lovers protection; the bower undergoes disintegration when the lovers quarrel and separate. Each sonnet in the sequence represents a tightly woven bower in itself which preserves the poet's memory of the experience of love. Here is a Pickthall version of the love bower which approximates the Pre-Raphaelite image:

Here where the bee slept and the orchis lifted
Her honeying pipes of pearl, her velvet lip,
Only the swart leaves of the oak lie drifted
In sombre fellowship.
Here where the flame-weed set the lands alight,
Lies the bleak upland, webbed and crowned with
white.

Build high the logs, O love, and in thine eyes
Let me believe the summer lingers late.
We shall not miss her passive pageantries,
We are not desolate,

When on the sill, across the window bars,
 Kind winter flings her flowers and her stars.
 ("Frost Song," CP 57)

The first verse conveys an image of passion spent. The sexual activity suggested by the sleeping bee, the "honeying pipes" of the "orchis" ("testicle," in Greek), and the "velvet lip" is all in the past. What remains is "sombre fellowship." There is also a suggestion of burned-out passion in the fireweed. The second verse is contradictory. While it suggests an attempt to keep passion kindled by creating a bower of blazing logs, there is also a suggestion in the phrase "Let me believe" that the poet is harbouring an illusion of sustained love. The bower may offer protection from the elements but, as "window bars" suggest, it is also a prison. This negative image is contradicted by the "flowers" and "stars," winter's promise that love, youth, and beauty will return with the spring.

But Pickthall created other bowers which are much more in keeping with Crawford's work. In Malcom's Katie, Crawford creates a universe in which women have power and a voice. She does this by exploiting and subverting the convention in English language poetry which images the New World as the New Eden. The title of the poem expresses the patriarchal concept of male ownership of women against which the poem itself works in an attempt to establish female autonomy and power. Malcom's Katie is essentially a rewriting of the Christian creation myth in which Eve resists the serpent's charms and is the primary

creative rather than destructive force. The spiritual force at work in this poem is not a remote and externalized male diety but "love," an internalized female principle which is sometimes personified as an earthbound animus figure. God in the poem remains in His heaven and His female ambassador on earth carries out His work. Katie has the power to reconcile warring male forces represented in the poem by her father, her husband, and her thwarted suitor. Central to Crawford's vision of a woman-centered earthly paradise is the bower of love, an image idealized in the following chorus:

O love will build his lily walls,
 And love his pearly roof will rear
 On cloud, or land, or mist, or sea--⁴⁰
 Love's solid land is everywhere!

In January of 1910, Pickthall published a love-bower poem which betrays Crawford's unmistakable influence:

The silver roads of Love are wide,
 O winds that turn, O stars that guide.
 Sweet are the ways that Love has trod
 Through the clear skies that reach to God.
 But in the cliff-grass Love builds deep
 A place where wandering wings may sleep.
 ("Swallows," CP 49, ll. 13-18)

As in Malcom's Katie, God remains in His distant heaven while "Love," a personified force, creates a protective space within nature. As women, identified with non-transcendent nature and denied entry into the transcendent realm--heaven in the Christian tradition--both Crawford and Pickthall envision a

space within nature which is inhabited by an earthly version of heavenly love.

Although Crawford is much more direct about investing nature with erotic connotations, Pickthall's love bowers are also suggestive, as in her poem "The Sleep-Seekers," which is the poet's invitation to a lover--or perhaps a muse--to enter the bower:

Lift thou the latch whereon the wild rose clings,
 Touch the green door to which the briar has grown.
 If you seek sleep, she dwells not with these things,--
 The prisoned wood, the voiceless reed, the stone.
 But where the day yields to one star alone,
 Softly Sleep cometh on her brown owl-wings,
 Sliding above the marshes silently
 To the dim beach between the black pines and the sea.

There; or in one leaf-shaken loveliness
 Of birchen light and shadow, deep she dwells. . . .

Here shall we lift our lodge against the rain,
 Walling it deep
 With tamarac branches and the balsam fir,
 Sweet even as sleep,
 And aspen boughs continually astir
 To make a silver-gleaming,--
 Here shall we lift our lodge and find again
 A little space for dreaming. (CP 51, ll. 16-23)

It is not possible to know where the poet stands in this poem because the poetic voice seems to shift location as the poem progresses. The "you" receives the invitation from the speaker to transcend the prison of normal consciousness--the "voiceless" state--and enter into the imaginative state of dreaming sleep. This poetic state is represented by the "dim beach" which is

located "There" in nature. In the closing stanza, however, the perspective shifts abruptly, and "There" suddenly becomes "Here," "you" becomes "we," and the sought-after state of consciousness is now a protective space deep within the womb of Mother Nature. Comparing these lines unfavourably with Archibald Lampman's practice, R.E. Rashley writes that "Lifting our lodge breaks the communion with nature of Lampman, and turns the last line, which with him would have been a communication of mood, into a separation both from life and from nature" (101). Rashley is objecting to the fact that these lines do not conform to the conventional male model which images communion between the poet and a clearly differentiated landscape. What they do image is a speaker who is not fully differentiated from nature; communion between poet and nature is not possible where the poet is identified with nature. This invitation to enter nature's womb is as much from Mother Nature herself as it is from the speaker. This poem is typical of Pickthall's early work, where the poet is often absorbed by her own landscapes.

As "The Sleep-Seekers" suggests, a poetic tradition which does not allow women separation from nature can result in confusion in terms of the woman poet's ego boundaries. Typically, Marjorie Pickthall's ego boundaries are fluid, and she often internalizes nature in the same way that the womb of nature internalizes her. For example, in "The House" (CP 69) the poet becomes Mother Nature within which the house is

nestled: "The house of my heart" fronts nature and "has no garden at all." Why Pickthall emphasizes the absence of a garden is not clear. But elsewhere in her poetry gardens are often associated either with isolation from the rest of the world (as in "A Western Window" and "Modern Endymion"), or with loss ("Her Garden"), or with death ("The Garden of Weariness"). In any case, in "The House" no cultivated space separates Mother Nature from house--an image which again evokes the bower.

Houses themselves are bowers, and as "The House's Setting" (CP 66) suggests, the poet identifies with the house; this house speaks and tells us that she may borrow all the joys and sorrows which encircle her in the form of trees. This characterization of the bower as both joyful and sorrowful is one of Pickthall's few realistic portrayals of domestic space. One of her most negative and revealing depictions of domestic space is "A Bird in the Room":

Last autumn when they aired the house
 A bird got in, and died in this room.
 Here it fluttered
 Close to the shuttered
 Window, and beat in the airless gloom,
 No space for its wing, no drop for its mouth,--
 A swallow, flying south.

And the velvet-creeping unsleeping mouse
 Trampled that swiftness where it fell
 On the dusty border
 Pattern'd in order
 With a citron flower and a golden shell,--
 But it might not fly and it might not drink,
 On the carpet's sunless brink.

A thought of you beat into my mind,

Empty and shuttered, dark, and spread
 With dusty sheeting
 To hide the beating
 Tread of the hours. But the thought was dead
 When I opened the door of that room, to find
 If the Spring
 Had left me anything-- (CP 32)

Ellen Moers has noted that one of the most frequently recurring images in women's literature is the bird. It is very often the author's double in that its littleness serves as a metaphor for her female sense of herself as small and insignificant. The bird's ability to fly is an expression of the author's longing for freedom from entrapment in domestic space and gender conventions.⁴¹ Pickthall's bird is doubly identified with the poet: in addition to its identity as Moers interprets it, a second level of identification arises out of the superstition to which the poem alludes. A bird in the house signals the death of its occupant. In addition, small birds in many of Pickthall's poems are, in keeping with Romantic convention, often muse figures. Thus, what this poem says is that domestic confinement is stifling unto death for all things represented by the bird: woman, poet, poetic imagination, and even nature itself, which here has been killed into art on the patterned border of the carpet where the dead bird lies. Like the poet, who longs for freedom and thirsts for experience, the bird has been denied its most basic and vital needs. Perhaps the "you" in the poem is not just the speaker's lost lover but the world at large from which she is cut off; condemned to domestic

entrapment she must endure the slow "Tread of the hours."

This association of woman with natural objects is central to Pickthall's "The Tree" (CP 34), in which the tree is described as the "green daughter" of the wind. Woman as tree has a long literary history, going back to the myth of Daphne. And in terms of female existence the tree is an apt metaphor for woman in that it has no mobility in space. But Pickthall does not exploit any of these poetic fictions. Her green daughter of Mother Nature is a sentimentalized "feminine" figure: "fair," "delicate," "Quiet," "seemly," "Unknown," and unknowing. She has, however--like the poem itself--one moment of power: when she comes into her own "infinite strength" birds make a bower of her branches and she creates with her spreading limbs a bower of "Peace like a spell . . . on that enclosed ground."

The identification of woman with landscape goes much farther back than the Romantic tradition in poetry. Classical mythology imaged this relationship in the story of Demeter and Persephone. While the myth has always been significant to writers of both genders, women have a special relationship to it.⁴² In her article entitled "Mother, Daughter, and the Birth of the Female Artist"⁴³ and in her longer study, The New Mythos: The Novel of the Artist as Heroine, 1877-1977, Grace Stewart examines the Demeter-Persephone story as a myth of identity which has structured the female literary imagination for more

than a hundred years. While Stewart limits her examination to women's autobiographical fiction, her observations are equally applicable to poetry written by women during the same period:

Structurally, the myth celebrates the origin of a cycle of birth/death/rebirth, supposedly the monomyth of all literature. But in the female version, the cycle is perpetual. Demeter's success is limited; Persephone is doomed to return to Hades. Phyllis Chesler remarks that the Eleusinian emotions of catharsis "are rooted in the acceptance of nature and biology's supremacy. The inevitable sacrifice of self that biology demands of women in most societies is at the heart of the Demetrian myth." As a woman, the novelist is fated to choose her sacrifice. She structures her fiction to suggest the inefficacy of either choice. She can repeat the sacrifice of self to womanhood or the sacrifice of womanhood to self (which, to her, means to art). The cycle is eternal. (The New Mythos 132-3)

The woman novelist's dilemma is identical to that of the woman poet caught in what Susanne Juhasz calls the "double bind": "If she is 'woman,' she must fail as 'poet'; 'poet' she must fail as 'woman.'" Marjorie Pickthall's derivative verse demonstrates that she often sacrificed her art on the altar of her femininity--a form of "sacrifice of self to womanhood"--and in doing so resigned herself to Persephone's fate:

Demeter, the strong woman who challenges patriarchal law, is offset by Persephone, the woman as victim. . . . Both the loss and the jubilant return are tinged with sorrow and what the Greeks term anagnorisis (recognition, epiphanic comprehension of identity). However, the story does not directly reveal the emotions of the maiden. She stands mute, torn between male and female lovers, mother and husband, a pawn in their battle for control. (The New Mythos 132)

This is the Persephone with whom Stewart's autobiographical novelists identify: a silenced victim of a fierce power struggle, a woman who is doomed to know herself only as an extension of the forces which jointly possess her.

In terms of Romantic convention, Demeter represents the Mother Nature from whom, as Margaret Homans suggests, women poets must separate "in the manner of daughters refusing to become what their mothers have been." But like Persephone, "women poets do not want to dissociate themselves [from Mother Nature] even though they know they must." Thus every attempt at separation is followed by a remerging with her. But for Pickthall, as for many of the novelists Stewart examines, enforced separation from Demeter does not result in Persephone's autonomy but in her marriage to Pluto, or death--another form of identity erasure; ironically, death and disappearance into the grave are just another kind of absorption by the landscape.⁴⁴ Thus the woman who refuses to sacrifice her conventional notions of femininity to her art is, like Persephone, doomed to an eternal and futile search for artistic identity. But as Grace Stewart observes in the novels she examines, and as we shall see in a handful of Pickthall's later poems, this search for identity is itself an identity in that it identifies the poet as seeker--the solitary figure whose search for self has been engaged in by so many women poets and novelists that the search

itself has become a recognizable poetic convention.

Persephone as a mute pawn in the power struggle between Demeter and Pluto is not unlike the maidservant of the mill in the Biblical story which Pickthall reinterprets in "A Mother in Egypt" (a poem which, interestingly, features a mother goddess who cannot protect the speaker from the violence of a male god). As we saw in that poem, Pickthall invests the silent and dispossessed maidservant with subjectivity and a voice in which to articulate her victimization. Similarly, in "Persephone Returning to Hades," she invests the mute Persephone with the interiority denied her in the myth. Persephone's remarkably eloquent monologue dramatizes the identity erasure experienced by Pickthall who, as a poet in the Romantic tradition, was forced to live that myth.

Much of the poem's success is due to its technical execution. For example, the word "little," the most overworked word in Pickthall's canon,⁴⁵ is not even used, much less abused. Further, there is no silver or gold, opals or pearls and, mercifully, no loveliness; that kind of diction and imagery mars many of her other poems. The blank verse of "Persephone" and its judicious use of long vowels create somberness without melodrama. It may have been the fear of her invalid mother's ever-impending death which helped Pickthall select the appropriate tone for Persephone's monologue:

Last night I made my pillow of the leaves
 Frostily sweet, and lay throughout the hours
 Close to the woven roots of the earth; O earth,
 Great mother, did the dread foreknowledge run
 Through all thy veins and trouble thee in thy
 sleep?

No sleep was mine. Where my faint hands had fallen
 Wide on thy grass, pale violets, ere the day,
 Grew like to sorrow's self made visible,
 Each with a tear at heart. . . (CP 178, ll. 1-9)

The striking image of "faint hands . . . fallen / Wide" on the grass creates a precise sense of Persephone's decreasing substantiality, which complements the concretization suggested by "sorrow's self made visible." This opposition of invisibility and visibility evokes nature's transformation, as fruitful summer disappears and desolate winter emerges in the landscape.

The reluctance with which Persephone leaves for hell is effectively conveyed in the opening lines of the second verse:

. . . Yet, ere I turned
 From these dim meadows to the doors of hell,
 Gathered these sad untimely flowers, and found
 Long beautiful berries ripening on the thorn,
 With one wide rose that had forgot to die.
 These I bore softly thence. But here within
 This gathering-place of shadows where I wait
 For the slow change, there cometh a sullen wind
 Blown from the memoried fields of asphodel
 Or Lethe's level stream; and these my flowers
 Slip from my hands and are but shadows too.
 (ll. 15-25)

"[T]urned" and "slow change" evoke again the turning of the seasons, and the reluctance with which Persephone turns and

changes is embodied in the rose that has forgotten death. The archaic diction--"ere," "thence," "cometh"--is less detracting here than elsewhere in Pickthall's work, where it is often disastrous; the damage done here seems to get cancelled out by the way in which sound and image work to such good effect in "doors of hell," "sullen wind," and "Lethe's level stream."

The last two verses are remarkably effective in their evocation of Persephone's deteriorating memory:

Why should I grieve when grief is overpast?
 Why should I sorrow when I may forget?
 The shepherds' horns are crying about the folds,
 The east is clear and yellow as daffodils,
 Dread Daffodils--

The brightest flower o' the fields.
 I gathered them in Enna, O, my lord.
 Do the doors yawn and their dim warders wait?

What was this earth-born memory I would hold?
 Almost I have forgotten. Lord, I see
 Before, the vast gray suburbs of the dead;
 Behind, the golden loneliness of the woods,
 A stir of wandering birds, and in the brake
 A small brown faun who follows me and weeps.

(ll. 26-29)

Interestingly, the tempo picks up as Persephone questions her state of mind. The cadences change and change again, suggesting the disruption of thought process. The "Dread daffodils," an allusion to the wondrous bloom of the narcissus which had enticed her to stray too far from Demeter--an error which resulted in her original abduction by Pluto--now signal the dreaded reunion with the god of death. The poem climaxes in "the vast gray suburbs of the dead," the most chilling and

powerful image in the poem. The last line is unfortunate: the weeping faun is too precious an image to end an otherwise quite powerful piece; the weakness of this line suggests a backing off, as if Pickthall is afraid of coming into poetic power.

Elsewhere in Pickthall's nature poetry the merging of persona and landscape almost always confuses the issue; in "Persephone" it is the issue. The fatality and unconsciousness which women poets in the Romantic tradition must struggle against is, in the Demeter-Persephone myth, central to the plot. Further, this merging process in Pickthall's poem is under tight, conscious control. But it is Persephone's loss of memory which is the most terrifying aspect of the poem, for to lose one's memory is to lose one's identity, and it is this loss of identity which makes the poem a kind of signature piece for Pickthall as a poet.

As the myth of female experience in general and female literary identity in particular, the story of Demeter and Persephone as it emerges in women's writing as far back as Mary Shelley's Proserpine⁴⁶ can be seen in terms of what Harold Bloom calls a "revisionary swerve"⁴⁷ away from the way in which male writers have represented the myth. For example, although Marjorie Pickthall studied and admired Swinburne's "Hymn to Proserpine" and "The Garden of Proserpine," the Persephone figure as she appears in "Persephone Returning to Hades" and "The Little Fauns to Proserpine" is radically different from

Swinburne's imposing Queen of Hell. As her correspondence with Helen Coleman reveals, Pickthall responded to the erotic pagan overtones of "The Hymn to Proserpine"--it would have been difficult not to, given her increasing dissatisfaction with repressive Protestantism.⁴⁸ Further, in much of her work she imitated Swinburne's florid diction, his elaborate use of assonance and alliteration, and the hypnotic cadences of his verse, but none of these Swinburnian affectations is present in her Persephone poems. Swinburne's Proserpine is, according to Nina Auerbach, one figure in the poet's "divine-demonic pantheon of goddesses and personifications," who represent "a crystallization of a myth central to the Victorian imagination": the myth of woman as angel-demon who effects the marriage of heaven and hell.⁴⁹ She is an incarnation of his "incestuously biting, loving sea-mother" who is the "embodiment of a transcendent new/old power reclaiming rule over the world" (Auerbach 105). She and her Swinburnian avatars, Venus, Faustine, and Dolores, perform a "demonic assault on conventional male gods" such as the "pale Galilean" in "Hymn to Proserpine." "Swinburne equates the loving pain his women inflict with the death of worn-out gods and the advent of a new dispensation superior in its authority because it is also an ancient one."

Conversely, Pickthall's Persephone is neither queen nor mother, nor does she possess divine or demonic powers. She is

daughter and helpless victim whose insubstantiality is conveyed in her vanishing form in "Persephone Returning to Hades." Similarly, in "The Little Fauns to Proserpine" (CP 180) she is not even present in the poem except in the memories of the creatures who track her vanishing footsteps. Finally, there are no engaging erotic overtones in Persephone's anticipation of her imminent fate; indeed, she dreads the reenactment of her initial sexual encounter with the lord of hell. While her admiration for Swinburne's work--especially his Proserpine poems--may well have inspired Pickthall to rework some of his themes, and while she imitated Swinburne almost as obsessively as she did Masefield and Yeats, it is entirely possible that her Persephone, like that of many women writers, is evidence that (as Gilbert and Gubar describe it) she "both participated in and . . . 'swerved' from the central sequences of male literary history, enacting a uniquely female process of revision and redefinition. . . ." (MA 73).

During the last eight years of her life, Pickthall wrote several nature lyrics and other short pieces which, while they differ in poetic intent--sometimes radically--reiterate on some level the process of losing her identity in the landscapes they depict. Some of these poems remain unfocused and vaguely recall her heavily derivative verse in which the voice of the model takes over and removes Pickthall from the poem. These poems are

nevertheless instructive because they demonstrate the enormous difficulties confronting the woman poet who attempts to enter the poetic tradition through the Romantic conventions of the dominant male tradition. But a few of these poems move beyond Pickthall's failure to establish poetic identity in terms of those conventions; these poems turn woman's place as defined by the conventions into a poetic fiction, or mask. That is to say, their poetic intent is to articulate the literary experience of being identified with Mother Nature--with inarticulateness and with fatality.

"For all literary artists," write Gilbert and Gubar, "self-definition necessarily precedes self-assertion: the creative 'I AM' cannot be uttered if the 'I' knows not what it is" (17). The "I" in Pickthall's "Inheritance" knows what it is in terms of the conventions which define it:

Desolate strange sleep and wild
 Came on me while yet a child;
 I, before I tasted tears,
 Knew the grief of all the years.

I, before I fronted pain,
 Felt creation writhe and strain,
 Sending ancient terror through,
 My small pulses, sweet and new.

I, before I learned how time
 Robs all summers at their prime,
 I, few seasons gone from birth,
 Felt my body change to earth. (CP 147)

It would be difficult to deny the "I" in this poem; the word is repeated seven times. It is no coincidence that the thrice

repeated phrase "I, before I" is a poetic rendering of "self-definition" before "self-assertion." What this poem is saying is that the poet, having found out how her self is defined, is now, for better or worse, asserting that self. It is, of course, a poetic or fictive self--the self as defined by the conventions of the tradition in which she has been trying to locate herself all her poetic life. But personal experience in the wider sense is also integrated here, for the poem, written within five years of Pickthall's death, looks back to the period in her life in which she became defined by the culture in which she was raised. This period was indeed a period--her first one--for this is a poem inspired by the newly awakened memory of the poet's first menstruation. Mensus is a woman's "Inheritance" from her mother--and from Mother Nature.

"Desolate strange sleep and wild" is a powerful evocation of the altered state of consciousness which the onset of mensus brings: with the sudden appearance of strange and unstaunchable blood comes dizzying insight into "the grief of all the years" which lie ahead: the tears to be tasted, the pain to be confronted as one's biological destiny unfolds. Acceptance of that blood means "the acceptance of nature and biology's supremacy," the notion which Phyllis Chesler sees at the heart of the Demeter-Persephone myth. Indeed, this poem reunites Persephone with Demeter as the speaker identifies her fate as her mother's own: the memory lost in "Persephone Returning to Hades" is here

restored. It is by way of this journey back through memory that the poet connects with an understanding of both her cultural and literary identity. These stanzas clearly articulate what it is to be female in patriarchal culture and a female poet in a patriarchal tradition: to be female is to be identified with nature, to feel one's "body change to earth"; it is to be identified with fatality and decay, to learn that time is one's greatest adversary. For time--to borrow horticultural terms used to describe the decaying effects of time upon woman--robs her of her "bloom" and "ripens" her to maturity. In short, time erodes her sexual attractiveness, her only power in patriarchal culture.

The most significant thing about "Inheritance" is that, like much of Emily Dickinson's poetry, it is not primarily a landscape poem; communion with nature is not its poetic intention, although it is clearly informed by the poet's experience of that convention. Its primary intention is not to get in touch with nature as a way of getting in touch with the poetic self but rather to get in touch with the poetic self by focusing directly on the "I." Consequently the convention is thrown into reverse field: the poet half of this poet/nature configuration comes to the forefront; the nature half recedes. The poet does not lose herself in nature but rather finds herself there. And finding herself there means reconnecting with her long matrilineal heritage; it is a terrifying

experience:

I, before I fronted pain,
Felt creation writhe and strain,
Sending ancient terror through,
My small pulses, sweet and new.

Who she is derives from an "ancient" source--from the first woman ever to hand down this terrifying "Inheritance," this germ of "dis-ease," to a daughter. Within the analytical framework in which we are operating here, that first woman is Mother Nature herself, or her Christian avatar, Eve.

To mention "Inheritance" in the same breath with Emily Dickinson is to imply its success. And it is without doubt a successful poem. Enclosed within Pickthall's canon, surrounded by failure after failure, it has never been recognized for the success it is. Not only does it integrate female experience and art and establish poetic identity, it is also technically excellent; it is better even than "Persephone Returning to Hades." It contains no pathetic fallacy, no overripe diction, no archaic language, no awkward syntactical inversions. The presence of a strong poetic voice is directly related to the absence of these irritating affectations; when Pickthall's poetic mask is securely in place, she has no need of them.

"Love Unfound" was written one year later than "Inheritance" but unlike that poem it focuses primarily on landscape and as a result risks falling into the trap laid for

the poet by the Romantic tradition governing nature poetry. Nevertheless, the poem does seem to throw the convention into some kind of reverse field in that the convention does not exploit the poet, the poet exploits the convention. The poem is an intense search for a lost female ancestor and, as the title suggests, the search fails; in this way it dramatizes both the poet's literary experience and female experience in the larger sense. But just how conscious this exploitation is, is difficult to determine because it is impossible to know the terms in which Pickthall perceived her identity dilemma; all we have to go on is the fact that she had perceived it a year earlier when she wrote "Inheritance." Here is "Love Unfound":

She was earth before earth gave
 Me a heart to miss her;
 Stars and summers were her grave,
 Any rains might kiss her;
 Wild sweet ways love would not cross
 Curbed in sorrels and green moss.

She's been dust a hundred springs;
 Still her face comes glancing
 Out of glimmering water-rings
 Where the gnats are dancing;
 Loosed is she in lilac flowers,
 Lost in bird-songs and still hours.

If I'd lived when kings were great,--
 Greater I than any,--
 I'd have sold my olden state
 For a silver penny,
 Just to find her, just to keep,
 Just to kiss her eyes asleep. (CP 126)

Although the poet avoids use of her characteristic affectations, the poem is not fully articulated, which suggests that she is

not entirely conscious of what she is trying to say. The poem operates on several levels, not the least of which is the biographical: it is one of the many short lyrics written after 1910, in which she appears to be expressing the loss of her mother, Lizzie Pickthall. But text and subtext are not fully integrated; this suggests that poetic intent is being sabotaged by unconscious intent. The experience of reading the poem is that of seeing double, of seeing two seemingly identical images out of focus with one another.

What appears to be the subtext of "Love Unfound" is the more interesting of the two images. The poem is subtitled "A Portrait," but clearly the image of this dead female ancestor is not a painted portrait but a landscape painting. A hundred years after her disappearance from memory, traces of her image are still recognizable in the landscape which has absorbed her. Perhaps the glimpse of this foremother's image which the poet catches in the rippled pool is a reflection of the poet's own face. As the last stanza suggests, even if the poet could exchange her female powerlessness for the male power to change the world, she could still not reclaim her lost matrilineal heritage. Indeed, so irrevocably lost is the identity of this ancestor that it is beyond even the highest order of male power to recover it.

A desire to prevent this kind of female disappearance is expressed in the second of "Two Lyrics," another of the poems

inspired by the death of Lizzie Pickthall:

How looked she when she breathed good-bye?
 Most like a bird, whose breast
 Across a thousand wastes of sky
 Is constant to her nest.

How looked she when she turned away?
 Most as a spirit might,
 Who shared our sorrow for a day
 Yet kept her home in sight.

O, looked she sad or seemed she glad?
 Most like a star, that knows
 Only the loveliness it had,
 The light to which it goes. (CP 129)

This catechizing process has an almost incantatory quality; it suggests a kind of ritual in which the dead woman becomes fixed in the memory of the living through her association with a series of images of transcendence and permanence. All of the objects with which she is identified seem to rise above the earth, to resist gravity, to transcend the grave which has the power to obliterate. This lyric is modelled closely on Christina Rossetti's "Gone Before":

She was most like a rose when it flushes rarest,
 She was most like a lily when it blows fairest,
 She was most like a violet sweetest on the bank:
 Now she's only like the snow, cold and blank,
 After the sun sank.⁵⁰

Although these lines identify the woman with landscape images, the rest of the poem--which is a long one--images her transcending heavenward. What Pickthall seems to have done is compress the Rossetti poem into three short stanzas.

However, the relationship between Rossetti and Pickthall goes beyond mere imitation. As poems like "Persephone" and "Love Unfound" suggest, Mother Nature's womb is also a tomb, and for the female poet, identified as she is with non-transcendence and fatality, death is essentially a female space. This would seem to account for the fact that, as in Rossetti's work, Pickthall's most distinctive voice emanates from the grave. Paradoxically, it is this most articulate voice which communicates her sense of herself as the silenced woman and the silenced poet:

I chose the place where I would rest
 When death should come to claim me,
 With the red-rose roots to wrap my breast
 And a quiet stone to name me.

But I am laid on a northern steep
 With the roaring tides below me,
 And only the frosts to bind my sleep,
 And only the winds to know me. ("Exile," CP 77)

Unlike "The Sleep-Seekers," in which the poetic voice seems to emanate from two places at once, there is no confusion about where the speaker stands--or rather lies--in "Exile." The poem post-dates "Inheritance" by three years and can be seen as its companion piece. "Exile," however, is not as strong as the earlier poem, suggesting perhaps that the terror of self-discovery that informs "Inheritance" had worn off. What is significant about this poem is that it addresses the question of

choice. This speaker's words are an implicit reproach to those who have robbed her of the power of choice. Her request to be buried under a headstone which would identify her to future generations has fallen on deaf ears, for she lies in a remote and inaccessible place in an unmarked grave. This erasure, or "Exile," from civilization's memory recalls "Love Unfound." The accuracy of the personal intuition operating behind this poetic/death mask allows the poem to recreate itself anew each time it is read. Whatever it meant to the poet in 1920, the personal message her poetic voice articulates here speaks to our contemporary understanding of the universal female experience of having no readily accessible history.

It is in keeping with the woman poet's Romantic literary experience that only "the winds"--that is to say, nature knows the speaker in "Exile." This disappearance is reiterated in "Departure," where "only the dreaming earth" knows the poem's vanished female figure:

She went. She left no trace to find her
 No word with winds or flower,
 No rose, no rose let fall behind her
 That lasted but an hour.

She went. She left no following voices,
 No sign with star or stream,
 Yet still the dreaming earth rejoices
 It knew her from a dream. (CP 200)

This poem was written in 1915, two years previous to "Inheritance," and it has a kind of "pre-conscious" feel about

it. Given that the female figure it depicts is tragically lost to human history and her identity erased through merger with nature, the word "rejoices" is somewhat incongruous; here, once again, is a poem slightly out of focus. But negation, made explicit through the six-fold repetition of the word "no," makes it difficult to deny that the poetic intention is to emphasize the unequivocal silencing of this female figure. Whatever depths of the unconscious it may emanate from, the universal fear of poets--"to leave no following voices"--is undeniably present in the poem. Only the most insecure of poets could be as prolific as Pickthall and yet so fearful of leaving "No word."

The images of forgotten woman and inarticulate poet are strongest in "Theano," which was written in the same year as "Inheritance":

All you who spared lost loveliness a tear,
 All you who gave some grief to beauty fled,
 Go your ways singing. Grief is ended where
 Theano laid her head.

She was so merry. Winter did her wrong.
 She was so young. Spring proved to her unkind.
 It loosed her like a bird without a song,
 A flower upon the wind.

Here in the shadow and the heat I stray,
 Spring's hand in mine, her music round me flung,
 Seeking the bird that fled me yesterday
 With all her songs unsung. (CP 199)

Theano is one of those minor figures in classical mythology

whose identity is so fragmented and scattered throughout the myths that it can be said of her that she has no identity at all. Not much more is known of her than what the poet says here in lines 5 and 6. Indeed, as this poem seems to suggest, Theano is such a shadowy figure that her life must go unsung, her death ungrieved; she is "loosed . . . like a bird without a song." The poet sums up Theano's life in four short, almost monosyllabic statements. It is all she can do, for it seems that spring has been as unkind to her as it was to Theano: the poet strays through "the shadow and the heat" in search of her lost muse; like Theano it has disappeared "With all her songs unsung."

In "Thoughts," another poem from this period which uses the poetry-as-birdsong convention, Pickthall possesses nature rather than allowing nature to possess her. This poem also demonstrates a unique way of transforming the muse convention to allow the poet her femaleness:

I gave my thoughts a golden peach,
A silver citron tree;
They clustered dumbly out of reach
And would not sing for me.

I built my thoughts a roof of rush,
A little byre beside;
They left my music to the thrush
And flew at eveningtide.

I went my way and would not care
If they should come or go;
A thousand birds seemed up in air,
My thoughts were singing so. (CP 142)

In this metaphorical depiction of the poetic process, nature is objectified, manipulated, and used by the poet to bribe her "thoughts" into "song." There are no sexual overtones in this courting of the implicit muse figure because by replacing the female muse with something as asexual as "thoughts," the poet has eliminated the problem; she need not assume the male task of sexual pursuit. Further, by using metaphorical suggestion to transform those thoughts into birds, she loses none of the effect of personification which enlivens the poet-muse relationship in male poetry.

As the cryptic nature of a poem like "Theano" suggests, it is silence rather than speech which calls for interpretation. As the daughters of verbally powerless Eve and inarticulate Mother Nature, both Pickthall and her literary foremother, Christina Rossetti, struggled against the silence which was their female inheritance. Like other poets working within the female tradition, they developed their poetry as an art of silence where it has historically been treated as an art of speech.⁵¹ Both Rossetti and Pickthall seem to accept death as a female space, but rather than be condemned to the eternal silence which death implies, they turn silence into a female aesthetic and in doing so exert cultural power by redefining what it is to be interpreted and defined. Their poetry stands

as evidence of their refusal to accept nature (and, by implication, themselves) as inarticulate; by turning silence inside out, they reject the male notion of poet as bard and assume the identity of poet as listener and interpreter of nature's silence. For example, the dead female figure in Rossetti's poem "Rest" is enclosed in the grave and held in "Silence more musical than any song" (293), and the dead persona in "Echo" invites her lover to return to her "in the speaking silence of a dream" (314). Similarly, Pickthall scours a February landscape in search of this speaking, singing silence which is Mother Nature's voice:

Where the long grass waves above,
Houses of forgotten love,
Where the west wind does not lift
Webs of summer as they drift,
By the wayside silence sings
To the tune of leaves and wings.

Here where only light is laid,
Silver, down the silver glade;
Here where treads no shepherd wind
With his fleece of clouds behind--
Underneath the dreaming deeps,
In the silence, Silence sleeps. ("February," CP 59)

This poem is informed by the positive power of the negative statement. Although the "wind does not lift" and there "treads no shepherd," these phrases nevertheless evoke images of lifting wind and treading shepherd. This contradiction is in keeping with the paradox of singing silence. In spite of winter's deathly grip, "silence sings" in this landscape. It is a

silence which only the poet knows how to interpret. As the in utero image of the closing line suggests, this voice of silence emanates from Mother Nature's womb--that paradisaal bower, one of the "Houses of forgotten love," which is the special preserve of the woman poet. "February," like all of Pickthall's nature poems which emphasize fecundity rather than fatality and invest nature with a voice rather than inarticulateness, is a pagan attempt to find an alternate myth of nature. Unlike the Mother Nature of the male Romantics, this eternally creative and articulate mythical figure legitimizes the female poetic voice.⁵²

From the unquiet grave of "The Wife" comes Marjorie Pickthall's strongest and clearest voice:

Living, I had no might
 To make you hear,
 Now, in the inmost night,
 I am so near
 No whisper, falling light,
 Divides us, dear.

