ecocritical readings of Canadian women's poetry

Greenwor(l)ds

Diana M.A. Relke

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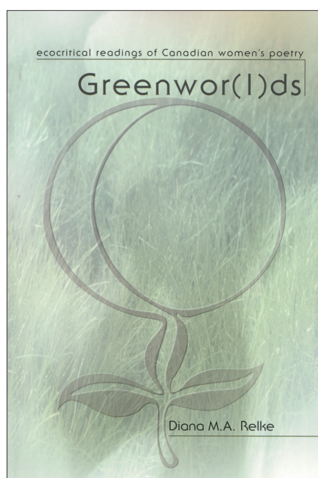

GREENWOR(L)DS: ECOCRITICAL READINGS OF CANADIAN WOMEN'S POETRY

by Diana M.A. Relke

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GREENWOR(L)DS

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Diana M.A. Relke

University of Calgary Press

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for my sister
Joan Relke
artist, scholar, and good friend

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Preface

In 1994, feminist philosopher of education Jane Rolland Martin reprinted several of her most influential essays in a volume she entitled *Changing the Educational Landscape.* She opened her introduction in dialogue with another influential feminist thinker:

> "I was in my fiftieth year when I began this book: for me a time of flowering," Carolyn Heilbrun wrote in the preface of *Reinventing Womanhood.* I was fifty-one when my flowering occurred. . . . (Martin 1)

Landscape. Flowering. How easily horticultural metaphors trip off the tongues of women when they are speaking personally, situating themselves in discourse, positioning themselves as subject. These metaphors seem to lurk in the language, held out to us as if by some invisible butler, ready for us to slip into. How easily, too, women rewrite them! For according to linguistic convention, women do not "flower" in their fifties. By the time a woman has reached her fifties, her "bloom" has faded and she has "ripened" into maturity.

Where do these metaphors come from? Why do women use them? How do women use them, and how do they use women? I have spent almost two decades pursuing these questions in the

poetry of Canadian women. Now, in my fifties, I am ready to "harvest" some of the answers. The season seems right for it. Canadian ecological literary criticism came of age in 1998, with the Spring/Summer issue of *Canadian Poetry*, subtitled *Much with Nature*, which brings together original essays by several ecocritics and convinces those of us who have been working in relative isolation that we are finally a community. The issue is the fruit of several years of literary ecoactivism on the part of *Canadian Poetry*'s editor, David Bentley, who has been inviting, inspiring, and even cajoling Canadian critics to take up the ecocritical challenge since at least 1980, when he published his editorial, "A New Dimension: Notes on the Ecology of Canadian Poetry." I am indebted to David for his encouragement and his own fine ecocritical work to which I refer so often in these essays, and for soliciting for *Canadian Poetry* some of the work reprinted here.

I have been so long at work upon these essays that the scores of people to whom I owe a debt of gratitude challenge the conventions of acknowledgment far beyond their limits, and the few names I mention here are only the tip of a large and solid iceberg in a sea of experience. I wrote versions of the opening pieces while working within the supportive environment of the feminist community at Simon Fraser University, where my students in the first women's studies course I taught — significantly, a course on women and utopias — helped me to understand how women envision a world in which earth care comes first. Of the many faculty members there, Andrea Lebowitz and Meredith Kimball stand out as the two whose influence most helped to shape my thinking about women's relationships, including those with nonhuman nature. The middle stages of this project were carried out in the stimulating interdisciplinary environment of the University of Calgary where I had the opportunity to present several papers on my work in progress and receive valuable feedback from Marsha Hanen, Dean of the Faculty of General Studies during the early part of my tenure there, Helen Buss and Aritha van Herk of the Department of English, and many other fine colleagues. The latest essays were written at the University of Saskatchewan where several colleagues, including Wendy Schissel, Susan Gingell, Carol Morrell and others had more influence than they can know. Our conversations about this project helped to keep me focused despite the often hectic work of

establishing the Department of Women's and Gender Studies which did not leave me much time for writing. I owe special thanks to Alison Mitchell, my hard-working research assistant for three years, and Tonya Kaye, tireless secretary in the WGSt office, both of whom helped to keep my other projects afloat when I needed the time to work on the essays. Friends in Vancouver — most notably Marjorie Weir, Carol Lane, and Irene Niechoda — have been long-suffering and unfailingly polite about serving as sounding boards, as were my kinswomen Daria Danko and Joan Relke. Like their commitment to feminism in their everyday lives, Daria's love of all things literary and Joan's organic vision as realized in her beautiful sculptures have been enduring sources of inspiration to me.

I owe thanks to many librarians in the Queen's University Archives, the E.J. Pratt Library (Victoria University), the W.E. Bennett Library (Simon Fraser University), and the University of Manitoba Archives. Thanks to a sabbatical leave approved by the University of Saskatchewan, I have been able to bring this project to completion. I am also grateful to the University of Saskatchewan for a grant in aid of publication. The Social Science and Research Council of Canada provided support almost continuously since the work began, and I am grateful for it. To Walter Hildebrandt, Shirley Onn, Linda Reynolds, and others at the University of Calgary Press, I give special thanks for shepherding the book through its final phases. I would also like to thank the Department of Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Saskatchewan for permission to use their department logo on the book's cover. The logo was designed by Joan Relke.

Although most of the essays included in this volume have undergone radical revision, expansion, and recombination since their initial publication, I am nevertheless indebted to the editors and many anonymous readers who helped with earlier versions as follows:

"Feminist Ecocritique as Forensic Archaeology: Digging in Critical Graveyards and Phyllis Webb's Gardens." *Canadian Poetry* 42 (1998): 66-99.

"'time is the delta': *Steveston* in Historical and Ecological Context." *Canadian Poetry* 38 (1996): 29-48.

"Tracing a Terrestrial Vision in the Early Work of P.K. Page." *Canadian Poetry* 35 (1994): 11-30.

"Myths of Nature and the Poetry of Canadian Women: An Alternative Reading of Literary History." *New Literatures Review* 23 (1992): 31-49.

"The Ecological Vision of Isabella Valancy Crawford: A Reading of *Malcolm's Katie.*" *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 22:3 (1991): 51-71.

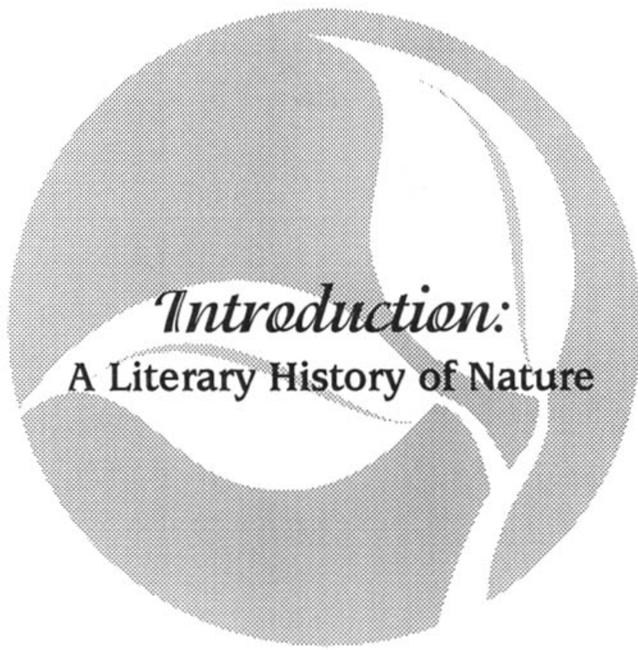
"The Actualities of Experience: Constance Lindsay Skinner's Indian Poems." *Atlantis: A Women's Studies Journal* 14:2 (1989): 10-20.

"Killed into Art: Marjorie Pickthall and *The Wood Carver's Wife.*" *Canadian Drama* 13:2 (1989), 187-200.

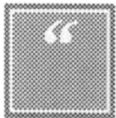
"Demeter's Daughter: Marjorie Pickthall and the Quest for Poetic Identity." *Canadian Literature* 115 (1987): 28-43.

"The Task of Poetic Mediation: Dorothy Livesay's Early Poetry." *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 17:4 (1986): 17-36.

"Double Voice, Single Vision: A Feminist Reading of Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie.*" *Atlantis: A Women's Studies Journal* 9:1 (1983): 35-48.



Introduction: A Literary History of Nature



“Nature does not exist for us, had no idea we were coming, and doesn't give a damn about us,” writes Harvard biologist Stephen Jay Gould. Why, then, should we give a damn about nature? Because, Gould advises, nature “holds all the cards, and has immense power over us. . . . If we treat her nicely, she will keep us going for a while. If we scratch her, she will bleed, kick us out, bandage up, and go about her business at her own scale.” Gould's rationale for environmental responsibility is powerful because it draws on two of the most powerful discourses in the history of Western culture: science and mythology. Science tells us that “We can surely destroy ourselves and take many other species with us,” but for the planet, which operates on the geological time scale, “time will clear the impact of any human malfeasance” (Gould 48-51). Myth speaks to us in a much more intimate way. Like the mother who had complete power over us when we were infants, “Mother Nature” provides for all our needs, but she gets to dictate all the terms. As infants, we had desires that demanded instant gratification, and when mother could not or would not comply, it must have felt as if she didn't give a damn about us. Trying to figure out whether this early experience influences Western culture's ambivalent attitude toward nonhuman nature, or if our ambivalence about nature influences our attitude toward women has occupied psychologists and ecofeminists for years.[1]

Gould is not usually given to constructing nature in gendered terms. On the contrary, he is reported to have ridiculed such constructions as "pseudoscience, poetry posing as theory" (Horgan 131). Yet science and myth are not so easily untangled as this repudiation would suggest, and much feminist scholarship has been devoted to disclosing the extent to which myths of nature — particularly the myth of feminized nature — informs the history, philosophy, culture, and praxis of science. Clearly, the myth of Mother Nature did not originate with science. Mother Earth, as she was known in a much earlier incarnation, is at least as old as the earliest written text about her. Indeed, Western civilization's first poem to represent woman as landscape may well be Western civilization's first poem.

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, archaeologists digging up the so-called "cradle of civilization" between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in the Middle East unearthed seven clay tablets dating back to the early centuries of the second millennium BCE. Written upon them in cuneiform, the earliest known form of writing, was the Mesopotamian creation myth known among scholars as the *Enuma elish*. This poem tells the story of how Tiamat, Ur-goddess and prolific mother of six generations of gods, declares war on her children but meets defeat at the hands of the most heroic of her progeny, the warrior god Marduk. Tiamat's demise is an orgy of violence. Marduk pushes the wild wind into her mouth, bloats her belly, shoots her through with arrows, and then splits her lifeless carcass in two. Out of one half he forms the vault of heaven, out of the other he creates the earth. Finally, he buries her head under the northern mountains and gouges out her eyes, thus causing Mesopotamia's two great rivers to flow down her cheeks.

The *Enuma elish* is not merely a myth about the creation of the material universe. It's also the story of the birth of civilization. As the root word *civitas* implies, what we call civilization came into being with the rise of cities and the subsequent establishment of city states. Although the transformation from the pre-literate age of stone to the literate age of bronze took place over the millennium which archaeologists call the Chalcolithic — the copper-stone age — the final shift into civilization is customarily dated at around 3000 BCE. Cultural feminists and traditional scholars continue to argue over whether this turning

point in history is best explained as technological evolution or patriarchal plot. Feminists are encouraged in their interpretation by Robert Graves' assumption, based on his reading of ancient mythologies, that Mesopotamia's gradual emergence from the Stone Age was a straightforward social transition from matriarchy to patriarchy, and that this was the model for all subsequent cultures in the ancient world (Graves 35). However, evidence seems to suggest that throughout the three millennia prior to this shift, forms of social organization could be radically diverse from community to community: some groups were warlike and male-dominated; others were more or less egalitarian and settled disputes by other than military means. However, despite this diversity, and in keeping with the increasing dependence on agriculture and animal husbandry, survival in most neolithic societies seems to have been expressed primarily in terms of fertility. While the hundreds of female figurines recovered from the ruins of these "primitive" communities do not amount to proof of either matriarchy or universal goddess worship in preliterate times (J. Relke), the recovery of written records from "civilized" societies allows for more certainty about what followed the shift. One form of social organization predominated — the patriarchal — and military capability became an increasingly important determining factor in the survival or demise of human populations. In other words, patriarchy, militarism, literacy, and the state — and even the feminization of nature — seem to constitute the very definition of civilization.

The importance of the *Enuma elish* to the dominant literary traditions of Western culture can hardly be overstated. Theologians trace its influence in the Bible, and classical scholars find its archetypal structures echoed in the epic poetry of ancient Greece. These are the founding texts of Western literature. But the feminization of nature is more than just one literary convention among many. Indeed, in his search for an appropriate metaphor for the psychic transformation of the primitive, asocial infant into the civilized, socialized male, Freud did not go far enough back in the literary tradition, for Oedipus is a relative latecomer to literature. Besides, in the context of militarism, patricide is as often celebrated as it is repressed. It makes more sense, therefore, to regard Marduk's destruction of the mother and his creation of the earth out of her body as civilization's first

act of "primary repression" — the act that triggers the creation of the unconscious and thereby produces the masculine subject.

Tiamat is important not only as the mother of all the gods; her story is also the mother of all creation stories. In *Creation and Recreation*, Northrop Frye distinguishes between two types of creation myth, sexual and artificial. Sexual creation myths feature "an earth-mother, from whom all living things emerge and to whom all dying things return" (1980 31). She is the symbol of *natura naturans*, nature as a bursting forth of life and energy, . . . animating the spirits of trees, mountains, rivers, and stones" (38). By contrast, artificial creation myths feature a sky-father, "an intelligent being who, like the God of the Old Testament, does not change, or, like the creating deity of Plato's *Timaeus*, imitates such a being" (32). In this cosmology, nature is *natura naturata*, "a structure or system" that "manifests itself in cycles" but has "no law of its own except what God bestows on it" (39). These polarized cosmologies constitute the binary opposition that structures the history of nature from classical and biblical times right up to the postmodern present.

Frye's account of the ancient history of the two great archetypal creators echoes the story of Tiamat and Marduk:

> It is natural to think that the earth-mother myth is the older of the two, being the myth more appropriate for an agricultural society, as its rival was for the more urban, tool-using, and patriarchal society that succeeded it. Certainly in Hesiod, one of the fountainheads of Greek mythology, the sky-father Zeus is thought of as a relative late-comer, the third at least of a series of sky-gods, who establishes his supremacy by force over a much older earth-mother. The latter retires sullenly below with her defeated titans, chthonic powers who, either as titans or as giants, meet us many times in many mythological guises. (Frye 1980 31-6)

Whether in the underworld of Hesiod's *Theogeny* or in the murky depths of the Freudian unconscious, the earth-mother is down but never out. Indeed, she also surfaces in the Bible like the — return of the repressed:

> In the first chapter of Genesis the artificial sky-father myth seems to have it all his own way. But there are two creation myths in Genesis, and the second or so-called Jahwist one, which begins in Genesis 2:4, is clearly much the older. In this account we start with the watering of a garden. The garden is a symbol of the female body in the Bible, recurring in the Song of Songs, where the body of the bride is described as "a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed." (Frye 1980 36-7)

Wild and malevolent, as in the underworld of Greek mythology, or compliant and domesticated, as in the Bible, the Earth-Mother continued to haunt patriarchal literary tradition until at least the early twentieth century. These two aspects of feminized, nonhuman nature are the basis of Western patriarchy's two competing stereotypes of women: the whore and the virgin.

Mother Earth has many modern biographers, one of the more recent of whom is Carolyn Merchant. In *The Death of Nature* (1980) and, later, in *Earthcare* (1996), a collection of her essays on women and the environment, Merchant uses contemporary feminist and ecological perspectives "to examine the historical interconnections between women and nature that developed as the modern scientific and economic world took form in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries — a transformation that shaped and now pervades today's mainstream values and perceptions" (1996 75-6). Merchant notes that for Europeans prior to the onset of the scientific revolution, "the root metaphor binding together the self, society, and the cosmos was that of an organism. . . ." The organic world view embraced both the nurturing and the destructive aspects of nonhuman nature and functioned as a code of ethics governing how it could be treated: "As long as the earth was considered alive and sensitive, it could be considered a breach of ethical behavior to carry out destructive acts against it" (1996 78). However, as the scientific revolution took hold, the organic world view gave way to one of mechanization and rationalism which transformed the image of nature from a paradoxically nurturing and destructive mother into a resource for economic production.

Merchant's account of Francis Bacon's role in establishing the scientific view of nature is well known. Although Bacon

himself was not a practitioner of science, he was its chief propagandist. Modernity owes much to Bacon: he was "the originator of the concept of the modern research institute, a philosopher of industrial science, the inspiration behind the Royal Society," and "the founder of the inductive method by which all people can verify for themselves the truths of science by the reading of nature's book" (Merchant 1996 80). Bacon lived at the time of Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser when upper-class woman was still an idealized figure in the courtly love tradition. This was also the era of the witch trials when thousands of peasant women were tortured, hanged, drowned, and/or burned at the stake. It's hardly surprising, therefore, that the language Bacon used to refigure nature derives from both poetry and the Inquisition. If nature does not submissively yield her secrets to her loving husband/scientist, she can always be teased and tortured into giving them up:

> The new man of science must not think that the "inquisition of nature is in any part interdicted or forbidden." Nature must be "bound into service" and made a "slave," put "in constraint" and "moulded" by the mechanical arts. The "searches and spies of nature" are to discover her plots and secrets. (Merchant 1996 81)

Bacon's images sanctioning the brutalization of nature greased the squeaky wheels of conscience for science and commerce. Moreover, in Bacon's view of nature, what could be done to her had theological support. As a consequence of Eve's sin, Adam had lost the dominion over nature that God had initially given him. Through science, man could probe the depths of nature for the knowledge he needed to regain control over it (Merchant 1996 81).

The Romantic movement in philosophy and literature which occurred at the height of the Industrial Revolution was in many ways a backlash to it. Science and commerce had assumed ownership of nature, and the poets of Romanticism wanted her back. Mother Earth played only a minor supporting role in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, where she is represented as giving birth to herself

through the seminal agency of "Main Ocean" (*PL*, VII, 276-292), but Wordsworth returned her to centre stage — this time as Mother Nature. Romantic Mother Nature is the signifier of all that civilized man has lost: in mythological terms, she represents the loss of Eden to the fallen Adam; in scientific terms, she represents the loss of the intimate connection between subject and object (Frye 1968 15); in psychological terms, she represents the lost bliss of infancy. In her *Women Writers and Poetic Identity* (1980), Margaret Homans traced the meaning for the male poet of this new incarnation of feminine nature:

> Where the masculine self dominates and internalizes otherness, that other is frequently identified as feminine, whether she is nature, the representation of a human woman, or some phantom of desire. . . . When nature is Mother Nature for Wordsworth, she is valued because she is what the poet is not. She stands for a lost memory, hovering just at the edge of consciousness, of a time before the fall into self-consciousness and into subject-object relations with nature, whether that original unity took place in earliest infancy or, fictively, before birth. (Homans 1980 12-13)

The Romantic movement in poetry may be the first time in the history of Western literary tradition that the return of the repressed is consciously willed. However, the poetic process for the Romantics was not a rejection of man's privileged place in a cosmos where nature is *natura naturata* — nature as structure or system. Rather, it is a process whereby transcendent man can be reconciled with *natura naturans* — nature as process — by internalizing and imitating her genius. In this desire to recover the mother, poets followed Romanticism's principle philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau for whom "man has lost the identity with physical nature which is also his own identity as a man, and in consequence his civilization has grown artifical, in a new and pejorative sense of that word, in need of a revolution which will recreate the natural society of liberty and equality" (Frye 1968 28).

Rousseau subscribed to the "doctrine of the natural goodness of man," the Enlightenment's update on the ancient

discourse of primitivism which originated with the Greeks and came down to the modern era via the Church Fathers. The discourse of primitivism is intimately interwoven into the history of Mother Nature because it is the history of "man" in relation to her. As George Boas defines it, "Primitivism is a name for a cluster of ideas arising from meditations on the course of human history and the value of human institutions and accomplishments" (577). As the history of primitivism makes clear, the Romantics were not the first tribe to long for a return to a "Golden Age" before the corrupting influence of civilization. Indeed, the idea of a Golden Age is a Greek idea, and the Garden of Eden is its Judeo-Christian equivalent.

The ideology of primitivism "maintains that the earliest stage of human history was the best, that the earliest period of national, religious, artistic, or in fact any strand of history was better than maturity." In keeping with this nostalgia, primitivism "argues that to discover the best stage of any historical series one must return to its origin. Primitive man, for instance, was better than civilized man, primitive Christianity was better than later developments of Christianity, the arts of savages and children are better than those of educated men and adults" (G. Boas 577). Enlightenment and Romantic philosophy's version of primitivism defined who was closer to nature than "civilized man" and thereby who was meant by the term "civilized." The Innocent Child, the Simple Peasant, the Savage — both Noble and Ignoble varieties — are closer to nature and thus do not strictly qualify as civilized. Eighteenth-century thinkers also had to deal with men who seemed to them neither wholly primitive nor wholly civilized but somewhere in between — the Turks, for example. For these men there was another category, namely "barbarian." This schema in which man's development is traced from savagery through barbarism and pastoralism to civilization would become the theoretical underpinning of the new science of anthropology.

At least half of all children, peasants, savages, and barbarians are female. What about the rest of womankind? As George Boas explains, they were covered under a theme within primitivist discourse which he calls "epistemological feminism":

> At the end of the eighteenth century, especially among the romanticists, it was believed that women

> had a kind of insight into the truth which was lacking in man; it was called "intuition." Intuition usually was directed towards character reading, the arts, and the concealed motives of human behavior. . . . [T]he German romanticists saw in the sex those dark enigmatic forces which are unperceived by the more active and rational male. This very attractive [sic] point of view was not of long duration. With the economic and political emancipation of women, they were given something approaching equality and hence lost what mystery they had previously possessed. (G. Boas 596)

In other words, unlike children, peasants, and savages, whose innocent, if lowly, place in the primitivist hierarchy is clear, women stood in an ambiguous relationship to both "primitive" and "civilized" man. Within primitive Edenic culture, woman had been the negative force that had corrupted man's innocence thus catapulting him into civilization (G. Boas 582). However, in response to (or reaction against) the rise of feminist thought in the late eighteenth century, woman came to be seen as the custodian of humankind's "primitive" instincts — a kind of throwback to the uncorrupted past. In Goethe's phrase, she was *ewige Weibliche* — the Eternal Feminine; the Victorians would eventually domesticate her as "The Angel in the House." If, as Boas suggests, women really did trade their primitive mystique for political and economic equality with men, it was not an entirely satisfactory swap. For it would seem that the only equality right woman did achieve was the right to be defined as the equal of civilized man in his corruption. In short, what the discourse of primtivism tells us is that it was not merely gender that determined one's identification with nature. Age, class, race, ethnicity, and nationality also went into defining one's place on either side of the civilized/primitive divide. Mother Nature, it would seem, enjoyed the company of just about everyone — everyone except "civilized" men, such as scientists and Romantic poets.

Nature was not so easily repossessed from the scientific image-makers as poets might have wished. Indeed, as the following passage from Gillian Beer's *Darwin's Plots* (1988) suggests, with the publication of his *Origin of Species* (1859), Darwin took over as nature's poet laureate:

> Darwinian theory takes up elements from older orders and particularly from recurrent mythic themes such as transformation and metamorphosis. It retains the idea of *natura naturans*, or the Great Mother, in its figuring of Nature. It rearranges the elements of creation myths, for example substituting the ocean for the garden but retaining the idea of the "single progenitor" — though now an uncouth progenitor hard to acknowledge as kin. It foregrounds the concept of kin — and aroused many of the same dreads as fairy-tale in its insistence on the obligations of kinship, and the interdependence between beauty and beast. (Beer 9)

In other words, Darwin's cosmology was no less gendered than those it succeeded. For Darwin, "Nature is always 'she,' whereas natural selection is neuter: the neuter becomes a form of sex, a sexless force":

> In the mythological order of his language natural selection appears as an aspect or avatar of the more general "Nature," whose maternal ordering is contrasted with the egocentric one of Man. She tends and nurses with scrupulous concern for betterment. The word "Man" in this polarization achieves a masculine rather than a fully inclusive use of the word. . . . (Beer 70)

Although, as Beer explains, Darwin struggled to deconstruct these gendered metaphors in subsequent editions of *The Origin*, the idea that "man" is embedded in nature was essentially unrepresentable — the "civilized" variety, at least. For "language is anthropomorphic by its nature and anthropocentric in its assumptions" while nature is neither. Moreover, Darwin's is a *scientific* enquiry into nature, and as Bacon so ably demonstrated, science is about man's mastery and domination of nature. In addressing his confraternity of scientists, Darwin was stuck with the analogies and metaphors offered by scientific discourse. He could not know that only by "giving up the will to dominate the material world and to relate it to our own needs, conditions, and sensibilities will it be possible for us to find a language that gives

proper attention to the nature of things" (Beer 50). With Darwin and his successors, the relationship between science and poetry went into reverse. As Beer goes on to argue, science was no longer merely the appropriator of poetic nature imagery; it was also its primary source.

Romantic Mother Nature was nature's last starring role in patriarchal poetic tradition. In keeping with Darwin, allusions to nonhuman nature, while no less and no differently gendered, were rarely so explicitly personified. Although many Victorian poets still longed nostalgically for her, Victorian culture as a whole embraced a new mistress: Progress. Victorians had enormous faith in progress, and the "immediate source of their confidence was the great strides man had lately taken toward fulfilling his oldest dream, the conquest of his physical environment. Man and nature had always been at strife, and now at last, thanks to the advance of scientific knowledge, man was winning, bringing nature meekly to heel" (Altick 107). Although she hung around backstage and accepted bit parts in the work of poetic naturalists — mostly in what came to be called "Victorian Romantic feminine verse" — Mother Nature was something of a has-been.

With the onset of modernism in the arts, Mother Nature was finally eclipsed by that most ancient of all nemeses: *civitas*. The triumph of the urban over nature is well expressed in the words of the futurist, F.T. Marinetti, writing in 1908:

> We will sing the great masses agitated by work, pleasure, or revolt; we will sing the multicolored and polyphonic surf of revolutions in modern capitals; the nocturnal vibration of arsenals and docks beneath their glaring electric moons; greedy stations devouring smoking serpents; factories hanging from the clouds by the threads of their smoke; bridges like giant gymnasts stepping over sunny rivers sparkling like diabolical cutlery. . . . large-breasted locomotives bridled with long tubes, and the slippery flight of airplanes whose propellers have flaglike flutterings and applauses of enthusiastic crowds. (Marinetti 286)

After five millennia, civilization is finally come of age. Marduk's victory over Tiamat is complete, and Zeus's triumph over the

Earth Mother and her titans is made permanent. In its celebration of the city, patriarchal poetics has vanquished all the phantoms of female nature. As the successor to literary modernism, postmodernism confirms the death of nature: "nature," write Jody Berland and Jennifer Daryl Slack, "is semiotic. . . . it is a cultural construction" (1). Indeed, in the feminist postmodernist view, *both* woman and nature are merely discursive categories — positions in phallocentric discourse. However, in the ultimate of all ironies, the price that postmodernism exacts for the cultural annihilation of nature is nothing less than the death of the city itself: as postmodernist James Donald has written, "there is no such thing as a city" (qtd. in Wolff). The city, like nature, is a text.

Postmodernism has liberated poets from responsibility for the green biomass that supports human life because that biomass is beyond the reach of accurate linguistic representation. The poet's material reality is confined to ink upon paper, and s/he is responsible only to poetic language. But postmodernism is not merely a matter of poetics. As a critique of the whole of Western discourse and a radically anti-Enlightenment philosophy, postmodernism has initiated a social, cultural, and scientific paradigm shift rivalled only by the Enlightenment paradigm it seeks to overturn. Within the current postmodernist paradigm, the foundations of Western knowledge, from the idealism of Plato to the scientism of modernity, are revealed as contingent sociohistorical constructs of power and domination. Indeed, under the scrutiny of cultural critics from across the knowledge spectrum the very definition of civilization is at stake.

However, in the process of questioning the legitimacy of separate genres of writing and thus dissolving the boundaries between poetic and scientific discourse, postmodernism potentially extends to scientists the same liberation from ecological responsibility as poets presumably enjoy. Moreover, the reduction of every relationship, every social space, every object of human consciousness to the status of text is even more devastatingly isolating than the objectivism of science. It's no surprise, therefore, that postmodernist critique has begun to rival science as a discourse of alienation. The modernist illusion that nature is directly knowable to us has been replaced by the postmodernist illusion that she is *un*knowable. Thus, we have embarked upon another phase of

disillusion. "What might be oxymoronically called classical postmodernism is now as obsolete as the high modernism it punctured," writes cultural critic of science Joel Kovel.

> Given the gathering threat, the postmodern critique of foundationalism clearly has to be rethought. What rang true when framed against the dominative tendencies of modern science's totalizing claims . . . is now glaringly inadequate when the danger to an actual foundation increases before our eyes. For the ecological crisis is no text, though misshapen and false texts play a major role in its working out. It is, rather, a threat to the life that produces texts. Another way of putting this would be to say that the postmodernist critique of science is true, and necessary, but also reductive insofar as it fails to recognize the material dimensions of the ecological crisis. And being reductive, it reveals its own false totalization, in this case, a crypto-idealism. (Kovel 199-200)

The crypto-idealism of postmodernism is not as cryptic as Kovel suggests. The reduction of the environment to a set of linguistic signs is not all that different from Plato's reduction of the material universe to a set of ideal forms. Signs may be in flux while forms are not, but this is a matter of complete indifference where matter is concerned. Actual nonhuman nature is not a text, although, as my tour of the literary history of nature has illustrated, many texts have disfigured our perception of it. Although it's necessary to know how discourse — both scientific and literary — has disconnected us from nature, it's also of crucial importance to study how discourse connects us to it. This is as much the responsibility of poets and literary critics as it is of scientists and cultural critics of science. We are all equally responsible for nature because we are all responsible for ourselves as creatures embedded in it.

Poets have been imposing feminine imagery on the Canadian landscape since the first Europeans came to impose "civilization"

on the "savages." In 1628, Robert Hayman, governor of a colony at Harbour Grace on Conception Bay, published his *Quodlibets, Lately Come Over from New Britianiola, Old Newfound-Land*, thought to be the earliest volume of verse in English about North America. A contemporary of Francis Bacon, Hayman described Britain's new real estate as a "plain, swarth, sluttish Jone" who would require some "neat husbandry" to transform her into a respectable dame, "pretty pert, and neat with good cloathes on" (qtd. in Djwa 1979 19). By the time of Confederation 250 years later, most of the indigenous peoples who had not been civilized to death were safely on reserves, and "sluttish Jone" had undergone poetic transformation into Mother Nature in both her nurturing and destructive aspects. As elsewhere in the Western literary tradition, Mother Nature went somewhat out of style with the onset of literary modernism, and the city moved closer to the centre of poetic consciousness.

In the sixties, in response to a wave of literary nationalism fuelled by anticipation of the Canadian centennial, the critical establishment compiled a three-volume *Literary History of Canada*. Northrop Frye's Conclusion to this massive project is perhaps the most provocative essay in the history of Canadian criticism. One of its most infamous and often quoted paragraphs is an explicitly subjective view of the nature imagery in Canadian poetry:

> I have long been impressed in Canadian poetry by a tone of deep terror in regard to nature. . . . It is not a terror of the dangers or discomforts or even the mysteries of nature, but a terror of the soul at something that these things manifest. The human mind has nothing but human and moral values to cling to if it is to preserve its integrity or even its sanity, yet the vast unconsciousness of nature in front of it seems an unanswerable denial of those values. (Frye 1965 830)

The critical industry that sprang up around this "deep terror" myth of Canadian poetry produced numerous book-length studies and countless articles which hardened Frye's observation into the dominant theory of Canadian poetry. Poets whose work measured up to this oppositional epistemology of nature were

deemed truly Canadian. But Frye's perceptions were based upon his experience of poetry written almost exclusively by men — principally the early modernist E.J. Pratt, whose work was coloured by his childhood experience of the harshness of life and death in an isolated turn-of-the-century Newfoundland fishing village. As a young man, Frye fell under the spell of Pratt's work and regarded it as the sum of all that had gone before it; as the years passed he also began to see it as the prophecy of all that came later. However, Canadian poetry by women tended overwhelmingly to refute Frye's terrifying view of nature as "other" and irreconcilably opposed to human consciousness; hence the work of women poets either remained on the peripheries of Canadian myth criticism or was subjected to the imposition of this dualistic way of knowing nature.

The assumption that women are unambiguous participants in the patriarchal worldview is not exclusive to literary scholarship. For example, Canadian historian Daniel Francis makes no reference to the possibility of gender difference in his fascinating analysis of the way the discourse of primitivism is played out in what Northrop Frye often called "the Canadian imagination." In *The Imaginary Indian*, Francis traces the history of North American white culture's appropriation of aboriginal symbols and rituals — the tendency to "play Indian" or "go native" — as betraying white culture's desire to reconcile its irreconcilable alienation from the New World it conquered, an alienation that persists to this day: "we have [always] suspected that we could never be at home in America because we were not Indians, not indigenous to the place" (233). This anxiety about being perpetually "out of place" probably accounts — at least, in part — for Frye's myth of alienation from Canadian nature. Francis does a fine job of unpacking the image of the Indian as a white construct. However, since "White Man" is the construct that keeps "Indian" in place as its binary opposite, Francis might have enquired into the possibility that his conclusion about white culture's alienation from the land overgeneralizes from his own experience as a white male. White men who internalize the fantasy of male transcendence of the body and nonhuman nature are doomed never to feel entirely at home anywhere on the planet. This is undoubtedly a contributing factor in the eagerness with which white men left their homelands and embraced the adventure of conquering the homelands of others. Space

exploration and the fantasy of colonizing "barren" planets are the ultimate expression of that alienation from the "mother" planet. Little wonder that white men were the first of our species to set foot on the ungreen moon. By contrast, identified with Mother Earth, white women are bound to express a different opinion on the subject. What Simone de Beauvoir called women's "immanence" has provoked several kinds of responses in Canadian women poets since the late nineteenth century: some have celebrated it; others have merely reconciled themselves to it; still others have been bewildered by it in the extreme. All have befuddled the orderly telling of Canadian literary history as white male critics want to tell it — including the history of Western culture's understanding of how language operates.

The theory-laden critical approaches that sprang up to challenge Frye's view eventually emerged as the dominant mode of critical enquiry. But, as ecocritic D.M.R. Bentley explains, they "have stressed the importance of language to the exclusion or near-exclusion of other matters, [and] have done literature a disservice by placing it in a realm remote from its physical, emotional, and moral contexts. Poems may be a part of a verbal universe but not one that is independent of the physical world" (1990 n. pag.). Thus, these new critical methods deny the possibility of exploring the alternative myths of nature evident in the poetry of women, myths that acknowledge a two-way relationship between text and context, myths informed by self-reflexivity and a sensitivity to the feminine. These alternative myths constitute an epistemology of knowledge which operates as a corrective not only to the hierarchical and oppositional model of nature identified by Frye but also to the view of poetry as detached from its "physical, emotional, and moral contexts."

One of the shorter and more useful studies elaborating Northrop Frye's "deep terror" theory of Canadian poetry is Sandra Djwa's "Canadian Poets and the Great Tradition," published in 1976. Like most literary historians before her, Djwa focuses primarily on the male poets deemed to be the major practitioners of nineteenth-century poetry. However, she is far more sensitive to the complex historical and intellectual context within which Canadian poetry developed. Hence her work implicitly subverts the pseudohistorical criticism of her influential male predecessors. Djwa maps out the busy historical intersection at which

colonial poetry became Canadian. She asserts that Confederation poetry arose out of the sometimes uneasy confluence of three intellectual movements: Romanticism, Darwinism, and the first wave of Canadian nationalism. Djwa does not fully deconstruct those three discourses but she does open up that possibility by addressing the ideological conflict among them:

> Darwinism had a profound effect on English Canadian Romanticism because *The Origin of Species* (1859) appeared just as the first "native" poetic group, that of the Confederation of 1860s poets, was emerging. . . . As a result, Canadian Romanticism was infused from its inception with overtones of Darwin's nature, an accident of literary history which strongly distinguishes the Canadian view of nature from those of the United States and Great Britain.
>
> Consequently, although the poets of the Confederation do attempt to write in the old Romantic mode . . . such poetry often breaks from within because it is attempting to hold in reconciliation two opposing views of nature. (Djwa 1976 47)

Djwa sees the literary effort "to hold in reconciliation two opposing views of nature" as a reflection of "the Canadian attempt to adapt evolutionary theory to existing religious and social structures." Her inclusion of the work of Isabella Valancy Crawford as part of the body of literature from which she draws these characteristics of Canadian Romanticism is a considerable improvement over the views of her critical predecessors, who were never entirely clear about Crawford's contribution to Canadian literary history. However, there is more at work in Crawford's long poem, *Malcolm's Katie*, than can be accounted for by Djwa's theory of breakdown and failed reconciliation.

Crawford wrote *Malcolm's Katie* against the backdrop of an emerging Canadian feminism, as well as an emerging conservationist movement that began when private individuals and groups became concerned about the despoiling of their immediate environment due to deforestation and industrialization. The *wise* use of resources — as distinct from their preservation or protection — quickly became the prevailing ideology. But, as the

hypocrisy of our own corporate green movement has shown, wisdom in this regard is subjective and dependent upon which powerful interest's resource use is in question. It's perhaps not surprising, therefore, that *Malcolm's Katie* inscribes several competing wisdoms, from the scientific to the sacred, each of which is grounded in a particular experience of nonhuman nature. The privileging of the feminine finds its full expression in Crawford's understanding of Iroquoian and Algonquian mythology, thus linking Woman and Indigene in its ecological vision. Perhaps it's this linkage which makes the poem exotic enough to capture the voyeuristic interest of white male critics from time to time. Whatever its appeal, it seems to keep the poem on a return trajectory in relation to the centre of the Canadian canon like some comet on a wide elliptical orbit around the sun.

If the struggle for national survival took on Darwinian overtones in male poetry, the struggle for poetic survival took the form of an identity quest in poetry by women. Crawford notwithstanding, female Canadian Romantics were largely indifferent to the Darwinian myth of nature. If they thought about it at all, it was probably in terms of its implications for Mother Nature. Darwinism does not dispel the myth of Mother Nature: it only emphasizes the questionable morality of the myth. Romantic Mother Nature is the benign aspect of the "huge, unthinking, menacing, and formidable physical setting" which so terrified poets in Northrop Frye's reading of Canadian poetry (1971 225). She is the amoral, inarticulate, feminine Other, the object against which male poets defined themselves as moral, human, articulate subjects. The paradigm of Romantic poetry images the poet 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. Women are also the children of Mother Nature, but as daughters they cannot achieve gender separation from her (Homans 14). Hence women poets of the Romantic Victorian period were as troubled by Mother Nature as their male counterparts were by a nature red in tooth and claw — and for similar reasons.

Darwinian theory robbed the men of their humanity and threatened their poethood as those identities had been defined

within the Christian tradition. Man as the crowning achievement of God's creation, and the poet as the divinely inspired inheritor of Adamic speech could no longer be taken for granted. But it was the poetic conventions of Romanticism which threatened women's humanity and poethood, for Romantic convention identifies women with a nonhuman, inarticulate, non-transcendent, feminized nature.[2] While male poets attempted to reconcile the Darwinian myth of nature with Christian mythology, women poets created alternative myths of nature which were more appropriate models of female identity and female poethood. These alternative myths can be found not only in Crawford but also in the work of the last generation of female Romantics, who wrote and published during the early decades of the twentieth century. Two representatives of this final flowering of Victorian Romantic verse were Marjorie Pickthall and Constance Lindsay Skinner.

Pickthall, arguably the most widely read poet of the early twentieth century (with the possible exception of Robert Service), fuelled the fantasies of several important male critics. Those fantasies worked to keep her in the eye of the Canadian reading public until a new generation of critics — men with other tastes in women — took over. This new generation transformed Pickthall from an icon of respectable femininity and Canadian literary taste into an insipid afterthought in the twilight of the late Victorian Romantic tradition in Canada. Like the lovely Lady of Shallott, she floated down the river of critical ideology and out of Canadian literary history.

Unlike the emancipated women of her era, Pickthall was no New Woman — at least, not in the early years of her career. She lived primarily in a world of books to which she surrendered herself, as many women in many male literary fantasies surrendered themselves to men. In her early nature poetry, all sense of an autonomous poet disappears because she cannot identify herself with the assertive "I AM" of the male Romantics who were her models. These poems are characterized by the absorption of the poet into the landscapes depicted in them. Consequently, they fail to conform to the conventional male model, which images communion between the poet and a clearly differentiated landscape. Curiously, however, although these poems fail to meet Romantic criteria, the emanation of the poetic voice from nature itself suggests an attempt to find an alternative myth of

nature. Pickthall escaped from Canada and the stifling Toronto literary community on the eve of the Great War. Doing agricultural war work in England and living off the land, she negotiated a new contract with Mother Nature, who shows up in Pickthall's later lyrics as an eternally creative and articulate mythological figure who legitimizes Pickthall's female poetic voice.

The identification of woman with nature posed similar difficulties for Constance Lindsay Skinner. Like Pickthall, Skinner was a fugitive from Canadian literary history and from Canada. Born and raised in Quesnel, British Columbia, in the 1880s, when Quesnel was still an isolated trading post, she left Canada for California while still in her teens. She remained a Canadian in her mind, her memories, and most of her books. As a novelist, historian, and playwright, Skinner was prolific. As a poet, her output was scanty. It took her twenty years to complete a series of poems which she brought together in the shape of a long poem called *Songs of the Coast Dwellers*. In form, they were such uncanny imitations of North West Coast Native oral myths and chants that A.J.M. Smith, in repatriating Skinner, published some of them in his *Book of Canadian Poetry* (1943) as authentic translations of Indian verse. In content, however, these poems were anything but Indian. They exhibited a peculiar combination of sadomasochism and early twentieth-century feminism — a fusion of violence and ecstasy in which woman gets her peculiar revenge on tyrannical man through sexual submission and subversion.

The strange combination of noble and ignoble white savagery bonded to a perverse kind of feminism complicates Skinner's attempt to adapt a convention of aboriginal art which images the artist as an extension of nature and nature itself as conscious, comprehending and eternal. As her articles on Indian poetics suggest, she was attracted to the convention of nature as an articulate poet-mother, an idea which would allow Skinner to be both woman and poet. However, her attempt to transform and utilize the alternative myth of nature offered by Indian poetics is largely unsuccessful because Skinner cannot escape the tyranny of the European tradition.

Although women have been written out of the history of the North American nature conservation movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, they are making a comeback, thanks to the efforts of feminist historians (Merchant 1995

109). The early poetry of Dorothy Livesay reflects her awareness of that movement. Livesay was still a girl when, in 1911, Canada finally established a national parks board and appointed its first commissioner, who argued for the protection of the wilderness for its own sake. In addition, Livesay was reading the poetry of Isabella Valancy Crawford and was deeply impressed by her ecological ethic and her recognition of the need to temper the masculine impulse to destroy the landscape in order to "civilize" it. It's hardly surprising, therefore, that Livesay assumed the poetic task, tentatively begun by Crawford, of mediating the conflict between culture and nature. As a feminist and the daughter of a woman poet, Livesay observed at first hand the ways social and literary conventions deny women literary authority. Having observed the conflict between poetic and female identities in her mother's hard-won success, Livesay chose to turn the tension between these two subjectivities into a source of poetic energy. Indeed, the kind of profound self-division that characterizes the work of Pickthall and Skinner 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 identities 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 a woman poet's struggle for poetic subjectivity as an extension of the larger problem of female identity in patriarchal culture. By releasing both nature and women from the patriarchal definitions that enclose them, Livesay restores the integrity of language by redefining its limits.

The poet-critic Robert Kroetsch has a provocative theory of Canadian poetry. He asserts that literature in Canada moved from the Victorian period into postmodernism without ever going through the period of modernism associated with T.S. Eliot and James Joyce.[3] He may well be right, for female nature did not entirely disappear from Canadian literature with the advent of modernism. She did, however, appear to take out citizenship. In place of Romantic Mother Nature, a European emigrée, "There is only old mother North America with her snow hair, her mountain forehead, her prairie eyes, and her wolf teeth, her wind song and her vague head of old Indian memories" (Tallman 253). More

important is the appearance in the 1940s of such writers as P.K. Page and Phyllis Webb, whose pursuit of the theme of reconciliation of the culture-nature conflict has been cause for considerable critical bewilderment, even hostility. Given that it's conflict rather than reconciliation which is seen as the impulse of international modernism, it's hardly surprising that Kroetsch so easily dismisses thirty years of modernist writing in Canada as "unmodern." For Kroetsch, as for most contemporary literary commentators, modernism *means* conflict — the conflict of twentieth-century life that catapulted language into deep crisis and fragmentation. Any poetic attempt to transform those fragments into a unifying reconciliation is viewed by critics such as Kroetsch as a Victorian Romantic project. That fragmentation is modernism's legacy to postmodernism, and Canadian postmodernists adopted a Heraclitean view of it, delighting in language and the reality it constructs as a process governed by unceasing conflict between creative and destructive forces. Contrary to critic Frank Davey's attempt to turn Dorothy Livesay into a foremother of Canadian postmodernists by imposing the Heraclitean model on her early poetry (1976 168), it's exactly that conflict which Canadian female modernists refused to celebrate.

Page and Webb read the work of male modernists, both national and international, and frequently offered what can be read as correctives to traditionally male modes of perception. Their contribution to Canadian poetics was their insistence on a language that would short-cut the patriarchal distance between female experience and knowledge. Hence Phyllis Webb's philosophical enquiry into woman's place in a dualistic universe exposes the inadequacy of dualism as a tool for apprehending reality. Livesay was aware of that inadequacy; her healing feminism seeks to bridge the gap between subject and object, culture and nature, through a process of self-reflection. This is also Margaret Atwood's project: *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* images that reconciliation in nationalist and feminist terms. Susanna Moodie is both a national and a poetic foremother with whom Atwood, as a woman writer and a Canadian, has to make peace. Similarly, P.K. Page's unique ability to endow meticulous greenworld portraiture with visionary precision opens up the possibility of a reconciliation between the particular and the universal, the concrete and the abstract. By translating these poetic

concerns into the West Coast postmodernist idiom, Daphne Marlatt was the first female poet to challenge the Heraclitean conflict celebrated by her male companion poets. In short, these poets offered intersubjective ways of seeing and knowing the world and new ways of resolving the conflict that arises out of a perception of reality as turning on an infinite series of hierarchically arranged oppositions, the most fundamental of which is the opposition between male and female and, by extension, between culture and nature. In this way, these poets are the inheritors of a tradition that began with Crawford.

As suggested by Kroetsch's failure to make sense of Canadian literary history except in terms of male-devised categories, it's sometimes better to ignore the rigidity of those categories altogether. The characteristics that define the boundaries dividing postmodernism from modernism, and modernism from Romanticism, make even less sense when applied to the poetry of contemporary Native women. Native women poets often appear happily oblivious to the opposition around which poets and critics of the dominant culture organize their literary worldview — especially the oppositions of postmodern/modern and intertextual/contextual. Like the white middle-class female poets whose achievements I have been tracing here, Native women poets *enact* the deconstruction of these binarized critical constructs through concrete imagery, rather than theoretical abstractions. They also share with other women poets a concern about Western culture's view of their relationship to nonhuman nature. However, whereas poets like Isabella Valancy Crawford and Constance Lindsay Skinner experienced Native mythology as a liberation from the oppressive category of white femininity, Native women poets are not always so sanguine about its libratory power for Native women in the context of primitivist discourse. The ideology of primitivism locates white women on the boundary between civilized and primitive — a disadvantaged location which only the cleverest of poets can successfully turn to their advantage. From the perspective of Native women, this location may well appear uncomplicated and especially privileged in comparison to their own. Their identity as both Native and female doubles the hurdle over which they must vault in order to enter Western literary history.

For Marilyn Dumont, it is her Métis heritage — the confluence of two traditions — that gives her the authority to challenge

primitivist assumptions as they inform both the dominant and the Native worldview. It is probably safe to say that neither Crawford nor Skinner would have had a serious problem with the image of the Green Indian that floats through contemporary conceptions of environmentalism in Canada. However, as an urban woman, Dumont is not about to adopt this stereotype as a poetic persona. For her, the Green Indian is as problematic a model for poethood as Mother Nature was for women in the Romantic tradition. However, by regularly returning to the authority of her past experience and her own body, Dumont is able to create a bridge over primitivist ideology and Native identity politics, and thereby create a poetic persona who is continuous with both the prairie and the urban landscape. This poet could hardly be more different from the one who, on behalf of the patriarchal State, impressed the fate of Tiamat into the damp surface of seven clay tablets.

Most of the essays in this volume have appeared elsewhere. Although they have undergone significant revision and expansion since their initial publication, I have chosen to present them in the order in which they were originally conceived. They are grouped around three moments in feminist ecocritical consciousness that correspond to my engagement with particular places in particular poetic texts. I call these three moments poetic consciousness, ecological consciousness, and ecocritical consciousness. To reason backwards from the third, before I could know myself as a feminist *ecocritic* of poetry, I had to become conscious of the *ecological* issues in women's poetry, and before I could do that, I had to know why they are issues for women and, more important, why they are *poetic* issues. This developmental process is subjective and says little about the somewhat more objective critical decisions that went into this structure.

The essays included in Part I, Poetic Consciousness, are preoccupied with the poet and her search for subjectivity in a literary universe governed by conventions that cannot accommodate women who are poets of nature. The emphasis in this section is on history and biography. "Double Voice, Single Vision," a reading of Margaret Atwood's *Journals of Susanna Moodie*, looks beyond the poem's undeserved reputation among many critics as nationalist propaganda and an illustration of Northrop Frye's male-centred "deep terror" theory of Canadian poetry. In its images of feminized nature and its representation of the problems

such images posed for Atwood and — in Atwood's view — for Moodie, the poem is much more interesting for its feminism than its nationalism. It was Atwood's fascination with the historical Moodie's split subjectivity which sparked my interest in tracing this phenomenon in the lives and work of Marjorie Pickthall and Constance Lindsay Skinner. Hence, in "Mother Nature, Daughter Culture," my emphasis is on Pickthall's biography, and on the way in which she was constructed by the Canadian critical establishment. On one hand, she identified with constructions imposed upon her by her critics; on the other, she embraced the nature constructions imposed upon women by Romantic literary convention. "Noble and Ignoble Savagery" sets the Indian poems of Constance Lindsay Skinner in the context of her childhood experience of Native culture and the very different world she entered when she left her home in the north to pursue a literary career in the United States. Skinner's *Songs of the Coast Dwellers*, in which she employs aboriginal motifs as a literary device for defamiliarizing the sexual violence she saw as characteristic of white patriarchal gender relations, challenges the gender-blind postcolonial critical view of white writers who incorporate images of the Indigene in their writing.

Working on Pickthall's and Skinner's poetry, and on Atwood's Moodie, convinced me that the uneven quality of women's writing could sometimes be ascribed to the writer's failure to understand the extent to which women's identification with nature is a construct. That understanding seemed very present to me in the work of Dorothy Livesay, Isabella Valancy Crawford, and Daphne Marlatt. Part II, Ecological Consciousness, contains essays which examine how these three very different writers not only understand the trope but use it to address ecological concerns. As a modernist, Livesay appealed to me as a link between the Romanticism of Crawford and the postmodernism of Marlatt — a link which suggested that there is a continuous female ecopoetic tradition in Canada. "The Task of Poetic Mediation" examines Livesay's first two collections, *Signpost* and *Green Pitcher*, in terms of their importance as the beginnings of what would become her well-integrated feminist ecological vision. Right from the start it would seem, Livesay had an understanding of the way language operates and was thus able to establish a stable poetic subjectivity. "The Ecological Vision of Isabella

Valancy Crawford" sets *Malcolm's Katie* in the context of the first wave of political feminism. I look at the way in which Crawford meticulously explores the various discourses that touch on nature — discourses such as mercantilism, Darwinism, Christianity, and aboriginal mythology. In "'time is, the delta,'" I contextualize Marlatt's *Steveston* in the literary politics of the early seventies and use insights from feminist critiques of science and feminist psychoanalysis to offer a postmodernist reading of Marlatt's feminist ecological vision.

Finally, the essays included in Part III, Ecocritical Consciousness, focus more directly on the critical act itself, and on the masculine construction of Canadian literary history. "Feminist Ecocritique as Forensic Archaeology" traces the conflict between structuralist and post-structuralist critics during the seventies that resulted in the establishment of postmodernist poetics in Canada. I challenge the view of Phyllis Webb's early work as an example of a moribund modernism and take issue with the critics whose devastating opinions of this poetry almost ended Webb's career. "Tracing the Terrestrial in the Early Work of P.K. Page" continues the challenge to the Canadian critical establishment, whose view of Page's early poetry fails to account for its ecological reverberations. Besides offering new readings of old texts by Webb and Page, these two essays address such feminist ecocritical questions as: Who gets to decide what can be said about nonhuman nature? Which poets are authorized to say it? What are the rules for deciding how it should be said? Finally, in a country whose cultural history has been "shot through with imperial preferences from start to finish" (Angus 6), what role do aboriginal critics and poets of nature play in the transformation of literary theory and poetic tradition? I pursue this last question through "Confronting the Green Indian" and "Recovering the Body, Reclaiming the Land," both of which address the work of Marilyn Dumont. As a Métis woman poet, Dumont has much to say about the myths of nature and culture that dominate white Canadian consciousness. I use her work as a guide to where white critics might go in search of the tools we need to deconstruct and reconstruct those myths.

While I have tried to make use of a variety of theoretical approaches and critical styles, all of these essays are linked by two interrelated themes, one ecological and the other feminist. My growing ecological concern is that for all its claims to explana-

tory power, orthodox postmodernist theory borders on the apolitical, reinforces the dislocation of humanity and nonhuman nature, and makes the possibility of a radically transformative ecopolitics even more remote than it already is. The more optimistic and feminist theme that is a constant throughout these essays concerns the struggle by women poets to make the best of a bad idea — namely, patriarchy. Their work not only revises the patriarchal myth of nature as female but also empowers readers to rethink our ecocidal relationship to nonhuman life. Despite their diverse methods and their differing degrees of success, these poets' search for "a language that gives proper attention to the nature of things" speaks to my hope that someday Marduk will put an end to civilization as we know it by laying down his arms and opening up his heart to peaceful reunion with Tiamat.

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1

Poetic Consciousness

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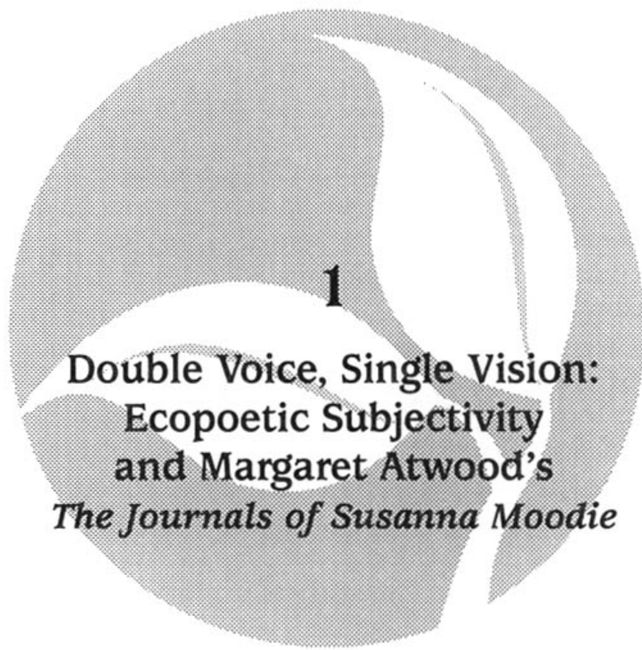


1

Double Voice, Single Vision: Ecopoetic Subjectivity and Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*

In 1985, the American feminist critic Sandra Gilbert lamented the decline of the poet-critic in Anglo-American literary tradition. "I've come to the tentative conclusion," she said in an interview with Gerald Graff, "that the special structures of the university have fostered a schism between the right brain (the creative writer) and the left brain (the critic), which leaves both halves of the communal mind engaged in activities that often seem partial, passionless, even pointless" (Graff 111). Virtually anyone working in the field of Canadian literature at the time would have seized on this lament as quintessentially American. Canadian literature in English has been dominated by poet-critics since at least Confederation, and their work, though "partial" in the ideological sense, has been anything but "passionless" or "pointless." From Charles Roberts and Charles Mair in the nineteenth-century, to Frank Davey and Robert Kroetsch in the late twentieth, Canadian writers have been regarded as not only our most important poets but also our most influential critics of literature and Canadian culture generally. Gilbert's observation is applicable in one respect, however — at least, as pertains to Canadian poet-critics since the sixties. Most have been obliged to earn their bread in universities, and this may well account for the huge dislocation between their poetry and their theories of poetry. Any naive critical attempt to apply the latter to the former is fraught with danger.

As a poet-critic of the seventies, Margaret Atwood was something of a rarity: she was female and she was not an academic. Nevertheless, her theories as presented in *Survival*, her thematic guide to Canadian literature, led many critics of her poetry and fiction astray, as did some of her commentary on her own work. *Survival* was one of several important books that drew on Northrop Frye's structuralist and mythopoeic theory, especially his "deep terror" myth of nature in Canadian poetry. Atwood thereby inherited the suspicion and hostility of both feminist and postmodernist critics opposed to Frye. For example, at a Vancouver conference in the summer of 1982, Barbara Godard contrasted what she called Atwood's "retreat from the logos and the word into sensation," her "nostalgia for origins," and "her desire for a transparent language" with the presumably more up-to-date post-structuralist features of Quebec women's writing, which was characterized by "puns, ellipses, changes in gender and spelling, neologisms, typographic variants, the use of the white page . . ." (Godard 123). Perhaps also affected by this need to read Atwood's language as if it were transparent, Jennifer Waelti-Walters chose to ignore the feminist irony and grim satire of Atwood's writing in her novel *Bodily Harm*, concluding that the book was a "piece of overt misogyny" (Waelti-Walters 121). The view of Atwood held by many male critics also tended to run the gamut from indifference to hostility. Frank Davey, for example, unfavourably contrasted what he saw as "the Atwoodian world of imminent and ubiquitous danger" to the lively and ludic postmodernist poetics of West Coast regionalists (1974 33).