Living, I had no claim
 On your great hours.
 Now the thin candle-flame,
 The closing flowers,
 Wed summer with my name,--
 And these are ours.

Your shadow on the dust,
 Strength, and a cry,
 Delight, despair, mistrust,--
 All these am I.
 Dawn, and the far hills thrust
 To a far sky.

Living, I had no skill
 To stay your tread,
 Now all that was my will
 Silence has said.
 We are one for good and ill
 Since I am dead.

(CP 201)

Surely the most silent woman in patriarchal culture is the betrayed wife. This wife's failure to make her unfaithful mate stop and listen to her complaints is really his powerful refusal to stop and hear them. Alive, she is the victim of this total censorship; dead, she is a powerful reproach. Merged with the summer, the dawn, the hills, and the sky, this dead woman has absorbed the power of nature's silent speech. Through the eloquent silence of death she can finally exert the force of her will. Her sinister silence will forever haunt his shadow, his strength, the sound of his own voice, his delight, despair, and mistrust. The penultimate line mocks their empty marriage vow, "till death do us part," for only her death has the power to make them "one for good and ill." By imposing her deathly presence on his consciousness she forces him to acknowledge the power which nature has over him and thus undermines the male illusion of transcendence. The narrowness of the grave, like the narrowness of her life, is reflected in the shape of the poem on the page. But unlike her empty marriage, this poem is densely crowded with language. It is a solid upright coffin of a poem: nothing opposes the force of its vertical gravity; the eye is convinced it can stand.⁵³

"The Wife" was written in 1918, when Pickthall was still in England. It was the following year that she wrote to Helen Coleman, lashing out at gender conventions and the "superficial femininity" which had held her back from experience. As we have already seen, this preoccupation with the female condition is reflected in much of the work she wrote in this period.* In 1920, she wrote a group of poems on the theme of female entrapment and her play, The Wood Carver's Wife, which develops this theme further in terms of artistic and religious conventions. The most experimental--and technically the least successful--of these poems is "Modern Endymion." Whereas in "The Wife," entrapment in the grave releases lucid speech, in "Modern Endymion," entrapment while still alive releases a stream of lunatic babble. Although there is no explicit reference to the gender of the persona in this poem, a gender role reversal is in keeping with the other reversals of the Endymion myth which Pickthall effects. The persona, like so many of Pickthall's personae, gazes out a window and into a garden. She is the inmate of an insane asylum:

They may stifle me all day, but by night I am free,
 Waiting for the goddess to climb the walnut tree
 In the gray asylum grounds
 Where the watchman goes his rounds,
 He never sees her mounting, limb by silver limb.
 He never sees her counting the stairway of the stars
 With her bright hair twining,--
 She's just the moon to him,

Shining,--

Shining through my window with the black strong bars.
(CP 88, ll. 21-30)

Her only release from stifling confinement behind "black strong bars" comes at night, when the moon inspires her fantasy of freedom. The sense of freedom she experiences arises out of her knowledge that her jailers cannot violate her fantasy. The doctor may imprison her body,

But he can't touch me.

He can't find her, he can't feel her, he can't see,
see, see

Her climbing to my window by the silver fruited tree.
(ll. 47-50)

What is most striking here is the opposition of male jailer and female agent of escape; it raises questions about Pickthall's revision of the Endymion myth. In the myth, Endymion is a kind of "feminized" figure in that he has been rendered powerless, silent, and immobile by his powerful oppressor. The moon goddess Selene has virtually killed him into a beautiful art object; he no longer exists for himself but for Selene's pleasure. In addition to the possible allusion to Endymion's feminization, the role reversals in Pickthall's poem also support a reading of the speaker as female: the gender of the oppressor is reversed from female to male; the role of the goddess is reversed from oppressor to liberator; and Endymion's silence is turned into speech. This last reversal recalls "A Mother in Egypt" and "Persephone Returning to Hades," and

repeats yet again Pickthall's preoccupation with speaking herself into existence.

Even Pickthall's love poetry alludes to a woman's need for control and freedom, especially from men who would entrap her sexually. Here, for example, is "Flower of Night":

Wait till the moonlight grows
 More pure, more deep, more still
 On the laurel leaf and the rose;
 Then have your will.

Leave me a little space
 To the dark wind and the dew;
 Then, with the light on your face,
 Call me to you.

Leave me alone an hour
 With the blown grass and the foam;
 Then, when the night's in flower,
 Bid me come home. (CP 124)

In keeping with Pickthall's Victorian sensibilities, the sexual allusions in this poem are made with the utmost delicacy. There is an opposition here between "home" and the "little space" the speaker needs in which to exercise her autonomy. The poem is conventional in its use of "light" and "dark" to suggest the opposition of male and female and in its evocation of female purity and imminent sexual readiness through the symbol of the flower. Entrapment notwithstanding, the poet seems to understand the need for a room of one's own. The theme is reiterated in "Solitude," where in order to recharge her creative energies the poet must withdraw from "friends" into the "lovely loneliness" that "drench[es] the winter's narrow

room" (CP 150).

Just what can happen when that "little space"--be it one's own room or one's own womb--is violated, is expressed in "The Princess in the Tower":

I was happier up in the room
At the head of the long blue stair
Than here in the garden's gloom
With roses to wear.

When stars my window were riming
I would lean out over the snow
And hear him climbing, climbing
A long way below.

But I was happy and lonely
As the heart of a mountain pool,
With stars and shadows only
Made beautiful.

Then he came. He said, "How chill is
This height I have won!
I will love you among the lilies,
And ride ere the sun."

So I followed him into the night
A long way down.
I would I were back on the height,
With dawn for a crown.

(CP 121)

Like the Lady of Shalott, this princess is "happy" in her tower, but her isolation, however protective, is also "lonely." Her state of sexual inviolation is perceived by her invading lover as "chill." Despite this charge of coolness, she agrees to forfeit her crowning "dawn" of virginity for the "roses" of sexual experience. But she learns to regret it, for in her surrender to love "among the lilies," she has abandoned the lonely but happy citadel of sexual innocence for the equally

lonely but unhappy abandonment by a lover who rides "ere the sun." As the pun on sun/son might imply, abandonment by the male lover is not merely the romantic notion it is in Tennyson's poem, where the Lady dies poetically of a broken heart; the threat of abandonment by the father of one's child hangs over this poem like a pall.

The anger and fear which simmer below the surface of such poems as "The Wife," "Modern Endymion," "The Chosen," "Flower of Night," and "The Princess in the Tower" are brought to a full boil in Marjorie Pickthall's verse drama The Wood Carver's Wife. Here, genre and setting become strategies for getting that fear and anger past both the external and the internal censors. Set in New France, the play is cast in the form of alternating sections of traditional blank-verse narrative and lyric. The remoteness of time and place and the florid embellishments of her style diverted attention from the fact that, as critic W.E. Collin recognized twenty-seven years later, The Wood Carver's Wife was "the drama of [the poet's] own soul."⁵⁴ While maintaining the image of herself as "Apart and aloof" from "the jar and fret of this present evil world," as Archibald MacMechan was soon to describe her,⁵⁵ and while meeting J.D. Logan's demands for "the chaste speech, lovely imagery, dulcet music, and exquisite emotion which constitute true poetry," Pickthall encoded in the subtext of this play her sense of herself as a

woman trapped in the gender conventions of her day and a poet martyred to the artistic conventions and expectations which had alienated her from her own experience and pointlessly consumed her creative energies. The play also expresses the conflict between her need to come to terms with the dictates of her Christian faith and her desire to express her spirituality in freer terms.

Pickthall created in Jean, the wood carver, not only a sadistic husband who demands total submission from his young and beautiful wife: as demonstrated by Jean's success in turning Dorette literally into an art object and religious icon, he is also the embodiment of an artistic and religious aesthetic which feeds on female sacrifice. Dorette is a woman whose Christian guilt robs her of the courage necessary to escape the fate foreordained by a misogynistic God. Entrapped in a loveless marriage, she reaches out to a man who seems to offer the sexual and emotional freedom she craves, but he, too, embodies the male pride and aggression which are so fatal to female aspirations.

The violence of conflicting passions in The Wood Carver's Wife is remarkably unlike anything else Pickthall ever wrote. The play is brutal in its evocation of male sadism and the female masochism upon which it feeds. The theme of jealousy and possessiveness is implicit from the start. In the opening lines Jean, who is carving a Madonna out of red cedar, sings to his model Dorette while she sits for him:

Hard in the frost and the snow,
 The cedar must have known
 In his red, deep fibred heart,
 A hundred winters ago,
 I should love and carve you so.
 And the knowledge must have beat
 From his root to his height like the mid-March heat
 When the wild geese cry from the cloud and the sleet,
 And the black-birch buds are grown.
 Then, were you then a part
 Of the vast slow life of the tree?
 Did you rise with the sap of his spring?
 Did you stoop like a star to his boughs?
 Did you nest in his soul and sing,
 A silver thrush in a shadowy house,
 As now, beloved, to me? (CP 215-6)

The sharply defined sexual imagery emphasizes Jean's extreme possessiveness. In a fit of jealousy he suspects that even the tree from which his cedar is cut is a rival for Dorette's sexual attention. This opening passage features the opposing images which run like a leitmotiv of violence through the play: the red colour of the cedar wood prefigures the later images of fire and blood associated with Christianity and Jean's sadistic fantasies; opposed to this is the bower image of Dorette as "A silver thrush in a shadowy house." As these images develop and expand they convey the increasingly intense conflict between Dorette's martyrdom to art and religion and her desire for escape into spiritual refuge.

Although Dorette's beauty has the power to arouse Jean's jealous anger against her, it is also the only power she has, and she fears "Time's own graver" who has the power to erode her sexual attractiveness:

. . . old age is solitary.
 A little stretching out of hands, a little
 Breathing on ashes, and even regret is gone.
 I tell you, I have seen old people here
 As not in Picardy. The milk-dry woman
 Crouching above her death-fire in the snow,
 The old man biting on a salted skin,--
 Their patience and the forest--O, I fear
 Age more than anything. (216)

Fear of time as one's greatest adversary is responsible for this starkly powerful image of old age. Dorette's fear is understandable, for her brief periods of escape from Jean are dependent upon her continued sexual attractiveness to her lover, De Lotbinière.

Despite her fear of ageing, Dorette is "yet too young" to be an ideal model for the Virgin of Jean's Pietà. "What do I lack?" she asks. Jean answers:

Why, the cold barren look on nothingness,
 The grief that cannot weep, for if it could
 It would be less grief. The inconsolable
 Dumb apprehension, the doubt that asks for ever
 "Is it so?" of Love and hears the answer "Yea," For
 ever. . . .
 I would grieve you if I could
 To make my Mary perfect. (217)

Jean's sadistic tendencies, which are later realized when he learns of Dorette's infidelity, are already apparent here in his desire to "grieve" her in the service of his art. "You are hard," Dorette answers, "You love your cold woods more than loveliness / Of look and touch." She is right, for in his relentless pursuit of artistic perfection he denies her humanity

and forces her to conform to his ideal of womanhood. While he is jealously possessive of Dorette as a sexual object, his real affection is for the idealized image of her which he is attempting to carve into the face of his Virgin.

Unlike Dorette, who in the flesh haunts Jean with a threat of sexual betrayal, his wooden duplicate of her is entirely under his control:

[I shall go] and see
 The shrine prepared to put my Lady in. . .
 You or the Virgin Mother? You, I think.
 They'll see you there between the candle flames
 A hundred years. The lads will worship you
 And maids with innocent eyes will wonder at you.
 Your beauty will lift many souls to God. (220)

In his confusion of Dorette with his sculpture Jean betrays his desire to entrap her in the enclosure prepared for his Pietà, and this desire is evidence of the threat her beauty poses. She is to become a live offering, a female sacrificed on the altar of a religion whose chief female saint is, in her martyrdom as well as her purity, the model for all Christian women. Martyred "between the candle flames," Dorette's beauty becomes the agent of transcendence not only for Christian souls but also for Jean, who experiences religious ecstasy in artistic perfection.

Dorette's only respite from Jean's oppression are her secret rendezvous with Lotbinière. But Lotbinière is grown tired of clandestine love. "Dark hours, dark deeds, and little darkling ways," he tells Dorette, are "A dirty smoke across the flame of

love" (222):

When will you to the forest,
 My dear wild dove? I saw red lilies there
 Burning in sun-bleached grass, and gentians spread
 Beside a little pool, less blue than he,
 The great kingfisher poised on the dead bough.
 Black squirrels chirred against the quarreling jays,
 There came a flight of emerald hummingbirds,
 While through the wind-swayed walls of reed and vine
 Laced the quick dragonflies. Sweet, will you come?
 (224-5)

This is a pagan call to a love free from the oppressive religious conventions which have turned Dorette into an object of Jean's sadistic pleasure. However, although her encounters with her lover "seemed no sin among the idle leaves," here in Jean's house she is overcome with guilt and shame. Perhaps she is also cautioned by the ominous tone created by "red lilies . . . / Burning in sun-bleached grass," the "dead bough," the "quarreling jays," and the entrapment suggested by "walls" and "Laced." Indeed, the burning red lilies recall Jean's cruel fantasies and prefigure even crueller ones.

Dorette is torn between her desire to respond to her lover's pagan call and her Christian guilt over her marital infidelity. By way of answer to Lotbinière's invitation she turns to the Virgin carved in her own image:

O Mother, hide me from his eyes.
 Build from your sorrowing hands a little ark
 Where that storm-driven bird, my soul, may rest
 Till all its heaviness is overpast.
 Where will that be? In the grave? I think not
 there.

Though my slight bones had lain for centuries
 Bound over with the prisoning forest roots,
 And had no other feasting than the rain,
 And known no other music than the wind,
 I should yet go climbing upward every spring,
 When the white throat came and burgeoning grains put
 out
 To look for him. . . (225)

But the Virgin's purity mocks her guilty passion, and Dorette finds her without pity: "she will not hear me." Dorette's image of resurrection into life after death is entirely out of keeping with Christian notions of descent into hell and transcendence into heaven. These Christian assurances are denied her because she is imbued with the poet's own female sense of herself as continuous with the non-transcendent landscape. Nevertheless, Dorette wants only protection in the bower of the Virgin's love.

Lotbinière, on the other hand, wants confrontation with Jean: "Let him find me here beside you," he says to Dorette in a show of reckless male pride. She answers:

 If he does
 I shall go mad indeed. Have I no claim?
 Have you no pity for me? Is your love
 Of such a bitter substance that my tears
 Can wring no answer from it, nor my hands
 Avail against your pride? See, see I'll kneel,
 Nay, stretch my length before you, in the dust
 Darken the hair you praise, with very death
 Entreat, beseech you, only that you go. (228)

Dorette is as much a powerless victim of Lotbinière's pride as she is of Jean's sadistic love. Unless she gets some control over events, she predicts, she "shall go mad"--as indeed she

does at the end of the play.

When Jean learns of his wife's infidelity, his cruelty intensifies. As he approaches her while she kneels before the Pietà, he says:

You should not pray to yourself. You are too
tender,
You irised bubble of the clay, to bear
The weight of worship. Prayer must not be made
To the weak dust the wind cards presently
About the world. Why, even your shadow, she,
Madonna of the reddening cedar wood,
Hath but a troubled momentary power,
A doubtful consolation, and a look
As though the wind would rend her and the fire
Eat to swift ash. No comfort there for sinners.
But you're no sinner, need no comforting
Other than mine. . . . (230)

On behalf of God, in whose image Jean as artist is created, he obliquely condemns Dorette to the everlasting fires of hell as punishment for her sin of adultery. Ironically, these red flames are transformed into images of the blood which supposedly washes away sin:

Blood, blood, and blood again. You shrink? By
blood
Was the world saved, and what's as red as it
Only by blood is turned wool-white again,
What's that to you, white rose? Go, sit you there.
I would make you more Madonna. (231)

Jean roughly orders her back to her chair, promising her that she will "taste / The year-long incense and the holy heat / Of candles":

If you move more, I will bind you to the chair
 As the Indians bind a prisoner to the stake
 Lest they miss one shuddering nerve, one eye-lid's
 droop
 Before the lifting fires. . . . Your pardon, wife.
 Was I so fierce? There's fire in me to-day.
 Would close a burning grip on the whole earth
 And break it into ash. . . Your face, your face.
 (233)

Burning at the heart of this sadistic fantasy is the image of Dorette's face whose beauty mocks Jean and defies all his attempts to imprison it in his fiery carving.

Just as the fire imagery becomes more and more explicitly associated with Dorette's martyrdom to Jean's art, so do the images of blood:

If I should gash this sacred brow I smooth
 Would you break blood? If I should pierce your
 heart
 Would she of the sevenfold sorrows leap and cry?
 I cannot part you. O the grief of it,
 That Mary should sit there with you, and you
 Climb heaven with her. I am grown old with grief
 In a short hour. To work, to work,--your face.
 (234)

Once again, the incantatory phrase "your face" is a powerful reminder that Dorette's features continue to elude Jean's artistic skill.

Dorette calls out in terror to the Saviour for pity, and Jean answers on His behalf:

I am saving you,
 Your soul alive, a brand in a great burning
 Here in my breast. I saw where you will sit

Years in the little forest-scented church,
 And lives like peaceful waves will break in foam
 Of praise before you. Then I turned me home.
 I saw--I saw--O, God, the chisel slipt
 And I have scarred you! I will heal the wound,
 Thus, thus. Be still. I am saving you. Now,
 Shagonas! (235)

In his perverse identification with the gentle Jesus, Jean sees himself as the instrument of Dorette's salvation from sin. He calls out to his Indian servant, Shagonas, whom he has ordered to capture Lotbinière, who has been hiding nearby awaiting confrontation with Jean. Jean drags Dorette to her feet, wrenches her face in the direction of the open door, and forces her to look on as Shagonas fires an arrow through Lotbinière's heart. Shagonas then lays the murdered man's sword across Dorette's knees in imitation of Christ's body which lies across the Virgin's knees in Jean's sculpture:

Your face again. Why, now you are fulfilled.
 You will make my Mary perfect yet, your eyes
 Now, now the barren houses of despair,
 Of the passion that is none, of dread that feels
 No dread for ever, of love that has no love,
 Of death in all but death. O beautiful,
 Stretched, stamped and imaged in the mask of death,
 The crown of such sweet life! . . .

. . . My queen, my rose
 Rent with strange swords, my woman of light worth,
 Behold, you have brought forth death. (236)

"Stretched, stamped and imaged in the mask of death," Dorette is at last killed into art, and her mind begins to disintegrate:

He said--he said there were flowers in the forest,
 White flowers by a blue pool, Our Lady's colours.
 May I go for them? All white, he said,
 White as the Virgin's hands. But you have made her
 Out of red wood with a light of fire upon it.
 Perhaps the flowers turned red. (237)

Triumphant, Jean picks up his tools and sets the finishing touches on his work of art: "Now, now my Virgin is perfect."

Marjorie Pickthall was herself a victim of conventions which kill women into art objects and saints. In her youth she had cultivated reticence, delicacy of feeling, self-diminutization, and perhaps even ill health as feminine ideals. And later, her admirers and mentors--to paraphrase Arthur Stringer--tried to pin wings on her because she wrote winged words. The pressure on her to live up to those angelic wings, as we have seen in her early letters to Helen Coleman, was a constant source of anxiety to her. She chafed under the restrictions of "respectability" and often used humour and--as her imitative poetry has already suggested--the words of other poets to express covertly her desire to break out of those restrictions and into fuller experience of the world. In a letter to Helen, written just before Pickthall left for England, she quotes Swinburne's "Hymn to Proserpine":

"I am sick of singing, the bays burn deep and chafe, I
 am fain
 To rest a little from praise and grievous pleasure and
 pain,

For the gods we know not of, who give us our daily
 breath,
 Behold they are cruel as love or life and lovely as
 death.
 Yea, is not even Apollo, with hair and harpstring of
 gold,
 A better god to follow, a beautiful god to behold?"--

O dear me, I don't think I should have been a
respectable lady if I'd lived in them days! I'd have
 gone off with anyone who looked like that. Daphne was
 a fool-- Don't be shocked, will you? It is all so
 heathenishly lovely, that poem. And so deadly true.⁵⁶

The whole range of restrictions which bound her are expressed here: her tightly constricting public image, her "feminine" respectability, and the religious conventions which made "them days" of paganism seem so "heathenishly lovely." What is "deadly true" in Swinburne's poem was also fatally true of her own life. Killed into the image of the angelic poet, she, too, chafed at "the bays [which] burn deep."

Perhaps one of the reasons Pickthall fled Toronto after her mother's death was to escape the pressure always to be something she was not. In England she apparently tried to turn a new leaf. When Helen, ill and impoverished, wrote to her about needing new clothes in order to keep up appearances, Pickthall wrote back advising her not to be a "Slave to Custom. There is absolutely no 'must' in things except the Musts of being born & dying."⁵⁷ Perhaps she felt that she herself had burned at the stake of appearances and respectability quite long enough. It is entirely possible that the anxiety about appearances which tortured her in her twenties became the rage out of which The

Wood Carver's Wife was born. For Dorette is clearly tortured into living up to the image Jean projects onto her. But whether or not it was the writing of The Wood Carver's Wife which was the cathartic process, by the time she entertained Stringer a few months before her death she was no longer anxious about living up to her angel wings.

Northrop Frye called The Wood Carver's Wife a "melodrama with a lot of Browning in it,"⁵⁸ and E.J. Pratt described it as "the Andrea del Sarto conception presented again as an artistic thesis."⁵⁹ But however much the play owes to Browning, Jean has none of the lethargy of del Sarto, nor does the setting have any of the quiet silver-greyness of Browning's Fiesole. Equally as important as the influence Pratt notes is the influence the play might have had on Pratt himself. He considered it "the finest single accomplishment of her life" and wrote that "it may be taken as the best approach to the evaluation of her gifts.

It was her own favourite and she lavished her resources on it. It exhibits her excellences and her limitations. As poetic drama, with the tonal climaxes of its blank verse sections, with its lovely fashioned phrases and the general harmony of the mood, it secured unstinted praise. And it might be unjust to demand qualities precluded by the form. (Pratt 335)

Perhaps this play inspired the brilliant "tonal climaxes" of Pratt's own Brébeuf and His Bretheren, and perhaps the image-pattern of fire, blood, and martyrdom at the stake which

structures The Wood Carver's Wife was Pratt's model for the similar image-complex in Brebeuf. Both poets were fascinated by martyrdom, although for different reasons,⁶⁰ and both were inspired by the religious zeal of the Jesuits in New France.⁶¹ Northrop Frye had good reason to believe that Pickthall exerted some influence on Pratt,⁶² as did Carl Klinck.⁶³

More important in terms of the present study was Marjorie Pickthall's contribution to the development of the female tradition in Canadian poetry. Not only did the Romantic tradition enjoy a final phase of refinement in her work, the recognition Pickthall earned for this achievement fueled the aspirations of other literary women.* Inspired by Isabella Valancy Crawford and encouraged by Helena Coleman, Pickthall rose to prominence in her own era. She was imitated by Audrey Alexandra Brown and Louise Morey Bowman, and even the young Modernist, Dorothy Livesay, studied her work with great care. Most important, despite the image imposed upon her by her critics and mentors, Marjorie Pickthall nevertheless stood as proof in the eyes of the next generation of female poets that women could indeed earn the respect and attention of a literary establishment dominated by men.

Notes

¹ "The Dinner Party," ts., 1904, LPC 61:2. Dates of composition of all poems cited in this chapter have been taken from the poet's typescripts, handwritten manuscripts, and manuscript books, MPC 1:1-12 and LPC 60-66.

² E.K. Brown, On Canadian Poetry (1943; rpt. Ottawa: Tecumseh, 1973), p. 65.

³ All biographical facts, unless otherwise noted, are from Lorne Pierce, Marjorie Pickthall: A Book of Remembrance (Toronto: Ryerson, 1924).

⁴ Arthur Christie Pickthall, "Biography," ms., LPC 67:17, p. 2.

⁵ Ethel G. Place, letter to Lorne Pierce, 15 March 1927, LPC 68:4, p. 3.

⁶ Veronica Strong-Boag, "Setting the Stage," The Neglected Majority, ed. by Susan Mann Trofimenkoff and Alison Prentice (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977), p. 95.

⁷ Catherine L. Cleverdon, The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada (1950; rpt. Toronto: UTP, 1974), p. 110.

⁸ For example, "poetesses" of the late Victorian Romantic tradition are satirized in F.R. Scott's caustic "The Canadian Authors Meet," Selected Poems (Toronto: OUP, 1966), p. 70. Robert A. Currie is similarly disparaging in his "Don't Blame This on Bliss" (1954), rpt. in Dudek and Gnarowski, pp. 149-50.

⁹ J.D. Logan, "A Decade of Canadian Poetry," Canadian Magazine 40 (March 1913), 344.

10 Logan's fears were not unfounded, for although until recently there has always been considerably more literary activity in Central Canada than in the West, centralist critics and practitioners of the established poetic tradition did eventually have to recognize Vancouver as a centre of literary activity. See, for example, A.M. Stevens, "The Western Movement in Canadian Poetry," Dalhousie Review 5 (July 1925), 210-217. Ten years after the publication of Logan's article, E.P. Frewster became the first president of the Vancouver Poetry Society. Stevens gives Frewster credit for inducing Bliss Carman "to repatriate himself as Bliss Carman, Vancouver, B.C." (213). Charles Roberts became a strong supporter of the Vancouver group which included such poets as Annie Charlotte Dalton, Lionel Stevenson, and Alice M. Winlow. Further, Isabel Ecclestone Mackay, Marjorie Pickthall, and later Audrey Alexandra Brown were all practitioners of the old tradition who spent part or all of their careers on the West Coast. But by this time the question of where the centre of Canadian literary authority should be located was no longer an issue. The more important question was: which literary aesthetic--the established poetic tradition or the new Modernism--was to be the authoritative one? The Canadian Authors' Association, established in 1921, did its best to keep the Victorian Romantic tradition alive and, in fact, at their founding dinner in Montreal made Bliss Carman Canada's unofficial poet laureat and crowned him with laurel.

11 "The Library Table," Canadian Magazine 40 (April 1913), 343-52.

12 J.D. Logan, "The Second Renaissance of Canadian Nativistic Poetry," Canadian Magazine 48 (January 1917), 344.

13 J.D. Robins, "Backgrounds of Future Canadian Poetry," Acta Victoriana 34 (March 1915), 309-317.

14 Archibald MacMechan, Headwaters of Canadian Literature (1924; rpt. McClelland and Stewart, 1974), p. 222.

15 Alfred Gordon, "Comments on Canadian Poetry," Canadian Magazine 49 (June 1917), 187.

16 Pelham Edgar, "Recent Canadian Poets," Ontario Library

Review 5 (1920), 6.

¹⁷ Similarities between Pickthall's work and that of the Canadian male Romantics are discussed in R.E. Rashley, Poetry in Canada (Toronto: Ryerson, 1952), pp. 101-103.

¹⁸ J.D. Logan, Marjorie Pickthall: Her Poetic Genius and Art (Halifax, N.S.: T.C. Allen, 1922), p. 13.

¹⁹ In a letter to Helen Coleman, dated 7 December 1908, Pickthall writes: "I fluctuate between seasons of lurid wealth and extended periods of acute financial depression. Poetry is all very well. But when you are reduced to seventeen cents and some stamps-- I'm fearfully afraid that 'The Pacific Monthly' is going to 'bust' before they pay me for that desert story" (MPC 2:13).

²⁰ Carol Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," Signs 1:1 (Autumn 1975), 1-30. As Marjorie Pickthall's letters and diaries strongly suggest, she inhabited the same kind of female world that Smith-Rosenberg describes as characterized by the continuity absent in the male world of progress; in mother-daughter relationships this continuity is maintained through the daughters' strong identification with their mothers. (9).

²¹ See throughout Diary 1-5, but esp. Diary 3, 12 January 1899: "I had to go to bed again. It seems to be a mixture of grip and collywobbles" (Marjorie Pickthall, Diary 1 and 2, ms., LPC 59:13-14, and Diary 3-5, ms., LPC 60:1-3).

²² Lorne Pierce, Marjorie Pickthall (Toronto: Ryerson, 1943), p. 6. This title is the text of a memorial address delivered at Victoria College, Toronto, 7 April 1943, in commemoration of the twenty-first anniversary of the poet's death. Hereafter cited as "Memorial Address." Pickthall reserved her fiction almost exclusively for male personae; only in her poetry does she make a place for a female subject.

²³ Letter to Arthur C. Pickthall, transcript, n.d. October 1919, LPC 59:8. Transcripts of his letters from his daughter are in Arthur Pickthall's hand.

24 Letter to Arthur C. Pickthall, transcript, n.d. April 1920, LPC 59:8.

25 Letter to Helen Coleman, 5 Jan. 1919, MPC 2:16.

26 The briefness of this visit raises questions about Pickthall's relationship with her father. The terms of Marjorie's will and the handling of her estate over the next nine years make some intriguing but inconclusive suggestions. Marjorie left almost \$4,000 in cash plus a potentially lucrative literary estate. In accordance with the terms of her will a \$2,500 trust fund was established, the income from which was bequeathed to her father. Her aunt, Laura Mallard, was the principal beneficiary: she received the balance of Marjorie's cash plus the income from her literary estate. To her uncle and executor, Frank Mallard, she bequeathed her books, china, jewellery, photographs, paintings, and other personal effects. Through his London attorneys Dr. Mallard instructed that Marjorie's clothing and books be dispatched to Arthur Pickthall and that Mr. Pickthall be permitted to choose either a piece of jewellery or a photograph from among Marjorie's other belongings. Given Mr. Pickthall's regard for his daughter, this seems a bit miserly--unless, of course, he had alienated the Mallards in some offensive way. Dr. Mallard also requested that Mr. Pickthall "act as his daughter's attorney in regard to her literary work" (Sheard, Breach, Wace and Roper [Barristers], letter to Wherry, Zimmerman and Osborne [Barristers], n.d., LPC 59:11). Mr. Pickthall accepted, and between 1922 and 1931 he earned almost \$30,000 for Laura Mallard through the sale of scores of Marjorie's manuscripts. But according to Lorne Pierce, Mr. Pickthall's expenses exceeded his commission, and in 1924, when sales of Marjorie's work had declined severely, Pierce wrote to Laura Mallard in England and suggested she permit Mr. Pickthall to retain "whatever amounts he is able to make on the meagre morsels which he may be able to gather up" (letter to Laura Mallard, 14 May 1924, LPC 59:11). Mr. Pickthall was apparently in such difficult financial straits that Pierce himself was turning over to him the entire proceeds from the sale of A Book of Remembrance. In early 1927, Pierce again found it necessary to apply to Laura Mallard on behalf of Arthur Pickthall. Although no copy of Pierce's letter has survived, Laura Mallard's answer has. It is dated at 23 Hammersmith Bridge Road. W., on Feb: 7th 1927, and says: "Sir[:] I have received your letter dated Jan: 27th. I think its contents are impertinently offensive-- Being Marjorie Pickthall's official biographer hardly entitles you to write to her Mother's sister in such terms, nor to discuss with anyone

knowledge you may think you have obtained of a strictly private family nature-- I am astounded at the very serious slur you cast on her Father's honour & character when you say 'He might have, in spite, mal-administered the estate, he did not for Marjorie's sake'-- We have always found him an honourable Englishman & quite incapable of betraying a trust--he was made Literary Executor at his own earnest request-- We don't at all know why Mr. Pickthall should not have told us he was in such pecuniary straits--he has been in steady work for many years with no outside call on his income-- When I sent him money two two [sic] years ago he said there was no necessity for me to do so-- We feel strongly that Marjorie would have wished her name to be engraved on the Cross she erected to her Mother and we thought her Father would have had that done long ago--he has certainly had sufficient money to do so-- Yours truly. . . ." (LPC 2:9). This letter is suggestive but also frustrating. Clearly whatever "mal-administration" Arthur Pickthall is guilty of, the family has decided to close ranks. If he did not "in spite, mal-administer the estate . . . for Marjorie's sake," then who might he have been attempting to spite? Laura Mallard is incorrect when she says that "he was made Literary Executor at his own earnest request." An undated letter from Dr. Mallard's attorneys to the solicitors in charge of probating Marjorie's will contains the following post-script: "Since writing the above [Dr. Mallard's intention to depute literary executorship] our client has asked us to suggest your asking Mr. Pickthall if he would be willing to act as his daughter's attorney in regard to her literary work, and if not if he would care to nominate someone suitable who would do so" (Sheard, Breach, Wace and Roper). With regard to the cross Laura Mallard refers to, it stands at the head of Marjorie's and her mother's adjoining graves in St. James Cemetary, Toronto, and no inscription is engraved upon it. Although the few letters to her father which remain extant are chatty and warm, they have been transcribed by Arthur Pickthall and the internal evidence suggests that they are censored. Other evidence suggests that she wanted to remain physically distant from him: after her mother's death she wasted little time in earning the money necessary to leave Toronto, and when she returned from her eight-year stay in England she spent only a week with her father before leaving for the West Coast. The trust fund that she instructed be set up for Arthur Pickthall certainly suggests that she did not trust him in the handling of his own financial affairs. Perhaps Arthur Pickthall felt slighted by the terms of her will and used his power as literary executor to carry out some spiteful act against her principal beneficiary. Whatever the answer to this mystery, it seems reasonable to conclude that Marjorie Pickthall was not entirely approving of her father and that she might have had good reason for it.

27 Arthur Stringer, "Wild Poets I've Known," Saturday Night (14 June 1941), 41.

28 Stringer had been active in literary affairs since at least 1914, when his book of poems, Open Water, was published. But unlike the other members of the literary establishment he was forward- rather than backward-looking. Unlike Logan, Pierce, et al, he did not fear innovation; indeed, as his experiments in free verse demonstrated, he welcomed it. But as this article suggests, he also did not share with the other Modernists their contempt for the old tradition.