What is interesting about all these critics is that they were — and continue to be — renowned for their ability to focus on textual particularities. Their blindness to the particularities of Atwood's texts may well be a feature of the extent to which they were influenced by Atwood's Frye-inspired criticism, which hardly ever worked as a satisfactory explanation of her poetry and fiction. Frye's views may have been a starting point — one of many — for Atwood; after all, she was his student at the University of Toronto, where she completed her undergraduate degree. But her poetry was by no means the fulfilment of his critical vision. She was under no illusions about the masculine bias Frye failed to notice in the poetry he considered emblematic of Canadian attitudes vis-à-vis nonhuman nature. Having come of age

as a poet during the earliest years of the Women's Movement, Atwood wrote her first books out of an increasing awareness that *patriarchy* was not just a handy label for an era in biblical times. Like all good poets, she did not *follow* critics — Frye or anyone else. Rather, like the excellent poet she was from the beginning, she anticipated the critics who, during the seventies were major figures in the establishment of North American feminist critique as a legitimate field within literary studies — critics such as Suzanne Juhasz, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and also Grace Stewart, who was herself trained at the University of Toronto, and whose early work had a mythopoeic focus.

Many of Atwood's early poems, written in the late sixties, extend the difficulty men have in coming to terms with women to the difficulty man has in coming to terms with nonhuman nature. Her landscape poems often featured an opposition between man and nature, between male idealism and the landscape upon which it is imposed. In Atwood's "Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer" (*Selected Poems* 60), 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. (*Selected Poems* 63)

Unlike Adam, the first patriarch, naming the newly made world in order to take possession of it, this pioneer experiences the failure of Adamic language to possess and define the New World. Atwood's pioneer fails to resolve the negative "tension / between subject and object," a tension which emphasizes the persistent alienation of nature from culture, denies the pioneer possession of "his beaches, his clearings," and consequently causes the "disintegration" of his mind. Atwood could hardly be clearer about the insanity at the heart of Western epistemology and, by extension, Frye's masculine myth of nature.

In "Backdrop Addresses Cowboy" (*Selected Poems* 70), another early poem, Atwood invests the landscape with her own voice. What that voice says is a direct attack upon the most important *macho* symbol of American popular culture, consumed across the entire Western world and beyond. 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 nonhuman 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. (*Selected Poems* 70-71)

What is remarkable about "Backdrop Addresses Cowboy" and "Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer" is that they were originally

published in 1968 — long before feminist analysis had properly got round to the question of the relationship between women and nature and ecology. Atwood was herself a pioneer with respect to these issues, yet for almost a decade her work was subjected largely to the imposition of Frye's view of nature in Canadian poetry, rather than acknowledged as the work that began the feminist decentering of it.

In her 1980 study of Margaret Atwood's poetry, Sherrill Grace called *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* Atwood's "major poetic achievement to date" and noted that "Atwood has given it her own endorsement by including it, *in toto*, in *Selected Poems*" (33). Interestingly, however, the difference between the initial publication and the reissue was the absence of the "Afterword" in the new volume, published in 1976. Atwood's "Afterword" to the *Journals*, a largely redundant account of the surface narrative, was for many years a convenient interpretive crutch that encouraged critical laziness with respect to the work. In spite of the poem's widely acclaimed importance to contemporary Canadian poetry, critics and reviewers, in using the "Afterword" as a point of departure, generally avoided all but a superficial reading of the text, a reading which reduced its significance to "a compelling articulation of a Canadian myth and a dramatic incarnation of our past" (Grace 33). However, by reissuing the entire text minus the "Afterword," perhaps Atwood was inviting an examination of the *Journals* on their own terms.

Although Grace did provide a fuller reading by considering a variety of important thematic concerns, she still leaned heavily on the "Afterword" and ignored a most obvious fact about the *Journals*, a fact which Frank Davey's brief description of the work in his *From There to Here* just missed pointing out. He described it as:

> . . . a reading of what the responses of the pioneer writer Susanna Moodie to the Canadian wilderness might have been had they not been filtered through various nineteenth-century literary and social conventions. These poems envisage a Moodie very much like Atwood, who sees the forest and streams as threaten-

> ing shapes, who feels remote from her husband and fellow settlers, but who, in addition, cannot help trying to impose some order on the green chaos she senses around her. (Davey 33)

This statement is both misleading and instructive. By imposing a simplistic and also inaccurate thematic reading on the work Davey subtly dismisses it as just another nationalist poem. Although there is indeed fear associated with landscape in the *Journals*, there is little evidence of Moodie's "Trying to impose some order on the green chaos she senses around her." What in fact Atwood's persona tries to do, as I hope to demonstrate, is to come to terms with the landscape and thus with herself. Davey does, however, describe Moodie not merely as a pioneer but a "pioneer writer" who, in Atwood's hands, becomes "very much like Atwood." These clues, along with the many direct references to doubleness in the poem, are crucial to the exploration of a more important story that lies like a mirror image just below the surface of the narrative. The night a bear makes a dream appearance in the *Journals* is "one / night the surface of my mind keeps / only as anecdote," the speaker tells us, "though beneath [are] stories" (*JSM* 38). Indeed, *all* the historical and quasi-historical events that organize the surface of the text are Moodiesque literary anecdotes that serve as metaphors for Atwood's own experience of being both a woman and a poet.

Although paranoid schizophrenia, "the national mental illness," is offered in the "Afterword" as the reason why "Mrs. Moodie is divided down the middle" (62), this is a somewhat reductive interpretation of all the varieties of doubleness that inform the poem. The immigrant Susanna Moodie, who is only one aspect of Atwood's persona, was first of all a woman and a human being in an era in which the term "human female" was assumed to be a contradiction in terms. Living out the split demanded of women between "human" and "female" is a condition of female existence in patriarchy. Second, as a woman writer — a similar contradiction in terms — Moodie was split between her loyalty to art and her duty as wife and mother, a situation exacerbated by the demands of pioneer life. Finally, as Atwood's poetic persona, Moodie suffers a further doubleness by sharing

her identity with the poet. Moodie's attempt to create literature out of her pioneer experience in the language of Victorian Romanticism, a language decidedly inappropriate to that experience, is analogous to Atwood's struggle to describe female experience in the only language we have: the language of patriarchy. I would like to shed some light on these three aspects of doubleness related to the persona and show how that doubleness is rooted in language. My interpretation of the *Journals* is dependent upon a reconsideration of Atwood's language in terms of the history of women's experience as poets.

During the Restoration, when women first began writing professionally, the most common responses to their work were hostility and indifference. Those responses had the effect of silencing all but the most intrepid women writers; rather than be silenced altogether, these women incorporated silences into their work by writing in accordance with "received" male literary criteria but encoding their own experience at a more subtle level in their texts. In this way they subverted male-created literary forms and conventions. These techniques later developed into what feminist critic Jeanne Kammer called "the art of silence," a female aesthetic that in modern poetry originates with Emily Dickinson (Kammer 153). What the art of silence says in women's poetry is that its creators are acutely conscious of the extent to which a patriarchally-conceived language has excluded them from poetic discourse. As a male-dominated symbol system, language — particularly the heavily allusive language of literature — can be experienced by women poets as devoid of meaning. Carolyn Burke noted that "when a woman writes or speaks herself into existence, she is forced to speak in something like a foreign tongue, a language with which she may be personally uncomfortable" (884). Women poets must therefore choose carefully from among the empty symbols and reinvest them with a meaning that conveys something of their own experience of the world. It's this careful choosing that accounts for Atwood's sparseness of language and the visual sparseness of the text on the page. Her flatness of tone has the effect of denying admittance into her language of all those patriarchal overtones which each word threatens to drag into her poetry. Atwood's use of syntactical compression performs a similar function in that it denies admittance to patriarchal rhetoric. Her syntactical method creates a

doubleness in her language: read syntactically, the *Journals* carry out a narration of the persona's life but, below the surface of this narrative, the syntax begins to break down, and as the spaces between the lines open up, a new language consisting of a series of discontinuous and often oracular epigrams or aphorisms emerges. When lifted out of their syntactical arrangement within the poem, lines such as "time a thin refusal" (11) and "words, my disintegrated children" (41) take on profound meaning in terms of female existence and female art. Significantly, this new language is not dissimilar to a pre-Socratic — and perhaps even pre-patriarchal — mode of discourse.[1] Like the gnarled utterances of the ancient female Oracles, these powerful aphorisms also create ambiguities which are nevertheless functional in that they open up the text to a wider play of meaning. That *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* were born out of the silence which has threatened so many generations of women poets is amply demonstrated in the "Afterword":

> These poems were generated by a dream. I dreamt I was watching an opera I had written about Susanna Moodie. I was alone in the theatre; on the empty white stage, a single figure was singing. (62)

The poet, as sole occupant of the theatre, is swallowed up by its vast emptiness, even as Moodie, the creation of the poet's dreaming mind, is threatened by the empty whiteness that surrounds her. Moodie sings out Atwood's text but there are no ears but the poet's to hear it. These empty white silences, represented in the *Journals* by snow covering the landscape and by vast empty spaces on the page, run like a *Leitmotiv* through the work.

It's not only language but also form that has been subverted in the *Journals*. An overall formal structure is suggested by the three parts of the work, which on the surface correspond to Susanna Moodie's youth, middle life, and old age. Journal I appears to comply with this structure, for it is a fictional recreation of Moodie's experiences as a young pioneer woman, and this first Journal must, of course, be interpreted on those terms. However, a journal is a document of process, a work without premeditated formal structure. What the *Journals* become in the second and third

parts is a record of the poet's own thought processes as she begins to discover just how fluid the identity boundaries are between herself and her persona. Gradually, Moodie becomes emblematic of the struggle faced by all poets who are women. Finally, she is transformed into the vehicle for a kind of utopian vision that is rarely — if ever — found in the works of Margaret Atwood. In the final poem Atwood and Moodie become fully integrated and Atwood restores formal structure to the work by making it circular. As we shall see, the final result is remarkably effective in bringing into single focus what at first appears to be the work's "double vision."

As many reviewers and critics have noted, visual perception and inner vision are central concerns in the *Journals*. What few have considered however is that women's perception of themselves and the world is uniquely different from male perception. In this connection, John Berger has written:

> To be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men. The social presence of women has developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under such tutelage within such a limited space. But this has been at the cost of a woman's self being split into two. A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. . . . From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually. (Berger 46)

Berger's description of woman's space and woman's perception corresponds with stunning accuracy to the vision that carries the *Journals*, for Atwood's Moodie is entrapped in that "allotted and confined space." Like Moodie's sister poet and contemporary Emily Dickinson, whose life was "shaved / And fitted to a frame," Atwood's persona is entrapped in ironclad Victorian convention variously represented by a photograph, a mirror, a burning house, a Victorian parlour and, finally, a grave. Survival in this confined space is indeed, as Berger's words suggest and Atwood's poem demonstrates, "at the cost of a woman's self being split into two." Like all women, Moodie "has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually," and as the opening lines

of the *Journals* suggest, she is indeed "continually accompanied by her own image of herself":

> Is it my clothes, my way of walking,
> the things I carry in my hand
> — a book, a bag with knitting —
> the incongruous pink of my shawl (*JSM* 11)

This is a uniquely female version of the "inward gaze," a static self-image that corresponds to the way culture has taught Moodie to perceive herself; it's a self-image that obstructs deeper inner vision. The incongruities between this self-image and Moodie's own instincts about her true nature initiate the obsessive search for her authentic inner self.

If Moodie's gaze, then, is obsessively inward, how does one interpret the landscape imagery in the *Journals* and the fear associated with it? As a reflection of the humanist philosophy central to Western thought, landscape in literature is "other," i.e., that which is set over against man and the culture he creates. Indeed, as Northrop Frye's work so famously revealed, there is a substantial body of Canadian literature that clearly exhibits this culture/nature opposition. Furthermore, women are presented as features in that landscape. This androcentric literary tradition is most apparent in literature featuring a male hero who, as Margaret Atwood herself has written, "moves through a landscape that is a landscape of women as well as one of geographical features" (1976 20). It's hardly surprising, then, that in a poem which presents a woman as the cental figure, landscape is not "other" but "self."

Beginning with the *Odyssey*, literature depicting the central character's quest for identity describes a journey through an often terrifying landscape. This tradition, coupled with the time-honoured association of women and nature, makes Susanna Moodie's emigration from over-cultivated England to uncultivated Canada a particularly appropriate metaphor for the female quest for identity. There is probably little difficulty in identifying a young, well-bred, well-groomed Victorian "lady" with the soft, verdant, "curvaceous" English countryside, both landscape and lady in Victorian England having been virtually transformed

into cultural artifacts. But for the woman who has been taught to perceive female attractiveness in horticultural metaphors, the fading of her "bloom" of youth and her "ripening" into maturity signal a shift in self-perception. These physical and psychic changes, which occur early in her life, constitute her loss of the sexual power that is her only power in patriarchal culture. This loss of power makes the rejection of self as cultural artifact an act of psychological survival. The historical Moodie arrived in Canada as a new wife and mother, the point in her life that marked the decline in her sexual power. And it's at precisely this point that Atwood takes her over as a poetic persona. The difficulty Atwood's Moodie has in making the shift in self-perception is manifest in the tension between woman as cultural artifact and woman as uncultivated landscape, a tension that characterizes the first two Journals and most of the third.

As a product of patriarchal conditioning, Atwood's persona recoils from the changes which time, her greatest adversary, forces upon her; indeed, as the *Journals* open, time has already begun to close down for her, as the epigrammic "time a thin refusal" of the opening poem suggests. Moodie gazes for the first time upon a landscape that is anything but soft and curvaceous, and sees instead "vistas of desolation" and "omens of winter" — promises of a hard, prickly, and understandably frightening part of herself with which she needs to come to terms. But entombed as she is in patriarchal gender conventions, Moodie finds this new landscape alienating:

> this space cannot hear
> [. . .]
> The moving water will not show me
> my reflection
>
> The rocks ignore. (*JSM* 11)

In this initial confrontation, the landscape defies comparison with Moodie's image of herself. On a second level of meaning, these lines convey the sense of invisibility and inaudibility that characterizes female experience in patriarchy. As Moodie enters

this new landscape of self, she sets in motion a process that leads to her ultimate release from the hermetically sealed space that confines and isolates her. It's a process of continually alternating self-denial and self-recognition.

The process of female self-awareness which the *Journals* record leads through long years of isolation, eventual insanity, death, and rebirth. It involves an initial discovery of where one stands in relation to the "real" world:

> Whether the wilderness is
> real or not
> depends on who lives there. (*JSM* 13)

To Moodie, who "lives there" — indeed, *is* the wilderness — it is very real. Men however, as she discovers in a sudden flash of recognition, "deny the ground they stand on" (*JSM* 16) and thus deny her. Her husband and the other men live in a phallocentric world of pretence and "illusion solid to them as a shovel" in that they refuse to "open their eyes even for a moment" to female presence in the world. Moodie, "surrounded, stormed, broken // in upon" by sudden self-insight, realizes that she is "the dark / side of light," the "unbright earth," an absence against which a sun-favoured male presence is defined. In this newly-felt remoteness from her "shadowy husband," Moodie perceives him as "an X, a concept" (19), an unknown quantity in a system of male logic. Significantly, Mr. Moodie is quickly written out of the poem (10) and Susanna is left in the bush to make her greatest self-discoveries. In his absence she suddenly recognizes the extent to which she is imprisoned in the cage of male logic. Illuminated by the light of an "inner" fire (22), her house can be seen for what it is: an artifact of culture designed by men as "a protective roof" over the heads of women and children, yet "Prisoning [them] in a cage of blazing / bars." Carefully designed to mathematical specification, this prison exhibits "the logic of windows" and "all those corners / and straight lines" so foreign to the landscape it inhabits and thus to Moodie herself.

The looking glass, symbol of patriarchy's ultimate judgement on all women, plays an important role in Moodie's quest for self.

In "Looking in a Mirror," she finally comes face to face with that cultural artifact, her "heirloom face," now a "crushed eggshell / among the other debris" of her former self. She now becomes fully conscious of that other landscape of self:

> the mouth cracking
> open like a rock in fire
> trying to say
>
> What is this (*JSM* 25)

But before she can fully speak herself into existence and release herself from the surface of the imprisoning glass — emerge reborn from the "crushed eggshell" of a former self — her husband quite literally writes himself back into her life: "He wrote. We are leaving" (26), and returns her to stifling confinement in a Victorian parlour, where she spends her middle years sifting through memories in an attempt to piece together her fragmented self.

In a Toronto lunatic asylum, where female insanity intensifies floor by upward floor, Moodie reaches the top-most level of madness and finds herself once more face to face with the landscape she seeks: "It was a hill, with boulders, trees, no houses" (50). But she is unable to make contact: "The landscape was saying something / but I couldn't hear." She has come a long way from "the rocks ignore" of her initial self-confrontation. Therefore, she declines an invitation to descend again into the assumed sanity of culture:

> They wanted me to go out
> to where there were streets and
> the Toronto harbour
>
> I shook my head . . . . (*JSM* 51)

She prefers insanity, because at least it promises "all kinds of answers" about herself.

With the death of Atwood's Moodie all semblance of an autonomous persona — and an autonomous poet — disappears. It's more accurate to call Moodie's "Resurrection" a reincarnation in the person of Atwood. The relationship between the nineteenth-century poet Susanna Moodie and her twentieth-century counterpart needs to be explored further before the final Journal can be interpreted, for this relationship is responsible for the doubleness of text and voice that becomes obvious as early as the end of Journal II. Atwood's interest in Moodie is hardly surprising, given the perennial concern among women writers for a literary matrilineage. The source of this concern was brilliantly argued by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar and widely received by feminist critics in the early eighties. As Gilbert and Gubar pointed out, the woman poet, confronted by a largely male literary tradition, is involved in a particularly intense struggle for self-creation, and "she can begin such a struggle only by actively seeking a female precursor" (1979 238). The very private and traditionally female genre which the *Journals* imitate in poetic form suggests the existence of a strong and intimate bond between Atwood and her literary foremother. But like all relationships patterned on the mother-daughter bond, the relationship between Atwood and Moodie is fraught with ambivalence. What Adrienne Rich once called "matrophobia" — not the fear of one's mother but the fear *of becoming one's mother* (238) — can be traced through Atwood's rejection of Moodie's art, to the fusion of their identities in the *Journals*. Here is Atwood's initial reaction to *Roughing it in the Bush* and *Life in the Clearings:*

> When I read them I was disappointed. The prose was discursive and ornamental and the books had little shape: they were collections of disconnected anecdotes. The only thing that held them together was the personality of Mrs. Moodie, and what struck me most about this personality was the way in which it reflects many of the obsessions still with us. ("Afterword" *JSM*, 62)

The *Journals* are an investigation into the personality behind the "discursive and ornamental" prose, and if the poems, as Frank Davey suggests, "envisage a Moodie very much like Atwood" (Davey 1974 33), it's because Atwood identifies in Moodie her own dilemma as a young poet. As Atwood recognizes, Moodie reflects "many of the obsessions still with us," and one of those obsessions is the woman's poet's search for an authentic voice. Moodie represents the female literary subculture in which all women writers in search of an authentic voice participate, and because that subculture defines itself in relation to the dominant, male literary culture, women run the risk of speaking in a double voice. For as pointed out by Suzanne Juhasz in one of the first comprehensive studies of contemporary American women poets, "women have sought to find voices in which they could speak as poets. Some of the difficulty that they have experienced in being heard comes from the strain of trying to make one sound out of two conflicting selves" (Juhasz 5). This is the double bind women writers have traditionally found themselves in: "If the woman poet 'writes like a man,' she denies her own experience; if she writes as a woman, her subject matter is trivial" (Juhasz 3). This split in the female poetic voice is made explicit in the *Journals*, not only in very obvious places, such as "The Double Voice" (42) but also in poems such as "Charivari," where the story told by the "American lady" is quoted word for word by the persona, as are Brian's comments in "Dream 2: Brian the Still-Hunter" (36), as if the poet were testing out various voices available to her. The ultimate voice to be tested and discarded is, of course, Susanna Moodie's, a voice whose echoes surface in such poems as "Thoughts from Underground":

> due to natural resources, native industry, superior
> penitentiaries
> we will all be rich and powerful
> [. . .]
> who can doubt it, look how
> fast Belleville is growing (*JSM* 55)

Although Atwood rejects Moodie's "discursive and ornamental" poetic voice, she embraces the spirit behind it, which can be

seen to represent a whole generation of Atwood's literary foremothers.

"The amazing thing about women writers in the nineteenth century," Atwood has written, "is not that there were so few of them but that there were any at all" ("The Curse of Eve" 1976 24). The denial of the validity of women's experience and the taboos against transforming female experience into art were among the difficulties that many women writers failed to transcend. Susanna Moodie gave birth to five children and raised them in the Canadian wilderness, yet she "composed uplifting verse" (41) about Canadian scenery. Her husband brought her, unwilling, to Canada and left her alone in the bush for months at a time, yet she wrote "verses about love and sleighbells" (47). Given this opposition between Moodie's art and Moodie's experience as wife and mother, it's hardly surprising that Atwood explores Moodie's (and by extension her own) difficulties as a woman poet through the traditional metaphor for literary creation, the metaphor of childbirth. However, whereas the poetic process is traditionally described in terms of gestation and the actual moment of birth, Atwood expands the metaphor to include infant mortality, a notion which "Death of a Young Son by Drowning" (30) seems to support. The metaphor of infant mortality is a particularly useful device to a poet working within the aesthetic of silence, for art, like a newborn child, is vulnerable to neglect and perishes as a result of the silence it may be born into. In this connection, the opening lines of "The Deaths of the Other Children" are worth looking at closely:

> The body dies
>
> little by little
>
> the body buries itself (*JSM* 41)

It's as important to read the vast empty spaces surrounding these words as it is to read the words themselves. The silence that surrounds these lines emphasizes their shortness, denies any syntactical connection between them, and even threatens to bury them, to swallow them up "little by little."

The disappearance in this way of words on the page is an intensely felt threat that is echoed throughout the *Journals*. For example, here are the opening lines of "The Wereman":

> My husband walks in the frosted field
> an X, a concept
> defined against a blank:
> he swerves, enters the forest
> and is blotted out. (*JSM* 19)

The figure defined against a vast expanse of white snow is analogous to a word from the poet's pen defined against a blank white page. Furthermore, to Atwood/Moodie, identified as she is with landscape, a white expanse of snow threatens to silence and erase her as well. This disappearance of poet and/or poem into a vast white silence is echoed in "Daguerreotype Taken in Old Age":

> but whose is this vapid face
> pitted and vast, rotund
> suspended in empty paper
> as though in a telescope (*JSM* 48)

Not even the enlarging effect suggested by the telescope can overcome the threat of the "empty paper" in which the image of self is suspended. Here, the poet/persona avoids being swallowed up by white, only to be "eaten away by light" at the end of the poem.

If we now return to "The Deaths of the Other Children" we can see how this disintegration of both the poet and her poetic offspring is further worked out in terms of the art of silence. It's worth quoting the text in full in order to get the effect of its appearance on the page, although the unique typesetting of the original is difficult to reproduce here:

> The body dies
>
> little by little
>
> the body buries itself

joins itself
to the loosened mind, to the black-
berries and thistles, running in a
thorny wind
over the shallow
foundations of our former houses,
dim hollows now in the sandy soil

Did I spend all those years
building up this edifice
my composite

self, this crumbling hovel?

My arms, my eyes, my grieving
words, my disintegrated children

Everywhere I walk, along
the overgrowing paths, my skirt
tugged at by the spreading briers

they catch at my heels with their fingers (*JSM* 41)

If we resist the syntactical pull of one line to the next — a pull which gives the poem a surface meaning corresponding to the persona's conscious awareness — and allow each line to emerge as an independent entity isolated by the white silence that surrounds it, we begin to get a glimpse of the submerged meaning, which corresponds to the consciousness of the poet herself. The title itself is suggestive: as the word "other," with its covert reference to woman-as-other, suggests, the poem is not concerned exclusively with infant mortality. In this poem, *woman as landscape* is not merely metaphorical but literal as well. The body "joins itself," becomes fully integrated, through the burial of the self in the earth. The body is then recycled as "black- / berries and thistles." The isolation of "black-" from "berries" which emphasizes blackness and suggests a pun on berries, evokes the blacking out of the "loosened [lucid?] mind" upon integration with the earth. Woman as literal landscape is also evoked by the line that reads: "the overgrowing paths, my skirt": as in many of Atwood's lines which attempt to reduce subject-object differentiation, the connective verb "are" is dissolved in a comma.

There are other isolated lines in "The Deaths of the Other Children" worth pondering. For example, the line which reads: "Did I spend all those years" is a profound questioning of the poet's very existence, for she feels powerless to write herself into existence: like her persona, she is "a word / in a foreign language" (11), a symbol in a patriarchal reading of the world. The power of literary self-creation belongs to men like the husband of Atwood's Moodie, who even has the power to write himself back into Atwood's text. For the woman poet however, as the epigrammic "words, my disintegrated children" suggests, language often disintegrates for her when she attempts to bring forth female experience in literary form.

Women who are forced to write in a foreign language are condemned to speak in a double voice, for the language of patriarchy cannot accommodate what a woman knows of the world:

> that men sweat
> always and drink often,
> that pigs are pigs
> but must be eaten
> anyway . . . (*JSM* 42)

The words for female experience, like "unborn babies / fester like wounds in the body." If a woman is to enter into discourse at all she must "[use] hushed tones when speaking" and "[compose] uplifting verse." Little wonder that it's by the light of an unusually "bitter candle" that Moodie writes "verses about love and sleighbells" which she knows are not art because "there is no use for art"; her useful creations are "exchanged for potatoes" (47). Given so many unsuccessful attempts to write herself into existence, it's hardly surprising that Moodie lapses into a kind of solipsism in which her own imagined death becomes a denial that she ever existed at all. In creating "histories, worn customs" and the "frames, commas, calendars / that enclose me," Moodie tells us, "I said I created myself" (52). "Or so I thought," she adds bitterly (53). This failed attempt at self-creation gives her cause to wonder: "What will they do now / that I, that all / depending on me disappears?" In the asking she answers her

own question: the genuine experience of her life disappears with her, for she has had no language to articulate it.

Women writers like Atwood and Moodie, who for so long have struggled with their "damaged / knowing of the language" and "negotiated the drizzle / of strange meaning" (*JSM* 15) in an alien literary tradition, share what Adrienne Rich once called "the dream of a common language," or as Atwood calls it, "dreams / of birds flying in the shapes / of letters; the sky's codes" (*JSM* 20). But "the sky's codes" are literally encoded patriarchal constellations that must be decoded by women writers and re-encoded to convey female experience. This is the process whereby women writers may reinvent language, create the *earth's* codes. But earth and sky are unnaturally opposed: "In the morning I advance," says Atwood's persona, but "The day shrinks back from me." The opposition is expressed here in mythological terms: Mother Earth advances around the male sun but instead of remaining fixed in the universe, sun "shrinks back" from earth as if to ignore her. It's the rightful placement of male and female cosmological principles which Atwood/Moodie longs for:

> When will be
> that union and each
> thing (bits
> of surface broken by my foot
> step) will without moving move
> around me
> into its place (*JSM* 21)

Bit by bit women may break through the resisting surface of a patriarchal tradition, even as the meaning of these lines breaks through the syntax. But such phenomena do not right the balance. In the longed-for totality, "the sky's codes" will become constellations which, like the sun, "move without moving" into place around the earth to form a union of "each / thing" in a total, androgynous cosmology.

Of course, this conflict between sun and earth, victorious male and vanquished female cosmologies echoes the ancient origins of patriarchal ideology. Northrop Frye, in a discussion of the two as "earth-mother" and "sky-father" creation myths, notes "that

the earth-mother myth is the older of the two, being more appropriate for an agricultural society, as its rival was for the more urban, tool-using, and patriarchal society that succeeded it. . . . [In] Greek mythology, the sky-father . . . establishes his supremacy by force over a much older earth-mother" (1980 36). This "supremacy by force" is suggested by another cosmological image in which Moodie, "the granular moon," is "being / eaten away by light" (48). Moodie's death-bed wish is for an end to this patriarchal aggression:

> the sky
> leaps at me: let there be
> the sun-
> set (*JSM* 48)

The death of Atwood's Moodie, with all its references to disintegration and decay, is analogous to the erosion of women's literature by male-defined literary criteria, and the consequent erasure of women's names from literary history.

In the underground and resurrection poems that close the *Journals*, the notion of opposing male and female cosmologies is developed further to reflect the culture/nature opposition. The patriarchal cosmology in these poems is teleological and is represented by Toronto, the Celestial City that turns out to be a "rivetted Babylon" (57) consistently described in the patriarchal language of the Bible. Beneath the city lie the ruins of ancient, pre-patriarchal, prehistoric cultures described in language borrowed from patriarchy but purged and reinvested with new meaning. By definition, this natural cosmology holds the possibility of rebirth in a new form. In "Resurrection" the two cosmologies are held simultaneously in the consciousness of the persona. This "dual-mindedness" is reflected in the placement of the text on the page:

> I hear now
>
> the rustle of the snow
>
> the angels listening above me

thistles bright with sleet
gathering

waiting for the time
to reach me
up to the pillared
sun, the final city

or living towers (*JSM* 58)

The lines that begin at the base margin represent the teleological order. The cosmology of process begins to take shape at the drop-line, "the rustle of the snow," and carries on with "thistles bright with sleet / gathering" and "or living towers." The placement of the latter half of the poem suggests the triumph of the natural cosmology over the teleological:

unrisen yet
whose dormant stones lie folding
their holy fire around me

(but the land shifts with frost
and those who have become the stone
voices of the land
shift also and say

god is not
the voice in the whirlwind

god is the whirlwind

at the last
judgement we will all be trees (*JSM* 59)

The lines that follow the unclosed parenthesis establish a new base-margin and become the main text.

The carefully arranged visual pattern of "Resurrection" suggests that the persona hears on the one hand "the angels listening above" in "the final city" and on the other "the rustle of the snow." The fact that the existence of heavenly angels is at best disputable ("I see now I see / now I cannot see") and that the presence of a snow- and sleet-filled winter wind is not easily

denied, is a further commentary on the opposition of the two cosmologies. Gradually the persona "shifts" to exclude the patriarchal voices and listens instead to "those who have become the stone / voices of the land." She makes a further "shift" to become one of those voices, a strong voice free at last of all doubleness. In this new single voice she speaks out against a humanist/androcentric ideology that insists upon the supremacy of man and his god over nature: "god is not / the voice in the whirlwind." She proclaims instead the primacy and numinosity of nature itself: "god is the whirlwind." Significantly, she ends by triumphantly declaring that "at the last / Judgement we will all be trees," *not* angels. The term "last judgement" has been stripped of all its patriarchal overtones of authority, damnation, salvation, and becomes merely a term that marks the point of metamorphosis into vegetation of all dead creatures.

The ultimate resolution of duality occurs in the final two poems of the *Journals*. Here, the persona is depicted as a kind of Persephone-Demeter figure, waiting below for her time of rebirth, and appearing above ground in the closing poem where she, like the mythological Demeter, takes responsibility for the December snow: "this is my doing" (60). The Demeter-Persephone myth is a particularly appropriate tool for exploring the death/rebirth theme here because the myth holds a primary place in Atwood's imagination and in fact structures her first published work, *Double Persephone*. Indeed, Journal III appears to be a re-working of the earlier poem. Further, the Demeter/Persephone figure is analogous to the Moodie/Atwood persona and helps to illuminate the literary mother-daughter relationship. Feminist critic Grace Stewart, in her early exploration of literature featuring the artist as heroine, discovered that "an appreciation of the Demeter/Persephone myth provides insights to women's lives and their art." Stewart deals with the two figures in the myth as one figure "because the two blur, just as the boundaries between mother and child fade in each woman" (1981 45). In the final section of the *Journals* the two do indeed blur and, as we have already seen, it is not always possible to separate Atwood the poet from Moodie the persona.

The fear of vanishing expressed throughout the *Journals* is undercut in the closing poem: "It would take more than that to banish / me," says Moodie:

it shows you how little they know
about vanishing: I have
my ways of getting through (*JSM* 60)

as indeed she does, via the pen of Margaret Atwood. The "you" introduced in this poem is the former Moodie, the artifact of patriarchal culture, now completely differentiated from the speaking persona. At the command of the new, self-identified Moodie, this dead "you" turns, uneasy, in her grave. She is told to "Turn, look up" to note that the city is already decaying back into "an unexplored / wilderness," a notion which is supported by the phrase "kingdom still" with its overtones of patriarchal monarchy and death. The "you" is then invited to "Turn, look down: / there is no city; / this is the centre of a forest," a forest held in the womb of the earth and awaiting its time of rebirth. Interestingly, this image is depicted in terms of the Persephone/Demeter theme, in Atwood's cover design for the *Journals*: opened out flat, front and back covers together form an image of Atwood in an underground forest juxtaposed against Moodie's daguerreotype lying coffin-like on its side above ground in a wintry black-and-white landscape.

The death/rebirth metaphor, with its cyclical implications, reflects the entire structure of the *Journals* in that the closing line of the work, "your place is empty," links up with the epigraph poem. The "your place" is "woman's place," that "allotted and confined space" John Berger describes in the passage quoted at the beginning of this analysis. Moodie, or Moodie in the guise of Atwood, releases her image from the frame that confines it:

I take this picture of myself
and with my sewing scissors
cut out the face.

Now it is more accurate:

where my eyes were,
every-
thing appears

Perception, or "eyes," with its implied perceiver/perceived, self/ other distinction, disappears and is replaced by "every- / thing,"

being and non-being, the union of subject and object which is the only possible state: the transitional state of becoming. This pre-patriarchal, Earth-Mother vision echoes the "each / thing" of the poet's longed-for androgynous totality. Atwood has brought Moodie through her search for self and beyond, into an identity that transcends gender and even species distinctions. This state of becoming is "a landscape stranger than Uranus / we have all been to and some remember" (*JSM* 30), a natural landscape estranged by patriarchy but nevertheless retained in female consciousness.

Clearly Margaret Atwood's concern with doubleness is not confined to *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, as the title of Sherrill Grace's study, *Violent Duality*, suggests. That title, which alludes to the "Afterword" of the *Journals*, implies that Atwood's doubleness is the source of conflict in her work. As for the source of the doubleness itself, it can be found, as Moodie's has been found, in the anecdotes of the poet's own experience:

> Robert Graves's poetic theories [are] set forth in many books, especially *The White Goddess*, which I read at the age of 19. For Graves, man does, woman simply is. Man is the poet, woman is the Muse, the White Goddess herself, inspiring but ultimately destroying. What about a woman who wants to be a poet? . . . Graves's pattern for the female artists was "create and destroy." (Atwood "The Curse of Eve" 1976 22-23)

Clearly Atwood was haunted by the Gravesian create-and-destroy model of female art in the early years of her career. Indeed, it's entirely possible that she internalized the White Goddess as a sinister double. Perhaps it's that double who is responsible for the "Afterword" to the *Journals*. For if the "Afterword" did not actually destroy the work, it did some violence by diverting attention from it. By focusing exclusively on the surface narrative, the "Afterword" denies the existence of the layers of meaning that lie beneath. However, as I have attempted to demonstrate, those layers of meaning, like Atwood's Moodie, have their ways of getting through.

Two years after the appearance of *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, Atwood published *Surfacing*, a novel with a much more explicitly ecological vision than the *Journals*. In Canada, critics seemed more preoccupied with the novel's nationalist reverberations; some even tried to put an autobiographical spin on the book. However, in 1976, American theologian Carol Christ, one of the early figures in the cultural feminist revival of neolithic goddess traditions, analysed the relationship between nonhuman nature and Atwood's protagonist in order to illustrate how transcendence of Christian mind-body dualism is central to female religious experience. In response, Judith Plasko, also a theologian, reread the novel in order to illustrate the need for a balance between immersion in, and accountability to, nature. Christ and Plasko also touched on nationalist concerns with respect to Canadian nature. Interestingly, Atwood's reply to these articles was that *Surfacing* is neither a feminist, nationalist, nor theological tract but rather, a novel. She did not deny the novel's ecological vision (Atwood 1976). But despite what would appear to be her resistance to the dissolution of artificial boundaries between genres, there is no question that Atwood the poet and Atwood the critic often speak in a single voice in *The Journals*. Indeed, her treatment of the split subjectivity of Susanna Moodie is at least as powerful a critical statement as anything she wrote in *Survival*. Moreover, by imitating the conventions of a personal journal, Atwood seems to suggest that the *reconstruction* of a writer's life may still be as important a critical task as the *deconstruction* of her texts.

2

Mother Nature, Daughter Culture: Marjorie Pickthall's Quest for Poetic Identity

In March of 1921, the National Community Players performed *The Wood Carver's Wife*, a one-act verse drama by the Toronto poet Marjorie Pickthall, at the New Empire Theatre in Montreal. The play was so well received that the Community Players took it to Toronto where it was presented again at Hart House Theatre. Critics hailed it as an outstanding Canadian drama: "In one short play," wrote Lorne Pierce in 1924, Pickthall "achieved such a triumph of skill as firmly to establish her among the masters of the dramatic form of her generation" (113). Although Pickthall was not present at either performance of the play, she was gratified by its success, for she thought more of it than anything she had previously written. Fourteen years after her death in 1922, W.E. Collin wrote that *The Wood Carver's Wife* "stood high in her estimation because it is the drama of her own soul" (75). Collin's statement would have bewildered Marjorie Pickthall's many admirers, for the play, which depicts an afternoon of terror in the studio of a sculptor and his beautiful wife and model, is a story of sexual betrayal, sadistic jealousy, ruthless artistic ambition, and murder. By contrast, Pickthall herself was the model of Victorian propriety and feminine virtue, and her audience had come to expect refined sensibility, literary decorum and, above all, Christian piety from her. Hence, the brutality and the anti-Christian sentiment that boil below the ornate surface of the play were largely ignored, and the work

was acclaimed for its "spirit of lofty tragedy" and its "unforgettable beauty of sentiment" (qtd. in Pierce 113).[1]

This misapprehension is symptomatic of the curious phenomenon that shaped the life and career of Marjorie Pickthall. On one hand, she was created by a middle-class conservative literary establishment in need of assurances that old traditions — traditional femininity as well as literary traditions — were still intact. In scores of reviews and critical studies of her poetry, they constructed her out of their fantasies of ideal womanhood, thus turning her into a cultural artefact — an *object d'art*. On the other hand, these critics were not alone in constructing her. Pickthall was also the product of her literary experience — the experience of reading poetry written almost exclusively by men, chiefly the British Romantics and the Victorian inheritors of their poetic whose work she studied assiduously and imitated obsessively in her own poetry. Through their construction of nonhuman nature as female and their personification of it as Mother Nature, they offered Pickthall an identity that seems to have appealed to her as the exact opposite of cultural artefact, namely, that of natural phenomenon. In this essay, I want to trace the process of that double construction, for the way in which Pickthall finally learned to navigate the treacherous course between poetic convention and critical reception illustrates a uniquely female struggle for self-representation and poetic subjectivity.

"Amnesia," says Sandra Gilbert, "whether willed or accidental, has long been a problem for feminism" (Graff 123). We now live in an era in which men have become "a new victim group, oppressed by the gigantic strides taken by affirmative action policies, can't get jobs, can't keep women . . ." (Dyer 10). As women in ever greater numbers respond to these male cries of pain by renewing a commitment to the assumption that women's primary responsibilities are comforting men, healing their self-inflicted wounds, and nurturing the next generation of patriarchs, we need reminding of how women fared during an earlier period of patriarchal retrenchment, the one that brought the first wave of political feminism to a close. For it's through the lives of individual women that we can come to understand how women themselves are used and — often unwittingly — collude in their own use as subtle weapons in defense of the status quo.

I have therefore chosen to reconstruct the life of Marjorie Pickthall within the context of Canadian literary history and the status of women in turn-of-the-century Canada. My reconstruction leans heavily on two sources, one slightly more reliable than the other: Pickthall's personal letters to friends and acquaintances,[2] and Pickthall's biography, penned in the rapturous prose of her most ardent admirer, the critic and editor of Ryerson Press, Lorne Pierce.

Killed into Art

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. Critics "seized on her poems and stories as works of distinction," 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" (65). Brown might also have noted 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 Pierce 157). Archibald MacMechan wrote: "Her death means the silencing of the truest, sweetest singing voice ever heard in Canada" (qtd. in Pierce 47). Within 18 months of her death no less than ten articles — all overloaded with 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" (10).

Pickthall's emergence as First Lady of Canadian Letters is best understood in the context of the social conventions that regulated gender at the turn of the century. Throughout the closing

decades of the nineteenth century, the middle-class community along the Toronto-Montreal axis was one of the most conservative strongholds in the English-speaking world. This was especially evident with respect to the women's suffrage movement. Active and highly visible suffrage campaigns were well underway in England, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. By contrast, in 1894, when Ottawa finally got around to discussing the question of women's suffrage, there was little interest in a Parliamentary debate on the issue. The following year, Member of Parliament Guillaume Amyot vigorously protested a motion made by Nicholas Davin in favour of a limited form of female franchise:

> Resorting to the well-worn theme that casting a ballot would remove women from their proper sphere, 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 and 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 the movement for the depoetization of Canadian women intensified, so did the counter-movement for the continued cultivation of women as angels and art objects. This anti-feminism was only one facet of delayed Victorianism in middle-class Canada, and the so-called Romantic "feminine" verse, which was to prove so irritating to the early Modernist poets,[3] 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 the periodical literature of the period illustrates, they published and favourably reviewed poetry by women that exhibited such feminine virtues as modesty, gracefulness, purity, delicacy, civility, compliancy, and politeness.

This, then, was the political and literary environment in which Marjorie Pickthall was raised from the age of six, when she was brought from England by her emigrating parents. Educated at Toronto's 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 adolescent shyness and her precarious health. These qualities are reflected in the poetry she produced during the early years of her career, poems that would eventually contribute to her image as the ideal "little woman" of Canadian letters with a suitably feminine lack of professionalism.

The year she 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 enjoying success but their work was not in the mainstream of the established tradition. Senior poets imitating the "Confederation" group were filling the pages of newspapers and magazines with pleasing but mediocre verse: among these were Wilfred Campbell, Isabel Ecclestone Mackay, John Reade, Helena Coleman, F.G. Scott, Sarah Ann Curzon, Mrs. J.F. Harrison ("Seranus"), Agnes Maule Machar ("Fidelis"), and Agnes Ethelwyn Wetherald.

The role of deliverer of a literary tradition *in extremis* was thrust upon the adolescent Pickthall; it was a fate she would come to loathe. She seemed an ideal candidate for the role. She was young; she was also directly in the mainstream of the already established Canadian tradition. Many of her models were the best of the nineteenth-century British poets, and she had great thematic affinity with D.C. Scott, successfully incorporated many Lampmanesque images, and recalled the best of Carman in the intense musicality of her verse. Furthermore, the Christian overtones of her poetry appealed to the 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 Archibald MacMechan, 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 poetry was undoubtedly soothing to those who feared the depoetization of women. In the flood of critical response to her work which climaxed in Lorne Pierce's biography in 1925, it is clear that she made a special impression upon male critics: she was seen as a Christian mystic, and her love of the language and mythology of the Bible was interpreted as 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 reimagined 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. . . " (13). Archibald MacMechan thought her "incapable of uttering a false note" (222); Alfred Gordon insisted that many of the poems contained in her first collection were "unsurpassed by any other work in the language" (187); and Pelham Edgar felt that it was "very difficult to say what faults, if any, there are" in her poetry (6). Indeed, so rhapsodic were the flights indulged in by her admirers that they succeeded in turning the poet herself into a literary creation — in effect, immortalizing her by "killing her into art."[4] By delivering the qualities of moral purity, bashfulness, and sweetness which had so charmed the men of Amyot's generation, she not only assured her immediate survival as a practising woman poet, she also won recognition as the foremost poet of her generation.

Consumed by Nature

Marjorie Pickthall was never comfortable in the limelight. Her response to fame was to withdraw even deeper into the world of books. But whereas her male mentors killed her into art, her male models absorbed her into their landscapes. Imitation is 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. But in Pickthall's case, 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 unique poetic. What proved so fatal to her early verse was her failure to understand "woman's place" as dictated by the conventions of the tradition in which she worked. Because she cannot identify with the self-assertive "I AM" of the Romantic male poets whose work she imitated, it's not always possible to know where the poet stands in many of her early nature poems. For example, in "The Sleep-Seekers," the poetic voice seems to shift location as the poem progresses:

> 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)

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: "There" suddenly becomes "Here," "you" becomes "we," and the sought-after state of consciousness is now a protective space deep within the womb of 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's objections are understandable, for these lines do not conform to the conventional Romantic 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. The invitation to enter nature is as much from nature itself 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.

But Pickthall was not alone among women poets struggling with this particular convention of Romanticism. In her *Women Writers and Poetic Identity* (1980), a book acknowledged by Romanticists as having helped to "[mark] the coming of age of a feminist criticism of the major texts of the English Romantic period" (Mellor 3), Margaret Homans theorized the problem. Using psychoanalytic terms reminiscent of Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*, Homans explained what aspiring women poets must confront in their initial encounters with Romantic nature poetry:

> . . . 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. (Homans 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 (Homans 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. He is transcendent; she is the agent of his transcendence. Fully differentiated from her, he now uses poetic language as a means of repossessing her.

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 Mother 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, inarticulateness, 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 thought they know they must" (Homans 14).

But 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. However, as suggested in another of Pickthall's early poems, "Persephone Returning to Hades," enforced separation from Mother Nature is equally as self-annihilating as merger with her, for Persephone's descent into hell represents another kind of disappearance into (or beneath) the landscape. This is in keeping with what Grace Stewart discovered in her examination of the Demeter-Persephone story as an important myth of identity that informed many works by women from the mid-nineteenth century on. Persephone as Stewart describes her in "Mother, Daughter, and the Birth of the Female Artist" embodies the identity dilemma experienced by women who struggle for self-representation in their writing:

> Demeter, the strong woman who challenges patriarchal law, is offset by Persephone, the woman as victim. . . . Both the loss and the jubilant return [of Persephone] 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. (Stewart 1979 132)

In Stewart's view, this is the Persephone with whom women writers identify: a silenced victim of a fierce power struggle, a woman who is doomed to know herself only as an extension of

the forces that jointly possess her. As in the literature Stewart examines, this is the figure who often emerges in the poems in which Pickthall attempts to work out her identity as poet.

In "Persephone Returning to Hades," Pickthall invests the mute Persephone with the interiority denied her in the myth. Persephone's eloquent monologue dramatizes the identity erasure experienced by Pickthall who, as a woman poet in the Romantic tradition, was forced to live that myth. The poem is an excellent illustration of all the faults and virtues of Victorian Romantic feminine verse. Decorous and delicate of feeling, "Persephone" helps to explain Pickthall's appeal to gender conservatives. Written when she was barely out of her teens, it is representative of Pickthall's early work which, as might be expected of any adolescent poet, is "virtually a sampler of floral embroidery, the apprentice work of a literary seamstress."[5] Yet for its type, "Persephone" is technically well executed — which helps to explain how the leading critics of the day justified their attempts to canonize her. For example, the word "little," the most overworked word in Pickthall's poetic vocabulary, is not even used, much less abused.[6] Further, there is no silver or gold, opal or pearl 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 sombreness without a lot of melodrama. Perhaps it was the fear of her invalid mother's ever-impending death that helped Pickthall select just the right tone of dread 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 they 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)

The problem for most Romantic feminine verse is that it lacks substance; here, that quality works to the poem's advantage. The

striking image of "faint hands . . . fallen / Wide" on the grass captures quite nicely a sense of Persephone's decreasing substantiality, which complements the concretization suggested by "sorrow's self made visible." Its flirtation with pathetic fallacy aside, this opposition of invisibility and visibility evokes nature's transformation, as fruitful summer disappears and desolate winter emerges in the landscape.

The last three verses are worth quoting, for they illustrate the kind of training Pickthall put herself through in her attempt to learn what Stuart Curran calls "a discipline of particularity and discrimination that is a test of powers" (190).

> . . . 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.
>
> 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.
> (*CP* 178-9)

"[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 distracting 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. Interestingly, the tempo picks up as Persephone questions her state of mind. The cadences change and change again, suggesting the disruption of thought process. "Dread daffodils," an allusion to the narcissus that had enticed her to stray too far from Demeter — the error that resulted in her original abduction — now signal the dreaded reunion with the god of death. Demeter forgotten, she now addresses her lord, Dis. The poem climaxes in "the vast gray suburbs of the dead," the most chilling image in the poem. The last line is unfortunate: the weeping faun is too precious an image to end what is otherwise a powerful piece in its own way; 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's 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's this loss of identity that makes the poem a kind of signature piece for Pickthall as a poet.

The work of the male Romantic poets was not the only poetry Pickthall imitated. Equally important to her was the Bible, whose female figures also influenced her poetic self-concept. "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" (Homans 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. . . . (Homans 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" (Homans 31). Conversely, "Eve, and women after her, have been dislocated from the ability to feel that they are speaking their own language" (Homans 32). So, whether women look to verbally powerless Eve or unconscious Mother Nature, they find no poetic role-models.

Although she avoided testing out Eve as a possible poetic persona, Eve nevertheless casts a long shadow across Pickthall's poetry. 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 fathers. Her 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 leading poetess be a Christian lady — and preferably High Church. 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 strong attraction to paganism that distressed these men. At the end of a three-page attempt to

explain away the Catholic and neo-pagan allusions in Pickthall's work, Pierce concluded 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*" (170). Logan recognized in Pickthall "a naturally pagan spirit" but felt constrained to footnote that in using the term "pagan" he "does not mean, of course, atheistic or unchristian" (13). Such dancing about on the head of a pin says more about their religious anxieties than it does about Pickthall's. Whatever Pickthall's religious convictions, she was constructed as Christian in the critical discourse, and that is how she has come down to us.

The recurring Roman Catholic presence of the Virgin Mary in Pickthall's verse was one reason why establishing her Protestant credentials proved such a strenuous critical activity. But Pickthall had reasons for gravitating toward the Mother of Christ, reasons alluded to in "A Mother in Egypt." This poem is based on Exodus XI, which relates an episode in the ongoing power struggle between Pharaoh and the God of Moses, and thus replays the theme of "Persephone Returning to Hades." 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 in eight verses spoken by the maid-servant, present in the biblical passage only as a binary contrast to Pharaoh. It is significant that Pickthall chooses to embody this trope — a poor and powerless female victim of the struggle between two oppressive patriarchal forces warring for total supremacy — and retell the story from her point of view.

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, cradles her dead infant in her arms, speaking to it, then to herself, then to

her gods, re-living in her madness the experience of the previous night's bloody horrors. The fourth verse illustrates the kind of thing that gave Pickthall's pious critics so much anxiety:

> 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? (*CP* 115)

Ironically, God scores a triumph on behalf of his 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 one child, is trebly dispossessed. In the evocation of the gentle Amun and the mild Hathor, mother goddess, a contrast is made between a woman-centred, process-oriented spirituality and a violent patriarchal presence, a wrathful Other, "who knows not change or pity" and makes "war on a child." Clearly Pickthall had some awareness of the way in which Judeo-Christian traditions oppress women and negate the female principle. Given this awareness, it's 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 theological commentary in "A Mother in Egypt" is its significance in terms of textual politics and woman as place-marker in patriarchal discourse. 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 Law of the Father, the law of language. 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's a political act of protest against the linguistic hegemony of the

Bible. That Pickthall would choose this insignificant, mute biblical figure and treat her in this way says much about her "Christian" reading strategies and more about her own struggle to acquire poetic speech.

Awakening

Transformed into nature by her male models, and into a cultural artefact by her male mentors and critics, Marjorie Pickthall had more fathers in her life than she could handle. As a consequence, she remained in a state of arrested poetic development until well into her twenties. By the time she was twenty-five years old the happy excitement of early recognition had degenerated into anxiety about her rapidly growing celebrity. She knew she was an imitative writer,[7] and her feelings of inadequacy were beginning to creep into her poetry and her letters. As she wrote to Helen Coleman, "Don't keep reminding me I'm a poet. . . . I very seldom feel equal to living up to my own Immortal Verse" (7 Dec. 1908 MPC 2:13). Her capitalization of "Immortal Verse" suggests an irony in keeping with her growing tendency to devalue her own work. A few months later, 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. . . . (28 Feb. 1909 MPC 2:14)

Clearly Pickthall was plagued with anxieties about disappointing Helena Coleman, matriarch of the literary community and one of her few female mentors. Given her painful awareness of the dislocation between herself and her art, it's probably not overstating the case to say that Pickthall feared exposure as a literary imposter. On some less conscious level, however, her refusal to "act up" to her poetry was almost certainly an "acting out" against the mentors who pushed and prodded her into the literary limelight.

Another factor in Pickthall's arrested development was yet another father — her real one, under whose roof she was still

residing. In addition, Marjorie and her mother, a chronic invalid, were close in the extreme. As in many Victorian mother-daughter relationships, it seems that Pickthall never fully separated her identity from that of her mother. Marjorie's almost obsessive devotion made Lizzie Pickthall's death in 1910 a major turning point in Marjorie's life. Within four months of the funeral, Pickthall was working as an assistant in the Victoria College Library and saving her salary. Eighteen months later, she was finally able to purchase a steamship ticket to England and sailed in December of 1912.

After a few months in London at the home of her mother's family, she and her cousin Edith "Didie" Whillier rented a cottage at Bowerchalke, near Salisbury, where Pickthall finally experienced the kind of sustained relationship with nonhuman nature about which she had fantasized in her poetry for so many years. When the Great War broke out in 1914, she was working on two novels, neither of which was going well. She tried to compensate by writing war poems which, as it turned out, were the worst verse she ever produced. In December of 1915, she decided to join the war effort. She trained as an ambulance driver, then as an agricultural worker at Stonehouse in Gloucestershire, where the Land Council had four acres under cultivation to help make up wartime food shortages. After a few months of exhausting farm labour, she invited a fellow volunteer to return with her to Chalke Cottage, where they cultivated an extensive garden and lived off the produce.

It was a very different Marjorie Pickthall who emerged from her wartime experience. 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. In response to a letter from Helen Coleman on the problems of being unmarried, Pickthall wrote that singlehood was not her problem:

> 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 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*. (29 Dec. 1919 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 dawning consciousness was leading her to the realization that she had been living her life vicariously through her art. The short stories which she was turning out at an astonishing rate were the "outlet" though 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, her male protagonists actively exercised the force of their masculine will upon the world around them.

Between 1917 and 1920, Pickthall wrote a handful of lyrics that break the grip of Romantic convention. These poems turn "woman's place" as defined by convention 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 fatality. "For all literary artists," write Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, "self-definition necessarily precedes self-assertion: the creative 'I AM' cannot be uttered if the 'I' knows not what it is" (1979 17). The "I" in Pickthall's "Inheritance" knows what it is in terms of the conventions that 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's no coincidence that the thrice repeated phrase "I, before I" is a poetic rendering of self-definition before self-assertion. What this poem seems to be 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 looks back to a period in her life in which she became defined by the oppressive culture in which she was raised. It's my guess that this period was indeed a period — her first one — for this poem reads as if 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" that lie ahead: the tears to be tasted, the pain to be confronted as one's biological destiny unfolds. In terms of the myth that structures Pickthall's imagination, this poem reunites Persephone with Demeter; the memory lost in "Persephone Returning to Hades" is here restored. It's via this journey back through memory that the poet connects with an understanding of both her cultural and literary identity. These stanzas 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's clearly informed by the poet's experience of that convention. Its primary intention is to get in touch with the poetic self, not by focusing on nature but rather, 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. In this reversal of figure and ground, the poet does not *lose* herself in nature but rather, *finds* herself there. And finding herself there means reconnecting with her long matrilineal heritage; as the second verse implies, it is a terrifying experience. Who the speaker is derives from an ancient source — from the first woman ever to hand down this terrifying "Inheritance" to a daughter. Within the analytical framework in which I am operating here, that first woman is Mother Nature herself.

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 and 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 — far better, for example, 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.

As "Persephone Returning to Hades" suggested, 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 the work of Christina Rossetti, Pickthall's most distinctive voice emanates from the grave. Paradoxically, it's this most articulate voice that 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 seemed to emanate from two places at once, there is no confusion about where the speaker stands — or rather lies — in "Exile." The poem postdates "Inheritance" by three years and can be seen as its companion piece. "Exile," however, is not as strong as the earlier poem, as if 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 that would identify her to future generations has fallen on deaf ears, for she lies in a remote and inaccessible place in an unmarked grave. In terms of Pickthall's place in Canadian literary history, this erasure, or "Exile," from civilization's memory is hauntingly prophetic.

The same year in which she wrote to Helen lashing out at gender conventions — and at herself for her complicity in agreeing to her entrapment in them — Pickthall completed the first draft of *The Wood Carver's Wife*. She posted the manuscript to her father along 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" (Oct. 1919 LPC 59:8). Her surprise is in keeping with the way in which genre and setting function as subconsciously chosen strategies for getting forbidden material past the internal as well as the external 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 the play, in all its rage and violence, was indeed the drama of the poet's own soul. While maintaining the image of herself as "Apart and aloof" from "the jar and fret of this present evil world," as Archibald MacMechan would soon describe her (226), Pickthall encoded in the subtext of this play her sense of her-

self as a woman trapped in gender conventions and a poet martyred to the artistic conventions and critical expectations that had alienated her from her own experience and pointlessly consumed her creative energies. The play also expressed 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, but also the embodiment of an artistic and religious aesthetic who 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. Trapped in a loveless marriage, she reaches out to Lotbinière, a man who seems to offer the sexual and emotional freedom she craves, but he, too, embodies the male pride and aggression that are so fatal to female aspirations. Perverse and fanatical in his Christian piety, Jean fancies himself the instrument of Dorette's salvation from the sin of adultery.

The action of the play moves through the process by which Jean creates a Pietà out of red cedar — wood the colour of blood and flame, signifiers of crucifixion and martyrdom at the stake, the controlling metaphors of the play. Jean's jealousy of Lotbinière consumes him to the point of artistic impotence; he cannot seem to capture Dorette's beautiful features in the face of his grieving Madonna, and he projects that failure onto Dorette — *her* failure to produce the required facial expression, *her* failure to remain pure enough to pose as the Virgin. At the climax of the play, Dorette poses, trembling, before Jean, who hurls sexual insults at her as he grows increasingly frenzied in his artistic frustration. He suddenly calls out to his Indian servant, Shagonas, whom he has ordered to capture Lotbinière, who has been lurking 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 across the knees of the Virgin in Jean's scupture. "Why, now you are fulfilled," says Jean, satisfied at last:

> 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. (*CP* 236)

"Stretched, stamped and imaged in the mask of death," Dorette is at last killed into art, and her mind begins to disintegrate. Triumphant, Jean picks up his tools and sets the finishing touches to his work of art: "Now, now my Virgin is perfect."