29 Pacey, after approaching Pickthall's work with some degree of sympathy in 1952 (Creative Writing in Canada [1952; rpt. Toronto: Ryerson, 1967], pp. 98-102), published a considerably less generous article five years later which concentrates almost exclusively on her derivative poems and leaves the impression that her work is of little value and hardly worth reading ("The Poems of Marjorie Pickthall" (1957); rpt. in Essays in Canadian Criticism, 1938-1968 [Toronto: Ryerson, 1969], pp. 145-151).

30 Roy Daniells, "Minor Poets 1880-1920," in Literary History of Canada, ed. by Carl F. Klinck, 2 vols., 2nd. ed. (Toronto and Buffalo: UTP, 1976), I, 441.

31 Qtd. in A. St. John Adcock, "Marjorie Pickthall," Bookman 62:369 (March 1923), 127.

32 Letter to Arthur C. Pickthall, transcript, 21 Feb. 1920, LPC 59:8.

33 Marjorie Pickthall, letter to Alfred Gordon, n.d., rpt. in BR 68.

34 Letter to Helen Coleman, 7 Dec. 1908, MPC 2:13.

35 Letter to Helen Coleman, 28 Feb. 1909, MPC 2:14. If Helena Coleman perceived the discrepancy, she never indicated it. Her Pickthall, as presented in an unpublished article she wrote after the poet's death, is every bit as fictional as the

Victorian heroine of Pierce's Book of Remembrance (Helena Coleman, "M.L.C.P.," MPC 3:36).

36 Letter to Helena Coleman, 12 June 1921, MPC 2:21.

37 At the end of a three-page attempt to explain the Catholic and neo-pagan suggestions in Pickthall's work, Pierce concludes that "It would be safer to say that Marjorie Pickthall grew up in orthodox Protestant Christianity, but found the Christ for herself. . . . Possibly we shall not err if we call her simply a Christian wandervogel" (BR 170). J.D. Logan recognizes in Pickthall "a naturally pagan spirit" but feels constrained to footnote that in using the term "pagan" he "does not mean, of course, atheistic or unchristian" (13). While he admits to a "wistful occupation with the legends, mysteries, and discipline of the Roman Catholic church" in Pickthall's work, he hastens to remind us of "the fact that she died in the Anglican faith" (23-4). Twenty years after her death Lorne Pierce was still arguing the point, except now he had to counter an even more horrendous accusation than Roman Catholicism: "Some have suggested, that [Pickthall's] confusion of symbol and creed anticipated the religious drifting and the intellectual fuzziness of our time, that it foreshadowed the eclipse of rational codes of belief and decency. Marjorie Pickthall was not an orthodox Catholic, although she was plainly fascinated by its rich symbolism, neither was she an orthodox Protestant. Her faith had no consistent theological foundations at all. But it is also true that it transcended the orthodoxies in the only way yet known to us, that is, the way of the true artist, and as such provided a meeting ground for all" ("Memorial Address" 18). Clearly fed up with all this dancing about on the head of a pin, Northrop Frye wrote in response that "it is an example of a very common type of critical fallacy which ascribes to vagueness in [Pickthall's] theoretical grasp of religion what is really, at worst, second-hand Swinburne, and, at best, the requirements of her genre. When she writes of Père Lalemant she is subtle and elusive not because her religion was fuzzy, but because she was writing lyric. . . ." ("Letters in Canada" [1957], rpt in The Bush Garden [Toronto: Anansi, 1971], p. 86).

38 In addition to Pickthall's poems featuring the Virgin Mary in her conventional form, several others reveal the poet's desire to retrieve the lost sacred female presence. See, for example, "Mary Shepherdess" (CP 97); "To a Believer" (CP 159); and "The Shepherd Boy" (CP 61).

39 For an analysis of the phallic and yonic symbolism in Crawford's poetry, see John Owen, "Crawford and the Penetrating Weapon," The Isabella Valancy Crawford Symposium, ed. Frank M. Tierney (Toronto: UTP, 1979), pp. 33-48.

40 Isabella Valancy Crawford, Collected Poems (1905; rpt. Toronto: UTP, 1972), p. 206.

41 Ellen Moers, Literary Women (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976), pp. 244-51.

42 Perhaps the most important difference between the ways in which male and female writers interpret and utilize the Demeter-Persephone myth is the fact that, unlike most women, men do not relate to it as a myth of identity. W.E. Messenger and W.H. New have noted that "the story of Odysseus's wanderings is a myth of male experience--of heroism, freedom, male wish-fulfillment--and that female experience is more cogently represented by the myth of Demeter and Persephone--of motherhood, creativity, purity, but also of susceptibility to male attack" (Afterword, A Twentieth-Century Anthology: Essays, Stories, and Poems [Scarborough, Ont.: Prentice-Hall, 1984], p. 601). Grace Stewart (The New Mythos: The Novel of the Artist as Heroine 1977-1977 [Brattleboro, Vermont: Eden Press, 1979]) also reviews male and female interpretations of the myth as they appear in literary criticism, psychoanalytic theory, and women's fiction. For men, Stewart suggests, the rape of Persephone has centrality, whereas for women the mother-daughter relationship is primary. Carl Jung seems to be the male exception to this general rule: Stewart notes that "Jung believed that the celebration [of the Eleusinian mysteries] was entirely female; whereas other myths might be male fantasies or anima projections, these rituals, he thought, were alien to man. 'In fact,' he wrote, 'the psychology of the Demeter cult has all the features of a matriarchal order of society, where the man is an indispensable but on the whole disturbing factor.'" But male literary critics tend not to concur: "[Theorist C.] Kerenyi, among others, disagreed with Jung, for he believed that men took part in these ceremonies and that the happy marriage of the ravished maiden was the prototype of all marriages" (46). In this regard Stewart quotes Philip Wheelwright's observations of the myth in male literature: "Evidently . . . rape symbolizes one of the most important and emotionally arresting 'passages' in human experience--the passage from the pure state of virginity through the shock of violation and attaining to the happy issue of periodic motherhood. Demeter's descent into Hades connects symbolically the rape archetype with the even

more universal archetype of death and life in alternation." In response to this statement, Stewart writes: "Wheelwright's masculine bias allows him to ignore the horrendous psychological effect of rape on the victim and on society, to overlook the fact that virgins are not the only victims of rape, to identify rape as an act perpetuated only on women, to equate death and rape (perhaps a fate worse than . . .), and to connect a happy issue of 'periodic motherhood' with such violence, as though, once initiated, women would delight in more of the same" (47-8). By contrast, women focus on the mother-daughter relationship in the myth: "Demeter is both the Terrible and the Good Mother, a split we all recognize in our own mothers. The personification of fecundity, nurturance, and loving concern, she also is powerfully awesome, persevering in her desire to maintain control over her offspring, vengeful, and able to withhold sustenance. Though not completely successful, Demeter challenges the patriarchal order on behalf of her daughter" (46). Further, women tend to focus on the way in which the myth "synthesizes the mother/daughter cathexis and the mysteries related to that relationship." Stewart therefore "label[s] the main figures in the myth Demeter/Persephone because the two blur, just as the boundaries between mother and child fade in each woman" (45). Finally, for some male writers (Swinburne, for example), Persephone is, like Demeter, a figure of divine and sometimes demonic power, whereas for most women she is mute and powerless to determine her own fate (see pp. 83-85 of the present study).

⁴³ Grace Stewart, "Mother, Daughter, and the Birth of the Female Artist," Women's Studies 6:2 (1979). For corroborating accounts of the way in which the myth informs the female imagination, see: Phyllis Chesler, "Heroines and Madness," Women and Madness (1972; New York: Doubleday, 1973), pp. 25-31; Lois Gotlieb and Wendy Keitner, "Demeter's Daughters: The Mother-Daughter Motif in Fiction by Canadian Women," Atlantis 3:2 (Fall 1977), 130-141; Susan Gubar, "Mother Maiden and the Marriage of Death: Women Writers and an Ancient Myth," Women's Studies 6 (1979), 301-315; Marianne Hirsch, "Mothers and Daughters," Signs 7:1 (1981), 200-222; Diana M.A. Relke, "Double Voice, Single Vision: A Feminist Reading of Margaret Atwood's The Journals of Susanna Moodie," Atlantis 9:1 (Autumn 1983), 35-48; and Adrienne Rich, "Motherhood and Daughterhood," Of Woman Born (1976; rpt. New York: Bantam, 1977), pp. 219-253. Several of these authors--most notably Grace Stewart--directly or indirectly utilize the psychoanalytic theory of Nancy Chodorow (The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender [Berkeley, Calif.: UCP, 1978] and/or the work of psychologist Dorothy Dinnerstein (The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise [New York: Harper

Colophon, 1976]), both of which proceed from the object-relations theory of personality development.

44 The search for artistic identity for which the Demeter-Persephone myth provides the metaphor need not necessarily end in either death or identity erasure. Mediation between these two extremes, as in the more successful of the novels Stewart examines and in Dorothy Livesay's poetry, carries the potential for escape from the inevitable opposition of femaleness and artistic creativity.

45 Ellen Moers writes that "little" is the most overworked word in the female canon. It derives from women's sense of themselves as little and insignificant (Moers 224).

46 For an analysis of Shelley's use of the myth in her Proserpine, see Gubar, "Mother, Maiden and the Marriage of Death," pp. 301-4.

47 Harold Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence (New York: Oxford UP, 1973), p. 14.

48 In a letter to Helen Coleman, dated 4 August 1910, Pickthall quotes a passage from the opening of "Hymn to Proserpine" and then writes: "O dear me, I don't think I should have been a respectable lady in them days! I'd have gone off with anyone who looked like [Apollo]. Daphne was a fool--" (MPC 2:15). This passage can be read as a longing for sexual experience inspired by the erotic overtones of Swinburne's poem. See p. 116 of the present study for a fuller analysis of this letter.

49 Nina Auerbach, Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1982), p. 104. All further references to this title appear parenthetically in the text.

50 Christina Georgina Rossetti, Poetical Works, ed. William Michael Rossetti (1904; rpt. London: Macmillan, 1906), p. 325. All further references to this title appear parenthetically in the text.

51 See Jeanne Kammer's theory of the strategies of silence in Emily Dickinson, Marianne Moore, and others ("The Art of Silence and the Forms of Women's Poetry," in Shakespeare's Sisters, ed. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar [Bloomington and London: Indiana UP, 1979], pp. 153-64). Kammer's theory is equally applicable to contemporaries of Dickinson and Moore, including Christina Rossetti and Marjorie Pickthall.

52 See endnote 6 (Introduction) and endnote 24 (Chapter III) of the present study.

53 My language is borrowed from Kammer; see her analysis of the visual impact of women's poetry (162).

54 W.E. Collin, "Dream Gardens," The White Savannahs (1936; rpt. Toronto: UTP, 1975), p. 75.

55 MacMechan, p. 226.

56 Letter to Helen Coleman, 4 August 1910, MPC 2:15

57 Letter to Helen Coleman, 27 March 1913, MPC 2:17.

58 Frye, pp. 186-7.

59 E.J. Pratt, "Marjorie Pickthall," The Canadian Forum 13 (June 1933), 335.

60 Pickthall wrote three poems on the Jesuit martyrs of New France: "Isaac Jogues" (CP 17), "Two Souls" (CP 19), and the finely crafted "Père Lalemant" (CP 21). Whereas Pickthall identified herself with her Jesuit martyrs, Pratt's preoccupation with martyrdom was almost certainly the result of watching his pious father in his torturous struggle with cancer; the Methodist clergyman endured his long illness without the aid of pain-killing drugs and met his prolonged death with the courage of a saint (biographical details from Mrs. Viola Pratt to Sandra Djwa, interview, 19 Jan. 1976).

61 The source for Pickthall's and Pratt's Jesuit poems is

historian Francis Parkman (The Jesuits in North America [1876; rpt. Toronto: Morang, 1906]), but both poets' recreations of Father Lalemant as a romantic visionary resemble each other more closely than they do Parkman's description of Lalemant.

62 Responding to a comment in Pierce ("Memorial Address," p. 5) concerning Pratt's and Pickthall's acquaintanceship at the Victoria College Library, Frye writes: "I think [Pickthall] handed rather more over to Pratt, besides library books, than simply her own resignation [as the foremost poet in the Canadian tradition]" (Frye, pp. 186-7).

63 Among Klinck's papers is a memo to himself in which he writes: "Brébeuf. Check Marjorie Pickthall's 'Père Lalemant.' Incidentally check Lorne Pierce's speech on Pickthall & Pratt (personal)--both Victoria College [i.e., "Memorial Address"]. Check Pratt's piece on Pickthall in Canadian Forum 13:334-5 (June 1933). Cf. Pratt's 'Come Not the Seasons Here' with [Pickthall's] 'Come not the earliest petal here' ('Quiet'). Is there a Shakespearean or other source?" (memo in the possession of Sandra Djwa).

Chapter II

Constance Lindsay Skinner and the Indian Fictions Genre

Art is based on Truth, the Ideal
which transcends actualities and
which must dominate them, and so
demands the service of reverence.

- C.L. Skinner¹

I am the Elder Brother
I am the Making-Right (priest)
I am the counsellor of Earth
 in the always calm place.

- Kwakiutl (SCD xi)

While Marjorie Pickthall was occupying the Eastern literary limelight, the British Columbia poet Constance Lindsay Skinner was reading Harriet Monroe's Poetry (Chicago), writing exclusively in free verse, and even experimenting with imagism. She published her first poem in 1910, when she was about thirty years old, and the climax of her poetic career came in 1930 when her only volume of poetry appeared under the imprint of an American publishing house. The book contains forty-one of approximately sixty poems which she published during her career. It opens with several of the poems for which she had received one of three prizes awarded by Poetry (Chicago) in 1914.² She

had won the prize for a cycle of ten poems on Indian motifs entitled "Songs of the Coast Dwellers." This positive response may explain why she persisted almost exclusively in the same poetic mode for the rest of her career. Her perseverance was rewarded by two more prizes, one from the Bookman and the other from Lyric West.³ But interest in her work was short-lived, and fifteen years later, when she published the 1930 edition of these Indian poems under the title which the well-received original ten had appeared, the book received only three routine American reviews, and Canadian critics continued to ignore her.

Skinner's interest in North American Indian culture is not surprising. She was born and raised at a remote trading post in northern British Columbia where her father was a Hudson's Bay factor. Among her literary forefathers were the major eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers, whose work she read in her father's well-stocked library.³ In addition, she was personally acquainted with several Indian bards of the tribes with whom her father did business.⁵ From them she learned an additional set of "literary" conventions which, combined with those she encountered in her reading of English literature, she put to use in all of her poetry.

Like Pickthall, Skinner began writing at an early age:

I wrote my first story when I was five and my first novel when I was eleven. At fourteen I wrote the words and music of a three-act operetta for children, which was performed. At sixteen I had published two short stories, written a lot of music (none of it

worth anything), and was doing dramatic criticism for one paper, fashions and social gossip for another, and political stuff for a third.

She went on to publish fourteen novels and twenty-eight more short stories, most of which, like Pickthall's fiction, are aimed at the juvenile market. Unlike Pickthall, however, Skinner created many female characters and gave them heroic roles. Indeed, she was far ahead of Pickthall in terms of the integration of female experience and art. Of the thirty-four dramatic monologues in Songs of the Coast Dwellers, fifteen feature female personae who articulate some aspect of female life in a male dominated culture. She also wrote at least two articles expressing her opinion on the conditions of women's lives, both of which demonstrate her awareness of current female concerns and illuminate her poetry.

Creative writing and feminist commentary were only part of Skinner's literary pursuits. She wrote four histories of American pioneer life for Yale University Press. One of these, Adventures of Oregon: A Chronicle of the Fur Trade (1920), was, in 1934, on the required reading list of most American high schools.⁷ The publishing house of Farrar and Rinehart commissioned her to edit and supervise a historical series on the rivers of America, a task which she did not live to complete.⁸ Skinner also published nearly 200 book reviews and critical articles. Despite her interest in American history, the content of most of her fiction is Canadian, although all but

one of her novels were published in the United States. Unlike other Canadian writers of the day who sold their work to American publishing houses (Bliss Carman, for example), she was not reclaimed by Canada during her lifetime.

Four years after her death in 1939, however, A.J.M. Smith included some of her poems in his Book of Canadian Poetry, in the section devoted to translations of Indian verse. He ignored or did not see Skinner's comments in the Foreword to the volume: "My Songs of the Coast Dwellers are not translations nor adaptations of Indian poems: nor were they suggested by Indian poems, for I had made no study of Indian poetry when I began to write them" (SCD viii). Despite Skinner's disclaimer, Smith's labelling has prevailed; literary history continues to consider her a translator rather than a creative artist.

Ironically, Skinner's demotion to translator is a tribute to the skill with which she practices the female art of literary camouflage. While ostensibly conforming in every detail to Indian poetic conventions, she subverts those conventions for her own purposes. Gilbert and Gubar have called this literary strategy "palimpsest": palimpsestic works are those "whose surface designs conceal or obscure deeper, less accessible (and less socially acceptable) levels of meaning" (MA 73). Something of this palimpsestic technique is alluded to in Skinner's literary creed as outlined in her third-person account of her childhood: "As both reader and writer it will always seem to her

that characters, people, are the heart of all literature (as well as of life), and where those are true no atmosphere, scene or radical colorings can make them alien."⁹ The spirit of this personal manifesto operates in Songs of the Coast Dwellers, for although the "atmosphere, scene or radical colorings" are derived from the Squamish Indian community in which they are set, Indian experience in these poems is secondary to female experience. What passes for a depiction of Indian customs and traditions is below the surface an exploration of sexual politics.

The setting of Songs of the Coast Dwellers, like seventeenth-century French Canada in Pickthall's The Wood Carver's Wife, operates as a distancing device. Skinner transplants into the Coast Salish Indian community at Squamish various customs and mythical figures from other Indian tribes and cultures. Further, she transforms these customs and figures into suitable vehicles for her exploration of the sexual act. Although it is less overtly brutal than Pickthall's play, Skinner's poem cycle is also concerned in part with women as victims of male violence. The male characters are insensitive to women's needs, although they are not portrayed as intentionally cruel, as is Pickthall's woodcarver. Skinner's male poet figure, however, does bear some resemblance to Jean in that the woman whose beauty supplies the content of his art is merely a vehicle for artistic transcendence. Like Dorette,

Skinner's female figures are often martyrs to male illusions of superiority.

Songs of the Coast Dwellers, in its treatment of sexual politics, is representative of its times. The book is informed by Skinner's knowledge of current trends in psychoanalytic theory, specifically the Freudian notion of anatomy as destiny. Indeed, many of the poems are marred as a result of her vacillation between acceptance of, and rebellion against, this theory. In 1927, the year in which the last of the Indian poems were published in magazines, she published an article which suggests that she had finally come to terms with current psychoanalytic thought. There she dismisses any "scientific" theory which attempts to explain the origin and nature of sexual difference. (The term "scientific" refers also to the social sciences which, in the early decades of the century, were not yet differentiated from the more traditional scientific disciplines.) With regard to female identity formation Skinner rejects biological determinism which she considers a male construct. In its place she advances a theory of self-determinism.

The article, entitled "Cheating at Solitaire,"¹⁰ discusses the evolution of female consciousness and self-determination as a gradual movement through history away from male definition and toward self-definition. The thesis is never stated quite this

clearly, for her article, with its tangle of metaphor, analogy, and oblique references, is a classic example of the female art of literary camouflage, or subterfuge. Skinner begins by denouncing "literary cartographers" (a metaphor borrowed from geography to describe critics) and their "prevalent passion for turning the simple into complexities," a habit "born of shallow wading in the sciences" (676). She then proceeds to emulate the critics by launching into a complex series of scientific metaphor without stating her subject. She borrows an analogy from physics to allude to the process of sexual differentiation in the human species as a process by which "Sameness" eventually reaches its "Pole of Divergence." This scientific phenomenon, she insists, has never been adequately explained. "Although science has now practically accepted the theory that the sexes' pole of divergence is in the realm of psychology, no scientific man has yet been able to stabilize it." Presumably this reference to the then widely accepted Freudian theory of sexual identity was less oblique to Skinner's 1927 readership than it is to the reader of the 1980s. Skinner dismisses this "now practically accepted" psychoanalytic wisdom in favour of a theory which she chooses to express through the metaphor of the "solitaire deck." Her proposition is that "All women cheat at solitaire sometimes; men, never" (676).

The solitaire metaphor, like the scientific ones which precede it, is never made literal. However, solitaire seems to

be Skinner's analogy of the game of life, and what she says about this game is that men do not have to cheat because they made up the rules, whereas women must cheat in order to win. Over the centuries women have obeyed the rules which govern what it is to be female: to be female is to be destructive rather than creative, unconscious rather than conscious, and passive rather than active. These definitions of femaleness arose out of "a mass of misconceptions.

For, strangely, less is really known about the mind of woman than about any other chemical which man employs in his formulae of joy. Wine, song and stud poker are far better documented. To be sure, there is an immense amount of literature on the subject but, as nearly all of it is based on masculine research, it must be classed as secondary, and not source material, and is to be used only with the greatest discretion. (676)

Patiently wading through centuries of "masculine research" and carefully removing the "mass of misconceptions," Skinner proceeds to trace the evolution of female creativity, consciousness, and activity from ancient Greece, through the Middle Ages and the pre-scientific modern era, to the present.

The men of ancient Greece defined woman as unconscious and destructive. This is apparent in the male construct of the Three Fates. With "little consciousness and less volition," these three women unravel the fabric of life and snip it off. A female version of this configuration might include five women, two of whom would be imaged as taking up these threads of

destiny and "crocheting them into antimacassars of original designs" (677). The male-defined woman of the Middle Ages is similarly uncreative. To man, she is "static mind in so far as he concedes that she is mind at all" (678). Trapped within granite walls and locked into her chastity belt, she passes the time by making tapestries, "weaving glowing threads in designs that are not of her own making." She "draws her stout threads about the figure of knightly man" as he engages in "his adventures, now hers at second hand. . . ." But behind her passive outer aspect, medieval woman is beginning "to dream of action." Just what form that action might take is eventually discovered by the woman trapped in the mirrored halls of Versailles. As "Crystal Gazer," she "gets several different slants on herself at once," and one of those slants is a view of herself walking away from male definitions of herself and toward self-definition: "once woman herself had become willing to leave man behind her, her moral and spiritual leadership was assured" (678).

Before explaining this radical notion of power reversal, Skinner returns to the solitaire metaphor. Despite the commencement of female self-knowledge acquired by woman in the pre-scientific era, she was reluctant to convert that self-knowledge into action. This reluctance to "cheat at solitaire" in order to escape the prison of man's definition of her derives from superstition. By breaking the rules of the game of life,

she would risk incurring the wrath of occult powers as represented by the symbols on her deck of cards. But now, in the scientific age, woman "feels no awe of kings nor love of knaves" (678). "And since no occult power, other than her own will and fancy, direct the cards, no bane dogs the cheater; so she plays them as she pleases. . . .

. . . Inevitably her mind . . . will advance with increased force and subtlety to the creation of her own patterns. Let man consider that: however helplessly. The Three Fates he invented, plus the two he never guessed, are upon him. In the tapestries which woman will weave hereafter, man--in so far as he may appear at all--will be in complete subjection to her original design of life and society. (679)

This prediction regarding man's "complete subjection" to woman's "design of life and society" goes beyond mere female self-definition. It suggests an inevitable shift from male to female cultural hegemony. Skinner's use of the tapestry metaphor is a kind of smoke-screen behind which this female supremacist fantasy attempts to hide, for it creates the illusion that her subject is woman's control over her own art rather than ultimate female control over the entire "design of life and society." Given the radical nature of this vision of the future, it is hardly surprising that Skinner feels constrained to bury it under several layers of metaphor. But more important, the reversal of power which she prophesies is evidence of her inability to imagine an alternative to the epistemology of opposition which governs gender arrangements and perpetuates the

notion that artistic creativity is gender encoded.

Despite its use as camouflage, the tapestry metaphor does indicate some understanding on Skinner's part of the fate of female art. Like the medieval tapestries which depict "his adventures, now hers at second hand," female art gets subsumed in and even cancelled out by male art; ironically, her Songs of the Coast Dwellers exemplifies this. It is a tapestry which at times does, and at other times does not, appear to be woven in a design of the poet's own making. "The Three Fates [man] invented, plus the two he never guessed," are all present in Songs of the Coast Dwellers in the form of female poet figures, nature goddesses, and mother figures, but the voices in which they speak contradict one another and consequently spoil the design. But perhaps this is not so surprising, given that most of the poems contained in the volume were written in the thirteen years previous to the publication of "Cheating at Solitaire." Perhaps it was the actual process of writing these poems which eventually lead to the understanding of female art which informs this article.

The note of confidence on which "Cheating at Solitaire" ends is absent in a sharply satirical article which Skinner published two years later, entitled "What Well-Dressed Women are Reading."¹¹ Within these two short years her faith in the emergence of women's creativity and individuality has been radically modified: now she represents women as fundamentally

shallow and frivolous. This later article is ostensibly a critique of radio as a prime factor in the decline of reading habits but the target of Skinner's criticism is the female consumer of books. The woman who emerges in this article, far from having a mind which is advancing "with increasing force and subtlety to the creation of her own patterns," has no mind of her own at all. In her mindless conformity to the dictates of fashion she has given up any claim she might have had to self-definition.

Women have fallen victim to what Skinner describes as the "Style Merger." For the woman who listens to and obeys the voices that speak to her across the air waves, literary style and current styles in hair, clothing, and interior decoration have become synonymous. The radio announcer, in an oracular voice which recalls the chorus in a Greek tragedy, ominously warns the fashion conscious woman against the faux pas of appearing in public with the wrong book under her arm:

Well-dressed Women were reading this season's best sellers. They selected the best sellers in preference to novels less successful financially, though equally seasonable, even as they chose, out of the several modish tricks of the couturieres, the one which was already blazoned upon the girdle and the neckline of millions. The new Style Merger, it seemed, was well in progress: hat, choker, hand-bag, and brains to match. (432)

The woman who, in "Cheating at Solitaire," spent centuries breaking out of enslavement to the male voices which defined

her, is here enslaved by the voice of fashion. Far from creating a uniquely female "design of life and society," she is not even capable of originality in the creation of her own outer image but must imitate the designs mass produced for women by the fashion industry.

But it is not only her personal appearance with which her reading material must be coordinated. She also chooses her books with her room decor in mind. Books are now accent pieces chosen for the colour of their bindings and purchased by the yard to complement the interior design of her home. This new development in female literary taste has "enlarged . . . the author's field. . . ."

I had cherished the common dream of authors: that my bright fancy might reflect in the hearts of Gentle Readers, but I had never thought of its putting lustre on their fingernails. I had not even considered bindings in relation to sofa pillows. The obvious link between Freudian fiction and inverted plaits had escaped me. (433)

Lurking behind the biting satire of this statement is a certain tone of bitterness with regard to the disappearance of Skinner's primary audience. By the time this article appeared Skinner had already devoted almost a whole career to the writing of novels and poems directed at an audience which, she now realizes, prefers to be fashionably up to date rather than enlightened. While this is in part a rationalization for her waning popularity with the reading public, her allusions to the

fundamental shallowness of the female mind are nevertheless revealing in terms of her struggle for poetic identity: if woman is this dependent on external voices, she can hardly be expected to articulate a voice of her own.

Although "What Well-Dressed Women are Reading" postdates almost all of Skinner's poetry, the harshness of her criticism is already apparent in Songs of the Coast Dwellers. While some of the female personae articulate the victimization of women in a system whose rules are dictated by men, others betray Skinner's ambivalence about women's efforts to break out of that system. Some of these latter personae obey the male voices and worship the male gods to whom women owe their subjection; others become negative figures because of their failure to conform to the roles assigned to women in a male dominated culture. By contrast, each of Skinner's male personae, like the radio announcer, speaks with the authority of one who makes the rules and with the confidence of one who believes in the appropriateness of male authority.

With one or two possible exceptions, none of the poems in Songs of the Coast Dwellers can be regarded as a notable artistic achievement. Like much poetry written during the first years of the Modernist movement, they represent an experiment in form and content which for the most part fails. But from a

historical perspective, the way in which they fail is more important than the fact of failure itself. For example, it is interesting to note that the poems which express the male point of view are far more successful artistically than those which articulate female experience. In the poems featuring male personae, Skinner's voice resonates with the assurance she borrows from her male mask of power; paradoxically, it is a mask of betrayal as well as concealment, for through it she reveals the degree to which she has internalized male ideology. The relative success of these poems is also due to the fact that they are only moderately experimental: they rely fairly heavily on established poetic conventions. But in the less successful poems, most of which feature female personae, the lack of a widely recognized body of convention governing the conversion of female experience into art forces Skinner to use inappropriate conventions, transform existing conventions, and create new ones. Given the high degree of risk involved in this kind of experimentation, it is not surprising that the quality of her work suffers. If her poetry fails artistically, it also succeeds in demonstrating the difficulties experienced by women poets of her generation who attempted to integrate female experience and art.

The work of Canadian women poets who have succeeded in integrating female experience and art is the focus of a study by Jean Mallinson. In "Versions and Subversions: Formal Strategies

in the Poetry of Contemporary Canadian Women," Mallinson looks at the ways in which "women poets adapt or transform genre and the formal strategies related to genre, to suit their varied and often new purposes."¹² Despite its contemporary application, the perceptual framework Mallinson has devised is useful as a model for the examination of work by earlier Canadian women poets, such as Skinner, whose work represents fledgling attempts at what Juhasz calls making "woman a function of poet, poet a function of woman." Songs of the Coast Dwellers relates closely to an area of Mallinson's study which explores the ways in which women poets "use fictions derived from North American Indian lore, and considers why these fictions, and the genres and formal strategies associated with them, are of particular use to women poets" (Mallinson iv).

As she points out, the use of material derived from Indian sources has a long tradition in Canadian poetry:

Joseph Howe's Acadia, printed in 1874, though written earlier, delineates a twin image of the Indian as noble savage and as violent wildman, Charles Mair's poetic drama Tecumseh centered on the historic events in which the great chief was involved. Duncan Campbell Scott wrote documentary romances evoking images of the Indian. Isabella Valency Crawford developed a sinuous, kinetic style which renders, through Indian fictions, her sense that nature is an animated, numinous presence, subject to transformations. Pauline Johnson, half Indian, wrote lyrics which honour the paraphernalia of the Indian-- canoe, tomahawk, feather, teepee. . . . (92)

In terms of the female tradition, Skinner can be seen as a

transitional figure linking the nineteenth-century poets, Crawford and Johnson, with contemporary poets such as Cam Hubert and Susan Musgrave. Skinner combines the sensuousness of Crawford with Johnson's attention to symbol and ritual. Crawford's Collected Poems appeared in 1905, just five years before Skinner began publishing her Indian poetry; personified aspects of nature in Skinner's "Song of the Four Mornings" (SCD 47-59) recall Parts II and IV of Crawford's Malcom's Katie.¹³ Johnson's Legends of Vancouver (1911), a collection of Squamish Indian legends, may well have sparked Skinner's interest in the Squamish community.¹⁴ Johnson's collected poems, Flint and Feather, appeared in 1912; some of her poems together with a few of Skinner's were selected for inclusion in an American collection entitled The Path on the Rainbow (1918), a selection of Indian translations and other poems employing Indian motifs.¹⁵ Skinner also contributed an epilogue to the volume as well as three Haida poems based on texts translated by John Swanton. The Kwakiutl and Tsimshian fictions in her work were almost certainly borrowed from texts translated by Franz Boas, whose poetic renderings of some of his translations also appear in The Path on the Rainbow. In terms of the dominant male tradition in Canadian poetry, Skinner is also a transitional figure: her style combines the free-verse and imagism of early North American Modernism with the more embellished idiom of late Victorian convention.

The Indian Fictions genre as Mallinson describes it is well suited to the needs of women poets:

The genres derived from Indian sources are not new: they are typically lullabies, complaints, spells, love songs, laments, elegies, celebrations--kinds familiar in the European lyric tradition. Some of these modes, like spells and lullabies, are closely linked with the oral tradition, with which women's literature is already associated. . . . Indian sources cut through the isolation of the solipsistic twentieth century lyric. The poet is provided with an alternative to the fiction of alienation, the subjectivity of the lyric voice is given a context in a real or imagined community, and the discontinuous intensity of the lyric is given continuity. (98-99)

This genre is especially suitable as a vehicle for transporting female experience out of the kitchen, the nursery, the female community, and into art. It does this by providing an alternative kitchen, nursery, and community which are suitably exotic and therefore poetically "legitimate." This is important to the woman poet who is trying to enter into a tradition which dictates that female experience is unworthy of poetic treatment. Most important, the genre provides the woman poet with a variety of personae which function as poetic masks. For example, one of Skinner's masks is based on Dzō'noq!wa--or D'Sonoqua, as Emily Carr was to call her--a Kwakiutl mythical figure whose story Franz Boaz translated and published in 1902.¹⁶ Another is based on the historical figure, Chief Capilano of the Squamish tribe, who was suggested to Skinner by an oil painting.¹⁷ A third is a poet figure who was inspired by the Coast Salish poet-dancer as

represented to Skinner by the Squamish Chief Mathias (SCD vii-viii) and by the Kwakiutl poet-priest whose poem appears in the epigraph to this chapter.

True to the genre Mallinson identifies, Songs of the Coast Dwellers, as described in Skinner's Foreword to the work, is a "succession of lyrics [which] presents, in primitive symbolism, the characters of an imaginary community and the interweaving of their lives.

There are the lovers and the women they mate with, or fail to win, the young mothers, the lonely maidens who still wait for love, and the women forsaken: the dying hunter, the village dandy, the aged man, the chief and his braggart little son, the priest, the man who weds money, the bear-killer, the poet whose songs begin to seek the realm of imagination above the actualities of experience and whose name, Kan-il-lak, is that of the divine culturist of a coast tribe; and the Four Seasons and the Earth, which appear as persons of the group. (SCD ix)

This is a catalogue of the various personae Skinner assumes in the thirty-four dramatic monologues contained in Songs of the Coast Dwellers. But despite this wide variety of poetic masks, there are only two significantly different points of view expressed in the volume: male and female. Skinner's description of the male poet Kan-il-lak's songs is an apt definition of these points of view, for it is the female personae who articulate "the actualities of experience" while the male personae transcend those actualities and enter "the realm of imagination." For the female characters, man is the reality

which defines their experiences as sexual objects, wives, mothers, and muses. But for the male characters, woman is merely a symbol of a greater, more permanent reality; she is the agent of male transcendence into the realm of poetic imagination. For the most part these two realms are mutually exclusive throughout the volume. There are, however, some interesting exceptions in which Skinner attempts to integrate female experience and poetic experience. Several of the female characters are unacknowledged poets of the community in that their monologues also seem to "seek the realm of imagination" beyond the realities of the female condition. It is these women who reveal the conflict between the roles of "woman" and "poet."

While the enormous popularity of Johnson's volume of Squamish Indian legends may have encouraged Skinner's interest in the Squamish, Johnson's description of that tribe's gender arrangements does not correspond to those of Skinner's imaginary community. Johnson makes a point of noting that Squamish women are skilled fishers and canoeists, that the birth of a daughter is as much cause for celebration as the arrival of a boy, and that women are depicted as heroes in tribal legend.¹⁸ These characteristics are in keeping with later anthropological observations of Coast Salish Indian culture.¹⁹ In Skinner's community, however, women operate exclusively within the domestic sphere, insensitive treatment of women by men is ordained by the gods, and girl children are despised while the

wayward behaviour of boys is indulged. While it is true that all of West Coast Indian culture was male dominated, women's contributions were more highly valued than they were in the European cultural tradition in which Skinner herself was raised. The attitudes toward women and sexuality which she depicts in her work are more in keeping with white patriarchal culture.

Skinner's description of the volume as a "succession of lyrics" presenting the interwoven lives of several characters suggests that her intention in bringing the poems together is narrative. Narrative continuity is achieved through grouping most of the poems into a number of recognizable sequences, all of which are governed by one dominant metaphor. This controlling metaphor is the courtship-marriage ritual which is treated in full in the opening sequence and repeated in part in subsequent sequences. The customs that make up the ritual include the lover's journey, the quenching of the torch, and the whip-plaiting. Interestingly, these are three of the ancient customs which Skinner admits to having reinterpreted for her own purposes: "I doubt that the Indians gave those customs my interpretation of them" (SCD viii). Indeed, the Coast Salish courtship and marriage customs bear no similarity to the ritual Skinner depicts.²⁰ Elsewhere, she attributes the search and the quenching of the torch to "some tribes" but does not name the tribes.²¹ As for the whip, the Coast Salish were known to use whips in the initiation ceremony of young shamans;²² the

Tsimshian earned their totems through tortures which may have included whipping.²³ But Skinner turns the whip into a symbol of violent male sexuality and in doing so betrays the intensity of her rage at the patriarchal conventions which victimize women. As we have already seen in "Cheating at Solitaire," she eventually used that rage to fuel her perverse fantasy of man's "complete subjection" to woman's "design of life and society."

The courtship ritual takes place in spring when a young brave descends into the forest in search of a virgin squaw who has hidden herself there in the hope of being found and claimed by a husband. The young woman is eventually discovered and taken by her lover to his hut. The morning after "the quenching of the torch"--the couple's first sexual union--the woman plaits a whip to present as a marriage gift to her husband. The opening sequence of eight poems follows the young couple through the ritual to the birth of their son. Five of these eight poems are in the voice of the woman, who moves from the euphoria of sexual anticipation, through bewilderment as a result of painful sexual initiation, to resentment of her fate, and finally, to resignation and the sublimation of her longings in motherhood. Significantly, in these five songs the woman speaks directly to individuals who cannot hear or understand her. In "Song of the Whip-Plaiting" she addresses her absent husband; "Song of the Basket-Weaving" is spoken to the Cedar-Tree; the woman speaks to her unborn child in "Song of the Cradle-Making," and in "The

Wild Woman's Lullaby" and "Song of the Young Mother" she addresses her infant son. The overall effect is one of isolation, which emphasizes women's frustrated desire to communicate the experiences of their lives.

This sense of isolation is intensified by Skinner's inclusion of three poems in this sequence from a male point of view which is entirely incongruous with the sentiments expressed by the female persona; while her songs deal with the disappointing realities of sexual politics, his idealize love, woman, and the role of the male lover and provider. In other words, his poems "seek the realm of imagination" while hers express "the actualities of experience." This combining of two mutually exclusive points of view reveals Skinner's struggle to come to terms with sexual difference. Biology is destiny in Songs of the Coast Dwellers, and so it is perhaps not surprising that her male personae celebrate their sexuality while the females lament theirs. In true Freudian fashion the individuals in Skinner's community articulate the penis-envy principle: maleness is apparent in the desire for sexual fulfillment while female identity is defined by the desire for a male child.

The sequence opens with the "Song of the Search," in which the bridegroom enters the forest in search of his bride. The sanctity of their imminent union is reflected in nature, in the union of the wolf with his mate, the deer with the doe, the night with the sea. The lover's spiritual and sexual longing

for his mate is quite beautifully expressed in the closing lines:

O Earth, Earth, great Earth,
 Say where is she, the Bearer of Morning,
 My Bringer of Song?
 Love in me waits to be born,
 Where is She, the Woman? (SCD 4)

As his "Bringer of Song" the woman he seeks is not just mate but muse as well. Sexual fulfillment is not her only promise; as the "Bearer of Morning" she is also the vehicle of his spiritual enlightenment. The phrase "Bearer of Morning" acts as an appropriate link with the next poem, "Song of the Whip-Plaiting," which begins: "In the Dawn I gathered cedar-boughs. . . ." This attempt at linkage is undermined by the abrupt transition from the metaphysical concerns expressed by a bridegroom in full poetic flight to the physical realities painfully articulated by a disappointed bride.

"Song of the Whip-Plaiting" contains the first of many images in the cycle in which human interaction with nature becomes a metaphor for the trauma of sexual initiation. The morning after her wedding night the young wife descends into the forest in search of cedar boughs from which to make her whip:

My black, flint knife.
 It whispered among the white strands of the cedar,
 Whispered in parting the sweet cords for thy whip.
 O sweet-smelling juice of cedar--
 Life-ooze of love!
 My knife drips. . . . (SCD 5)

The action of the knife and the sexual experience are inextricably associated in the young wife's thoughts. As instruments of violence, knife and whip transform the "Life-ooze of love" into a sinister image of dripping blood. The black of the knife and the white of the cedar strands imply an opposition of darkness and light corresponding to male and female, an opposition which is sustained throughout the sequence. Later in this poem the wife speaks of "Little strands of pain" which she weaves into her gift of love; as she weaves she muses: "Ah-- sometimes--thou wilt be gentle? / Little roots of pain are deep, deep in me."

"Song of the Whip-Plaiting" ends with the plaintive four-word stanza, "I am thy woman." "Song of the Full Catch" picks up on this theme in that it is in part the lover's tribute to her faithfulness. In this song the male provider returns with his day's catch and is guided home by the sound of his woman's call. The overall mood of this poem is one of perfect harmony. The speaker is indeed blessed with a "Full Catch": his being is in harmony with the "good wind" and the "swift water" that carry him home to the "Sweet . . . pine bed" of his faithful woman. By contrast, the wife still longs for fulfillment, although not necessarily through her mate.

"Song of the Basket-Weaving" expresses the hope for fulfillment through motherhood. In this poem the young wife tunes her senses to the burgeoning world around her and invokes

the Spirit Mother of the Cedar-Tree:

All the Earth sings: and its voices are one song!
 I alone am silent: I alone, a maid waiting him, the
 Fate,
 The Stirring One, the Planter of the Harvest,
 The Basket-Filler.
 Cedar, Cedar-tree, Mother!
 See how beautiful, how liberal, is my basket,
 How tightly woven for the waters of love,
 How soft for the treading of children's feet,
 How strong to bear them up! (SCD 8)

Conceiving a child is depicted as a release from silence and isolation. Although the young wife clearly awaits her mate--her "Fate," the "Basket-Filler"--it is less clear that "the waters of love" are exclusively associated with him. The "treading of children's feet" evokes an image of an unborn child treading amniotic waters. This gradual shift of focus from mate to child is made complete in "Song of the Cradle-Making":

Thou hast stirred!
 When I lifted thy little cradle,
 The little cradle I am making for thee,
 I felt thee!

.

Oh, never have I seen so much light
 Through thy father's doorway! (SCD 8)

At the quickening of the child in her womb the darkness which is associated with the husband begins to lift, and the bright hope of motherhood illuminates the young woman's life.

One dark spot remains, however:

Last night I said: "When the child comes,
If it is a son--
 I will trim his cradle with shells;
 And proudly I will bear him in his rich cradle
 Past the doors of barren women.
 All, all, shall see my Little Chief
 In his rich cradle!"

.
 Oh, I know not if thou be son--
 Strong chief, Great Fisher, Law-of-Woman,
 As thy father is;
 Or only Sorrow Woman, Patient Serving Hands,
 Like thy mother. (SCD 9)

A male child would be cause for celebration and would give the young wife status in the community. Part of the pleasure of motherhood, it would seem, is the satisfaction of feeling superior to barren women. But these modest benefits notwithstanding, the pregnant wife is caught in a patriarchal dilemma: if her child is a girl it will be born into sorrow and servitude; if it is a boy she will have contributed to the next generation of legislators of the "Law-of-Woman."

Taken together, the next two poems in the sequence can be seen to illustrate the biology-as-destiny theory of sexual identity. "Love Song to Storm-Dancer" features a male persona while "Storm-Dancer" herself is the speaker in "The Wild Woman's Lullaby." These two poems depict the sexual act as both beautiful and violent but the purpose of sexual union is very different for each of these speakers. "Love Song to Storm-Dancer" (SCD 11-12) is almost identical in sentiment to "Song of

the Search" in that it expresses the urgency of male sexual desire. This sense of urgency is conveyed through the beating of the "Drums of Night" which open the poem and the "Drums of Dawn" which close it. Although the poem is supposedly a love song, these drums are beating out a "war-chant" (l. 10). The violence evoked by this war image is augmented by violent diction such as "beating," "breaking," "Piercing," "shrill arrowed," and "trampling." The eternal persistence of the male sexual drive is conveyed through the fact that sexual encounter does not bring fulfillment in this poem but only the kindling of "new desire" (l. 26).

This unresolved state of sexual excitation is carried over into "The Wild Woman's Lullaby," which is similarly stormy in mood. Storm-Dancer recalls the mythical figure D'Sonoqua, the wild woman of the woods who steals children and carries them away to her cave; she is an articulate monster-woman through whose open mouth a terrifying "Ooo-ooo-ooo" is released into the forest. Skinner's domestication of this traditionally free spirit is perhaps a reflection of her anxieties about the patriarchal definition of woman as destructive and beyond the reach of culture's civilizing influence. Not only is the wild woman tamed and turned into a nurturer rather than a destroyer of children, words in praise of male domination of women are put into her mouth. Here, Storm-Dancer describes the father of the child she sings to as

Fiercest in war, wisest in council, swiftest in
 hunting,
 Harshest and fondest in the tent of his
 woman! (SCD 13)

Significantly, sexual harshness is counted among the male virtues and is valued equally with fierceness, wisdom, swiftness, and capacity for love. This celebration of male sexual violence is in startling contrast to "Song of the Whip-Plaiting," where the persona had expressed a wistful longing for a gentler touch.

But Storm-Dancer has more to celebrate than the fact that her mate is the most brutal of men. The release from silence and isolation promised in "Song of the Basket-Weaving" is here fulfilled, for the fact that mother turns poet seems to suggest that motherhood can release the powers of the imagination:

What shall I sing to thee, babe on my back?
 Song of the Eagle that mates with the storm!
Hi-i-ri-i-ki! Ri-eeek
 The wild gale is weeping, driven before him
 To his nest on the black lone mast of the night;
 Swinging, swinging, far out, high out, over the sea!

.
 . . . Thy mother is Storm-Dancer, daughter of Winds.
 What art thou, Little Chiefling, babe of my heart?
 The star that I plucked from the mast of the night,
 When the wings of thy father outstrove me! (SCD 13)

The young mother recreates for her son the story of his conception in images of pursuit and capture. The "nest on the black lone mast of the night" is an image of sexual encounter as

a dark and isolated event; this image will be repeated and expanded in the last poem of the sequence. Clearly flight and freedom haunt the imagination of the "wild" poet-mother. But more interesting than the images of flight and freedom, pursuit and capture is the poet-mother herself. Her portraiture reveals Skinner's ambivalence, for it is not at all clear what keeps this "Wild Woman" wild in her state of domestic captivity. Can she be seen as an imperfect transformation of D'Sonoqua? Or is she perhaps "wild" in one or more senses of the word: uncivilized, ostracized, alienated, or maybe even slightly insane? As a woman who presumes to be a poet she is an outsider, yet her possible mental instability excuses her poetic pretensions. On another level she can be seen to represent a reconciliation between the domestic and artistic realms: she is a woman poet whose poetry is "permissible" by virtue of the fact that it is a lullaby, a poetic form which falls within the realm of the domestic. This wild, unconventional poet-mother stands in opposition to the more conventional poetic concerns expressed through Kan-il-lak, Skinner's male poet figure, who is featured in the second sequence of the cycle.

The Kwakiutl figure D'Sonoqua is not the only legendary figure Skinner's Storm-Dancer recalls. Insanity, ostracization, and alienation are all suggested in the Nootka legend of "The Jealous Woman."²⁴ Jealous of her husband's second wife, this woman flees into the forest taking her infant son with her.

Exposure to the elements transforms her into a wild creature, and in her rage and jealousy she neglects the child she carries on her back. The only clue to her whereabouts is the wailing of the starving baby. By pursuing this pitiful cry, the child's father and his fellow tribesmen finally locate the woman but by then the baby is nothing more than a bag of bones on its mother's back. The wild mother is taken back to the village and, with the bones of her infant still fastened to her back, is locked in a pen in her husband's house. For a long time she refuses food but eventually eats some wormwood, which cures her.

This aberrant wife and mother is one of the Nootka versions of D'Sonoqua,²⁵ and it really matters little which figure is the inspiration for Skinner's wild poet-mother. What is important is the way in which Skinner re-imagines her. Flight, pursuit, capture, and incarceration characterize the Nootka legend, and while these elements are also apparent in "The Wild Woman's Lullaby," they are romanticized and rendered benign. Female rebellion and infanticide are replaced in Skinner's version by maternal nurturance and devotion to one's mate; female destruction in the Nootka legend gives way to a modest and feminine form of literary creativity. In short, what Skinner does with this highly threatening female figure is to confine her within the same set of social and literary conventions in which Skinner herself, as a woman and a poet, is entrapped. As we shall see in the Kan-il-lak sequence, her male poet figure

operates under no such physical or creative restrictions.²⁶

"The Wild Woman's Lullaby" is followed by the last poem in the courtship-marriage sequence. Even after several months of marriage and the birth of her son the speaker of the "Song of the Young Mother" still has not come to terms with the violence of her wedding night:

Strange, that pain came with love.
I knew it not until thy father sought me.

.

He circled my house with the arms of strength,
And took me with weapons. . . . Joy?
Ay. Yet I cried from the depths with a sudden deep
cry,
And in grieving earth was the torch quenched.
. . . Darkness . . . and his, his in that dark . . .
None had told me. . . .
Nor that his strength would leap rejoicing at my
cry. (SCD 15-16)

The opposition of sound and silence in these lines is significant. Undercutting a rather hesitant admission of pleasure in the sexual act is the young wife's cry of pain; yet more impressive than this articulation of pain is the silence suggested by the ellipses and broken syntax. There appears to be no language with which to communicate the trauma of sexual initiation. Indeed, pain, silence, and the phallus-as-weapon image seem more suggestive of sexual assault, an act carried out here in psychological as well as physical darkness. The image recalls the dark and isolated place of sexual encounter in "The Wild Woman's Lullaby." That a woman's pain should be a man's

pleasure is clearly a source of bewilderment for the young wife.

A source of resentment is the young woman's bitter recognition of her parents' complicity in this act of violence. The experience has revealed to the young wife

Why the maiden plaits a whip of cedar-fibre
To give into her husband's hand on her marriage day.
Once I asked my father--it seemed so strange
A maid should weave and weave a rod for her own
sorrow.

He laughed and said: "it is our custom; ay, an old
custom.

I know not if it means aught now,
Or ever did have meaning."

My mother sat near. I have remembered that she spoke
not;

But, silently, in the shadow of his body, drooped her
head. (SCD 17)

The father's laugh of indifference aligns him with the husband who rejoices in female pain. The mother withdraws in silence and droops in the patriarchal shadow like a flower that has been denied sunlight. The young wife's father is the guardian of a patriarchal status quo which even he cannot satisfactorily account for. Nevertheless, he offers the existence of that standard as sufficient justification in itself.

The wife's registering a complaint with her family about her husband is entirely in keeping with Coast Salish custom. A woman's family vigorously defended her against maltreatment and exacted heavy fines from the offending husband. The Squamish wife who was irreconcilably unhappy in marriage could easily obtain a divorce.²⁷ In this imaginary community, however,

discontent is a woman's lot, and, like her mother, the young wife acquiesces under the weight of custom and tradition as upheld by Skinner's patriarch:

. . . Ay, 'tis old, the custom,
 Old as earth is old;
 Ancient as passion,
 Pitiless as passion--
 Pitiless, pitiless, the earth-way for women!
 Bitter it is, as the taste of bright sea-water,
 That he, who takes the gift and wields our weaving of
 desire,
 Knows not the meaning of the gift--nor can know ever.
 Into the heedless hand of passion
 We yield our power-of-pain.
 It is the law of the earth-way. (SCD 17)

Yielding to love and sexual desire is perceived as a powerfully masochistic act. Through the gift of the whip the young wife has consented to her own subjugation. Women are slaves to their own passion, which is used as a weapon against them. By making a gift of their love they place the instrument of their own enslavement into heedless male hands.

The wife's resentment of male power is evident in her ambivalence toward her male child:

So it is with birth-giving.
Aii-he! The mightier pang,
 The mightier loving--
 And thou and thy father, the two Strong Ones,
 Glad, glad, of the woman's pain-cry. (SCD 17)

Not even his infant innocence spares the male child from a share of his mother's bitterness toward men who triumph in women's pain. But a child elicits a "mightier loving" than his

insensitive adult counterpart, and that greater love is a source of new power for women:

Sleep, sleep, thou drowsy one,
 Thou art guarded well,
 Ay, rock, rock, safely, safely, Little Man-Child,
 A woman watches thee. (SCD 18)

In the male-female relationship imaged in these lines there is an ironic reversal of power and powerlessness. For a moment, the female power to nurture and protect the vulnerable "Man-Child" is held up in contrast to the male power to inflict pain. But the briefness of infancy promises that this power will be short lived, for as the young mother has already observed, soon her child will be "Glad, glad, of the woman's pain-cry." Just how brief this period of male vulnerability is, is expressed in "Song of the Little Son" (SCD 31), which features an arrogant toddler who intimidates his mother and grandmother. The poem's violent imagery and diction suggest that the model for this "little chiefing" is a type common in white patriarchal culture, a child who, in keeping with the "boys will be boys" theory of childrearing, is taught to cultivate arrogance and brutality as masculine ideals.

Although "Love Song to Storm-Dancer" and "The Wild Woman's Lullaby" seem to work together as a pair in the opening sequence, they were not part of the original sequence of ten poems published in 1914. "The Wild Woman's Lullaby" was first

published in 1916, the same year in which four of the eight poems in the Kan-il-lak sequence appeared in Poetry (Chicago). This suggests that it may have been written at about the same time as the Kan-il-lak poems with which it has a thematic relationship. But Kan-il-lak is neither "wild" nor female, nor are his songs covert or unofficial contributions to the cultural heritage of his community. Despite his official status, his songs are not concerned primarily with the interpretation of Indian legend but with the assertion of his own poetic identity as "divine culturist." Like the Romantic poets he seeks communion with Mother Nature, and like the poets of an even older European tradition he courts a muse.

This convergence of Romantic and Indian traditions in the figure of the poet is apparent in Skinner's article, "The Indian as Poet," which was published as the Epilogue to The Path on the Rainbow.²⁸ The Indian tradition as she perceives it seems to offer her an alternative to the objectification of nature which poses such a problem for the woman poet:

The Path of the Rainbow is Poetry's Highway--its arch reaching the threshold of the Great spirit because broad-based enough to span all Nature. The primitive poetic impulse begins at the base of the Rainbow, as a blind urge feeling for man's relative place in Nature. Nature, the Tremendous, is the primitive bard's habitat. He is moved to discover himself in relation to Her and to communicate to his tribe the emotions stirred in him by his first dim perception of kinship--moved, to both, by that poetic impulse which, paradoxically, sets him apart from, in advance of, the crowd, yet makes him all mankind's and naturekind's intimate. (341)

After the inter-relation of man and Nature is felt, the primitive bard's senses are liberated to rhythm. . . . Launched on the rhythms of Nature, his imagination wakes and grows. Objects in Nature are more than they appear; they are conscious, they comprehend. He ceases to believe in death. Life is endless rhythm, endlessly flowing. So death becomes for him a winter that calls him forth again--with new vision, quicker imagination, enlarged sense of beauty and wonder, his feeling for rhythm intensified and diversified. The actual and the mystic are so blent in him, that he arrives again at the earth base of the Rainbow as conscious Interpreter. (343-4)

On one level, the Indian concept of poetry seems to offer an alternative to the opposition of poet and nature, poet and woman, which Romantic convention insists upon. For identification with nature does not imply identification with unconsciousness, inarticulateness, and fatality; indeed, nature is conscious, comprehending, and eternal. Nevertheless, the image of the rainbow arc suggests the transcendence of nature, while the blending of "actual" and "mystic" in the poet recalls the quest for communion between poet and Mother Nature which informs Romantic poetry. Skinner identifies this contradiction as paradox: she sees the poet as identified with humanity and with nature but at the same time "apart from" both. This attempt, on the one hand, to resolve the opposition between nature and the human by imaging the poet as connected to both and, on the other, to assert the poet's autonomy by presenting him/her as apart from both says more about Skinner's struggle to come to terms with her own identity as both woman and poet than

it does about Indian poetics.

In another article, which reads like a radical revision of the patriarchal notion that God the Father is the sole legitimate model for all earthly authors, she calls nature the "mother of poets."²⁹ In this alternate myth of nature which recalls Pickthall's articulate Mother Nature, the "voice of the great mother" speaks on behalf of "the invisible Creative One." In other words, Skinner sees nature, not Adam, as the recipient of God's gift of language. Most important, this is applicable not just to Indian poetry; it is at the heart of the European tradition as well:

One who has heard melody on a frosty starlit night, or the harps of daybreak, knows that the rhythms and tones of Nature's supposedly silent phenomena were clearly heard by David, Shakespeare, Whitman, both Brownings, Swinburne and Lanier. (666)

Nature's silence is an illusion. The poets listed here have inherited language from nature, not from God through Adam. As listeners and interpreters of "Nature's supposedly silent phenomena," Marjorie Pickthall and Christina Rossetti might well be added to the list. This belief in nature as the articulate poet mother allows Skinner to be both woman and poet, but, as the Kan-il-lak sequence demonstrates, in practice this theory cannot prevail against the tyranny of the European tradition.

Kan-il-lak represents one of the ways in which Skinner attempts "to live out the split demanded of [her] between

'woman' and 'poet.'" This sequence resembles the Medieval tapestry she describes in "Cheating at Solitaire" into which woman weaves male experience, "now hers at second hand." Indeed, this adopting of a male persona--or, more specifically, the powerful mask of the male poet--allows Skinner to slip comfortably into the traditionally male poetic role, and most of her perceptions from this point of view are decidedly male. Through Kan-il-lak, Skinner indulges in poetic abstractions, asserts the superiority of male symbols such as the sun over female symbols such as the earth and the moon, treats male sexuality as the life-giving, life-sustaining force, and praises an omnipotent male god who transcends nature. The sequence is presented as a variation on the courtship motif and follows the poet-lover on his journey in search of "the Desired," Nak-Ku, who is clearly the poet's muse. This relationship between poet and muse is conventionally erotic and the muse traditionally elusive at first and then submissive. Skinner subverts the convention briefly by allowing the muse interiority, making her the speaker of one of the poems in which she expresses her jealousy of her sister muses and her triumph over them as Kan-il-lak's favourite.

"Kan-il-lak the Singer, to Nak-Ku" is cast in the traditional courtly love convention:

Nak-Ku, Desired!
 Thine eyes speak gifts
 But thy hands are empty.

Thy lips draw me
 Like morning's flame on a songbird's wing.
 I follow--but thy kiss is denied.
 I am a hunter alone in a forest of silence. (SCD 18)

Nak-Ku as Kan-il-lak characterizes her is modelled on the "cruel mistress" who has tortured generations of male poets.

Kan-il-lak's complaint is that Nak-Ku has teased him with the promise of inspiration but has so far failed to deliver it.

Leaving him in the vacuum of his own silence, she has run from him on feet shod with "little moccasins of silver" (l. 13). She is as elusive as the "little silver shadows" (l. 22) which run teasingly across the floor of his hut. This identification of woman/muse with the moon is made in each of the Kan-il-lak poems and gives continuity to the sequence.

In true courtly-lover fashion, the poet responds to his muse's heartless treatment by retreating to nurse his frustration:

I have closed my door:
 The heavy cedar-blanket hangs before it.
 Since thou comest not,
 Better that my narrow pine couch seem wide as a winter
 field.

.....

I hear the pattering of women on the sand-paths:
 Fluttered laughs, bird-whisperings, before my lodge--
 "Oh, Lover! Lover!"
 Brave little fingers tap upon the cedar-blanket.
 But I do not open my door;
 Better this grief!
 I am thy poet, Nak-Ku,
 Faithful to her who has given me
 Dreams! (SCD 10-20)

Nak-Ku's rivals are no temptation to Kan-il-lak, who remains faithful to his inspiration. Like Skinner's radical reinterpretation of Indian customs in the preceding sequence, this use of the courtly love convention, like the inclusion of the muse, helps to emphasize just how secondary the Indian setting and Indian experience are in these poems.

Slightly less conventional is the muse's response to the poet which she voices in "Nak-Ku Answers":

I have given dreams to Kan-il-lak, the Singer.

Oh what care I, Kan-il-lak,
 Though thy hut be full of witches,
 Thy lip's melody flown before their kisses?
 Know I not that all women
 Must to the Singer bring their gifts?
 Know I not that to The Singer comes at last
 His hour of gift-judging?

I will lie, like a moonbeam, in thy heart.

A hundred gifts shall fall, regarded not.
 But where, among the dust of forgetfulness,
 The one pearl shell is found again;
 The deeps no man has seen
 Brimming its lyric mouth with mystical murmurs--
 There shalt thou pause,
 And render me thy song! (SCD 20)

The publication of this poem predates the appearance of "Cheating at Solitaire" by eleven years. Yet by giving the muse a poetic voice of her own, Skinner has already created one of those two conscious and creative Fates which she adds to the mute and unconscious three created by men. The Medieval weaver of tapestries is also present here in Nak-Ku's realization that

female "gifts" are utilized exclusively in the service of male art. As muse, woman is denied creative power of her own and is merely the agent of male transcendence into the realm where the "lyric mouth" brims "with mystical murmurs"; this is "the realm of imagination above the actualities of experience." On a second level of meaning, this poem is also about the divisiveness which results from the patriarchal judgement of women. Reduced to competing with other women--"witches," as she jealously calls them--Nak-ku's only consolation is her confidence that the results of Kan-il-lak's "gift-judging" will be in her favour.

As her association with the moon suggests, the muse is a creature of the night. Kan-il-lak, associated with "the man-strength of sun-light" (24), pursues her through the night ("Night-Song of Kan-il-lak," SCD 21) and encounters her at dawn. Interestingly, "Dawn-Song of Kan-il-lak" is the most skillfully crafted poem in the entire volume. It is modelled on the work of Skinner's contemporaries, the early Imagist poets:

Dimly
 About the dark sea's marge
 Move the shores of dawn;
 Fainter
 Sounds the one golden note
 Of the passing star:
 Earth lies mute.

Now
 From the hill-riven sky
 Showers the white air;
 The waking leaves
 Send a ripple of song down the mountain-side.

The cedars, sleeping
 On the swing of the cliff,
 Stir, stand erect,
 With slow arms
 Push wide their misty doors;
 Shadow, like a gull,
 Lifts from the gleaming sea.
 Morning, with bells in her bright hair,
 Enters the world!

So to my heart comest thou. (SCD 23-24)

The conventions which inform the sexual imagery in this poem are based on patriarchal notions of female passivity and male activity. In keeping with Romantic convention, a mute and passive female landscape is brought to life through the stirring of erect pines; the result is the birth of the illuminating dawn. In its suggestion that male power is the source of spiritual illumination, this image is in direct opposition to the images of violence and darkness associated with male sexuality in the previous sequence. Because it is surrounded by others which use Indian fictions, the fact that this poem does not go almost unnoticed. Only its title, changed from "Dawn Song" to "Dawn Song of Kan-il-lak" in this volume, integrates it into the genre. This again is evidence of the superficiality of the Indian motif.

"I Sing of the Desired" (SCD 22), "Sun-Song of Kan-il-lak" (SCD 24-5), and "Stars" (SCD 25) all repeat from the male perspective the images of pursuit and capture which inform "The Wild Woman's Lullaby." The symbology associated with "the Desired" expands in these songs to include the swift-pinioned

bird snared in Kan-il-lak's "nets of song" and the chaste stars upon which the poet focuses in his attempt to transcend into the upper realms of the imagination. The climax of his poetic experience is articulated in "A Prayer of Kan-il-lak" (SCD 27), which contains no trace of a female presence. Moon and stars of the earlier poems have been transcended, and here, "Above the dust of barter and the murk of fame," the poet comes face to face with "Kia-Kunae, God." It is significant that Skinner images the ultimate imaginative experience as a confrontation between male poet and male god, for as we shall see in the later sequences, attempts by her female characters to transcend "the actualities of experience" rarely get off the ground.

Almost all of the male personae in Songs of the Coast Dwellers exhibit Kan-il-lak's positive male self-assertion. "Indian Spring" is perhaps the most remarkable example of the way in which Skinner asserts her creative powers through a male character:

I on the thighs of God, as the leaf on the willow!
 I the song of his lips and the light of his mirth,
 I the wind between his frontlets, the desire to his
 children,
 I the sure arrow of his heart!

 I the seed in his spilling pouches, I the spear that
 wounds to harvest;
 I the life-bringer, I his servant to the law that is
 forever;
 I the linked hands of unborn children--
 Mystic fetter round the loins of men and women;

I the sober splendor of their fusion, I the paeon of
 their hope!
 Oh, I on the thighs of God, as the leaf on the willow!
 (SCD 59-60)

To repeat again Gilbert and Gubar's observation, "For all literary artists . . . self-definition necessarily precedes self-assertion: the Creative 'I AM' cannot be uttered if the 'I' knows not what it is." In "Indian Spring" the "I" is clearly male and, more specifically, phallic. Furthermore, this phallus, situated as it is "on the thighs of God," is the divine instrument of creation and as such engenders art. Almost certainly--to invert the question explored by Gilbert and Gubar--the penis in this poem is a metaphorical pen. Only once in the cycle does a female character move toward a self-assertion corresponding in strength to that exhibited by Kan-il-lak and the persona of "Indian Spring." This woman, "The Jealous One at Berry-Picking," is one of the cycle's most negative figures and is severely punished by Skinner, who allows the woman neither love nor recognition as an artist.

"The Jealous One at Berry-Picking" is a derisive portrait of the village spinster. It is a dramatic monologue in which the speaker, Kot-'e'-o, launches into a vindictive attack on the three young female companions who accompany her on the salmonberry-picking expedition. The companions all have suitors while Kot-'e'-o has none. Kot-'e'-o's sour-grapes attitude

toward the situation is the source of the poem's high humour, for although she denies it, Kot-'e'-o has earned in full her reputation as the "Jealous One." She tries to redeem herself in the eyes of her companions by establishing herself as the champion teller of the "Tale of the Berry" but finds that she is as unsuccessful at accomplishing this as she is at attracting a lover:

You will not listen to me?
 That is foolish, for none tells the Tale of the Berry
 better than I.
 This I know; for I have heard all the maidens tell it.
La'n'ya! It was a poor tale!
 (They laugh! They wag the head!) (SCD 41)

The derisive laughter of her companions elicits a venomous attack on each of them in turn:

Who is Whalaka,
 That she should catch old Noan's son?
 Why did he run to her with his fire?
Tst-st-st-st!
 Because her house is the next house to his--
 But for the ten little houses between--
 And mine is too far. That is all!
 Certainly I will kick over your basket, Whalaka.
 (SCD 42)

Kot-'e'-o carries out her threat and kicks Whalaka's basket down a hill. All three maidens flee, leaving Kot-'e'-o alone in the darkening forest. She is eventually fetched by her mother, who drags her daughter kicking and screaming out of the woods:

Ak! Ak!

Nay--wait, my mother, till I tell thee.

It is true I have no berries--

Nay--wait--ak! ai-hi! oi-ick!

They lied! I did not so!

They ran and told thee lies!

The berries? Na-- 'Tis true I have none; they took--

Ai!-ak! ak-i-hi! ak! ak! ah-k-k-k!

Ah-k-k-k! oi-eek! O-i-eek-ow-ow-oo-yah-yah-h-h-h!

(SCD 46)

Kot-'e'-o's monologue is intended as a comic piece. More interesting than the humour, however, are the contradictions and ambivalences on Skinner's part in presenting so unsympathetically a character who so clearly embodies the conflict experienced by women who do not fit the role assigned them by society. Kot-'e'-o's inability to compete on the marriage market and her failure to achieve recognition as the teller of the "Tale of the Berry" make her the object of derision rather than sympathy. Yet there seems to be an unconscious attempt by Skinner to convey some of the fears and frustrations which plague this enraged social outcast.