In the spring of 1920, disenchanted with postwar England where, as she wrote to her father, "it is a drawback to be a woman [who is] known to do anything with her brains" (April 1920 LPC 59:8), Pickthall returned to Canada and settled on the West Coast. The following year, Toronto poet Arthur Stringer came to tea at the tiny cabin on Boundary Bay which served Pickthall as a summer workshop. Twenty years later, Stringer happened upon a copy of Pierce's biography of Pickthall in which the meeting between the two poets is mentioned. 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." 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. . . . 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. (Stringer 41)

Forty-five years after Guillaume Amyot's anti-suffrage address to the House of Commons, men, it would seem, could still be 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."

But unlike the critics of a generation earlier, Stringer did not refuse to recognize that Pickthall'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:

> 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!" . . . [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 wingèd 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 conflab of two old market-worn commercial travellers.

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 Pickthall is like a breath of fresh air after the parodies created by the Pierces, the MacMechans, and the Logans of twenty years earlier. While it's true that Stringer has constructed another kind of fiction here, his honesty about doing so provides enormous insight into the kind of process by which Marjorie Pickthall had been manufactured for public consumption.

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 "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 rainforest. These activities aggravated her mercurial 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. She spent the winter trying to recover from these strenuous activities. By now, her ailments included neuralgia and gynecological complaints. In the spring she underwent surgery. Eleven days later, she died of an embolism. Fittingly, her body was returned to Toronto, where she was buried next to the mother she had so loved.

Marjorie Pickthall was a victim of conventions that 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. Later, her admirers and mentors — to paraphrase Arthur Stringer — tried to pin wings on her because she wrote wingèd words. The pressure on her to live up those angelic wings was, as we have seen in her early letters to Helen Coleman, a constant source of anxiety to her. She chafed under the restrictions of "respectability" and often used humour and 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" —

"Oh dear me," Pickthall writes, "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" (4 August 1910 2:15). The whole range of restrictions that bound her are expressed here: her tightly constricting public image, her feminine respectability, and the religious conventions that 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 [that] burn deep." When Helen wrote to her about needing new clothes in order to keep up appearances, Pickthall wrote back from England advising her not to be a "Slave to Custom. There is absolutely no 'must' in things except the Must of being born & dying" (27 March 1913 MPC 2:17). She felt that she herself had burned at the sake of appearances and respectability quite long enough. Having fled

Toronto and the pressure always to be something she was not, she did succeed in turning a new leaf. By the time she entertained Stringer a few months before her death, she was no longer anxious about living up to her angel wings.

3

Noble and Ignoble Savagery: Patriarchy and Primitivism in the Poetry of Constance Lindsay Skinner

> I am the Elder Brother
> I am the Making-Right (priest)
> I am the counsellor of Earth
> in the always calm place.
> *Kwakiutl* (*SCD* 1)

t the turn of the twentieth century, the city of Vancouver was still largely confined to the south shore of Burrard Inlet. Across the Inlet, on the north shore, was the Squamish reserve. The old village at its centre provided Constance Lindsay Skinner with a model for the imaginary community she brought to life in a long series of poems called *Songs of the Coast Dwellers*. During a two-year stay in Vancouver while still an adolescent, homesick for the town in BC's Caribou district where she had been born and raised, Skinner was drawn to the Squamish village. As she visited with its inhabitants, her childhood experience of West Coast Native culture began to take on importance for her adult life and career. While attending a ceremonial dance on the reserve, she consulted with Mathias, Chief of the Squamish, who provided her with a context for the ritual:

> "A very long time ago," says Mathias, "my people noticed how the birds, fluttering to the ground from their nests at dawn, began to dance before they looked for food. They say, too, that the birds leaned their heads low, first on one side, then on the other, listening to the earth. And what they heard, they

> danced. So it became the custom of our young men to go at dawn into the woods to listen to the earth. And the listener to whom a song is given returns to dance it for his tribe, so that all may share with him the song which the earth gave to him while he listened in the forest at dawn." (*SCD* viii)

Skinner must have been profoundly impressed with this story, for she spent several years studying the process whereby drumming, chanting, and dancing are brought together in an intricate, perfectly coordinated, and deeply meaningful ritual. For her, this performance was not an expression of wild, irrational savagery but rather, a highly disciplined artform which, if she could theorize it, would illuminate the poetic process as it had evolved in the Western tradition. What she wanted to theorize and thus objectify was her subjective childhood experience of Western literature as "mingled strangely yet intimately" with aboriginal art, "all one by the glistening river" that flowed through her memories of childhood (1928 8).

Like many early modernists, Skinner believed that poetry had become excessively refined, narrowly intellectual, and disconnected from the bodily senses. Poets needed to reacquaint themselves with the source of the sounds and rhythms that inspire all great poetic art. Her theory of the origins of poetic art clearly demonstrates her reliance on the language of primitivism and the anthropology of her day:

> I believe, with the poets of the Squamish tribe of British Columbia, that rhythm is a direct impartation of Nature to her human children. There are no barriers — actual barriers of concrete nor figurative ones of education — between the savage and the Earth. Nature is his mother, his home, his city, his provider. All his thinking is inspired and directed by his relations to her and her moods. He hears her voices as his educated white brother does not hear them. To him her secret songs come not only through the imagination but aurally. (Skinner 1918 666)

Skinner may have cast her theory in the language of Romanticsm and primitivism, but she was right on target with respect to aboriginal art.[1] Mother Earth, not the poet, is the source of all poetry. Listening is as important as imagining. In the Squamish ritual, the poet-dancer re-enacts the importance of keeping his ear to the ground for Mother Earth's gift of a song, just as a robin listens for the sound of the gift of an earthworm. Paradoxically, only if the poet maintains this connection to the earth can his song "begin to seek the realm of imagination above the actualities of experience" (*SCD* ix). In other words, what Skinner felt she had come to understand through her study of aboriginal artistic process was the law that governed poetic transcendence: without connection — without "immanence" — there can be no transcendence. Moreover, as the "mother of poets," nature is herself a poet. While in the time-honoured Western myth, the patriarchal God of the Bible bestows the gift of language directly on Adam, in this alternative myth of nature which recalls Marjorie Pickthall's articulate Mother Nature, the "voice of the great mother" speaks on behalf of "the invisible Creative One."

For Skinner, nature is also the source of great poetry in the European tradition:

> One who has heard melody on a frosty startlit 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. This embrace of nature as the articulate poet mother allows Skinner to be both woman and poet. However, as many of the poems in *Songs of the Coast Dwellers* demonstrate, in practice this theory cannot prevail against the tyranny of the European tradition. Her allusion to Elizabeth Barrett Browning notwithstanding, it did not escape Skinner's notice that what was also identical in the two traditions was the assumption that the sex of the poet is properly male. This helps to explain why, throughout *Songs of*

the Coast Dwellers, Skinner is caught in the contradiction of two positions she articulated in a pair of witty articles, one of which prophesies women's eventual power over both art and society, while the other presents women as both incapable and undeserving of such power.

In this essay I reconstruct Skinner's life and times in order to make sense of that contradiction and to provide a context for reading her Indian poems. I choose this biographical and historical approach to her work because I think it sheds more light on the intersection of patriarchy and primitivism than do current postcolonial literary views of white-authored texts that incorporate North American aboriginal themes and images. Canadian postcolonial theory, developed during the eighties, tends to participate in the gender scepticism of that decade of theorizing in which there was a shifting away from a perception of Western culture as divided along gender lines toward one in which racial divisions were viewed as more determinative of relations of power. This theoretical shift was as much an effect of patriarchal revivalism in society at large as it was of the desire for a more nuanced theory of difference than the one offered by feminism during the previous decade (see Bordo 215-243). Combined with a narrowing of critical focus to issues of textuality, this shift of view privileged colonialism over patriarchy as defining the conditions under which all texts featuring images of the "indigene" were produced.

In an objective sense, a biographical and historical approach to such texts is neither better nor worse than the postcolonial approach. The former accounts for both authors and readers, while the latter is grounded in the postmodernist suspicion of literary authority. In practice, this does not always work out well for the empowerment of women readers or for issues of humankind's relationship to nonhuman nature. "Our very survival," writes Tania Modleski, "hangs in the balance, so that there can be no question of *choosing* between authors and readers. We must, I think, not mimic the oedipal hostility implicit in Roland Barthe's remark that the 'birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author'" (136). My intention, therefore, is to pay close attention to the issues of female literary authority that obtained during the early twentieth century for the purpose of raising questions about the conditions of textual production that

tend to get left out of postcolonial readings of white-authored texts that borrow from indigenous traditions. With those questions in mind, I conclude this essay with a brief look at the work of postcolonial literary theorist Terry Goldie as an extension rather than a disruption of earlier gender-blind theories which offer, at best, a partial account of the gendered aspects of literary subjectivity.

Skinner's Life and Times

The association of art almost exclusively with masculinity would seem to account for the revealing way in which Skinner reinterpreted Chief Mathias's story for her own purposes. The controlling metaphor in *Songs of the Coast Dwellers* is the journey of the young man into the forest at dawn. But in Skinner's version, it's not a song he seeks but rather, a wife. In this reinterpretation, the process of artistic creation becomes the sexual act. This in itself is not unusual in the context of Western poetic convention, for the act of begetting a poem upon the body of the Muse is hardly new. However, in Skinner's transformation of the poet-dancer's ritual into the ritual of courtship and marriage, respect and reverence for feminized nature becomes predation and violence against women. Throughout *Songs of the Coast Dwellers*, sexual victimization is repeatedly presented as the fate of married women. In the context of the debate among early twentieth-century sexologists and feminists, this is an interesting enough theme in itself. However, what this theme says, by analogy, about the fate of literary women — women like Skinner herself — is far more interesting. For starters, it makes it all but impossible to resist invoking the question that opens *Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's 1979 classic of feminist literary criticism: "Is a pen a metaphorical penis?" (3). Skinner pursues this question obsessively throughout *Songs of the Coast Dwellers*, and her not-so-veiled allusions to female sexual and artistic dissatisfaction suggest her failure to resolve to her own satisfaction the "anxiety of authorship" so brilliantly theorized by Gilbert and Gubar.

Like many over-achievers, Skinner defended against feelings of literary marginality by publishing novels, essays, plays,

histories, newspaper columns, and book reviews at a phenomenal rate — and she was an interesting writer in most of these genres. "Good writing," she said in "On Writing of Many Kinds," "can be done swiftly by good writers. . ." (1922 95). Writing poetry was, however, a painfully slow process for her, not only because poetry insists on being about itself as a process but, more important, because the process itself has a way of brutally exposing the limits of literary talent. For all her elaborate theorizing of the process, Skinner never managed to feel at home in the praxis. She may have felt entirely at home with the North West Coast oral tradition familiar to her from earliest childhood, but her success as an immigrant practitioner in the poetic tradition of her literary forefathers was at best mixed.

It took Skinner twenty years to write the individual poems contained in the volume she eventually published under the title *Songs of the Coast Dwellers*. She prefaced the collection with a Foreword in which she wrote:

> The succession of lyrics 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)

It's not the "primitive symbolism" but rather, Skinner's careful arrangement of the poems that creates the impression of individuals whose interwoven lives constitute community. However, she is not presenting an accurate depiction of aboriginal community. Indeed, as she makes clear in her Foreword, the "customs, which I have used in a few poems for my own purposes

. . . had been long out of practice" among the "Indians of the wilderness which environed my youth." Moreover, she continues, "I doubt that the Indians gave those customs my interpretations of them" (*SCD* viii). As I read them, her reinterpretations suggest that she is using her imaginary community as an alternative setting for exploring her view of what constitutes patriarchal sexual relationships and other gender inequities as they characterize the dominant white culture. For no amount of "primitive symbolism" can fully disguise the fact that the gender issues and sexual conflict played out within Skinner's community are virtually identical with those that were currently being debated by feminists in the context of Western patriarchy and those which women writers were grappling with in the context of patriarchal poetics. But Skinner's position on many of these issues and conflicts was unique. It is unlikely that all white women of her generation would have agreed with her representation of female experience. Nor would feminists have unanimously endorsed the views expressed through her aboriginal characters. All of this, together with her own ambivalence, conscious and unconscious, accounts for her decision to lift the issues out of their familiar context and defamiliarize them through relocation in an alternative setting.

Skinner may have been moving her discussion of sex and gender to what was alien territory for her readers, but this setting was familiar and comfortable for her. While she was growing up during the closing decades of the nineteenth century, rebellion was raging on the prairies, and tales of Indian savagery were being spun for consumption by the whites of central Canada. By contrast, the Caribou was remote from the violence, relatively isolated, and accessible only by steamboat up the Fraser. Skinner's British-born father was Factor at the Hudson's Bay Company trading post of Quesnel, and Constance was his only child. The Skinner family had established close personal relationships among the Native peoples with whom Robert Skinner did business. As explained by Jean West Maury, a journalist who interviewed Skinner in 1933, her first baby shoes were a tiny pair of deerskin moccasins from which she graduated to snowshoes almost as soon as she could walk. According to Skinner herself, she often accompanied her father on his regular visits to the outlying Native communities (1928 8). As the only white

child in the district, her companions were Native children, and her adopted grandfather was a Native "bard" who regularly chanted and prayed "to the rising sun, to the full moon, and to the burning northern lights" and told her "Indian legends that are part of the warp and woof of her childhood memories . . ."(Maury 21). *Songs of the Coast Dwellers* suggests that she was on intimate terms with a variety of North West Coast legends which, like the Indian artefacts that cluttered the New York apartment where Maury interviewed her, represented several cultural traditions, including Haida, Tsimshian, Kwakiutl, Nootka, and Coast Salish.

Running parallel to her childhood experience of the immediate, the oral and the aural, was Skinner's formal schooling, presided over by her practical Scottish mother, Anne Lindsay Skinner, in the library of their large log cabin which contained some two thousand books. Milton, Shakespeare, Coleridge, Thackeray, and the biblical scribes were among the literate bards who captured her imagination — an imagination in which, as Skinner explained, "stories, books and people from other ages and places mingled strangely yet intimately with now and here, all one by the glistening river" (1928 8). As an adolescent, Skinner fell ill and was taken to Vancouver for medical treatment. She never returned to her home in the north, where the idyllic life she had known was quickly disappearing, thanks to the social upheaval wrought by the massive exploitation of the Caribou gold fields and the proliferating government policies regulating property and white-Native relations. At the age of sixteen, Skinner left Vancouver to live with relatives in California. Barely out of her teens, she moved from Los Angeles to Chicago and, finally, to New York. Most of her career was devoted to research and writing that reflected her continuing interest in, and commitment to, the culture and history of the Canadian north west.

Songs of the Coast Dwellers represents the smallest fraction of Skinner's literary output. She was also a prolific novelist, playwright, historian, journalist, and cultural critic, whose many essays and almost two hundred book reviews appeared in countless newspapers, magazines, and scholarly journals. Although her poetry and most of her fiction are set in Canada, almost all of her work was published in the United States. Her early successes were as a drama critic, and one of her own plays, *Birthright*, a

tragedy about a halfbreed girl in a missionary household in northern British Columbia, toured the United States and played in such centres as Boston, Buffalo, Chicago, and many smaller centres. But if Americans remember her at all, it's as a historian of the North American west. As she herself pointed out in 1934, her *Adventures of Oregon: A Chronicle of the Fur Trade* (1920) was required reading in most American high schools (1934 17). Indeed, her histories were so successful that the publishing house of Farrar and Rinehart commissioned her to edit and supervise a historical series on the rivers of America, a task she did not live to complete.

Skinner's early life set her apart from her middle-class urbanized female contemporaries, whose lives were governed by the kind of social and gender conventions which Skinner had only imperfectly internalized, thanks to her unconventional upbringing and her early escape from parental supervision. Remarkably, she was only fifteen when she began to write for newspapers and magazines, and by the time she reached maturity, when other women of her age were settling into marriage and motherhood, her prolific writing career was well under way. Not surprisingly, therefore, she chose to emulate the most successful of her nineteenth-century literary foremothers by remaining single and focusing her energy exclusively on her writing. She took a keen interest in issues raised by the Women's Movement, but although her many novels featured strong female characters living independent of men, she distanced herself from the Women's Movement per se. As she said in a 1911 interview published in Vancouver's *Daily Province Magazine*,

> I don't know much about Women's Movements, Suffragetteism, Women's Clubs, Councils, etc., and I am not, I think, in favour of any movement which primarily depends for its existence on sex segregation. But I recognize that at present the segregated "Club," the "woman's" movement, has to exist, because men have so signally failed to keep our civic, social, and national standards high-flying in clean air. In this day of male blood-lust for money, women are leading practically all the ethical and aesthetic movements. (*Daily Province Magazine*, 11 Jan. 1911, 4)

Here, Skinner appears to identify herself with what has come to be called maternal feminism in that she subscribes to the idea of women's authority in matters of morals and aesthetics. It is significant that she characterizes the Women's Movement as "sex segregation" — what contemporary feminists call separatism — but nevertheless regards separatism as a kind of necessary evil for overcoming the larger evil of "male blood-lust for money." She seems not to have much interest in women's political equality, as her somewhat trivializing reference to "Suffragetteism" suggests. Perhaps, like her contemporary Emma Goldman, she had little faith in the ability of women to use the vote to address the failure of men "to keep our civic, social, and national standards high-flying in clean air."

But Skinner's critique of the Women's Movement may not have been quite as deliberate as my reading suggests. Thirty-four years old at the time of her *Daily Province* interview, Skinner had one foot in each of two generations of women. The older generation had produced the militant feminists who were carrying the Movement toward its goal of women's suffrage, but most younger women were suing for peace in the war between the sexes. Skinner's statement may be more a reflection of ambivalence about her marginality than a carefully reasoned articulation of her feminist position. Backlash had the general effect of eroding some of the female self-confidence that earlier phases of the Movement had inspired, and patriarchal revival was breathing new life into old feminine stereotypes. Skinner's characterization of the Women's Movement as "sex segregation" may well have been a defense against the stereotype of the unmarried woman as man-hating feminist and sexual ignoramus. Her unmarried foremothers, who had totalled 11 percent of the female population in the late nineteenth century, had enjoyed a distinct advantage over her: they had lived in a pre-Freudian world in which the only stigma they had to deal with was "failure" to attract a husband. By the time Skinner's generation was reaching maturity, the percentage of women choosing not to marry had dropped to 4.6 percent, the Old Maid stereotype had been revived, and thanks to the new science of sexology, it was taking on pathological characteristics (Simon 19-20). For example, Freud equated feminism with lesbianism and lesbianism with pathology. As a consequence, any opinion advanced by unmarried

feminists on sexual matters was presumed to emanate from that pathology. Skinner, who cultivated an image of herself as an authority on the social, literary, and gender issues of the day, may have distanced herself from organized feminism in order to escape the inevitable ridicule heaped upon single women associated with the Movement.

Nowhere is Skinner's defensiveness on gender issues more apparent than in "Cheating at Solitaire," a 1927 article that took issue with the new science of psychology as the exclusive authority on gender difference, sexology's obsessive investigation of the differences between single and married women, and Freud's increasingly influential theory of female biology as destiny. "Although science has now practically accepted the theory that the sexes' pole of divergence is in the realm of psychology," she noted, "no scientific man has yet been able to stabilize it" (675). Skinner's article is an expression of her ambivalence about the essentialism of psychology which tries to account for the evolving differences between women, "married or unmarried" (676), and men. Although Skinner addresses these issues with the intention of amusing sophisticated readers, her deep resentment against the male-dominated sciences and their social impact is apparent. "Cheating at Solitaire," together with another article published two years later, sheds considerable light on the way she represents female creativity and conflates sexuality and violence in her poetry.

"Cheating at Solitaire" rejects biological determinism as a male construct. In its place, she advances a theory of self-determination. Skinner describes the evolution of female consciousness and self-determination as a historical rather than a scientific phenomenon — as a gradual movement away from male definition and towards self-definition. Her thesis is never stated quite this clearly, however. With its witty tangle of metaphor, analogy, and oblique references, the article is a classic example of the female art of literary camouflage, or subterfuge, an art which Skinner employed in order to get her opinions on sex and gender past the censors — internal as well as external, no doubt. Skinner begins by denouncing "literary cartographers" — a metaphor borrowed from geography to describe cultural 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 mock these critics by launching into a complex series of scientific metaphors without explicitly stating her subject. She borrows an analogy from physics to describe sexual differentiation in the human species as a process by which "Sameness" eventually reaches its "Pole of Divergence." Skinner dismisses psychoanalytic wisdom in favour of a theory 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, a game played without a partner, seems to be Skinner's analogy of the game of life, especially as played by those without a spouse. As a metaphor, the game of solitaire is preferable to either stud poker, that quintessentially masculine game in which the winner takes all and thus singles himself out from the crowd of losers, or Old Maid, that other popular card game of the period in which the singling out process defines the loser. What Skinner says about solitaire 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 that govern what it is to be female: to be female is to be destructive rather than creative, unconscious rather than conscious, passive rather than active. These definitions of femaleness, she claims, 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 great 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 women as unconscious and destructive. This is apparent in the male construct of the Three Fates. With "little consciousness and less volition," these three feminine archetypes 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 first inklings of female self-knowledge acquired in the pre-scientific era, woman 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 — a solution, perhaps, to men's inability "to keep our civic, social, and national standards high-flying in clean air." Skinner's use of this tapestry metaphor is a kind of smoke-screen behind which her female supremacist fantasy attempts to hide: 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's hardly surprising that Skinner feels constrained to bury it under several layers of metaphor. But more important, the reversal of power she prophesies is evidence of her inability to imagine an alternative to the epistemology of opposition which not only governs gender arrangements but also perpetuates the notion that artistic creativity is gender encoded. In Skinner's view, the only alternative to male supremacy is female supremacy.

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." 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 airwaves, literary style and current styles in hair, clothing, and interior design have become synonymous. The radio announcer, in an oracular voice that recalls the chorus of 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 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 that 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.

It's not only her personal appearance with which her reading material must be coördinated. 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. Despite these possible sour grapes, her allusions to the fundamental shallowness of the female mind are nevertheless revealing in terms of the female poet figures depicted in her poems: 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 Wearing" is in part a rationalization for her waning popularity with the reading public, it is also a revealing comment on the post-feminism of the late 1920s. In that decade, as in the 1990s, direct discussion of feminist issues took place in an environment of increasing male hostility and decreasing feminist interest among young women. For example, an earlier generation had sought to curb male sexuality and made it an issue in the campaign for sex reform. But the new generation, influenced by the image of the flapper, chose to pursue liberation through sexual experimentation. These women were also influenced by the advice of popular sexologists, who encouraged women to adapt to the male sex drive (LeGates 287). The issue of male sexual domination of women was no longer fashionable, yet it was an issue with which Skinner had an enduring preoccupation. Is it any wonder, therefore, that she chose to pursue her discussion of it under the cover of an imaginary aboriginal community?

Songs of the Coast Dwellers

Skinner's description of *Songs of the Coast Dwellers* as a "succession of lyrics" presenting the interwoven lives of several characters (*SCD* ix) suggests that her intention in bringing the poems together is narrative. Although the logic of the story's unfolding is obscured by Skinner's weakness for elaborate levels of metaphor and analogy, she does manage to achieve narrative continuity by grouping most of the poems into a number of recognizable sequences, all of which are governed by the

courtship-marriage ritual, which is treated in full in the opening sequence and repeated in part in all subsequent sequences. The customs that make up the ritual include the lover's journey, the quenching of the torch, and the whip-plaiting. Like the poet-dancer's journey, the torch and the whip are ancient customs which Skinner reinterprets for her own purposes. She turns the whip into a symbol of violent male sexuality, and in doing so betrays the intensity of her rage at the victimization of women by patriarchal convention. 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 an eligible virgin who has hidden herself there in the hope of being found and claimed by a mate. 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 in a gesture of sexual submission. 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. This story is a version of what Nancy K. Miller has called the "female plot," an "organization of narrative event which delimits a heroine's psychological, moral, and social development within a sexual fate" (1983 125). Miller refers largely to prose fiction in her description of how women writers subvert this plot from within, but because of the narrative structure of Skinner's poem-cycle Miller's observations are useful here as well:

> [F]emale-authored fiction generally questions the costs and overdetermination of this particular narrative economy with an insistence such that the stories produced provide internal commentary on the status of female plot itself. They thereby solicit a reading of

> narrativity that takes into account the ideology at work in this genderization of experience. (1983 125-6)

By reworking the female plot several times throughout the volume — some reworkings more violent than others — Skinner's narrative does indeed solicit such a reading but leaves the basic tenets of the ideology intact. Her male figures are pitiless husbands who, according to the female speakers, brutalize their women in the act of sex but who, in their own voices extol their love for their mates in grandiose poetic flights. Curiously, little violence is associated with men's roles as warriors and hunters. These activities are addressed in several poems in which the language of courage and honour, rather than the language of slaughter, dominates. In addition to torches and whips, knives and spears — and, in one case, a burning log — are implicitly instruments of torture when associated metaphorically with sexual union but take on much nobler significations when featured as the technologies of hunting and warfare. Women are repeatedly imaged as tearful and bewildered as they struggle to reconcile brutality and love. This example from "Song of the Young Mother," in which the female speaker addresses her infant son, is typical:

> 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.
> (15-16)

More revealing than the 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 image of the phallus as weapon seem more suggestive of sexual assault, an act carried out here in psychological as well as physical darkness. Female pain as male pleasure hints at a kind of sadomasochism that pervades many of these poems, including those featuring male children whose upbringing includes corporal punishment and the cultivation of arrogance and brutality as masculine ideals.

Two poems in the opening sequence suggest Skinner's struggle with the implications for women poets of scientific biodeterminism, specifically, the Freudian notion of biology as destiny. "Love Song to Storm-Dancer" features a male persona, while "Storm-Dancer" herself is the speaker in "The Wild Woman's Lullaby." This pair of poems depicts the sexual act as both beautiful and violent, but the purpose of sexual union is very different for each of these speakers. In "Love Song to Storm Dancer" (11-12), the urgency of male sexual desire is conveyed through the beating of the "drums of Night" which open the poem and the "Drums of Dawn" which close it. The eternal persistence of the male sexual drive is suggested in the implication that sexual encounter does not bring fulfilment but only the kindling of "new desire."

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 North West Coast 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 (E. Carr 33-40). 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 sexual domination 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! (13)

In what is perhaps an allusion to sexology's popularized assertion that women can and should adapt themselves to the male sex drive, sexual harshness is counted among the male virtues and is valued equally with fierceness, wisdom, swiftness and capacity for love. This celebration male sexual violence is in startling contrast to "Song of the Whip-Plaiting" (4-6), where the persona expresses a wistful longing for a gentler touch.

But Storm-Dancer has more to celebrate than a mate with the singular distinction of being the most brutal of men. The longing for release from silence and isolation through motherhood, a longing expressed in several other poems, including "Song of the Basket-Weaving" (7-8), is here fulfilled. As a mother turned poet, Storm-Dancer appears to suggest that motherhood can release the power 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-ki! Ri-eek*
> 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! (13)

The young mother recreates for her son the story of his conception in images of pursuit and capture. And while these images are not nearly as violent as the images of sexual predation featured elsewhere in the courtship-marriage sequences, clearly flight and freedom haunt the imagination of this "wild" poet-mother. 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's 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 that 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. I shall return to Kan-il-lak, the "divine culturist," as Skinner calls him in her Foreword, but first something should be said about the possible connections between Storm-Dancer and aboriginal legend.

The Kwakiutl figure D'Sonoqua is not the only legendary figure Storm-Dancer recalls. Insanity, ostracization, and alienation are all suggested in the Nootka legend of "The Jealous Woman." 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. With the bones of her infant still fastened to her back, she is locked in a pen in her husband's house (Sapir and Swadesh 67-9). This aberrant wife and mother is almost certainly one of the Nootka versions of D'Sonoqua, and it really matters little which figure inspired Skinner's wild poet-mother.[2] 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, with its intimations of female power, gives way to a modest and feminine form of literary creativity. In short, what Skinner does with this highly threatening female figure is confine her within the same set of social and literary conventions in which Skinner herself, as a woman and a poet, is entrapped. As

the Kan-il-lak sequence reveals, her male poet figure operates under no such physical or creative restrictions.

Although "Love Song to Storm-Dancer" and "The Wild Woman's Lullaby" work as a pair in the opening sequence, they were not part of the original sequence of ten poems which first appeared in Harriet Monroe's *Poetry (Chicago)* in 1914.[3] "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*. This suggests that the pair 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 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. 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 masculine. Through Kan-il-lak, Skinner indulges in poetic abstractions; asserts the superiority of masculine symbols (such as the sun) over feminine symbols (such as the earth and the moon); treats male sexuality as the life-giving, life-sustaining force; and praises an omnipotent male god. 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, the poet's muse. The 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 the one of the poems, "Nak-Ku Answers," in which she expresses her jealousy of her sister muses and her triumph over them as Kan-il-lak's favourite:

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! (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." The relationship between gift-giving muse and gift-judging poet could hardly be more different from the relationship between revered Mother Earth and respectful poet-dancer.

Throughout the Kan-il-lak sequence, the images of pursuit and capture presented in "The Wild Woman's Lullaby" are repeated from the male perspective. The muse, symbolically associated with the moon, is a creature of the night, and Kan-il-lak, associated with "the man-strength of sun-light" (24), pursues her through the night and encounters her at dawn; thus the courtship-marriage ritual is translated back into the context of gender-

coded artistic creativity. The symbolism around the muse figure expands in the later 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 to the upper realms of the imagination. The climax of his poetic experience is articulated in "A Prayer of Kan-il-lak" (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's significant that Skinner images the ultimate imaginative experience as a confrontation between male poet and male god, for 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 masculine self-assurance. "Indian Spring" is perhaps the most remarkable example of the way 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 splendour of their fusion, I the paean of their
> hope!
> Oh, I on the thighs of God, as the leaf on the willow!
> (59-60)

As Gilbert and Gubar observed, "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" (1979 17). 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. It is the transcendental signifier that integrates the holy trinity of masculinity, divinity, and literary authority. 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 phallic 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, a portrait constructed along the lines of the stereotypical Old Maid. The poem is a vindictive attack by the speaker, Kot'-'e'-o, on the three young female companions who accompany her on a berry-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 mate:

> 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!) (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. (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 —
Na — 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! ah-k-k-k!
Ah-k-k-k! oi-eek! O-i-eek-ow-ow-oo-yah-yah-h-h-h! (46)

Kot'-e-'o's monologue is intended as a comic piece. More interesting than the humour, however, are the contradictions and the ambivalence on Skinner's part in presenting so unsympathetically a character who so clearly embodies the conflict experienced by women who, like Skinner herself, 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 an object of derision rather than sympathy. Yet there seems to be an unconscious attempt by Skinner to convey some of the fears and frustrations that plague this enraged social outcast.

"The Jealous One at Berry-Picking" may have been inspired by the Tsimshian legend of Gunachnishemgad, translated by Franz Boas and published in 1912. The occasion of the legend is a berry-picking expedition. It features a haughty "princess" (Boas's term), a basket of berries which is repeatedly spilled down a hillside, and several female companions who desert the princess

in the darkening woods. During the course of the tale, the princess's excessive pride is broken. She goes on to earn the respect of the tribe and is rewarded with a noble husband. Through a series of trials that 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 (Boas and Swanton 147-93).

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 is clearly not the kind of attention she seeks:

> O Maidens —
> O Whalaka, Udz, Aidzumka!
> Harken 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!) (49-50)

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 flitter-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. (39)

This opening section establishes Kot'-e'-o as a self-conscious poet/interpreter of nature. In keeping with the definition of the aboriginal poet as listener who hears Mother Earth's whispers and hears the leaves "clap their hands" (*SCD* xi), 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 depicted in the opening sequence, 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 oblique allusion to sexual violence suggests that rage and a desire for retaliation may also be present here, for it's not men but maidens who are performing this violent act.

Not only does Kot'-e'-o's special talent for hearing nature's voice lend legitimacy to her claim to poethood, 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. . . . (40)

Unlike the male poet Kan-il-lak, who limits his repertoire to dialogues with his muse, his (male) maker, and the landscape, Kot'-e'-o assumes the official task of Poet Laureate of the community, the task of interpreting 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 masculine sun over a feminine 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's 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, Kot'-e'-o introduces 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. (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. However slippery this poem's relationship to authentic North West Coast legend, pride and fear in equal amounts are well-documented daughterly feelings for the mother in patriarchal culture.

The Haida woman is one of a pair of frightening images that 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.* (46)

The "Woods-ghost," armed with "the long hissing serpent," would seem to signify male sexual power. The conflation of this figure with the Haida woman, as the italicized line at the end of the verse suggests, makes her even more fearsome and powerful. Indeed, by meting out Kot'-e'-o's well-deserved punishment, this awesome phallic mother becomes the true hero of the poem.[4]

The sequence that stands in startling contrast to the clusters of monologues I have discussed thus far is the largest group of poems in *Songs of the Coast Dwellers.* The focus in this sequence is on community, rather than individuals, and features none of the sadistic sexual conflict that informs the earlier sequences. These twelve loosely related pieces depict the changing of the seasons and are primarily variations on the theme of humankind's relationship to nonhuman nature. While Skinner's irritating penchant for elaborate allegory seems somewhat more under control here, her desire to present a positive communitarian alternative to patriarchal individualism, with its inherent gender conflict, is undermined by her tendency to sentimentalize. Although we view it through the mist of this sentiment, the communal setting does provide a better context for understanding Skinner's preoccupation with sexuality.

In this sequence, the emphasis shifts from the sexual act itself to fertility. Given that at least part of Skinner's continuing interest in aboriginal culture throughout her adult life was an attempt to make sense of her childhood experience and to communicate her knowledge of aboriginal culture to her white readership, it seems reasonable to assume that her emphasis on fertility is a reflection of her childhood observations. As her histories of the North West Coast and the fur-trade suggest, she had an interest in the economic and political changes wrought by contact with Europeans. One of the most important social transformations involved a shift in the status of aboriginal women within their communities. Ethnographer Nancy Bonvillain explains these changes:

> According to numerous accounts through the nineteenth century, women sometimes prostituted themselves voluntarily; in other cases, their sexual services were exploited by male relatives. Not only was women's personal degradation involved in this business, but venereal disease evidently spread rapidly and caused many illnesses and deaths. Population decline among Pacific peoples resulted directly from deaths from syphillis and also from frequent cases of infertility among survivors. . . . Swift decreases in population, additionally caused by widespread disastrous epidemics of smallpox in the late nineteenth century, led to a marked emphasis on women's procreative roles to ensure community survival. This responsibility can be viewed as both positive and negative. It clearly recognized women's vital contribution to their lineages, but it also increased physical and social burdens for mothers. (Bonvillain 102)

These were the conditions that obtained during Skinner's youthful tenure among the chiefdoms of the North West Coast during the late nineteenth century. She could not have avoided noting the centrality of fertility in the survival of aboriginal community. In the imaginary community of *Songs of the Coast Dwellers*, fertility and spirituality are intimately linked. Nature in this particular sequence is alive with spirits — deities who operate in

the lives of community members and preside over daily rituals, especially those involving fertility. Some of these spiritual entities bear Nootka names, suggesting that the inspiration for this sequence may have come partly from Nootka legend. However, as the sequence moves toward conclusion, it becomes clear that poetic licence still takes precedence over faithful depiction of any actual aboriginal community of Skinner's acquaintance, Nootka or otherwise.

The sequence starts out as a kind of utopian vision that partly echoes the female "design of life and society" expressed in "Cheating at Solitaire." But this poetic attempt at utopia is not nearly as radical as the proposal Skinner makes in her essay, for it moves toward an equalization rather than a reversal of power between the sexes. In contrast to the opening sequence in the volume with its articulation of the unjust realities of life in a male dominated culture, "Song of the Four Mornings" presents an alternative way of being for both sexes. The 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 so central to women's lives. In its idealistic presentation of those rituals, the poem can be seen as the poet's attempt to transcend the bitter realities of female existence: it is Skinner's attempt, as poet in her own right, to reach "the realm of imagination above the actualities of experience."

The sequence follows a pantheon of deities 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 community as a whole; even some of the spirits take turns at narrating events. Male and female in this sequence do not fall into Skinner's more typical active/passive, aggressor/victim pattern of sexual union. Indeed, it's the women who initiate sexual encounter. At the dawn of summer they descend 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 a redundant parenthetical statement, making it doubly clear just who is in control of this event. The women, not the men, make the first response to the call of Eros and head for the forest. From there, *they* — italicized — 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"; however, sexual union is achieved with a minimum of pain and tears.

Skinner's vision of community was almost certainly inspired by the social practice of North West Coast aboriginal peoples in which women not only have a voice but also publicly recognized roles as distributors of resources in their communities (Bonvillain 99). Indeed, "Autumn Dawn" idealizes this aspect of Native 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: the spirit Kunae receives thanks for the raw materials of game, fish, and fruit, but gratitude for the finished products accrues to women. Following a long catalogue of the goods and services they provide, the women 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. . . ." (54-55)

Significantly, Skinner cannot sustain her gender-balanced vision. Sons are still indulged and daughters despised — a notion not at

all in keeping with the expressed preferences among many North West Coast cultures for the birth of daughters in recognition of women's responsibility for procreation and continuity of matrilineages (Bonvillain 99). But at least, unlike the isolated female speakers of earlier sequences whose indifferent mates can neither hear nor understand them, these women evoke the respect of their attentive menfolk.

Although "the men answer not" the questions posed by the women, the light of understanding gleams in their eyes. However, in keeping with Skinner's habit of capitulation to patriarchal norms, she seems intent upon us knowing the precise nature and divine sanctification of the power differential between men and women in this well-ordered social structure:

> 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-tink, 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. (55-6)

It's not just the silliness of her tinking and tonking that betrays Skinner's uncertain grip on poetic power. As elsewhere in her work, the kind of Victorian sentimentalism that eventually undermined maternal feminism takes over here. The best that can

be said of this vision is that while the image of women as utterly selfless mates and the power behind the throne hardly qualifies as a liberating vision from today's perspective, it's a considerable improvement over the oppressive gender arrangements represented elsewhere in the volume. Typically, Skinner uses the typographical devices of italics and dashes to drive home her point about who follows whom, who possesses whom, and which authorities legitimate this hierarchical arrangement. It would seem that her attempt as a poet to reach "the realm of imagination above the actualities of experience" has resulted in neither an egalitarian alternative to brutal patriarchal rule, nor a fulfilment of her prophecy of women's ultimate control over the entire "design and life of society." Patriarchy and aboriginal alternatives to it just don't seem to come together for her in any entirely satisfactory way. Once again, we are left with a sense of something not quite completed, a sense of desire unfulfilled.

Reflections on a Postcolonial Critical Paradigm

Four years after her death in 1939, A.J.M. Smith repatriated Skinner by including some of her poems in his *Book of Canadian Poetry* (1943). Interestingly, he placed them in the section devoted to translations of authentic Indian verse, despite Skinner's insistence in her Foreword that *"Songs of the Coast Dwellers* are not translations nor adaptations of Indian poems. . ." (*SCD* viii). Why Smith would choose to ignore this disclaimer will never be known, but whatever his motivation, the dislocation between his labelling and the internal evidence of the poetry almost certainly inspired the vagueness in Monroe Beattie's description of Skinner's work in the early sixties. Writing in *Literary History of Canada*, Beattie called *Songs of the Coast Dwellers* "free-verse adaptations of west coast Indian songs" that "recreate the verbal and emotional effects of primitive poetry" and hence are of "literary as well as anthropological" interest (237-8). Not surprisingly, this rather nondescript description inspired neither literary critics nor anthropologists to follow up on Beattie's invitation to demonstrate some interest in them.

Smith was, of course, not alone in making careless assumptions about the work of literary women. Nor has such carelessness disappeared from the critical enterprise, despite the last thirty years of feminist attempts to correct the record. Indeed, the postmodernization of criticism in some ways echoes the remasculinization of literature that occurred with the onset of modernism.[5] The recovery of work by women lost to literary history has become even more complicated, for it's no longer merely a matter of correcting the male bias of modernism; feminist critics must also struggle against new critical frameworks which are often more resistant to feminist revision than older ones. Thus, throughout this essay I have implicitly challenged the male bias that informs the critical view of aboriginal imagery in texts by white writers, a critical view which has come to dominate postcolonial literary studies in Canada. Postcolonial literary theory, grounded as it is in the work of the fathers of postmodernism and post-structuralism, often recycles the phallocentrism of the tradition against which it claims to rebel. As exemplified in the work of Terry Goldie, this view is inadequate as a framework for disclosing the methods and motives of white women writers who contributed to the literary construction of what Goldie calls "the indigene." In *Fear and Temptation: The Image of the Indigene in Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand Literatures* (1989), Goldie employs Edward Said's idea of "standard commodities" and organizes his reading around five commodities "which appear to be standard in the 'economy' created by the semiotic field of the indigene": sex, violence, orality, mysticism, and the prehistoric. Goldie's work has been cited by many postcolonial scholars working in the field of Canadian aboriginal studies. As categories of analysis, these commodities are indeed useful in that they correspond to assumptions that underpin primitivist discourse — which is, of course, Said's reason for having theorized them in the first place. But as my reading of Skinner's work implies and Nancy Miller's account of the female plot suggests, primitivism is not the only ideology operating in female-authored texts.

In my subjective experience of it, Goldie's model has a way of reducing all the texts he considers to the level of sameness and leads too easily to the conclusion that "if you've read one, you've read 'em all." The reintroduction of biographical and

historical detail, while threatening the purity of postmodernist discourse analysis, is still the best way I know of opening up the possibility of uniqueness and restoring informed creativity to the act of reading texts produced under conditions significantly different from, but not entirely alien to our own. No two poets — indeed, no two persons — internalize cultural ideology in the same way, and if we are to understand why the view of women as coextensive with nonhuman nature seems to survive all our sophisticated theorizing to the contrary, we need to resist the impulse to reduce large groups of texts to a kind of undifferentiated gender relativism.

Although Goldie passed over Skinner's work in his otherwise exhaustive study, her work is nevertheless a conspicuous illustration of the commodities he cites, most especially the commodities of sex and violence. However, as my reading of her work suggests, it's not sex and violence in the manner so neatly defined by Goldie as "poles of attraction and repulsion, temptation by the dusky maiden and fear of the demonic violence of the fiendish warrior" (15). Rather, in Skinner's exploitation of these commodities in feminine terms rather than the conventionally masculine ones which Goldie applies to the works he studies, her poetry seriously challenges many of the critical generalizations which have come to shape our postcolonial view of white representations of North American aboriginal cultures and peoples.

Goldie's study, as he explains it,

> ...emphasizes texts rather than authors, partly as a response to the philosophical assumption explored by Foucault in "What is an Author?" (1979) that defining a text by its author limits a reader's understanding of the complexity of discourse, but even more as a response engendered by the specific objects examined here. The semiotic field of the indigene is so circumscribed that the obvious intentions of some authors to write in support of the indigene or to create "realistic" images are even less likely to be fulfilled than other attempts to liberate textual representation. (192)

But what, it needs to be asked, is responsible for such a circumscribed semiotic field? The texts or the reader? Whatever the authors' intentions, a semiotic field defined exclusively by the commodities of orality, mysticism, sex, violence, and the prehistoric is Goldie's choice of a theoretical framework for reading their texts — a framework every bit as limiting as "defining a text by its author." Indeed, this framework limits the degree of complexity texts are permitted to deliver. Virtually any text featuring aboriginal imagery — including texts by aboriginal writers — can be reduced to these commodities simply by ignoring the possibility that there are other factors in play, including factors external to the text. Thus, having *begun* his study by limiting expectations of the texts he intends to explore, Goldie can only *end* it with this tautology: "A central factor in all the literature on the indigene is that his or her role is invariably that of the indigene." Citing contemporary Canadian fiction as exemplar, he continues: "There are novels in which a woman is not Woman . . . but there are none in which an Indian is not INDIAN . . ." (215). But this analogy does not really work, for if readers were to confine their reading of images of women in novels to five commodities which, *to them*, appeared to be standard in the economy created by the semiotic field of Woman, they would almost certainly find no "novels in which a woman is not Woman."

I do not wish entirely to demonize Goldie, for by examining such a remarkably wide range of white authored texts, from the early narratives of discovery through the narrative poetry of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to contemporary fiction, he officially staked out the territory for Canadian postcolonial literary studies. My quarrel with Goldie is from the perspective of women's studies. The central contradiction in his work is, of course, that he has no problem factoring in the whiteness of the authors he reads: indeed, most of his readings of texts are dependent upon that factor. His Foucauldian escape hatch is reserved for questions of authorial gender: without it, his theory would crumble under the weight of its own masculinism. He was heavily influenced by the conflicted theoretical debates of the eighties, debates which transformed feminist literary studies in ways that were not always positive: social action was displaced by privatized reading; gender difference

was discredited as essentialist; the deconstruction and disappearance of Western man was extended — often by feminist critics themselves — to include the disappearance of women; readings by women lost some of their authority to the act of reading "like a woman"; and the social oppression of women was reduced to a linguistic phallocentrism in which women writers could now be seen to participate equally with men. Consequently, within postcolonial literary studies, white women writers were no longer seen to be writing as women but rather, as whites.

In this climate of gender scepticism, Goldie was free to ignore the gender of the white women writers whose work he scrutinized. He could now submit it equally with male authored texts to his two explicitly phallocentric metaphors of "*penetration* (the forcible imposition of the dominator and his discursive system within the dominated space) and *appropriation* (the consumption enforced by the dominator of what belongs to the dominated)" (15). Focused exclusively on the text as an autonomous entity that transcends the material conditions of its production, Goldie's work and subsequent studies that rely heavily upon it have led to two reductive notions: that cultural appropriation is a sufficient explanation for white writing that incorporates aboriginal imagery and that cultural appropriation in men's and women's writing is virtually identical. These assumptions originate with the motives Goldie attributes to white authors:

> The importance of the alien within cannot be overstated. In their need to become "native," to belong here, whites in Canada, New Zealand, and Australia have adopted a process which I have termed "indigenization." A peculiar word, it suggests the impossible necessity of becoming indigenous. For many writers, the only chance for indigenization seemed to be through writing about the humans who are truly indigenous, the Indians, Inuit, Maori, and Aborigines. (Goldie 13)

This is a quintessentially white male dilemma. As Simone de Beauvoir made so abundantly clear in *The Second Sex*, Western man has spent the better part of two millennia perfecting a

definition of himself as *transcendent* and thus indigenous to no particular place (except perhaps the kingdom of god), a definition that differentiated him from woman, who remained mired in *immanence* and thus the equivalent of virtually all other biologically reproductive species indigenous to planet Earth. Suddenly to imply — however subtly — that "the impossible necessity of becoming indigenous" is an experience shared equally by men and women is to ignore the degree to which this ideology has been internalized in Western consciousness and the possibility that men and women internalize it differently. De Beauvoir's own resentment of female biology is an illustration of how women — often unhappily — resigned themselves to Woman's Place among the denizens of the fields and forests. If the "importance of the alien within cannot be overstated," then it is not an overstatement to emphasize that centuries before the White Man's encounter with the indigenous peoples of the New World, the overwhelming evidence for a repressed "alien within" was the misogyny at the heart of this patriarchal ideology. Woman, defined at least as far back as Aristotle as "non-man, defective man, assigned a chiefly negative value in relation to the male first principle," is the fundamental Other upon which all other Others can be seen to be modelled. She was — and still is — an Other who "stands as a sign of something in man himself which he needs to repress, expel beyond his own being, relegate to a securely alien region beyond his own definitive limits" (Eagleton 132-3). Thus it's not so much a question of the degree to which women share in men's desire for indigenization but, more important, of acknowledging that the desire itself is intrinsic to the definition of masculinity. At best, women stand in a paradoxical relationship to this desire: insofar as women have been encouraged to deny their own experience and embrace male experience as human experience, they share in the desire for indigenization. Yet women are always already indigenized by virtue of an internalized definition of themselves as coextensive with nature. In constructing woman as "immanent" and man as "transcendent" vis-à-vis nonhuman nature, man himself prepared the ground for his own sense of alienation and the concomitant desire for indigenization and, to a significant extent, excluded women from what Goldie calls its "impossible necessity."

Undoubtedly literature by white women overlaps with that of men, for the ideology of primitivism was part of the mental furniture of the vast majority of people of European descent regardless of gender: *Songs of the Coast Dwellers* offers ample evidence of that overlap. But as I am arguing here, primitivism is processed differently in women than it is in men because of the way in which patriarchal discourse intersects with it. As theorized by Goldie, the semiotic field of the indigene, like Northrop Frye's "deep terror" theory of Canadian literature, ignores that difference, thus necessitating Goldie's imposition of a simplistic binary construction on women's writing in order to make it fit with that of men. Quoting from Sander Gilman's study of images of racialized female sexuality in the nineteenth-century male imagination, Goldie defines sex and gender in binary terms as "poles of attraction and repulsion, temptation by the dusky maiden and fear of the demonic violence of the fiendish warrior.

> Often both are found in the same work . . . in which the warrior constantly attacks, but the maiden is an agent to avoid that attack. They are emotional signs, semiotic embodiments of primal responses. Could one create a more appropriate signifier for fear than the treacherous redskin? He incorporates, in generous quantities, the terror of the impassioned, uncontrolled spirit of evil. He is strangely joined by the Indian maiden, who tempts the being chained by civilization towards the liberation represented by free and open sexuality, not the realm of untamed evil but of unrestrained joy. "The 'bad' Other becomes the negative stereotype; the 'good' Other becomes the positive stereotype. The former is that which we fear to become; the latter, that which we fear we cannot achieve." Added to this is the alien's fear of the "redskin" as hostile wilderness, the new, threatening land, and the arrivant's attraction to the maiden as restorative pastoral, this new, available land. (Goldie 15-16)

Goldie owes as much to Frye as he does to Gilman. Like Frye's construction, Goldie's features a "hostile wilderness" and a "threatening land." Goldie takes it one step further, however, in

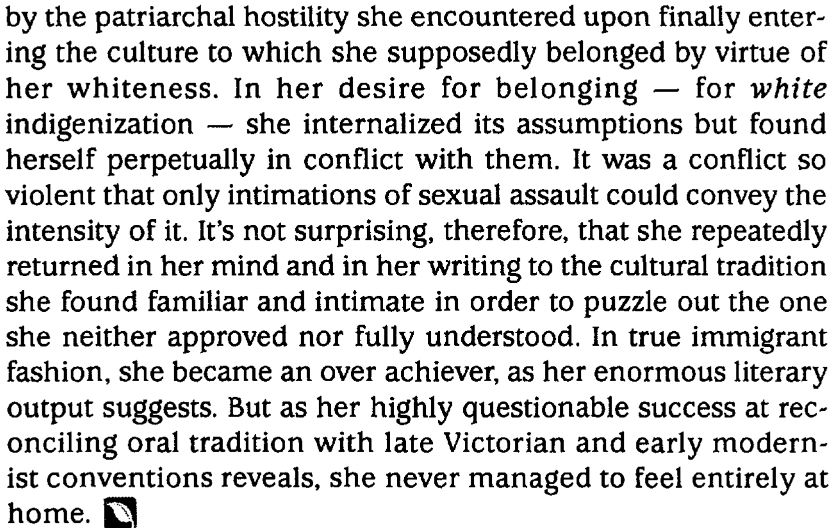
his suggestion that this landscape is nevertheless attractive but, like the "Indian maiden," attractive only by virtue of its availability — its "takeability." In other words, the subjectivity of the writer implied in Goldie's framework is both male and heterosexual. Indeed, this construction cannot accommodate the subjectivity of the female writer. For the male writer, the "Indian maiden" may well signify the "unrestrained joy" of "free and open sexuality" as opposed to the "demonic violence of the fiendish warrior," but does it make sense to pursue these significations in writing by women? Is the Indian maiden such an unambiguous turn-on for women? Do women writers project onto the warrior a demonic and fiendish violence they repress as the "alien other" in themselves? For women writers, do sex and violence fall so neatly and conveniently into mutually exclusive but mutually enhancing binary opposite categories? In short, to what extent can Goldie's white male fantasy of the indigene illuminate aboriginal imagery in writing by white women? Goldie asks the question, "Could one create a more appropriate signifier for fear than the treacherous redskin?" Constance Lindsay Skinner's answer might well be a resounding *Yes*. For as I read it, her work can easily lead to the conclusion that just as there is literature in which a woman is not Woman, so too are there texts in which an aboriginal figure is not the Indigene.

Perhaps the most obvious inadequacy in Goldie's work relates to the question of community. In writing by women, what he sees as the desire for indigenization may well be a desire for a different kind of community. At any given time between the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution — from the era of discovery to the era of mass emigration — social conditions in Europe were appalling because, as Ronald Wright has noted in his *Stolen Continents*, the "achievements of Europe were technological, not social" (12). While many arriving Europeans may have been intent upon using their superior technologies to possess and exploit the New World, others were interested in studying aboriginal cultures for their own sake as well as for possible clues to Europe's own social origins, and even as sources of inspiration for a new social vision. It's true that much of this kind of study helped to buttress primitivist ideology, but some of it also influenced Western movements for social justice and equality. As Paula Gunn Allen has argued, both socialism and feminism owe aspects of their thought to "ideas that pervade American Indian political thought and action":

> Ethnographer Lewis Henry Morgan wrote an account of Iroquoian matriarchal culture, published in 1877, that heavily influenced Marx and the development of communism, particularly lending it the idea of the liberation of women from patriarchal dominance. The early socialists in Europe, especially in Russia, saw women's liberation as a central aspect of the socialist revolution. . . . [It was through] the work of Morgan and the writings of Marx and Engels . . . that the age-old gynarchical systems of egalitarian government found their way into contemporary feminist theory. (Allen 1986 220)

Allen may be overstating the case, given the multiplicity of influences on socialist and feminist theory with respect to ideas about political and social equality, but her point is well taken. Morgan and his successors influenced thinking on important social reform issues of the early twentieth century, issues that found their way into early modernist literature. One of the issues that preoccupied many women was the tension between individualism and communalism: it was a theme that may be traced in many of the female-authored works that flooded the popular literary marketplace in North America. Skinner's *Songs of the Coast Dwellers* was certainly among them.

If the poetry of Constance Lindsay Skinner tells us anything, it's that an aboriginal figure in white-authored writing may not always be so unambiguously Indian, and that white women's motives for cultural appropriation of aboriginal imagery may be more complex than male-biased theories of the Other are capable of disclosing. There is no question that Skinner employed many of the assumptions that underpin the ideology of primitivism to make adult sense of her childhood experience of aboriginal culture, but it also seems clear that it was not those particular assumptions which triggered her particular kind of desire for indigenization. Indeed, her struggle in *Songs of the Coast Dwellers* suggests that her desire for indigenization had much more to do with her troubled arrival in white culture as a young adult than it did with her departure from the aboriginal environment of her youth. Affectionately embraced by the people among whom she was raised, she was wounded and enraged


by the patriarchal hostility she encountered upon finally entering the culture to which she supposedly belonged by virtue of her whiteness. In her desire for belonging — for *white* indigenization — she internalized its assumptions but found herself perpetually in conflict with them. It was a conflict so violent that only intimations of sexual assault could convey the intensity of it. It's not surprising, therefore, that she repeatedly returned in her mind and in her writing to the cultural tradition she found familiar and intimate in order to puzzle out the one she neither approved nor fully understood. In true immigrant fashion, she became an over achiever, as her enormous literary output suggests. But as her highly questionable success at reconciling oral tradition with late Victorian and early modernist conventions reveals, she never managed to feel entirely at home.

Ecological Consciousness

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4

The Task of Poetic Mediation: Revisiting Dorothy Livesay's Early Poetry

> Words have
> no morality
> exist in innocence
>
> handled well
> can perform miracles
> gently massaging the heart
>
> yet
> like snowballs
> secretly laden with ice
> can strike the eye
> blind
>
> "Ars Poetica"
> 4 January 1977
> (Livesay Papers, Box 83, Folder 13)

The death of Dorothy Livesay in December of 1996, just short of her ninetieth birthday, brought to a close one of the longest and most remarkable careers in the literary history of Canada. Her life bridged the decades between two waves of political feminism as well as the onset of two literary movements, modernism and postmodernism. Primarily a poet, Livesay was also a journalist, a biographer, a fiction writer, a literary critic and scholar. As a scholar, her most important contribution was her unearthing of Isabella Valancy Crawford's unpublished manuscript, *Hugh and Ion*.[1] Livesay made this discovery during the course of a lengthy investigation into Crawford's life and work. The materials from this project — research notes, drafts of essays, copies of articles, published and

unpublished — fill four boxes in the Livesay collection in the archives at the University of Manitoba. Interestingly, the Crawford Livesay found is very much like Livesay herself. Love has been a perennial and overriding concern for Livesay as a poet, and her research reconfirmed this to be true of Crawford as well. "[O]ther matters that concerned her: poverty in a world of wealth; destruction of the natural environment; continual wars & the threat of mankind's self-destruction," notes Livesay in an untitled, undated essay (Box 102 Folder 9). These are, of course, high on the list of Livesay's own poetic concerns.

It's hardly surprising that Livesay went looking for Crawford and found herself. Livesay's research journey was in many ways a return to her literary roots. She was fourteen years old when her mother, poet Florence Randall Livesay, added to her impressive collection of books by Canadian poets a copy of the newly published *Selected Poems of Isabella Valancy Crawford* (1923), edited by Katherine Hale. The young Dorothy "loved it."[2] Fifty years later, in her essay on "the factual and the literary background of Isabella Valancy Crawford," Livesay compared *Malcolm's Katie* to *Hugh and Ion*, concluding that

> ...the immigrant's axe becomes inextricably linked with the native canoe. Only by learning the arts of the Indian can the European exist. He must learn how to use the canoe, how to hunt and fish in the wilderness . . . but he and the native are hampered by the evils the White Man brings with him — the evils of the class structure, poverty versus wealth, overcrowding, disease and alcohol. The only way he can purge himself of these is to seek the forest wilderness and maintain its natural ecology. (Livesay *JCF* 1973 167)

The Indigene was not an image Livesay used in her own poetry. She did not have the kind of direct experience of indigenous culture that Crawford probably had during her extended visits to the summer home of Catherine Parr Traill near the Stony Lake Reserve in Peterborough County (Livesay 1973 163-164). Raised in urban environments, Livesay always experienced what she called "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" (*Collected Poems* v). What Livesay did have was a keen appreciation of the Indigene's power as a signifier of mediation between nonhuman nature and the White Man — a signifier of the passion for unification and regeneration in Crawford's work. Impressed since adolescence by this theme of mediation, Livesay had to work it out in her own way.