"The Jealous One at Berry-Picking" may have been inspired by the Tsimshian legend of Gunachnishemgad, translated by Franz Boaz and published in 1912.³⁰ The legend begins as a haughty young noblewoman and ten other Indian maidens embark on a salmonberry gathering expedition. On their way up a hillside the princess steps on some grizzly-bear dung, becomes angry, and loudly expresses her revulsion. When the women finish their gathering each attaches a strap to her full basket and slings it

around her neck. As they begin their descent into the village the strap on the princess's basket breaks and her berries spill out onto the ground. The maidens help her recover them and re-sling her basket around her neck. The strap breaks again several times, and with each episode two or three of the maidens desert the haughty noblewoman. The last time her basket falls she has only one companion left, who stands by and watches the princess retrieve her berries. The princess angrily sends her on ahead. Alone in the darkening woods, the young noblewoman is approached by two young men who offer to carry her basket home for her. When they reach their destination, the princess realizes that she has been abducted into a strange village. She is forced to marry one of the men, who is the eldest son of Grizzly-Bear. Her breaking basket-strap and this enforced marriage, she now discovers, are punishment for her expression of revulsion against the bear. She must forfeit her splendid copper bracelets and ear ornaments to her sisters-in-law as atonement for her excessive pride. Now humbled, she willingly joins her sisters-in-law in their task of wood-gathering and eventually makes an important contribution to the tribe by discovering that driftwood makes the best fuel. In return for this contribution, the tribe's medicine woman arranges for the princess's escape and advises her that she will meet a man in a copper canoe who will help her; she is to offer herself in marriage to this great man. Through a series of trials which

test her courage she earns her new husband's devotion and bears him a son whom she names Gunachnishemgad. Although her father's tribe is hostile to the boy, the princess is fiercely protective. As a result he grows into a great hero who becomes the progenitor of the Raven Clan.

Temperamentally, Skinner's Kot-'e'-o resembles the heroine of the Tsimshian legend but the two women clearly do not share the same fate. Both stories emphasize punishment and redemption in the eyes of others. But while the Tsimshian princess proves her worthiness in the role of wife and mother and is rewarded by becoming the matriarch of a great clan, Kot-'e'-o seeks in vain to redeem herself by adopting the male role of poet. Not only is she unsuccessful, she is severely punished for this offence. Unable to assume the role of wife and mother or the role of poet, she is effectively denied both biological and artistic creativity.

Like the "Wild Woman" poet, Kot-'e'-o is an outsider, and the notoriety she has achieved for herself is clearly not the kind of attention she seeks:

O Maidens--
 O Whalaka, Udz, Aidzumka!
 Hearken while I sing the Tale of the Berry.
 It is I, Kot-'e'-o---they call me Jealous One
 (It is a lie: I am not so!) (SCD 49-40)

Kot-'e'-o would rather be known for her abilities as a poet than her inability to attract a male suitor. Indeed, the lyrical

description of the berry-picking which opens her monologue challenges some of Kan-il-lak's most poetic flights:

Berries are ripe.
 Oh, hi na-na-ya--
 Berries are ripe!
 In the green shallows of the bushes
 The leaves flutter-flutter,
 Like little sea-waves,
 When Yu-ahte, the Young Wind, treads lightly,
 Laughing, laughing, with eyes shut,
 Saying, saying, what he speaks not--
 (Tst--st--st-- Little Wind--st!)
 Flutter, flutter little leaves,
 Whisper and be very angry!
 Yet shall the ten brown fingers of the maidens
 Strip your green boughs of the ripe pink berries!
 Salmon-berries, Salmon-berries,
 Hiding in the leafy shallows,
 We will catch you without nets,
 We will spear you with our little sharp nails,
 We will snare you with our ten brown fingers.
 (SCD 39)

This opening section establishes Kot-'e'-o as a self-conscious poet/interpreter of nature. In keeping with Skinner's definition of the poet as listener, who hears nature's whispers and hears the leaves "clap their hands,"³¹ Kot-'e'-o is attuned to the whispering of the leaves and the laughing of the wind. But there is more on her mind than just artistic creativity. She perceives the act of berry picking in terms of the courtship ritual and sexual initiation which we have seen depicted in the opening sequence and which we shall see again in "Song of the Four Mornings," where expectant young virgins hide in the forest awaiting discovery by their eager bridegrooms. However, in this image, not virgins but "ripe pink berries" are "Hiding in the

leafy shallows" to be discovered by "ten brown fingers" which will snare and spear them with "little sharp nails." This implicit allusion to sexual violence suggests that rage and a desire for retaliation may also be present here, for it is not men but maidens who are performing this violent act.

Not only does Kot-'e'-o's special talent for hearing nature's voice define her as a poet, her "Tale of the Berry" suggests that she, rather than Kan-il-lak, may be the "divine culturist" of the tribe:

Once, once, far, far, long back,
 When that old man the Sun was a baby,
 Rocking on the tree of Heaven;
 And the earth sat still and fed him strength
 From the thousand gushing mountain-tips
 Of her warm brown breast--
 That so he might grow swiftly strong
 To run every day across the great world
 And carry the Kettles of Light--

.

All this forest was a river,
 A flowing green river of the sea. . . . (SCD 40)

Unlike the male poet Kan-il-lak, who limits his repertoire to dialogues with his muse, with his (male) maker, and with the landscape, Kot-'e'-o assumes the official task of Poet Laureate of the community, a task which involves the interpreting of tribal history and myth. Significantly, Kot-'e'-o's creation myth abounds in maternal images. Unlike the "Sun-Song of Kan-il-lak," which asserts the omnipotence of "the man-strength of sun-light," Kot-'e'-o gives the highest honour in creation to

Mother Earth, to whom the sun owes its existence and its strength. Indeed, the image of the sun as both "old man" and "baby" seems to undercut the notion of the superiority of a male sun over a female earth. Kan-il-lak's image of the sun as a ravisher of the female is contrasted here by Kot-'e'-o's image of the sun as a kind of servant to the "great world" for whom he daily carries "Kettles of Light."

It is perhaps not surprising that Kot-'e'-o's tale, like the legend of Gunachnishemgad, is informed by matriarchal power, for the most impressive image of power in her monologue is her mother: "My mother is a Haida woman; / The Haida women are most big and strong and fierce." Long before her actual appearance on the scene at the end of the poem, we are introduced to the formidable Haida woman:

. . . Aidzumka!
 I would you were my sister,
 That I might tell your unbecoming thoughts
 To my strong, fierce mother.
 Ay! there would be music in the village,
 A roaring and a dancing!
 You would sing like the wind through a rock.
 She would beat out the wild shrill sound
 Like Man-es-tet-su, the Priest's Drum-beater.
 (SCD 44)

The most hateful curse Kot-'e'-o can hurl at her companion is the wish that she might have a mother like the Haida woman. The pride in and fear of her mother expressed here by Kot-'e'-o is in keeping with the ambivalence of mother-daughter relationships, an ambivalence already noted in the young wife's

poems.

The Haida woman is one of a pair of frightening images which haunts the final section of Kot-'e'-o's monologue:

What is that? there--there--stalking?
 It is tall. It is silent.
 It comes swiftly through the black pines.
 It is the Woods-ghost with the long hissing serpent
 in his hand,
Ai-i! ai-i! Oh-ah! the Woods-ghost. Oi-ick! the--!
Nay--nay--Nay-y--it is my mother--!
It is my strong, fierce mother, the Haida woman.
 (SCD 46)

The "Woods-ghost," armed with "the long hissing serpent," is clearly some kind of representative of male sexual power. He is set up here in contrast to the Haida woman, who, as the italicized line at the end of the verse suggests, is the more fearsome and powerful of the two. Indeed, by meting out Kot-'e'-o's well-deserved punishment this awesome mother figure becomes the true hero of the poem.

The link between poetic imagination and punishable conduct in a woman is also suggested in Skinner's fiction. In 1927, the same year in which "The Jealous One at Berry-Picking" appeared in Southwestern Review, Skinner published her novel, Roselle of the North.³² Aimed at an adolescent female audience, the moral of this novel is that immodesty in a woman is not only unfeminine but extremely dangerous and should be punished. Modesty and bravery are compatible qualities possessed by Roselle, a young white girl who is adopted by a tribe of Cree

Indians. Equally brave but lacking in modesty is Roselle's closest companion, the Indian maiden, Unripe Nut. She is inordinately proud of her bravery which she comes by honestly: she is descended from a long line of exceptionally strong women. This vain Indian girl and her mother Matilla closely resemble the mother-daughter pair in "The Jealous One at Berry-Picking." Matilla is a large woman whose "strong bony frame suggests a man's" and whose "face was like a warrior's, with its stern mouth, piercing eyes, and eagle nose" (45). Despite her warrior-like aspect, all Matilla's battles are fought on the domestic front. She is a stern disciplinarian who beats her daughter regularly for her vanity, her lack of feminine modesty, and her jealousy of the other girls which is an inevitable symptom of her extreme egocentrism.

Like her counterpart in "The Jealous One," Unripe Nut is a self-appointed poet of the tribe. She causes much dissension among the other young women by declaring herself the "best story-teller" among them and by selfishly seizing the prized task of introducing Roselle to the legends of the Cree people. Roselle's favourable response to Unripe Nut's legend of the origins of warpaint feeds the young poet's vanity and tempts her to pass off some of her own imaginative creations as ancient legend; these stories are, however, received with considerable suspicion. Her "wonderful, true story" about what happens to the ripples made by a canoe paddle is, like Kot-'e'-o's "Tale of

the Berry," a woman-centered fantasy in which a demi-goddess is credited with the control of daylight and darkness, the blowing of the wind, and the destination of ripples which appear on lake and river surfaces. But Unripe Nut's tale is a dismal failure because she selfishly refuses to give it a satisfactory ending. Consequently, her story elicits only disappointment: "It tells everything but what you promised to tell!" (154), Roselle complains. No more "legends" are forthcoming from Unripe Nut. Instead, she tries to turn herself into a legend by attempting the heroic act of rescuing Roselle from the wicked white traders who have kidnapped her from the tribe. Although her ancient and exceedingly vain grandmother had once won the honorary title of woman warrior for a similar act, this kind of task is not normally within a Cree woman's purview, and Unripe Nut succeeds only in disgracing herself by almost bringing about Roselle's death. Now she must endure the humiliation of being whipped at length by Matilla in the presence of several male members of the tribe whose derisive laughter only intensifies the girl's humiliation. Cured of her unwomanly pretensions, Unripe Nut is imaged in the last scene of the novel reciting upon request from her betters a poem in honour of the virtuous Roselle; significantly, it is a poem written by Tataka, a young male poet of the tribe.

The portrait of the frustrated female poet Unripe Nut is far more ambivalently drawn than that of her twin Kot-'e'-o.

Despite the fact that Unripe Nut's behaviour becomes increasingly more alienating as the novel progresses, the narrator insists throughout that she is at heart an admirable individual, if somewhat "Unripe." Kot-'e'-o has no narrator to contradict the negative impression created by her conduct; further, Skinner allows us no sympathy for Kot-'e'-o's inability to achieve full identity with either her female or her poetic roles--harsh treatment, considering that this is the dilemma Skinner herself must confront as a woman poet. The implicit relationship in these twin portraits between poetic creativity and unfeminine conduct recalls Gilbert and Gubar's theory of "the anxiety of authorship." While Marjorie Pickthall seems to have dealt with this anxiety by repressing her own creativity and imitating male models, Skinner seems to see punishment--especially corporal punishment--as the solution to "unnatural" female creativity. Perhaps her habit of making her female characters the focus of her obsession with violence is a symptom of that patriarchal "dis-ease" which afflicts women poets.

"The Jealous One at Berry-Picking" is one of a sequence of three poems from the point of view of unwed characters in the community. These three poems are among the least successful in the cycle largely because they are meant to be humorous, and Skinner is not a skilled humorist. More important, all three poems feature negative characters who elicit no sympathy for the problems associated with singlehood. Perhaps only marital

problems are worthy of sympathy and serious treatment. This is entirely in keeping with the lower status accorded to unmarried individuals in patriarchal culture. With the exception of these three poems, Songs of the Coast Dwellers contrasts effectively--if at times unwittingly--the discrepancy between the realities and the ideals which govern gender arrangements in patriarchy. While marriage is depicted in the opening sequence as an institution designed to meet the needs of men at the expense of women, in this sequence women are characterized negatively as not possessing the qualities men require in wives. While it is true that the comic mode in which these poems are cast is intended to mitigate this negativity, the humour succeeds only in conveying Skinner's ambivalent attitude toward her theme. The portrait of the old maid Kot-'e'-o is not merely humorous but cruelly derisive. In "The Unwilling Lover Prays for Courting Weather" (SCD 34-5), the groom is reluctant to commence courtship proceedings not merely because this is a loveless match of convenience but because his intended mate is fat and sulky. In the "Song of the Conqueror of Women" (SCD 36-8), we can to some degree approve the behaviour of the vain and heartless dandy because the women who compete so vigorously for his attention are foolish and self-demeaning.

Another way in which this sequence supports patriarchal notions of gender is in its reversal of the pursuit and capture ritual of courtship. While elsewhere in the cycle the male

pursuit of "the Desired" is sanctified by nature and elevated through its use as a metaphor for the quest after spiritual illumination, here the pursuit of men by women is depicted as a degrading activity. The "Conqueror of Women" is justified in his anger which "splits the hearts of women" because to pursue a man so shamelessly is conduct unbecoming the female sex. Similarly, Kot-'e'-o's aborted attempt to escape her frustrating situation by transcending into the realm of poetic imagination is entirely in keeping with her inability to catch herself a man. Whether the goal is a mate or spiritual enlightenment, only men, it would seem, are sanctioned to engage in pursuit and capture.

The largest group of poems in Songs of the Coast Dwellers contains twelve loosely related pieces on the changing of the seasons. These poems are primarily variations on the theme of humankind's relationship to the natural world. "Indian Spring," which we have already examined, is one of these twelve. The inspiration for this sequence may have come from Nootka legends, for some of the characters bear Nootka names.³³ Two chief deities compete for prominence in this group: Kunae-Kia the "Supreme One," who is "Man-Soul of the Vast," and Swiya, who appears in several aspects: she is variously Mother Earth, the Earth Witch, and the goddess of Spring. In keeping with changes in Indian mythology as a result of the contact with

Christianity,³⁴ Swiya, as a female deity, is always secondary to the male Kunae. Significantly, however, she gets far more attention from Skinner than does her male superior. Most of these twelve poems do little more than repeat the themes treated elsewhere in the volume. However, the sequence which introduces the group is an interesting variation on those themes.

"Song of the Four Mornings" is a sequence of four "dawn" poems. Like Kan-il-lak's "Dawn Song" each of these poems is meant to convey a mystical moment of illumination. At the dawning moment of each new season the members of Skinner's community have a profound vision of their place in the cosmos. More important, the sequence as a whole is a utopian vision which prefigures the female "design of life and society" suggested in "Cheating at Solitaire." While the utopia presented in "Song of the Four Mornings" is not nearly as radical as the later vision, it nevertheless moves toward an equalization of power between the sexes. In contrast to the opening sequence of the volume which articulates the unjust realities of life in a male dominated culture, "Song of the Four Mornings" presents an alternative way of being for both sexes. This sequence employs the courtship-marriage ritual as a metaphor for the cycle of the seasons and depicts a relatively egalitarian community where women and men move joyfully and in harmony with one another and with nature through the seasons of their lives. This is Skinner's last full treatment of the

rituals which are so central to women's lives; in its ideal presentation of those rituals it can be seen as the poet's attempt to transcend the bitter realities of female existence and to reach "the realm of imagination above the actualities of experience."

The sequence follows a pantheon of gods and seasonal spirits as they direct and participate in the mating rituals. The poems are narrated from several points of view: the men, the women, the tribe as a whole, and even some of the spirits take turns at narrating the events. Each of the seasons is represented by a personified spirit who enters into the rituals at the dawn of the appropriate season. The spirits of Spring, Autumn, and Winter are male; these are the three husbands of Swyia. The spirit of Autumn, Plem-Salia-Kwi, is also a kind of patron saint of men, the "Hunters and Providers" of the community. Tem-Eyos-Kwi is the spirit of Summer; she is the guiding spirit of women, "the Harborers, the Fosterers." The chief god Kunae, male counterpart to Swyia, makes only a brief appearance. Significantly, he does not participate in the rituals but is the recipient of the community's gratitude for the abundant harvest.

Male and female in this sequence do not fall into the active aggressor-passive victim pattern of sexual union. Indeed, it is the women who initiate sexual encounter. At the dawn of summer they follow Tem-Eyos-Kwi into the forest; from

their hiding places among the leaves they call to the men:

"Come, come, O swift and strong!
We are the women: seek us.

.....

O men, Hunters of Life,
We are the Harborers, the Fosterers--the women!
Seek us!"

(It was the women, the Harborers, the Fosterers, who
rose first,
And followed Tem-Eyos-Kwi:
They called to the men.)

("Summer Dawn," SCD 50-1)

Interestingly, Skinner feels constrained to insert this somewhat redundant parenthetical statement in which she makes it very clear just who is in control of this event. The women, not the men, make the first response to the call of eros; "They" in turn call the men to join them.

The men, armed with their weapons of "Lightning and heat," "enter the forest with the tramp of thunder and the darkness of storm." Significantly, there are no ellipses or syntactical breaks in this rendering of the climactic moment:

And the song of the women is stilled.
The cry of offering ascends, it passes the swooping
shadows;
There is a sigh through the forest of wings sinking--
Then the hush.

On the leaves is a sweet whisper of rain,
Whispered sweetness of pangs past.
The warm soil drinks the coolness of tears--
Tears that are dropping melodies
Because cunning hands and strong have shaken the
living cords. (SCD 51)

Sexual union is achieved with a minimum of pain and tears--perhaps because these men, unlike their brutal counterparts in the opening sequence of the volume, rely more on "cunning" than brute force. Another significant difference between this sexual episode and the one imaged in the opening sequence is that the "darkness of storm" associate with male sexuality lifts immediately:

The skies part, the black wings fold;
 The Sun-Chief's canoe rides on the upper blue with
 furlled sails;
 Tem-Eyos-Kwi, laughing, is at the paddle,
 Our village is drenched with light. (SCD 51-2)

This is the moment of illumination--or, in terms of the act just depicted, the moment of conception. It is a moment shared by man and woman, for both male and female principles are present in this image, in which the female spirit of the dawn ushers in the male spirit of day.

The closing image of "Summer Dawn" is as close as Skinner can come to an egalitarian vision:

Two by two, they come up from the forest--the men and
 the women.
 The women's smiles are the little sun-tipped clouds
 Floating across the face of the mountain:
 The look in their eyes is deeper than seas.
 High in the light the men lift their heads.
 On their clear brows is the mystic mark
 Of those from whom a great dream has gone forth.
 Firmly they hold the hands of the women,
 Who have given peace to their strength, and a meaning.
 Together, together, the Race-Makers enter the lodges.
 (SCD 52)

As the givers of "peace" and "meaning" to men, women are still the agents of male transcendence, and yet the look in their eyes suggests that they, too, have experienced mystical vision. But more important is the implication created by the emphasis on the word "together": ideally, the perpetuation of life results from the equal partnership of men and women.

Skinner's vision of a utopian society is almost certainly inspired by the fact that traditionally Indian women of some North West Coast tribes have a voice in the community and are recognized as making valuable contributions. Indeed, "Autumn Dawn" idealizes this aspect of Indian culture and even suggests that the way women win respect is by speaking out on their own behalf. In this lengthy poem women's work is valued equally with that of men: Kunae receives thanks for the raw materials of game, fish, and fruit, but gratitude for the finished products accrues to women. Following a lengthy catalogue of the goods and services they provide, the women are given a chance to speak out on the importance of their domestic activities:

"Is not thy roof fragrant with cedar-trays of
berries?
Have I not stored thy house full?
Hast thou not a little wayward son of thee at each
of thy hands?
Is the cradle on my back--the cradle of thy despised
little daughter--empty?
Where is another such wife?
Speak, O thou Hunter of Life. . . ." (SCD 54-55)

Clearly, all is not perfect in this utopia. Sons are still

indulged and daughters despised. But at least--unlike the isolated woman in the opening sequence, whose audience can neither hear nor understand her--these women are paid attention to by their menfolk. Although "The men answer not" these somewhat academic questions, the light of understanding gleams in their eyes:

For the silent men have seen
 That Plem-Salia-Kwi walks not alone.
 Through all his paths, She follows him--his woman,
 his mate--
 Sharing his blanket.
 She has no other garment, her breast is bare,
 She has given all to him she follows;
 So comes he with plenty!
 He tires not forever on his leagues of march,
 Because her feet are set to his footprints,
 And the gleam of her bare hand slants across his
 shoulder.
 Therefore the silent men, the Hunters and Providers
 of Life,
 Greet Plem-Salia-Kwi, the Harvest-Bringer, their
 blood-brother the Mated One,
 With the tink-tonk, tink-tonk, tink-tonk of bright
 hammers,
 Shaping gifts for their women;
 Ringing their thanksgiving song for full joys--
 Full baskets, full cradles, the full arms of sleep.
 (SCD 55-6)

The illuminating autumn dawn which ushers in the guiding spirit of men, Plem-Salia-Kwi, also brings a special moment of enlightenment. Male egocentrism is transcended and male vision widened to admit the presence and importance of woman to man's endeavours. While this image of woman as the utterly selfless mate and the power behind the throne might not satisfy today's ideal of sexual equality, it is a considerable improvement over

the gender arrangements depicted elsewhere in the volume; here, women's contribution is at least recognized and rewarded.

In terms of its exploration of the female condition, the six poems of the closing sequence of Songs of the Coast Dwellers repeat and expand the themes treated in the opening sequence. Interestingly, three of these poems--"She Who Cannot Give," "The Strange Woman at the Mountain," and "The Strange Woman Asks"--do not employ the conventions of the Indian Fictions genre. Like Skinner's use of the courtly love and muse conventions in the Kan-il-lak sequence, this is evidence of just how secondary the Indian motif is to the concerns Skinner repeatedly addresses throughout the volume. Because of the strong thematic relationship of these three poems to the rest of the cycle, their maverick quality goes almost unnoticed; further, Skinner attempts to integrate them by flanking them on all sides by poems which do use Indian fictions. However, their remarkable directness gives them away. What masquerades elsewhere in the volume as Indian experience is in these three poems undisguised female experience.

Although the first poem in the sequence does employ Indian fictions, it is not cast in the form of a song. "No Answer is Given" is an exploration of the difference between male and female notions of love. It is Skinner's clearest expression of women's inability to make themselves heard and their needs

known. In a dialogue between hunter and maiden, male sexual desire and female constancy are polarized and presented as the central contradiction of romantic love. As if to lend credence to her assertions of male indifference, Skinner makes the hunter the controlling persona of the poem and thereby allows him to demonstrate his own insensitivity. In his retelling of his encounter with the young maiden, the hunter quotes the maiden directly yet fails to understand the meaning of her words.

The poem begins by setting up the classic male-female contrast; it is a contrast between hunter and hunted, active and passive, perceiver and perceived:

I am Ah-wo-'a-te, the Hunter.

I met a maiden in the shadow of the rocks.
 Her eyes were strange and clear,
 Her fair lips were shaped like the bow of dawning.
 I asked her name,
 Striking my spear in the deep earth for resting.
 "I am K'antlak, a maiden, named for the
 morning. . . ." (SCD 77)

The image of the spear striking into deep earth restates once more the theme of violent sexual encounter. It is perhaps no coincidence that the maiden's name is so similar to Kan-il-lak's, for K'antlak's "strange and clear" eyes identify her as a kind of poet-seer. Indeed, like Kan-il-lak, this female poet "begin[s] to seek the realm of imagination above the actualities of experience":

". . . On the mountain top I heard two eagles talking,
 The word was 'Love.'
 They cried it, beating their wings on each other
 Until they bled; and she fell,
 Yet falling, still weakly cried it
 To him soaring; and died.
 I came to a mossy low valley of flowers
 There I saw Men'iak, the white grouse,
 (White with chaste dreams, like the Spring Moon,
 fairer than flowers).
 Through the forest a dark bird swooped with fierce
 eyes,
 And Men'iak flew down to it.
 Her white breast is red-dyed, she lies on the moss;
 Yet faintly cries the same strange word.
 Hunter, will you come to my little fire and tell
 me what Love is?" (SCD 77)

K'antlak's description of female victimization is a translation into animal terms of the sexual relationship which was expressed less metaphorically in the opening sequence of the cycle.

K'antlak seeks to know the true nature of a love which leads women to submit willingly to male violence. In the case of the eagle pair, the violence between them results in the death of the female rather than in the death of her love for the male. The white grouse, virginal as the moon which symbolizes female chastity, flies eagerly toward sexual encounter, an experience which does nothing to mitigate her longing for her mate. The way in which bird imagery is used in these lines recalls the flight and freedom, pursuit and capture conflict expressed in "The Wild Woman's Lullaby."

Sexual encounter between hunter and maiden is expressed in highly metaphorical terms:

I could not see the maiden's face clearly, for the
 dusk,
 Where she sat by her small fire--only her eyes.
 In the little flicker I saw her feet--they were bare--
 Tireless, slim brown feet.
 I saw how fair her lips were.
 I drew nearer to cast my log on the fire. (SCD 78)

Ah-wo-'a-te perceives the maiden in a series of images which fragment her body into sexually enticing objects. His inability to see her clearly also suggests his failure to understand the true nature of her request--namely, to show her that love is not the bewildering conflict she has perceived it to be. Clearly K'antlak's highly poetical rendering of the painful "actualities of experience" has failed to illuminate the hunter's understanding.

The hunter approaches K'antlak and enacts his own definition of the meaning of love:

"Maiden, I am the Hunter.
 When dusk ends the chase I leave the Mighty Killing.
 Far or near, where gleams some little fire,
 I grope through the forest with my heavy log
 Till I find one by the fire, sitting alone without
 fuel. . . ." (SCD 78)

To the hunter, "love" is merely an activity in which he engages when nightfall forces him to leave the hunt. At dusk he seeks out a woman who is not already spoken for. When he finds her, as he has now found K'antlak,

I cast my log gladly into the fire--thus!
It grips, the flame mounts, the warmth embraces. . . .

Almost I can see your face, Woman;
The bow of your fair lips is hot with speeded arrows,
Your strange clear eyes have darkened.
Fear not--our fire will outlast the dark." (SCD 78)

Characteristically, Skinner uses an ellipsis to suggest the climactic moment, which is for her rarely expressible in language. The hunter, still blind to K'antlak, makes out the darkness of disappointment and bewilderment in her eyes but cannot interpret it. According to his understanding, a passion which can outlast the night is surely the "love" this strange woman has asked to be shown.

The almost humorous effect of the post-coital dialogue between the hunter and the maiden is perhaps excusable, given that the female perspective on sexuality was such highly experimental subject matter for Skinner's generation of poets:

"Hunter, what of the cold on the bleak hillside
When the log burns gray and the fire is ashes?
I replied: "I have never seen this:
When the fire burns low I am asleep."
She said: "What of me, if I sleep not, and see the
ashes?"
I yawned: I said: "I know not.
I wake in the sun and go forth."
The bow of her lips was like the moon's cold circle.
She said, "Hunter, you have told me of Love!"
"It may be so," I answered. I wished to sleep.
She said, "Already it is ashes."
I looked and saw that her face was gray
As if the wind had blown the ashes over it.
I was angry. I said: "Better you had slept."
She said, "Yes . . . but I lie bleeding on the moss,
Crying this word."

I answered: "This is so; but wherefore?" and asked
idly

"Wherefore remember him who brought to your lone
little fire

The log that now is ashes?"

She shivered in the cold dawn.

I saw that her eyes were darker than shadows. . . .

(SCD 78-79)

The sexually satiated hunter, who can think only of sleep, is bored and finally angered by the incomprehensible chatter of the unfulfilled K'antlak. By pointing out the parallel between herself and the virgin white grouse whose injuries only increase her longing, K'antlak attempts to make Ah-wo-'a-te understand that he has done nothing more than help to perpetuate the destructive cycle of so-called "love" relationships. The hunter, who can see no profit or logic in female constancy, responds in the only way he knows how:

Her mouth was like my perfect bow

But I could fit no more arrows to it. (SCD 79)

K'antlak's passion cannot be rekindled, for it is emotional and not sexual fulfillment she seeks.

In a last attempt to communicate her needs to the hunter, K'antlak projects herself into the desolate landscape:

. . . "Hunter, see how gray are these rocks
Where we have sheltered our brief night."

I looked. They were ashen.

She said, "See how they come together here--and here--

As the knees--the breast--the great brow--the
forgotten eyes--

Of a woman,

Sitting, waiting, stark and still,--

And always gray;
 Though hunters camp each night between her knees,
 And little fires are kindled and burned out in her
 hollows."

It was so; the mountain was a stone woman sitting.
 K'antlak said, "She remembers him who turned her fire
 to ashes.

She waits to know the meaning of her waiting--
 Why the love that wounded her can never be cast out."
 (SCD 79-80)

This woman in stone conveys an accurate image of the silenced female in patriarchal culture--silenced by male failure to understand women in their attempts to articulate the experiences of their lives. This image of the woman who waits passively in stony silence "to know the meaning of her waiting" is in sharp contrast to the image of male indifference which closes the poem:

I asked idly, "Who will tell her?"
 And laughed, for the sun was up. I reached for my
 arrows.
 K'antlak looked up to the other gray face, and said:
 "No Answer is Given."
 Down to the cold white endless sea-shore
 Slowly she went, with bent head.
 A young deer cast its leaping shadow on the pool;
 I ran upon the bright path, swaying my spear.
 (SCD 80)

The futility of any attempt to penetrate male indifference to female emotional needs is conveyed in the knowing look K'antlak exchanges with her stony counterpart. A point of contrast is made in this image between the total immobility of the stone woman and the male prerogative of travel and movement in space. This opposition of stasis and motion is enhanced by the contrast

between the slow movements of K'antlak and the image of the hunter running after the leaping deer.

Socially conditioned sexual response is also the theme of the next poem in the sequence, entitled "She Who Cannot Give." It, too, concerns unanswered questions. Like Ah-wo'a-te, this woman knows only one mode of response:

I am fire and a song:
Fire kindled by storm,
Song of the woman who is taken.

When you asked, the song ceased;
The flame died when you asked. (SCD 80-81)

This woman is so conditioned to violent sexual encounter that she cannot respond to the wooing of a gentler lover: when he asks, "No Answer is Given." The absence of the usual Indian paraphernalia is probably responsible for the briefness of this poem. There is no basket weaving, whip plaiting, or any other decorative metaphor to cushion the impact of its blunt sentiment.

Similarly, the "Strange Woman" whose poems close Songs of the Coast Dwellers wanders through a landscape which contains no Indian huts, no canoes, and no Indian nature gods. It is a psychological landscape which reflects the desolation of a woman who is alienated from the civilized illusions she had once found comfort in. This woman is a kind of composite of all the female personae in the cycle who have suffered disillusionment in love. "The Strange Woman at the Mountain" is a vivid portrait of a

victim/survivor of male psychological and sexual tyranny:

I have sought for strength in men;
 Eager to bow before it
 The head and the thighs
 That are too heavy with pride:
 Eager to shatter there as crystal
 The will that slowly darkens and turns to iron.
 But only in my own soul have I found it--
 The strength I have sought in men. (SCD 82)

Like the "wild" woman whose poetry masquerades as lullaby, this "strange" woman is unconventional, ostracized, alienated from culture because she can no longer share in that culture's commonly held beliefs. She is "strange" because estranged from patriarchal notions which encourage false male pride. She no longer believes in the myth of superior male strength, realizes that signing on to male illusions of intellectual and sexual superiority is self-destructive, and has discovered that her own inner strength is equal to the kind of strength women have been taught to look for only in men. But loneliness is one of the negative side effects of freedom from commonly held illusions; therefore, this alienated woman turns to nature for solace and companionship:

Mountain,
 Are you, too,
 Fire quenched in rock;
 Will that ranged heaven for a god to break it,
 Frozen into immobility?
 Are you, too, loneliness--
 Too far above earth,

And not near the stars?

Only in my own soul-- (SCD 82)

The image of the mountain recalls the woman of stone in "No Answer is Given." Here, however, the woman only ponders the possibility of turning to stone and becoming through her estrangement as lonely and remote as a mountain-top.

Significantly, she ends by rejecting this image of frozen isolation in a space which touches neither heaven nor earth. Instead she turns inward once again to the source of her own independence and strength.

Jean Mallinson recognizes Skinner as a precursor of contemporary Canadian women poets who work within the Indian Fictions genre. However, because she believes that Skinner's poems are reinterpretations of Indian verse rather than original works, Mallinson concludes that the difference between Skinner and her successors is that her work is not a rendering of her own sense of being a woman (Mallinson 99). Yet the poems are informed by the poet's own experience and/or perception of female sexuality, for it is extremely doubtful that she made any ethnographical studies of sexual practises and attitudes among North West Coast Indian women; furthermore, during the early twentieth century no such studies were available for her to consult. Indeed, this aspect of Indian culture has only just recently been recognized as a potentially valuable area of

anthropological investigation.³⁵ As I hope this chapter has demonstrated, many of the poems in Songs of the Coast Dwellers reflect, record, and interpret the patriarchal world from a recognizably female point of view in that they depict the victimization of women through sexual violation, emotional brutality, and social alienation. Further, despite her profound ambivalence about female poetic power, and although she requires the male mask of poetic power to achieve it, Skinner does succeed in identifying herself with the role of poet. But most important, whatever one thinks of the poetry, it does represent a bold and interesting experiment in the integration of female experience and art--an integration which is crucial to the development of female poetic identity.

Notes

- 1 Constance Lindsay Skinner, "Poetry--The Living Speech: Why the Invention of New Forms Fails," Poetry Review 5 (July-Dec. 1914), 207.
- 2 "Notes," Poetry 7 (Jan. 1916), 215.
- 3 Constance Lindsay Skinner, "On Writing of Many Kinds," Journal of Information for Literary Workers 59 (23 Dec. 1922), 95.
- 4 Constance Lindsay Skinner, "A Hudson Bay Childhood," New York Herald Tribune Books (26 Feb. 1928), 8.
- 5 "Notes," Poetry 5 (Oct. 1914), 47.
- 6 Skinner, "On Writing of Many Kinds," p. 95.
- 7 Constance Lindsay Skinner, "The Reviewer Replies," New York Herald Tribune Books 10 (27 May 1934), 17.
- 8 D.M. LeBourdais, "The Saskatchewan," Canadian Forum 30 (July 1950), 88.
- 9 Skinner, "A Hudson Bay Childhood," p. 8.
- 10 Constance Lindsay Skinner, "Cheating at Solitaire," North American Review 224:4 (Nov. 1927), 675-79. All further references appear in the text.
- 11 Constance Lindsay Skinner, "What Well-Dressed Women are Reading," North American Review 227:4 (April 1929), 430-34. All further references appear in the text.