The first phase of Dorothy Livesay's career — the years in which she published *Green Pitcher* (1928) and *Signpost* (1932) — is generally considered her apprenticeship period. These early works, which helped to established Canadian modernism, are thought to have been prepara tion for her more important poetry of the sixties and seventies. While this view is undoubtedly true to a large extent, it carries with it an implicit devaluation of her first poems. But the poems contained in these volumes, along with those from the same period published for the first time in Livesay's *Collected Poems* (1972), are not just intensely personal adolescent outpourings: they are also a working out of a complex and well-integrated world view that remained at the heart of Livesay's poetic vision to the end.[3] In these poems Livesay creates a special role for the woman poet — a role not limited to the articulation of female experience but expanded to include the task of mediating the conflict between culture and nature. In her role as poet-mediator, Livesay articulates an alternative to the patriarchal world view and its principle of opposition between male consciousness and the world which man dominates and perceives as "other."

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," where 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. (*Collected Poems* 53)

Here, several decades before the onset of the ecological crisis in the sixties, 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 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 Lampmans nor the Carmans, have done anything to halt the attack on nature; the roar of cities has replaced their voices just as effectively as it has the pioneer's. Little wonder Livesay rejects the Romantic nature conventions in which they worked and takes up instead the crucial task of mediation.

Poetic mediation as a uniquely female role can be better understood in terms of anthropologist Sherry Ortner's "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" — an early classic of modern feminist scholarship — 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" (69). 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 observed 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 "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 women, is a kind of processing plant in the service of culture. Women's special abilities — their biological function of regeneration and the socially conditioned skills, such as mothering and cooking, which are related to that function — make their task as synthesizers and converters 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.

In a world that 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 role of poet-mediator is entirely in keeping with Livesay's world view. What the Romantic nature poets 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. Frank Davey has labelled this vision "Heraclitean" because of Livesay's emphasis on "the sufficiency of the physical universe" (1974 168). 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, "philosophies / Have never darkened me. / I live in what I feel and hear / And see" (*Collected Poems* 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.

The tasks of poetic mediation are 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 maintains. "Any biological differences affect one's point of view" (Lever 50). But despite their differing points of view, in Livesay's vision, male and female are not naturally opposed; as she has said: "I feel that men and women are complementary; they really do need each other"

(Barber 15). 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 a woman's sexual 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 she attempts to break down the hierarchical relationship between language, a product of human culture, and that which language is made to appropriate — namely nonhuman nature. The human tendency to appropriate nature by means of language is addressed by Margaret Homans in her study of women poets and the Romantic tradition: "Hierarchy or relativity in language is fundamentally the same as propriation in language, because both fulfil the need for . . . the primary to posit a secondary. . . . [The] use of nature as the ground for human meaning is also propriative . . . because it subjects nature to human usage and denies its separate identity" (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 Homans writes, "is often cited as the extreme case of Dickinson's wariness about human efforts to possess nature" (189).[4] 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. (*CP* 36)

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.” This poem challenges what Homans calls “the mistaken belief that nature participates in the human community of understanding” (189).

Similarly, in Livesay's “‘Haunted House,’” nature is a stranger. In addition to affirming nature's autonomy, this estrangement also emphasizes the persistent 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. (*Signpost* 30)

Like Dickinson, Livesay seems to suggest that 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 possess nature; we may invade it and occupy it but this does not mean that we know it on its own terms. 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.

Livesay performs her first task by demonstrating that nature is not subject to definitions imposed upon it by human language. As many of her poems assert, we may see and hear the other species in nature, both plant and animal, but we cannot possess them by naming them. Yet if a poet wants to write a poem about nature's inaccessibility to poetic language 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" (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. (*Green Pitcher* 5)

Singing silence is an image which appears repeatedly in Livesay's poetry. 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.

"I Saw My Thought" is another poem in which nature eludes language:

> 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. (*Signpost* 33)

The direct equivalent of a thought is a hawk. Yet the hawk's elusiveness immediately exposes this direct equation of nature/bird and human thought as a fiction, for "words" are a mere "shadow" 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. The hawk disappears into the heavens; the poem is only its 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.[5]

Traditionally, poetry is an art that 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.
(*Collected Poems* 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 "I Saw My Thought," 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 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 "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 a empty day. (*Signpost* 51)

The farmer is as inaccessible to the poet's art as the poppy. While both flower and farmer cast their shadows 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.[6]

The disappearance of the human figure in "Fable" demonstrates that Livesay's understanding of the dislocation between words and their referents is not limited to language's relation to nonhuman nature. However, despite her realization that human beings are as elusive to language as nature is, she exploits language's fictiveness as a device for maintaining the balance between her identification with nonhuman nature on the one hand and with humanity on the other.[7] 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,[8] 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 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. 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 that 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. (*Signpost* 19)

The habit of "microscopic" scrutiny which the speaker ascribes to the lover she addresses is suggestive of the way 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, 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 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 its conditions of worthiness. The division of women into hierarchies of worthiness is a fact of female existence in patriarchy.

Livesay uses the tree as a personal and specifically female symbol in many of her poems.[9] 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. (Lever 49)

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.[10] 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.[11] 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 sometimes suggests 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.[12]

"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? (*Signpost* 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 expresses the conflict between woman and man. Robbed of power and denied Adam's privilege of naming, 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 nature-culture conflict. 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.

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 nature-culture conflict. The sentiment expressed in "'Haunted House,'" where culture is portrayed as fleeting and nature as the constant, seems naïve 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.
(*Collected Poems* 19)

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 which always indicates that nature is here on its own terms rather than the poet's. The word "forgetting" is significant, for to lose one's memory is to lose one's identity. In "forgetting that / Man has kinship" with nature, culture has in effect erased its own identity.

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.[13] In keeping with Livesay's position at the crossroads of culture and nature, "Threshold" presents the image of a woman as 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.
(*Signpost* 27)

The potential threat of domestic isolation and entrapment prompts this speaker 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 that 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.[14]

The relationship between house and nature in "Green Rain" is an expression of complementarity rather than opposition between culture and nature:

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.
(*Signpost* 32)

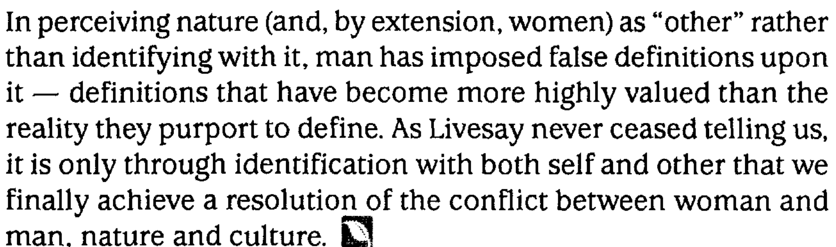
Getting in touch with yourself again after a disappointing love affair is a healing process in which inner conflict is resolved. In this particular case, the process also involves the poet's getting in touch through memory with her matrilineal heritage and disengaging herself from unhappy memories of 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. But more important, 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 grand-

mother" (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.

Although Dorothy Livesay's poetry went through several phases over the course of her long and distinguished career, she never really gave up her role as poet-mediator. Her poetry of the 1930s and early 1940s is in many ways a reformulation of her original vision in socialist terms. Similarly, her African poems of the late 1950s and sixties derive much of their power from the poet's appreciation of the close relationship between nature and culture which she perceived in Zambian society. With the onset of the Women's Movement in the late sixties, Livesay's concern with the ideology inherent in existing language intensified. As suggested by the following lines from "Winter Ascending," published in the early eighties, Livesay became more committed than ever to alerting us to the folly of diminishing the environment that nurtures and sustains us:

> 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?
> ("Winter Ascending" ca. 1981)


In perceiving nature (and, by extension, women) as "other" rather than identifying with it, man has imposed false definitions upon it — definitions that have become more highly valued than the reality they purport to define. As Livesay never ceased telling us, it is only through identification with both self and other that we finally achieve a resolution of the conflict between woman and man, nature and culture.

5

The Ecological Vision of Isabella Valancy Crawford: A Reading of *Malcolm's Katie*

The literary reputation of Isabella Valancy Crawford has undergone profound transformation over the years since the onset of literary nationalism and feminism in the seventies. Once labelled "a naive but original genius who wasted her talent writing polite album verses," Crawford has now become, in the words of Robert Alan Burns, "a poet of wide-ranging intellectual interests and remarkable accomplishment" (24-25). Critical opinion of that accomplishment has been fought largely on the battleground of her most complex poem, of which D.M.R. Bentley writes: "No long poem from nineteenth-century Canada has been so much discussed as Isabella Valancy Crawford's *Malcolm's Katie: A Love Story* (1884), and none has been surrounded by so much critical controversy. . . . *Malcolm's Katie* has not dwelt among the untrodden ways of Canadian literature but, on the contrary, has achieved through the praise, blame and scrutiny of critics and scholars a central place in the canon of nineteenth-century Canadian poetry" (1987 xi). The appearance of Bentley's scholarly edition of the poem in 1987 invites a further phase of critical interest, particularly from feminist readers, for Bentley has prefaced the volume with a reading of the poem that draws attention to feminist concerns.

Much of the critical controversy Bentley refers to has been provoked by the internal contradictions in *Malcolm's Katie*, contradictions which make a tricky business of determining the consistency of Crawford's vision. But many of those

contradictions may be attributed to the era in which the poem was written, an era characterized by intense debate about the emergence of women as social reformers and cultural critics. This paper is an attempt to set *Malcolm's Katie* within that particular historical context. But since my reading of the poem is necessarily mediated by my own historically conditioned frames of meaning and perception as a late twentieth-century feminist, I would like to begin by constructing a framework for interpreting the poem in terms of my deep concern for the future of our planet. Like many other feminist critics, I read women's texts as a rich source of alternatives to the dominant modes of perception — time-honoured habits of thought which continue to jeopardize that future.

One of the things that has always intrigued me about *Malcolm's Katie* is that it contains so many models of the relationship between humankind and nature. There are five such models, each of which is identified with one of the story's characters. Very briefly, these models are: the *commercial* model, represented by Malcolm, in which nature is ruthlessly and thoroughly subdued by man and turned into a profit-making enterprise; the *military* model, represented by Max, armed with his axe and engaged in guerilla warfare with the landscape; the Darwinian, or *scientific*, model, represented by Alfred, in which nature is hostile and triumphantly destructive to man and the culture he creates; the *New Edenic* model, represented by Katie, in which nature and culture are reconciled and exist in harmony; and, finally, the most complex model of all, the one delivered to us by the narrator, in which the boundary between humankind and nature seems to disappear. In this final model, which I am labelling the *ecological* model, nature is presented to us as a culture in itself, represented by a community of mythic personae strongly influenced by Canadian aboriginal traditions. This ecological model transcends conventional Romantic conceptions of man's reconciliation with nature which implies a pre-existing dualism; instead, it critiques hierarchical and dualistic ways of perceiving reality and suggests an alternative epistemology of knowledge based on equality and multiplicity.

Widely read in the discipline of philosophy, Crawford was — as many contemporary critics have demonstrated — aware of the dominant epistemologies of knowledge, epistemologies

structured on the model of a dualistic universe. Indeed, Heraclitean and Hegelian concepts have been used extensively to analyse the conflict of opposites in her work.[1] Some critics argue that Crawford reconciles herself to the Heraclitean *necessity* of conflict, while others maintain that the Hegelian *reconciliation* of conflict is central to her vision in *Malcolm's Katie*. Both arguments are sound and well supported by textual evidence; however, neither view accounts for the way the poem also threatens to subvert dualism altogether through an attempt to *decentre* the notion of conflict itself.

In her Introduction to *Romanticism and Feminism*, Anne K. Mellor writes that "the Romantic ego was both potently male, engaged in figurative battles of conquest and possession, and at the same time capable of incorporating into itself whatever attributes of the female it desires to posses" (7). As a woman and a poet working within the Romantic tradition, Crawford was in a position to experience the way Romantic nature poetry achieves the reconciliation of man and nature at the expense of women in general and women poets in particular. The paradigm of Romantic poetry images the interaction between human moods and natural phenomena as a universal marriage between the male poet and nature — a coupling which depends upon identifying nature as both otherness and female, and subjectivity as male. Within this convention, 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. This identification of men with language/culture and women with inarticulate nature is alluded to in *Malcolm's Katie*. For Katie, who is so surrounded by flower imagery that at times she seems to merge with the landscape, is also a woman of few words, while her menfolk are garrulous, often to the point of long-windedness: "words!" says Katie to Max in the opening lines of the poem, "only words! / You build them up that I may push them down" (I, 35-36).

Crawford's preoccupation with the conflict between man and nature must also be seen within the context of the early phase of nineteenth-century feminism, the period in which *Malcolm's Katie* was written. As social reformers, women activists were

critiquing industrialization, urbanization, and the abandonment of rural life, and they shared with many male reformers a "desire to re-create a cohesive, organic community bound together by an enveloping web of shared moral and social values" (Bacchi 10). *Malcolm's Katie* is clearly a celebration of that rural idyll, but it is also a utopian vision in that it reveals evidence of a desire to temper Victorian "progress," with its program of industrial and commercial expansion, through a uniquely female ethic of care and responsibility for nature. That concern is in keeping with a debate that figured prominently in the first wave of feminism, the debate over women's role as the arbiters of morality in a culture increasingly characterized by questionable marketplace ethics.[2]

The hierarchical and dualistic models of the relationship between culture and nature are those associated with the male characters. None of the three — the commercial, the military, the scientific — is the model which is established at the end of the poem. This suggests that Crawford has reservations about them, that each of the three has serious shortcomings. What they have in common is conflict between culture and nature. In the commercial and military models, nature is depicted as beaten into submission by culture, as represented by Malcolm and Max. Malcolm and his male kinsfolk are depicted as dragging the ripping beak of the plough through the knotted soil (I, 77) — a particularly violent image of rape when constructed by a woman aware of the way she is identified with nature. In Max's model, the conflict between culture and nature is depicted in homicidal terms: Max is imaged as happily slaughtering trees, the "monarchs of the forest." In both these models, culture is the oppressor while nature is the oppressed. In Alfred's Darwinian model, the hierarchy is reversed: nature is the ultimate oppressor and human culture is the oppressed. Man's initial triumph over nature is only temporary; culture may win a few battles in its conflict with nature but nature wins the war.

The New Edenic model, which eventually wins out over the other three, differs from them in that it is not characterized by conflict and hierarchy. Nature and culture are depicted as complementary rather than opposed. This notion of complementarity is effectively imaged in the final section of the poem, where the "drooping vines" flourish on the "rude walls" of Max and Katie's

humble cabin (VII, 3-4). This modest homestead scene is remarkably unlike the vision that compelled Max to construct it, a vision articulated in his Song of the Axe and characterized by "Cities and palaces" that "furnish forth the lives of kings" (IV, 44, 42).

The New Edenic vision accords with the conventional Romantic notion of the reconciliation between man and nature, for Mother Nature — and hence the feminine — must be subdued and possessed in order for it to be realized. This is in keeping with the binary mode of thought that informs Romanticism; the reconciliation of conflicting opposites is only possible where opposition exists prior to it. For as Anne Mellor notes, despite the balance implicit in the notion of complementarity, "The dualism inherent in Western thought, whether conceived in terms of the Greek opposition between techne/physis, or the Cartesian mind/body split, or the Kantian subject/object, or the Hegelian dialectic of thesis/antithesis, or . . . the difference of male/female, enforced a cultural practice that could only produce the repression and exploitation of the Other, be it the other class, the other race, the other sex" (Mellor 5). Hence, paradoxically, the New Edenic model, for all its improvement upon the models characterized by conflict and hierarchy, must sacrifice the feminine in order to realize the goals of equality and complementarity.

Nevertheless, for several reasons, I have identified Katie as central to the New Edenic vision. First, her association with the flower imagery in the poem makes her the site of reconciliation between humankind and nature. More important, as the New Eve, she is a mediator of conflict. Part of Crawford's project is to liberate women from their association with sin, death, and the amoral/immoral Eve of Genesis who created conflict between God and man, heaven and earth, transcendent and non-transcendent realms. Evidence for this project may be found in Katie's refusal to succumb to Alfred. Unlike her biblical counterpart, who cannot resist the serpent — the villain of Genesis — Katie is not even tempted by Alfred's considerable charms.[3] Creative rather than destructive, the spiritual force at work in her is love, an internalized principle, not an externalized, personalized deity. Except for one brief moment (to which I shall return), God remains in His distant heaven and Katie, his ambassador on earth, carries out His work. Katie has the power to reconcile all the

warring forces in the poem, namely, all the hostility that characterizes the male relationships. She is the still, moral centre of the poem, a kind of fixed signifier that defines all the floating signifiers that swirl around her. Hence she occupies the central position in the carefully constructed family tableau that closes the poem. There she sits, surrounded by her male entourage, Malcolm on one side with baby Alfred on his knee, Max on the other twisting a lock of her hair around his wrist.

As I have already suggested, the male-identified, conflict-laden conceptions of the culture-nature relationship are not entirely eliminated in the New Edenic model; they have been subsumed into it. This subsuming process begins in Part I of the poem where "Max begins and ends his discussion of pioneering by manifesting a certain amount of hostility to Katie's father, a self-made man who seems to him to be made of "'rock through all' and, moreover, to evince an idolatrous affection for the products of his farm."

> In Max's eyes . . . Malcolm's farm is a series of "Outspreading circles of increasing gold" in which the living (and Edenic) bounty of nature . . . has been transformed by an unloving, snobbish *homo economicus* into "ingots," "golden fleeces" and even golden calves. But in the central portions of his discussion, under pressure from Katie, Max arrives at a more charitable construal of Malcolm and, in the process, articulates his own, very positive understanding of pioneering. (Bentley 1987 xxxv)

Given that it is Katie who, with a few well-timed phrases, steers Max through his narrative on the various ways one can undertake the project of pioneering, I do not entirely share Bentley's certainty that the "positive understanding of pioneering" which Max articulates is his "very own."

"He [Malcolm] worked for all" (I, 68), says Katie reprovingly, leading Max from his initial opinion of Malcolm as *homo economicus* and into his second take on Malcolm, where Malcolm and his kinsmen become Max's own predecessors as quasi-military types doing battle with nature:

> " . . . I heard him tell
> "How the first field upon his farm was ploughed. . . .
> "O, such a battle! had we heard of serfs
> "Driven to like hot conflict with the soil,
> "Armies had march'd and navies swiftly sail'd
> "To burst their gyves. . . ." (V, 69-70, 81-84)

"Yet you said such fields / were all inglorious" (89-90), says Katie, thereby maneouvering Max into an articulation of his image of himself as a soldier of the axe and, from there, into his explanation of how he differentiates his vision from the larger, imperialistic model, which is also characterized by militarism and commercialism. From there, he finally arrives in New Eden, whose central feature is the equal partnership of man and woman complemented in the final scene of the poem by the equal partnership of culture and nature. In short, true to her observation regarding words — that he "builds them up" so that she "may push them down" — Katie gives Max the appropriate cues and thereby succeeds in getting Max slowly to dissociate himself from all pioneering projects which have as their central feature the oppression and enslavement of nature and to identify himself with a vision characterized by cooperation and equality.

Significantly, it is only when Max is in the physical presence of Katie that he subscribes to that non-conflictual, non-hierarchical model. As we have already seen, he is so convincing in his description of it that Bentley is persuaded that it is Max's "very own." However, once Max has put distance between himself and Katie, he seems to escape the sphere of her moral influence and reassociate himself with militarism, commercialism, and imperialism. Many critics, including Bentley, have struggled with the ambiguous references in Part II of the poem, where Max the soldier is cheerfully slaughtering nature, unaware that what he is partly making way for is the industrial and economic exploitation of nature.[4] The troubling image of the "smooth-coated men," who will eventually come and build "mills to crush the quartz," "mills to saw the great, wide-arm'd trees," and "mills to grind the singing stream of grain" is a startling image of nature quite literally being put through the mill (II, 230-235).

Part IV is even more explicit in its depiction of Max as at a considerable distance from Katie's influence. It is here where

Max makes a direct connection between his pioneering project and imperialism. Max is depicted as slaughtering nature to the tune of his Song of the Axe. But he is not making way just for commercial exploitation. The vision expressed in his song features not only kings and cities and palaces but also a nation which grows so tall that its imperial crown smites the very heavens (IV, 48-50). This image of Christian sacrilege prefigures Max's invocation of Satan, whom Max calls upon to assist him in murdering Alfred. But it is God who answers and strikes a blow against the soldier of the axe. It seems appropriate that, for the first and last time, God should make an appearance at this point in the poem, for Katie is not only absent in the flesh, she is also absent in spirit. Max has lost his faith in her, God's ambassador on earth.

Before moving on to the final, ecological model of the nature-culture relationship, more needs to be said about this role of God's ambassador which is so different from Eve's role as the agent of Satan. Like the themes already discussed, Crawford's redemption of women from the curse of Eve is informed by the controversy over women's increasing participation in public affairs. What has been called "the cult of true womanhood" was the ideological source of the moral authority of women. As the "morally superior sex," women were to guide and uplift their more worldly menfolk and thus offset the hardening influence of business.[5] While this ideology legitimized women's perspectives on social issues such as temperance, prostitution, and other "purity" reforms, it also caught women in a double bind. For the ideology also dictated that women should perform their moral tasks quietly and inconspicuously. Determined to make their voices heard and influence the course of social change, women were nevertheless haunted by their own ambivalence about female power. That ambivalence was as ancient as it was pervasive. Indeed, was it not through abandoning the feminine qualities of docility and reticence that Eve brought about the Fall?

Central to the Fall as depicted in Genesis is Eve's move from passivity to activity. As long as she remains passive, Eve remains moral and paradise remains intact. Her move from passivity to activity transforms her into an immoral creature because the act she undertakes is in defiance of God's moral law. Eve's action is to exert immoral influence on Adam. This association between

immorality and female activity colours Katie's ambiguous portraiture. Crawford's heroine is both excessively feminine and exceedingly powerful.

Katie is quite possibly the most passive heroine in all of nineteenth-century Canadian literature and, in terms of her effect on the male characters in the poem, also the most influential. Paradoxically, by remaining passive, she persuades all the men to do her bidding. As if to make explicit the connection between female activity and disaster, Katie moves from passivity to activity only once, and the incident almost ends in death. The only act she performs in the poem is a foolish one: she goes for a walk on a logjam, falls into the river between the crashing logs, and is almost drowned. By rescuing Katie, Alfred gets his chance to set an evil plan in motion — his plan to ingratiate himself into the hearts of Katie and her father. In short, in addition to its function as a device for driving the plot forward, Katie's sole move from passivity to activity makes a direct link between female action and immorality.[6]

This one incident notwithstanding, Katie remains passive throughout the poem, and in doing so she exerts moral influence on all the men. For example, in Part I, Max asks her how she plans to influence Malcolm into foreswearing his hostility against Max and accepting him as a son-in-law. Katie answers: "I'll kiss him and keep still — that way is sure" (I, 133). And she is right, for like the silent and docile woman so revered by patriarchal culture, Katie remains passive and reticent on the subject of Max, and by the end of the poem Max and Malcolm are reconciled.

As if to emphasize this important link between female silence and moral consequence, the only time Katie breaks her feminine vow of silence she triggers a chain of events that almost ends in disaster. Throughout Alfred's first stage of wooing, Katie refuses to tell him that he has no chance of winning her. However, at the end of Part III she changes her mind and tells him "Nay" (III, 269). This articulation immediately catapults Alfred into action: he departs for Max's homestead and tells Max that Katie has betrayed him. Max believes him, loses his faith, and calls upon Satan. A "voice from God" answers, a tree falls and pins Max to the ground, and Alfred leaves him to die. The implicit message of this chain of events seems to be that women should remain silent or risk influencing men into immoral acts against God.

Katie's most triumphant achievement occurs as a result of her heroic passivity. In the climax of Part VI, Alfred, finally convinced that he shall never win Katie's love, tells her that Max is dead. When she faints at his feet, he resolves to kill both himself and her, takes her in his arms, and leaps into the millrace. Miraculously, Max arrives in the nick of time and rescues Katie. The following passage occurs when Katie regains consciousness, just as Max is trying to decide whether or not to return to the millrace and rescue Alfred:

> "O God!" said Max, as Katie's opening eyes
> Looked up to his, slow budding to a smile
> Of wonder and of bliss, "My Kate, my Kate!"
> She saw within his eyes a larger soul
> Than that light spirit that before she knew,
> And read the meaning of his glance and words.
> "Do as you will, my Max. I would not keep
> "You back with one light-falling finger-tip!"
> (VI, 129-136)

First, what *is* the meaning of Max's glance and words? Indeed, what are his words? His words are: "O God! . . . My Kate, my Kate." In other words, Max is making an association between God and Katie, between divine and earthly love.[7] This is in contrast to the implicitly sacrilegious way he had formulated love in Part II, as he "made pause to clear / His battle-field" of "the tangled dead" (II, 175-177). The smoke had risen from his bonfire of trees and blotted out the heavens — God's dwelling place.

> . . . Max car'd little for the blotted sun,
> And nothing for the startl'd, outshone stars;
> For Love, once set within a lover's breast,
> Has its own Sun — its own peculiar sky,
> All one great daffodil — on which do lie
> The sun, the moon, the stars — all seen at once,
> And never setting; but all shining straight
> Into the faces of the trinity, —
> The one belov'd, the lover, and sweet Love!
> (II, 182-190)

Max cares little for the sun and nothing for the stars, those constant reminders of the divine, because he has his own version of heaven, his "own peculiar sky," his own earthly trinity, consisting of himself and Katie and their love for each other. But now, having glimpsed the gates of hell and returned to the sphere of Katie's moral influence, he recognizes in her the reconciliation of sacred and profane love. And some twenty lines later, what he has said finally dawns on Katie: "My Max! O God was *that* his Katie's name?" (VI, 154) she exclaims (emphasis added). This is a confusing line, one that to my knowledge no critic has attempted to interpret. However, I believe the line may be read with the emphasis added, so that Kate actually means: "Are my name and God's synonymous in Max's mind?"[8] As the fourth and fifth lines of the passage suggest, Katie sees in Max's eyes a possible destiny for him but she decides to remain silent and not influence him for fear that she will only hold him back. In other words, instead of *actively* influencing his decision about whether to rescue Alfred or let him drown, she tells him, "Do as you will." Then she buries her face in the moss at his feet and stops her ears, refusing even to witness Max's decision. Allowing Max to make his own decision without interference from her is what differentiates Katie absolutely from Eve. Eve receives from the serpent a vision of a possible destiny, a vision in which she and Adam become as knowledgeable as God. Although she succeeds in influencing Adam to do what she wants for the purpose of moving him in the direction of that destiny, her action results in disaster. Conversely, Katie gets Max to do what she wants by refusing to act — by refusing to exert her influence. That is, of course, a paradox — the paradox of women's moral influence. What that paradox asserts is that the best way for a woman actively to exert moral influence is passively to do nothing.

Nineteenth-century feminists eventually resolved the paradox of women's moral authority — the double bind in which the cult of true womanhood had trapped them. They accepted the ideology's designation of women as the morally superior sex, settled on a definition of passivity as relative, and went on to become activists — but not without considerable disagreement and dialogue among women and their critics about how much activity was appropriate to the "naturally" passive female sex.[9] Although fraught with the era's ambivalence, *Malcolm's Katie*, in

its attempt to reconcile femininity and power, is a contribution to that dialogue.

Were it not for the mythological interludes that interrupt the love story in several places, *Malcolm's Katie* would be merely a typical Victorian Romantic poem expressing late nineteenth-century post-Darwinian anxiety. For if we ignore what I am calling the ecological model of the culture-nature relationship, the vision expressed by the narrator of these interludes, the poem could be read as an attempt to resolve the conflict between Romantic Mother Nature, who never betrayed the heart that loved her, and Tennyson's Darwinian nature, red in tooth and claw. We could then agree with Sandra Djwa that *Malcolm's Katie* is part of the nineteenth-century literary effort "to adapt evolutionary theory to existing religious and social structures." Djwa finds this "yoking of evolution and ethics" in the work of the Canadian male Romantics — the Confederation poets — and uses it to explain *Malcolm's Katie* which, she claims, "places the whole struggle for survival in the human and natural world within God's hand" (1975 49). But while Djwa's theory of nineteenth-century Canadian poetry is an eminently useful one, I believe it is somewhat reductive when applied to Crawford's work.

In the long lyrical passages depicting the changing of the seasons in terms of Canadian aboriginal mythology, each of the elements in nature is personified as a mythological figure, invested with subjectivity, and imaged as caught up in a web of creative relationships with all the other elements. This web both mirrors and magnifies the web of human relationships in the love story. In addition to their function as a device for managing time and space, these mythological interludes inscribe an altered perception of the relationship between time and eternity, motion and stasis, process and teleology — those binary opposites which Djwa implicitly identifies with Darwinism and Christianity. The male poets were trying to live out the split demanded of them by evolution and Christian ethics, a split mirroring the dualism of soul and body. But they were also structuring their vision on the model of one man's relationship with one woman — a subject-object relationship between male poet and inarticulate, unconscious, amoral Mother Nature — while Crawford was

substituting a model of the whole human community's relationship with the natural community. Moreover, because of the subjectivity with which she invests nature, the alienation between those two realms begins to break down, and the definition of what is articulate, conscious, and moral (and therefore human) and what is not is thrown into question. For Crawford's personifications of nature are more than mere human projections. They are not merely Romantic personifications which encroach on nature by giving a familiar human face to its alienness.[10] Indeed, Crawford subverts that Romantic convention by revising it for her own purpose of envisioning a radically different attitude toward nature which Nobel prizewinning scientist Barbara McClintock called "a feeling for the organism" — a way of allowing nature to enter human consciousness and explain itself on its own terms.[11]

Crawford's vision constitutes an alternative epistemology of nature which does away with the identification of nature as female and culture as male and with the hierarchical and oppositional dualism upon which those identifications depend. The personification of nature as a multiplicity of female and male figures suggests that nature cannot be reduced to the qualities associated exclusively with the female gender. What we regard as male principles also seem to be operative in nature. Moreover, nature is too complex, too multi-faceted, to be confined to one metaphor and its variations — namely, the metaphor of Mother Nature. Even Katie, who represents a concept of nature which in spite of its ethic of reconciliation is still tied to Christian and Romantic notions of nature, acknowledges that multiplicity when she refers to the "wild woods and plains" as "bounteous mothers" — plural (VII, 31-32). The narrator's vision enlarges Katie's by presenting us with a whole community of metaphors that only just begins to express the endless variety in nature.

Crawford's metaphor of nature as a culture is, I think, an effective way of conveying the fact that human culture is merely an extension of the natural order. For culture is not separate from nature and opposed to it. For example, when Jane Goodall first travelled to the Gombe Reserve in Africa to search for chimpanzees in nature, what she found were chimpanzees in culture — chimpanzee culture, that is. Similarly, at the heart of human

culture are human beings, organic creatures, and every cultural artefact is an extension of nature. One cannot build a house or publish a book without trees; houses and books are trees in another form. Hence Max's homicidal conflict with the "monarchs of the forest" may be read as a denial of his utter dependency upon them. His self-stylization as soldier of the axe artificially inflates his heroism, for primitive as an axe may be, his "enemy army" has no comparable arms with which to defend itself. Indeed, the lyrical passage that opens Part IV offers a critique of this kind of militaristic egotism. The personified North Wind rushes "with war-cry" and wrestles with "the giants of the woods" (IV, 1-2), but his inflated self-importance is punctured when he realizes that he will be mocked and his bravery belittled for slaying the defenseless — "sick rivers" already "in the cold thongs of death" and "swooning plains, / Bright with the paint of death — and lean and bare" (IV, 28-30). But at least the North Wind has the grace to be "troubl'd in his soul" by such self-aggrandizement (IV, 15). Not so Max. It is therefore fitting — quite literally, poetic justice — that one of his mislabelled "enemies" should strike back at him on his own terms and almost kill him, and that several of these enemies, reduced to commodities and marked "MG" — Max's initials as well as Malcolm's — should mount a similar counterattack against Max's beloved.

Alfred's Darwinian model is similarly undermined by the narrator's. In the interaction between human culture and the natural order, Alfred recognizes only death-dealing conflict between subject and object, while the narrator of the mythological passages articulates meaningful interaction within a community of subjects, interaction which drives the ongoing process of birth. For example, Part II opens with a long passage in which the personified Sun reproaches "the Moon of Falling Leaves" for trying to kill "the happy, laughing Summer." But the Sun mockingly points out that Summer is not really killed; she has only "gone a little way before" and "will return again" to kiss her "children" to sleep and remind these species of vegetation that she is "still the mother of sweet flowers" and that they should smile in their "heart-seeds / At the spirit words of Indian Summer" (II, 110-145). This allusion to the seeds of rebirth and renewal places the emphasis on species rather than individuals and suggests that death is meaningless except as life in a phase of transformation.

While this philosophy may not be news from the point of view of the late twentieth century, what is still radical about this passage and alien to contemporary dualistic habits of thought is the way in which its construction mimics the process of intersubjectivity. The Sun does not address the Moon entirely in his own voice, but rather, enters into Summer's subjectivity, speaking from her perspective and quoting her directly and at length. What we see, in effect, is the female poet taking on the subjectivity of the ungendered narrator, who in turn takes on the subjectivity of the masculine personified Sun, who in turn takes on the subjectivity of feminine personified Summer. This constellation of variously gendered subjectivities, each contained within the other as the fetus is contained within the womb, is an image of all life on earth as mutually created and interdependently creative subjects. Regardless of gender designation, each entity has the power to contain and constitute the being of the others, much as a mother contains and constitutes the being of her offspring. In this variation on the theme of organic process, the emphasis is on mutually life-enhancing, intimate connection rather than dialectically achieved balance between the remote polarities of life and death.

A poem that denies the validity of dichotomies such as male/female, culture/nature, subject/object is necessarily paradoxical, for there is no Archimedean point outside the binary structures of gendered language from which to speak. Crawford has no choice but to use gendered metaphors to convey a perception of reality that does not artificially cleave it into two unequal and incomplete parts. Nor can I, in my attempt to reconstitute Crawford's vision, tell my story in a language uncorrupted by false dichotomies. I have chosen to explicate the narrator's introductory passage in Part II in terms of the complex womb imagery which Crawford's construction of it suggests to me because, unlike John Ower, who turns Max's axe into a kind of Lacanian transcendental signifier, I see the womb as the poem's controlling presence. This decentering of the phallus is in keeping with French feminist theory, which argues that "In order to undermine dualist thought-modes and cultural systems, . . . the Other — the female — must be resituated, not in opposition but within. The woman must become not an object but a process, an opening up into the unconscious. . ." (Mellor 5). What better way to

resituate women "within" than by designating the womb, with its connotations of "within," as central — not so much as a *symbol* of the feminine, or Romantic Mother Nature, but more importantly, as a *presence* signifying a process within which male and female are both engendered? The womb is a place of perpetual flux and transformation as well as a space within which the cultural constructs of masculine and feminine do not exist, for subject and object have no meaning there. Gender undifferentiated fetuses within the womb, like females and their fetuses, are related intersubjectively; subject-object differentiation is strictly an *ex utero* phenomenon.

The womb as an apt poetic metaphor for intersubjectivity and "an opening up into the unconscious" is in keeping with an experientially female psychological phenomenon, documented by psychoanalytic theorist Jessica Benjamin, in which desire is symbolized, not as the Freudian or Lacanian phallus but as a space, a place within the self from which female agency can emerge. As Benjamin has observed, "An important component of women's fantasy life centers around the wish for a holding other whose presence does not violate one's space but permits the experience of one's own desire, who recognizes it when it emerges of itself. This experience of inner space is in turn associated with the space between self and other . . ." (1986 96). In female fantasy, that space is the context in which one can be with others yet "experience the most profound sense of self" (92). In Crawford's textualized fantasy, that space is the con/text — the world of relationship, where the subjectivity of all life forms is acknowledged and nurtured. The poem as a con/textual space is — to borrow an image from the poem — the "*Dark matrix she, from which the human soul / Has its last birth*" (VI, 2-3).

The image of the phallic axe may well signify the conflict of opposites, as Ower suggests, for Max does destroy in order to create (36), but that image — indeed, the entire notion of creative-destructive opposition — is repeatedly overturned by the intersubjective vision inscribed in the poem. The image of the human community as contained within the biosphere of planet earth is a model of nature as a creative intelligence that holds destruction in its womb, where it is nurtured and transformed in nature's own creative image. This is at one remove from the traditional Romantic system of organic process because it is

experientially rather than theoretically based; it is unconsciously experienced by the body rather than consciously perceived through the intellect. Moreover, the unconscious experience of the womb is one shared by all human beings and countless other species of life; the conventional Romantic "experience" of Mother Nature pales by comparison.

This privileging of perpetual creation over destruction questions not only the military model but also the scientism of Alfred's reading of Darwin, in which Alfred inappropriately transfers to human cultures what applies to species. His arrogant humanism does not permit him to see that nature is the *primary* creative process which makes possible the *secondary* process of culture. Instead, he pits the production of human cultural artifacts, such as cities and nations and technologies, against organic creation and then views culture's inability to compete as nature's denial of life. There is a kind of womb envy in this formulation — a sulky withdrawal from life because ("male") culture cannot usurp but can only modestly imitate ("female") nature's creative capability. Alfred's personification of death as a female figure is a classic case of projection. He displaces onto nature the culture-builder's own destructive impulses — impulses that reduce nature to an exploitable resource for producing lifeless cultural artifacts which, unlike nature's "artifacts," have no power to reproduce themselves organically. Hence nature, like the sex identified with it, is blamed for culture's relative impotence. Alfred interprets nature as the enemy, as does Max, albeit on a grander scale.

But if Alfred has set himself against nature, Katie integrates him back into it. She names her new baby for Alfred, once a destructive villain but now a repentant and transformd man, whose death is neither confirmed nor denied at the end of the poem. Hence his destruction is suspended and subsumed within the creation of his namesake. This allusion to cyclical process is mirrored in the mythological interludes, in which several deaths are presaged, only to be subsumed within successive rebirths.[12]

Organic creativity as primary and constant is mirrored back to the level of the love story in Katie's constant and unshakable love for Max. D.M.R. Bentley interprets the tale in terms of Jean Kennard's analysis of women's domestic narratives structured on the two-suitors convention. There are, however, profound

differences between those narratives and *Malcolm's Katie*. In the novels Kennard examines, the heroine comes to maturity when she realizes that she has been mistaken in her preference for the "wrong" suitor. She is made to see that it is the hero who has the "correct" interpretation of events and is therefore the "right" suitor. Not so Katie. From the beginning her view of things is the "right" one, and sooner or later all the male characters are brought within her perspective. Moreover, the story of "Malcolm's Katie" does not end in betrothal; it begins with it and moves beyond, into the story of "Katie's Alfred," whose infant presence in Part VII signifies a new beginning, which undermines the closure toward which the narrative has been moving. Hence, even the New Edenic model, whose reconciliation with the forces of militarism, commercialism, and scientism rationalizes those models and narcoticizes us against their ethic of domination, is superseded by the larger vision.

As the suspension of closure implies, the story does not so much "end" as shift into another dimension, suggested by the family tableau and the stasis which characterizes it. But this dimensional shift is not the conventional spatialization of time, but rather a dynamization of space achieved through the introduction of baby Alfred, and hence in keeping with female desire as an intersubjective space within which all can emerge and grow. This space-time/stasis-motion conflation is not confined to Part VII: as the hectic male activity around Katie's relative passivity throughout the poem suggests,[13] time is to eternity as the womb is to the fetus; eternity and teleology are contained *within* time and process, not the reverse. In Crawford's cosmology, there is only the eternal present — a dynamic space where all objects are subjects, where self and other meet in a web of intersubjective relationship.

Isabella Valancy Crawford introduced into Canadian poetry an alternative epistemology of knowledge — an experiential way of seeing and knowing the natural world; it is a kind of ecological vision which is, admittedly, fragmentary but nevertheless present in Crawford's poem. That vision is echoed in the poetry of later female Romantics, such as Marjorie Pickthall and Constance Lindsay Skinner, and in the early modernist poems of Dorothy Livesay; it also appears in Margaret Atwood's *Journals of Susanna Moodie*, a long poem which, like *Malcolm's Katie*, resists closure through a radical dynamization of space. Hence

Crawford's significance as a precursor of twentieth-century Canadian women poets can hardly be overstated. Most important, Crawford speaks to all readers who share a concern for the future of our culture, our species, our planet, and hence is eminently worthy of the ongoing critical dialogue which her poetry has inspired.

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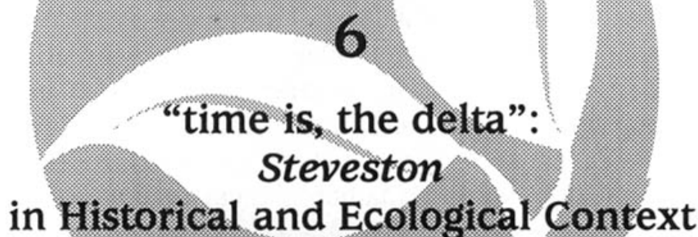
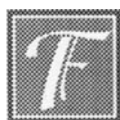


6

"time is, the delta": *Steveston* in Historical and Ecological Context



rank [Davey] and George [Bowering] were much more aware of the tradition they were battling than I was — and they were Canadian. I was an immigrant, and so I had an experience of otherness that I could work with right from the start. When you feel excluded or marginalized, what you work toward is synthesis.[1]

The publication of Daphne Marlatt's *Steveston* in 1974 was a milestone in the history of West Coast writing. Until its appearance, poetry in Vancouver was dominated by men, chiefly the founders of *Tish*, the poetry newsletter that had championed early postmodernism and initiated the decentralization of Canadian poetry in the sixties. Inspired by American writers such as Charles Olson and Robert Duncan, Frank Davey, George Bowering, James Reid, David Dawson, and Fred Wah had introduced into Canadian writing a new aesthetic. Delightfully phenomenological in method and content and attuned to multiplicity, fragmentation, discontinuity, non-linearity and unpredictability, this aesthetic was celebrated as "the triumph of particularity over philosophy" (Davey 1974 21). *Tish* postmodernism was, however, securely grounded in Heraclitean philosophy, which turns on the concept of the dynamic conflict of opposites — specifically, the conflict between creative and destructive forces in nature. Indeed,

the aligning of West Coast writing with "the elements of an environment in which no one element fully controls another" (Davey 1974 20) gave Heraclitean process status as a theory of knowledge. When translated to the level of literary politics during the seventies, however, this epistemology of conflict seemed to have more in common with Darwin than Heraclitus, for the West Coast writers saw themselves as locked in a struggle for survival with what Davey called "the control and logic-oriented criteria of modernism" that dominated Canadian critical practice (1974 22). Postmodernist pressures in the literary ecosystem were forcing criticism to evolve in tandem with poetry. Thus "the survival of the fittest" became a prominent theme in the critical discourse, a theme made explicit in the title of the groundbreaking article, "Surviving the Paraphrase" (1976), Davey's challenge to the Canadian critical establishment.

The celebration of conflict as the transformative dynamic of a Heraclitean, post-Einsteinian universe precluded any serious critique of conflict, thus making a kind of social Heracliteanism possible. While this was entirely in keeping with the New Left politics of the sixties, it was out of step with the feminism of the early seventies which was beginning to question the traditional hierarchy of values that elevated competition, autonomy, and independence above the qualities of nurturing, intimacy, and interdependence. By the mid-seventies, West Coast writing was ready for a subtler approach, which *Steveston* appeared to embody. Davey, who reviewed the poem in manuscript, may have intuited this when he described the work as "a truly relevant kind of writing that would initiate us into the intricacies and depths of the post-modern age" (1974 197). Indeed, long before the degeneration of race/class/gender into the dogma it has now become, the poem not only sensitized readers to that complex intersection, it also insisted on the treatment of race, class, and gender in historical and ecological context. While the main antagonists in Marlatt's poem/history of the British Columbia fishing town are the Fraser River and the fish cannery, the conflict between them not only provides the context for, but is also contextualized in, the particularities of individual lives — including the poet's and the reader's.

Privileging aesthetics, Davey found the "most important ideas of Marlatt's poetry . . . implied by its form," its reading of the

world as "a mélange of cues and signals," and its invitation to the reader "to abandon his logical, linear, and superficial attitudes toward experience . . . " (1974 195). Yet he couldn't entirely resist the pull of external referents and their ethical implications, as is demonstrated in his enumeration of the poem's "many foci":

> the exploitation of natural resources, the exploitation of early Japanese-Canadian fishermen who were eventually rescued from economic servitude to the fish packers by their internment at the start of World War II, the exploitation of all weaker groups (the Indian, the Chinese, the Nisei, the poor, the female) by wealthy and legally-sophisticated corporations, the heroic tenacity of the exploited in living their very real, sexual, and substantive lives in the mud and storm to which the abstract powers of corporate finance have confined them. History in these poems becomes both personal and contemporary; the "political" implications of the facts Marlatt discovers reach into both her life and the reader's. (Davey 1974 195)

By foregrounding the continuity between "the exploitation of natural resources" and "the exploitation of all weaker groups," this content summary invites an exploration of the poem's ecological focus. Such an approach would emphasize synthesis and connection without denying Heraclitean conflict and would pay special attention to Davey's observation that what Marlatt discovers as an aural historian "reach[es] into both her life and the reader's." This kind of approach would acknowledge that *Steveston* is not merely a linguistic *tour de force* but also a blueprint for an ethical alternative to the epistemology of conflict.

I've organized this paper around some reflections upon the writing of *Steveston* which Marlatt shared with me over dinner in the spring of 1994. In keeping with this informality, I've also subordinated an orderly pursuit of my thesis to an approximation of the way in which *Steveston* accretes layers of meaning as it flows forward and backward through time and across space.

Hence I've layered in several theoretical digressions wherever the textual tide seems to pull for them. Most important, I've adopted the position that language is less opaque than current fashion would have it — that, indeed, the assumption that language is exclusively self-referential leads to a pernicious linguistic determinism, which *Steveston* implicitly problematizes. In this, I'm responding to sociologist of art Janet Wolff's call for a more ecologically responsible approach to language. In her search for a more inclusive theory of modernism — including contemporary modernism, "sometimes called the postmodern" (20) — Wolff rejects

> ...a too radical poststructuralist position, in which social structure, institutions, and power relations evaporate in a commitment to the view that everything is (only) discourse. For . . . [while] it is crucial to be self-reflexive about the way in which "the environment" and its problems are formulated, . . discussions about the environment cannot be premised on the assumption that everything is only "text," or that social and economic relations, being merely discursive constructs, are somehow merely fictions.
> (Wolff 17)

What's needed now, Wolff claims, is a theory that "stress[es] the dialectical relationship between text and context" (7), an approach that honours the "two-way relationship" between texts and experiences (22). Marlatt's experience of otherness is a good place to start, for it does give her certain epistemic advantages.

One could say, maybe, "I can imagine how you feel" because that ability to imagine your way into another reality is crucial to any sense of dialogue. . . . We talk about Otherness all the time in terms of other human beings — who we can actually communicate with. Where the otherness is really important, though, is with species. We can't even begin to imagine what life would be like as a single-celled amoeba in the ocean.

Yet, this is exactly what *Steveston* invites us to do. Here's how it begins:

> **Imagine: a town**
>
> Imagine a town running
>   (smoothly?
> a town running before a fire
> canneries burning . . . . (83)

"Imagine" is quite literally the key to the poem. Followed by a colon, the word establishes the precondition for reading the poem, much as the turn of a key in a machine's ignition establishes the precondition for its running. The word turns the poem on, setting it running, unsmoothly, against the shape of itself on the page, a shape full of droplines and short lines, hazards and hairpin turns. This is the beginning of trying to imagine what it might be like to make a journey upstream to spawn — or even downstream, over rocks, through the delta, against the incoming tide, and out to sea. If the perils of this journey appear to reinforce the primacy of conflict and opposition — fish at odds with river — then we need to imagine more complexly. At the centre of this poem is the delta, a place where time is spatial and space is dynamic: "time is, the delta." A "triangular alluvial tract at mouth of river enclosed or traversed by its diverging branches" (OED), the delta is a transitional space whose natural architecture helps to dissipate the overpowering energy of opposing forces, reconciling incoming with outgoing waters, giving incoming or outgoing salmon a chance to swim through.

I'm interpreting the delta as a transitional space because the concept is useful for tracking the way the poem attempts to move beyond conflict and reach toward interconnection and synthesis. Transitional space is associated with the psychoanalytic premise that "[w]e recognize ourselves in the other, and we even recognize ourselves in inanimate things" (Benjamin 1988 21). In 1982, Donna Bassin argued that spatial imagery is often employed by women poets to express the sources of creativity (200), and psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin concurred when she observed the same phenomenon in the narratives of her female

analysands. Benjamin took the argument further, theorizing transitional space as intersubjective space, a place between self and other where both meet in a web of intersubjective connection (1986 92-95). The advantage of a theory of transitional, or intersubjective, space is that it accommodates both separation and connection: in Benjamin's construction, subjects are interconnected, not merged, and thus remain subjects in their own right.

Neither self nor other is ever entirely singular, as the image of intersubjectivity as a web suggests. It's therefore more accurate to talk about *selves* and *others*. This accommodates multiplicity, which Marlatt expresses paradoxically as "multiplicity simply there" (90). The intersubjective web also has theoretical implications for the nets and networking imagery that floats like a *Leitmotiv* through Marlatt's work. Although not everywhere present as a concrete image in *Steveston*, the net nevertheless casts its influence across the entire text. Indeed, the delta, with its implied network of river branches, is only one of the net's several permutations. As Brenda Carr has noted, "the image of the net or web as a metaphor of [the] sense of interconnection between human life and all life forms in the environment" is central "to the ecological vision that [Marlatt] conceptualized in *Steveston*" (104). But Marlatt's nets are more complex than that. Laurie Ricou has described them paradoxically as "containers made up of holes" (1986 207). The fluid movement of subjects in and out of intersubjective connection and the fluidity of the boundary around intersubjective space introduce time into the paradox and thus may help to resolve it. However, nets also connote deadly entanglement — especially for a fish — which cannot be resolved by simply invoking paradox, that convenient concept for keeping the contradictions inherent in language under control.

Contradictions are always set up by language because language works in a bipolar fashion. So it's difficult to use language to get at the enmeshment that is one fabric — which the poem is always reaching for.

Past and present collide and intermesh at the delta. The past makes its initial appearance in the image of men driven by fire toward the water's edge: "the bodies of men & fish corpse piled on top of each other." The present silts up over the past: "rot, an endless waste the trucks of production / grind to juice, driving through . . ." (83). The collision of nonhuman and human initiated processes results in an especially noxious enmeshment through which corporate privilege can drive, impervious. Three poems later we get a better sense of how this privilege functions. The "corporate growth that monopolizes" is a growth in more than one sense: it's a tumour, a malignancy that "sucks them dry, these men," "these women in white, tired, or wearily hopeful, drained / by the ditches of their unsatisfied lives" (89).

Distinguishing villain from victim becomes more personal as *Steveston* progresses. The trucks of production appear again, "loaded with offal for what / we also raise to kill, mink up the valley" (90). It's not difficult to imagine other trucks, loaded with fish-torsos — the "harvest," the "subhuman facets of life we the / town (& all that is urban, urbane, our glittering table service, our white wine, the sauces we pickle it with, or ourselves), live off" (90). In other words, it's all connected at this delta, silted up, layer upon interconnected layer, suggesting a multiplicity of positions from which to imagine. If you're a poet, it's easier to trace this kind of conflict than it is to reach beyond it. If you're a reader, it's easier to "[retreat] into the metaphor that language is its own ecology" (Ricou 1991 3) than it is to critique it. If you're a fish, it's easier just to die right here in this delta, "ringed with residue" (83), than it is to negotiate it. It always comes down to the fish in this one-industry town — salmon whose chances of making it even as far as this filthy delta are not what they were: imagine what the journey might be like when "boats equipt with the latest machinery, radar, sonic scan" (122) and driftnets are lurking just beyond the delta. Or back up even farther in time and imagine what it's like swimming in the opposite direction, through "water / swollen with its filth, with sewage, milldirt" (86) from sawmills and canneries passed along the way. If you're a yearling salmon, what are your chances?

Chance is very complex. . . . It's not just a lucky card, or just accident, hazard. It's bigger than that. Chance is a name that we give to a force that we can't control. So we call it evil, or we personify it — Lady Luck, or whatever. But chance is operating all around us. It's so large that we can't see its whole shape.

Chance is personified — or, more accurately, fishified — in the opening poem. But even in this somewhat more manageable size, it's not easy to see its whole shape. Now you see it, now you don't: "enigmatic" to the end, "chance lurks / fishlike, shadows the underside of pilings," vanishes under the rot and the refuse, surfaces in the closing line, "flicks his tail & swims through" (83). Meaning is as slippery as a fish in *Steveston*, and it's not easy to follow the ecological thread: now you see it, now you don't. A multiplicity of reverberations is set up by the appearance of chance as a fish who, by chance, makes it through all the treacheries that lurk in wait at the delta. But amidst the uncertainty one thing seems certain: it's not by chance that chance is invoked so early in the poem, for it's the single most important signifier in Western culture's construction of the natural environment.

At the close of the eighteenth century, the fossil was already showing signs of displacing the Bible as the text that tells the one true story of nature. But while the fossil recorded *change* as the norm instead of the exception, it could not edit the Prime Mover out of the story; that task was left to Darwin. Darwin's nature-story, which was more "a form of imaginative history" than a theory (Beer 16), argued that it was *chance*, not some divine plan, that determined the outcome of change. What this meant for science was nothing less than its liberation from theology and its investiture as *the* epistemological authority. In addition, evolutionary theory provided overwhelming support for the construction of nature as science's absolute Other. Unlike Darwin's nature, science left nothing to chance. Science was about keeping all the variables tightly under control, stripping nature of its context, dissolving its interconnections, including its interconnection with the scientist. Science was also about having the answers (hypothesis) before you've even asked the questions (experiment). This is what's still involved in practising the time-honoured scientific method — which isn't really a

method at all, but rather, a theory of knowledge in itself.

Katherine Hayles, who started out as a scientist but ended up a literary theorist, has this to say about the scientific construction of knowledge:

> Somehow the idea got started, sometime in the seventeenth century, that we know the world because we are separated from it. Objectivism led to some scientific advances but also to a profound alienation about which many writers and philosophers have meditated. What if we started from the opposite premise that we know the world because we are connected to it? Then to discover that one's views have been shaped in conscious and unconscious ways by one's experience, culture, history, and traditions . . . is to discover that one has a position from which to interact with the world. . . . The result is a much less alienated vision of the world, and also a truer vision of the world, since it acknowledges that positionality is always already affecting the picture we see. (qtd. in Stites 106)

In contrast to the scientific method, which is thought to yield "objective knowledge," positionality informs a method which Hayles calls "empowering reflexivity" — empowering because it incorporates subjectivity and thus yields a truer, more complex knowledge. The subjectivity of the knower is not a variable that the knower can control for through some magical act of self-transcendence — an illusion that *chances* partial and even perverse understandings of the reality under study. Reflexivity is a method of knowledge production that not only acknowledges the experiences of the knower but also uses them as a significant indicator of the reality against which hypotheses are tested. By inviting us to imagine, *Steveston* invites us to integrate subjective and "objective" knowledge. This process is enacted in the ironically titled "Life Cycle" (114-5), which is about the death-cycle: descriptions of dying fish from an authoritative treatise on Pacific salmon are integrated into the poet's experience of the fishing town and its inhabitants, once as lively as newly hatched fish but now cycling into idleness and decline. The interconnection results in a knowledge truer and more

complex than either objective fact or subjective experience generates on its own.

To return to the living fish, if the fisheye-view in *Steveston* seems to stretch the imagination beyond reason, then besides pointing out that all poetry does that, I would argue that this particular poem is in good company. Prize-winning geneticist Barbara McClintock stretched her imagination so far beyond scientific reason that not even what life in the ocean is like for a single-celled amoeba could have entirely eluded her. Here's how she describes her experience of studying chromosomes:

> When I was really working with them I wasn't outside, I was down there. I was part of the system. I was right down there with them, and everything got big. I even was able to see the internal parts of the chromosomes. It surprised me, because I actually felt as if I was right down there and these were my friends. . . . As you look at these things, they become part of you. And you forget yourself. (qtd. in Keller 1983 165)

This is empowering reflexivity at work. McClintock called it "a feeling for the organism" (198), and her biographer associated this feeling capacity with McClintock's otherness, which gave her an epistemic advantage in a male-dominated scientific community that ignored her groundbreaking work for many years. Her distance from the centre gave her a better view of the limitations of the scientific method: "You get lots of correlations, but you don't get the truth . . ." (203). As Davey's reviewing of *Steveston* in manuscript implies, Marlatt was far more fortunate than McClintock in that her work was celebrated even before it was published. However, her feeling for the organism has never enjoyed the kind of status conferred upon her feeling for the language.

While not identical, a feeling for the organism and a feeling for language are closely linked. To swim through language as a fish swims through water isn't necessarily to retreat into the metaphor of language as its own ecology. That retreat, which Ricou calls a refusal to see the connections (1991 3), is a refusal to see "the mesh of the net" we are caught in, "the accretion of

all our / actions, how they interact, how they inter/read . . ." (113). Like McClintock, who achieved unique insight into the life of chromosomes by asking herself what she would do if she were one, Marlatt challenges herself and us to dive in and interpret "the reading . . . the sea makes of *us*." She can do this because she knows that self-reflexivity is more than just a function of language. It's both a capacity and an epistemological standpoint. Take, for example, "Response":

> 'I think the fish like their water clean too,'
> she says, with a dry laugh where: this outgoing
> river, this incoming tide
>
> mingle & meet. To take
> no more than the requisite, *required* to grow, spawn,
> catch, die: required to eat. (111)

The deceptively simple words of this fisherwoman articulate *Steveston*'s ecological vision. The capacity for self-reflection implied in the word "too" is the capacity to interpret the reading the fish make of *us* — or, more accurately, the industrial waste and other sewage that *represent* us in their underwater world. As suggested in her humorless laugh, her comment is no romantic flight of fancy, no sentimental notion about fish with endearingly human preferences. Rather, it's intersubjective knowledge — the kind of knowledge that incorporates postionality. As if to reinforce this, the poem positions her in transitional space, that place where tide and river enmesh. Marlatt can't let the fisherwoman's insight stand without comment; otherwise, you get lots of correlations, but you don't get the truth. So she risks a "Response" — a response that comes to her as a flash of insight, something she *sees as she writes*. Every bit as self-reflexive as the fisherwoman, she reaches toward balancing the requirements of the whole interdependent ecosystem — *the enmeshment that is one fabric*.

One of the things I really wanted to talk about in* Steveston *was the women — the absence of the women [in public spaces],

I mean. They were either in the canneries or at home. It was such a male world, the fishing world, which was why I was so delighted to find my single fisherwoman.