- 12 A. Jean Mallinson, "Versions and Subversions: Formal Strategies in the Poetry of Contemporary Women," diss., Simon Fraser Univ., 1981, p. iii. All further references appear in the text.
- 13 Crawford, Collected Poems, pp. 198-202 and pp. 214-15.
- 14 E. Pauline Johnson, Legends of Vancouver (Toronto: McClelland, Goodchild & Stewart, 1911).
- 15 George W. Cronyn, ed., The Path on the Rainbow: An Anthology of Songs and Chants from the Indians of North America (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1918).
- 16 "Dzō'noq!wa," Franz Boas and George Hunt, Kwakiutl Texts (New York: G.E. Stechert, 1902), pp. 507-8.
- 17 "Notes," Poetry 9 (Feb. 1917), 265.
- 18 Johnson makes many references throughout Legends of Vancouver to the status of Squamish Indian women. For references to the role of women in Squamish legend see "The Two Sisters" (pp. 1-10); women as fishers and canoists and the attitude toward female children are discussed in "The Lost Salmon-run" (pp. 35-45).
- 19 See, for example, women as shamans and owners of property (Behari L. Verma, "The Squamish: A Study of Changing Political Organization," diss., University of British Columbia, 1954, p. 19) and the tradition of "mother-right" in matriarchates like the Squamish tribe (Charles Hill-Tout, The Salish People, Volume II: The Squamish and the Lillooet [Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1978], pp. 31-22. In her study of Haida Indian women, Margaret Blackman makes the following observation about matriarchates: "A common theme running through the analysis of matrilineal societies is that women enjoy, if not external authority, culturally favorable status simply by virtue of the fact that descent is traced through females who are seen as the focus of the entire social structure." She quotes anthropologist Nancy Quinn: "male dominance myths, far from reflecting women's overall low status, arise precisely because women have considerable economic importance, personal autonomy,

and domestic influence" (During My Time [Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1982], p. 50).

20 For a description of Coast Salish courtship and marriage customs see Diamond Jennes, The Faith of a Coast Salish Indian (Victoria: Anthropology in British Columbia Memoir No. 3, 1955), pp. 80-82. Hill-Tout describes an elopement into the woods after which the final decision to make the match permanent is made; he mentions no "lover's search," no torches, and no whips as part of the courtship-marriage ritual ("Marriage Customs," pp.40-43).

21 "Notes," Poetry 5 (August 1914), 47.

22 Jennes (p. 28) refers to this custom, in which the instrument used is a cluster of spruce-boughs, not plaited cedar-boughs, as in Skinner's poems. In Hilary Stewart's Cedar (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1984), an exhaustive study of the North West Coast Indian use of cedar wood, bark, withes, and roots, Stewart describes hundreds of items made, from canoes, houses, and totem poles, to medicine, clothing, and diapers but makes no reference to whips.

23 In her Klee Wyck (Toronto: Oxford, 1941), Emily Carr describes a visit to the Tsimshian community at Greenville, B.C., and relates the following: "Every clan took a creature [totem] for its particular crest. Individuals had private crests too, which they earned for themselves often by privation and torture and fasting" (p. 73).

24 "The Jealous Woman," Edward Sapir and Morris Swadesh, eds., Nootka Texts: Tales and Ethnological Narratives (Philadelphia: Linguistic Society of America, 1939), pp. 67-9.

25 Among the Nootka, the "Wild Woman of the Woods" seems to have been splintered into three legends. In addition to her incarnation as "The Jealous Woman," she appears briefly as "the great Woman of the Woods" in the myth entitled "How Andaokot First Came to this World" (E.Y. Arima, The West Coast (Nootka) People [Victoria: British Columbia Provincial Museum, 1983], pp. 50-54); in that myth she catches children, hangs them over the fire alive, and smokes them to death (p. 50). She appears again as "Pitch Woman" in "The Stealing of Children by Pitch Woman and their Rescue" (Sapir and Swadesh, pp. 89-901) in which she

carries children off into the woods.

26 Emily Carr received the legend of D'Sonoqua from a Kwakiutl when she asked him to tell her the story of the woman she saw carved out of a cedar tree. Like Skinner, Carr reinterpreted the Wild Woman of the Woods as having a protective as well as a destructive aspect because when Carr saw the huge D'Sonoqua carving a bird was nesting in her open mouth and a cat was sleeping between her feet (Carr, p. 52).

27 Verma explains that there was no ritual or official procedure for obtaining a divorce; if a woman was unhappy in her marriage she could simply leave (p. 37). Jenness writes that "if a man's daughter were unhappily married, he sometimes invited his son-in-law and his son-in-law's kinsmen to a feast, at which he put on his masked-dance costume, clothed his daughter in rich goat's wool blankets, and denounced her ill treatment in a song that was taken up by his relative with drums and sticks. In this way he publically shamed his son-in-law, whose kinsmen hastily offered compensation, and either ensured the woman against further ill treatment or agreed to annul the marriage" (p. 71).

28 Constance Lindsay Skinner, "The Indian as Poet," The Path on the Rainbow, pp. 341-47. All further references appear in the text.

29 Constance Lindsay Skinner, "The Rainbow Path," Reedy's Mirror 27 (13 Dec. 1918), 666.

30 "Story of GunaxnēsEmg.a'd," Franz Boas and John Swanton, eds., Haida Songs and Tsimshian Texts (Leyden, Holland: E.J. Brill, 1912), pp. 147-93.

31 "The Rainbow Path," p. 666. See also Skinner's Forward to Songs of the Coast Dwellers, p. ix.

32 Roselle of the North (New York: Macmillan, 1927). All further references appear in the text.

33 Cam Hubert, whose Indian stories and poems are based on legends told to her by the Nootka band at Ahousat, B.C., uses

some of the same names. For example, "Tem Eyos Ki" ("Tem-Eyos-Kwi," as spelled by Skinner) is the central character in "Tem Eyos Ki and the Land Claims Question" (Dreamspeaker [Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1978], pp. 89-137.

34 A Coast Salish Indian at Sardis, interviewed by Jennes, "emphatically asserted that the name 'cicə|sɛ'm' [He Who Dwells Above] was introduced by white missionaries, and that his people in pre-European days never prayed to a supreme being. . . . Instead they prayed to the sun and the forces of nature, and to the spirits of various animals." Jennes also says that "The Coast Salish Indians on Vancouver Island also maintained that the doctrine of a supreme being was of recent introduction." He reckons that after the arrival of the white man the Salish "synthesized their earlier beliefs and Christian teachings, and evolved an orderly mythology on an imported monotheistic base" (Jennes, p. 88).

35 Blackman laments that Indian ethnographic sources "chronicle a male world seen through the eyes of male writers, a bias present in most earlier ethnographic literature from all areas of the world. The lives of women are described primarily as they impinge upon or compliment the lives of men" (p. 25). She especially notes that early ethnographers "are silent on the details of sexual behaviour." One ethnographer observed that pre-marital (and extra-marital) sex was sanctioned, whereas Blackman's female source insists that women rigorously protected girls from sex until marriage. Indian women informed Blackman that young women were relatively ignorant of sex, while male ethnographers' sources (i.e., the male members of the tribes) insist that women were sexually aggressive. She quotes anthropologist James Deans: "women considered it their duty to encourage at all times sexual intercourse." Blackman attributes these conflicting observations to male bias: "Wanton female sexuality is a rationalization in a number of cultures for the avoidance and control of females by males" (pp. 41-2).

Chapter III

The Task of Poetic Mediation:

Dorothy Livesay's Early Poetry

I have always been fascinated
by the role of the woman as
writer.

- Dorothy Livesay¹

Men have called the country
by their names
The names grew
taller than trees
than clouds they are
more memorable

The passionate naming
is how we fool
nature --
fool ourselves?

- Dorothy Livesay²

In 1920, while Constance Lindsay Skinner, now in New York, was completing her cycle of British Columbia poems, and Marjorie Pickthall, secluded in her Vancouver Island shack, was writing her last poetry, the eleven year old Dorothy Livesay was moving from Winnipeg with her parents to what she remembers as "Toronto's tight Victorian city."³ Victorian or not, the literary community along the Toronto-Montreal axis was undergoing the initial stages of radical change. Critical

articles in revolt against outworn poetic conventions were beginning to appear in newly established magazines such as The Canadian Bookman and The Canadian Forum. These articles either called for a revitalization of Canadian poetry or praised bold experiments in form and content by free verse and imagist poets who were publishing in various American magazines.⁴ By 1922, Raymond Knister was publishing imagist poems in the Iowa city magazine, The Midland, and the following year W.W.E. Ross and R.G. Everson also began using the new techniques.⁵ These poets were inspired by the work of Ezra Pound, Richard Aldington, D.H. Lawrence, H.D., Vachel Lindsay, Carl Sandburg and others who were writing for Marianne Moore's The Dial and Harriet Monroe's Poetry (Chicago). By 1925, the Montreal poets F.R. Scott and A.J.M. Smith, who were also writing free verse and imagist poetry and reading T.S. Eliot, had launched The McGill Fortnightly Review.

Although Dorothy Livesay has come to be identified with these years of initial ferment, she was relatively remote from the issues and from the centres of literary activity during the 1920s and early '30s. She wrote much poetry during her adolescence but, as she later recalled, she was not especially interested in pursuing a literary career. Her mother, Florence Randall Livesay, was juggling marriage, motherhood, and a busy career as a poet and journalist and was receiving little in the way of support from her publisher husband, J.F.B. Livesay. Her

lonely struggle did little to recommend the literary life to her young daughter.⁶ Livesay recalls that Pelham Edgar, who read some of her early imagist poems during a visit to her mother, responded by praising Audrey Alexandra Brown, one of the current imitators of Marjorie Pickthall's Romantic verse.⁷ The young Livesay did not find this encouraging. At university she would suffer a further discouragement: writers' clubs were off limits to literary women, who were looked upon as an aberration. For these reasons, poetry would remain largely a private pastime for Livesay until the 1930s.

While Knister, Ross, and others were rebelling against the literary establishment, Livesay was engaged in a different kind of rebellion. She attended Glen Mawr private school along with the daughters of Toronto's "best" families. A plain, shy girl (by her own estimation), she secretly poured out her heart in short lyrics about romantic love and the female condition inspired by her resentment against Glen Mawr's insistence on "lady-like behaviour" and by the lectures on feminism and birth control which her father encouraged her to attend. When she was thirteen, her mother discovered some of these poems and, without her daughter's knowledge, sent one off to The Vancouver Province for publication. Livesay entered university in 1927 to study modern languages and literatures. The poems which, with considerable reluctance,⁸ she began to submit to magazines, newspapers, and campus publications are informed by her

rebellion against conventional Christianity, her feminist interest in the writings of Havelock Ellis and Engels' Origins of the Family, and her involvement in an unhappy love affair. Again, it was her mother who, in 1928, arranged for the publication of her daughter's first volume of poems, Green Pitcher. As Livesay recalls, she herself was indifferent.

In her second year at the University of Toronto, Livesay's poem "City Wife" won the prestigious Jardine poetry award. But this event did not bring her into close contact with other practising poets, for she was now preparing to leave Toronto for France, where she completed the third year of her degree in Aix-en-provence. Some measure of recognition came late in 1929, when E.J. Pratt accepted some of her poems for publication in The Canadian Forum. But by then she was off to France again, this time to Paris and the Sorbonne to do post-graduate work on the Symbolistes. She returned to Toronto in 1932, the year in which she published her second collection, Signpost, inspired by her ever increasing interest in women's issues and also by a second love affair, in Paris. But even before the book appeared she rejected the kind of poetry it contained for a new interest and a new career: the woman-centered vision of these poems gave way to a socialist vision. Her new poetic mandate was to give voice to working-class concerns; her new career was social work.

If during the late twenties Livesay was resentful about the cultural attitudes which discouraged female literary pursuit and

lonely because of campus regulations which kept her on the peripheries of literary activity, she was at least free of peer pressure. The relative isolation in which she wrote until 1932 allowed her to work out a unique poetic based on her own artistic concerns. This is not to deny that she was influenced by other poets. Included in the list of literary foremothers she cites are the imagist H.D., Elinor Wylie, Katherine Mansfield, and Edith Sitwell.⁹ Emily Dickinson was also important to her; as she recalls in an interview, she began reading Dickinson's poetry in 1928. She read the work of Marjorie Pickthall even earlier: in the days before Livesay's adolescent rebellion against Christianity, she identified closely with the Anglo-Catholic elements in Pickthall's poetry. But what she liked best about Pickthall was the intense musicality of her verse. This is hardly surprising, given Livesay's impeccable ear. But Pickthall and Livesay share similarities that go beyond theme and image. Of equal importance, the work of Constance Lindsay Skinner, a friend of the poet's mother, was also familiar;¹⁰ the adolescent Livesay read Skinner's work in Poetry (Chicago), a magazine which played an important role in her poetic development.¹¹ Perhaps the young poet was encouraged by Skinner's obvious refusal to accept the notion that female experience is too trivial for poetic treatment--or that a female poet is herself trivial.

Livesay's first two volumes, along with other early pieces

(published for the first time in Collected Poems: The Two Seasons [1972]), begin where Marjorie Pickthall and Constance Lindsay Skinner stop. Pickthall's career ended with the discovery of her life-long victimization by poetic conventions while Skinner devoted her whole poetic career to the development of an elaborate metaphor which transported female experience from the realm of the merely domestic into the realm of art. Throughout their careers both these poets were haunted by the fear that their gender disqualified them as poets. No such fear haunted the young Dorothy Livesay. Even though she published reluctantly at first, an early diet of women's literature provided by her father and the evidence of her mother's hard-won successes left no doubt in her mind about female literary competence. As she said looking back on those early years, "I believed that it was perfectly possible for me to write."¹²

Despite the apparent ease with which Livesay assumes her literary role, her poem "A Dream" suggests that as an aspiring young nature poet she may nevertheless have experienced great reservations about her capacity to enter the male dominated world of art:

It was as if I stood outside the frame
 Of a great picture, staring long within
 At a strange country never seen before
 Where I myself was walking, all alone,
 Pushing deeper and deeper into the sombre woods,
 Seeing only the pale sky overhead
 And the dark scarlet of the painted trees --
 Soon I had disappeared, but following after

Great flocks of heavy birds soon filled the sky
 And shook the forest with their mighty laughter.
 (TS 20)

Although Livesay herself has no idea of the significance of the dream which inspired this poem,¹³ the "great picture" into which the poet disappears may well be her dreaming mind's way of expressing one of the huge literary canvases created by Wordsworth or Coleridge. These poets' landscapes would indeed be "strange country" to a female nature poet in her early confrontations with nature personified as a vast and silent maternal figure. As we shall see in several of her early poems, Livesay associates poetic thought with birds; given this association, the "heavy birds" who dominate this devouring landscape might well represent the giant male figures who dominate the Romantic tradition; establishing one's poetic voice within hearing range of their "mighty laughter" might well be dreamt about as a terrifying experience. But more important here is the confused perspective. As in Pickthall's "The Sleep-Seekers," it is not possible to know where the poet stands in this poem. Once the poet enters the picture she becomes split in two, with one half watching and narrating events as the other half silently disappears into nature. This suggests the separation of woman and poet which Romantic convention demands; further, the "Pushing" indicates a somewhat forceful--perhaps even violent--separation. Given the difficulties her predecessors experienced in trying to come to terms with their

literary forefathers, it is easy to understand why Livesay might express this sense of self-alienation in such nightmarish terms.

In complete opposition to this terror of being split in two by convention, swallowed up by nature, and silenced by overpowering male voices is the poetic self-assertion expressed in "Defiance":

Cover me with gravity
 As you would cover a live bird
 With pine needles.
 Cover me so
 And I shall go on laughing,
 Breathing the sweet scent,
 Brushing the needles away from my face.

O cover me with gravity:
 Unless I am smothered --
 Wings beaten --
 I shall laugh still.

(GP 3)

The connection between poet and nature is the bird which, as in "A Dream," is also Livesay's symbol for poetic inspiration. The laughter in this poem is not the "mighty laughter" of literary forefathers but of the female poet herself. As the pun on the twice repeated word "gravity" suggests, what the poet is defying is her banishment to the grave. Livesay, it would seem, is in the tradition of Rossetti and Pickthall, whose most defiant voices emanate from the grave. As in the work of her foremothers, death may be a female space--"woman's place"--but it can be poet's place as well. Unless she is "smothered," "Wings beaten"--in other words, as long as she has something to say--she will defy the conventions that doom her to silence.

Whatever terrifying experience inspired the nightmare vision of "A Dream," it is certain that, as an aspiring female nature poet, the young Dorothy Livesay had to confront the same conventions as did Pickthall and Skinner. But unlike these earlier poets, who perceived in those conventions the mutual exclusivity of the female role and the poetic role, Livesay sees the tension between the two roles as a source of energy which can be harnessed in the service of her art. By identifying herself with both nature and poetry she creates for herself a unique female poetic role: that of mediator between culture and nature. Her ability to see herself as self-integrated yet part of both culture and nature enables her to imagine a culture/nature configuration which is characterized not by irreconcilable opposition and conflict but by difference and complementarity.

For many Canadian writers, from Susanna Moodie in Roughing it in the Bush to Margaret Atwood in "Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer," the figure of the pioneer has been emblematic of the relationship between culture and nature. Livesay makes use of this archetypal figure in "Pioneer," in which the poet speaks directly to culture on nature's behalf:

He laboured, starved and fought:
 In these last days
 Cities roar where his voice

In lonely wilderness first sang out praise.

He sits with folded hands
 And cries to see
 How he has ravaged earth
 Of her last stone,
 Her last, most stubborn tree. (TS 53)

Here, several decades before the onset of the ecological crisis in the 1960s, Livesay takes up the task of mediating the conflict between culture and nature. Singing out nature's praises has proved a hypocritical activity for this pioneer. His song of praise has been meaningless accompaniment to the more important task at hand: ravaging the earth. This particular form of hypocrisy has serious implications for poetry and the culture which produces and consumes it. Countless volumes of poetry in praise of nature have been consumed right along with nature itself. Neither the Wordsworths nor the Coleridges, the Pickthalls nor the Skinners have done anything to halt the mindless attack on their beloved nature; the roar of cities has replaced their voices just as effectively as it has the pioneer's. Little wonder Livesay rejects the conventions they worked in and takes up instead the crucial task of mediation.

This dramatic "re-vision"¹⁴ of the female poetic role can be better understood in terms of anthropologist Sherry Ortner's article entitled "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" in which she states that "culture (still equated relatively unambiguously with men) recognizes that women are active

participants in its special processes, but at the same time sees them as being more rooted in, or having more direct affinity with, nature."¹⁵ The active participation of women in the poetic process is, more often than not, accepted by Pickthall and Skinner as limited to the inspirational roles of Mother Nature and Muse. But without giving up the belief that she is "rooted in," or has "direct affinity with, nature," Livesay perceives her active participation in culture's "special processes" as that of poet.

While the female role of poet-mediator may be unique to poetry it is really only an extension of woman's time-honoured and universal role in culture. By shifting the traditional female role out of the narrow confines of the domestic and into a wider sphere of influence, Livesay transforms the negative aspects of that role into positive advantages. As Ortner explains, women in virtually all cultures occupy an intermediate position and most of their traditional duties within the domestic sphere are mediative:

. . . [woman's] socializing [of children] and cooking functions within the domestic context show her to be a powerful agent of the cultural process, constantly transforming raw natural resources into cultural products. Belonging to culture, yet appearing to have stronger and more direct connections with nature she is . . . seen as situated between the two realms.
(Ortner 80)

"Intermediate," or "middle status" on a hierarchy of being from culture to nature, Ortner explains, "may have the significance

of 'mediating,' i.e. performing some sort of synthesizing or converting function between nature and culture. . . .

The domestic unit--and hence woman, who in virtually every case appears as its primary representative--is one of culture's crucial agencies for the conversion of nature into culture, especially with reference to the socialization of children. Any culture's continued viability depends upon properly socialized individuals who will see the world in that culture's terms and adhere more or less unquestioningly to its moral precepts. (Ortner 84)

The domestic sphere, presided over by woman, is a kind of processing plant in the service of culture. Woman's special abilities--her biological function of regeneration and the socially conditioned skills, such as mothering and cooking, which are related to that function--make her tasks as synthesizer and converter of nature crucial to the continued viability of culture. As poet-mediator, Livesay shifts the synthesizing and conversion process out of the domestic realm and into the realm of poetry. Instead of processing infants and raw foodstuffs into crucially required cultural products, she transforms traditional language and cultural attitudes into new language and attitudes crucial to the viability of both culture and nature. Consequently, unlike the mediative enterprise described by Ortner, which ensures the maintenance of the status quo, Livesay's concern is to ensure the continued viability of culture and nature through a redefinition of both.

In a world which views culture and nature as irreconcilably

opposed, Livesay's tasks are more challenging than the traditional female mediative tasks, for the power of her agency must be exerted in not just one but two supposedly opposing directions. In order to meet this challenge, she extends the limits of language through the use of poetic fictions which bridge the gap between subject and object, self and other. In this way she effects a resolution of the conflict which arises out of opposition and images a new relationship in which culture and nature exist in cooperation and mutual dependence.

The conflict between culture and nature has always been a significant theme in Canadian literature, and in 1970 D.G. Jones perceived the conflict in gender terms in his Butterfly on Rock, a study devoted to tracing this theme in the work of many of Canada's major writers:

The antagonism between nature and culture [in Canadian literature] is part of a larger drama involving the whole of western culture. . . . Rather than accept the world as it is, western man has sought to transform it, to refashion the world in the image of his ideal. Certainly he has enlarged his understanding of nature to an astonishing degree, but more often than not he has used this understanding to consolidate his power over nature rather than to extend his communion with her. He has persisted in opposing to nature the world of ideas, the world of his ideal, and in his idealism he has tended to become exclusive rather than inclusive, arrogant rather than humble, aggressively masculine rather than passively feminine. In extremes he has declared total war on the wilderness, woman, or the world of spontaneous impulse and irrational desire.¹⁶

This is the conflict, expressed in universal terms, between male

and female in patriarchal culture. It is also the internal struggle between poet and woman. Although Jones does not mention Livesay in his study, it is this conflict which she undertakes to mediate in her poetry. As we shall see, for Livesay the personal is always the universal: whether she addresses the theme of female powerlessness in heterosexual relationships or the woman poet's experience of patriarchal literary conventions, she depicts the struggle as part of the larger conflict between nature and culture. In keeping with her mediative task, many of her poems are informed by a vision of new ways of being for both male and female, culture and nature. This poetic enterprise is not unlike Constance Lindsay Skinner's attempt to convey the intimate relationship between humankind and nature which she sees at the heart of traditional Indian sensibility.

In a world in which culture is opposed to nature, and in a literary tradition where the roles of woman and poet are mutually exclusive, Livesay's identification with both realms and both roles is a source of considerable tension.¹⁷ This tension can be inferred from Livesay's Foreword to her collected poems:

Especially do I note [in my poetry] the dichotomy that exists . . . between town and country--that pull between community and private identity that is characteristic of being a woman; and characteristic, for that matter, of life "north," life in Canada. Perhaps we are a country more feminine than we like to admit, because the unifying, regenerative principle is

a passion with us. (TS v)

On both private and public levels, opposition is the problem and synthesis the solution. The "dichotomy" she notes in her poetry is her personal experience of the conflict between culture/"town" and nature/"country." Culture's "pull" puts demands on her "private identity" which quite naturally pulls in the opposite direction; the term "naturally" is used here advisedly because it is Livesay's ("private") identification with nature which resists the pull of culture/"community." Tension is a fact of female existence--it "is characteristic of being a woman"--but that tension is not necessarily negative. For the delicate balancing act required to keep her aloft on the tightrope of mediation/synthesis between "private"/female identity and public/poetic identity is largely dependent on the tautness of the rope. As we shall see, on the one hand she must discover herself by discovering nature; on the other she must guard against robbing nature of its own identity by entrapping it in poetic language. But mediation is not just a private act of self-integration. In projecting her tasks and special abilities onto culture (specifically Canadian culture) as a whole, she reveals her desire to turn this mediative project into a cultural enterprise. Mediation of the dichotomy between nature and culture is crucial to the ultimate synthesis of our natural "innocence" and our cultural "experience."

The role of poet-mediator is entirely in keeping with

Livesay's world view. What the male Romantics spilled so much ink over in an attempt to reconnect with--namely, their legacy from Mother Nature--Livesay accepts as a given. For her, the body, not the intellect, is the ground of being, the source from which all intellectual, spiritual, and emotional experience flows. In keeping with his Adamic role as namer, poet Frank Davey has labelled this vision "Heraclitean" because of Livesay's emphasis on "the sufficiency of the physical universe."¹⁸ But Livesay did not consciously choose this world view from the variety of prepackaged philosophies available to her. Indeed, as she says in one of these early poems (a view which was shortly to be changed by her conversion to communism), "philosophies / Have never darkened me. / I live in what I feel and hear / And see" (TS 68). In other words, the vision which may seem to owe much to Heraclitus grows directly out of Livesay's personal experience as a woman; whatever its relationship to classical philosophies it is primarily a feminist vision.¹⁹

The role of poet-mediator is also in keeping with Livesay's belief in literature as a vehicle for social change. In her depiction of the conflict between male and female she communicates her belief that the opposition between culture and nature is destructive to both realms. "Biologically speaking, [men and women] are different," Livesay said in 1975; "Any biological differences affect one's point of view."²⁰ But

despite their differing points of view, in Livesay's vision male and female are not naturally opposed: as she said in a 1979 interview, "I feel that men and women are complementary; they really do need each other."²¹ The unnatural opposition of male and female in patriarchal culture, like the antagonistic opposition of civilization and the natural world, is presented in her poetry as one of the central problems of human existence. This unnatural opposition is at the heart of the conflict between woman's heterosexual needs and her equally important need for personal autonomy.

* * *

Livesay begins her attack on the hierarchical and oppositional relationship between culture and nature, male and female, within the arena of poetic language where, as we have seen in Pickthall's and Skinner's work, that relationship is responsible for the mutual alienation of woman and poet. Unlike her predecessors, Livesay attempts to break down the hierarchical relationship between language, a product of human culture, and that which language is made to appropriate--namely nature and, by extension, women.²² This project is crucial to Livesay's poetic identity. "If the pen is a metaphorical penis," Gilbert and Gubar ask, "with what organ can females generate texts?" (MA 7). A possible answer to this question can

be found in the title of Livesay's first volume of poems, Green Pitcher, published when the poet was just eighteen years old. The image brings together nature and woman in one symbol representative of the poet herself. This title alludes to a Spanish folk song which Livesay uses as an epigraph to the collection:

In a pitcher I have
My songs in store.
When I wish I uncork it,
And out they pour.

The sentiment expressed in these lines is in keeping with a comment Livesay has repeated several times throughout her career: "I've never felt that the poetry belonged to me. I am the vessel through which it comes. . . . What's coming through has been for everybody."²³ It would seem that right from the beginning of her career Livesay has refused to be haunted by patriarchal notions of poetic creativity. In the image of the green pitcher--the image of poet as vessel--the organ of reproductive or generative literary power is not the mighty pen/penis but the womb. Further, Livesay's sense of herself as entirely unpossessive of the poetry to which she gives birth is in direct opposition to the archetypal patriarchal poet: "because a writer 'fathers' his text, his literary creations . . . are his possessions, his property. Having defined them in language and thus generated them, he owns them, controls them, and encloses them on the printed page" (MA 12). In terms of

nature poetry, what is being owned, controlled, and enclosed on the printed page is nature itself. Opposing this image of entrapment is Livesay's gesture of releasing her poems and, by extension, the natural world they depict, into the freedom of the world at large.

Margaret Homans writes that "Hierarchy or relativity in language is fundamentally the same as appropriation in language, because both fulfill the need for . . . the primary to posit a secondary. . . . [The] use of nature as the ground for human meaning is also appropriative . . . because it subjects nature to human usage and denies its separate identity" (WWPI 188). According to Homans, Emily Dickinson understood that nature is an autonomous entity. Dorothy Livesay's respect for nature's right to its own identity places her in the Dickinson tradition. Indeed, Livesay's foremother may even have influenced her directly in this respect. For example, Livesay places the title of her poem "'Haunted House'" in quotation marks, suggesting that it has a specific literary source. That source is almost certainly Emily Dickinson's "What mystery pervades a well!", a poem which, as Homan's writes, "is often cited as the extreme case of Dickinson's wariness about human efforts to possess nature" (WWPI 189). The relevant phrase appears in the closing stanzas:

But nature is a stranger yet;
The ones that cite her most
Have never passed her haunted house,

Nor simplified her ghost.

To pity those that know her not
 Is helped by the regret
 That those who know her, know her less
 The nearer her they get.

Homans points out that the terms "her ghost" and "her haunted house" are inappropriate descriptions of nature, and that in choosing these terms the poet demonstrates the impossibility of ever knowing nature on its own terms: nature will always be in many respects "a stranger." Our relationship with nature is paradoxical: "Her apparent presence seems to invite knowledge but her absence makes knowledge impossible" (WWPI 189). This poem challenges what Homans calls "the mistaken belief that nature participates in the human community of understanding" (WWPI 189).

Similarly, in Livesay's "'Haunted House'" nature is a stranger. But whereas Dickinson is concerned only with asserting nature's autonomy and persistent mystery, the estrangement in Livesay's poem emphasizes the antagonistic alienation of nature from culture:

If people cannot stay in this sun field
 Of wayward grass,
 If people cannot live
 Where ghost winds pass,
 Wild raspberries know how.

Deep in July
 The thick down-hanging canes
 Bring mockery to the house half fallen down
 With roof awry:
 Wild raspberries are sweet with wind

And the bees' hum
 Around this green sun field
 Where footsteps never come.

If people go away
 Or even fear to pass,
 Wild raspberries and grass
 Are here to stay. (SP 30)

The natural world and the human community exist in a state of mutual alienation. "Wild raspberries" have knowledge that is inaccessible to human beings; that knowledge assists nature in resisting human efforts to possess it. As the juxtaposition of flourishing raspberries and dilapidated house suggests, culture may attempt to possess nature but nature ultimately thwarts those efforts; culture comes and goes but nature is "here to stay". For Livesay, the tasks involved in transforming this state of mutual alienation into mutual cooperation are twofold. First, she must explode the illusion that culture can know nature by possessing it; we may invade it and occupy it but this does not mean that we know it on its own terms; to invade and occupy nature is not to know it but to attempt possession of it. Getting to know nature on its own terms is the second task, which is carried out through a process of self-reflection; for Livesay, becoming conscious of nature on its own terms means becoming conscious of self, and this can only be achieved by identifying herself with nature and by refusing to attempt possession of it.²⁴

Livesay performs her first task on the level of language by

demonstrating that nature is not subject to definitions imposed upon it by human language.²⁵ As many of her poems assert, we may see and hear the other species in nature, both plant and animal, but we cannot possess knowledge of them by naming them. This contradicts Adamic notions of language. Emily Dickinson expressed this sentiment in the conclusion to one of her poems concerned with nature's inaccessibility to the poet's art:

Nature is what we know --
 Yet have no art to say --
 So impotent Our Wisdom is
 To her Simplicity

In her analysis of these lines, Homans explains that Dickinson's use of the phrase "her Simplicity" is not an attempt to define nature; it is a term which, in its utter failure to capture nature's unfathomable multiplicity, demonstrates nature's resistance to human language. Human impotence with regard to the appropriation of nature's secrets is a recurring sentiment in Livesay's poetry as well.

If a poet wants to write a poem about nature's inaccessibility to her art she must name nature even while admitting that naming it does not bring it into her poem. A useful device for conveying this contradiction is paradox: "Whether or not the contradiction is resolvable," explains Homans, "paradox articulates the possibility of pure contradiction, which . . . typifies relations between the human and nature" (WWPI 189). The paradoxical relationship between

human language and nature informs Livesay's "Secret":

How lovely now
 Are little things:
 Young maple leaves --
 A jet crow's wings.

I have been lost
 These many springs:
 Now I can hear
 How silence sings. (GP 5)

Singing silence is an image which appears repeatedly in Livesay's poetry, as it does in Marjorie Pickthall's (see, for example, "February," discussed on page 98). The paradox of singing silence helps to explain how nature can keep its "little things" a "Secret" from the poet even while she names those things. This paradoxical presence/absence of nature is contrasted and thus given emphasis by the non-paradoxical presence/absence of the poet: she has been absent for many springs but is now present in the poem. In the process of getting lost and finding herself again she has discovered the "secret" to being a poet: being a poet means knowing precisely what is and what is not accessible to one's art. This pattern of loss and recovery of self appears again and again in Livesay's early work and is suggestive of her movement back and forth along the tightrope which connects female and poetic identity--a movement which, as we shall see later, expands her art to admit new ways of knowing both herself and nature.

"I Saw My Thought," another poem in which nature eludes

language, is so remarkably similar to Marjorie Pickthall's "Thoughts" that it is tempting to regard it as Livesay's model. Pickthall's poem, examined in Chapter One, is worth quoting again in order to see it side by side with Livesay's version:

I gave my thoughts a golden peach,
A silver citron tree;
They clustered dumbly out of reach
And would not sing for me.

I built my thoughts a roof of rush,
A little byre beside;
They left my music to the thrush
And flew at eveningtide.

I went my way and would not care
If they should come or go;
A thousand birds seemed up in air,
My thoughts were singing so.

The muse in this poem is conventionally elusive and then submissive; it is also unconventionally asexual. This bird/thought/muse is a metaphor for poetic process. More important, in recognizing the landscape convention for what it is--merely convention and not literal truth--Pickthall is able to objectify nature, possess it, and use it as an appropriate substitute for the sexual enticements with which the male poet courts his female muse. Livesay offers an interesting corrective:

I saw my thought a hawk
Through heaven fly:
On earth my words were shadow of
His wings, his cry.

How many clouded days
Precede the fair --

When thought must unrecorded pass
 Through sunless air. (SP 33)

As in "Thoughts," the direct equivalent of a thought is a bird--specifically a hawk, which, while it is presented more directly than Pickthall's metaphorical birds, is equally as elusive. The significant difference here is that this direct equation of nature/bird and human thought is immediately exposed as a fiction, for "words" are mere "shadows" of the natural objects they describe: there is no direct equation but rather a huge dislocation between bird and thought--between nature and the word imposed upon it. In Pickthall's poem, her autonomy as a poet is assured only through her fictive possession of nature, for in possessing it she prevents herself from being absorbed by it. It is therefore not surprising that her poem ends with the surrender of the birds/thoughts to the poet's poem. In the Livesay poem the hawk disappears into the heavens; the poem is only his shadow on the page. Just how faint that shadow is, is conveyed in the second stanza: so elusive is nature to poetic art that the days of its absence from poetry are without number. "I Saw My Thought" is a key to understanding all of Livesay's poems which address the limits of poetic language. Taken together, these poems can be seen to debate the definition of poetry as a mere shadow of the reality which inspires it.

The images of bird, flight, and thought which inform "I Saw My Thought" appear again in "Sympathy" along with the Dickinson

notion of the impotence of "Our Wisdom"--that is to say, human wisdom in general and not just one poet's impotence with words:

There is a silence on a country road
 Where I have found alone
 Your shy mind groping for a hidden word
 Before the thought has flown.

And always, in all quiet, I shall feel
 Your impotence with words --
 Whether you saw a mountain's silver peak,
 Or just, the flight of birds. (GP 1)

Clearly, the futility of grasping nature by means of language is not confined to Livesay's art alone. This crucial fact of human existence creates a sympathetic bond of understanding between poets. As in "Secret," there is an emphasis on finding--finding out about the impotence of words and finding others who are finding this out. The huge dislocation between human language and nature is emphasized here by the vast distance between earthbound, groping poet and the remoteness of mountain peak and birds in flight. The human tendency to create hierarchies, even within nature itself, is suggested by the word "just," which is used to bring mountain peak and birds into a hierarchical relationship. The comma following "just" makes us pause and ponder the relationship the poet is suggesting. Because no such hierarchy exists in nature, its presence here in the poem only serves to emphasize the fact that the words used to name nature are not the same as nature itself.

Traditionally, poetry is an art which attempts to separate

time from its content, and in terms of nature poetry this means taking nature out of the temporal context which is its vitality and imprisoning it on the printed page--in effect, killing it into art. A poem ironically entitled "The Prisoner" is intentionally overloaded with the kind of poetic diction often used by poets to achieve this end. The poem works in opposition to its title in that it demonstrates the impossibility of ever making nature "The Prisoner" of timeless words:

These days like amethysts slip through my fingers,
 Pale and cool, with a wind ruffling the rough
 Brown grasses of the fields.
 These days, grown passionless
 As the stones of amethysts,
 Yet clear, limpid, and lovely,
 Slip past as my arms rise vainly
 To seize for one instant the beating wing
 of meadow-lark --
 Slip past and fall through my eager fingers
 I know not where.
 For I cannot follow this falling, nor chase, even
 The unseen lark through its heaven. (TS 55)

Nature casts its shadow over this poem in the form of simile and abstraction. Despite the poet's efforts to entrap the content of "These days" in diction such as "Pale and cool," "rough / Brown," "passionless," "clear, limpid, and lovely," and even to harden time itself into an image of "amethysts," both time and its content of wind, grass, and bird escape her linguistic grasp. Not even one instant of time is accessible to her art. That most important of all moments is represented here, as in "Secret," by the bird/muse of poetic inspiration whose complete

dislocation from the earthbound poet is emphasized in the words "unseen" and "heaven." Nature's escape from the poet is also conveyed through the shift from visual imagery in the first six lines to the merely aural in the last five. Nature disappears from sight and leaves only the sound of "beating wing." Soon this, too, disappears and language alone remains. Unable to manipulate nature, she manipulates words: in the phrase "follow this falling" the emphasis is on wordplay, not nature.

In keeping with the traditional identification between woman and nature, to imprison nature by means of language is to imprison women by the same means. Therefore, the woman poet who assumes that she can trap nature in her net of words is herself caught in a web of paradox: how can she be both captor and captive? Something of this notion is expressed in Livesay's "The Net," a poem which faintly recalls Pickthall's "A Bird in the Room," where the entrapment of the speaker is implicit in the entrapment of the bird:

There was a beating of air.
Wings flashed,
And a bird seemed caught in my hair
Arrested a moment there
From breathless flight.

I say it was caught,
Its very movement and line
Subject to visible laws:
I say it was caught,
And all in a moment, mine.
I say this because
I knew in my soberest thought
Myself the captive was. (TS 21)

Untangling the meaning of this poem is almost as difficult as untangling the paradox of female literary existence as defined by poetic convention. If we assume that, as in "Secret" and "The Prisoner," "bird" carries its dual identity as natural object and poetic inspiration, then we must replace the word "hair" with "words," for a "Net" of words is all the poet has with which to capture nature and transform inspiration into a poem. In the first verse, the poet is struggling with the illusion that she has actually captured the bird, removed it from its temporal context ("flight")--in short, "Arrested a moment" of time in her net. And yet, the bird only "seemed caught." Her momentary doubt about having really captured it springs from her knowledge that if nature can be captured so can she. Therefore, her thrice repeated insistence in the second verse that she has indeed captured it and made it "Subject to visible laws," or subject to poetic convention, leaves her no choice but to admit that she herself is the captive.

Conversely, in "Fable," neither nature nor human beings are subject to the laws of poetic convention:

I saw a poppy in a field
 And could not let it blow
 As it had blown the summer through
 Gaily to and fro.

I saw a farmer on the road
 And could not let him be
 Till I had gazed my full at him
 And he had gazed at me.

Now must the flower fade too soon,

The farmer turn away,
 And I for theft have gained no more
 Than on an empty day. (SP 51)

The farmer is equally as inaccessible to the poet's art as the poppy. While both flower and farmer cast their shadow here, in reality the flower fades and the farmer turns away. The illusion that time can be separated from its content is alluded to in the closing line. The phrase "empty day" is an image of time without content; however, the notion that time can exist without content is a fiction--or, perhaps, a "Fable." But this fable/fiction is useful here because it invites a comparison between itself and the day which has as its content farmer and poppy. Time, not the poet, despite her act of thievery, remains in possession of its content. In effecting the flower's fading and the farmer's turning away, time causes both to evade the poet's grasp.

A similar failed attempt to capture a farmer in the net of language is the subject of the appropriately entitled "Impuissance," in which the poet finds a boy pitching hay into a wagon but loses him again. Here are the closing stanzas:

I longed to cry out,
 "Stay! stay! I am here."
 But the words would not come:
 My feet were held fast.
 Instead I watched the wagon
 Pass through the gate
 And lumber along the road
 Till the boy was only a swaying form
 Against the sky.

The sun lay burnt yellow
 Over the bristling ground.
 I could hear the wind running among the rushes
 In the field by the river's edge. (GP 4)

The poet has no words with which to prevent the boy's disappearance. His journey through time and across space removes him not only from the poem but also from the poet's visual grasp, leaving her with only a "swaying form," which in turn disappears. As in "The Prisoner," she is left with only an auditory impression of the scene around her.

* * *

What Homans says of Dickinson is equally applicable to Dorothy Livesay in that it describes her understanding of the limits of language as they reflect the limitations of culture in general:

Dickinson's art is not impeded in any way by her recognition that nature is not to be possessed, because she understands and makes use of a general dislocation between words and their referents that includes, but is not limited to, language's relation to nature. Because she knows that all language is figurative, she feels no special distress at the discovery that actual nature is not the same as the words used to name it. (WWPI 192-193)

The disappearance of the human figures in "Fable" and "Impuissance" demonstrates that Livesay's understanding of the dislocation between words and their referents is, as in

Dickinson's poetry, not limited to language's relation to nature. However, unlike Dickinson, whose understanding of the fictiveness of poetic language helps her avoid the conventions which entrap women poets in the landscapes of their own poems, Livesay, despite her realization that human beings are as elusive to language as nature is, exploits language's fictiveness as a device for maintaining the balance between her identification with nature on the one hand and with humanity on the other.²⁶ She names herself with the words used to name nature but in understanding "that actual nature is not the same as the words used to name it" she turns the central paradox of female existence into a poetic mask, or fiction, through which she examines the destructive consequences of the conflict between male and female and, by extension, culture and nature.

The nature image Livesay most frequently uses in the maintenance of her poetic mask is the tree. Paradoxically, she uses the tree as a personal symbol without imposing her own femaleness onto actual trees--as Pickthall does in "The Tree"--and without accepting the tree's inarticulateness as her own. By a further turn of the paradox, she can also exploit what we understand as the tree's qualities--silence, rootedness in space, remoteness from culture--to convey her sense of herself as a woman: silenced, trapped in male definitions, banished from the centre of cultural experience. But one more turn of the paradox is required in her poems which depict male-female

relationships, for in her belief that male and female are complementary rather than opposed Livesay identifies man with nature as well, without denying that culture is, in Ortner's words, "still equated relatively unambiguously with men."

In "The Difference," a sonnet which reiterates the sentiments expressed in "'Haunted House,'" Livesay uses the tree as personal symbol to make a statement about temperamental difference between lovers which can also be read as sexual difference and, on another level, as the opposition which results from culture's objectification of nature:

Your way of loving is too slow for me.
 For you, I think, must know a tree by heart
 Four seasons through, and note each single leaf
 With microscopic glance before it falls --
 And after watching soberly the turn
 Of autumn into winter and the slow
 Awakening again, the rise of sap --
 Then only will you cry: "I love this tree!"

As if the beauty of the thing could be
 Made lovelier or marred by any mood
 Of wind, or by the sun's caprice; as if
 All beauty had not sprung up with the seed --
 With such slow ways you find no time to love
 A falling flame, a flower's brevity. (SP 19)

The habit of "microscopic" scrutiny which the speaker ascribes to the lover she addresses is suggestive of the way in which culture possesses nature by objectifying it, clinically observing it, and entrapping it in scientific and economic definitions. This is the way culture comes to "know a tree by heart" (i.e., by rote) without ever knowing it in spirit. The

tight octave in which this tree is trapped only serves to emphasize the way nature is made to conform to culture's definitions of it. The sestet suggests the arbitrariness of the rules governing culture's conclusions about what is and what is not worthy of its approval. This approval is awarded on the basis of the arbitrary hierarchies which culture imposes on nature: these false hierarchies are conveyed in the poem through the contrast between "A falling flame, a flower's brevity" and the enduring tree whose very endurance condemns it to human scrutiny and, ironically, earns it the dubious honour of culture's approval. The phrase "microscopic glance" is a contradiction in terms which effectively points out that the discrepancy between nature and human knowledge of nature is as vast as "The Difference" between a four-season long microscopic examination and a momentary glance. But culture harbours the illusion that given enough time and a powerful enough microscope it can know nature thoroughly. This illusion is, in the end, culture's loss; the beauty of flame and flower is lost to culture because it does not understand that their brevity is their beauty. This is the result of culture's faulty perception of time. The octave presents the human perception of time as an observable continuum; by contrast the sestet presents the eternal present which is nature's time: past, present, and future are contained simultaneously within the seed. The inability of the lover (and culture) to perceive time in this

way causes him to miss the fact that beauty is not relative in nature but, rather, equally present in seed and tree.

On the level of the nature-culture relationship in "The Difference," Livesay's identification with nature allows her to have more knowledge of nature than does culture as a whole. This knowledge, expressed in the sestet, qualifies her to speak to culture on nature's behalf. As poet-mediator she warns culture that unless it gives up its illusions that it can possess nature by objectifying it, it (culture) will forever miss much of what nature has to offer. On the level of the male-female relationship in the poem her gender carries the authority of experience. What she articulates in the subtext on behalf of womankind is the female experience of having to endure male scrutiny, of having to wait for male judgement to come down on whether or not she meets his conditions of worthiness. The division of women into hierarchies of worthiness is a fact of female existence in patriarchal culture.

As we shall see, Livesay uses the tree as a personal and specifically female symbol in several other poems. But to interpret the tree narrowly as female is to miss the wider meaning she sometimes attaches to this symbol. Responding in an interview to a question concerning the nature imagery in her poetry, Livesay says that

. . . of the natural images, the tree is central because it has roots; underground roots to the basic elements of life and death. Everything that dies goes to the earth and the tree is reaching to new universes, in a sense, and towards the sun with its branches, and the tree doesn't flourish by itself very often. The tree needs company, other trees. And, of course, according to archetypal patterns, trees in a sense are people. A tree is the symbol for man. . . . [It is also] The tree of life. And, of course, it's the Garden of Eden symbol--it's absolutely fundamental.²⁷

With regard to the tree as Livesay's personal symbol, this image of the tree as reaching out in two opposing directions is entirely in keeping with her role as poet-mediator, for the tree in this image is a conduit, or link, between two realms. Further, earth and sun between which the tree mediates are archetypal symbols of woman and man which Livesay uses in her poetry. Her use of the generic term "man" in her definition of the tree as symbolic of "people" is useful to us because it points out that, unlike sun and earth, which do not change their symbolic gender meanings in her poetry, tree can sometimes symbolize man as well as--or instead of--woman, depending upon the context of the poem in which it appears and upon the tree's relationship to other symbols in the poem. The tree's need for "other trees" is in keeping with Livesay's belief in man and woman as complementary rather than opposed. Finally, the Garden of Eden which the tree often evokes is itself a complex symbol, for it is sometimes suggestive of the patriarchal Garden of the Christian Bible while at other times it is the garden of nature

to which Livesay flees when her identity is threatened.

"Alienation" reads like a feminist enquiry into what really happened when Adam and Eve were expelled from Paradise:

What was it, after all,
The night, or the night-scented phlox?
Your mind, or the garden where
Always the wind stalks?

What was it, what brief cloak
Of magic fell about
Lending you such a radiance --
Leaving me out?

What was it, why was I
Shivering like a tree,
Blind in a golden garden
Where only you could see?

(SP 11)

There is no God present in this "golden garden" of Eden, except in the form of a stalking wind and a sinister "magic" which transfers all knowledge to Adam, leaving woman more like the tree stripped of its fruit of knowledge than like the temptress Eve. This "Alienation" of Eve from Adam is central to the conflict between woman and poet, woman and man. Robbed of power and denied language, woman is doubly alienated from the "garden," that cultivated space which represents civilization as opposed to the natural wilderness. Further, the "Alienation" of the tree of life from male consciousness--"Your mind"--which this poem can be seen to depict is at the heart of the conflict between nature and culture. In terms of Livesay's cosmology, what is required is an expansion of male consciousness to permit the inclusion rather than the "Alienation" of nature/woman.²⁸

On one level "The Invincible" reverses the sentiment expressed in "Alienation" by investing the tree with exceptional power. Paradoxically, it also repeats the notion of male power and female powerlessness which is implicit in "Alienation." Again, the setting is a dark garden and the speaker cannot see: she must rely on her sense of hearing to interpret the scene:

In the dark garden
 I hear strange rhythms
 Rising and falling:
 Deeper and deeper
 The elms delve their arms
 Into the helpless earth
 And suck the young wines
 Of spring.

Stronger and bolder are elms
 Than blinded men. (GP 3)

The poem is prefaced by a line from Henri Bordeaux: "On ne devine jamais la puissance des arbres"--the power of trees is inestimable. This is in keeping with the sentiment expressed in "The Difference": Western culture is incapable of knowing nature; estimation of nature's power is beyond measurement with the tools presently in use. Further, as the final couplet suggests, nature is more powerful than culture, although culture is blind to that fact. On a second level of meaning, the exploitation of the powerless by the powerful is imaged here in terms of the invincible trees' power over the "helpless earth." Earth's maternal qualities are implicit in the elms' sucking of her "young wines / Of spring." The implication is that although

culture refuses to acknowledge it, it (culture) is entirely dependent upon nature for its power and its continued existence--a fact which refutes the notion of conflict and underscores the complementarity between culture and nature.

While the relationship of tree and earth in "The Invincible" encourages a reading of tree as a male symbol, the opposition of tree and sun in "The Shrouding" suggests that tree in this poem is symbolic of woman:

Sun through the winter's dust
 Gleams meagrely
 In mockery of birds who through the afternoon
 Murmur their short, inconsequent sharp notes
 And think to welcome spring.

For still snow clings
 Along the northern fences
 Greyish and all unkempt:
 Still the elms stand lone
 Seeming to harbour winter in their boughs,
 Unready still to yield to loosening sap,
 Unready for the battle with the sun.

Must we awake from this long quietness of sleep,
 Must we arise and find
 Beauty in wakening?

Let me lie safe on lonely northern ground
 Safe in the snow;
 Wrap me in silence, let me not ever know
 When the sun burns, nor whither flies the crow.

(TS 17)

The poet achieves identification with the elms in the pivotal third verse. In the first two stanzas her gaze is focused on "elms"; her fellowship with them is suggested by her use of the pronoun "we" in the third stanza; finally, she shifts to the

singular, self-asserting "I" of the last verse. This ultimate differentiation of herself and nature is supported by the imagery: all the rebirth images are associated with the elms and all the death images with the poet. The implications of this association with death are profound, for what the poem is about is female reluctance to enter into the violence of male-female relationships. Like the elms, she is "Unready to do battle with the sun," but as the death imagery suggests, unlike the elms she may never be ready; indeed, as the title suggests, she is preparing to put herself permanently out of love's reach. The final verse presents the quintessential female dilemma: she has to choose between safe but lonely isolation, represented here by a grave in "northern ground," which is permanently out of sun's burning reach, and the hurt which is guaranteed her in a relationship with a man. This image of eternally suspended fertility recalls the bleak vision of T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land.

Female ambivalence about love relationships is also the theme of the sonnet "Sun," where it is conveyed through the paradoxical relationship between symbols:

This sunlight spills the answer, and is swift
 To magnetize my passion, draw it forth
 For you or any man to look upon.
 I am as earth upturned, alive with seed
 For summer's silence and for autumn's fire.
 I am as bound as earth, yet wholly free
 As the slow early wind that trails the breath
 Of hidden wood-anemones.
 I am all things I would not let you know

Save that, in knowing spring, they are displayed:
 The softest singing from a thrush's throat
 Tells you my thought before I breathe a word.
 I may escape--you hold my body still
 In stretching out your hand to feel the wind. (SP 7)

As the thrice repeated "I am" suggests, the poem is about trying to establish one's identity in relation to a lover. The several levels of paradox convey the difficulty of the task; they also suggest an endless variety of ways of being. Throughout the poem the desire to lose oneself in the other is in conflict with the desire for autonomy. The contrast between exposure to male scrutiny in line 3 and the image of concealment ("hidden wood-anemones") in line 8 conveys the conflict between the speaker's desire to surrender fully and the female fear of vulnerability. This ambivalence is expressed again in lines 9 and 10: she wants to keep herself entirely to herself but in yielding to love she is fully "displayed." The experience of feeling both trapped in and liberated by love is expressed twice here, once in lines 5 and 6, where on the one hand she feels as bound to him as the earth is to the sun yet on the other as free as the wind; again, in the closing two lines, the double meanings carried by "may" and "still" emphasize the ambivalence: although he is "still" holding her body now she "may" get the chance to escape later; or, although he holds her body motionless she may escape if she wishes. Significantly, the "you" of the poem remains identified with "sun" throughout, while the speaker vacillates between earth, wind, and "all

things." Perhaps what the subtext is suggesting here is that in Western culture, which values the kind of autonomy that results from objectifying woman and nature, male power resides in the ability to maintain a strong sense of self, while female powerlessness is a result of the inability to remain centered.

Getting centered again after a disastrous love-affair is the subject of one of Livesay's best imagist poems, "The Forsaken":

I found a stone
 Grey with water's passion:
 I found a stone
 And was still.

In every hill and valley
 Of my contemplation
 Stones lay in heaps
 In quivering, jagged piles,
 Grey with the kiss of wind
 And the sweep of water.

I found a stone
 And was shaken, suddenly,
 Discovering myself. (GP 9)

Joyce Whitney has written that the poet here "can only react passively to passion by being worn smooth. The girl recognizes . . . the traditional male-female relationship: the male integrated into the sweep and flow of life, as free to act as wind and water, the female restricted to being acted upon, a lifeless object."²⁹ But the suggestion of "being worn smooth," which is indeed there, is at odds with the "jagged" stones; further, the passivity Whitney reads in the stillness of line 4

becomes a "quivering" in line 8, until finally the poet is "shaken, suddenly." This suggests a kind of coming back to life, a transformation from passivity to activity which is in keeping with discovering oneself.

In contrast to "The Forsaken," where male passion wears the woman down, the "Fireweed" image suggests a burning out:

Seed of the fire
 Sprung from charred ground
 To hide the dry, stark trees
 Carved in black nakedness.

Tongues of fire on fire,
 Where moths unsinged
 Seek honey in their need
 And their desire.

Flower of rocky land
 Growing in engine-smoke,
 Scattered beside the curling rails,
 Rooted in soot:

Untamed and prodigal
 Flower of flame,
 You are forever
 Seed of my fire.

(GP 6)

The images of destruction and renewal are far more extreme here than in "The Forsaken." The black nakedness of the trees in the first verse emphasizes the vulnerability of everything they symbolize in Livesay's cosmology. Loss and recovery are imaged simultaneously in scorched earth and intrepid flower. The second verse presents an image of positive passion: the moths can approach the fiery plants and fulfill their need without being consumed. The culture-nature conflict is implied in the

third verse, where nature adapts to the technological fallout of "engine-smoke." The speaker has emerged all the stronger from this holocaustal experience of love.

Like "Fireweed" and "The Shrouding," Livesay's "Pioneer," examined earlier, concerns the vulnerability of trees and what they symbolize for the poet. Isolated from the landscape he has helped to destroy, the pioneer now "cries to see / How he has ravaged earth / Of her last stone, / Her last most stubborn tree." This is Livesay's clearest and most profound statement regarding the conflict between culture and nature. The sentiment expressed in "'Haunted House,'" where culture is portrayed as fleeting and nature as the constant, seems naive by comparison. In "Pioneer," culture's civilizing impulse has erased nature. And given all the tree's associations--woman and man, humankind as a whole and the poet herself--the implication is that culture's blind determination to eradicate nature is suicidal.

During the course of "Hermit," a long dramatic monologue, the speaker expresses a sentiment similar to that in "Pioneer":

-- The things you farmers fear: wind and sun
 Rain, even, and snow; they're welcome here.
 All things are welcome here: men, silence,
 Or a crowd of eager boys coming from school.
 Take silence, now. You think I'm lonely, yes:
 Because, near to the land as you have to be,
 You do not feel yourselves at one with it.
 You have grown out of it, forgetting that
 Man has a kinship with each stone, each tree

Which only civilization drove him from:
 If he returns, he'll find no loneliness. (TS 18)

Here again is the suggestion that civilization is in conflict with rather than complementary to nature. Nature's processes should not be feared but welcomed as signs of sustained vitality. The presence of silence evokes that paradoxical presence/absence of nature in the poem which always indicates that nature is here on its own terms rather than the poet's. The word "forgetting" is significant, for as we have seen in Pickthall's work, to forget is to lose one's identity. In "forgetting that / Man has kinship" with nature, culture has in effect erased its own identity.

"Pioneer" is one of the more literal examples of what Livesay calls "the dichotomy that exists [in her poetry] between town and country." Right from the beginning of her career she has portrayed urban centres as crucial to human communication and as stifling enclosures which threaten private identity. For example, the second poem in her first collection, "A Country Mouse in Town," is an early expression of this dichotomy:

He brings me hot-house roses,
 Buds that pressed their sniffing noses
 Against a window-pane!

He knows naught of flowers,
 Of mystic scents, of faery powers,
 Of gardens in the rain.

City-bred and sleeping
 He does not hear the wind come creeping
 Along my moonlit lane.

He brings me hot-house roses,
 And never, never once supposes
 I'm going home again! (GP 1)

The charming fable to which the title alludes emphasises the incompatibility of rural and urban sensibilities. The flowers brought to the speaker by her suitor are symbolic, for as "hot-house roses" they are examples of the way in which culture subdues nature by committing it to stifling confinement within culture's enclosure. While his gift of flowers is undoubtedly intended to secure the speaker's affections, they only serve to remind her that to yield to his wooing is to commit herself to confinement in domestic space. Like the roses she, too, will spend her life pressing her nose longingly against a pane of glass. Alienated from nature, this "City-bred" suitor is incapable of understanding that the speaker, like the hot-house rose removed from nature, has left her real self behind. He "never, never once supposes" that she intends to go "home again" in order to escape the threat to her identity which his courting poses. Here again we have the central dilemma of female existence: to opt in favour of autonomy is to forego intimacy.

The dichotomy between town and country, intimacy and autonomy, is also the subject of "Song from the Multitude," a long dramatic monologue in which a wife, trapped in domestic space which is itself enclosed in urban space, longs to "blot out the memory"

So sharp, so luminous, of field and wood,
 And never know again the ache to touch
 Even one blade of grass clean of dust.
 Then I could turn within, turn to my work
 In the house and learn these other narrow ways
 Where knowledge is enclosed in parallels,
 Street upon street. Then I need not wait
 In hunger for your step to come, your arms
 To hold me and your voice to hush.
 It is not wise for any woman thus to be
 So helpless when alone, with no reserves
 To fall upon save a blank kitchen wall,
 The meaningless ticking of a kitchen clock,
 This narrow life, these walls to beat against,
 This little space of floor when my quick feet
 Would fain run miles upon a country road
 Stumbling and falling, yet flying, flying on. . . .
 (TS 58-9)

As in Pickthall's work, this erasure of memory is an erasure of identity. For a woman in patriarchal culture, marriage means giving up one's own identity or, in terms of Livesay's poetic, rejecting nature. It also means trying to make housework and culture's "other narrow ways" fulfill basic needs. The wife realizes that her loneliness and isolation have made her too dependent on her husband and that he cannot fulfill all her needs. Indeed, heterosexual arrangements in patriarchy do not fulfill a woman's need for either autonomy or nurturance. This isolation and alienation from herself inspires fantasies of escape.

In her despair she sings and dances through the empty rooms, trying "to show the chairs how gay I am! . . .

But not until I force the table-legs
 To caper through the hall, will my dull heart
 Be light again, my laughter be like wind.
 Not until the mad impossible day
 Arrives, when you and I return again
 To the wide heaven and the farstretched earth,
 And know ourselves through knowing quietness.
 Not until then, dear love, will there be joy
 To cover us with gold, a sun-like web. (TS 59)

Here again is the suggestion that it is not just women whose identity is dependent upon the connection with nature. The wife realizes that both of them need to escape the narrowness of culture and experience "the wide heaven and the farstretched earth" if they are ever really to know who they are.

But this wife's mate is not in agreement:

"It is enough," you say, "to be content
 To walk out in the evenings under a sky
 Far off and cool, and hear the high clear sounds
 Of children calling, women singing, organ-grinders
 Winding out the old interminable song.
 It is enough to be content with love." (TS 59)

If the crush and the noise of urban life are all he needs, then they should satisfy her as well. He, of course, has her at home; she is his little portion of nature and thus he, unlike her, is not entirely alienated from it. Nevertheless, the fact that she has his love should be enough for her.

But the love her husband would like her to be content with is sexual, and, indeed, in the night the wife is able to forget her isolation and loneliness: "Then in the dark, in the night, I cry out, I say: / 'This is enough! I need no comfort more.'"

But by morning she longs again for escape, and her mate's insistence that she be satisfied with his "love" entraps her as effectively as her four kitchen walls:

Therefore I say in all the beggar prayers
 You do not hear, love is a prisoned place,
 Love is a darkness with one blinding lamp
 To lighten it, where ever our tired eyes
 Must gaze unswerving, or else we lose
 All sense, all sight. Therefore I cry alone,
 Let me go, let me fly away, let me find peace
 Untroubled by the warring of two selves,
 Cool as the dim recesses of a wood.

.

I am enchained, imprisoned by your words,
 Your look, and even less than these--your coat,
 Hung upon a nail, which every time
 I pass I cannot keep from touching: so,
 By little things you hold me from the door,
 Bid me to sing within; when some far voice
 Integrally my own, is hushed, is dumb. (TS 60)

To believe that sexual fulfillment is all there is to love is to be imprisoned in a narrow definition of love. His refusal to hear her condemns her to a long sentence in that prison. In need of him and in need of autonomy, her "two selves" are engaged in irreconcilable civil war. Imprisoned in his definition of her, she is effectively silenced; she has no voice with which to speak herself into existence. These incompatible definitions of love and the speaker's failure to communicate her needs recall Skinner's "No Answer is Given."

"City Wife" is a kind of companion piece to "Song from the Multitude." It, too, is a long dramatic monologue in the voice of a woman who is trying to come to terms with marriage. But

whereas, in "Song of the Multitude," the wife longs to return to her place of origin in the country, the speaker in "City Wife" is a city woman who is newly relocated on a farm. As the title suggests, she is more identified with culture than with nature, and she has difficulty getting used to sharing her new husband with the land. In the morning, when he drives his horses and wagon through the gate and out to the fields, her eyes follow him possessively. But the lesson she must learn is not to be possessive, and it is her experience of nature that teaches her. As she loses herself in the landscape she also loses faith in her mate's love but when she recovers herself again the doubt dissipates. This pattern of loss and recovery is repeated several times in the poem:

I ran from there, thinking I could not turn
 But only follow the swiftly-curving road
 Until I saw that silence was swinging back,
 A golden pendulum above the wood --
 No! the spring sweetness was too much: a voice
 Seemed to cry loud and louder: Turn! Turn once --
 As long ago one thought he heard a voice
 And could not move until he called her name:
 The name of all names surely loveliest,
 Of lost, forever lost, Eurydice.

How many of us have learned, with Orpheus,
Not to look back at loveliness:
Not to look back, lest any evil chance
Should tell us how life vanishes . . . (SP 43)

The loss and recovery pattern is supported by the image of the pendulum. The opposition of human voice and nature's silence is significant here, for the voice that shatters nature's and the

speaker's equilibrium signals the return of her doubt and feelings of possessiveness. The speaker formulates the lesson she must learn in terms of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth: like Orpheus she must not turn in doubt, for to "look back at loveliness" is to objectify it; this method of possession will always backfire and result in irretrievable loss. Following her husband's example she allows nature to possess her, and in yielding to nature she finds herself again:

I am not frightened of the earth,
 For I have flung myself
 Deep in a field of grass and dust
 And known myself. . . . (SP 44)

Although the loss and recovery pattern repeats right to the end of the poem, the closing lines present an image of self-integration and the disappearance of doubt:

I hear no answer in the quiet elm,
 Still and enduring. Even as the tree, I wait
 Till over the hill the horses slowly climb.

As elsewhere in Livesay's work, silence indicates the presence of nature on its own terms and woman identified with tree is an image of female self-integration; "over the hill" and into this image of perfect equilibrium "the horses slowly climb."

If the tree is a symbol of Livesay's connection with nature, then the house represents her relationship to culture. The house is an appropriate symbol for woman's place in culture not just because she spends so much time there but also because

man doesn't. In the appropriately entitled "Symbols," the poet is finding this out:

"You are the house," I shout,
 "And I
 Importunate without."

A sudden open door --
 Too fast,
 I plunge to the house core.

In the bare, dusty room
 My cry
 Vanishes into gloom.

"You are the house," I said.
 At last
 Within, I find you fled. (TS 21)

The woman who believes that house and husband come together in one package may be in for a shock. Culturally conditioned romantic notions combine with heterosexual needs to make women feel particularly "Importunate without" a house, and a hasty decision to acquire one can result in isolation and entrapment rather than domestic bliss. As the third stanza suggests, entrapment in domestic space not only restricts mobility but also silences. Finally, it is not just women who eventually come to perceive domestic space as a trap: as this woman has discovered, her man is fled.

In keeping with Livesay's position at the crossroads of culture and nature, "Threshold" presents an image of woman balanced between the domestic and the natural world; she is attempting to balance the rewards and sacrifices of domestic

life:

This is the door: the archway where I stopped
 To gaze a moment over well-loved fields
 Before I sought the fire within, the bright
 Gold sunlight on the floor, and over all,
 Upstairs and down, some clear voice singing out
 Music I knew long since, but had forgot.
 This is the door, the threshold of my way
 Where I must watch the early afternoon
 Cast shadows on the road of morning's light,
 The gardens and the fields of noonday sun.
 This is the door, where others quickly pass,
 But where my feet seek out a resting-place --
 Balanced for this brief time between the thought
 Of what the heart has known, and must yet know.

(SP 27)

Unlike the speaker in "Symbols," whose hasty "plunge to the house core" results in isolation and entrapment, this speaker takes time to review her transition from "well-loved fields" to domestic space. The phrase "This is the door" appears three times, as if she wants to fix in her mind that a door is not just an obstacle to freedom but also a connection--an "archway," a "threshold"--between two realms. She notes that nature can inhabit domestic space in the form of "bright / Gold sunlight on the floor" but does not forget that she "must watch the early afternoon / Cast shadows." One of those shadows is apparent in the image of others who can quickly pass on to new experiences while she must remain. Balanced against this is the sense of security which home offers. The reference to recalling long-forgotten impressions, or "music," associated with the house seems to suggest that domestic space is a primal part of her

identity. This is, of course, in keeping with the fact that for most of us identity formation begins in the domestic setting; the woman who returns to the domestic realm upon marriage is, in more than one sense, returning home. In terms of Livesay's poetic, it is significant that the poem ends in a state of suspended animation, for it emphasizes the need to integrate one's connections with nature and home.

The relationship of house, nature, and memory in "Green Rain" makes it a poem about female identity:

I remember long veils of green rain
 Feathered like the shawl of my grandmother --
 Green from the half-green of the spring trees
 Waving in the valley.

I remember the road
 Like the one which leads to my grandmother's house,
 A warm house, with green carpets,
 Geraniums, a trilling canary
 And shining horse-hair chairs;
 And the silence, full of the rain's falling
 Was like my grandmother's parlour
 Alive with herself and her voice, rising
 and falling--
 Rain and wind intermingled.