The link between sex and death goes back a long way in literary history. But whereas sex *as* death is the time-honoured convention, in *Steveston* — as Marlatt herself has pointed out — the convention is turned inside out in a couple of ways. First, "the movement of the river out towards the sea, where it disappears, [is] a movement into the invisible that [has] to do with birthing and dying [and] in fact the two [are] metaphors of each other" (B. Carr 103). The second reversal — or, more accurately, subversion — of the convention has to do with sex *in defiance of* death. "Woman's body," Marlatt notes, "has been so repressed in our culture — fetishized on the surface but repressed deeply in terms of our actual sexuality and the force of our desire" (B. Carr 99). Perhaps it was a sense of the repression, or containment, of her own sexuality that permitted her to interconnect with a similar kind of repression at work in the lives of Stevestonians, for Marlatt's sexuality was still contained within the norms of heterosexuality. Perhaps it was her nascent desire to break out of that containment — her response to "the bio-feedback of [her] body in the act of composition" — that motivated the subversion of the sex-as-death convention.

Paradoxically, imagining what life is like for others — fish, men, women, river — entails imagining what death might be like. All forms of life that converge at the delta confront the possibility of a similar kind of death, namely, death by containment — containment in nets, norms, cans, and/or canneries. The ultimate in containment is the goal of the fish-canning process. It's not enough to turn a living fish into a corpse; it must be contained in such a way "That no other corpus work within it" (90). Those cans of "Pacific Ocean flesh" also contain the lives of those who can it: caught, gutted, packed, steamed, and served up "in a crimson sauce of their own blood," they are contained in the stasis of a living death.

The lives of the women in Steveston are contained by the cannery even before they are old enough to work there. Stasis rather than process is what characterizes the life of the young

girl in "Imperial Cannery, 1913" (84-5). Now that "she is old enough to be her / mother inside, working," she stands just inside the door of the cannery, "leaning into the / threshold, waiting for work," waiting for the turn of "the wheel that time is," waiting for her turn at "the wheel that keeps turning / turning, out of its wooden sleeve, the blade with teeth marked: / for marriage, for birth, for death." What connection are we being invited to imagine here? Did the cycle of this young woman's life, regulated by the canning industry of 1913, differ so radically from the cycle of women's lives as regulated by the patriarchal gender norms that characterized the rest of capitalist culture? Moreover, do the lives of women in 1913 differ so radically from the lives of women at the time of *Steveston*'s writing? Gender norms are like the blades of the cannery wheel — the "'iron chink'" that "beheads each fish": they work to eliminate a woman's intellectual life and chop the rest down to marriage, childbirth, and death. The patriarchal status quo, like the Imperial Cannery of 1913, relies upon the containment of women's lives within this narrow conception of the female life cycle. It's this continuity of female experience through time and across space which the poem invites us to imagine.

The men of Steveston appear to have more freedom of movement in space than the women do: they walk through the streets (95-6), work on the docks and the open decks (97-8), visit Christine's coffee shop (101-2), and drink in the Steveston Hotel bar (89). But they, too, are "stopt up, burning, slow, nowhere to go, no crowds to / light, no strange women, no gambling games, no risk" (89). Steveston no longer gives young men the opportunity to flex their masculine muscles. "Except [for] the occasional storm outside, the rare failure of guaranteed equipment, / the unexplained accident," the masculine rivalry and adventure of primitive free enterprise has been "forced out, bought up," a victim of corporate takeover.

But it's more than just the ecological crisis, triggered by overfishing, industrial pollution, and monopoly capitalism that constrains the lives of these men. Their character is crippled by the constricting norms that give them such obvious gender advantage. Like the girl poised on the cannery threshold, the three boys of "Low Tide. A beached vessel" (95-6) — boys as "idle" as their fathers in the Steveston pub — are poised on the threshold of manhood, where they're learning the masculine "orders of

power." They have already cultivated competitive acquisitiveness as a masculine ideal: "the fear somebody's beating somebody to it." Hence they hurry to rip off whatever they can from a beached gillnetter: "Hold this, hurry, I can rip the door off." An adult passer-by, higher up on the male hierarchy and thus free to impose his authority here, challenges their trespassing. Men in training, the boys assert their developing masculinity, "try it on for size." This counterchallenge works: the man backs down, "unwilling to meet their eyes." He "walks off" — but not before invoking the authority of someone even higher up the hierarchy: "If the patrolman comes along you'll be in trouble."

And what about the gillnetter, convenient object upon which to exercise one's developing masculinity? Here's a place where *Steveston* reinforces Jessica Benjamin's claim that "we even recognize ourselves in inanimate things." The small vessel is perched on the rocks, "beached, bleached, like some dying fish." "Her sullen cabin's locked," but two of the boys "violate" her by a side window and find a key. "Inscrutably closed, she allows no keys to hold, nothing so easy. . . ." Once the threat posed by higher orders of masculine power has been successfully challenged, the boys return to their plundering: "Back to the joyous act of 'making' her." This poem makes it possible to recognize which gender has the dubious honour of providing the foundation for masculine hierarchy. Marlatt does this by flouting pedantic cautions against pathetic fallacy, false projection, and anthropomorphism, cautions informed by arbitrary rules upheld largely by those who subscribe to the very objectivism that poetry seeks to subvert. If we can't recognize ourselves in the artifacts of human culture, how can we ever expect to recognize our interconnection with nonhuman nature?

Equally important, "Low tide" provides a clue to the way in which containment within restrictive gender norms is subverted. In acting out their erotic fantasies vis-à-vis the gillnetter, these boys make it possible to survive their oppressive containment at the lowest rung of the male hierarchy. Similarly, the girl who awaits a life contained by the tedious hours of cannery work is poised on the threshold of sexual experience. She's "in her element, dreaming of sails, her father's, a friend's son . . ." (85). (The son of a friend of her father's?) She is also "dreaming, of fabric she saw at Walker's Emporium, & the ribbon." (A new beribboned

dress in which to impress the son of a friend of her father's?) These are the erotic dreams of the young — dreams that break open the containment of their lives. Moreover, 1974 is not 1913, and there are options: "'The kids grow up & go elsewhere,' she said, / *not* fishing, not limited to that . . ." (92).

Erotic dream is also the survival strategy of their adult counterparts who never go elsewhere. It's true that "the plant packs their lives, chopping / off the hours, contains *them* as it contains first aid, toilets, beds" (91), but in a long vacated house "back of the carpentry shed," there's still "the vestige of a self-contained life," suggestions of an autoeroticism in defiance of containment. Here, "a nude on the wall glints / kittenish," and an iron bed, a "sleeping place between shifts," suggests "wet dreams, pale beside the / clank of forklift, supply truck, welding shed." Somewhere under all the oppressive norms that regulate gender arrangements and harness men's and women's libidinal resources in the service of profit, there flows a river of the erotic that strains at the dykes of containment. This irrepressible river of desire echoes the Fraser itself: "Over the edge of the / dyke a river pours, uncalled for, unending. . ." (83).

The feminism of the seventies was still very much focused on analysing gender stereotypes and searching for an androgynous ideal. Thus it's no surprise that Marlatt was so delighted at finding her single fisherwoman, who makes several appearances in *Steveston*, two of which balance her between private and public space. She can be read as the poem's primary interconnector — and not just between the human world and the underwater world of fish. She operates in domestic space but she is not confined in it. She articulates gender norms: "'Seems like, with men around, you're always at the stove'"(107). She also transcends them: "She went to town to pay the bills, 'somebody's got to look after that.'" She does it all. She "walks, from counter to stove, with a roll" — the same roll that balances her on the deck of her boat, balanced against "the river's push," "rolling, *with it* . . ." (109). "She runs in the / throat of time, voicing the very swifts & shallows of that river," voicing, too, her knowledge of all the forces that collide in transitional space, "this amphibious place, / half earth half water, half river half sea" (108). She understands the returning fish, the filthy river, the polluting industries, the weather, the wind, the waves — and the market forces that are

indifferent to them all. Marlatt gives more poem-space to the fisherwoman's exact words than to those of any other Stevestonian. In the act of writing out the fisherwoman word-for-word, she experiences a flash of insight: "Somehow they survive, this people, these fish, survive the refuse bottom, filthy water, their choked lives, / in a singular dance of survival, each from each" (110). Heroic survival notwithstanding, this separation, each from each, suggests a dangerously disconnected community — an ecosystem whose survival hangs in the balance.

If you point to something too obviously, it destroys the balance. Connections are there but they're not foregrounded. It's all a matter of shading.

Photographs like the ones Robert Minden contributed to *Steveston* aren't really black and white. The connections among the various parts of a photographic image emerge only as a function of the myriad shadings of grey along the black-white continuum. Indeed, things rendered exclusively in "black & white we only half perceive" (112). It's all a matter of shading. Shading implies shadows, in which so many things lurk in this poem. Steveston is, after all, a shadow of its former self: "Shadowy, this / piratical emblem of another era. Boomtown" (100). Dead past and living present seem in conflict — a conflict which only an aural historian, as distinct from historians of the dead past, can reconcile. The aural historian moves through the shadows of *Steveston*, a shadow herself, prompting Ricou to call her the "elided Daphne, the silent interviewer [who] emerges in [Marlatt's] absence. . . . Daphne Marlatt is the absent woman recording" (1986 207), and what she's recording in her interviews is living memory, thus integrating the past into the living present. Most readers are fascinated by the unclosed parentheses in the text; fewer make much of the quotation marks, always closed, holding the words of her living subjects in their respectful embrace and turning the text into a transitional space, where subject(ivitie)s meet in a web of intersubjective connection.

At the risk of destroying the balance by pointing too obviously, I want to point to two "webs, / of strange connection" (119)

in *Steveston* — two perfectly balanced poems located side-by-side in the text. These poems flow into each other like the sea and the river, creating a transitional space, in which past shades into present and time shades into space. "Ghost" (117-18) speaks directly to a Japanese Canadian fisherman, himself a ghost (a shadow? a shade?) of his former self — one of the dispossessed, one of the so-called enemy aliens banished to a wartime internment camp and impelled by some strange inner necessity to return to Steveston like a salmon to its stream of origin. Why this return? Returning from confinement, what was there here to find?

> Were you fined? Did you cross the border inadvertently? Did chart & compass, all direction, fail? Interned,
> your people confined to a small space where rebirth, will,
> push you out thru the rings of material prosperity at war's
> end fixed, finally, as citizens of an exploited earth:
> you drive your own car, construct your own house, create your
> registered place at Packers' camp, walk the fine (concrete)
> line of private property. (117)

The reference to rings recalls Marlatt's *Rings*, her poem cycle celebrating the birth of her son, his journey out of confinement in the womb, down the birth canal, and out through the vaginal ring. Here, by sheer act of "will," this ghost of a dispossessed Japanese fisherman is reborn into postwar prosperity. He's balanced on the fine line between exploited and exploiter, repossessed of property and, paradoxically, possessed by it.

All the connections in "Ghost" are feminine. This fisherman's wife, daughters, and granddaughter are his "ties to shore." The feminine connects him also to the past: "teachers, cabaret girls, longlegged American army wives you chauffeured, cared for, daughters, / friends of your daughters, down thru the water smiles of easy girls, / caught, kore. . . ." Kore, daughter of Demeter and maiden of the flowering earth, is the sum of all his past connections to the "natural world" — feminine connections reduced in the present to "erotic ghosts of the flowering earth" who haunt his dreams, now that he has "return[ed] to a decomposed ground choked by refuse, profit, & the / concrete of private property; to

find [him]self disinherited from / [his] claim to the earth." Paradoxically, this poem of connection is also *Steveston*'s clearest articulation of *dis*connection — the disconnection of the realm of refuse, profit, concrete, and private property from the interconnected world of nonhuman nature.

The temptation here is to formulate the dislocation of culture and nature in gender terms. Nor would it be altogether inaccurate to do so, for despite the simple dualism of the culture/nature opposition, the poem does return again and again to the idea that human culture invites its own disinheritance from the earth by treating nature the way it treats women: "white women, white bellies of salmon thieved by powerful boats" (118). Moreover, although Marlatt's feminism was not yet well integrated in the early seventies, she had read *The Second Sex*, in which Simone de Beauvoir exposed male transcendence and female immanence as the most important assumptions upon which Western patriarchal culture rests. Insofar as *Steveston* is an exploration of the "immanence of things" (119) and frequently associates immanence with the feminine, de Beauvoir's influence on the poem is apparent — which brings me to the other poem in this balanced pair, the poem titled "Or is there love" (119-20).

What a fisherman's children can inherit from their disinherited ghost of a father is his wealth — or what passes for wealth — in this case, a house, "handed down from father to not son but daughter," a house now "webbed with weaving, leaf tracery & light (of pots, plants), a house she / inhabits, immanent, at the edge of town a field. . . ." Now under female proprietorship, this house, located on what was once a field, a "wild place — where foxes / might live," no longer seems quite so thoroughly disinherited from nature. Indeed, positioned "at the edge," on the boundary between culture and nature, it occupies transitional space and is itself occupied by one who mediates between culture and nature.

The idea that women are mediators between culture and nature first appeared in feminist scholarship in 1974, the same year in which *Steveston* was published. In other words, it was an idea whose time had come, so it's no surprise to find it in Marlatt's poem. Much critiqued and refined since it first captured the feminist imagination, this idea was introduced into the literature by anthropologist Sherry Ortner, who conjectured 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" (69). "Intermediate" or "middle status" on a hierarchy of being from culture to nature, Ortner explained, "may have the significance of 'mediating,' i.e., performing some sort of synthesizing function between nature and culture . . ." (84). How you construe women's synthesizing activities depends on who you are. If you're an anthropologist trying to understand woman's place on the margins of man's culture, synthesis serves to maintain the patriarchal status quo. If you're a poet trying to understand woman's place in the ecosystem, synthesis serves to maintain culture's connection with nature. An artifact of culture, this female inhabited house is surrounded by "summer's wilder growth," backed by a garden of beans, "lettuce, children, friends," and set "under the trees that sway like / underwater weeds, connecting things."

But it's not just the reconnection of culture and nature toward which this poem reaches. It also reaches for an understanding of the paradox of home and homelessness. The internal necessity of untangling that paradox was the primary motivating factor in the creation of *Steveston*. Marlatt was drawn to Steveston by its strange familiarity — strange because she knew very little about Japanese culture, familiar because the Asian aspects of Steveston, both Chinese and Japanese, reminded her of her childhood in Malaysia. At home in Vancouver, yet oddly out of place there, she found expression for her dislocation in the context of a house inherited by the daughter of a disinherited Japanese Canadian fisherman: "To live in a place. Immanent. In / place. Yet to feel at sea." If you're marginalized, your distance from the centre of things is not just where you live; it's also who you are. Who, for example, is this Japanese Canadian woman who drives the distance from town, following the westward push of the water, out to her house at "the end of the road"? "Who also" this Canadian poet-from-elsewhere, who "drives back, late, by the shining / water roads from town" after an evening at the "Western Front," Vancouver's centre of things literary?[2] Two different journeys from two different centres end in a single question that links the women intersubjectively: "who are you now / you've cut yourself adrift, alone?"

Who you are is a function of where you are and how you got there: it's all a matter of *place*. Steveston is a place where a web of cultures is mapped onto nature, a place where individual cultures once put down roots and now put out seed: "the place itself, mapt out, a web, was grass: / tall, bent grass swaying heavy with seed. Cottonwood whose seeds make a web in the wind." Grass and cottonwood intermingled? For better *and* worse, this is time at work on space, culture at work on nature, home at work on homelessness. The fisherman's daughter doesn't consider herself a part of Steveston's Japanese community: "'. . . I don't belong to Buddhist Church, I don't / send my kids to sunday school.'" So why does she stay? Here's where it all comes down to place: "'well, I *live* here.'" Here, in place, you (she? the poet? the reader?) "find a self, under the trees that sway like / underwater weeds, connecting things." Submerged, the connections aren't always visible but they're there. You have to imagine your way into them.

In the seventies, West Coast postmodernist writers were fond of quoting a particular Heraclitean aphorism which for them expressed the transformative conflict of opposites that informed both natural process and the processes of language: "You cannot step twice into the same river." Anyone who's returned to Marlatt's Fraser as often as I have over the twenty years since its first appearance can hardly deny this truth. But more to the point, there is indeed something in this aphorism that suggests conflict — perhaps it's the emphasis on the negative. Heraclitus had second thoughts, however. He was apparently aware that his dynamic resists a strict application of the law of contradiction, for he amended the aphorism to read, "We step and we do not step into the same river; we are and we are not" (frag. 81). This shift is a subtle one but it's nevertheless radical, for it throws the whole dynamic into a kind of reverse field: synthesis emerges while conflict recedes. Indeed, the revised aphorism anticipates the Hegelian view of becoming as a synthesis of being and nonbeing (Capék 390). But whether Marlatt is more Hegelian than Heraclitean becomes a trivial question in the larger context of her feminism.

In an interview with Brenda Carr — aptly titled "Between Continuity and Difference" — Marlatt describes her project and her positioning vis-à-vis West Coast postmodernism:

> Working for change is what makes feminism different from the postmodernism I learned from the *Tish* days. . . . [P]ostmodernism, although it critiques the master narratives of our culture, the institutions and the codes, still ends up being complicit with them because it has no program for change. A program for change means valorizing a difference, and as soon as you valorize a difference you're moving out of postmodernist deconstruction into a position of . . . belief or trust in a certain meta-narrative. It's a difference at such a basic level that I think it's often been overlooked, but it's a difference that leads to a radical shift in world-view. (B. Carr 106)

The shift from conflict toward connection and synthesis makes all the difference, a difference that amounts to an epistemological shift into the empowering reflexivity of positionality. There is a position — a third space — between the two elements of many binary pairs, a place where synthesis takes a turn now and then, and where an act of imagination brings together text and context, knowledge and experience, continuity and difference, culture and nature, poet and reader in a web of interconnections. In making this epistemological shift, Marlatt steered her postmodernism around the trap of linguistic determinism implicit in the notion that there is no nature except the one we construct — a dangerous phallacy that alienates us from the world even more profoundly than does the objectivism of science. At the heart of *Steveston*'s ecological vision is the conviction that there is a reality external to our constructions of it: language may stand between us and that reality but it also connects us *to* it. Indeed, it might even be said that we cannot be separated from nature *except* by language, and that the extent to which our connections to nature *exceed* language is a measurement of our willingness to follow Daphne Marlatt's example and make the crucial epistemological shift.

3

Ecocritical Consciousness

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7

Feminist Ecocritique as Forensic Archaeology: Digging in Critical Graveyards and Phyllis Webb's Gardens

> [T]he best and the worst critics
> *tell their stories plainest.*
> Russel M. Brown,
> "Critic, Culture, Text" (155)

t first glance it would seem an easy task to trace the history of ecocriticism in Canada, for that history is relatively short. Indeed, it was only in 1991, that Laurie Ricou wondered aloud in an editorial in *Canadian Literature* why ecocriticism in Canada, as compared to the United States, seemed "almost an underground phenomenon." Against the backdrop of the mass trend of environmentalism, "eco-critics thrum like some scattered little grey birds among a flock of cranes beating their way into motion." Ricou also noted that "nature has loomed large in the Canadian consciousness. Canadian critics have been loud . . . on landscape. . . . But in the apparently closely related matter of environmentalism, critics on Canadian literature lag behind. . . ." Speculating on the reasons for that lag, Ricou suggested that "Perhaps Canadians are naturally wary of another U.S. academic fashion" (3). But if Canada was lagging behind the U.S., it was not by much. Indeed, writing only one year earlier than Ricou, American literary critic Glen Love complained of his profession's failure "to respond in any significant way to the issue of the environment, the acknowledgment of our place within the natural world and our need to live heedfully within it, at peril of our very survival" (202).

Having studied Canadian literature in Vancouver through the seventies and early eighties, I can say with some confidence —

at least from a Western perspective — that Canadian resistance to American trends is largely confined to the level of nationalist rhetoric. It is not merely geography but also literary ideology that makes the critical distance from south to north a lot shorter than it is along the east-west axis. This is not to say that Canada has not had its unique critical perversions, one of which relates to another of Ricou's speculations on our ecocritical tardiness: "Perhaps Canadians' writing of the land as adversary inhibits eco-criticism" (3). Ricou was, of course, alluding to Northrop Frye's impression that "a tone of deep terror in regard to nature" has always been a unique characteristic of the Canadian literary imagination (Frye 1965 830). It was an idea that launched an entire critical industry in the late sixties and provoked a lengthy critical war. As a feminist ecocritic whose work could be called forensic study of the casualties of that war, I find Ricou's suggestion a good excuse to start digging up various literary and critical burial sites for those bodies of writing whose death seems both untimely and suspicious.

Digging Literary History

The movement that introduced postmodern aesthetics into Canadian literature produced a dazzling and delightful body of writing. But the effort to get the importance of that writing recognized by the critical establishment proceeded within an epistemology of conflict. As a result, many writers sustained serious injury. Phyllis Webb, for example, named her "critical wounds" as one of the reasons for the years of silence that preceded the publication of her *Wilson's Bowl* in 1980. Her early work, the subject of the second part of this essay, got caught in the critical crossfire, and it was her great misfortune that many of her critical supporters were on the losing side of the war. But as it turned out, the transition was more complex than just a shift from modernism to postmodernism. Today, thanks to several new critical perspectives, including feminist literary critique, ecocriticism, and other anti-Enlightenment approaches, it is possible to recover that early poetry as establishing the necessary preconditions for an emerging feminist and ecopoetic consciousness in Canada.[1] But before making what I hope is a contribution to that recovery, I would like to return to Ricou's allusion to Canadian

literary ecophobia because I think it is important for an understanding of how the absence of a feminist perspective in the war between structuralists and post-structuralists might have contributed to the view that ecocriticism in Canada is "almost an underground phenomenon."

I want to begin by making what by now should be an unprovocative claim — namely, that not all the critics who followed Frye's lead saw Canadian writers as *endorsing* the view of nature as a terrifying "other," opposed to human consciousness. But in the interest of overturning Frye's structuralist school of thought, postmodernists chose to project this humanist episteme on many of the writers favoured by structuralists. In the late sixties and seventies, these writers became identified with a modernism which was, in the words of Frank Davey, "essentially an elitist, formalistic, anti-democratic, and anti-terrestrial movement" (1974 19). Over against them were the postmodernists, "the only writers who have shown faith in the ability of the universe to direct composition through open, random, or multiphasic forms, or a belief that the 'craft' of writing involves a listening to 'Mother Nature'" (Davey 1974 111). Chief spokesperson for postmodernism, Davey drew a similar battleline across the critical landscape — a line which defined Canadian structuralism as thematic paraphrase (1976). Once these literary and critical battlelines were drawn, there was little room for writers or critics whose work resisted such oversimplification; no small amount of it was authored by women.

In 1988, the feminist critic Helen Buss presented a conference paper entitled "Women and the Garrison Mentality: Pioneer Women Autobiographers and Their Relation to the Land." Her point of departure was Northrop Frye's 1965 Conclusion to *Literary History in Canada*, in which he made the provisional proposition that what Canadian writers have in common is the idea of the garrison that protects against "a huge, unthinking, menacing, and formidable physical setting" (830). Tracing the elaboration of this proposition through two decades of literary commentary, Buss demonstrated the way in which the "garrisoning" of Canadian criticism — both structuralist *and* post-structuralist — excludes female writers whose work is important to an understanding of Canadian literature:

> The elaboration of Frye's garrison mentality has . . . become . . . a big stick critics may wield to beat any writer whose reaction to the Canadian landscape is anything less than traumatic. As well, a kind of second generation of "garrisoned" critical commentary has begun to emerge in which Frye's garrison mentality is assumed and internalized. Critics now propose that various postmodern writers can rescue us from its doom and gloom. Such writers are seen as self-engendered . . . white knights, puncturing with their postmodern comic shafts the heavy "realism" of earlier writers. (125)

The phallic imagery here is hardly accidental, for this debate is irrelevant to an ecocritical reading of the women writers Buss studies: they are neither garrisoned against nature nor interested in transforming it.[2] Buss has "no root quarrel" with the elaboration of Frye's metaphor of the garrison, nor does she "intend to dismiss past critical research as 'paraphrase' and suggest that critics should now move on to a more up-to-date post-structuralist world and reject the past as 'thematic criticism.'" Instead, in the spirit of "present-day writers who wish to ungarrison our literature and our criticism" (125), she recommends "not only that we go through the archaeological site of the Canadian tradition again, but that we expand the perimeters and, indeed, even change our definition of territory" (126).

This archaeological expedition has been central to the task of establishing feminist ecocriticism in Canada, and it has been an especially time-consuming project. For example, until very recently Buss's recovery of pioneer autobiographers appeared to be the only significant ecocritical contribution to women's nature writing in prose. Indeed, as late as 1996, Andrea Lebowitz could still observe a huge gap in the fossil record. In the Introduction to her anthology *Living in Harmony: Nature Writing by Women in Canada*, Lebowitz wrote: "Except for early settlement journals, the work of women nature writers has been hidden from history. Yet this obscuring has more to do with the perceptions of the historians than with the merits of the female writers. Bringing these women back into focus redresses a wrong of literary history but more importantly it offers another way of

seeing our connection to the land." Like Buss, Lebowitz cites the myth of the garrison as obscuring a "second story" about nature — the one told by the women who find that "the natural world offers an alternative way of being human through harmony with the land." In the archaeological spirit, she uncovers a further stratum: "While the story of the garrison is largely a male narrative, it is clearly not shared by many men, particularly nature writers. As with their brothers, women nature writers do not concur with the garrison mentality nor do they necessarily have the same outlook as the male authors" (1996 2). What Lebowitz alerts us to here are diverse strata in *both* the female and male traditions.

War is notorious for its destruction of archaeological evidence, and the conflict between structuralists and post-structuralists was no exception. In his campaign to capture the critical beachhead, Frank Davey attacked D.G. Jones's *Butterfly on Rock* and buried it under a rubble of overgeneralization: it was "bad sociology" — prescriptive, normative, polemic, and extra-literary (1976 8). Sifting through the critical site again, Buss tagged Jones as privileging those writers "who work at removing the garrison, at letting nature in" (123). This find is a valuable artifact in itself, for it identifies Jones as recognizing that there are Canadian writers who question the garrison as an appropriate response to nature, terrifying or otherwise. Further evidence of this critical diversity can be found a little deeper down in the Jones site — evidence that it was not just postmodernists who took an interest in nature's side of the story:

> 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. (Jones 1970 57)

From the perspective of the feminism of the 1990s, this passage is indeed a fossil. Today, it might be used as an example to illustrate why we should persist in avoiding the fiction that "man" is a generic term. It is manly of Jones to indict mankind and thereby acquit womankind of the felonious act of ecocide, but such linguistic chivalry is better off dead. We might also fault Jones for his dependence on traditional gender stereotypes. After all, the reliance on metaphors that associate women with nonhuman nature only reinforces the oppressive patriarchal gender hierarchy.[3] But *Butterfly on Rock* was published in 1970, a date which suggests that Jones was ahead of his times, for feminist analysis of the myth of Father Culture and Mother Nature had not yet properly begun.[4] As for theorizing ecofeminism itself, the work would not get officially under way until later in the decade, when feminists finally caught up with Jones: contrary to those who accepted Frye's provisional and impressionistic characterization of nature in literature as malevolent and adversarial and hardened it into a literary theory, those first ecofeminists recognized that "Nature did not declare war on humanity; patriarchal humanity declared war on women and on living nature" (King 116).

What Jones has also done is turn the structuralist tradition against itself: by exposing as potentially violent the general laws by which binary structures work, he reveals the violence at the heart of our hierarchically structured social relations. Indeed, Jones's articulation of the binary oppositions that govern the relationship between human and nonhuman nature and, by extension, between male and female — oppositions such as culture/nature, exclusive/inclusive, arrogant/humble, aggressive/passive, masculine/feminine — moves him in the direction of post-structuralist analysis. In addition, Jones anticipates the ecocritic D.M.R. Bentley. In his call for an ecological poetics, Bentley cites as ecocidal "the heady combination of scientific rationalism, protestantism, and capitalism that is known today as modernity" (1990 n.pag.). Underpinning Western science,

religion, and political economy is Western idealism, which Jones fingers as the ecocidal culprit: "Whether its ultimate vision is heavenly or earthly, Western idealism tends to be narrowly rational. In its extreme form it tends to demand nothing less than the complete victory of mind over matter. Such a victory may require of a man that he either renounce the world or destroy it" (1970 57-58). Jones would have been more accurate had he said that *because* its ultimate vision is *either* heavenly or earthly — never integrated — Western idealism supports an excessively narrow construction of reason. Nonetheless, even here he has all his binaries in a row. It was with these very linguistic oppositions — heaven/earth, mind/matter, renunciation/destruction — that ecofeminist thought began, in the work of the first feminist theologians and biblical revisionists.[5] Perhaps the reason why, of all the structuralists, it was Jones who articulated the founding insights of ecofeminist analysis was that he chose the Bible as the source of his critical metaphors.[6]

Ecocritical readings are, of course, possible without reference to feminist analysis, but it is difficult to imagine a sophisticated ecocritical theory that does not attend to the traditional gendering of nonhuman nature as female. Here is where Jones might be seen as a possible exception to Laurie Ricou's suggestion that Canadians are wary of trends in American scholarship. In 1967, three years prior to the appearance of *Butterfly on Rock*, American Paul Shepard published his *Man in the Landscape: A Historic View of the Esthetics of Nature*. Jones made no direct reference to this book but it is hardly likely he would have completely ignored it, given that the book he was in the process of writing set Canadian "man" and the landscape in the context of the whole of Western culture. Shepard acknowledged that "relationships between men and women partly determine how people use their environment" (106), noting that "authority and dominance over the land carries the force of sexual aggression . . ." (107). He argued that the "low social and political status of women coincides with the general absence of devotion to place and of a mythology of rootedness in nature." But Shepard also took issue with the feminism of the period which he saw as focused exclusively on female access to the male realm of industry, military service, and business; as a consequence, women were being "swallowed by a system which is antithetical to their innermost natures" (105).

Shepard's implicit belief in the appropriateness of identifying women with nature and men with culture belongs to the philosophical dualism that underpins Western culture. The "system" is "antithetical to [women's] natures" but presumably not to men's because according to that rigidly dualistic view Father Culture is rational, while Mother Nature is not. Nothing overturns that dualism quite so effectively as Father Culture's thoroughly irrational act of ecocide. Where Jones got stuck, like Shepard and most of Western philosophy before him, is in the assumption that reason is opposed to what Jones calls "irrational desire." Jones did not take that extra step that would have led him to the obvious conclusion that what Western idealism is really opposed to is the rational, where rationality means the absence of the irrational desire to believe that the world of women and of nonhuman nature exists exclusively to furnish "man's" residence in it. Nevertheless, his analysis did point the way to a critique of dualism that is fundamental to an understanding of how many women writers were using language to explore "woman's place" in the terrestrial world, just as that very world was being claimed as the exclusive turf of the Canadian postmodern writer. The feminist ecocritical task is the recovery of that turf on behalf of women writers — modernists, postmodernists, and those who could not have cared less about these abstract categories.

The critical practise of eliding the *identification* of a problem with the *endorsement* of the habits of mind that created the problem in the first place is a form of killing the messenger. Had this not been the homicidal practice in the war against structuralism, Jones's protofeminist critique of the garrison mentality might not have slid into that underground of ecocritical sensibility. I agree with Buss, who rejects the opinion that all so-called "thematic criticism" is always "narrowly focused and reductive." To my mind, some of Jones's insights correspond to what Buss calls "part of a broader structuralist approach to literature that can offer new ways to view a large body of literature and be most useful for establishing 'difference'" (133). "Difference" refers not merely to women's difference of perspective, but to all diversity — critical diversity included. Perhaps Canadian ecocriticism should remain an "underground phenomenon," providing that "underground" denotes a "resistance" movement, as when Bentley calls for an approach to Canadian writing that "offers

resistance to any and all forces that participate or cooperate in disprizing environments, people, and poems of their diversity by threatening to obliterate their unique, local, regional, and national characteristics" (1990 n.pag.).

Digging Webb's Gardens

Where the early post-structuralists failed women writers, and Canadian criticism more generally, was in the binarism of their own thought. By setting Canadian postmodernism in opposition to virtually all that went before it, instead of understanding it as one of many evolutionary extensions of modernism, they were as guilty as their structuralist adversaries of misleading and misdirecting the act of reading. No writer can be more aware of this than Phyllis Webb. Between 1954 and 1965, Webb had the bad taste and poor judgement to write poems that were still beyond the analytical competence of the querulous critics of the seventies and early eighties. For this sin, she was accused of intellectualism, narcissism, solipsism, and cynicism; her work was also acknowledged for its "authenticity of statement," its "extremely fine craftsmanship," its "mastery of form," and other virtues similarly vague.[7]

One especially notorious treatment was a 1973 article by John Bentley Mays. Recently returned from a failed sabbatical and searching for someone to blame, Mays held Webb personally responsible for what he saw as the unqualified failure of late modernist poetry. He described her work as "vain, sectarian, as without acme or direction, as distorted by her lusts, and as inconclusive as any in the recent career of literary modernism" (1973 11). The following passage is especially noteworthy:

> . . . what Miss Webb has called "shaping the world in the intimate terms of the self," shaping the otherness of language into an image of the self's motions, is doomed, and it dooms the writer into an interminable futility. The word written becomes merely another disjunct, silent object in a kosmos of silent objects; it hardens instantly, like excrement, even as the body excretes the next word, and the next. The excrement piles up in

> loathsome, fearful *objectivity* amidst the impenetrable, unredeemable otherness of the world and becomes as terrifying as the world itself. But the artist cannot stop making words; "All writing is pigshit," screams Artaud, yet cannot cease to write, as though the sheer weight of words might someday tip the world off balance, and into sanctity. (29-30)

There is more projection than analysis going on in this passage, for nowhere in the twenty-two turgid pages that precede it, nor in those that follow, did Mays get around to explaining that Webb was not endorsing, but rather, questioning the beliefs and values over which he himself was sulking. Frank Davey published the article anyway, in *Open Letter*,[8] and used it as the basis of his section on Webb in *From There to Here*, which appeared the following year and represents her as "see[ing] the phenomenal world as a place of casual but relentless torture"; as "retreat[ing] . . . from the world of matter, morality, and process"; and as "emphasizing the fact that the crippling insufficiencies of the terrestrial penetrate even within the poet and her language." "Most important," Davey claimed, Webb "scrupulously avoids the contradiction of fashioning poems of elaborate technical artifice while claiming to believe in the vanity of such worldly creations" (1974 261-262). He saw her poetry as located "at the juncture between the modernist and post-modernist sensibilities," concluding that her "desperation clears the way for the creative junk-gatherers [of postmodernism] who will ask much less of the world than she, but find much more" (264).

Mays and Davey had a devastating effect on both Webb and the study of her work. With the exception of three poems, no new work appeared for several years, and no major scholarly articles on Webb were published. What little critical interest remained, shifted away from Webb's poetry altogether and onto criticism itself. Most notable was feminist Jean Mallinson's 1978 response, which blasted Mays' article as an "outpouring of hysterical outrage" and "the most extravagant, malevolent, and self-indulgent piece of ideological criticism in recent Canadian letters . . ." (93). The actual specifics of Mays' and Davey's assessments of Webb's poetry went virtually unchallenged, and Mallinson had put her finger on precisely why. The critical battle was not about

poetry; like all wars, it was about ideology. Nothing less than a new book from Webb would get the scholarly juices flowing again, but *Wilson's Bowl* was a long time coming.[9] Twelve years after the attack, George Woodcock undertook a critical analysis of it but could not resist prefacing his article with this retort: "I accept the accuracy of Davey's insight in placing Webb at the point where modernism . . . expands into a field whose variegation of talents and approaches made it more complex and sophisticated by far than the literary garbage collection which he seemed to envisage as post-modernism" (528).

Buried under all the excrement, junk, garbage, and other effluvia of critical warfare were some genuinely useful insights, such as Davey's and Woodcock's acknowledgment of Webb as a transitional poet. Like virtually all poets who began writing before the advent of postmodernism, Webb intermittently echoes T.S. Eliot in her work — sometimes to offer a corrective. More important, as Davey suggested, she cleared the way for something new, although he passed right over it in his haste to dispatch her to the realm of the dead and best forgotten. Today, critics are now able to explore the possibility that long before Davey began railing against the "elitist, formalistic, anti-democratic, and anti-terrestrial" philosophy of literary modernism, Webb had already seriously undermined it. Far from "scrupulously avoid[ing] the contradiction of fashioning poems of elaborate technical artifice while claiming to believe in the vanity of such worldly creation," she made poems that enacted contradiction in order to expose the bankruptcy at the heart of the late modernist aesthetic and the philosophical traditions that underpin it. Most important of all, she opened up the possibility of a new aesthetic before most Canadian postmodernists had even put pen to paper.

Formally trained in the discipline of philosophy, Webb knew its limitations far better than any of her critics. For example, much has been made of "Marvell's Garden," the poem most frequently chosen by anthologists to represent Webb's early work — and rightly so, for not only is it one of her most revealing statements of poetics; it is also an enquiry into woman's place in a dualistic universe and, by extension, woman's place in the universe of poetry. Indeed, it is probably the most important key to understanding the act of writing in Webb's early work. As I'll be

returning to this garden again and again throughout my analysis, it seems appropriate to look at the poem in some detail here:

> Marvell's garden, that place of solitude,
> is not where I'd choose to live
> yet is the fixed sundial
> that turns me round
> unwillingly
> in a hot glade
> as closer, closer I come to contradiction
> to the shade green within the green shade.
>
> The garden where Marvell scorned love's solicitude —
> that dream — and played instead an arcane solitaire,
> shuffling his thoughts like shadowy chance
> across the shrubs of ecstasy,
> and cast the myths away to flowering hours
> as yes, his mind, that sea, caught at green
> thoughts shadowing a green infinity.
>
> And yet Marvell's garden was not Plato's
> garden — and yet — he *did* care more for the form
> of things than for the thing itself —
> ideas and visions,
> resemblances and echoes,
> things seeming and being
> not quite what they were. . . . (*EYRE* 16-17)

The act of writing requires solitude; thus Webb's poet is attracted to Marvell's solitary garden, where he shuffled his thoughts into poems. She may go there, "unwillingly," to write, but it's not where she'd "choose to live." For as Marvell's own poem tells us, his garden was not a garden at all, but a transcendent, mind-over-body realm, which the poet, in keeping with Western philosophical tradition and poetic convention, could confidently represent as an exclusive male preserve. Scornful of women and the sexual distraction they represented, his garden of poetic creativity was doubly paradisal: not only was it an image of Eden, it was Eden without Eve.[10] It's hardly surprising therefore that Webb's poem expresses such ambivalence toward it.

Marvell's poem may have expressed a preference for platonic form over content but this would seem to contradict Marvell's biography. That contradiction is foregrounded through a comparison of "The Garden" with Marvell's other famous poem, "Bermudas." Whereas "The Garden" is about rejection of the real world of flux, change, and "love's solicitude," "Bermudas" alludes to Marvell's active engagement with the real world of Puritan dissent, civil war, and his subsequent political exile to the Bermudas. These two poems add up to a superb illustration of philosophical dualism, with "The Garden" advocating withdrawal into heavenly paradise, and "Bermudas" embracing paradise on earth, a primary example of which for Marvell and his English contemporaries was the Bermudas. This philosophical split is the focus of Webb's poem:

> That was his garden, a kind of attitude
> struck out of an earth too carefully attended,
> wanting to be left alone.
> And I don't blame him for that.
> God knows, too may fences fence us out
> and his garden closed in on Paradise.
>
> On Paradise! When I think of his hymning
> Puritans in the Bermudas, the bright oranges
> lighting up that night! When I recall
> his rustling tinsel hopes
> beneath the cold decree of steel.
> Oh, I have wept for some new convulsion
> to tear together this world and his.
>
> But then I saw his luminous plumèd Wings
> prepared for flight,
> and then I heard him singing glory
> in a green tree,
> and then I caught the vest he'd laid aside
> all blest with fire. . . .

The exclamatory "On Paradise!" expresses more incredulity than reverence. The abstract realm, which was doubly paradisal for Marvell, is only half a paradise for Webb: it may be an excellent place for singing/writing, but it is too isolating, "too carefully

attended," and "too many fences fence" it in. The "bright oranges" allude to Marvell's appreciation of nature's abundance in the Bermudas — the oranges, figs, melons, and pomegranates that his poem values above all the jewels of Persia. What Webb's poet weeps for is an integration of these two paradises. For there is value in both the transcendent realm, which Marvell reached on the "luminous plumèd Wings" of poetry, and the terrestrial realm of embodied experience which, in the act of transcendence, Marvell "laid aside."

Just as "Marvell's garden was not Plato's / garden," neither is it Webb's:

> And I have gone walking slowly
> in his garden of necessity
> leaving brothers, lovers, Christ
> outside my walls
> where they have wept without
> and I within.

All poets must "of necessity" enter the garden of intellection, for it's a necessary room of one's own.[11] Yet if this female poet is to duplicate for herself the conditions governing Marvell's poetic creativity, she too must scorn "love's solicitude" by re-imagining the garden as excluding men, be they brothers, lovers, or Christ himself. But it doesn't work: as the tears suggest, this is little more than a static and sterile world in which Webb's poet cannot flourish; nor can those she excludes from it flourish without her. Again, small wonder that she has "wept for some new convulsion / to tear together this world and his." The real "necessity" here is not merely the integration of mind and body, celestial and terrestrial, but more importantly, the integration of the mutually exclusive realms of male and female.

"Marvell's Garden" was published in *Even Your Right Eye*, Webb's first solo book,[12] which is full of personae in search of a place from which to write. The book appeared in 1956, a noteworthy date because the 1950s was the decade identified as the most regressive of the twentieth century with respect to the fortunes of Western women. But the night is always darkest before the dawn, and for women writers in many parts of the English-

speaking world, it had been a long night — one that had begun with the onset of literary modernism. For in addition to its "elitist, formalistic, anti-democratic, and anti-terrestrial" dimensions, modernism was also anti-female. The modernism of Eliot and Joyce, founding fathers of the movement, was "constructed not just against the grain of Victorian male precursors, not just in the shadow of a shattered God, but as an integral part of a complex response to *female* precursors and contemporaries," as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have observed.

> Indeed, it is possible to hypothesize that a reaction-formation against the rise of literary women became not just a theme in modernist writing but a motive for modernism. . . . [For modernism] functions simultaneously to counter and to recover the noble fatherhood of precursors from Homer to Dante and Shakespeare. . . . [B]y and large [modernism] remained (and may have been unconsciously designed as) a men's club. It is not surprising, therefore, that on his first reading of *The Waste Land* Joyce noted that T.S. Eliot's masterpiece "ends [the] idea of poetry for ladies." (Gilbert and Gubar 1987 156)

If the garrison has any applicability to the writing of women, it is on the level of modernist convention. There was not much room for women to move around in modern poetry, so they either had to "write like a man" or get out.[13] To choose the latter option obviously meant silence — and there was certainly no shortage of that in Webb's early career. To choose the former meant entanglement in a web of contradiction and paradox beyond what modernist convention was designed to accommodate. As "Marvell's Garden" suggests, Webb was fascinated by that extra dimension of contradiction and paradox.[14] The narcissistic selfhood of the lyric positioned the poetic I/eye at the centre of experience — as it did the "I" of Andrew Marvell — but that subject position is unavailable to Webb's poet.[15] The poet orbits "the fixed sundial" at the centre of the garden, but as she closes in on it she finds what Pauline Butling calls "a dissolving centre of contradictions and reversals: 'closer, closer I come to

contradiction / to the shade green within the green shade'" (1988 70). The poem's claim that "too many fences fence us out" could well be made on behalf of all women poets who never quite gained access to the centre of the modern lyric.[16]

The masculinity of modernism accounts for the "dominance of male figures" in Webb's early work which, in the context of some of the *Wilson's Bowl* poems, she would call "more of an embarrassment to myself than anything else": "Some have suggested that these figures could be masks, personae, my animus, my male muse in many guises. . . . I think that those interpretations are significant — I might even agree with them.[17] They signify the domination of a male power culture in my educational and emotional formation so overpowering that I have, up to now, been denied access to inspiration from the female figures of my intellectual life, my heart, my imagination" (*WB* 9). This is certainly borne out in "Marvell's Garden," where the metaphysical garden signifies "a male power culture" — the culture of poetry. The figure of Marvell himself, a kind of Father Culture, becomes poetry's gatekeeper, who has "denied access" to women. In this way, "The Garden" can be seen as a logical precursor of *The Waste Land* — and, of course, Eliot alludes to Marvell's poem in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." As a consequence of this denial of the feminine, Webb's personae are often in search of a garden of their own.

The garden is an intermediate, or transitional, space where mutually alienated culture and nature meet and interconnect. As Paul Shepard writes:

> City buildings are for people. In spite of roaches and rats, urban houses and pavements have no little transition to nature, no intermediate ground shared with the external world, except for gardens. Like the cathedral, the garden or park represents the point at which the interpretation of experience in nature is transitional between mythical and rational, between an internal, personal sense of identity and the universe. The garden is composed of real nonhuman organisms with their own independent existences, but which are perceived metaphorically and reassuringly. Unlike the buildings which turn the individual in on himself, the garden is the landing from which outer space is confronted. (113-114)

It is true that Marvell, in caring "more for the form / of things than for the thing itself," was more interested in "outer space" than he was in "the landing," but this is in keeping with Father Culture's metaphysical preoccupations; Shepard would likely include Marvell in the male category of "the esthetes who attempt to etheralize [sic] their sexuality" (107). But the fact remains that real gardens on real earth are places where nature and gardeners are on intimate terms. The gardener may transform nature in anthropocentric ways but, as Shepard intimates, in the process nature can also transform the gardener in ecocentric ways. That process is hermeneutical, rather than metaphysical, and is analogous to a poetic process in which the opposition between "mythical and rational," "personal" and "universal," dissolves. Hence, Webb's poets negotiate with many gardeners, gatekeepers, and muses — all aspects of Father Culture — for a place to put down roots and grow.

Marvell's garden of poetic creativity may have "closed in on Paradise," but Father Culture also presides over another of paradise's binary opposites, which is also a garden of sorts:

> The poet in his tree of hell
> will see life steadily and see it well.
>
> The world is round. It moves in circles.
>
> The poet in his vision tree
> imparts immaculate necessity
> to murder, ignorance and lust.
>
> The world is round. It moves in circles.
>
> Poetry, the poet's curse,
> will look, for better or for worse,
> like a simple monk in meditation
>
> cloaked in apparent deprivation:
> in its ambiguous nakedness
> glows the raiment of its otherness.
>
> The world is round. It moves in circles.
>
> With laughter on his haunted face,
> a madman captive in a leaf's embrace,
> the poet wildly shakes his tree . . .

> The world is round. It moves in circles.
> ("In Situ" *EYRE* 54)

In 1982, Sharon Thesen provided a superb anthropological and Jungian analysis of this poem that links it with Webb's later work. In that context, "Webb's conception of the 'poet in his tree' suggests the shamanic vocation of the poet as messenger of the other, as spiritual adept, and as 'seer' of visions" (17). This interpretation helps Thesen to illuminate the petroglyph poems of *Wilson's Bowl*. But "In Situ" has more obvious links to poems of the same period. The poem is part of a two-part sequence that explores the dark underside of modernist convention, which was in part a reaction against the sentimentalization of nature perceived to characterize late Victorian Romanticism. "In Situ" is nothing if not a desentimentalization of the garden: in this hellish inversion of Marvell's heaven, male poet, simple monk, and Matthew Arnold, alluded to in the second line, add up to an unholy masculine trinity. The Arnoldian allusion is especially significant, for if anyone set himself up as Father Culture, it was Arnold. Indeed, Arnold was the first Western thinker to isolate "culture" as a definable entity, which he then implicitly defined as white, upper-class, male — and literary. "In Situ" atop his cultural elitism, Arnold wished to see life steadily and see it whole. While many of his numerous essays are devoted to positive things, such as "sweetness and light," what he also reported on from his lofty perch was philistinism, barbarism, and anarchy. This is not much different than the "murder, ignorance and lust" which Webb's treed poet imparts with "immaculate" fidelity.

In distant orbit around Arnoldian Father Culture circles Mother Earth, also known as "Mother Nature." Compared to the "simple monk" — naked yet clothed in "otherness" — what does *she* look like up close?

> Sprouts the bitter grain in my heart,
> green and fervent it grows as all
> this lush summer rises in heats about me,
> calls along the vines of my wrath,
> chokes and enchants my eyes
> Even the crows that nest in this valvular forest

> scream and collect the glittering fires
> of my hatreds, dispose this desperate love,
> my fury, amid the sinister leaves.
> Hot, the wind threatens my trees with weather,
> rushes the crows to skies of their ancient glory,
> vultures, and I watch, tormented by sun.
> I am all land to this malignant grain, ambiguous,
> it burgeons in a single season, like fear.
> Like fear I have known it, a forest of green angels,
> a threat of magnificent beasts. . .
> ("Sprouts the Bitter Grain" *EYRE* 19)

This is not the view from atop culture's vision tree, but rather, the view from the other side of the culture/nature divide — the view, it might be said, from outside the garrison. Perhaps this is what it feels like to be identified as Father Culture's Other, repository of all his ambivalent feelings about his inability to transcend the human condition, which entraps him in nature, just as the poet "In Situ" is "captive in a leaf's embrace." My interpretation here draws on Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, another work by a female philosopher of the fifties, in which she notes that "still in our day woman inspires man with horror: it is the horror of his own carnal contingence, which he projects upon her" (138).

As for the garden, this poet-as-landscape/poet-as-poem, *is* the garden. *She* is the transitional space between culture and nature. This corresponds to Sherry Ortner's view of woman's place in a variety of patriarchal societies: "Belonging to culture, yet appearing to have stronger and more direct connections with nature [woman] is . . . seen as situated between the two realms" (80). She may perform the function of mediating between the realms (84), but in the case of this poem, she is also the site of the conflict between them: she is a terrible warning against using language to conquer nature rather than to extend communion *with* nature. Perhaps this is why all those ambivalent feelings — bitterness, wrath, hatred, desperation, fury, and fear — are not simply projections but are also internal to the poet/landscape that articulates them: she is as threatening as she is threatened, as malignant as she is maligned. These are the kinds of paradoxes that fascinated Webb and rendered suicidal the poets she entangled in them.

Like "In Situ," "Sprouts the Bitter Grain" can be seen as a reversal of Andrew Marvell's garden because Webb's poem tells the garden's side of the story. The paradox at the heart of Marvell's poem was that its images of growth were inconsistent with the notion of timelessness. But this was no problem for Marvell: through poetic transcendence into the realm of abstraction he could annihilate terrestrial flux and change. Indeed, Marvell's poem actually equates "transcending" with "Annihilating" nature. As Webb's poem intimates, it's only through this act of transcendence that Marvell's garden "closed in on Paradise." But transcendence is at best a poetic fiction, at worst a dangerous illusion, for it alienates us from nature. Moreover, the assumption at the heart of the illusion is that it is the male poet who is transcendent; women, like nonhuman nature, are merely the agents of his transcendence. Thus Webb's female garden closes in on hell: despite her images of organicism and growth, she is a garden trapped in the timelessness of a "single season"; she is the "hot glade" of "Marvell's Garden" trapped for eternity under a scorching summer sun.

But gardens, despite the serpents who often lurk there, are not always the site of such conflict. Gardens are sometimes recreational spaces, places of play — in this case, the play of meaning — and this poet/landscape would prefer that construction:

> And Oh, I call,
> Oh, to the gods of the temperate climes,
> Praise me, destroy these criminal branches,
> Bring me — soft — the weather of meadows,
> The seasons and gardens of children.
> ("Sprouts the Bitter Grain," *EYRE* 19)

The suggestion of children at play in gardens leads to a possible play on words: "temperate" evokes "temporal," and "climes" rhymes with "times." Is this tormented landscape, constructed according to the unsentimental conventions of modernism, calling upon the father-gods of an earlier poetic tradition to reconstruct her in their processural, if no less gendered, terms? If so, as the destruction of her "criminal branches" seems to suggest, no matter whose version of feminine stereotyping we impose

upon nature, there are always ecocidal consequences. What this garden and this poet want is an abandonment of the illusions of timelessness and transcendence, and an acknowledgment of the cycles of the seasons and the human embeddedness in nature.

Throughout *Even Your Right Eye*, what Webb calls her "adherence to the modernist approach as developed by the old boys" (Butling 1991-92 35) was in conflict with the conventions modernism carried forward from earlier traditions. The I-ness of the modern lyric both attracted and eluded her. Perhaps that I-ness is "the bitter grain" that both "chokes and enchants my eyes." For indeed, while her vision in these early poems is startling in its clarity, the "I" in almost every case finds the fictions of transcendence, timelessness, and idealism hard to swallow. Integrating her vision with the demands of modernist convention — "Grafting the living and the dead / into the flesh of eternity" — requires that "the I become the We" ("Sacrament of Spring"). This fiction of eternity is the "troublesome lie" at the heart of the poetic tradition; poetic conventions are "a little gang of sweet pretence" that splinters the I, as in the line that reads "I, how can I, I", and alienates these multiplying subjectivities from "that virtuous land / where one can die without a second birth" ("Lament").

Webb's poets in these earliest poems may be "moved by pure design" but by withdrawing into "abstractions," they are "draw[ing] the curtains" against the terrestrial world of growth and change: "Thus I elaborate a rite [write?]," "call in the leafless winter that I shun" ("Curtains"). In what is perhaps another allusion to Arnold, father of poetry as a substitute religion, empty poetic form becomes the implied analogue of the empty "shape of prayer," "curved and going nowhere, to fall / in pure abstraction saying everything / and saying nothing at all" ("The Shape of Prayer"). Compared to all these leafless, lifeless, deathless shapes and abstractions, the "bird of death is radiant and complex" ("Pain").

Webb's poets live inside these early poems; thus by lashing out at the conventions and systematically killing them off, as it were, they are committing a kind of suicide — which may account for the many repetitions of the suicide theme throughout Webb's work. It was a theme that some critics dismissed as self-pitying and others embraced as ennobling; both groups tended to interpret it as signifying ultimate finality (and, illogically, as

autobiography). But there were always more poets where the dead ones came from, and it is through their pain, despair, loss, and suicide that Webb renews herself again and again, as her poetry cycles through the seasons of its early development.

Implicit in a passage from C.G. Jung's *Alchemical Studies*, quoted by Thesen in her analysis of Webb's vision tree, is the philosophical link between the poems in *Even Your Right Eye* and those of Webb's next book, *The Sea is Also a Garden*: "The philosophical tree usually grows alone and 'on the sea' in the Western Land, which presumably means on an island. The secret moon-plant of the adepts is 'like a tree planted in the sea'" (Thesen 18). This in turn relates to how Webb spent the years in which she wrote all of her early poetry: "I grew up on an island — Vancouver Island. I was born in Victoria and grew up there, and my one ambition when I was a teenager was to get off that island — you know, onto the big mainland! The big city! And then half way through my life my ambition was to get back onto an island . . ." (qtd. in Munton 82). Webb's personae would not be entirely free from the discomfort of ill-fitting conventions until Webb herself made the permanent move to Salt Spring Island in 1969. In the meantime, her growing consciousness of the sea as the ultimate garden of creativity, including poetic creativity, would have to carry her through. Some of the poems in *The Sea is Also a Garden* were written during her 1960-62 Vancouver stopover between ten years in Montreal/London/Paris and seven years in New York/San Francisco/Toronto. What is important about the book for my argument is that it was published a year before the UBC summer poetry course, a Canadian literary event that has passed into legend. There, in 1963, Webb and several other West Coast poets would come into fruitful contact with Americans Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley, Denise Levertov, and Allen Ginsberg. This meeting would shift the axis of poetic influence from east-west to south-north, catapult Canadian poetry beyond traditional modernist convention, and thus accelerate Webb's development in the direction it had been slowly moving in *The Sea is Also a Garden*.

The book opens with these lines from William Carlos Williams which serve as the epigraph:

But the sea
which no one tends
is also a garden

"Mad Gardener to the Sea . . ." opens the book and plays off these lines. Unlike Williams' sea/garden, Webb's gets regularly tended — by the moon/gardener, who is as mad and rageful as any of Webb's muses. These emotional qualities implicity associate the moon with the feminine in accordance with antique gender mythology. But this poem "dreameth" back even farther than the earliest human cultures, back "beyond all Paradise," "back to water" as the first garden, the place where all subsequent gardens — including Marvell's — had their beginning. The sea is, then, the Garden of Gardens, and long before there were human females to identify with it, the moon gardened there, turning the tides as the garden turned through night and turned through day, and seeing the sea through the seasons. The sea makes it possible to see.

What the poet sees is that not all gardens in the Western literary tradition close in on heaven, hell, or any other transcendent realm. There are, for example, the three she chooses to claim for herself in "Three *Haiku* on a Literary Theme." All three of these gardens, which Webb borrows from "The Song of Songs," Shakespeare's *Othello*, and Thomas Brown's "My Garden," close in on love:

i
"A garden inclosed
is my sister, my spouse". Bloom
blue delphinium.

ii
Gardener is will.
"Our bodies are our gardens".
Insect, who are you?

iii
Heart's flowering. "A
garden is a lovesome thing",
December lover.

In startling contrast to "The garden where Marvell scorned love's solicitude," these gardens owe their very existence to love. Love is, after all, the name we give to the most powerful interconnecting force between self and other: in Webb's many catalogues of emotions, Love always shines like a beacon illuminating the process of interconnection. Marvell's notwithstanding, many gardens in literature have been metaphors for poets' most intimate relationships: their gardens have been their sisters, their spouses, their bodies, and other "lovesome" things. Compared to Webb's sea/garden, they may appear overly feminized, anthropomorphized, and sentimentalized, but they all have an immediacy which, for Webb, is absent in the late modernist tradition. Little wonder, then, that her poet lays claim to these gardens. She claims a corner of each by planting a new particularity within it — a "delphinium," an "Insect," a "lover." Most important of all, in terms of Webb's evolving poetic, in recasting these familiar literary gardens in Haiku form, what she has created is a transitional space in which the literary traditions of East and West meet and interconnect.

What the poet also sees now is made clear in a pair of poems called "Breaking" and "Making." To paraphrase:[18] she sees the necessity for "Breaking" out of the religious, literary, and philosophical prisons of Western culture because there is a "Destructive element" in all our systems of thought, which systems are themselves undergoing destruction. Notions of resurrection and eternal life have "clattered to the ground" with the "crucifix," and it would be best "not to raise our silly gods again." Our oppressive (and patriarchal) literary traditions now "bear a crown of darkness," and our ancient philosophies are like antique marble sculptures "crumbling in the terrible Grecian light." All of these crumbling systems are, of course, the context for the poetic conventions out of which Webb's poetry is also "Breaking."

For Webb, a new kind of poetry is now in the "Making" — one that gives poetic voice to a time-honoured mother-culture:

> Quilted
> patches, unlike the smooth slick loveliness
> of bought,
> this made-ness out of self-madness
> thrown across their bones to keep them warm.
> It does.

This new poetry may not be as grand as the old tradition, but it will do: it's homemade, out of "self-madness," like a crazy-quilt of random patches — a craziness that is not so much a breakdown as a break*through*.[19] It may not require a grand poet, toiling in the isolation of his genius, but it will do: "two bodies are better than one for this quilting." It may not be grandly inspired by the saints of Western Christianity, but it will do: "Exemplary under the tree, / Buddha glows out now." Despite the alleged modesty of this poetic quilting project, "A grace is made, a loveliness is caught." Most important of all, there are no elite upper realms here because, quilted in "the mild unblessedness of day," this poetry honours "the untranscended soul." This is a poetry free of old conventions and pretensions: thus, "for our dubious value it will do. / It always does."

In "Marvell's Garden," the poet "caught the vest he'd laid aside / all blest with fire"—caught it but did not put it on; in its maleness it did not quite fit. In "Flux," the poet *is* that vest, that perishable body:

> Who would call me to still centres
> needs a lesson in desire.
> I am fire's ephemeral
> boast on Heraclitean air.

Here, Webb critiques the "still centres" that so attracted T.S. Eliot and his fellow modernists. Still as death and devoid of desire, those centres are the transcendent realms that go back to the dualism of Plato and Parmenides. Webb embraces instead the temporal realm of change and flux as represented by Heraclitus, who envisioned the world as periodically destroyed by fire, only to be renewed in every detail. Heraclitus would become the patron saint of postmodernism, yet Davey ignored his presence in Webb's work. The Heraclitean vision is certainly in keeping with the successive generations of Webb personae who self-immolated on the funeral biers of modernist convention, only to rise from the ashes because

> Nothing finally is final —
> every love is a rain

opening the bud to fire
asking and receiving its own Easter.

Interesting here is Webb's ability to see correspondences between systems of thought, such as Heraclitean and Christian philosophies, which were regarded by most other poets of the sixties as trapped in binary opposition. In Webb, the Heraclitean-Christian correspondence can be read as a corrective to Eliot's vision in "Little Gidding," where fire is more hellish than Heraclitean, and the conflagration of matter (*mater*?) separated man from it, purifying his soul of all earthly desire so that he can achieve integration with a transcendent God. By contrast, the fire in "Flux" is for the purpose of nature's renewal and is a promise of the return of earthy desire. This is nature's "own Easter," not man's. Annihilation and renewal are not opposites, nor are they even two separate processes. Paradoxically, they are the same thing, torn apart only by the relentlessly polarizing forces of language. Whereas in "Marvell's Garden" the poet weeps "for some new convulsion / to tear together" what language tears assunder, in "Flux" she achieves the longed-for integration by intimating that opposites have more in common than otherwise. The only "transcendence" here is the transcendence of binary opposition. Webb's embracing of this paradox recalls several of her female contemporaries, whose poetic visions are characterized primarily by integration. As Sharon Thesen put it: "While Webb's concerns are passionate, her poems are never linguistic or ideological battlegrounds: whatever they might be saying, we are aware of an energy composed inside the diction and consciousness of the poem" (13).[20]

Some of the Webb-poets who killed themselves to escape a bad relationship with modernist convention were replaced by others who became mistresses *par excellence* of the form. In *The Sea is Also a Garden*, several of them reveal their skill in such poems as "Galaxy," "Images in Crystal" and, here, in "The Glass Castle":

The glass castle is my image for the mind
that if outmoded has its public beauty.
It can contain both talisman and leaf,
and private action, homely disbelief.
[. . .]

> I do not mean I shall not crack the pane.
> I merely make a statement, judicious and polite,
> that in this poise of crystal space
> I balance and I claim the five gods of reality
> to bless and keep me sane. (*SAG* 12)

This is an image of "Webb's mind, [which] seems always to be *moving toward composure*" (Thesen 13). Indeed, what keeps the poet of "The Glass Castle" sane in a place that drove her predecessors mad is "balance." This balance keeps the poem from becoming an ideological battleground upon which two theories of poetry compete for dominance. Like her dead sisters of *Even Your Right Eye*, she recognizes that the head-poetry of elaborate technical artifice is "outmoded," yet unlike them she values it for its "public beauty" in much the same way that we cannot help valuing public art, even while we watch it "crumbling in the terrible Grecian light." This recognition means that she can always "crack the pane," escape the outmoded conventions, and put her five senses to work on different kinds of poetry.

As if to honour all her suicidal poets, Webb writes "To Friends Who Have Also Considered Suicide," reminding them that suicide is "still a good idea":

> In the end it brings more honesty and care
> than all the democratic parliaments of tricks.
> It is the "sickness unto death"; it is death;
> it is not death; it is the sand from the beaches
> of a hundred civilizations, the sand in the teeth
> of death and barnacles our singing tongue:
> and this is "life" and we owe at least this much
> contemplation to our Western fact: to Rise,
> Decline, Fall, to futility and larks,
> to the bright crustaceans of the oversky. (*SAG* 23–24)

Suicide did prove a good idea because it brought "more honesty and care" to Webb's poetry, as successive generations of Webb's personae demonstrate. These suicides allowed Webb to clear the sand "of a hundred civilizations" from between her teeth, unbarnacle her "singing tongue," and rise like a lark in the sky

above her "bright" sea-garden. Now, if only the Fathers Culture of Western civilization would also self-immolate, the possibility of a more honest and careful culture might rise out of the ashes; after all, it would not be the first time.

Webb closes *The Sea is Also a Garden* with a poem that "recalls H.D.'s *Sea Garden*" (Thesen 13) and has come to be regarded as emblematic of a struggle that characterizes the work of many women poets operating within male-dominated traditions. Indeed William Wordsworth's patriarchal shadow looms large over "Poetics Against the Angel of Death":

> I am sorry to speak of death again
> (some say I'll have a long life)
> but last night Wordsworth's "prelude"
> suddenly made sense — I mean the measure,
> the elevated tone, the attitude
> of private Man speaking to public men.
> Last night I thought I would not wake again
> but now with this June morning I run ragged to elude
> The Great Iambic Pentameter
> who is the Hound of Heaven in our stress
> because I want to die
> writing Haiku
> or, better,
> long lines, clean and syllabic as knotted bamboo. Yes!
> (*SAG* 39)

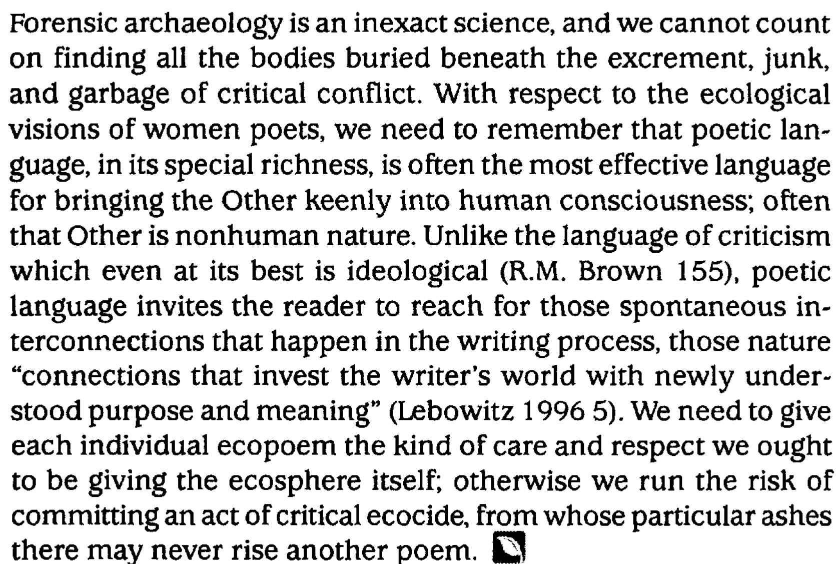
The poem begins with a characteristically feminine apology for speaking out, but ends with an emphatic assertion of the poet's right to speak. Between this opening and closing is an attempt to come to terms with the patriarch of Romantic poetry, the "Angel of Death" to so many women poets, and imaged here in a poetic dialogue which, like Marvell's garden, excludes women. The Wordsworthian tradition, with its "elevated tone" and its ponderous measure — its egocentric I AM-bic pentameter[21] — threatens to hound the female poet into a deathly silence. The poet's retreat from the patriarchal British tradition and her escape into what is for her a more congenial Eastern tradition echo all the suicidal retreats and great escapes I've been tracing through Webb's early work.[22]

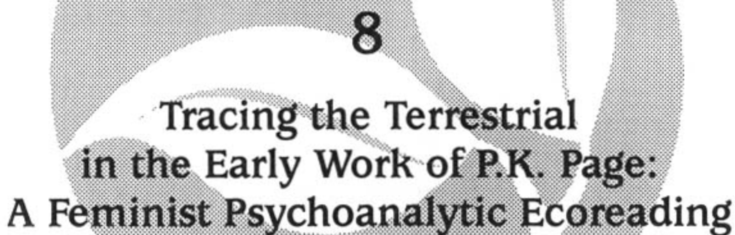
Phyllis Webb *is* enjoying a long life, and she *has* risen out of the ashes of a critical war in which she was unjustly burned at the stake of literary ideology. *Naked Poems*, the book that followed *The Sea is Also a Garden*, and which was condemned by Davey as written in "a language so private, cryptic, fragmentary, and 'naked' that it almost abandons communication" (1974 262), survived his attack to become a cherished contribution to Canadian poetry. *Naked Poems* contains what is perhaps the briefest and most succinct statement of ecopoetics in all of Webb's early work:

> *What do you really want?*
>
> want the apple on the bough in
> the hand in the mouth seed
> planted in the brain want
> to think "apple" (*VT* 104)

Here, the desire is toward a perfect integration of real gardens, where real apple trees grow, with the internal garden, the garden of intellection and poetic invention. Only through this process of integration and internalization can we begin to move beyond our dualistic habits of thought and reintegrate humanity and nonhuman nature. For if we can only learn to "think 'apple,'" we will be able to speak and act on the wisdom that "apple" has long signified in Western culture. It was, after all, the impossibility of the apple in Marvell's Eveless Eden that made his garden so uninhabitable, his thought so unthinkable, his greening so ungreen. The simplicity and directness — indeed, the nakedness — of Webb's statement is surely among what Bentley calls "the ways in which poems . . . act to bridge the gaps within and among things human and nonhuman that were opened by modernity" (1990 n.pag.).

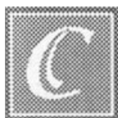
Critical warfare is hardest on those poets whose work has the dubious honour of serving as battlefield. Were it not for her philosophy of rising from the ashes of destruction, Phyllis Webb might never have survived her "critical wounds" to take up making poems again. Had she remained a mere casualty of war, her early work, like the writing of untold numbers of her female predecessors, might well have been lost to literary history.


Forensic archaeology is an inexact science, and we cannot count on finding all the bodies buried beneath the excrement, junk, and garbage of critical conflict. With respect to the ecological visions of women poets, we need to remember that poetic language, in its special richness, is often the most effective language for bringing the Other keenly into human consciousness; often that Other is nonhuman nature. Unlike the language of criticism which even at its best is ideological (R.M. Brown 155), poetic language invites the reader to reach for those spontaneous interconnections that happen in the writing process, those nature "connections that invest the writer's world with newly understood purpose and meaning" (Lebowitz 1996 5). We need to give each individual ecopoem the kind of care and respect we ought to be giving the ecosphere itself; otherwise we run the risk of committing an act of critical ecocide, from whose particular ashes there may never rise another poem.



8

Tracing the Terrestrial in the Early Work of P.K. Page: A Feminist Psychoanalytic Ecoreading



ategorizing the poetry of P.K. Page has never been an easy critical task. The scant attention paid her during the first three decades of her career was perhaps a reflection of the discomfort of critics, who could not pigeonhole her work as belonging to a particular literary school or influenced by a particular mode of philosophical thought. As John Orange has observed, "Initially she was aligned with the leftist poets of social protest and the modernists; then she was seen as part of a cosmopolitan-metaphysical group.

> Gradually her connections to the Symbolists were emphasized until, in the late seventies, her work began to be assessed on its own terms, and its recurring images and metaphors came to be seen as an enclosed poetic world, or myth, which emphasized ways of seeing, the nature of the real, and mystical vision, in an increasingly transparent language. (Orange 1989 10)

Orange is quite accurate; one can almost hear the collective sigh of relief that runs through the criticism of the seventies, when it was finally agreed that Page lived in her own private clutter of images, a transcendent realm at several removes from the incessant flux and process of nature. Critics such as the postmodernist

Frank Davey, for example, writing in 1974, could now project back on to the young modernist Page "a severe distrust of the physical universe" and dismiss her as one of "the various 'anti-life' poets of twentieth-century Canadian poetry" (Davey 1976 233-4).

While it is true that the exquisite visionary precision latent in Page's early poetry did emerge as one of the central features of her work during the seventies, it is also true that the heavy critical emphasis on the recurring metaphor of eyes and seeing as a poetic device that distances her from material reality helped to obscure the way she sometimes incorporated other bodily senses to keep her connected to the natural world and underscore her identification with it. Fortunately — or perhaps not so, given the severity of the ecological crisis — we have an urgent reason for re-visioning what poets like P.K. Page may have been trying to tell us about nature and their relationship to it.

In the eyes of literary critics during the seventies, there were only two responses to nature a Canadian poet could have: s/he either recoiled from it in deep terror, the view of Northrop Frye's disciples, or she could revel in its Heraclitean clash of opposites, à la Davey and other postmodernists. Either way, opposition and conflict were central. Now, however, critics such as D.M.R. Bentley are urgently investigating how literary criticism can "confirm or assist the reintegration of humanity and nature," how "critics of Canadian poetry [can] participate in undoing the erosion of people's sense of their integrity and interconnectedness with nature . . . " (Bentley 1990 n.pag.). Feminist critique can offer at least one answer in keeping with what Bentley calls "ecological poetics," for a feminist perspective encourages us to examine the way women have internalized the assumption that women are to men as nature is to culture. While 25 years of feminist scholarship, coupled with our increasing environmental awareness, have made it ludicrous to insist that one sex is somehow "closer" to nature than the other, the age-old belief that men can transcend nature while women are hopelessly embedded in it is in part responsible for some significant differences between male and female conceptualizations of nature. To be sure, any critic — feminist or otherwise — who pursues this difference risks being labelled a gender essentialist. Yet given that both sexes are equally and inextricably embedded in nature,

and that traditionally the most influential male thinkers have denied this for men, while women have had to embrace it for themselves, it makes sense to examine women's poetry for possible ways of coming to terms with that human embeddedness. Nothing less than the survival of the planet is at stake.

In this essay, I apply an ecological and psychoanalytic perspective to a handful of P.K. Page's poems written before feminist scholarship and environmental crisis raised into general consciousness the ecological folly of buying into notions of male transcendence and female immanence. Unlike her more highly sophisticated later poetry, in which she confidently plays with and delights in the notion of transcendence, a few of her early poems, along with her novel *The Sun and the Moon*, retain much of the naiveté of girlhood and emerging womanhood; hence they can be seen as possessing clues to the way women grew into their culturally assigned place vis-à-vis nature. More important, these early works suggest a more terrestrially-grounded side of Page's sensibility which, despite the images of summer green and winter white that have dominated her work since the beginning, is largely overlooked by most critics and even denied by some.

Two early poems provide a key to a more ecologically centred appreciation of Page. One of these, a poem originally entitled "Landscape of Love," is a favourite of Page's and was chosen by her for reprinting in two of her early volumes:

> Where the bog ends, there, where the ground lips, lovely
> is love, not lonely.
> Land is
> love, round with it, where the hand is;
> wide with love, cleared scrubland, grain
> on a coin.
> Oh, the wheatfield, the rock-bound rubble;
> the untouched hills
> as a thigh smooth;
> the meadow.
> Not only the poor soil lovely, the outworn prairie,
> but the green upspringing,
> the lark-land,
> the promontory.

> A lung-born land, this,
> a breath spilling,
> scanned by the valvular heart's
> field glasses. (*As Ten as Twenty* 1)

An exclusively visionary and metaphysical interpretation of Page would focus on the image of field glasses with its implication of distance and the sense of sight. Such a reading might also interpret this alleged remoteness as undermining the effort at intimacy with both landscape and lover, seizing on the words "there" in the opening line and "untouched" in the eighth as evidence of this unfulfilled intimacy. Yet even if we accept these fragments as distancing effects, this poem nevertheless stands in startling contrast to others similar to it written by Page's male contemporaries. Take, for example, F.R. Scott's "Trans Canada," in which the remote landscape is seen from an aircraft that springs "upward into a wider prairie," high above the material prairie around Regina (Scott 34-5) — or, more significantly, Scott's "Flying to Fort Smith," imaging another landscape peered at "through panes of glass," a landscape remote from the "long lanes of space" where the airborne poet dreams of future cities sleeping "Underground / In the coins of rock" (Scott 31). By contrast, Page gives us the other side of those hidden coins, as it were — the more visually immediate "Grain / on a coin," an image at once organic and inorganic.

Page's poem may even be seen as a corrective to the male landscape poetry of early Canadian modernism in that it directly contradicts A.J.M. Smith's "The Lonely Land," which is often cited as the most representative landscape poem of the period. Page's landscape is by contrast "not lonely" because, unlike Smith's, it is an intensely "Personal Landscape," for this was how she retitled the poem when she chose it as the opening piece for her 1946 volume, *As Ten As Twenty*. Contrary to the widely held opinion of her work as almost exclusively visual, this poem is so replete with evocations of the sense of touch that even the word "untouched" evokes its opposite. The female body, round, wide, smooth to the hand's touch, shares an intersubjective space with the "cleared scrubland," "the wheatfield," "the rock-bound rubble," and "the outworn prairie." I will return to this concept of intersubjective space, as it is central to the ecological poetic

operative in much Canadian poetry by women. First, however, I would like to examine a poem which may be seen as a kind of companion piece to "Personal Landscape."

The image of "untouched hills" in a poem of such tactile intimacy as "Personal Landscape" is a paradox which "Virgin," another frequently republished poem, helps to unravel:

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.
(*The Metal and the Flower* 30)

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" (Moers 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. 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." This poem of female desire and self-discovery not only images the deep interconnectedness of humankind and nature; along with "Personal Landscape," it also helps to refute the view that for Page "terrestrial life is an amalgam of deceit, pain, overpowering speed, and sin" (Davey 1976 231). Indeed, as "Virgin" demonstrates, nature is not merely "the environment" — a humanistic construct defining man as the measure and the centre of all that surrounds him — but rather, something that is also as intimately internal to us as a male lover enclosed within a woman's sexual embrace. In other

words, our relationship to nature is paradoxical: nature is our "holding environment" which we in turn hold within ourselves.

The paradox that characterizes our relationship to nature corresponds to a paradox addressed by feminist psychoanalytic theorists. Drawing on the work of British object-relationist W.D. Winnicott, Jessica Benjamin theorizes it as the intersubjective mode of spatial representation: the "intersubjective mode assumes the possibility of a context with others in which desire is constituted for the self. It thus assumes the paradox that in being with the other, I may experience the most profound sense of self" (Benjamin 1986 92). The intersubjective mode is associated with the "interior of the body and the space between bodies [which] form an elusive pattern, a plane whose edge is ever-shifting" in that it "both forms a boundary and opens up into endless possibility" (94). This intersubjective space is a place where all objects are subjects, where self and other meet in a flow of mutual recognition, where relationship is akin to *process* rather than *structure*. Intersubjective space is often likened to the psychoanalytic "holding environment," a transitional space in which "experience can be transformed in the process of self-discovery." Understanding the fantasy lives of women, including the literary products of that fantasy, involves recognizing in women "the wish for a holding other whose presence does not violate one's space but permits the experience of one's own desire," a holding other who acknowledges that desire "when it emerges of itself." Inner space as women often experience it is not sealed off but rather, opens out onto "the space between self and other: the holding environment and transitional space" (Benjamin 1986 96). The intersubjective mode of representation thus provides a clear accounting of the female desire and self-discovery of "Virgin," and the more subtle auto-eroticism implicit in "Personal Landscape," where the poet is alone in nature but "not lonely."

The intersubjective mode is distinct from the intrapsychic mode of symbolic representation, in which the phallus is the organizer of desire: "The phallus as emblem of desire [represents] the one-sided individuality of subject meeting object, a complementarity that idealizes one side and devalues the other" (Benjamin 1986 98). This mode is unlike the intersubjective mode in several ways. First, it preserves the dualistic, hierarchical,

oppositional distinction between subject and object. Second, eschewing the interdependence and fluid ego boundaries of the intersubjective mode, it idealizes autonomy, individualism, separation, and distance from the other; it obeys the laws of structure rather than process. And finally, it is the mode which has traditionally governed gender relations (and, by extension, Western humanism's attitude to devalued, "feminine" nature). Significantly, despite the evidence that what is experientially female is the association of desire with intersubjective space, "women who present such images of spatial containment and inner space also have masochistic fantasies in which surrender is called forth by the other's power to penetrate, to know, and to control their desire" (97). These masochistic fantasies are the dark underside of women's propensity toward ideal love: the internalization of the father qua phallus as a representation of agency and desire accounts for women's traditional readiness to idealize men, who heroically struggle for transcendence, and who represent and give women vicarious access to that transcendence (Benjamin 1986 79).

Benjamin concludes that the self which develops and accumulates through intersubjective experiences of self-recognition "is a different modality that sometimes works with, but sometimes is at cross-purposes to, the symbolized ego of phallic structuring. It is essential to retain this sense of the complementary, as well as the contrasting, relationship of these modes. Otherwise, one falls into the trap of choosing between them, grasping one side of a contradiction that must remain suspended to be clarifying" (1986 94). In other words, we need to suspend our binary habits of thought if we are to grasp what is meant here by complementarity. This sense of complementarity and contrast is important to an examination of Page's initial attempt at an ecological poetic.

In addition to the characteristics already outlined, the intersubjective mode has also been associated with empathy, an interpersonal relatedness during which one experiences temporary identification with the other's emotional state yet remains aware that the source of the emotion is in the other.[1] This has obvious implications for Page's romance, *The Sun and the Moon*, written when she was just twenty-one years old.[2] This novel, as Jean Mallinson has noted, is "important to the student or serious reader of Page's poems" (Mallinson 1979 8). Indeed, it may be

read as one of Page's earliest attempts to work out her ecological poetic. A narrative of female power and desire, the novel may also be read as a tragic commentary on how that power and desire are thwarted by the failure to understand and value them. The failed interrelationship between the novel's two central characters echoes the failure of humankind's relationship to nature.

John Orange's sustained reading of the novel leaves little to add, except perhaps an extension of the psychological allusions. Orange focuses on the Jungian allusions which, when seen to provide the structure of the work, divide its symbols and images neatly into masculine and feminine:

> The symbolic design is complex and consistently used to make statements about male versus female, art versus nature, intellectual and civil order versus intuitive spontaneity and empathy with the particularity of things as they exist in nature. The masculine realm of intellectual ordering, the spirit divorced from matter, and artistic patterning is associated with symbols of the sun and various forms of light, jewellery, the wind, hunting, the colour brown, and music. The feminine realm of earth and dream is symbolized by the moon, the sea and its plants and fish, rocks, trees, the colour white, a white panther, various flowers and vegetation, and doves — all images consistent with the rites of the Great Goddess of earliest mythology. . . . (Orange 1989 17-8)

Orange's analysis makes sense of the way the novel is constructed on the principle of binary opposition. From the perspective of the postmodernist era, this structure may seem conventional, but during the 1930s, the mapping of the psyche by Freud and Jung into pairs of opposing drives or archetypes was still finding its way into Canadian fiction. Freud's concept of *Einfühlung*, coined as "empathy" from the Greek *empatheia* by Freud's translator James Strachey, emerges in the novel as a potential force for reconciling these oppositions.

The novel, as succinctly described by Orange, "follows the love affair between eighteen-year-old Kristin Fender, who was

born during a lunar eclipse and possesses the power to 'become' objects in her environment through concentration and empathy, and Carl Bridges, a thirty-seven-year-old successful artist who, significantly, wants to paint Kristin the moment he meets her" (Orange 1989 17). Page's choice of the names Fender and Bridges is intriguing. On one level the names are appropriate: through marriage, Carl wishes to create a permanent bridge between himself and Kristin, but in the end she fends him off, choosing instead to merge with nature. However, on a less obvious level the names take on an ironic reversal, for it is Kristin who possesses the potential for creating interpersonal bridges: her empathic power is both cause and consequence of her ability to relate intersubjectively. Orange is correct in attributing significance to Carl's desire to paint Kristin, for the only way he can "fend 'er" off is to objectify her — quite literally — by turning her into an art "object," a representation of ideal womanhood, contained, controlled, and disempowered.

The tragedy of the story is that neither Carl nor Kristin can fully appreciate the positive power of Kristin's gift:

> "Sometimes," he said, "you almost take the words out of my mouth. It's as if you know me from the inside — an empathetic knowledge of me."
>
> "What is empathetic?" She sat up straight.
>
> "Well," he hesitated. "It's a psychic term really. An inner knowledge resulting from the projection of the mind of the observer into the thing observed."
>
> "Oh!" Why are we talking like this, why already are we on the subject I dread? She raised her hand to her mouth to hold it steady. "Is there any cure for it?" she asked.
>
> "Cure?" said Carl. "No, I don't think so, darling. It's a sort of extra sense that leads to a fuller understanding. I don't think it's a thing people try to cure." (*The Sun and the Moon* 107)

Carl has an intellectual understanding of Kristin's empathetic facility, yet he experiences her empathy as an assault on his identity. He has accurately analysed her propensity for a fuller —

and perhaps too revealing — understanding *of him*. Not surprisingly, it cripples his creativity, and he finds himself unable to paint. Carl embodies what psychoanalyst and novelist Stephen Bergman has identified as "the difficulty men have in perceiving, understanding, and being in the *process* of relationship. While it is easy for men to envision self, and even self and other, it seems less easy to envision the *relationship* between self and other, with a life of its own, in movement, as a process, arising from and reflecting upon all participants, its realness defined by the qualities inherent in mutual empathic connections" (2). Rather than a relationship of intersubjective *process*, Carl's ego demands a relationship of subject-object *structure* in keeping with the intrapsychic mode of symbolic representation.

Conversely, to Kristin, who has virtually no intellectual grasp of the empathetic, Carl's creative paralysis is more evidence in support of her superstitious belief in coincidence, a belief in her power to annihilate the other — to eclipse the other as the moon had eclipsed the sun at her birth. Their relationship founders on her conventionally phallic idealization of him, coupled with his conventionally masculine inability to relax his rigid ego boundaries and enter into the intersubjective space she creates for them. Although each sincerely desires the other, each is operating in a different relational modality. His art is dependent upon his ability to remain autonomous and "objective"; she idealizes his autonomy and objectivity. Hence she responds with a traditionally feminine gesture of self-sacrifice and withdraws from him. After observing Carl at his pastime chopping down trees, she fulfils the desire she had experienced on the eve of her wedding: to become a tree rooted in the earth, battling the wind, sheltering the birds, and "knowing the re-creation of self in the united forgetfulness of self" (*The Sun and the Moon* 97). This loss of self is consistent with Benjamin's observation that the two modalities of psychic representation can sometimes work at cross-purposes: "The fantasy of submission in ideal love is that of being released into abandon by another who remains in control. . . . [T]he freedom and abandon called forth by this powerful, controlling other represent an alienated version of the safe space that permits self-discovery, aloneness in the presence of the other" (Benjamin 1986 97). Kristin's surrender of her power to nature creates an ironic turn of events: it transforms the tree into a phallic symbol with

the power to eclipse Kristin's individuality, even as she feared eclipsing Carl's.

Not surprisingly, Kristin as subject is absent in the closing image of the novel:

> The sun and a small wind broke the surface of the lake to glinting sword blades. On the far side, where the trees marched, unchecked, right down to the water's edge, there the lake was a shifting pattern of scarlet, vermilion and burnt orange. (137)

Diction suggesting breaking, slashing, and burning subvert this tranquil image and echo the destruction of the marital bond. Denied the fulfilment of her desire for intersubjective connection with Carl, Kristin abandons that desire and passes clear through intersubjective space and onto "the far side" of it, merging with and disappearing into the landscape. Small wonder that Page came to conclude that her "subconscious evidently knew something about the tyranny of subjectivity years ago when it desired to go 'through to the area behind the eyes / where silent, unrefractive whiteness lies'" ("Questions and Images" 21).

Benjamin argues that "individuality is properly, ideally, a balance of separation and connectedness, of the capacities for agency and relatedness" (82). However, if individuality and desire "remain unchallenged male domain," it leaves women "to be righteous and deeroticized, intimate, caring, and self sacrificing" (85). Indeed, unreciprocated desire for the balance of interconnectedness leaves only two alternatives: withdrawal into the loneliness of independence and autonomy, as suggested by Kristin's withdrawal from her marriage, or the self-erasure of sustained merger with the powerful phallic other. Page's ability to illustrate these two opposing alternatives in one tragic gesture is a significant literary feat. It demonstrates her ability not only to embrace paradox but to see beyond it to the interconnectedness of all phenomena. Paradox is only a *seeming* contradiction, and when we invoke it we are admitting our tragic inability to conceptualize in anything but binary terms. It is this dualistic habit of mind which has wreaked havoc in our relationships with each other and, by extension, the rest of the natural world.

Just as there is a point of balance between separation and connectedness, so too is there a fine line between intersubjective connection and the erasure of identity through sustained merger. Sustained merger, as the novel suggests, is (to paraphrase Page's comment quoted above) a tyrannical form of subjectivity — a subjectivism as extreme as objectivism, its polarized opposite. But if we reconceive our relationship with nature as a process rather than a structure — a flow back and forth along a continuum rather than an opposition governed by subject/object dualism — the distance between the polarized extremes might be construed in terms of intersubjective experiences of varying degrees of intensity. That Page was intent upon exploring her relationship to nature within the context of this kind of fluid process is suggested in "Reflection," a poem written while she was at work on *The Sun and the Moon*. Not surprisingly, in this poem, which combines visual and tactile imagery, self and nature are both represented by a tree:

> In the noon of yesterday I saw a tree
> pretending it was a woman,
> bending over a stream,
> dipping its arms in the water
> as pale women on still nights dip theirs,
> its thick hair falling forward
> over its face, missing its own reflection.
> And I bent over the water beside it,
> dipping my hands in the stream
> and my hair fell forward
> and I was a tree.
> In the reflection I saw
> a tree and a woman bending,
> merged in the water
> and knew not whether I was the woman or tree.
> ("Reflection" 23)

There is nothing quite like pathetic fallacy for exposing the egocentricity of Western humanism — especially when it comes to divining the true nature of Nature. Indeed, this tree, which pretends it is a woman and misses seeing its own reflection, has much in common with Wordsworth's lonely cloud. It is, of course,

humankind who pretends that nature is a woman, just as in this poem it is really the woman who pretends she is a tree. What the projection of femininity onto nature has meant in a phallically oriented culture is that we treat nature the way we treat women; as an ironic consequence, in its currently desecrated state, "Mother Nature" is giving us back an astonishingly accurate reflection of ourselves. In other words, like the persona in the first seven lines of this poem, we have recreated nature in our own image.

Perhaps it is the time dislocation between the tree at noon and the "women on still nights" that prompts the poet actively to test this projection instead of passively accepting appearance as reality. In the act of bending over and disturbing the reflective surface of the water she takes back her projection and, instead, *introjects* the implicitly blurry image of self and tree merged, and for an instant in time — the magical moment of noon — she experiences herself as indistinguishable from nature. This movement from projection to introjection illustrates the process of self-"Reflection" which brings her into empathetic intersubjective relationship with the other. Unlike Kristin's sustained merger with nature which erases her from the text, this moment of merger at "noon of yesterday" is at one end of the relational continuum; at the other is the present "Reflection" upon it which returns the poet to herself while simultaneously revealing her deep interconnectedness with nature.

This interconnectedness is consistent with Page's own evaluation of the poetic operative in her work. In "A Conversation with P.K. Page," interviewer John Orange questions the extreme dualism often imposed on her work: "it seems to me you're not trying to leave the world behind the way some critics see you — life-denying Manichean, Gnostic, anti-life and so on. Do you feel in any way that there are two planes of existence unrelated to each other except in the most tenuous ways?" Page's response is emphatic: "No! No! Of course not. I think everything is immensely integrated. I think, as far as I'm capable of understanding at all, that things are intermeshed. They're . . . all part of the same thing . . . " (Orange 1988 73-4). The unique way in which Page conceptualizes and uses metaphor allows her to compensate for its conventional dualism. For Page, metaphor "'gives two for one' — gives two *in* one. Two or more separate ideas, objects, images

fuse. In doing so generate energy. Illuminate" ("The Sense of Angels" 18-19). This notion of two *in* one, rather than one superior to and illuminating the other, transforms metaphor into a useful device for conveying a vision of the world *prior to* Western culture's conception of it as two unrelated planes of existence. It also makes it impossible to distinguish a primary (or so-called "literal") from a metaphorical level in her work; hence the critical view of Page as a "difficult" poet. The difficulty is, in fact, not in Page, but rather, in our critical methodology. If some of her poems have been ignored it is almost certainly because they do not yield to conventional critical tools.

Take, for example, the habit of quoting fragments, a habit which constitutes an assault on the integrity of a poem, and which obscures as readily as it illuminates. The failure of this critical tool is especially true in the case of "Summer," a poem whose processural flow overpowers its tidy division into three verses, in turn divided into conventionally capitalized and punctuated sentences. "Summer" is also a perfect illustration of the indistinguishability of primary and metaphorical levels:

> I grazed the green as I fell
> and in my blood
> the pigments flowed like sap.
> All through my veins the green
> made a lacey tree.
> Green in my eye grew big as a bell
> that gonged and struck
> and in a whorl of green in my ear
> it spun like a ball.
>
> Orphaned at once that summer
> having sprung
> full grown and firm with green,
> chorussed with fern
> Oh, how the lazy moths were soft upon
> my feminine fingers,
> how flowers foamed at my knees
> all those green months.
>
> Near reeds and rushes where the water lay
> fat and lustred by the sun

> I sang the green that was in my groin
> the green
> of lily and maidenhair and fritillary
> from the damp wood
> of cedar and cypress from the slow hill,
> and the song, stained with the stain of chlorophyll
> was sharp as a whistle of grass
> in my green blood. (*The Metal and the Flower* 40)

This poem may be interpreted as investing nature with subjectivity, giving it a voice with which to articulate its celebration of self. This is a way of suggesting that nature is not the inarticulate and hence inferior other, but rather, that humankind does not understand any of nature's multiple languages. Positing an interiority to nature in this way also effectively characterizes it as a holding environment. Anthropocentrism aside, the act of endowing nature with human consciousness can be seen as consistent with the intersubjective mode of representation which incorporates the process of self-reflection as a way of entering into the experience of the other. Conversely, the poem may be read as the internalization of nature by the poet as subject, suggesting the fluidity of boundaries characteristic of intersubjectivity. Either way, the poem itself becomes a linguistic space, a place where self and other meet in a complex web of intersubjective connection. Auditory and tactile imagery combine with the visual, and alliteration makes the language move in time with the falling, flowing, growing, springing, foaming, and rushing of nature's processes explicit in the diction. Language as a mediator between humankind and nature has both a connective and a disruptive aspect. Yet when this poem is read as a linguistic space, rather than a symbolic structure, an emphasis on the connective emerges.

An almost exclusive critical emphasis on the symbolic in Page's poetry can obscure those places where a reading on the relative literal level might allow for an alternative, less metaphysically driven interpretation. For example, while the cold and agèd male figure imaged in "Spring" may be read as Old Man Winter, this turns the poem into an allegory of the seasons, obscuring the fact that men are as embedded in nature as are women, and that Page has perhaps intuited this. The poem images the old

man kneeling in his flower garden surrounded by spring blossoms and "sharp green shoots emerging from the beds." His "creaking joints" thaw like ice in the warm spring sun until finally he can "bend with a dancer's ease,"

> and all that he had clutched, held tightly locked
> behind the fossil frame
> dissolves, flows free
> in saffron covering the willow tree
> and coloured rivers of the rockery.
> (*As Ten as Twenty* 23)

This image of relaxing, opening out onto nature, becoming continuous with it is congruent with Page's poetic as I am construing it here. So too is the image of the old man's breath, implicity visible in the early spring air, which takes on the "yellow and white and purple" of the flowers around him, while his hands become "curved and cool for cupping petals." The fossil image, which looks backward in time, finds its complement in the closing section of the poem which looks forward to a time when

> . . . he is the garden — heart, the sun
> and all his body soil;
> glistening jonquils blossom from his skull,
> the bright expanse of lawn his stretching thighs
> and something rare and perfect, yet unknown,
> stirs like a foetus just behind his eyes.

This is hardly an image of heroically transcendent man. When the old man is finally laid in earth, he will be quite literally merged with the landscape. But this allusion to death is overturned by the more powerful language of birth, as if death were controlled and contained in birth like a foetus in the womb. Conventional as this notion of process might be, it takes on a new dimension when the implicit womb imagery is seen in the context of intersubjective space and the paradox of nature as a holding environment at once external and internal to us. The cultivated

garden is itself an intermediate or transitional space between uncultivated nature and overcultivated culture, as it were. A garden is a place where both nature and gardener undergo a transformation in which each responds directly to the other by mutually mirroring the growth process common to both. Chemical fertilizers and pesticides notwithstanding, the interaction that occurs in a successful garden is a model of cooperation between humankind and nature. Western culture's enduring love of gardens is a small beacon of hope in an otherwise gloomy ecological crisis.

Page, the self-identified "city person" who has "lived in the country a good deal — felt close to nature" (Wachtel 60), is an enthusiastic gardener. This is worth bearing in mind when we are tempted to interpret the image of the garden in her work exclusively as a symbol of some greater and more permanent reality remote from terrestrial nature. Indeed, Page has used garden imagery to convey her sense of the folly in opting for isolation in a realm of self-generated images. Here, for example, are the opening lines of a 1950s poem, "After Rain":

> The snails have made a garden of green lace:
> broderie anglaise from the cabbages,
> chantilly from the choux-fleurs, tiny veils —
> I see already that I lift the blind
> upon a woman's wardrobe of the mind. (*Cry Ararat!* 18)

Despite their reminder of how easily we feminize nature, these lines nevertheless demonstrate that the metaphysical imagination sometimes has its advantages: it can momentarily heal the world of fragmentation, find beauty in a world in which destruction is regularly visited upon human endeavour. Indeed, the female mind has its own unique metaphysic of order and beauty which is capable of transforming a ruined garden into a poem, a

> garden abstracted, geometry awash —
> an unknown theorem argued in green ink,
> dropped in the bath.
> Euclid in glorious chlorophyll, half drunk.
> (*Cry Ararat!* 18)

The theorem, with its suggestion of a transcendent realm of ideal forms, is a mathematically logical structure transformed here by "female whimsy" into a linguistic structure of fantastic beauty. However, this whimsy, which floats about the poet like "a kind of tulle, a flimsy mesh," is a self-enclosed world, absolutely inaccessible to Giovanni, for whom a garden is a garden and not a poem. It is for his sake, as he squelches dolefully through his soggy ruin of a garden, that the poet "suffer[s] shame in all these images," for their seductive beauty distances her from his distress: "I find his ache exists beyond my rim / and almost weep to see a broken man / made subject to my whim." Her fanciful response to what distresses him trivializes his pain; her impulse to tears is as much a response to her self-imposed isolation, which limits her ability to empathize with him, as it is to his inability to see the beauty in the ruin. Hence, the poem closes with an expression of her desire for interconnection — her wish that he might "come to rest within this beauty as one rests in love" and, reciprocally, that she be able to "keep [her] heart a size / larger than seeing, unseduced by each / bright glimpse of beauty" that threatens to keep her isolated in her private world of abstractions.

Nature, like anyone else with whom we may find ourselves in relationship, can sometimes be difficult to live with — especially when we want to do something silly, such as go to sea in submarines, for example; situations like this are survived largely by construing nature as the enemy. But even when we make seemingly reasonable demands on nature, as in "After Rain," nature often reminds us that "reasonable" is a relative term. Like all relationships, humankind and nature's demands compromises we do not always want to make, as the poet hopes Giovanni will learn. In exchange for those grudging compromises, nature might ignite the imagination, making possible a delightfully whimsical poem.

Western culture's propensity for fleeing messy, demanding nature and opting for the tidy and harmonious realm of pure abstraction is also the subject of "Arras," a poem which has fascinated many critics. Its elaborately stylized images of nature have strengthened some of the most persuasive arguments in support of Page as an escapist from nature in the raw. However, like "After Rain," it may be read as a caution not to be seduced by the formal realm of classical simplicity, stasis, and permanence

depicted in the arras. For the poet is not comfortable with this static realm: "I fear / the future on this arras." One may indeed fear for the future in a realm of timelessness where "future" can have no meaning. Yet the scene depicted in the arras is as seductive as eternity must be to a Christian, or the realm of eternal forms to a Platonist.

The ancient world, from which we have inherited our dualistic habits of mind, is suggested in the opening lines by the allusions to ancient dress: the "habit — classical" and "sandalled feet" of Plato's era. If it really were possible to separate mind from body and transcend into the platonic realm beyond life's change and stir, we might miss the hot imperfections of life and the stimuli of ever new and strange phenomena:

> I ask, what did they deal me in this pack?
> The cards, all suits, are royal when I look.
> My fingers slipping on a monarch's face
> twitch and grow slack.
> I want a hand to clutch, a heart to crack.
> (*Cry Ararat!* 100)

To opt for the realm of perfection and stasis is to be dealt the elitist hand: the royal face-cards in the deck are all perfection, all blank reflection, all unseeing eyes — four to a card — like the eyes in the tail of a peacock. This royal flush, like the peacock's tail, is beautiful but the poet wants more: she wants hands and a heart that respond in passion, but passion cannot exist in that fleshless realm. The flow of desire and empathy when an anxious hand reaches out to clutch a caring hand is an experience unique to the world as we know it, with its physical intimacy and its multiplicity of human emotions. It is perhaps preferable to take one's chances with a breakable heart, rather than live eternally in world of cold indifference, where the poet's question "Does no one care?" is academic. Much as the poet wants to "make a break . . . / take to [her] springy heels," she remains poised on the threshold between the material world and the world of the arras. She hopes that "hands might hold me if I spoke"; she dreams of "the bite of fingers in my flesh." But such hopes and dreams are in vain, for none of this bodily contact

can happen in the world beyond material nature where eyes, like the eyes in the tail of the peacock, are sightless and close "on nothing." In the end, as in "After Rain," it is the poet who must take responsibility for this flat, two-dimensional world of images: "I confess: / It was my eye."

When viewed in the context of poems like "After Rain" and "Arras," Page's poetry of so-called "mystical vision" becomes a terrestrial vision that moves us closer to, not farther from, the world of the body and its multiple senses. Indeed, as I have attempted to suggest in the context of the works examined here, a sustained response to the tactile and spatial allusions in Page's poetry is called for. Such a response can reward us with a vision of what Page has called "another realm — interrelated," the realm of intersubjective space, a place where it is possible to learn, as Page has, that we "have been upside down in life — like a tree on its head, roots exposed in the air" ("Questions and Images" 21). But this reward requires an act of critical will. Only by abandoning our idealization of autonomy, individualism, and distance — the phallic ideals of literary criticism as well as Western culture as a whole — can we get ourselves right-side up, reroot ourselves, and help to undo the erosion of humankind's sense of integrity and interconnectedness with nature.

Few critics have taken the time to set Page's work in the context of the various female traditions in Canadian poetry. Among women, she has always impressed us as unusually unique. But in addition to this remarkable uniqueness, Page's poetry has much in common with that of Margaret Avison in that both poets seek an enhanced vision of reality through empathy. In terms of the ecological poetic that governs a substantial stream within the Canadian female tradition, Page's early work reaches back to Isabella Valancy Crawford, whose *Malcolm's Katie*, written against the backdrop of the first wave of political feminism, inscribes one of the most sustained nineteenth-century enquiries into the complex relationship between humankind and nature. Some of Page's early work has even more in common with the healing feminism of Dorothy Livesay's first phase of poetic development in that the self-reflective approach toward a deeper appreciation of nature's processes is common to both, as is the

fascination with the tree as a personal symbol. In its subtle corrective to the work of her male contemporaries, Page resembles the young Phyllis Webb, whose philosophical enquiry into woman's place in a dualistic universe exposes the inadequacy of dualism as a tool for apprehending reality. And, finally, Page's early work has something in common with Margaret Atwood: both writers have created personae whose female identity is intimately caught up in their relationship to nature. In view of her illuminating contribution to a female ecological tradition in Canadian poetry, an ongoing investigation into the terrestrial vision of P.K. Page is a critical task whose time has finally come.

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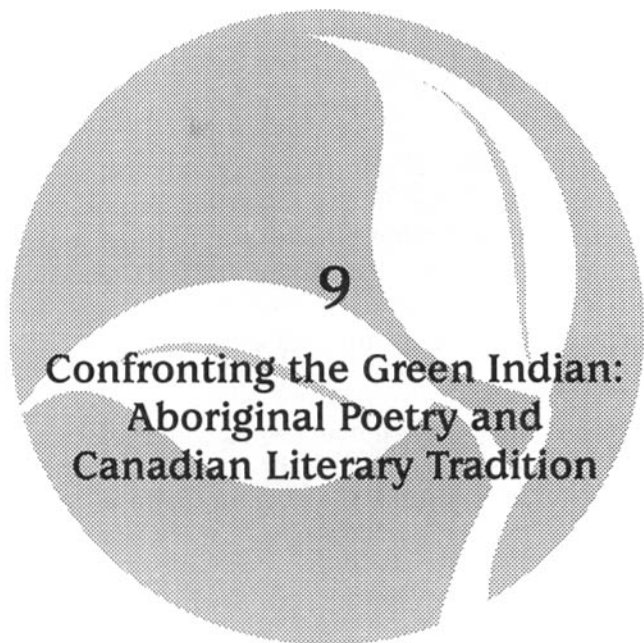


9
Confronting the Green Indian: Aboriginal Poetry and Canadian Literary Tradition

In *The Imaginary Indian*, Daniel Francis tells the story of the Englishman Archie Belaney, whom we have come to think of as having perpetrated a colossal hoax on the North American public by transforming himself into Grey Owl. Belaney, a dedicated woodsman and conservationist, assumed his Indian persona in 1930, when he turned to writing as a way of getting his environmentalist message out to the public:[1]

> While Grey Owl took advantage of the image of the Indian to advance his career as a writer, he in turn made an important contribution to the image. . . . [T]hrough his books and public appearances he established the Indian in the public mind as a natural preservationist. Civilized, industrial man was "the parasite supreme of all the earth," he wrote. He walked through the woods and only saw the profits to be made by cutting down the trees. On the other hand, Native people, living close to nature, learned a reverence and a responsibility for it. They were conservationists by instinct. (Francis 140)

Grey Owl had little difficulty in convincing his white audience of his Indian identity. Not only did he resemble what the White Man thought an Indian should look like,[2] he also added welcome

fuel to the cause of social reform, whose advocates — so many of whom had their roots in the maternal feminism of earlier decades — were grappling with the appalling social consequences of industrial capitalism, including the Great Depression. More important, Grey Owl harnessed the ideology of primitivism in the service of environmentalism:

> The greening of the Indian begins with Grey Owl. To him belongs the credit for affirming, if not creating, the image of the Indian as the original environmentalist, an image which has gained strength in the years since he expressed it. (Francis 140)

The "greening of the Indian" has been both a boon and burden to Native people. There is no question that it has given an additional measure of credibility to the ethics of aboriginal land claims over the past three decades, but it has also served to undermine the economic aspirations of Native people whose desire to share in the profits of resource development is often viewed as hypocritical by those who subscribe to the stereotype of the Green Indian. Indeed, like the maternal feminism of the past which exploited for activist purposes the only authority granted to women but failed to challenge the Father-Culture/Mother-Nature opposition, aboriginal environmentalism is a double-edged sword. In the popular imagination, it grants Native people authoritative insight into the nature of Nature, even as it functions to keep the civilized/primitive binary firmly in place.

Ambivalence about the Green Indian stereotype is not confined to land-claims activism. It's part of the larger conversation within Native communities as they continue the long process of recovery from colonialism. That process includes determining the degree to which indigenous peoples have internalized Western culture's ideology and epistemology, including its attitudes to nonhuman nature. The recent history of Western culture's interactions with nature include commercially and recreationally exploiting it; scientifically objectifying it; and Romantically worshipping it. We know this has left its mark upon nature. What we seem incapable of fully understanding is the degree to which these limited ways of knowing nature have impoverished us.

Language as we now speak and write it cannot easily accommodate alternatives to our narrow repertoire of human-nonhuman relationships. This accounts for the gullibility that Archie Belaney was able so easily to exploit. As the Green Indian, he represented white culture's only way of conceptualizing a relationship with nonhuman nature that was neither exploitive nor objectifying. In the Western imagination, those who do not exploit or objectify nature are *ipso facto* preservationist or environmentalist. It seems clear that, in their non-industrial past indigenous peoples had far more complex ways than this of living in, being among, and interacting with nonhuman nature. Whether or not those modes can be fully recovered and expressed in the written language of contemporary poetry has been a question for many Native writers. And whether or not contemporary theories of language can access the sensibility expressed in Native poetry is a question for those who would read and study it. One thing seems clear: as a trope, the Green Indian has its limitations.

All of the previous essays in this volume have addressed poetry by women in the mainstream of Canadian literary tradition — or rather, so close to the mainstream as to make no difference from an aboriginal perspective. By contrast, this essay is a wide-ranging tour of a vast landscape that lies beyond the walls of the tight little garrison of white Canadian poetics. On this tour, I want to visit some of the dislocations between the dominant literary culture and aboriginal sensibility with respect to the poetic imaging of nonhuman nature, the relationship of the poet to it, and the responsibility of the human community for it. Stops along the way include a visit with old and new Indian stereotypes and archetypes of nature; two poems illustrating contrasting views of the relationship between language and nature; aboriginal theorists and critics of Native literary traditions; and a brilliant deconstruction of white Canadian literary tradition by a relatively new Native woman poet. The purpose of this tour is to establish a background for an alternative theory of Canadian poetry which the final essay in the volume calls for. My special interest in the present essay concerns colonialist discourse as the source of stereotypes, such as the Green Indian, with which Native poets must grapple in order to enter Canadian poetic tradition, liberate it from its garrison prison, and transform it for their own purposes. The epistemological strategies that emerge

in Native literary criticism appear to resonate with many of the themes pursued in the earlier essays. I am also interested in the way postmodernist theory both enables and denies this transformation. Although, in deconstructing the civilized/primitive opposition, postmodernism has released aboriginal peoples from their status as features in a picturesque landscape, or obstacles in an inhospitable one, it cannot accommodate the knowledge traditions which Native poets seek to recover. On the other hand, in the absence of a postmodern sensibility, the spiritual traditions of North American aboriginal peoples are too easily conflated with the myth of the Green Indian — and the myth of Mother Nature — and so it has been difficult for Native writers to translate those traditions from oral to written form without reinforcing those myths. This has been complicated by the search for an authentic Native voice.

To my mind, the most successful Native poetry is that which engages not only the stereotypes white culture has imposed upon indigenous peoples, but also the myths that purport to explain white culture to whites. For these are the myths that hold the Canadian tradition together, form the critical and theoretical assumptions that underpin it, and keep Native poetry outside the garrison walls. This kind of engagement involves confronting literary history which, like Canadian history generally, "has been shot through with imperial preferences from start to finish" (Angus 6). Such confrontation is, I believe, the only way for Native writing to become more than just a decorative tributary to the mainstream. The work of Marilyn Dumont is an excellent example of this kind of confrontation. A Métis woman whose roots are in the Canadian prairies, Dumont is a poet whose very name evokes the image of the simultaneous conflict and integration of two cultures. Like her ancestor Gabriel Dumont, she demonstrates unusual courage as she works out her own unique poetic of integration against the conflict of neocolonialism and the linguistic determinism of postmodernist poetics. My tour of this newly charted literary landscape ends with a visit to what I consider to be Dumont's most important poem. A significant contribution to Canadian literature, "Letter to Sir John A. MacDonald" strikes at the very foundation of Canadian poetic tradition, flings wide the garrison gates, and opens the way for a profound rethinking of the literary, critical, ecologi-

cal, and political myths by which many garrisoned Canadians live their lives.

Stereotypes and Archetypes, Old and New

The Green Indian is one of the more recent incarnations of *l'homme sauvage*, the central figure in the discourse of primitivism which has explained non-industrialized, indigenous peoples to white Western culture since the earliest days of European conquest of the "New World." Eighteenth-century philosophers, most especially Jean-Jacques Rousseau, gave *l'homme sauvage* new importance as *le bon sauvage*, the centrepiece of the "doctrine of the natural goodness of man." This Romantic myth persists to this day. As Daniel Francis explains,

> We have a long history of romanticising Indians, discovering in their character and culture many fine qualities we think are lacking in our own. From the Noble Savage of years ago to the Mystic Shamans and Original Environmentalists of today, we continue to create idealized images of Indians which may have as little connection to reality as the demonic ones. (Francis 222)

The Mystic Shaman has something in common with the Eternal Feminine (*ewige Weibliche*) of Romantic gender ideology in that both signify those dark enigmatic forces of nature that exist beyond the experience of Rational Man. Similarly, as the Original Environmentalist, the Green Indian is a kind of consort to Mother Nature; together, they function to keep in place the image of women and aboriginal peoples as hopelessly embedded in non-rational, amoral nature and the image of the White Man as the sole legitimate signifier of civilization.

The White Man is not the only signifier that holds the Green Indian in place on the wrong side of the civilized/primitive binary. Instructive in this regard is Sarah Carter's recent historical study of the role of captivity narratives in "regulating race and gender relations" and "clarifying and maintaining boundaries

between Native and newcomer" on the Canadian prairies (Carter xv). Carter's analysis of the stories of white female captives of Indian bands that circulated during and after the Second Riel Rebellion of 1885 leaves little doubt about the four race-gender categories that governed Canadian colonial discourse: white masculinity and white femininity, Indian masculinity and Indian femininity. Of these four categories, only white masculinity escapes construction in primarily sexual terms. In contrast to salacious savages, promiscuous squaws, and chaste white womanhood, men of unambiguous Anglo-Celtic ancestry have an identity that transcends the sexual. As pioneers and government agents, Mounties and military men, white males are the valiant bringers of "civilization" and the regulators of the sexuality of others. These sexualized categories also form the binary structures of civilized/primitive, positive/negative, that keep the discourse from unravelling.

In their feminine virtue, their sexual appetites presumably bred out of them in the "civilizing" process, white women signify White Man's only way of producing more white men. In their "primitive" licentiousness, therefore, Native women are important as signifiers of everything that white women are not. In their "primitive" lusts that also include warlust, Native men emerge in the discourse as reassurance that such qualities in the White Man are well under "civilized" control. In this highly gender-inflected strain of colonialist discourse, all "savages" are of the ignoble variety: these are Red Indians—red with the blood of innocent white women and courageous white men, red as the Scarlet Letter of illicit sexuality. Only when the Red Indian had been subdued and safely isolated on the reserve could the Green Indian — that gentle creature of the wilderness who possesses innate knowledge of wild ways — arise to take his place in the discourse.

The myth of the Green Indian is not exclusively the product of the discourse of primitivism, however. It required some integration of Native sensibility, which Grey Owl came by through his Iroquois wife Gertrude Bernard, known to Grey Owl's readers as Anahareo. Indeed, he credited her with having transformed him from a woodsman and hunter into a conservationist. Anahareo was Grey Owl's second wife; his first had been an Ojibway woman (Francis 135). Although his reconstruction of

himself failed to fool aboriginal people, the integration of aboriginal knowledge into his image gave it just enough authenticity to convince whites. Despite the eventual unmasking of the hoax, Native sensibility would never again be free of this primary association with conservation and environmentalism. Written in the language of the colonizer, contemporary Native poetry cannot help but evoke the ghost of the Green Indian.

The Green Indian isn't the only stereotype Native people are forced to confront. Native women grapple with an additional level of colonialist imagery created especially for them. For example, the scholar-poet Emma LaRocque worries about "insidious notions" within aboriginal communities that "Native women should be 'unobtrusive, soft-spoken and quiet,'" and that they should "not assume elected leadership, which is taken to mean 'acting like men.'"

> The "traditional Indian woman" is still often expected to act and dress like an ornamental Pocahontas/"Indian Princess." But who should our models be? How should we maintain the traditions we value without adhering to stereotype or compromising our full humanity? If one must look to the past for models and heroes, we might do well to take a second look at Pocahontas. The irony is that the real Pocahontas was neither unobtrusive nor quiet. Quite the contrary: she was in fact revolutionary — for the wrong cause, but revolutionary nonetheless! (1996 14-15)

The revolutionary potential of Pocahontas seems not to have captured the imagination of most Native women: haunted by the colonialist stereotype of the Squaw, they have embraced her quiet, unobtrusive binary opposite. For many such women, there is a more congenial figure available to them: the Earth Mother. In her appeal to both maternalism and environmentalism, she is as irresistible to Native women as Mother Nature has been to women in the dominant white culture.