I remember on that day
 I was thinking only of my love
 And of my love's house.
 But now I remember the day
 As I remember my grandmother.
 I remember the rain as the feathery fringe
 of her shawl. (SP 32)

As we have already seen, getting in touch with oneself again after a disappointing love affair is a healing process essential to the maintenance of female identity. In this particular case

the process also involves getting in touch through memory with one's matrilineal heritage and disengaging oneself from unhappy memories of a rainy day, a lover's house, and disappointed hopes. The "half-green of the spring trees" is an image of promise only half fulfilled which the poet dismembers and "re-members" as the "feathery fringe" of her grandmother's shawl. This is also a union of woman and nature on the visual level. Their union on the aural level is achieved through the association of indoor and outdoor sounds: the "rising and falling" of grandmother's voice intermingles with the sound of "Rain and wind"; this aural image also unites the natural world with the cultural enclosure, as do the "green carpets" and the presence of nature's paradoxical silence in the house. These visual and aural images of union imply continuity rather than opposition between culture and nature.

Woman becomes united with house as well, through a cluster of comforting memories of grandmother's house filled with all the familiar objects which the poet identifies with her. This complex union on several levels is achieved through the mantra-like repetition of a cluster of key words and phrases associated with house, memories, matriarch, and nature: these are all the essential ingredients of female identity. The two dominant phrases, "I remember" (repeated six times) and "my grandmother" (repeated four times), are dislocated throughout the poem until the penultimate line where they complete the re-membering

process by uniting. This tangle of associations is Livesay's most complex expression of woman as the uniting force between culture and nature.

As in Pickthall's work, bowers and houses are synonymous, but unlike Pickthall, Livesay does not believe in the nature bower as Mother Nature's protective womb:

I dreamed that I dwelt in a house
On the edge of a field
With a fire for warmth
And a roof for shield.

But when I awoke I saw
There was nothing at all
But rain for my roof
And wind for my wall. ("Wilderness Stone," SP 24)

While the nature bower in Pickthall's poetry is woman's alternative to man's transcendent paradise, here the alternatives are domestic space as a paradisaic illusion and the nature bower as decidedly unprotective. Besides depicting the shattering of woman's most cherished illusion in patriarchal culture, this double bower image represents the extremes on either side of Livesay's place at the junction of culture and nature. From her perspective neither extreme is habitable.

The bower as a short-lived illusion is also imaged in "Fire and Reason":

I cannot shut out the night --
Nor its sharp clarity.

The many blinds we draw,
You and I,

The many fires we light
 Can never quite obliterate
 The irony of stars,
 The deliberate moon,
 The last, unsolved finality of night. (GP 16)

This bower recalls Pickthall's bower of blazing logs in "Frost Song." Like Pickthall's ambivalent fire-bower, this poem concerns the ephemeral nature of passion: passion will eventually give way to reason, regardless of the lovers' efforts to blind themselves to that fact by hiding away in their love nest. The reality is that the heavens shift and, ironically, the stars which once made the lovers' paths to cross will eventually separate them. The phases of the moon are deliberate and relentless in their marking off of the final nights of passion.

Accepting that humankind "has kinship with each stone, each tree," as the speaker in "Hermit" explains it, involves recognizing that one is subject to nature's processes. As we have already seen in connection with Marjorie Pickthall, turning oneself into an art object is an attempt to deny the natural process of ageing. Men are equally as guilty of denying this important link with nature. While women resort to cosmetic and dietary excesses in an attempt to deny nature, men indulge in fantasies of the immortal soul's transcendence of nature and its processes. "Sonnet for Ontario" is about the acceptance of natural process as the central fact of human existence:

Although I'll never see the purple smoke
 Of prairie crocuses without sharp pain
 Sudden and sweet: Although I'll never hear
 A prairie meadow-lark without a stop
 In my quick pulse, an in-taking of breath
 Till the wild notes are fallen on the air;
 Although a kind of day, a certain wind
 Will touch me with old wonder, old delight --

Still there is something in these trees, these hills,
 This orderly succession of straight roads
 And fields; a sober-mantled loveliness
 That quickens with content the turn of years:
 So if I close my eyes, there is no choice --
 This land grows like a garden in my heart. (SP 28)

At the heart of this poem is Livesay's personal experience of leaving her native Manitoba for Ontario during the period in her life when she was maturing into womanhood. Her acceptance of both experiences--moving and maturing--becomes a metaphor here for growing old gracefully. The quickness of pulse and the wildness of youth, expressed in the prairie images of the octave, give over in the sestet to the Ontarianesque orderliness, sobriety, and contentment that come with "the turn of the years." On a second but not unconnected level of meaning, the poem images culture and nature in harmony rather than in conflict. Civilization is absent from the octave and present in the sestet in the form of straight roads and orderly fields. In refusing to favour one over the other, the poet creates no hierarchical arrangement between the two realms. While the image of the garden sometimes symbolizes the imposition of culture's values onto nature, here, as more often

in Livesay's poetry, it is an image of nature and culture in cooperation: "land" and "garden" are brought together in an image which focuses on growth.

Although Dorothy Livesay's poetry has gone through several phases over the course of her long and distinguished career, she has never really given up her role as poet-mediator. Her poetry of the 1930s and early '40s is in many ways a reformulation of her original vision in socialist terms. Unfortunately however, the task of translating female experience into working-class experience often proved intractable. For example, in "The Outrider" (TS 112-120), the poet assumes a farm-boy persona in whose voice the Canadian rural experience is contrasted with the anonymity of "Asphalt and factory walls." The failure of this poem can be attributed to the alienation of the poet from her own experience as an educated urban woman. Livesay's African poems of the late 1950s and '60 are more successful: they derive much of their power from the poet's appreciation of the close relationship between nature and culture which she perceived in Zambian society. But it was during the late 1960s that Livesay achieved full poetic power, when she found kindred spirits among younger poets such as Elizabeth Brewster and Margaret Atwood: not only was she a significant influence on Brewster, Livesay was also secure enough as a poet to open herself to the influence of the much younger and less experienced Atwood.

Livesay's career came full-circle in the late 1960s and '70s, when she became one of the most important feminist poets in Canada and the foremother of a new generation of women poets.

Notes

- ¹ "Women as Poets," Room of One's Own 1:1 (1975), p. 12.
- ² From "Winter Ascending" (Prince George, B.C.: Caledonia Writing Series Broadsheet, n.d.).
- ³ Dorothy Livesay, Right Hand, Left Hand (Erin, Ont.: Press Porcepic, 1977), p. 19. All biographical information, unless otherwise noted, is from this source.
- ⁴ See, for example, John Murray Gibbon, "Rhymes Without Reason," Canadian Bookman 1:1 (January 1919), 26-34, and Huntly K. Gordon, "Canadian Poetry," Canadian Forum 1 (March 1921), 178-80.
- ⁵ Dudek and Gnarowski, p. 4.
- ⁶ In an interview with Joyce Marshall ("A Bluestocking Remembers," Branching Out 7:1 [1980], 18-21), Livesay talks at length about her mother's lonely struggle. As a failed writer, J.F.B. Livesay was jealous of his wife and "never took any real interest in [her] writing. . . . [S]he went on doggedly, but without any real support from her husband." As a result, young Dorothy was not especially interested in a full-time literary career; she thought "that men would never accept a woman as having an independent career as a poet in Canada, and I would have to fit it in, as my mother had, on the side. . . (19).
- ⁷ In an interview with Bernice Lever (Canadian Forum 55 [Sept. 1975], 45-52), Livesay recalls: "I remember Edgar sitting beside me on our sofa. He looked at my poems, but he began raving about Audrey Alexandra Brown, a young poet in Nanaimo. This rather put me off!" (46).
- ⁸ Both Livesay's parents had ambitions for her which far exceeded her own. See Right Hand, Left Hand (32) and

"Interview," Canadian Forum (46). Florence Randall Livesay made up for her daughter's reluctance by arranging for the publication of her first poems as well as her first two collections (Dorothy Livesay to Sandra Djwa and Diana Relke, interview, 24 Jan. 1986).

⁹ Livesay lists her literary foremothers in an interview with Doug Beardsley and Rosemary Sullivan (Canadian Poetry 3 [Fall and Winter 1978]), 90-91.

¹⁰ Information regarding Livesay's early familiarity with the poetry of Emily Dickinson, her knowledge of Skinner, and her admiration for Pickthall was revealed in an interview (Livesay to Djwa and Relke). In an earlier interview she said: "Pelham Edgar was a great admirer of Marjorie Pickthall, as I was. I read and memorized almost all her poems. Her rhythms, her music entranced me. She influenced my rhythms very much because she was influenced by Biblical rhythms and I was raised on the Bible, a good Anglican" (Dorothy Livesay to Sandra Djwa, 15 December 1974).

¹¹ ". . . I was happiest breaking into free verse (encouraged by reading Poetry: Chicago which my mother subscribed to)" ("Song and Dance," Canadian Literature 41 [Summer 1969], 43).

¹² Marsha Barber, "An Interview with Dorothy Livesay," Room of One's Own 5:12 (1979), 15.

¹³ As Livesay has said, this poem was indeed inspired by a dream, although she is not able to interpret its meaning. However, she seems to have no objection to this reading (Livesay to Djwa and Relke). Nevertheless, my language is intentionally cautious in recognition of the huge discrepancy between literary analysis and psychoanalytical interpretation of dreams.

¹⁴ This term was coined by Adrienne Rich ("When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," Adrienne Rich's Poetry, ed. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi [New York: Norton, 1975]) and is defined by Rich as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering a text from a new critical direction. . . an act of survival" (p. 90). Woman's role in the literary universe is, as Livesay demonstrates, also subject to "re-vision."

- 15 Sherry Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture," Woman, Culture and Society, ed. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1974), p. 69.
- 16 D.G. Jones, Butterfly on Rock (Toronto: UTP, 1970), p. 57.
- 17 For feminists, tension between one's gender identity and one's vocation seems to be a fact of life in patriarchy. For example, the term "feminist critic" can be compared to the term "woman poet" in that feminists who practice criticism experience considerable tension between their two roles. Apocalyptic titles of ground-breaking feminist critical articles betray some of that felt tension: "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," "Dancing Through the Mine Field," "Storming the Toolshed." Indeed, the dictum "the personal is the political," is a feminist war-cry which defies patriarchy's practice of relegating women to the realm of the personal/private and denying them access to the political/public arena. Having reached a critical mass, the negative tension between the personal and the political, like the tension between Livesay's two roles, has been transformed into the major source of positive and explosive energy which fuels the feminist movement.
- 18 Frank Davey, From There to Here (Erin, Ont.: Press Porcepic, 1974), p.168.
- 19 While regarding the body rather than the (transcendent) soul, spirit, or mind as the ground of being is not the same as the French feminist concept of "writing the body," both ideas can be seen to express a philosophical concern with the body as primary rather than secondary. Hélène Cixous, in her "The Laugh of the Medusa" (Signs 1:4, 875-93), insists that "Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word 'silcnce,' the one that, aiming for the impossible, stops short before the word 'impossible' and writes it as 'the end'" (886). Lesbian writer Nicole Brossard, in her "Tender Skin My Mind" (In the Feminine, ed. by Daphne Marlatt, et al [Edmonton: Longspoon, 1985], pp. 180-82), briefly describes the process of "writing the body":

"Lesbians inspire me in the sense that we . . . bring ourselves into the world. . . . When I say that we literally bring ourselves into the world, I really and truly mean literally. Literal means what is represented by letters. It is what is taken as the letter. Now we take as the letter what our bodies are, our skin, sweat, pleasure, sensuality, enjoyment. These are the first letters which form the beginning of our texts" (181). Unlike Brossard, Livesay is not concerned with creating a "woman's language" which would be the oppositional counterpart to existing (male) language; nor is she concerned with literalizing language. Rather, she exploits the inherent fictiveness in existing language in order to effect an alternate epistemology of complementarity which renders binary oppositions (man/woman, object/subject, culture/nature) illusory.

20 "Interview," Canadian Forum, p. 50.

21 "Interview," Room of One's Own, p. 32.

22 The way in which language reflects cultural attitudes about biological difference is described by Lorraine Gauthier, with reference to the work of Luce Irigaray ("Desire for Origin/Original Desire: Luce Irigaray on Maternity, Sexuality and Language," Tessera, no. 3 [forthcoming]): "The issue for Irigaray is not only to retrieve corporeality [see not 19]. It is especially a question of recognizing the difference in differently sexed bodies and the role of that difference and its repression in the elaboration of the metaphors which underlie our sexual symbolic representations. She wishes to unmask the myth of 'language' as neutral, a neutrality which in effect is masculine, and, unrecognized as such, is presented as universal in opposition to the 'specificity' of female language. This supposedly neutral language, linked to male physiology, devalues or excludes the multiplicity, fluidity and flux of female experience which finds itself unrepresented and unrepresentable. For Irigaray, both sexes speak a 'specific' language, each from the position of 'other.' It is only when this is recognized that each will be able to speak to the other. For this to happen women must be allowed to develop our language, our symbols with which to express our 'selves,' our experience, and in such expression discover ourselves as true other, as women, not as 'other' to the one" (Tessera ms. 3-4).

23 Alan Twigg, "Matrona" (interview with Dorothy Livesay), For Openers: Conversations with 24 Canadian Writers (Madierra Park, B.C.: Harbour Publishing, 1981), p. 137.

24 While Homans' analysis is useful for identifying the reasons why much nature poetry by women fails, her theory is based on the assumption that the opposition of nature and the human as it is manifested in male consciousness is the norm and that, like Dickinson, women poets must seek to duplicate this opposition in their own relationship with nature. But feminist investigation of Western science is a useful corrective to this ideal of absolute objectification. In "Feminism and Science" (1982; rpt. in The Signs Reader [Chicago: UCP, 1983], pp. 109-122), Evelyn Fox Keller explains that feminist scientists take their lead from a recent trend which questions "the very assumptions of objectivity and rationality that underlie the scientific enterprise. To challenge the truth and necessity of the conclusions of natural science on the grounds that they . . . reflect the judgement of men is to take the Galilean credo and turn it on its head. It is not true that 'the conclusions of natural science are true and necessary, and the judgement of man has nothing to do with them'; it is the judgement of woman that they have nothing to do with" (112). Keller consults psychoanalytic models of identity formation to explain the origins of the male-devised concept of objectivity which informs the scientific method. The illusion of objectivity arises out of the process by which male children develop autonomy. It is a process which is characterized by identification against the female and, by extension, nature which is the object of scientific observation. However, the maintenance of autonomy, Keller explains, is dependent upon "seeking to master the other." It is this ideology of mastery and dominance which is at the heart of the objectivist illusion. But to argue for an understanding of scientific objectivity as merely a male illusion is to risk "viewing science as pure social product; science then dissolves into ideology and objectivity loses all intrinsic meaning. In the resulting cultural relativism, any emancipatory function of modern science is negated and the arbitration of truth recedes into the political domain. Against this background, the temptation arises for feminists to abandon their claim for representation in scientific culture and, in its place, to invite a return to a purely 'female' subjectivity, leaving rationality and objectivity in the male domain, dismissed as products of a purely male consciousness" (113). Keller describes this rejection of objectivity as a "nihilist retreat [which] is in fact provided by the very ideology of objectivity we wish to escape. This is the ideology that asserts an opposition between (male) objectivity and (female) subjectivity and denies the possibility of mediation between the two. A first step, therefore, in extending the feminist critique to the foundations of scientific thought is to reconceptualize objectivity as a dialectical process so as to

allow for the possibility of distinguishing the objective effort from the objectivist illusion. . . . In short, rather than abandon the quintessentially human effort to understand the world in rational terms, we need to refine that effort. To do this, we need to add to the familiar methods of rational and empirical inquiry the additional process of self-reflection. . . . [W]e need to 'become conscious of self'" (114). In mediating the conflict between culture and nature through personal identification with both realms, Livesay also mediates the "opposition between (male) objectivity and (female) subjectivity," and in doing so effects an epistemological shift from inevitable opposition and the objectivist illusion to an alternate epistemology which recognizes the "objective effort" even while it incorporates the "process of self-reflection."

25 As Carolyn Merchant notes in the pre-Baconian myth of nature, "Controlling images operate as ethical sanctions--as subtle 'oughts' or 'ought-nots'." . . . Contemporary philosophers of language have critically reassessed the earlier positivist distinction between the 'is' of science and the 'ought' of society, arguing that descriptions and norms are not opposed to one another by linguistic separation into separate 'is' and 'ought' statements, but are contained within each other." (100-101). Contained in Livesay's implicit statement that nature "is not" accessible to her art is a statement of ethical restraint: nature "ought not" to be trapped in human (especially scientific and economic) definitions.

26 Maintaining one's connection with both nature and humanity is still important to Livesay: as she writes in "Song and Dance," "For me, the true intellectual is a simple person who knows how to be close to nature and to ordinary people" (p. 45).

27 "Interview," Canadian Forum, p. 49.

28 Alienation, the garden, and the "night-scented phlox" suggest that an early scene in D.H. Lawrence's Sons and Lovers may have influenced this poem. In that scene, Mr. Morel locks his wife out of the house; in the garden she has a kind of mystical experience while inside her husband drops into an alcoholic stupor. Thus an irony is created: although she is locked out, he is alienated (Sons and Lovers [1913; rpt. New York: Compass Books, 1958], pp. 23-4). I am indebted to Sandra Djwa for this reading.

29 Joyce Whitney, "Death and Transfiguration: The Mature Love Poems of Dorothy Livesay," Room of One's Own 5:12 (1979), 101.

Conclusion

In her memoir of the late 1920s and '30s, Dorothy Livesay writes: "The other Canadian artists of my era were . . . men. . . . No companion women poets were born until the end of the First World War. . . . So until they began to make their mark in the forties, I always had the feeling I was struggling alone to make a woman's voice heard."¹ Indeed, the several women poets who were operating during the late twenties and early thirties--poets such as Katherine Hale, Lyon Sharman, and Agnes Ethelwyn Wetherald--were a generation older than Livesay and/or were still imitating the male voices of the late nineteenth century.² Pickthall and Skinner, the two members of that earlier generation who had attempted to "make a woman's voice heard," were silenced: by 1932, when Livesay's second book was published, Pickthall had been dead ten years, and her work was rapidly falling into obscurity; as for Skinner, her voice had never really been heard in Canada. Without a supportive community of feminist poets during the 1930s, it is not surprising that Livesay temporarily abandoned the theme of sexual politics for party politics, a subject preoccupying her male counterparts.

Despite this change of focus, Livesay's voice continued to

be heard, and the female tradition continued to operate alongside the louder male voices. For if, as poets, Hale, Sharman, and Wetherald were not the active feminist role-models Livesay required, they were, along with Isabel Ecclestone MacKay, Agnes Maule Machar, Helena Coleman, Sarah Ann Curzon, and Livesay's own mother, Florence Randall Livesay, contributors to a rich tradition of female writing in other genres, such as fiction, drama, biography, literary and cultural criticism, social history, journalism, and travel literature. This female literary heritage, along with profound social changes--many of which were effected by active women's organizations--and the improved status of women through the suffrage movement, almost certainly played a role in Livesay's persistent presence among her male companion poets.

As we have seen in the preceding chapter, Pickthall's struggle with Romantic nature convention and Skinner's difficulties with the integration of female experience and art were problems which Livesay, in her role as poet-mediator, was able to solve. Further, the negative tension between femininity and creativity which Pickthall had been unable fully to resolve was transformed by Livesay into a source of explosive poetic energy. And whereas Skinner had returned to and modified an ancient Indian myth of Mother Nature as an alternative to Romantic convention, Livesay created a new myth of nature by

refusing to impose a gender definition upon it. In short, by resolving the oppositions which had bound each of her two predecessors in male definitions of her self and her art, Livesay not only liberated the female poetic voice but also developed new ways of knowing herself and the natural and cultural environment which sustained her.

This process of evolving female poetic consciousness continued through succeeding decades of the century. For example, Livesay's problem with the translation of female experience into working-class experience was solved by a poet of the next generation, P.K. Page. Page's "The Stenographers" and "Typists" are at once "proletariat" poems and poems of female experience. Further, in poems such as "Young Girls," Page focuses much more directly on the nature of femaleness than Livesay had previously done:

Nothing, not even fear of punishment
 can stop the giggle in a girl.
 Oh mothers' trim
 shapes on the chesterfield cannot dispel
 their lolloping fatness.
 Adolescence tumbles about in them
 on cinder schoolyard or behind the expensive gates.

Too much weeping in them and unfamiliar blood
 has set them perilously afloat.
 Not divers these--but as if the waters rose in flood--
 making them partially amphibious
 and always drowning a little and hearing bells;
 until the day the shore line wavers less,
 and caught and swung on the bright hooks of³ their sex,
 earth becomes home, their natural element.

Ambivalence about growing up female is captured here in the implicit conflict between mothers and daughters: "mothers' trim / shapes" are a feminine ideal in patriarchal culture, and that trimness is a reproach to the "lolloping fatness" of adolescent daughters who have not yet conformed to that ideal. Copious female tears and the "unfamiliar blood" of adolescent menses signal the first major crisis in women's lives. They must now submit to being "caught and swung on the bright hooks of their sex" if they are to assume their proper place in patriarchal culture. Despite this ominous sentiment, there is also celebration here in the irrepressible giggles of girlhood and in the feeling of coming home to oneself once the crisis of female adolescence is negotiated.

Page's "Virgin" is in the tradition of Pickthall's "Inheritance" and Livesay's "Sun" in that its subject is female self-discovery. "Virgin," however, focuses exclusively on sexual experience and has none of the ambivalence which characterizes its predecessors:

By the sun, by the sudden flurry
of birds in a flock,
oh, by love's ghost
and the imagined guest--
all these
shattering, shaking the girl
in her maidenhood,
she knows
him and his green song smooth as a stone
and the word
quick with the sap and the bud and the moving bird.

As Ellen Moers has written, "Common sense . . . taught us, long ago, that Portnoy's complaint is hardly of an exclusive masculine nature; and that virgin girls are no more shut out from sexual experience than their male counterparts" (256). But what differentiates "Virgin" from male masturbation literature is that this orgasmic experience brings not only knowledge of one's own sexuality but of nature as well. For the Virgin's "imagined guest" is indistinguishable from nature: in knowing "him and his green song smooth as a stone," she comes to know nature "quick with the sap and the bud and the moving bird." As in Livesay's poetry, this simultaneous recognition of self and nature reconciles the human with the natural realm. The kind of confident female candor which characterizes Page's work can be seen to originate not only in Livesay's steadfast presence but also in the emergence of other women poets such as Margaret Avison, Anne Wilkinson, Anne Marriott, and Phyllis Webb.

Despite a growing female literary community, the preoccupation with writing oneself into existence continues to be a central concern for women poets. One of Margaret Avison's longest poems, "The Agnes Cleves Papers," is an example of the way in which women create a poetic mask through which literary authority is articulated. Agnes Cleves is her "Papers"; she creates her identity as she writes/tells her stories. The poem is composed of several seemingly unrelated fragments of the

speaker's past life which she recollects and assembles as her own personal myth of identity. In this way, the poem recalls the search for female identity which Pickthall undertakes in "Persephone Returning to Hades"; in its "re-membering" process, it also recalls Livesay's "Green Rain." The impulse behind Agnes Cleves' incarnation of self is described in the following passage:

One evening, just a year or two ago,
 The simple penetrating force of love
 Redeemed me, for the last perhaps. I've seldom
 dared, since,
 To approach that; not that it would go out,
 But it might prove as centre of all
 Revolutions, and, defined,
 Limn with false human clarity
 A solar system with its verge
 Lost, perhaps, but illumined in
 A mathematical certainty
 And for my secret I would have a universe.
 The need to tell you is exciting
 And very bleak.

The same creative force of "Love" that informs the poetry of Crawford and Pickthall operates here as the sacred presence which redeems Agnes Cleves and immortalizes her in the language of her stories. Just as the universe is "illumined" through the calculations, or "mathematics," of great thinkers (Tycho Brahe and Kepler are Avison's favourites), so is Agnes Cleves revealed through the illuminating "Word." And just as mathematics reveals the limits of the "solar system," so does the language of this poem reveal the outlines of female personality. The "need to tell" is not only "exciting" but also absolutely

necessary to female identity. But fear of the failure of language to call Agnes Cleves into existence makes the writing of the poem/"Papers" a "bleak" task; however, she soon finds that "Telling it in plain words / Makes me see how I feared the wrong thing" (97). Given the female legacy of silence, the right thing to fear is, perhaps, the inability to tell at all. In "plain words," Agnes Cleves writes/speaks herself into existence and springs off the page into immortality just as "Valerius in [the] December" of his life (90) secured his own immortality through his nine books of memorable deeds and sayings.

Clearly Agnes Cleves is, like Avison, a creative artist in that her personal myth as it takes shape on the page is a work of art. However, like many of Avison's female predecessors and successors, her Agnes Cleves fears the possible failure of her attempt at self-creation--fears that her text cannot contain her. Her text, "that circular apartment" (91), contains "too many doors" through which she sees herself, "A woman in a bathrobe" who is "always just about to disappear." But the "many means of egress" through which Cleves/Avison could so easily disappear (like Persephone through the doors of hell) get "stopped up" (91), for the distinctive voice of Agnes Cleves is ever-present and, in fact, is the unifying principle of the poem. However we choose to interpret the various fragments of Agnes Cleves' myth, we cannot deny that it is her personality

which holds those fragments together. Although the preoccupation with writing oneself into existence continues to be a primary concern for contemporary women poets, it should not be forgotten that this strategy was not always possible for their predecessors, notably Constance Lindsay Skinner, who so often felt obliged to use the mask of the male persona.

Identification with nature, as in Pickthall's work, and mediation of the conflict between culture (and nature, as in Livesay's, continue to characterize the female literary tradition in Canada. The difficulty men have in coming to terms with nature and, by extension, with women is a frequent theme in Margaret Atwood's poetry. Atwood's landscape poems often feature an opposition between man and nature, between male idealism and the landscape upon which it is imposed. In The Journals of Susanna Moodie,⁵ Mrs. Moodie is identified with the Canadian landscape--rough, prickly, and oppressed by the men who come from Europe to exploit the New World and to build their "rivetted babylon" (133) on the clearings decimated by the axes and, later, the bulldozers of culture. Moodie's ultimate (female) insanity finds its revenge in Atwood's "Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer" (60) in which the male pioneer's failed attempt to impose culture's rigid order upon nature results in madness:

Things
 refused to name themselves; refused
 to let him name them.

The wolves hunted
 outside.

On his beaches, his clearings,
 by the surf of under-
 growth breaking
 at his feet, he foresaw
 disintegration

and in the end

through eyes
 made ragged by his
 effort, the tension
 between subject and object,

the green
 vision, the unnamed
 whale invaded. (63)

The failure of Adamic language to possess and define the landscape recalls Livesay's cautions about the limits of poetic language. The pioneer's failure to resolve the negative "tension / between subject and object" emphasises the persistent alienation of nature from culture--an alienation which denies the pioneer possession of "his beaches, his clearings" and causes the "disintegration" of his mind.

In "Backdrop Addresses Cowboy" (70), Atwood invests the landscape with her own voice. What that voice says is a direct attack upon the most important macho symbol of North American culture: the cowboy. Atwood exposes both the childishness and destructiveness of macho mentality: like a toddler with a Fisher-Price toy, the cowboy drags "a paper-mâché cactus / on

wheels behind [him] with a string," and yet this seemingly innocent child's play is menacingly "full of bullets." The implications of this mentality for nature are profound:

. . . you leave behind you a heroic
 trail of desolation:
 beer bottles
 slaughtered by the side
 of the road, bird-
 skulls bleaching in the sunset.

I am also what surrounds you:
 my brain
 scattered with your
 tincans, bones, empty shells,
 the litter of your invasions.

I am the space you desecrate
 as you pass through. (70-71)

Most readers find little hope in Atwood's vision, and yet the conclusion of The Journals of Susanna Moodie features a potential resurrection of Moodie and the landscape. Both Moodie and nature are entombed in the womb of the earth beneath the glass and concrete of Toronto and await rebirth. The implication is that nature is irrepressible and that given enough time all the rivetted Babylons of culture will convert back into a wilderness.⁶ This recalls the sentiment which one of Atwood's foremothers, Dorothy Livesay, had expressed in "'Haunted House,'" a poem inspired by one of her foremothers, Emily Dickinson.

Identification with marginalized cultures, as in the work

of Constance Lindsay Skinner, also continues to inform Canadian women's poetry. As Jean Mallinson's study demonstrates, the Indian Fictions genre has been enjoying a revival since the late 1960s. For example, Carolyn Zonailo's "D'Sonoqua" suggests one way in which the Kwakiutl "Wild Woman of the Woods" has undergone "re-vision" by contemporary women poets:

This terrible mother's mouth
is swollen
larger than a pregnant womb.
She gives birth by eating.

Her cannibal jaws swallow
and spew me out like a maggot.
I bring food, bring gifts
from the mouth
of the hungry woman.

Twice born, I
dream of a mother
more frightening than nature.
I fashion her
in the bole of a tree
in the vision
of my childhood nightmare.
Her breasts are blood red.
Her breasts are an eagle beak.

At night the village children
hide under woven blankets
under their mother's belly
but the spirit woman
holds the children
tighter than fear.

She carries them
to a cave
where her terrible
mother wrath devours.⁷

As Mallinson notes, Zonailo's D'Sonoqua is "the wrathful, potentially destructive mother that women recognize in their own

mothers and in themselves." Like Skinner's domestication of this mythical figure, Zonailo's representation of D'Sonoqua's wildness provides the poet with a way of coping with her "dark double, by giving her a public, shared presence in a poem" (Mallinson 123).

Other oppressed minority groups have provided women poets with a metaphor for the female condition. In addition to Livesay, who took up the cause of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War in her documentary poem Call My People Home (TS 180-194), Daphne Marlatt speaks out on behalf of the dispossessed Japanese fishermen in her long poem Steveston.⁸ The poem was written as part of an oral history project and as such suggests that history is not always obtainable from history books. Indeed, it can now be bought by the can in the supermarket. Those cans, which supposedly contain Fraser River salmon, actually contain the lives of past generations of immigrant fishermen, caught, gutted, packed, steamed, and served up "in a crimson sauce of their own blood" (90). The cannery is a "corporate growth [as in malignant tumor] that monopolizes / the sun. moon and tide, fish-run" (89)--in short, all of nature. Steveston's cannery and the river which supplies it are violently opposed in the poem, and like Livesay, Marlatt takes on the task of mediating that conflict. Culture's insensitivity to nature is perfectly captured in the description of the river

as an "irrational (hence renewable) / creature" (86) and therefore not in need of any particular care or nurturance from its human exploiters. But despite the cannery's malignant attack upon the natural world around it, the much maligned Fraser continues to flow and to bear its cargo of life relentlessly to the sea. This recalls the triumph of woman/nature in Atwood's vision.

It is tempting to continue here by pointing out Sharon Thesen's indebtedness to Page, Atwood, and Marlatt, for Thesen herself has acknowledged that indebtedness.⁹ But it would be misleading to suggest that the female tradition in Canadian poetry can be fully understood merely in terms of a direct line of influence from Pickthall and Skinner, through Livesay, to today's women poets. Yet without foremothers such as Livesay, Page, Avison, and Webb, it is doubtful if Atwood, Marlatt, Thesen, and the many other women poets writing today could have developed into the kinds of poets they are. Whether or not these later generations modelled themselves directly on the work of earlier ones is only of limited importance: the mere existence of poetic foremothers who could succeed in a male dominated tradition almost certainly had a positive psychological effect on their successors. Pickthall and Skinner, Livesay and Page treated uniquely female experience in their work, and the present generation, perhaps encouraged

directly or indirectly by them, and certainly inspired by an emerging feminist sensibility, felt freer to treat female experience and feminist concerns more overtly. Consequently, the task of making "woman" a function of "poet" and "poet" a function of "woman"--in short, the task of establishing poetic identity--has been far less problematic for contemporary women. Gilbert and Gubar say it well when they write that "if contemporary women do now attempt the pen with energy and authority, they are able to do so only because their . . . foremothers struggled in isolation that felt like illness, alienation that felt like madness, obscurity that felt like paralysis to overcome the anxiety of authorship that was endemic to their literary subculture" (MA 51). As we have seen, Pickthall and Skinner, and even the young Dorothy Livesay, have paid the price of isolation, alienation, and obscurity. As a result, the Pages and the Atwoods, the Marlatts and the Thesens enjoy the energy and authority which will be their legacy to future generations of Canadian literary women.

Notes

¹ Dorothy Livesay, Right Hand, Left Hand, p. 19.

² In 1932, Helena Coleman was 54 years old, Katherine Hale was 36, Mrs. J.F. Harrison ("Seranus") was 54, Lyon Sharman was 41, and Agnes Ethelwyn Wetherald was 56. These poets were either imitating the male "Confederation" poets or were not pursuing female concerns in their poetry. Louise Morey Bowman was 32, and although she wrote in free verse her chief model was Pickthall and most of the Pickthall poems she was attracted to were modelled on nineteenth-century male poems. To be fair, a handful of Bowman's poems attempts to deal with "feminine" themes, and as Livesay later recognized ("Interview," Room of One's Own, p. 26), Bowman's work needs to be rescued from obscurity. Audrey Alexandra Brown was only 26 in 1932, but her work, like much of Bowman's, imitates Pickthall's imitative verse.

³ P.K. Page, The Glass Air: Selected Poems (Toronto: Oxford, 1985), p. 12.

⁴ Margaret Avison, Winter Sun/The Dumbfounding: Poems 1940-66. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982, p. 92.

⁵ Margaret Atwood, The Journals of Susanna Moodie, in her Selected Poems (Toronto: Oxford, 1976), pp. 80-115. All quotations from Atwood's poetry are from Selected Poems; references appear in the text.

⁶ For a fuller reading of the Journals in these terms, see Relke, "Double Voice, Single Vision."

⁷ Carolyn Zonailo, Auto-da-Fe (Vancouver: Blewointment-press, 1977), n.p.

⁸ Daphne Marlatt, Steveston (1974); rpt. in The Long Poem Anthology, Michael Ondaatje, ed. (Toronto: Coachouse, 1979), pp. 83-123.

⁹ Sharon Thesen discussed her indebtedness to other Canadian women poets at a seminar entitled "Language and Language Theory in Women's Writing," at the Women and Words Conference, Vancouver, on 2 July 1983.

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