The potency of the Earth Mother is apparent in this passage from Beverly Hungry Wolf's moving essay entitled "Life in Harmony with Nature":

> Mothers should teach their sons and daughters from the moment of birth to have reverence for nature and the Earth Mother. We must speak out loudly about healing our Earth Mother. . . . As givers of life, we women have a special relationship to the Earth. As mothers, we know what a hard time we have to bring life into the world and then to be responsible for that life, from then on. So we can see how hard the Earth Mother's job is, for she is a much greater giver of life for all of us, including the people of every tribe and nation. (Hungry Wolf 81)

If this Earth-Mother mythology and its connection to human mothering recall the maternal feminism that united many non-Native women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century,[3] it may have something to do with what Paula Gunn Allen calls "The Red Roots of White Feminism" (209). While white women have certainly never experienced a lack of Earth-Mother imagery within their own cultural mythology, Allen has a point when she claims an Amerindian influence on turn-of-the-century feminist thought. For ethnographer Lewis Henry Morgan's 1877 study of what he interpreted as the "matriarchal" structure of Iroquois culture provided Friedrich Engels with the basis for a theory of Mother-Right in his *Origin of the Family* (1884), which in turn influenced socialist feminist thought. It is to be regretted that the fashion in white North American culture to "play Indian" and "go native" did not include a healthier dose of "going matriarchal." Maternal feminism may have exploited the ideology of women's moral authority, but without the political and economic authority to back it up, non-Native women fought an uphill battle to exert their moral influence.[4]

Many Native women writers across North America have been deeply inspired by Allen's gynocentric evocation of the sacred, largely because she associates the Earth Mother with important aboriginal symbols: she is "the Eldest God," and Native women can be "certain of her centrality, her identity as the Sacred Hoop of Be-ing." Allen's work is also a popular source because she distances Native gynocentricity from that of cultural feminism: "Modern feminists sometimes theorize about the shift from matriarchies to patriarchy in the Old World, but a more complete and accurate retelling of history and of the contemporary

manifestations of that shift among American Indian peoples would make such theorizing unnecessary" (11-12). However, as Allen must herself know, there is no end to the "accurate retelling of history": Old World history remains patriarchal in every new retelling. Prehistory is another matter entirely. Compared to the prehistory of North America which ended 500 years ago, the prehistory of the Old World lies 5000 years in the past. None of it comes down to us orally; theorizing is our only access to it. This is the fundamental difference between aboriginal Earth Mother traditions and cultural feminism's reconstructions of Western prehistory which all too easily tip over into goddess cultism and sentimental maternalism.[5]

But a comparatively recent prehistory with a strong oral link to the present cannot be trusted always to yield up the kind of imagery that so empowers Beverly Hungry Wolf's environmentalism. Indeed, Emma LaRocque seems as ambivalent about aboriginal matriarchalism as many non-Native feminists are about maternal feminism and goddess culture:

> We know enough about human history that we cannot assume that all aboriginal traditions universally respected and honoured women. (And is "respect" and "honour" all that we can ask for?) It should not be assumed, even in those original societies that were structured along matriarchal lines, that matriarchies necessarily prevented men from oppressing women. There are indications of male violence and sexism in some aboriginal societies prior to European contact and certainly after contact. But, at the same time, culture is not immutable, and tradition cannot be expected to be always of value or relevant in our times. As Native women, we are faced with very difficult and painful choices, but, nonetheless, we are challenged to change, create, and embrace "traditions" consistent with contemporary and international human rights standards. (1996 14)

LaRocque is understandably wary about a nostalgic and uncritical return to the past, for the romanticization of aboriginal history is no more liberating than the Romantic impulse that

produced the Green Indian. Liberation does not lie in romanticizing the past but rather, in transforming the present. As feminists have discovered in recovering the history of Western women and feminism, what worked in the past does not always have value or relevance in the present. Navigating a course between stereotype and Native tradition has been the primary task confronting all Native poets, male and female, in their attempt to enter Canadian poetic tradition. It's a course that avoids many of the tenets of postmodernist discourse theory, such as the one that would, for example, dismiss as naive the assumption that there is a "real" Pocahontas behind the stereotype of colonialist discourse. If feminism has taught us anything, it's that white patriarchal history is replete with heroic figures and can afford to indulge in abandoning them as fictions. Not so aboriginal cultures, whose past is still in the process of being recovered. Native women can and will connect with a real Pocahontas, if enough Native poets put their minds to it.

Language and Landscape

Western logic tells us that, of all the possible discourses of reconciliation between aboriginal culture and the dominant white culture, environmentalism holds out the most promise. Why, then, has it been just another discourse of division between us? It may seem simplistic to say that the difference between white culture's and Native culture's conceptions of environmentalism is the difference between stewardship — or *management* — and survival. For it seems clear that despite the dire warnings of scientists that the survival of the human race is dependent upon the survival of such things as the ozone layer and the rainforest, white culture remains in the grip of the paternalistic notion that environmentalism is primarily a favour we do for the planet — for Mother Nature, or Gaia, as she is now known among certain scientists. Native writers understand this as a form of hypocrisy. Here, for example, are some lines from Jeannette Armstrong's "Degrees of Green":

> . . . over and over
> old world magi

in search of new world guiding stars
speak of saving the planet
while believing in geometric shapes
in pyramids in hierarchies
in what can be measured and squeezed in the hand
in power in gold (99)

The theme of salvation structures Western consciousness: Christ saves man, man saves planet. But salvation is always a future and otherworldly event. In the meantime, there is power and wealth to be had at the top of those pyramids and hierarchies. This is the same paternalism which, in patriarchal culture, defines women as fragile creatures in need of manly protection — a story told in deep denial of the fact that it is to women that men owe not only their lives but also the daily maintenance that keeps them free to manage the earth and everything on it from their vantage point at the top of the pyramid.

When the question of cultural survival is raised by Native groups, the dominant culture translates this into the survival of consumer culture and the corporations that manage it. Corporatism and consumerism now determine our links to nonhuman nature. Our survival depends upon the ability of corporations to manage nonhuman nature and thus maintain the flow of consumer goods that sustains us:

business is the buzz word
caught on the tongue
embedded in the brain
as the sole sustainable reality (Armstrong 99)

Corporations and the governments we elect to do their bidding speak of tradeoffs in formulating their ideology of sustainable society. A human face is put on this definition of survival when it is argued, for example, that the survival of loggers, their families, and their communities is solely dependent upon the ability of loggers to sell their labour to the deforestation industry. This — quite literally — illustrates the inability to see the forest for the trees. Yet "one needs to believe most / that a sustainable

society / is possible" (101). Hence both Native and non-Native peoples have a stake in consumer culture's construction of sustainable society. But this is by no means all that is meant by cultural survival. Here are the closing lines of Armstrong's poem:

> one needs to feel the immensity of meaning
> in the reflection that earth will continue
> bereft of humanity (101)

The planet does not need saving "for its own sake." It's for our sake that we need to maintain the planet in a form that can sustain us. The planet can manage without us.

The view that nature must be managed is not confined to Canadian environmentalism. Nor is the view of nature as text exclusive to postmodernism. One of Canada's most cherished modernist poems, F.R. Scott's "Laurentian Shield" (1945), illustrates the interdependence of both white Western views:

> Hidden in wonder and snow, or sudden with summer,
> This land stares at the sun in a huge silence
> Endlessly repeating something we cannot hear.
> Inarticulate, arctic,
> Not written on by history, empty as paper,
> It leans away from the world with songs in its lakes
> Older than love, and lost in the miles. (Scott 38)

This is something of an improvement on Galileo, who declared that nature speaks the language of mathematics, and that if you want to understand "her," you must learn to speak her language. At least Scott has the grace to admit that whatever language nature speaks and sings, he cannot hear her. She is not so much "Inarticulate" as he is deaf. Nor is she as inarticulate as she is nonliterate. The image of the land as a *tabula rasa* — "Not written on by history, empty as paper" — is a characteristically white Western view of nature that distinguishes it from the view of indigenous peoples. As Richard Dyer writes in his analysis of whiteness,

> From the first, the properness of the white occupation of the North American continent (and indeed of other territories to be colonised) was argued in terms of the fact that the indigenous people did not cultivate the land, did not order it and therefore did not realise the true human ([i.e.,] white) purpose towards creation. White cultivation brings partition, geometry, boundedness to the land, it displays on the land the fact of human intervention, of enterprise. The frontier, and all the drama and excitement its establishment and maintenance entail, is about the act of bringing order in the form of borders to a land and people without them. (Dyer 33)

Scott's poem traces this ordering process of colonization, a process whereby the land is transformed by white civilization from an inarticulate *tabula rasa* into a text:

> This waiting is wanting.
> It will choose its language
> When it has chosen its technic,
> A tongue to shape the vowels of its productivity.
>
> *A language of flesh and of roses.*
>
> Now there are pre-words,
> Cabin syllables,
> Nouns of settlement
> Slowly forming, with steel syntax,
> The long sentence of its exploitation. (Scott 38)

This is perhaps the single most important illusion of colonialism — the belief that the colonized welcome colonization: the landscape here is both "waiting" and "wanting" what Imperial Man has in store for it. Like *genus homo* evolving from the "primitive," pre-linguistic, through the linguistic, and eventually to the "civilized," literate state, Scott's Canadian landscape is transformed into text. The railroad, white Canada's favourite symbol of communication from coast to coast, is the sentence that utters the State into existence. Scott is right to build into this

textualization of nature the sense that this process is also a jail sentence and an act of exploitation. But sentencing and exploitation are not, as Scott intimates elsewhere in the poem, merely the acts committed by a greedy capitalism, acts which Scott's more humane socialism will correct. Whose flesh is implied here? Whose roses? Absent from Scott's landscape — in both its "primitive" and "civilized" state — is the indigenous human population, a population for whom the land is anything but inarticulate and knowable only as a visual phenomenon. In this regard, it's not insignificant that the perspective of Scott's poetic persona is an aeriel one in which only his sense of sight is engaged. Flying high above the landscape, his other four senses are alienated from it, "the drone of the plane" drowning out the "songs in its lakes" and eliminating the possibility of ever hearing what it is "Endlessly repeating." This privileging of the sense of sight and the concomitant devaluation of the other human senses are entirely in keeping with the metaphors of knowledge that inform Enlightenment philosophy: the light of Reason ignites and the darkness of ignorance is banished.

Far from modelling an irreconcilable opposition between modernism and postmodernism, "Laurentian Shield" prefigures the postmodernist impulse to deconstruct the nature/culture binary. In Scott's poem, as in the postmodernist formulation, culture and nature — as sociologist Janet Wolff explains — "seem to evaporate in a commitment to the view that everything is (only) discourse." Wolff cautions that "discussions about the environment cannot be premised on the assumption that everything is only 'text,' or that social and economic relations, being merely discursive constructs, are somehow merely fictions" (Wolff 17). Moreover, when postmodernist language theorists reduce nonhuman nature to a text, they seem — like Frank Scott — to have no idea what that might mean in the context of aboriginal culture. The texts referred to by these theorists are either in electronically mediated circulation or on library shelves and consist of signs without referents. By contrast, in an article about Haida writing, an article with the highly instructive title of "That is Also You," Robert Bringhurst writes:

> Once, it seems, there was scarcely a stream or a reef or a cove, or a species of fish or mammal or bird, that

> lacked its place in the multi-dimensional web, the narrative map of relations between the Haida and their world. Even now, abused as it is, the land is thick with images and stories, rich with meanings beyond the reach of history. But few of these remain in living memory. (Bringhurst 36)

This relationship between nature and "text" lies beyond postmodernist comprehension, for that which is beyond the reach of history and living memory is, within postmodernist logic, non-existent for us. This logic dictates that nonhuman nature cannot be "thick with images and stories": nonhuman nature *is* the images and stories we make up about it. What has been left out of a theory that reduces reality to signs is precisely what has been left out of virtually all of Western thought since Plato reduced reality to forms — namely, the material body. As D.M.R. Bentley has written in this regard, "The eye that reads, the voice that speaks, the ear that hears, the brain that perceives, comprehends, interprets, and remembers: all are physical, as, of course, are books, and pages, and print" (1990 n.pag.). To say that the images and stories thickly embedded in the land lie beyond history and living memory is only to say that they are absent from human consciousness. It is not to say that they are absent. The land, like the human body of which it is a part, is the custodian of culture — whether or not we are conscious of everything nature has in custody. This is a far cry from the claim that nature is a text. Neither is it compatible with what might be called Green Indian poetics.

Aboriginal Critics and Theorists

Green Indian poetics involve what Audre Lorde called using the master's tools to dismantle the master's house. The recovery of the images and stories that are thickly embedded in the land is not a matter of picking up a pen and writing them down in the language of the colonizer. To do so is to participate in the textualization and fragmentation of nature, and thus to distance oneself even more from it. As Jeannette Armstrong suggests, "writing from a distance / becomes difficult" because writing is "the second by second fractioning" of "kaleidoscopic distortion":

poetry dries up
in the desolation
left in the wake of human disorder
and to stay lucid
one continues only by groping
by feeling
for new words (100)

But "new words / will not be formed by old precepts." Green Indian poetics are merely a new edition of an old precept — the Romantic poetic illusion that what has been lost can be linguistically reappropriated. The Green Indian, writing with the White Man's pen, cannot recover the earth from "the desolation / left in the wake of human disorder."

The Green Indian has been a door through which aboriginal writers have entered Western literary tradition — and a window through which non-Native readers have seen them. For Native writers could not enter a written tradition exclusively on aboriginal terms. Colonization is not merely a process whereby the land is transformed into geometric fields, clear-cut forests, and concrete jungles. It's also a process whereby the bodies and subjectivities of indigenous persons are themselves sites of transformation. Poets who identify as Native cannot simply decolonize, nor can they untransform the land. In a poem ironically entitled "'Progress,'" Emma LaRocque worries about Native poets who entertain such illusions:

Earth poet
So busy
weaving
        magic
into words

so busy
placing
        patterns
quilting
        stars
so busy
making
        the sun

dance
so busy
singing
        your songs
in circles
so busy
tipping
        moons
in dreams

Earth poet
so busy
touching
        the land
scape
mad modern man
must take me
look at
cold steel spires
stealing earth and sun
        dance.
                (LaRocque 1990 137)

LaRocque seems to have put her finger on the Green Indian syndrome — a tendency in some Native "Earth" poets to keep the civilized/primitive binary in place. Instead of a *process* that would move Native sensibility beyond colonization, these poets have opted for an imitation of Western "Progress" — an obsessively busy activity whereby a series of poetic products are manufactured out of the sacred images and symbols of Native culture. They are word-packages that travel along a literary assembly line not unlike the conveyor belt suggested by the shape of LaRocque's poem on the page. Under the pressure of aboriginal identity politics, many Native writers have felt obligated to prove their authenticity by loading up their poems with authentic Native references. Shamanistic magic, sundances, and sacred circles may be an improvement upon the canoes, beads, beaver ponds, and buffalo that once satisfied non-Native consumers of "Indian" literature, but their effect is the same.[6] "[W]eaving / magic / into words," "making / the sun / dance," and "touching / the land / scape" are merely poetic gestures that reinforce the colonialist notion of the Indian as a green mystic for whom the

"cold steel spires" of civilization are beyond his "primitive" comprehension. This is the essentialist underside of aboriginal identity politics and the search for an authentic Native voice.

But Native poetry can be more than just the manipulation of symbols and images in the service of political correctness. Native poetry can do more than simply wordsmith in the Western fashion, more than merely touch the landscape — the term landscape being, of course, a white Western construction that stands in for the land from which the White Man is alienated. Native poetry can do more than "play Indian" or "go native" in Green-Indian fashion. Authenticity, if it exists at all, exists in the present, not in some wordy nostalgic return to a past that can never be perfectly reconstituted. It exists in the possibility of transformation. Paradoxically, authenticity may have more to do with trickery — the power to trick written language out of its relentless polarization of subject and object. It's therefore not surprising that the Trickster figure, "who is found in oral cultures the world over, but who is special and central in the cultures of North America" (Keeshig-Tobias 173), represents the ultimate challenge to the Green Indian. Tomson Highway celebrates contemporary Native writers who are "picking the Trickster, that ancient clown, up from under that legendary beer table on Main Street in Winnipeg or Hastings Street in Vancouver." These writers "will soon have her standing firmly up on his own two feet so she can make us laugh and dance again" (qtd. in Acoose 39). Unlike the Green Indian, whose virtue lies in knowing his place on the primitive side of the civilized/primitive binary — the nature side of the culture/nature divide — the Trickster dances the sundance wherever s/he pleases.

The "trickster discourse" of many Native poets has transformed the savage into a "word warrior" who ranges across the literary landscape of North America without even having to clear Customs.[7] For the forty-ninth parallel is a white line, a scar across the North American landscape and across the body of Native literary tradition. While it leaves its disfigurement, it does not divide the tradition in any deeply significant way. Tribal diversity notwithstanding, American critical insight is often applicable to Native writing in Canada, as, for example, the observation that Native literary works are "always at least bi-cultural" by American critic Kimberly Blaeser:

> Though they may come from an oral-based culture, they are written. Though their writer may speak a tribal language, they are usually almost wholly in the language of English. And though they proceed at least partly from an Indian culture, they are most often presented in the established literary and aesthetic forms of the dominant culture. . . . The writers themselves have generally experienced both tribal and mainstream American culture and many are in physical fact mixed-bloods. Beyond this, the works themselves generally proceed from an awareness of the "frontier" or border existence where cultures meet. (Blaeser 56)

Historically, white culture has been blind to the potential power of a "border existence" because white culture is obsessed with the notion of purity. On the level of race, this obsession is built into the language, so that "halfbreed," rather than, say, "doublebreed" came to define what Blaeser more accurately refers to as "mixed-bloods." The implication is that the halfbreed is half Native, rather than half white, for "white" implies purity and cannot exist in an impure form. This ideology of white purity is reflected in American "one-drop" blackness where, as late as the 1930s in some southern states, people with even trace amounts of African ancestry were legally designated Black (Dyer 24). The notion implicit in "halfbreed" of halving, rather than doubling, is not confined to English, nor to issues of race. To cite a gendered example from another Western language, single mothers in Germany are traditionally referred to as *Halbstärke*, or half-strength parents, rather than, say, *Dopplestärke*, which would acknowledge the double measure of parental strength required of single mothers. These subtle linguistic devaluations reinforce the ideology of white patriarchy, whose concept of wholeness is signified in the image of white masculinity. This definition of wholeness is also reinforced in the heterosexist assumption that what defines gay men is effeminacy. None of these observations are new: they have been thoroughly explored by many postcolonial critics and theorists.

With regard to the first bicultural feature of Native literature noted by Blaeser, namely the integration of oral and written traditions, Amerindian poet-critic Duane Niatum explains that

contemporary "tribal poets," in translating Native oral traditions into written forms, have grafted "world culture" onto "the roots of their tribal cultures." According to Niatum, the traditional aboriginal world view "is organic and tells its story like the seasons, the turnings of the earth, the sun and moon, man and woman, cloud and wind." The addition of the "element of modernity" contributes to contemporary Native poetry "one more method to develop the very important element of balance and proportion, a fluid element in which the image-symbol is helped to grow and change." For today's tribal poets, "this slight disruption from their cultural roots, as they enter the exile landscape of the twentieth century, is actually a mirror-image of exiled man and woman found today around the world." This paradoxical integration of the Amerindian organic world view and Euroamerican alienation from it appears to give contemporary Native poets a place from which to explore the "breakdown between the mind and body in the Euroamerican" and to conclude that "fantasy not grounded in some way to the physical universe can quickly surprise the one engaged in it by creating its own abstract prison." "In contrast to . . . the Euroamerican denying the external world, the tribal poet embraces the world beyond the self, the earth, sea, sky, bird, animal, fish and plant, stone and snowflake" (Niatum 66-67). If Niatum's theory of Native poetry is accurate, it would seem that Native writers have worked out a poetic that shares something with that of several women working within the dominant tradition — namely, an emphasis on reintegration across the artificial division of the world into the mutually alienating realms of culture and nature.

In Trickster fashion, Duane Niatum's poets offer an alternative solution to the culture-nature split, an alternative that avoids postmodernist reductivism and alienation from nature by approaching the problem from the opposite direction. What we learn from Native poetry, he claims, is that "the truth of words is no more or no less than the truth revealed in Nature. This belief relates to the fact that as a tribal poet, the word is a sacred object, a vital force of man and woman and the natural world" (Niatum 65). In other words, whereas in postmodernist poetics nature is a text constructed *by* the poet, in Native poetics, nature creates the text *through* the poet.[8] The difference may seem trivial but the implications are profound. The postmodern poet, like

postmodern nature, is exclusively a cultural construct. By contrast, the Native poet is the site of nature-culture integration — or, more accurately, an entity who, like the Trickster, pre-exists the culture/nature rupture.

Dearjohn, O how I love to write . . .

The poetry of Marilyn Dumont is remarkable for the way in which it addresses virtually all the issues, problems, and possibilities I have been cataloguing here. A word-warrior, she not only confronts the myths and stereotypes generated by white culture, she also challenges those aspects of Native identity politics that keep Native poetry on the peripheries of white culture and Canadian poetic tradition. Most important, aware of herself as a site of conflict and reconciliation, she is able to produce poetry that enacts the process of transforming the present. She is the kind of Pocahontas figure that LaRocque would encourage Native women to seek out as a model. Like LaRocque's "real Pocahontas," Dumont is anything but "unobtrusive, soft-spoken and quiet."

Dumont is no Green Indian, no "Earth poet" busy "weaving / magic / into words." As a self-styled Urban Indian who is nevertheless committed to a culture rooted in green forests and grasslands, she occupies a place at the intersection of multiple intersections. Her Métis identity — neither exclusively aboriginal nor exclusively white — functions in her work as a signifier of intersections, such as the intersection of the spatial and the temporal; the visual and the aural; the oral and the written. The ability to bring all her senses to bear upon her work should surprise no one, given that she is both a poet and a filmmaker, and she seems to understand her two media of communication as interlinked. Ironically, Dumont has more interest in the white side of her heritage than many exclusively white poets — who, true to the Western consumerist ethic of throwing things away and buying something new, jettison the search for a supposedly outmoded wholeness and integration and embrace a newly minted fragmentation for its own sake.

Perhaps more than any other Native woman poet writing in Canada, Dumont has what Blaeser calls "an awareness of the . . .

border existence where cultures meet." Aware that she is operating within Canadian literary tradition as part of a written tradition as old as Western civilization itself, she positions herself in dialogue with it: she invades it, occupies it, argues with it, and makes it her own. Perhaps no other poem in her (so far) small oeuvre demonstrates this better than her "Letter to Sir John A. MacDonald," a dearjohn letter in which she announces her exit from Canadian nationalist mythology and her entry into Canadian poetic tradition:

> Dear John: I'm still here and halfbreed,
> after all these years
> you're dead, funny thing,
> that railway you wanted so badly,
> there was talk a year ago
> of shutting it down
> and part of it was shut down,
> the dayliner at least,
> "from sea to shining sea,"
> and you know, John,
> after all that shuffling us around to suit the settlers,
> we're still here and Metis. (*RGBG* 1996 52)

Here — "funny thing" — the myth of the vanishing Indian gives way to the reality of the vanishing railway. But this is not just a message from an unvanished Indian: it's a communication from border country. As a "halfbreed" — read "doublebreed" — she has twice the credentials necessary for undermining all the nationalist myths of identity alluded to in the poem. Traditionally, dearjohn letters announce the end of a love affair and are written by the departing loved one. But there's no love lost here. This may warm the hearts of all those who have never quite been able to work up a case of hero worship for MacDonald equal to, say, American worship of George Washington. The poem can nevertheless be read as alluding to a love affair, namely Pierre Berton's love affair with an idea he called *The National Dream* (1970), reasoning, no doubt, that if the Yanks could have an American Dream, Canada could have a dream too. Thus he reminded Canadians that the building of the railway, which

supposedly united Canada "from sea to shining sea," was the story that could resolve Canada's chronic identity crisis, just as the War of Independence had supposedly resolved a similar crisis in the United States. Berton was following in the footsteps of E.J. Pratt, who had made a similar kind of contribution to Canadian mythology with his epic poem *Towards the Last Spike* (1952). Canadians must have remained unconvinced of the railway's symbolic value, for other than a few public sighs of nostalgia, exaggerated by the Canadian news media into a major protest, politicians didn't get nearly the flack some might have expected for shutting part of it down. Perhaps it's the shutting down of it, rather than the building of it that defines Canadian identity. Dumont's poem might therefore also be read as a "Dear Pierre" letter.

Dumont's poem is also a "Dear Frank" letter:

> We're still here
> after Meech Lake and
> one no-good-for-nothin-Indian
> holdin-up-the-train,
> stalling the "Cabin syllables / Nouns of settlement,
> / . . . steel syntax [and] / The long sentence of its exploitation"

The footnote is not what you'd call a poetic device, yet Dumont footnotes these lines from Scott's poem — as if to make sure we don't miss her point. Elijah Harper scored more than a footnote in Canadian history. Sole Native MLA in Manitoba at the time, Harper rewrote the Great Train Robbery when he single-handedly derailed the Meech Lake Accord, a text drafted by Chief Engineer Brian Mulroney and his crew of 10 white men for the purpose of railroading a settlement of the White Man's differences with himself. "Dear Brian . . ." Like that fated text, nature-as-text by F.R. Scott is not written in the stone of the Laurentian Shield. Dumont unwrites it and, in the process, rewrites Scott's poem.

"Where are the coolies in your poem, Ned?" asked Scott in response to *Towards the Last Spike* (Scott 64). He meant, of course, the thousands of Chinese who helped to build the railroad, and whom Pratt had overlooked in his epic. What Dumont means to ask F.R. Scott in turn is: Where are the Indians in your poem, Frank? The indigenous peoples, so absent

from his silent landscape, show up in this long sentence of their exploitation:

> and John, that goddamned railroad never made this a
>   great nation,
> cause the railway shut down
> and this country is still quarreling over unity,
> and Riel is dead
> but he just keeps coming back
> in all the Bill Wilsons yet to speak out of turn or favour
> because you know as well as I
> that we were railroaded
> by some steel tracks that didn't last
> and some settlers who wouldn't settle
> and it's funny we're still here and callin ourselves
>   halfbreed.

Reclaiming (and repopulating) Scott's empty landscape would appear to be an easier task than settling land claims with settlers who still don't seem to want to settle — in more than one sense of that word. For as Daniel Francis has argued, the White Man can't settle in a land where he doesn't feel at home; he can only possess it. He may possess the land but the disintegrating railway signifies his inability to possess it on his own terms. Indeed, as the railway myth suggests, he's far better at *traversing* it than *inhabiting* it. Ironically, the White Man is more at home in the halfbreed, where his blood intermingles with that of the Indigene. Perhaps this is why it's Riel and not MacDonald who just keeps coming back to haunt the White Man in a place otherwise haunted by a lack of ghosts.[9]

"Letter to Sir John A. MacDonald" isn't just a witty subversion of the colonialist assumptions that lie close to the surface of Canadian poetic tradition. Nor is Dumont's repeated assertion of her halfbreed identity merely a strategy for announcing her subjectivity as a position in poetic discourse. The poem's direct engagement with two iconic male figures of the dominant culture — MacDonald and Scott, representing politics and literature respectively — suggests to me that the poem is an important key to Dumont's poetic. In my view, it's no accident that it

takes the form of a personal letter to Canada's archetypal White Man, or that it directly confronts what many white men have tried to turn into Canada's national myth of identity. A poet who directly quotes another poet's poem — and even footnotes the source — is doing far more than just engaging in intertextual play: she is insisting that we get the connection. I think that connection is contained in the theme of *traversing* versus *inhabiting* — the "settlers who wouldn't settle" versus those who are "still here and callin ourselves halfbreed." This is the problem at the heart of Canada's chronic identity crisis, a problem drowned out by the voices of federalists and separatists "quarreling over unity."

I am always irked and a little amused whenever a white Canadian man trivializes the struggles of Native people — or women, or other Canadian Others — as "merely" identity politics, for identity politics have been a national obsession of white Canada since Confederation. White Canadians may not have invented identity politics but will almost certainly go down in world history as having perfected them. Indeed, as Dumont's poem reminds us, identity crisis management has been part of the job description of virtually every Canadian politician since MacDonald. The great flag debate of the sixties; the Official Languages Act of the seventies; the patriation of the Constitution in the eighties; and the Old-Boyism of Meech Lake in the nineties are only the most recent examples of identity as capital-P Politics in Canada. Moreover, all of those political battles were fought with the weapons of race and gender — the white race, the masculine gender. Mythology plays a central role in identity, and the failure of white politicians and poets and pop historians to get all Canadian constituencies to take the railway myth seriously enough to fight to keep the railway itself intact speaks to the myth's essential emptiness — its triviality.

White Man's Language

"Letter to Sir John A. MacDonald" is about leveling the battlefield of identity politics, not so much by adding weight to the Native end of the field as by rendering the weightiness of cultural mythology weightless at the white end. Aboriginal identity issues are also Canadian identity issues — and poetic identity is,

of course, a central concern for every poet, especially one on the race-gender margin of the dominant tradition. This raises certain questions about Dumont's poetic choices. Why Scott's poem? Why not Pratt's? Pratt's is, after all, much more racist, sexist, and ecophobic than Scott's. Scott's seems merely naive by comparison. Why does Dumont choose to bracket the poem with two assertions of her halfbreed identity, one in the first line and one in the last? Indeed, why does she insist upon such a politically incorrect term as interchangeable with "Métis," which she uses elsewhere in the poem? Most of all, where is the "here" that the "I" and the "we" of the poem "still" occupy? It's this last question that interests me here.

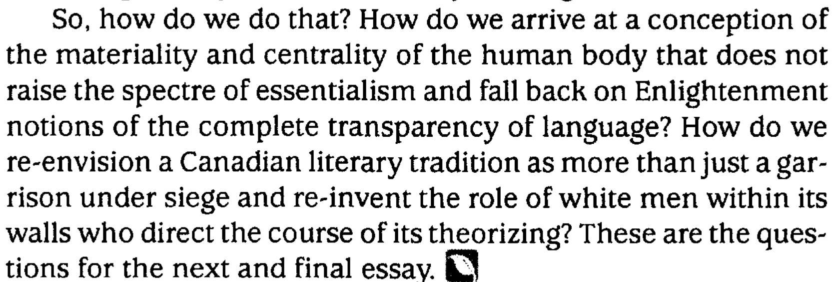
"Here" means more than a position in written discourse, for not until very recently did the indigenous peoples of this continent have a written language in which to position themselves. They can hardly be here "still" when they were never here to begin with. The place first assigned to them in written discourse — colonial discourse — is, from the Native point of view, a "there" place, not a "here" place. In Scott's poem, Natives are neither here nor there; they are nowhere. "Here" must be someplace else. That place is inaccessible to postmodernist theories of language because of their textual bias: they tell us that language mediates our relationship with nature — and, for that matter, with everything else that isn't us. I take "us" to mean human consciousness, not the human body, which is also "us." Language theorists tend to regard this mediation as a one-way process; we construct reality through language; reality does not talk back, and hence has no role to play in the construction of us. And yet, before you write a poem — even a postmodernist one — you have to pick up a material pen in your material hand, which is part of your material body, and you have to apply your material brain, ear, and eye to the task. The here-ness of the body is palpable. The connection between the material body and the body of language is real, not just a trope.

In "The Sound of One Hand Drumming," Dumont puzzles her way through to an understanding of this White Man's language: "words," she writes,

> . . . vault into theories as ornate as rococo
> and as cluttered as a bad relationship

with oneself or anyone else within reach
of those words that flow like milkweed from
            Philosophers while
The small single words
of brown women hang on
clotheslines stiff in winter and
thaw only in early spring but
no one takes them off the line because
no one wants last year's clothes,
they're the wrong colour and out of fashion and
if dead-white-men stopped writing for one thousand
            years and
only brown women wrote
that wouldn't be enough . . .   (*RGBG* 60-61)

Non-white and non-male bodies cannot simply be dispatched by theorizing them out of existence, reducing them to "gendered" and "racialized" texts, or by dismissing as unfashionably unpostmodernist the body as the ground of self-other relationships. Such white masculine theorizing leaves women and Others out in the cold, hangs them out to dry. Even if "only brown women wrote" for the next thousand years, "that wouldn't be enough" — not because that's not enough time to rewrite the world, but because *writing* is never enough. As "Letter to Sir John A. MacDonald" implies, Scott may have written Canada on the *tabula rasa* of the landscape, but neither that text nor the text of the Meech Lake Accord has the power to unite us "from sea to shining sea." Nor, for that matter, did Pratt's textualized railway, or Berton's, or anyone else's, ensure that the real-world railway would remain intact. Disclosing the gap between us and the world is no longer the problem for theory. Closing it is.



So, how do we do that? How do we arrive at a conception of the materiality and centrality of the human body that does not raise the spectre of essentialism and fall back on Enlightenment notions of the complete transparency of language? How do we re-envision a Canadian literary tradition as more than just a garrison under siege and re-invent the role of white men within its walls who direct the course of its theorizing? These are the questions for the next and final essay.

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Recovering the Body, Reclaiming the Land: Marilyn Dumont's Halfbreed Poetic

In my experience, it often pays to be a bit intuitive when reading poetry and take the risk of crossing the line that divides clarity from hunch. As I intimated in the preceding essay, Marilyn Dumont seems clear in her insistence that white Canadian readers of "Letter to Sir John A. MacDonald" take responsibility for white mythologizing and white textualizing of reality. My hunch was that travelling back to the source of the railway myth of Canadian identity might be a way out of that cul-de-sac of text fetishism. I began from my personal conviction that the dispute over the place of railway history in the defining mythology of this land is not unique to indigenous sensibility, but also that the centrality of the CPR as an economic symbol in the history of the Canadian state is hardly a debatable issue. My own failure to internalize railway history as a myth of identity at least partly accounts for my sense of the significance of Dumont's poem. In the immigrant community where I was born and raised, the CPR was perhaps the biggest provider of jobs, and thus had economic importance. However, in my recollection, there was no shared sense of it as anything but a sometimes adequate, sometimes oppressive, always demanding employer who often put strains on family life by requiring employees to be separated from wives and children for days and weeks at a time. I am indifferent to the myth not only for reasons of class and ethnicity, but also gender: railway technology is coded masculine, and when I was a girl, elaborate train sets

were toys that rich boys got for Christmas. I can, however, appreciate that Canadians who were not so directly involved in railway life but collected railway paraphernalia as boys might be more susceptible to the romanticization of CPR history. Although, as Dumont's poem makes clear, indigenous peoples would have additional reasons for hostility to the myth, my own indifference to it allows me some sympathy with Dumont's feelings about it.

Harold Adams Innis, a political economist, communications historian, and one of white Canada's most important thinkers during the middle decades of the twentieth century, began his career by writing a history of the CPR, and it was almost certainly Innis who got white Canadians like E.J. Pratt and F.R. Scott to thinking about the railway in mythological terms. Like his international importance as a founding father of the discipline of Communications Studies, Innis's contribution to the way members of the dominant culture think about themselves as Canadians can hardly be overstated. He drew attention to their colonial status *vis-à-vis* Britain and the United States and thereby created a desire in white Canadians for a myth of their own — and inadvertently supplied them with the material for it.

What began with Innis as an exclusive focus on transportation — transportation prior to the telegraph being coextensive with communication — became, as Ian Angus explains, "both generalised and transformed into a communication theory of society and civilization" (6). As Americans discovered when Frederick Jackson Turner wrote his theory of the frontier, the leap from theory to national myth is a short one: Innis taught Canadians to think about the railway as not just a way of moving staples, but more important, as a form of communication; hence Scott's notion of the railway as "Slowly forming, with steel syntax," a "long sentence." The irony is that the railway is a signifier of Canada's colonial and colonialist dependency — in the context of Innis's thought, at least. Indeed, white Canada is still propped up by two other cultures: the European and the indigenous. Despite the globalization of the economy, we still export our nonhuman nature by the trainload, and we still import our culture, including European theories of language that textualize our bodies and our ecosystem out of existence. White Canada's other crutch is the land itself and its natural resources, which

keep white culture relatively enriched by keeping aboriginal cultures relatively impoverished.

Clearly, in this era of postcolonialism, Innis's work no longer speaks directly to the issues. However, Ian Angus has revised Innis's thinking about colonialism and communications to bring it more in line with postcolonial concerns. In his treatment of the problem of white Canadian identity, Angus's work recalls that of Daniel Francis, and like Francis, Angus does not factor gender into his theory. However, because his focus is on styles of communication, the theoretical net he casts captures many of the issues I have been examining throughout this book. In this essay, I bring Angus's work — and, by extension, Innis's — into dialogue with Marilyn Dumont's. Like a face-to-face conversation, the interaction between their texts has no disciplinary roadmap and thus takes some wide detours around scholarly convention, which privileges professionalism over personal anecdote, structure over process, closure over open-endedness. Yet this seems an appropriate way to end a book about the need to integrate such things as object and subject, structure and process, and to embrace such paradoxes as open-ended closure. Therefore, rather than edit out the cross-disciplinary connections which Dumont and Angus evoke for me — connections in keeping with the integrative philosophy of Communications Studies — I have chosen instead to insert four section headings which I hope will serve as signposts.

"The Politics of Language" follows Angus, who sets the problem of *traversing* versus *inhabiting* the land in the context of Innis's theory of written versus oral communication. In direct contrast to postmodernist theories that widen the gulf between knowledge and experience, a gulf that defines Western consciousness, Angus's postcolonial model of communications envisions a bridge over it. The second section, "Time and Space," is a discussion of written and oral communication as epistemologically very different from one another: they are ways of knowing whose mutual isolation impoverishes Western culture and perpetuates the oppression of non-white, non-male, non-wealthy, and nonhuman life. "A Plea for Time" looks at how Western culture's construction of history as linear distorts the felt experience of history and how orality undermines the linear construction of time. Finally, "A Critique of Space" examines why the concept of

space inhabited remains outside white male consciousness and how the spatial notions of centre and periphery perpetuate the white masculine status quo and the tyranny of literacy over orality. As a poet with a stake in both oral and written traditions, Dumont has a position on all these issues. Her poems are not merely grist for the mill of academic literary criticism; they are occasions for rethinking our relationship to the common ground we call Canada. What they have to say about language and landscape — and the body that mediates between them — rewrites both literary history and humankind's relationship to nonhuman nature.

The Politics of Language

Angus has two reasons for revisiting Innis. He is in search of a response to the Canadian crisis of identity which has only deepened in the context of a burgeoning multiculturalism and economic globalization. Angus's revision of Innis is in response to the kind of malaise that inspired George Grant's *Lament for a Nation* (1965), which mourns a Canada that never was and never can be. While Grant's white male lament is neither mine, nor Dumont's, Angus's web of multiple contexts is far larger than Grant's concerns — large enough to accommodate the sweeping issues addressed in "Letter to Sir John A. MacDonald" and a handful of Dumont's other poems.

Another reason for returning to the modernist Innis stems from Angus's ambivalence about the direction of postmodernist cultural studies. As co-editor of a 1993 special Innis issue of *Continuum: The Australian Journal of Media and Culture*, Angus joins with his collaborator Brian Shoesmith in saying that "cultural studies appears to be caught in an endless oscillation between text and audience which effaces questions of power, or deflects them into spurious claims of resistance. . . . Innis permits us to criticize contemporary forms of power without falling prey to the illusion of transparent, social relations. . . . Our use of Innis then, is thoroughly political and attempts to shift the focus of studies of communication and culture from studies of representation towards their material embodiment" (Angus and Shoesmith 1). The reintegration of material embodiment into theories of

culture opens up the possibility of exploring the limitations of current discourse theory and literary criticism, limitations which not only trivialize the lived experience of women and racialized Others but also justify a narrow categorizing of writing by poets who happen to be Native. As Dumont has written in this regard,

one wrong sound and you're shelved in the Native Literature section
resistance writing
a mad Indian
unpredictable
on the war path
native ethnic protest
("The Devil's Language" *RGBG* 54)

Dumont's poetry is more than "resistance writing," "native ethnic protest," and the identity politics that these imply. Angus's reworking of Innis's thought permits a view of Dumont's work as occupying multiple places in Canadian book stores, libraries, and literary traditions.

"It is the great merit of Innis to have taken social science to the critique of colonialism," writes Angus. "It allows us to probe the possibility of a postcolonial exit from Europe. Not to traverse but to inhabit our own space" (15). Angus's observations on this theme of *traversing versus inhabiting* — Dumont's theme in "Letter to Sir John A. MacDonald" — are from his contribution to the Innis issue of *Continuum*. Entitled "Orality in the Twilight of Humanism," the article revisits Innis's theory of communication in terms of its potential to advance the present postcolonial enterprise in Canada.[1] This enterprise involves "the struggle of aboriginal peoples for independence and/or influence, and the assertion of a traditional heritage that can address contemporary social problems caused by European society, and the technological domination of nature" (2). As the elevation of the building of the railway to mythological status suggests, the way Innis's thought was embraced by white Canada was highly selective and partial: the emptiness of Scott's landscape — especially with respect to indigenous peoples — is indicative of this selectivity, as is Pratt's exclusion of the Chinese labourers from his railway poem.

Angus's work also addresses "the question of the history and fate of the ex-European people who have found themselves on the margins of European power, and who are faced with a choice of identifying with it or questioning its foundations on the basis of their historical experience in the New World. In this case, the issues of their identity, their relation to nature and technology, and their relation to aboriginal peoples are enfolded in questioning the concept of 'civilization'" (2). As a first generation Canadian, whose multi-ethnic parental origins lie in the war-ravaged landscapes of eastern Europe, I have observed at first hand the experience of "white ethnics" during the middle decades of the twentieth century. My interest in pursuing issues of identity in the context of nature, technology, and aboriginality is therefore deeply personal. I would add a third marginalized constituency to the two that concern Angus simply by noting here that the intersection of these particular white identity issues with issues of female and aboriginal subjectivity raises new questions about the relationship between patriarchy and primitivism.

Innis's theory of Canadian economic history was not just about Canada as, successively, a colony of France, Britain, and the United States. It was, more importantly, a deconstruction of the civilized/primitive binary. Like many other veteran soldiers of World War One, Innis returned from the war with one overwhelming question on his mind: What *is* civilization? "The experience of the first World War was the first time that Europeans and European colonials could no longer blame . . . conflict on benighted savages. . . . They had to face the fact that it was the civilised nations of Europe who originated the mass destruction which could no longer be viewed as a conflict between civilization and savagery. . ." (Angus 4-5). Virtually all of Innis's work is an attempt to redefine civilization, diagnose its failures, and prescribe a therapy for its ills in the context of the media of communication that constitute it. Innis replaced the civilized/primitive binary with another pair of categories: writing and orality. He documented "the unacknowledged importance of the oral tradition in maintaining Western civilisation," and he wished, "by acknowledging that importance, to promote greater orality in the present. . . . The therapeutic goal of his communication theory is therefore oriented toward a greater 'balance' between the competing biases of writing and orality" (Angus 11).

While Innis's prescription for the healing of civilization is one of transformation from competition to balance between the two communicative capacities, Angus takes it one step further: "The therapeutic intention of communication theory cannot be properly fulfilled through the notion of balance. It is better served by a metaphor of excavation, of digging down to the fundamental unity from which communicative capacities have been abstracted. . . ." (14). Theorizing that "digging down" process requires that Angus revisit "the fundamental notion of humanism — the unity of the human body as the origin of media of communication, and human capacities and creativity." However, I would hasten to add that it's not Angus's intention to recover the unified humanist body per se:

> The present tendency of media is to shatter this unity, to fragment human capacities, and to fracture the conception of the self. In this situation, the unity of the human body becomes very problematic, and motivates a historical reflection on the origins of the conflicts of our own time that recovers the unity of the human body that is present in orality. (Angus 12)

There is no question that the notion of the unified humanist body, like the notion of a unified Canada, is at least as fragmented as the railway in Dumont's poem. The "long sentence" of Scott's poem is now a series of sentence fragments — as is the textualized body of postmodernist discourse. The "unity of the human body that is present in orality" is beyond the consciousness of a society where virtually all media of communication are mechanized. We are surrounded by auditory and visual texts — voices disembodied and bodies desubstantialized, electronically transmitted to us as sounds and images. These texts are extensions of the disembodied voices and desubstantialized bodies of written discourse. We are prisoners of this Guttenberg Galaxy: constituted through our mechanized media, we are so overpowered by their influence that it's impossible for us to make a study of orality on any terms but those dictated by that influence.

Indeed, for all their claims to speak on behalf of oral as well as written discourse, contemporary theories of discourse are

rooted in this obsessively literate communication tradition. While theorists have had much to say about the spoken word as it functions in the Western tradition, their conclusions cannot simply be projected onto oral-based traditions, such as the traditions of aboriginal cultures, because discourse theory is contaminated by its own graphocentric bias. Blinded by that bias, "the unity of the human body that is present in orality" is indistinguishable from the unity of the humanist body, for the textualization of the body has achieved status among the leading thinkers of our time as "a privileged theoretical turn immune from cultural suspicion and critique" (Bordo 291). All bodies — humanist or otherwise — are ipso facto discursively constructed. Such is the cul-de-sac into which the linguistic foundationalism of contemporary discourse theory forces us. Only from the perspective of a marginalized orality is it possible to conceive of the human body as material and unified. Although herself grounded in postmodernist theories of discourse, Julia Kristeva tried to theorize the material body as "a maternal body prior to discourse" (Bordo 291). During the eighties, her view was an interesting possible road out of the cul-de-sac, but she was ambushed by the anti-essentialist hysteria of postmodernist feminism. In all fairness to feminism, however, I would have to agree that Kristeva's Eurocentric middle-class maternal body flirts a little too strenuously with notions of female biology as destiny. Innis, for whom geography was destiny, is less dangerous to women and Others.

Innis implicitly warned about the seemingly unbridgeable gap between writing-based and oral-based cultures in an essay entitled "Industrialism and Cultural Values":

> We must all be aware of the extraordinary, perhaps insuperable, difficulty of assessing the quality of a culture of which we are a part or of assessing the quality of a culture of which we are not a part. In using other cultures as mirrors in which we may see our own culture we are affected by the astigma of our own eyesight and the defects of the mirror, with the result that we are apt to see nothing in other cultures but the virtues of our own. (Innis, qtd. in Angus 10)

The history of white-Native relations would certainly seem to exemplify this. Where else could the notion of the Noble Savage have come from, except the White Man's projecting upon aboriginal cultures those qualities he regarded as the virtues of his own? At least part of that "nobility" was confirmed by his astigmatic perception of aboriginal gender relations: what he saw among the "savages" were males engaged in "important" activities, such as hunting and warfare, and females doing "unimportant" things, such as cooking and caring for infants. He concluded that these savages were indeed noble and living in an Edenic state of nature, where they fulfilled God's law giving man dominion over woman.

If theorists operating out of a writing-based culture are incapable of assessing the value of an oral-based culture, surely it cuts two ways. An aliterate observer would be at a loss to assess the true value of a writing-based culture. Therefore, the "ideal theorist" as we might envision her would have credentials in both perspectives. The closest we can come to this hypothetical ideal is the halfbreed, our most immediate candidate being Marilyn Dumont who, although she has mastered the master's language of poetry and made it her own, is far from alienated from the ethos of orality, as some of her poems of childhood suggest. Take "The Devil's Language," for example. It's about learning the King's English, from its "ABC's," through its "Dick and Jane," to "its lily white words / its picket fence sentences / and manicured paragraphs." The King's English "could silence us all," says the poet; "its had its hand over my mouth since my first day of school." Although no such hand muffles the mouth of her father, he claims to be unaware of it:

> my father doesn't read or write
> the King's English says he's
> dumb but he speaks Cree
> how many of you speak Cree?
> correct Cree not correct English
> grammatically correct Cree
> is there one? (54)

Speaking his dumbness, he contradicts it because he speaks "the Chief's Cree not the King's English," and the Chief's Cree is any-

thing but dumbing. Whatever the status of its grammar as measured by the standards of literacy, it's Cree that can take you back,

> back to your mother's sound, your mother's tongue, your
> mother's language
> back to that clearing in the bush
> in the tall black spruce
>
> near the sound of horses and wind
> where you sat on her knee in a canvas tent
> and she fed you bannock and tea
> and syllables
> that echo in your mind now, now
> that you can't make the sound
> of that voice that rocks you and sings you to sleep
> in the devil's language. (55)

The devil's language, it would seem, still has the power the priests feared in it. And, as loyal soldiers of text-ridden Mother Church, they had reason to fear it. For it has the uncanny power to transform the present by recovering unwritten voices and echoes, sounds and songs, performable rhythms that can appear in written form only as fragments of historical fact. The only sin here is that this poem's particular apostate cannot perform those rhythms because of that textualized hand over her mouth.

Time and Space

So how can she unmuffle herself? More to the point, how do *we* unmuzzle ourselves and liberate the body and nonhuman nature from the long sentence of their exploitation? One answer lies in an understanding of the biases of space and time:

> Every medium of communication has a bias toward either space or time. . . . By "bias" is meant the emphasising of a certain aspect of experience, the time-oriented aspect or the space-oriented aspect, and it is intrinsic to the medium of communication [in relation]

> to the media environment as a whole. Bias is not a bad use of a medium; it is unavoidable. . . .
>
> Since every medium of communication is biased towards either space or time, it is impossible for a single medium to be complete. If the society was only oriented to space, for example, it would be unstable with respect to time. If a society was only oriented to time, it would have great difficulty in occupying a single area successfully. (Angus 9)

On this understanding of media as necessarily biased but incomplete in relation to each other, it's not difficult to see why the goal of Innis's theory is oriented toward greater balance between the biases of space and time. In the postmodern and postcolonial context, with its paradoxical desperation and celebration of fragmentation, it's even easier to understand why Angus stresses some kind of move toward integration.

Innis associated space-biased media with industrialization, mechanization, and modernity. Innis suggested that "our society has been extremely efficient in media oriented towards space.

> We have more and more organization over a larger and larger area, developing what is essentially a world system. What we do not do well is organize things in the dimension of time. While we have a very efficient and well-integrated world system, it is extremely sensitive to periodic shocks and dislocations. The critique is that it does not have stability over time, despite a remarkable stability over space. (Angus 9)

The railway may have conquered space, but time is conquering the railway. Under the influence of Marshall McLuhan's theory that electronic media constitute an annihilation of both time and space, early Canadian postmodernist poets attempted to mythologize "new literary and intermedia forms" as "the stimulus of an electronically decentralized and retribalized culture" (Davey 1974 23). But this myth is also unsatisfactory, not only because the technology involved is beyond the economic means of many would-be retribalized tribes, but also because "writing" —

electronically mediated or not — also "has a centralising effect tending to promote bureaucratic organisation due to its one-sided orientation to space" (Angus 10-11). Who has the technology has the monopoly on power/knowledge in this "information age." More important, electronic media not only exacerbate disembodiment; they are too easily appropriated in the service of a totalitarian, metanational corporatism whose centre is not so much nowhere as everywhere, omnipresent but invisible and hence inaccessible to study and critique. Even without such high-tech mediating technology, "Writing tends to promote analytic, abstract thought, and to isolate the writer and the reader from each other." Moreover — and here, scientific writing is the prime example — writing "continually liquidates its past to present an analytic, synchronic, theoretical summary of the current state of knowledge" (11). In other words, in text-based culture we do not remember the past; we annihilate it by overwriting it.

By contrast, an oral-based culture is time-oriented and focuses "much of its energy toward not forgetting, towards continuously re-enacting the past in the present." Angus explains:

> Oral society is based upon the notion of speech as action, rather than language as description, and has evolved many strategies for overcoming the tendency of spoken words to be forgotten. Stories, rituals, and so forth are built upon formulae and mnemonics. Poetry has a key function in which the rhythmic metre makes things easier to remember and to put in place. . . . Oral society is homeostatic due to the continuous incorporation of the past into the present. (Angus 11)

The Okanagan novelist Gerry William relates a good example of what Angus is getting at: "I remember the way my grandmother used to tell stories. She spoke Okanagan, and it used to drive us kids nuts, because she always circled around and around. We were forced to pay attention to every word, because she never explained what she was saying. She just spoke, and the words would circle in my mind for days. I worried at each line, each phrase, gnawing at it, trying to understand why she said them in the way she said them" (161). The non-linearity, the circularity

of oral stories sharpens the concentration and challenges the listener to worry and gnaw at the meanings until they are fixed in memory. With each new telling there would be new meanings to pile together with the old ones.

"Equally important," Angus points out, "because speech is action . . . [o]riginality or creativity [resides in] enactment or performance."

> The oral mind is oriented towards narrative accounts; stories rather than lists. Consequently, there is no neutrality but a standpoint with both a descriptive and evaluative dimension. Orality is participatory and inclusive, not distant. It acts over small spaces and unites people in face-to-face encounters. Being situational rather than abstract, oral tradition is agonistic, or rhetorical, rather than epistemological (which is based on a separation of the knower from the known). (Angus 11)

Because of its here-ness and now-ness, orality is rooted in the body — especially in the bodily senses of hearing and touch. Orality is self-reflexive and up close: it unites people and connects knower and known. It constitutes an alternative epistemology, one with an emphasis on connection, rather than separation — integration, rather than fragmentation. This is what makes orality such a powerful critique of space-oriented, print-dominated, subject-object differentiated textuality. This is what makes "speaking the devil's language" like "talking back / back(words)" to "God the Father and standard English," and also "like talking back(wards)" in time (*RGBG* 55).

It was not Innis's intention to present time-biased orality as merely a critique from the margins of space-oriented and text-dominated culture and its space-biased technologies of communication. Nor was he satisfied to represent orality as the lost-forever half of some post-lapsarian divided whole. Rather, he had another account of orality, one which acknowledges that, as a communicative capacity, writing has its origins in the body and that its abstraction "from the unity of the living body has allowed [it] to be developed in ways which would not have been

possible if [its] integration in orality had never been sundered" (Angus 14). This moves orality from the colonized margin to the centre of the empire of communications:

> Orality is also viewed [by Innis] as a fundamental synthesis, a basis co-ordinating all human senses, and incorporating both time and space in a unique manner. As he says in "The Problem of Space," "In oral intercourse the eye, ear, and brain, the senses and the faculties acted together in busy co-operation and rivalry each eliciting, stimulating, and supplementing the other." Orality understood in this manner, is an integration of human capacities into a functioning whole, from which all other media abstract partial selections and developments of human capacities. In this formulation, orality is not merely alongside other media of communication; it is the fundamental basis of all human communication from which other media derive, and to which they are secondary. (Angus 12)

Because all human capacities, including space- as well as time-biased communicative capacities, originate in the material human body, that body is central, not peripheral, and its unity fundamental. The textualized body, by contrast, is a fragmented body because the space-biased media of communication through which it is constructed are themselves fragmentary: they are communicative capacities split off from their origin in orality, abstracted from the unity of the living body. The fragmented body is a satellite body that traverses space in perpetual orbit around the central body from which it has been split off. Seen in this way, the celebration of the textualized, fragmented, postmodernist body does not overturn but rather, reinforces the long-standing fantasy of transcendence — the patriarchal denial of the body, the mother, nonhuman nature — in short, the origin. The material body is central in space and time, peripheral in space-biased fantasy. The problem is that space-biased fantasy has the monopoly on knowledge in Western culture. I am, after all, writing an essay in a book for national distribution, not performing a chant in a neighbourhood ritual. I can only

hope, as Innis hoped, "to motivate the reader to intervene in the text in an oralist manner. Then, by micrological extension, perhaps to intervene in society as a whole in a similar manner" (Angus 10).

Angus suggests that we embrace the paradox of Innis's two conceptions of orality — the marginal and the central — rather than try to resolve it: "A great thinker such as Innis does not simply make logical mistakes; this central contradiction motivates and animates his entire work in a manner that is characteristic of the age as an attempt to think through dependency in a neo-colonial and post-colonial context" (12). Dumont's halfbreed poetic features a "Half Human / Half Devil (Halfbreed) Muse" who not only embodies the centre-margin paradox, but also enacts the process of "excavation, of digging down to the fundamental unity from which communicative capacities have been abstracted" (Angus 14). This Muse transforms the lily white words, picket-fence sentences, and manicured paragraphs of grammatically correct, Imperial English into the lurching, laconic, dancing, drumming devil's language. The Muse's first challenge is to shut out the industrialized, mechanized, modernized din that numbs, dumbs, and deafens the senses central to orality:

> shutting off
> a dripping faucet so there is no
> leak, no leak, not a drop
> my eyes want to push out, out
> through mind-skin, arms and legs are propelled
> through numb air, words writhe, wrists flare escaping
> numbness, no sound, no sound
> no movement, stuck, a blank
> wound in a rope ball, tight, hard
> spun, a drill bit piercing
> earth, whir of steel exhaling rock
> dust, drill bit biting, dog
> gnawing bone, gripping ivory
> hankering down on, grinding . . . (*RGBG* 51)

The only way for this Muse to "push out," to "escape" colonized space, is to seize the steel technologies that overpower modern

consciousness and use them to initiate a process that moves out of the narrowness of headspace and into bodytime. Escape is both an outward and an inward/downward process: mechanized tools begin the escape from the confines of tight, hard, rocklike "mind-skin" but are soon discarded for a primal, instinctive way of gnawing down to organic bone. The real performance can begin only when there is a giving up of space and a giving over to time:

> Giving up to giving over
>
> Lurch, lurching laconic
> dance, drum rattle
> gangly movement, offbeat, arm
> bent over head, leg
> straight out, head twisted and shift
> of body to next feral contortion
> animal skin taut, blood
> paint, ochre skin, as smell
> pebbles encased trapped
> in sound, pebbles rasp
> against thin dry skin
> a heard of rattles overtakes me

In Trickster fashion, the Muse is transformed from human to nonhuman form. The transformation brings a heightened state of awareness in which sound and smell, movement and touch take over. These written traces on the page are, of course, not identical with the *experience* of transformation engendered by the dance — a mindbody experience in real spacetime. These fragments are, however, the immediate offspring of the unified human body; they are also a blueprint for enacting an alternative way of knowing nonhuman nature. The poem is not so much about language on the page as it is about the body — eyes, wrists, arm, head, leg, skin, blood — as the origin of written language. Eyes push beyond the "mind-skin," escape the limits of the visual page, and the body becomes "encased trapped / in sound" instead. Or, to put it another way, the "civilized" page becomes coextensive with the "primitive" body. The halfbreed Muse does not internalize nature, or commune with it, as in British Romantic fantasy. Nor does s/he indulge in Canadian Green-Indian

fantasies: s/he is not that ecologically correct Noble Savage who knows nature's wild ways. Rather, s/he is their embodiment.

Although written poetry cannot rhyme in a way consistent with the demands of oral cultures, it is nevertheless the space-biased medium that remains closest to its origins in orality. It's therefore capable of embracing paradox — Innisian paradox included. In Dumont's poetic, the paradox finds expression in the halfbreed: both white and Native, the halfbreed is both central and marginal. The halfbreed aesthetic does not pit itself against the centre, even though that culture "misrecognizes the conditions of its own existence" and "fails to understand that it does not sustain itself of itself but only through its relations to the periphery, on which . . . it is 'dependent'" (Angus 6). Simply to oppose the centre would only serve to identify "halfbreed" with a savagery still — as always — in binary opposition to the civilized. Rather, halfbreed poetics theorizes and diagnoses civilization. This critique and diagnosis is "Not an outright rejection, but a taking on board of the ideal of civilisation in the moment that it becomes apparent that the centre has become the source of a new and intensified savagery" (6). In other words, to extend the idea of "taking on board," halfbreed poetics is a kind of rescue operation. The halfbreed poet does not abandon the past, the present, or the planet in some Trekkie fantasy that *traverses* time and space in order to escape the imperialist atrocities of the past and save a disintegrating humanism. Rather, like all the other halfbreeds who, despite those atrocities, are "still here," as Dumont's dearjohn letter reminds us, the halfbreed poet remains an *inhabitant* of this time, this space, this body, which is the only ground from which to deliver the past from its colonial myths, and to rescue civilization from its own savagery. This is not romanticism; this is survival.

A Plea for Time

The question of the recovery of orality and the sensibilities associated with it has been an issue for scholars in the various branches of communications studies almost since the day Innis counterposed the categories of literacy and orality. But rather than balance them, as he proposed, or integrate them, as Angus proposes, we have

tended to oppose them in binary fashion. From anthropology to linguistics, many intellectuals have seized upon the concept of orality as an alternative to literacy and the return to orality as the remedy for what ails Western culture. In this way they have added orality to the cluster of labels Western culture gives to its longing for something lost. Like the European poets who longed for reunion with Mother Nature, like the white North Americans whose similar longing was expressed in the fantasy of the Green Indian, like the cultural feminists who long for the return of the goddess, those who would recover orality are routinely dismissed as nostalgics. Specifically, they are criticized for their phonocentric romanticization of the wholeness perceived as characteristic of non-literate modes of being. But that contemptuous critique is itself a symptom of the psychic alienation of graphocentrism. As Innis's work and that of some of his successors implies, we are all inmates of the Gutenberg Galaxy prison. To censure all attempts at jailbreak is to make a virtue of imprisonment. The text fetishism of postmodernist theorizing is only the most recent and most extreme expression of a phenomenon that reaches back through the Enlightenment, the Renaissance, the Golden Age of Greece, to the Mesopotamia of 3000 BCE. It is Western elitism writ large. "Those who think of the text as the paradigm of all discourse," writes rhetorician Walter Ong, "need to face the fact that only the tiniest fraction of languages has ever been written or ever will be. . . . Hard-core textualism is snobbery, often hardly disguised" (Ong 1986 26).

How the past is conceptualized determines whose ideas about recovering it are dismissed as nostalgic and romantic and whose are treated with respect. I find it fascinating that when physicists claim that there is nothing in current theoretical physics that actually forbids travel back in time, no one accuses *them* of nostalgia for the past. Having reduced the material universe to a mathematical text, their fantasies of recovering the past in every detail are apparently legitimized. This form of textualizing the universe is what Edmund Husserl called "the mathematical substruction of space and time" (Angus 13–14). While the reduction of time and space to a mathematical text may have been crucial to Einstein's construction of the geometry of spacetime, the thought experiment he performed in order to conceptualize spacetime demonstrates that textualization is no substitute for the lived experience of spacetime. The phrase "thought

experiment" is scientific spin for what we in the humanities call "fantasy." Einstein fantasized the human body traversing space at the speed of light — a fantasy he articulated in the language of mathematics. This fantasy is now the metaphor of cyberspace, where "travellers" are fantasized as surfing from website to website at warp speed.

The belief in the electronic mediation of communication as the traversal of space through the annihilation of time is no less "romantic" and illusory than the belief in the ability to recover in every detail the lost Eden of orality. "Visiting" the website of the Paris Chamber of Commerce is even less an experience of France than is a visit to the French Embassy in downtown Ottawa. Implicit in both romantic views is a denial of the material present, including the material body. The material body is not lost in the past; it has merely been erased from consciousness — or, more accurately, masked by a text. Space and time are not annihilated by e-mail and the Internet; those technologies merely reinforce the fantasy of escape from the material content of space and time. A distinguishing feature of Western culture would seem to be its desire to annihilate that which it cannot understand or control by other means, be it Indians, the body, or the content of time and space. It didn't work on the Indians, and it won't work on the body or lived spacetime.

The mathematical textualization of time underpins our conception of history as linear. Innis provided "a critique of the mathematical substruction of time" when in "A Plea for Time" he pointed out that "there are two ways of misunderstanding history":

> We may misunderstand history as antiquarianism, as that which is simply finished, or on the other hand, as that which remains and continues, implying that we understand those of the past as if they were just like us in the present. In both cases, we misunderstand history, which is change in continuity, and continuity in change. Innis has done a great deal to resurrect the notion of history from this dilemma of reduction backward to the past, or forward to the present. (Angus 13)

The misunderstanding of history as that which is simply finished gives rise to the notion that any attempt to recover the past in the present is nostalgic and romantic. In the linear model of history, time is divided up into past, present, and future. Yet these designations are merely categories which, in true Western epistemological fashion, come to stand in for the reality they purport to explain. This linear conception of time does violence to the felt experience of history — to the experience of "change in continuity, and continuity in change."

Indeed, the more things change, the more they remain the same. White dominance has been continuous since the establishment of the Canadian state, but the content of whiteness has changed. Not until the sixties did those of East and South European origin fully qualify as white. Being born on Canadian soil didn't give you permission to feel Canadian, although you always automatically answered *Yes* on those government forms that ask "Are you a Canadian citizen?" — in contrast to your immigrant parents who always had to hesitate for a moment. But if any constituency stands as proof of the definition of history as change in continuity, continuity in change, it's Canada's indigenous population — and not just in the white imagination where, as I've already suggested, the Indian turned from ignoble Red to noble Green but nevertheless remained a savage. Profoundly changed through relationships of love and war with the White Man, indigenous peoples are nevertheless "still here," as Dumont's dearjohn letter asserts. That doesn't stop Dumont from wondering "where we fit in this 'vertical mosaic,' this colour colony." The "job application asks if I am a Canadian citizen and I am expected to mindlessly check 'yes,' indifferent to skin colour and the deaths of 1885" ("It Crosses My Mind" *RGBG* 59). Clearly official history, constructed through space-biased media of communication and, in turn, reinforcing the White Man's monopoly on knowledge and power, is linear and hence informed by the "misunderstanding of history as . . . that which is simply finished." This misunderstanding is at the heart of the bureaucratic question

> "Are you a Canadian citizen?" I sometimes think to
> answer, *yes, by coercion,*   *yes, but no . . . there's*

> *more,* but no space provided to write my historical interpretation here, that *yes but no,* really only means *yes* because there are no lines for the stories between *yes and no . . .* (*RGBG* 59)

In a nation-state obsessed with space and possessed of space, there is no space provided for alternative histories. Bureaucracy is a feature of the text-dominated, space-biased nation-state, and the bureaucratic questionnaire is a way of annihilating through texualization the felt experience of history. Subjectivity is split along the fault-line of a convenient binary: past/present. But convenient to whom? This assault on subjectivity is emblematic of the institutional monopolization of knowledge/power which defines civilization as we know it.

The notion of time as linear is disrupted by orality, not only through its focus on the local and the particular, but also through its emphasis on stories, on speech as action, and on the here-and-now situation in which that action, or performance, takes place. As already noted, "Originality or creativity does not reside so much in making up new stories but in the quality of this enactment or performance" (Angus 11). Stories may have an ordinary, everyday, mundane sameness about them, but every enactment will be original, creative, and different. In this way, the past seeps through the cracks in the present and transforms it, as in Dumont's poem with the title of "A^cimowina" which, significantly, is a Cree word meaning "everyday stories." The poem is worth quoting here in full in order to convey in full the idea of performance as transformance:

> my grandmother stories follow me,
> spill out of their bulging suitcases
> get left under beds,
> hung on dooknobs
>
> their underwear and love lives
> sag on my bathroom towel racks
>
> their Polident dentures in old cottage cheese containers,
> Absorbine Junior, Buckley's and "rat root" take over my
> bathroom counters

their bunioned shoes crowd my doorway

their canes trip me
and their *Enquirers* cover my coffee tables

their cold tea stains my cups and
teabags fill my garbage

their stories smell of Noxzema, mothballs and
dried meat. (*RGBG* 70)

"Storytelling and creative writing are fundamentally different," says Gerry William (160). Yet here, past stories seep up through the cracks in the present poem. Past and present, space and time are collapsed as the commonplace particularities of the past transform the lived-in space of the present in an almost surreal takeover. There is no boundary here between outer space, which is measurable, quantifiable, and inner space, which is not. There is an intimation of *space traversed* in the opening lines that gives over to *space inhabited* as the poem progresses.

By contrast, in the white Western imagination, Time, not Space, is the Final Frontier. Even science now questions the linear conception of time and history, as when cosmologist Stephen Hawking, in his pointedly titled book, *A Brief History of Time*, claims that we do not understand the "shape" of time. This would indeed seem to be the case, as suggested in the results of astrophysicist Wendy Freedman's calculation of the age of certain Hubble-telescoped stars, which turn out to be "older" than the universe itself: no amount of tinkering with the numbers has so far been able to resolve that paradox. This may well be evidence that a crack is beginning to open up in a wall of the most privileged cell in the Gutenberg Galaxy prison.

A Critique of Space

If time is no longer linear for physics, what does this do to space? Although Innis frees us from the illusion of the linearity — the mathematical textualization — of lived time, his theorizing stops short of a "comparable critique of the mathematical substruction of lived space."

> As time can be misunderstood as a linear progression which poses the apparent choice between discontinuity and continuity, so space can be misunderstood as simple location in a mathematical grid in which the opposition of here to there eradicates continuity in difference, or traversal. In his concrete descriptions, Innis always uses the notion of space as traversed space — that is, space that has been unified and differentiated through media of communication — and simultaneously conceptualises space as already necessarily quantified. It is only on the basis of this quantified conception of space that the contrast between space and time can stand as emblematic of the problems of mechanisation, and industrialisation as a whole. Thus, the contradiction in the conception of oral tradition enters the conception of space as well. (Angus 13)

Innis would appear to be his own best example of "the extraordinary, perhaps insuperable, difficulty" of assessing the bias of the culture of which we are a part. While claiming that space is constructed through the media of communication that traverse it, for him traversed space pre-exists its traversal by those media. This is as contradictory as the paradox of orality as both peripheral and central, but unlike that paradox it is dysfunctional. It's an oddity indicative of the white Canadian consciousness of space. Perhaps space can enter the White Man's consciousness only as *space traversed*, not as *space inhabited*. For men like MacDonald and Scott and Pratt, the notion of Canada as a material landmass is not accessible to consciousness except as *space traversed*. We no longer have to wonder that so-and-so many miles of railway track appealed to them as a powerful image of Canadian identity, or — as in Dumont's poem — that the settlers can't settle, or that the White Man can't settle his territorial quarrels with himself, much less the outstanding land claims with the land's first people.

The absence of a functional critique of the mathematical substruction of space led Innis to counterpose time and space in an unusually dramatic way, a way that defined the contrast between them as emblematic of the crisis of Western culture. But the mathematical substruction of space allows for no collapsing of centre and periphery. In a mathematical grid, the location of Ground

Zero must be determined, but once that determination is made, Ground Zero is always the centre, while Ground Two, or Ten, or Three Thousand is always the periphery. As Hart Cohen has pointed out, for Innis, "access *from* the centre to the periphery also meant access from the periphery *to* the centre. In this regard, the term 'cultural monopoly' (the control of communications and culture by the centralised power) becomes particularly potent" (3). No wonder Innis could conceive only of "balance" between centre and periphery. Balance allows for only minor and momentary power reversals from centre to periphery and back again. Integration is achievable only where centre and periphery collapse into each other.

Historically, the periphery has been doubly peripheral for Native communities. Not only were most Native people located at some distance from the metropolitan centres, they were isolated on reserves. In some cases, this made it possible to raise whole urban neighbourhoods of non-Native children on the myth of the vanished Indian. Many of those neighbourhoods were themselves ethnic urban peripheries where adults, as immigrants, had little or no knowledge of their new country's indigenous population. Here, the myth had an even better chance of taking root. "Circle the wagons!" is a familiar cry if you spent your Saturday afternoons watching double-features at the movies. And if someone had given you reason to think about it — and nobody ever did — you would have had to agree that virtually every one of those Hollywood Westerns was about the vanished Indian and how he vanished. You saw those wagons circle so may times, and you saw so many mounted Indians fall dead to the ground that you'd have been surprised to see a live one in the street. An urban Indian? Not likely! You wouldn't have recognized him as Indian anyway, since the Indians in the movies looked like Grey Owl. Where would you find real Indians to play Indians in the movies anyway? You certainly didn't know that circling the wagons was not a historically accurate representation of frontier warfare but rather, a Hollywood technique for getting all the action onto the pre-Cinemascope screen. With respect to knowledge about Indians, you were on the periphery; Hollywood was the centre.

The Hollywood image of circled wagons has something in common with Northrop Frye's famous image of the garrison. As White Man's space, each serves to define those within it as the

centre and those outside it as the periphery. But the politics of the periphery — more commonly known as identity politics — are an attempt to make the periphery central. However, making a virtue of marginalization has in some cases derailed aboriginal identity politics. Dumont's willingness to take on this issue has earned her the approval of another Native woman poet, Beth Cuthand, who describes Dumont as "A Métis poet with an attitude and I applaud her courage and clarity" (*RGBG* back cover). Attitude is present in the sharp opening statement of "Circle the Wagons," a prose-poem true to Dumont's image of herself as one of "the sharp-toned-and-tongued kind / who keep railing on about this stuff / when all well-mannered and sophisticated Indian types / would have reasonably dropped it long ago" ("The Sound of One Hand Drumming" *RGBG* 60):

> There it is again, the circle, that goddamned circle, as if we thought in circles, judged things on the merit of their circularity, as if all we ate was bologna and bannock, drank Tetley tea, so many times "we are" the circle, the medicine wheel, the moon, the womb, and sacred hoops, you'd think we were one big tribe, is there nothing more than the circle in the deep structures of native literature? Are my eyes circles yet?
> (*RGBG* 57)

Feminists who have squirmed over the cultural feminist stereotype of wild-haired women who, beneath a full moon, smear each other with menstrual blood and run with the wolves will find something familiar in this rant. The search for an authentic voice is never easy, what with structuralists telling us how to do it and post-structuralists telling us it can't be done: literary critics claim to see only "the circle in the deep structure of native literature," while theorists of constructionism warn about the cultural essentialism implicit in such a claim. The binarism of Western thought often drives women and Others into thinking that because white patriarchy favours linearity, the rest of us must celebrate circularity. What's the difference, the poet asks, between the stereotype of the welfare Indian, dining on bologna and bannock and tea, and the stereotype of the Native

writer, writing exclusively about medicine wheels and moons and sacred hoops?

Dumont is suspicious of critical description that tips over into political prescription because it assumes that indigenous peoples are "one big tribe" and, moreover, puts her in a cultural bind: ". . . I feel compelled to incorporate something circular into the text, plot, or narrative structure because if it's linear then that proves that I'm a ghost and that native culture really has vanished and what is all this fuss about appropriation anyway? . . .

> There are times when I feel that if I don't have a circle or the number four or legend in my poetry, I am lost, just a fading urban Indian caught in all the trappings of Doc Martens, cappuccinos and foreign films but there it is again orbiting, lunar, hoops encompassing your thoughts and canonizing mine, there it is again, circle the wagons . . . . (*RGBG* 57)

The task for halfbreed poetics is to get the Doc Martens, cappuccinos and foreign films of the Urban Indian to integrate with the hoops and the moons and the circles of orality. But as the reference to the Hollywood image of circling wagons suggests, the task often feels artificial. An authentic collapse of centre and periphery depends upon our willingness to abandon our "more marginalized than thou" politics of identity.

Interesting in the context of Innis's dysfunctional critique of space is the sense of marginalization Dumont's speaker feels as an "urban Indian," living at the supposed centre but identified with a culture that seems to have chosen to make the periphery its permanent home. As she writes in her critical essay, "Positive Images of Nativeness," "To write what I experience as an urban native writes against what is believed to be properly true, but which is the reality for increasing numbers of native people" (1993 49). As a Native *woman,* Dumont is doubly marginalized, if studies of Canadian urbanized Native people are any indication. Canadian geographer Evelyn Peters has observed that "Women are largely absent from analyses of 'images' of aboriginal people and they are almost invisible in the literature on cities, despite their disproportionate representation in the urban

aboriginal population" (50). In other words, it's not merely the myth of vanished Native culture that creates for the speaker of "Circle the Wagons" the experience of being "lost" and "fading." The power reversal between centre and periphery permitted by Innis's theory of space might work to establish a better balance of power in the White Man's quarrel with himself, but it sure won't work for women and Others.

Angus maintains that in order "to understand the contemporary tension between the unity of the living human body and the development of the capacities from this unity, we require a critique of space as well as time" (13). Only when we have both will it be possible to understand that the centre-margin paradox of time-biased orality is complemented by a similar paradox within space-biased textuality. This would move us beyond the balance of biases sought by Innis and into the integration articulated by Angus. If we could somehow acknowledge space as both traversed and inhabited, we might not have to wonder how Dumont's halfbreeds, who have never been "here" in written discourse, can be "still here" in the text of Dumont's poem. In true halfbreed fashion, they can be both a position in space-biased discourse and a material presence in real spacetime: in this understanding, sign and referent are not nearly as disclocated as orthodox postmodernist theory would have it. Theresa de Lauretis's corrective would then be applicable here: "the signifier does not endlessly rush on toward the abyss of nonmeaning, there is a referent, the real world, after all" (1986 17).

On the other side of longing for what is absent is the dissatisfaction with what is present — and that's why the transformation of the present is crucially important. Because what's present in the present is the only thing we *can* transform. Although there is no ultimate escape from the Gutenberg Galaxy prison, the institution is amenable to transformation from within. Jacques Derrida is the father of postmodernist discourse theory and the principle critic of what he sees as the romanticization of orality. Champion of orality, Walter Ong is in turn critical of Derrida for dismissing its importance: "to try to construct a logic of writing without investigation in depth of the orality out of which writing emerged and in which writing is permanently and ineluctably

grounded is to limit one's understanding" (Ong 1982 77). What Ong is calling for here is a focus on integration, rather than the binarization implied in Derrida's discrediting of orality and exalting of textuality. The past can never be recovered in all its particularity: old-growth forests can never be undecimated, vast stretches of prairie farmland can never be uncultivated, and halfbreeds can never be the "fullbreeds" their Native ancestors were. But we can reconnect with the forests and the fields we do have, providing we acknowledge that the bodies we do have — bodies as experienced in real spacetime — are themselves a medium of communication. The body can close some of the distance opened up by space-biased media of communication.

The body is our primary means of communication with nonhuman nature because it's our bodies as much as our texts that define our environment for us. Moreover, this is — in scientific parlance — "an interactive picture of organism and environment" (Lewontin 91). We're not born alienated from nonhuman nature, or from our bodies. That alienation has to be taught to us. And Western civilization, in all its patriarchal disguises — colonialism and capitalism, objectivism and textualism — is a demanding, often violent teacher:

He Taught Me

to identify things outside myself:
the names of trees, animals, the weather
instead of his hand wedged inside of me,
the way he would prepare to fall
a tree.

only
the tree never was,
never grew beyond a sapling,
was never cut and limbed,
never skid over logging roads,
laid on the landing,
or hoisted into a truck,
never travelled the raw road to the mill,
never seasoned in the yard, never
matured, or went through the peeler, or saw,

nor the green chain,
nor dryer, to end up as
someone's rumpus room wall. (*RGBG* 73)

As these lines suggest, learning to objectify nature means learning to identify it as only things outside ourselves, learning to know trees, animals, the weather only as names, and learning to repress the violence this does to us, the way this cuts into us, fells us, processes us, commodifies us. Consenting to this violent pedagogy is, paradoxically, like consenting to repeated rape. As survivors of regular and repeated sexual violence know, dissociation — mental escape from the body and from the violation in progress — is a psychological survival strategy. To be "civilized" is to live in a perpetual state of dissociation which, ironically, we now call — to quote the acerbic words of Seyla Benhabib — "basking in fragmentation, enjoying the play of differences and celebrating the opacity, fracturing, and heteronomy of it all." Like Benhabib, I "do not celebrate this mood" (2).

But the body remembers what consciousness forgets:

he would never have suspected
that I'd find my way back
through clear cuts, slash and burn,
along right-of-ways, cut-lines, nerve-endings,
longitude and latitude,
along arteries, over skin plains,
and valleys of hair,
topographical features of flesh,
after surveying,
calibrating the fault lines.

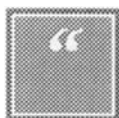
he would never have guessed
that I'd become a forester of my own flesh.

As imaged here, the road to recovery after prolonged violation is difficult and dangerous. It requires that we return to the scene of the crime, revisit the devastation, examine the damage, the deforestation. We — the White man and all who embrace his experience as their own — must unlearn and relearn, reflex and reflect

upon, and reconnect with nonhuman nature in erotic celebration, reconnect with our bodies in autoerotic union. We must reclaim our forests and become foresters of our own flesh. We must cease endlessly *traversing* this land and learn at last to *inhabit* it.

Afterword:

Does Nature Matter?



"When we study nature there is no way around the fact that nature is studying itself," writes Gerry Zukof (qtd. in Campbell 129). All the women whose work is represented in these essays were on some level aware that in studying nature they were studying themselves. How could it have been otherwise? The literary evidence of the last 5000 years identifies women with the realm of the organic, and while women as well as men have accepted this as fact, that evidence has been subjected to intense cross-examination since women in large numbers began to take up the pen. While many women ecoactivists of recent times have traded on this understanding of femaleness to speak on behalf of a beleaguered planet, women activists weren't always so sanguine about woman's place in nature. These horticultural images, for example, are drawn from a famous feminist tract addressed to upper-class women of the late seventeenth century:

> How can you be content to be in the World like Tulips in a Garden, to make a fine *shew* and be good for nothing; have all your Glories set in the Grave, or perhaps much sooner! . . . What a pity it is, that whilst your Beauty casts a lustre all around you, your Souls which are infinitely more bright and radiant . . . shou'd be suffer'd to over-run with Weeds, like fallow and neglected, unadorn'd with any Grace! (Astell 141)

In writing these words in her "Serious Proposal to the Ladies" (1698), Mary Astell was not merely participating in a feminine version of the literary conventions of her day. Her prose was illustrating the unfortunate consequences of what Simone de Beauvoir would eventually call women's "immanence." Yet rather than abandon this horticultural imagery, Astell implores women to forsake their frivolous ways and support her proposal for a women's academy, which she characterizes as a place where women "shall feast on Pleasures" of the mind, a place where there "are no Serpents to deceive you, whilst you entertain yourselves in these delicious Gardens" of knowledge (151).

Writing almost exactly a hundred years later, in an even more famous work of feminist theory, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Mary Wollstonecraft used an almost identical metaphor to express her dismay over her frivolous middle-class sisters:

> The conduct and manners of women, in fact, evidently prove that their minds are not in a healthy state; for, like the flowers which are planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty; and the flaunting leaves, after having pleased a fastidious eye, fade, disregarded on the stalk, long before the season when they ought to have arrived at maturity. (40)

Like Astell before her, Wollstonecraft goes on to attribute this "barren blooming" to the "false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men." Extending rather than abandoning the metaphor, she rebukes the homage paid to the physical charms of women as "a true north-east blast that blights the tender blossoms of affection and virtue" (65) and urges women to cultivate their minds instead of their bodies. Wollstonecraft was a product of Enlightenment thought and Astell of its precursors, and they used the discourse of rationalism to defend against female entrapment on the wrong side of the culture/nature divide. Hindsight is an exact science, and in our current understanding Astell and Wollstonecraft are the beginning of feminist wisdom, not the end of it. Now, two centuries after the appearance of *The Vindication*, we have finally conceded that

women, not men, are our best authorities on women. Therefore we are beginning to listen to what women have been saying about themselves — including that extension of themselves called nature. This is what I have tried to do throughout these essays from both a feminist and an ecocritical perspective.

I have invoked two feminist icons from the past in order to make a point about feminist writing. Whenever feminists write — regardless of the school of political thought we write out of and regardless of the tropes we use — our writing is always political. This is sometimes hard to remember during the periods of patriarchal revival that follow the waves of feminist activism. We are in one of those periods now. Fighting off the malignant influence of a renewed misogyny, feminist theorists — especially in the United States, which produces much of the theory consumed in North America — are finally emerging from almost two decades of fruitless infighting that has dulled the political edge of feminist critique. I was heartened by the appearance in the United States of *The Ecocritical Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996) in which Cheryl Glotfelty, one of the book's editors, draws analogies from the history of feminist literary critique to introduce the emerging field of American ecocriticism. As this way of conceptualizing ecocriticism came a bit late to have any significant impact on my essays, perhaps Glotfelty and other authors featured in the *Reader* can serve as a way of summing up. For many of the critical and theoretical concerns that have preoccupied me over the past 15 years are the ones that many American ecocritics have been puzzling through as well. I therefore offer this Afterword as a way of locating my own work within a larger theoretical context. My intention here is to reinforce what I hope is a growing perception within the Canadian critical community that ecocriticism is a legitimate endeavour in its own right, rather than some ephemeral spinoff of "real" literary studies — an endeavour that contributes not only to our understanding of literature and landscape but also to a vision of the future of literature and the species that produces it.

Glotfelty uses Elaine Showalter's model of the developmental stages of feminist criticism as a "scheme for describing three analogous phases in ecocriticism" (xxii). She finds parallels between feminist criticism's *images of women stage* and ecocriticism's study of representations of nonhuman nature. The

women's literary tradition stage, which involves the recovery of lost women writers, she likens to the recuperation of "the hitherto neglected genre of nature writing." Finally, she compares the *theoretical stage* of feminist criticism, with its emphasis on "the symbolic construction of gender and sexuality," to ecocriticism's examination of "the symbolic construction of species" (xxiii-xiv). What I have done in these essays is collapse all three stages into one — and with good reason, as it turns out. For Showalter's use of the concept of stages initially encouraged a view of the history of feminist literary criticism as linear. To borrow from Ian Angus as quoted in my final essay, this is a misunderstanding of history "as antiquarianism, as that which is simply finished." For as Andrea Lebowitz has noted, "Chronology is not the most important factor in feminist literary criticism" (1991 2). Just as it would "be wrong to think that all early [feminist] criticism of the seventies was naive and simple and well left behind," so too would it be inaccurate to view ecocriticism's initial practices as wholly replaced by later, supposedly more sophisticated methodologies. Like feminist criticism, ecocriticism is not written exclusively for the edification of other experts in the field. Thus it attempts to address the current crisis in Western knowledge, at the heart of which is our view of nonhuman nature as "environment" — as that which merely surrounds us. Therefore, the "consciousness raising" stage of ecocriticism, like its parallel stage in feminist criticism, is ongoing. The poems of Phyllis Webb, P.K. Page, and Daphne Marlatt are perennial favourites among Canadian readers of poetry. Those readers need to be aware that these poems do not always conform to the conventions of the literary movements they are presumed to represent, and that the indiscriminate imposition of those conventions upon them can prevent other, more liberating meanings of nonhuman nature from emerging.

The broader readership of literature still needs to learn how to recognize stereotypes of nonhuman nature — stereotypes such as "Eden, Arcadia, virgin land, miasmal swamp, savage wilderness" (Glotfelty xxiii) and, of course, Mother Nature. As a first step, readers at large need to become aware of these images if we are ever to alter those Western attitudes toward nature we saw so sharply critiqued in Jeannette Armstrong's "Degrees of Green" and Marilyn Dumont's "He Taught Me." As for Mother

Nature, her image still floats through our public discourse: one only has to watch the nightly weather report on television to hear her name spoken when "natural disaster" strikes. Hardly ever is she credited with the balmy weather of high pressure systems. Indeed, in this era of patriarchal revival, stereotypes of women as witches and bitches, castrating wives and irritating mothers-in-law, are making a comeback in advertising, film, and rock video. So too are the images of nature as infinitely exploitable — not only in the commodification of nature by the ecotourism industry, but also in the specularization of nature by made-for-TV eco-documentaries that trivialize animal behaviour as primetime entertainment.

The second stage of ecocriticism — the rehabilitation of nature writing, the rediscovery of long-neglected texts, and the reevaluation of time-honoured ones — is also far from over. In addition, like feminist criticism in its second stage, which developed strategies for understanding the lives of women writers, strategies which many feminists still use to determine the conditions under which women wrote, ecocriticism must continue to contextualize its work in "the environmental conditions of an author's life — the influence of place on the imagination"— in order to demonstrate "that where an author grew up, traveled, and wrote is pertinent to an understanding of his or her work" (xxii). As I have tried to show, this methodology is an especially useful way of illuminating the literary history of nature as it was written into the lives and work of poets such as Susanna Moodie, Marjorie Pickthall, and Constance Lindsay Skinner. What better way to move readers — and watchers of television — toward an understanding of how the conditions of their own lives and the myths of nature they consume shape their distorted relationships with nonhuman nature?

Just as the newest stage of feminist criticism — the theoretical stage — would be meaningless without insight from the longer established ones, so too is the third stage of ecocriticism empty without the other two. As "a theoretical discourse whose theme is the link between the oppression of women and the domination of nature," the endeavour "carried out under the hybrid label 'ecofeminism'" (xxiv) not only collapses the three stages of criticism into one but also turns the parallel discourses of feminism and ecology into intersecting paradigms. In this regard,

throughout these essays I have employed a feminist ecocritical method that obeys Barry Commoner's first law of ecology: "Everything is connected to everything else" (qtd. in Glotfelty xix). I have borrowed from many discourses beyond the discipline of English Studies: history and biology, physics and philosophy, psychoanalysis and communications studies. This does not mean that feminist ecocriticism is all-inclusive. Rather, I have understood it as a way of questioning exclusions, from the denial of the author's gender as an important variable in the theoretical paradigms of Canadian postcolonial studies, to the denial of the body as a medium of communication in theories developed within other branches of postmodern cultural studies.

Indeed, like several American ecocritics featured in Glotfelty's *Reader*, I have been critical of contemporary theories of discourse. I have also utilized their insights when it has suited my purposes. This is as it should be. Theory and ecocriticism have many common goals, the most important being that at their best they both expose the logocentrism and phallocentrism that underpin Western thought. Both seek to overturn the view of man as the centre and measure of all things. But wherever theory succumbs to the condition it purports to critique, that's where it parts company with ecocriticism. While contemporary theory sets out to deconstruct the dualisms of Western thought, it often ends up reinforcing the very "dualisms that separate meaning from matter, sever mind from body, divide men from women, and wrench humanity from nature" (Glotfelty xxiv). "While both theory and ecology reject the traditional humanist view of our importance in the scheme of things, what they focus on as a replacement is quite different," writes Suellen Campbell.

> Theory sees everything as textuality, as networks of signifying systems of all kinds. Foucault sees an idea like madness as a text; Lacan sees a human being as a text; Derrida argues that everything is text in the sense that everything signifies something else. But ecology insists that we pay attention not to the way things have meaning for us, but to the way the rest of the world — the nonhuman part — exists apart from

> us and our languages. . . . The systems of meaning
> that matter are ecosystems.
> (Campbell 133-134)

Matter *matters*. This certainly describes the spirit that informs the greenwords and greenworlds I have been exploring here. It also explains why throughout the writing of these essays I became increasingly convinced that what's missing in Foucault, Lacan, and Derrida — founding fathers of postmodernist theory — is a sense that they experience any part of themselves as constructed by a system other than the system of signs. I have based that conviction on a central contradiction in their work and that of many of their disciples — feminist disciples included. As antifoundationalists, they have rightly critiqued and rejected arguments from biological nature as revealing the universal Truth about nature, human or otherwise. But in a wild pendulum swing against this biologism, they have embraced a "discursive or linguistic foundationalism as the highest critical court, the clarifying, demystifying and liberating Truth" (Bordo 291). Feminists who adopt this extreme view are, I suspect, too impressed by the cultural power that accrues to male theorists who express Oedipal hostility toward their own intellectual forefathers, for in a patriarchal culture power is defined by Oedipal success. However, if we are to recover a commitment to the material world that continues to serve as the battleground upon which Oedipal wars are fought, the pendulum needs to return to a central truth: biological nature has as much of a hand in "constructing" us as do the signs that stand in for it.

What men and women have accepted as evidence for maleness has been quite different from the evidence for femaleness. Men too are authorities on themselves, and what they — Foucault, Lacan, and Derrida — say about themselves as identified with, and thus as extensions of, the realm of the symbolic ought to be taken as seriously as women's conceptions of themselves as coextensive with nature. To the extent that men's self-knowledge is complete, I have deferred to their insight. But what women poets appear to have known that Foucault and Lacan and Derrida do not appear to know is that the realm of the organic and the realm of the symbolic overlap. The poets I have examined knew

this because they were aware of themselves as living in the overlap zone, the area where nature is culture and culture is nature. They also knew that men live there too. Women are still waiting for the number of men who have caught up with this truth to reach a critical mass, to join with David Rains Wallace in acknowledging "that the world is much greater and older than normal human perception of it . . . that the human is a participant as well as a perceiver in the ancient continuum of bears and forests" (qtd. in Campbell 134). But we can't wait much longer. Time is running out.

This brings me to the urgent question of alternatives with which I want to close. I have been tracing the history of female authored alternatives to our masculine worldview, which seems to have entered the postmodern age intact. But as suggested by American Dana Phillips, male ecotheorist of the postmodern condition, knowledge about that worldview is not yet as complete as it needs to be:

> Our thinking about nature should not be limited to strategies based on alternative worldviews. . . . We haven't half understood our current worldview just yet: the apocalyptic word *post* in the compound *postmodernism* implies that one cannot get out ahead of its curve. . . . [N]ature may soon begin dictating a new worldview of its own, setting harsher limits to our thinking, and our behavior, for us. Meanwhile, we ought to begin what [Fredric] Jameson has called "the practical reconquest of a sense of place," a practice he terms "cognitive mapping." Cognitive mapping entails the establishment of "an *imaginary* relation to the *real*": which I understand to mean the imagination of the real *as real*, as something that *matters*. . . . However, although Jameson uses the word *reconquest*, I want to suggest that the imagination of the real as real, and treating it as such, would be an historically original act. Whatever our reverence for nature may have been in the past, only recently have we begun to understand it in rich enough detail for the sort of cognitive mapping we must do. (Phillips 219)

If our minds are maps of the real, then why not redraw them? If nature is a text, then why not rewrite it? As their greenwor(l)ds reveal, Canadian women poets have been redrawing the map and rewriting the text since at least the middle of the nineteenth century, but they did so in the context of their own experience, their own culture, their own historical moment. For them, nature was already "dictating a new worldview of its own," and like many women, then and since, they learned to take dictation. Can the masculine mind learn to redraw itself? Can men learn to take dictation? Now that we are beginning to understand nature "in rich enough detail," we should be able to start drafting a whole new book of nature — a new edition of "the real." The old Mesopotamian edition of this "real" as female has gone through countless revisions and reprintings since it was promulgated in the *Enuma elish*. And Western culture is nothing, if not a culture that goes by the book. Hence nature continues to be treated to the kind of rage and reverence visited upon women in the patriarchal culture which the *Enuma elish* was written to celebrate. We should now begin the rewriting of this "real *as real*." With any luck, we may begin treating nature, not as female, not as a text, but as something real, as real as matter, as something that really *matters*.

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Introduction

[1] Dorothy Dinnerstein's *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* (1976) and Elizabeth Dodson Gray's *Why the Green Nigger?* (1979) were two of the earliest works to combine psychoanalysis, Western mythology, and what would become known as ecofeminism.

[2] See Margaret Homans for a complete explication of this theory of Romanticism.

[3] See Neuman and Wilson (111-112 and 152) for a fuller explanation of Kroetsch's theory of Canadian literary history. Kroetsch, like most Canadian postmodernists, holds the belief that truly Canadian poetry did not exist before postmodernists invented it. This oedipal hostility is characteristic of much male-authored literary commentary.

1
Double Voice, Single Vision

[1] Whether or not women use language differently than men was a question pursued by many feminist linguists during the seventies. Inga-Stina Ewbank abstracted some interesting conclusions about women's language from a study by a team of Norwegian linguists: "Statistical surveys conducted by contemporary researchers into linguistic sex differences seem ironically, for all the desire not to fall back on stereotyped notions of sex roles, to have found a set of

predictable characteristics applying to female as against male language: it is simpler, using shorter sentences and fewer subclauses; and this also involves it being, in construction and syntax, more illogical and incoherent. It is also more emotional; and, finally, it is more adapted to the situation in which the speech occurs than its male counterpart" (69).

2
Mother Nature, Daughter Culture

1 Pierce quotes many one-liners from critical studies and/or reviews of Pickthall's work but often neglects to identify his sources.

2 Pickthall's papers are housed in two locations: the Marjorie Pickthall Collection (MPC) at the E.J. Pratt Library, Victoria University; and within the Lorne Pierce Collection (LPC), Queen's University Archives (two manuscript books, Box 60, Folder 9; individual poems, Boxes 60-66). Her letters to Helen Coleman are in MPC, while transcripts of the letters to her father, copied in his hand and identified by month and year only, reside in LPC. Quotations from them are identified parenthetically in the text by date, collection, and Box/Folder number. Dates of composition of Pickthall's poems have been taken from the poet's handwritten manuscripts ("ms") and autographed manuscripts ("ams") in LPC. Dates of composition are as follows: "The Sleep-Seekers," ms. 1905; "Persephone Returning to Hades," ams. 1905; "The Mother in Egypt," ms. 1905; "Inheritance," ms. 1917; "Exile," ms. 1920. All are reprinted in her *Collected Poems* (1927) and are identified parenthetically by page number in the text.

3 For example, "poetesses" of the late Victorian Romantic tradition are satirized in F.R. Scott's well-known poem, "The Canadian Authors Meet" (70).

4 The process by which women are "killed into art" — inscribed in patriarchal discourse — was first theorized by Gilbert and Gubar (1979 14-27), who illustrated the process through examples from Victorian literature and the cosmetic practices engaged in by nineteenth-century women. The way in which women collude in the process has relevance today in the eating disorders of anorexia and bulimia.

5 Thus does Stuart Curran describe the all but forgotten Mary Russell Mitford's first book of Romantic poems (Curran 190).

6 See Moers, who maintains that "little" is the most overworked word

in the female canon. According to Moers, this relates to the woman writer's sense of herself as small and insignificant because she is female (244).

[7] Even Lorne Pierce felt constrained to address the problem of her derivativeness. Despite the delicate phrasing, his comments clearly state that she was not only made aware of her tendency to imitate but was also concerned about it. Pierce relates an incident in which Pickthall's father, always Marjorie's sternest critic, cautioned her against "draw[ing] so largely on Fiona MacLeod [William Sharp]." Pierce continues: "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. . . . She was almost afraid to read [other writers] lest her own individuality would be overshadowed" (Pierce 58).

3
Noble and Ignoble Savagery

[1] See, for example, aboriginal literary critic Duane Niatum (65–67).

[2] 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" (Arima, 50-54); in that myth she catches children, hands them over the fire alive, and smokes them to death (50). She appears again as "Pitch Woman" in "The Stealing of Children by Pitch Woman and their Rescue" (Sapir and Swadesh 89-91), in which she carries children off into the woods. Emily Carr received the legend of D'Sonoqua from a Kwakiutl Indian 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 destructive aspect because when Carr saw the huge D'Sonoqua carving in the forest near Alert Bay in British Columbia, a bird was nesting in her open mouth and a cat was sleeping between her feet (E. Carr 52).

[3] The poems, which appeared under the title of volume she would eventually collect, were singled out for an award by *Poetry*'s editorial board, a decision which outraged one of the magazine's

chief contributors, Ezra Pound, who wrote to Monroe telling her that the choice was "particularly filthy and disgusting" (Pound 66).

4 The link between poetic imagination and punishable conduct in a woman is also a theme in Skinner's fiction. See, for example, *Roselle of the North* (1927).

5 See Gilbert and Gubar, 1987. I discuss their theory of modernism in essay 7.

4
The Task of Poetic Mediation

1 The poem was buried in the Crawford papers at Queen's University. As the manuscript was untitled, Livesay called it "The Hunters Twain." This title probably would have appealed to Crawford's nineteenth-century sensibilities. However, Livesay's choice was later overturned by Glen Clever in favour of the title *Hugh and Ion* (Clever xvi).

2 On 22 November 1989, I was researching the Livesay papers in Winnipeg, where the poet herself was consulting some of her early letters in preparation for a memoir she was writing. This gave me the opportunity to confirm a few insights I had about the ecopoetic connection between Livesay and her foremother. Livesay was predisposed to be as helpful to me as possible, as she knew my work on her early poetry and had written to me to say that "It is very warming to find that your point of view expresses what the poems are meant to mean" (letter to Relke from Livesay, 20 January 1987; in possession of the author). Livesay was well known for her helpfulness to critics with whom she agreed!

3 Several critics — perhaps not always intentionally — trivialize Livesay's earliest poems by calling them almost exclusively personal and private and calling her later poems profound because universal. See esp. Steinberg (1960); Stevens (1971); Gibbs (1970); Skelton (1973); Foulks (1977). I argue that there is more profundity and universality in Livesay's early work than is generally recognized.

4 Livesay revealed her early familiarity with Dickinson's poetry in an interview (Djwa and Relke 1986).

5 Two other poems directly addressing the limits of poetic language are "Sympathy" (*Green Pitcher* 1) and "The Net" (*Collected Poems* 21). "The Net" uses the traditional identification between woman

and nature to suggest that to imprison nature by means of language is to imprison women by the same means.

[6] A similar failed attempt to capture a farmer in the net of language is the subject of the appropriately entitled "Impuissance" (*Green Pitcher* 4).

[7] This need for balance is described in precisely these terms by Livesay herself: "For me, the true intellectual is a simple person who knows how to be close to nature and to ordinary people" (Livesay 1969 45).

[8] I borrow language from Homans' statement on Dickinson's understanding of the limits of language (192-93).

[9] See, for example, "The Shrouding" (*Collected Poems* 17), in which the conflict is between (female) elms and (male) sun.

[10] See, for example, "Sun" (*Signpost* 7).

[11] See, for example, "The Invincible" (*Green Pitcher* 3), in which the opposition of power and powerlessness expressed as the relationship between invincible trees and maternal earth encourages a reading of tree as male.

[12] The female speakers in "A Country Mouse in Town" (*Green Pitcher* 1) and "Song from the Multitude" (*Collected Poems* 58-60) desire to escape into nature in order to restore themselves to themselves.

[13] In the appropriately entitled "Symbols" (*Collected Poems* 21), the female speaker feels "Importunate without" a house, and her hasty decision to inhabit one results in isolation because her mate is not to be found there.

[14] See also "Wilderness Stone" (*Signpost* 24), which presents an image of the extremes on either side of Livesay's place at the junction of culture and nature; from her perspective neither the wilderness isolated from culture nor the house isolated from nature is habitable.

5
The Ecological Vision

[1] See, for example, Burns, Jones, and Hughes and Sproxton, but especially Ower, who deals extensively with the binary oppositions in the poem in terms of "a dialetical relationship between good and evil, spirit and matter, love and death, Fall and Redemption" (36).

[2] See Cook and Mitchison (224) and Houghton (351) on women's moral authority in Victorian culture.

[3] As many Christian mythologizers would have it, Satan would have no power if he were not suave and attractive and persuasive. Hence, as many of *Malcolm's Katie*'s critics have complained, Alfred's vision is the most convincing of all the myths of nature inscribed in the poem. But far from being a weakness in Crawford's argument against the narrowness of scientific logic, Alfred's vision exerts an irresistible temptation upon the reader which makes her/him all the more appreciative of Katie's easy resistance.

[4] See Bentley (xxxvii-xxxix) for a discussion of this ambivalence which takes account of earlier critical efforts to deal with it.

[5] See Welter for a discussion of the origin and content of the cult of true womanhood.

[6] This scene is the one most used to condemn the poem as melodramatic. This alternative reading redeems the scene by demonstrating its crucial role in delineating Crawford's view of the perils of female "activity."

[7] See Ower (35) for a discussion of the Platonic/Romantic/Christian view of the reconciliation of sacred and profane love as it is expressed in Crawford's work.

[8] See Miller (1985), who argues that "emphasis added" is a feminist reading strategy.

[9] See Rosenberg (7-16) on Darwin's claim that women are more passive than men and on how nineteenth-century feminists chose to interpret Darwin for their own purposes.

[10] Nor are these personifications an appropriation of the indigene as Terry Goldie defines it, for Crawford does not stereotype Native people through her use of Native mythological figures. Indeed, by investing Native figures with subjectivity she not only challenges the assumption of aboriginal "otherness," she also uses it to strengthen her argument for an epistemology of knowledge characterized by intersubjectivity.

[11] See Fox Keller's biography of McClintock in which she explains how she managed to look deeper and farther than her colleagues into the natural phenomena that were the "objects" of her scientific research. In effect, she regarded those objects as speaking subjects: "one must have the time to look, the patience to 'hear what the material has to say to you,' the openness to 'let it come to you.' Above all, one must have 'a feeling for the organism'" (198).

[12] See, for example, Part II, the first mythological interlude (II. 14, 76, and 95).

[13] As D.M.R. Bentley writes, quoting Sara Jeannette Duncan, "Very much the 'painted pivot of [a] merry-go-round' ... , Katie sits at the centre of a turning world in which all the characters, sometimes almost as woodenly as Duncan's amusement-park metaphor suggests, move along lines long-established by convention" (Bentley 1987 xvi).

6
"time is, the delta"

[1] This and other italizised passages are fragments of an audiotaped conversation with Daphne Marlatt that took place at my home in Saskatoon on 15 April 1994. Unless otherwise noted, biographical details in the text are drawn from this conversation.

[2] "'Who also' could be read as the narrator as you do, I suppose, though it was meant to be the subject of the portrait, this fisherman's daughter who is also an artist & who I saw as very contemporary in her involvement in that field" (Daphne Marlatt to Diana Relke, letter dated 20 February 1995). Canadian literature students who are not familiar with Vancouver and its literary community are sometimes baffled by the "Western Front" reference, which for them evokes a geographically distant Europe and an historically distant World War. My interpretation here is intended to offer an alternative that emphasizes the poet's experience of place as centrally important to the poem.

7
Feminist Ecocritique as Forensic Archaeology

[1] In 1991-92, Pauline Butling edited a special issue of *West Coast Line* dedicated to Webb's life and work. The overwhelming number of contributors are women, who use a wide variety of approaches, many of them feminist. The emphasis in the volume is on the poetry published since 1980.

[2] I find it significant that the early women writers who hold time-honoured places in the Canadian canon are for the most part those who appear to be the most "garrisoned" — Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill, for example. This may say more about the unconscious selection criteria employed by the canonizers than it does about early Canadian women's writing.

[3] See Murphy (156ff) for an analysis of the stubbornness of the nature-as-female myth and the difficulty even feminists have of detaching themselves from it.

[4] The first important article was probably Rosemary Reuther's, published in 1971. A theologian, Reuther saw the devaluation of nature as originating in the apocalyptic-platonic religious heritage of classical Christianity. But it was Sherry Ortner's article, published in 1974, that really questioned the simplistic equation of women with nature and men with culture, and thus inspired the deconstruction of the culture/nature binary.

[5] In 1976, there occurred an early meeting of American feminism, theology, ecology, and Canadian literature in a pair of articles by the theologically trained critics Carol Christ and Judith Plasko. See Essay One.

[6] Jones's awareness of the limitations of the garrison thesis would become much more explicit. See, for example, his contribution to the 1989 Bliss Carman Symposium, an essentially post-structuralist reading in which Jones overturns the all too easy critical view of Carman as an "armchair vagabond" — a poet who envisions nature from within the comfort of the garrison. With the conventional critical blinkers off, the typical Carman poem appears different from the settler's vision that encourages a garrison reading: "Unlike events in a pioneer narrative or an E.J. Pratt narrative, it settles nothing, establishes no stable centre, ensures no projection of a line (or break in such a line). Carman's vision is the nomad's vision: the lines are unpredictable or discontinuous. A centre may appear anywhere, another centre, and each may wander or disappear" (1990, 34).

[7] See Hulcoop for a review of Webb criticism (20-25).

[8] Mays suffers from manic-depressive illness, which may account for this article (Mays 1995). However, it does not account for Davey's willingness to publish it.

[9] It is not clear just how much the Mays-Davey drubbing, coupled with the resulting critical silence, had to do with *Wilson's Bowl* not even being nominated for a much deserved Governor-General's Award for 1980. On the dustjacket of *Wilson's Bowl* was printed Frye's endorsement of it as "a landmark in Canadian poetry," but this may have been a kiss of death with respect to the Award, for by 1980 Frye had become something of a *persona non grata* within a rapidly postmodernizing critical establishment.

[10] These are the relevant lines from "The Garden":

Such was that happy garden-state,
While man there walked without a mate:
[. . . . .]
Two paradises 'twere in one
To live in paradise alone.

[11] See Hulcoop for a comparison of "Marvell's Garden" and the opening section of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (32).

[12] In book form, her work first appeared in *Trio*, in 1954, along with poems by Eli Mandel and Gael Turnbull.

[13] Janice Williamson provides an excellent analysis of Mays' and Davey's treatments of Webb's work in the context of critical misogyny (Butling 1986 156-7). It would seem that for all their complaints about modernist aesthetics, Mays and Davey had no problem with its masculine ethos. I have written elsewhere regarding Canadian male poets' ambivalent stance toward this ethos. Although relatively mild when compared to the male poetic hostility in Britain and the United States, the critical wing of the Canadian modernist movement nevertheless "waxed ecstatic over the 'masculine' vigour of E.J. Pratt's verse, while F.R. Scott and A.J.M. Smith engaged in a revolt against the Romantic 'feminine' verse of Canada's first poetic movement" (Relke 1992 41). In 1993, D.M.R. Bentley also noted this anti-female tendency: ". . . Pratt was on the side of Modernist 'revolt' rather than nationalist 'tradition'. . , denigrat[ing] more recent writers of the traditional school in terms reminiscent of F.R. Scott's 'The Canadian Authors Meet,' which had recently appeared among poems by [A.J.M.] Smith, A.M. Klein, Leo Kennedy, Robert Finch, and Pratt himself in *New Provinces* (1936). In Scott's Eliotic satire, Miss Crotchet and other 'Virgins of sixty . . . still write of passion' and depict 'native' plants with the assumptions and diction of Victorian poets. Pratt's comment that '[p]oetic diction dies the hardest death of all flora and fauna, and most of the poetettes are in its grip' reflects the same high Modernist bias against the Romantic, the local, the subjective, and the feminine" (1993 625).

[14] See Butling (1986).

[15] See Brenda Carr (in Butling 1991-92 67-79).

[16] A similar search for the centre can be traced in the work of Margaret Avison, as in these lines from "The Agnes Cleves Papers":

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. (Avison 92)

[17] Webb's proliferating personae can be seen to connect her to Yeats's modernism, but the way she employs female masks is unique, as I attempt to demonstrate throughout this essay. Similar ambivalence about approaching the remote centre of the universe may be traced in the poetry of Anne Wilkinson, Miriam Waddington, and others.

[18] To "paraphrase," if I may paraphrase Davey creatively, is to trace a single meaning through a poem, a meaning that makes sense in the context of the larger story being told — which I am doing here. On the other hand, to "deconstruct" is to read all meaning as indefinitely deferred — which Steven Scobie does with "Breaking" (Butling 1991-92 125-138); nevertheless, the poem does survive — just as it survives my paraphrase. But in order to be respectful to individual poems as gardens of interconnection with the Other, criticism has to fall somewhere between the polarized extremes of passive paraphrase and aggressive deconstruction.

[19] I am indebeted to David Bentley for this insight.

[20] The idea of "Flux" as a corrective to Eliot is, I think, important. Canadian women poets frequently offered such correctives to male poets. For Eliot, time is the predator who stalks him; time is the fire in which he burns. But for Webb — at least, by this stage in her development — time is a companion who accompanies her on the journey. Who should know better than Northrop Frye the Christian problems Eliot had with time? As Frye has written, "All three dimensions of time for Eliot are categories of unreality: the no longer, the not yet, and the never quite. . . . [A]t the top of Eliot's [Ash-Wednesday] staircase is a total unification and absorption of reality into the infinite being of God. Like Dante whom he is following, Eliot wants his pilgrimage to pass beyond the categories

of time and space and the cycle of nature that revolves within these categories" (Frye 1976 293). The chief difference between Eliot's and Webb's visions is the difference between a Newtonian and an Einsteinian universe. Eliot's ideal is a universe without matter, where the time-space continuum would be flat, as it might appear on a map of Eliot's crossroads of time and timelessness. Webb's is a universe in which the time-space continuum curves around matter, creating the forces of gravity that ground her in it.

[21] I'm indebted to West Coast writer Gladys Hindmarch for pointing out this play on words to me many years ago.

[22] Webb's attraction to Eastern forms, both here and in "Three Haiku on a Literary Theme," is part of the evidence for Davey's claim that she is "at the juncture between the modernist and post-modernist sensibilities." On one hand, Webb prefigures the sixties fascination with all things Eastern including the mysticism that was seen to represent an alternative to Western rationalism. On the other, she echoes a similar fascination expressed in early Pound et al. and in Ernest Fenollosa's promotion of the Chinese written character as a medium for poetry. This trend in both periods is what Brenda Carr describes as an "appropriation of Eastern forms and images [that manifests] the West's colonizing relationship to the exotic East," but in Webb's work also represents "the marked displacement from her own Western context [that] foregrounds the act of translation or mediation . . . (Butling 1991-92 73). In 1981, in a series of fragments later published as "On the Line," we discover why she has not yet made the move to "long lines, clean and syllabic as knotted bamboo": "[T]he long line (in English) is aggressive, with much 'voice.' Assertive, at least. It comes from assurance (or hysteria), high tide, full moon, open mouth, big-mouthed Whitman, yawp, yawp, and Ginsberg — howling. Male" ("Talking" 1982 68). In other words, she was beginning to question whether or not Eastern poetic form was such an unambiguous escape from patriarchal poetics.

8
Tracing the Terrestrial

[1] See, for example, Judith V. Jordan, "Empathy and Self Boundaries" (83-4) and Janet L. Surrey, "Relationship and Empowerment" (167), in Jordan, et al; and Diana Relke (1993 105).

[2] Although not published until 1946, the novel was written ca. 1937.

Quotations are taken from the 1973 reprint, *The Sun and the Moon and Other Fictions.*

9
Confronting the Green Indian

1 Throughout this essay I am taking a page from Francis on the question of terminology: "... I use the word Indian when I am referring to the image of Native people held by non-Natives, and I use the terms Natives, Native people or aboriginals when I am referring to the actual people. What to call non-Natives is equally puzzling. White is the convenient opposite of Indian but it has obvious limitations" (Francis 9). Multiculturalism is the only "obvious limitation" Francis acknowledges. I have already begun the further unpuzzling of "white" in the introductory essay by acknowledging its gender-inflectedness.

2 As Francis explains: "With his long braids (which he died [sic] to keep black), dark skin (which he coloured with henna), and glowering stare (which he practised in front of a mirror), he seemed to have stepped right out of the pages of Fenimore Cooper. Even his drinking was seen as confirmation of his Native identity. 'I am sorry to hear that Grey Owl has been indulging too freely in liquor,' wrote a senior official in the Parks Branch on one occasion. "As a matter of fact, with so much Indian blood in his veins I suppose it is inevitable that from time to time he will break out in this connection'" (137).

3 Maternal feminism was not exclusively a white feminist ideology. See, for example, the work of Anna Julia Cooper, a Black American maternal feminist whose views were shared by the famous Black intellectual, W.B.E. DuBois, who popularized them in his novels.

4 In postcolonialist reconstructions of the past, the moral authority of white women, who lacked the necessary political and economic power to influence the most important moral decisions, White Woman is constructed as the single most potent signifier of colonialism's immorality. In this way, postcolonial discourse reproduces a phenomenon inherent in colonialism itself. As Richard Dyer writes in the context of India and British colonialist discourse, white women "express disapproval of British practice in India, though always at the level of how Indians are treated rather than whether they should be treated at all; they criticise the conduct

of empire, not the enterprise itself. This is a logical conclusion of the civilizing mission, which did not question the presence of the British in the empire, but did challenge the actual behaviour of the rulers toward the ruled, either in terms of Christian principle or because such rudeness and cruelty itself set a bad example of moral refinement. While being thus the conscience of empire, women were also seen as the cause of its decline" (186). Thus does the moral authority of white women entrap them between the resentment of the male colonizer and the resentment of the colonized — a legacy handed down to today's white feminists, whose own authenticity depends upon negotiating a course between the resentment of white men and the resentment of non-white women, and refusing the latter's implication that feminism is White Woman's burden.

[5] I do not mean to disparage the recovery of myths more conducive to women's spiritual needs. Bereft of a mythology of our own for so many centuries, cultural feminism has recovered a sense of the sacredness of the female body and nonhuman nature. Goddess mythology has done much to liberate women from the self-hatred inspired by the misogyny of many of the Church Fathers, who still cast long patriarchal shadows over contemporary Christianity. Whatever its sentimentalizing tendencies, goddess sensibility easily reveals its value when contrasted with the Christian and Islamic fundamentalism that currently has much of the modern religious world in its misogynist grip.

[6] See Keeshig-Tobias for a review of the Indian paraphernalia favoured by white publishers and editors (173).

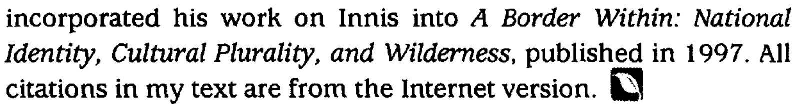
[7] I am borrowing this terminology from Kimberly Blaeser, who traces it to the work of other Native literary critics (Blaeser 60-61).

[8] It should be noted here that this is precisely the idea Constance Lindsay Skinner worked with in her attempt to theorize an integration of aboriginal art and Western poetry. See essay 3.

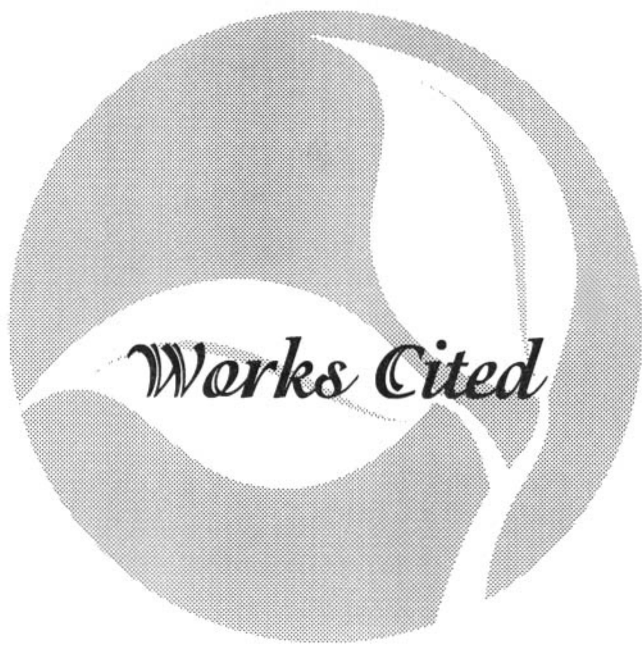
[9] The allusion here is to the closing lines of Earl Birney's "Can Lit": "it's only by our lack of ghosts / we're haunted" (49).

10
Recovering the Body, Reclaiming the Land

[1] The special Innis issue of *Continuum* containing Angus's article appears on the *Continuum* website. Angus subsequently



incorporated his work on Innis into *A Border Within: National Identity, Cultural Plurality, and Wilderness*, published in 1997. All citations in my text are from the Internet version.



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