

# DEMETER'S DAUGHTER

## *Marjorie Pickthall & the Quest for Poetic Identity*

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**M**ARJORIE PICKTHALL sold her first manuscript to the *Toronto Globe* in 1899, when she was 15 years old.\* Her career ended abruptly in 1922, when, at the age of 39, she died in Vancouver of complications following surgery. Perhaps no other Canadian poet has enjoyed such enormous fashionable success followed by such total eclipse. Canadian critics of the early twentieth century "seized on her poems and stories as works of distinction,"<sup>1</sup> 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."<sup>2</sup> 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."<sup>3</sup> Archibald MacMechan wrote: "Her death means the silencing of the truest, sweetest singing voice ever heard in Canada."<sup>4</sup> 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."<sup>5</sup>

Modern literary historians have taken the opposite view. Pickthall's poetry is often regarded as "proof" of the bankruptcy of the Canadian poetic imagination during the first two decades of this century. For example, in 1957, when Lorne Pierce did her the disservice of publishing a selection of some of her most derivative verse, much of it written when she was little more than an adolescent, Desmond Pacey responded: "If one approached the book seeking a new revelation

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of Miss Pickthall's genius one would be disappointed."<sup>6</sup> For Pacey, this edition of her work only served to confirm his earlier opinion that Pickthall had fulfilled her artistic potential with the publication of her first volume of poems, and that her later work "sustained rather than enhanced her reputation."<sup>7</sup> And yet, as a closer examination of some of her poems will reveal, she did develop significantly as a poet over the course of her short career. What Pacey identified as the "essential hollowness" of her work gives way in the later poetry to considerable depth of insight and an increased sense of her identity as a woman and a poet trapped in the literary and gender conventions of her day. I would like to begin by exploring Pickthall's emergence as First Lady of Canadian letters because her attempt to come to terms with that role is part of the struggle for self-representation which she undertakes in her poetry. This will be followed by a comparison of two of her early poems with a group of later ones which, I believe, reveals a degree of originality not generally recognized in her work.

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

men 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.

At the age of sixteen, Pickthall had no way of knowing what the literary establishment had in store for her, nor could she have been aware that in terms of life experience she was not yet equipped to meet the demands of a supposedly discerning reading public. Bound by the gender conventions of her day, she was denied the kind of experience necessary to her art. Many of her poems were created out of second-hand experience derived from a close study of the work of her many male models. Later in life she came to realize how fatal this was to her art. Indeed, as she wrote when she was 37 years old:

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

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

I would seek out a little roof instead,  
A little lamp to make my darkness brave.  
"For though she heal a multitude," Love said,  
"Herself she cannot save."<sup>8</sup>

Appropriately, she titled this poem "The Chosen." It is a successful poem because, unlike the fatally imitative work of earlier years, it expresses first-hand knowledge: it is an expression of Pickthall's experience of limited experience. In an attempt to meet the expectations of her readership in general and her mentors in particular, she studied the "fields" and "songs" of life as they appeared in the work of her literary forefathers, guessed at the greenness and sweetness of that life, and imitated it in her own verse. Trapped behind the "narrow window" of convention, she studied the freedom of male activity on the street below and recycled her observations as poetry. From her dizzying perch above the lesser poets of the day, she administered short-term healing to a dying tradition but had no remedy for her own ailing poetic: "I've got a kind of passionate distaste for my own work lately," she wrote to the poet Helena Coleman the year in which "The Chosen" was written.<sup>9</sup> She longed to be "unhoused without the bars" of the gender conventions and the literary expectations that entrapped her; like her speaker she felt

she was living in the “darkness” of her own ignorance of life. This is in keeping with the sentiment she had expressed two years earlier in a letter to her intimate friend, Helen Coleman, niece of Helena Coleman:

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*.<sup>10</sup>

This statement seethes with anger at the gender conventions which entrapped her. By the time she wrote “The Chosen,” that rage had degenerated into fear and unhappiness. Lacking the male power to “stir things up *fine*,” the speaker in “The Chosen” calls upon the Source of all power. The God she invokes is the ultimate patriarch, the dispenser of power not only to the oppressive culture in which she lives but, more specifically, to her male models and mentors to whom Pickthall must be grateful for the dubious honour of being “The Chosen.” Given that by definition she has no access to that all-pervasive power, it is hardly surprising that she is “hungry for the dust” and “weary of the stars” of a meaningless celebrity.

**I**MITATION IS, OF COURSE, a valid starting-point for an apprentice poet but, ideally, by the time a poet has earned critical acclaim she has abandoned her dependence on her models and established a voice of her own. 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 is 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. (p. 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 unfavorably 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.”<sup>11</sup> 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.

The failure of Pickthall’s early nature poetry can best be understood in terms of Margaret Homans’ theory of female poetic identity. Female literary experience — the experience of reading poetry written almost exclusively by men — is the subject of her *Women Writers and Poetic Identity*, a study of women poets in the Romantic tradition. Using psychoanalytic terms reminiscent of Harold Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence*, Homans explains 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.<sup>12</sup>

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 (p. 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 though they know they must" (p. 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 has discovered in her examination of the Demeter-Persephone story as the myth of identity which has informed the female literary imagination for at least the last hundred years. 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.<sup>13</sup>

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 which jointly possess her. As in the literature Stewart



“[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:

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

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

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

(ll. 26-29)

Interestingly, the tempo picks up as Persephone questions her state of mind. The cadences change and change again, suggesting the disruption of thought process. “Dread daffodils,” an allusion to the wonderous bloom of the narcissus which had enticed her to stray too far from Demeter — an error which resulted in her original abduction by Pluto — now signal the dreaded reunion with the god of death. The poem climaxes in “the vast gray suburbs of the dead,” the most chilling and powerful image in the poem. The last line is unfortunate: the weeping faun is too precious an image to end an otherwise quite powerful piece; the weakness of this line suggests a backing off, as if Pickthall is afraid of coming into poetic power.

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



**D**URING THE LAST EIGHT YEARS of her life, Pickthall wrote several nature lyrics and other short pieces which, while they differ in poetic intent — sometimes radically — reiterate on some level the process of losing her identity in the landscapes they depict. Some of these poems remain unfocused and vaguely recall her heavily derivative verse in which the voice of the model takes over and removes Pickthall from the poem. These poems are nevertheless instructive because they demonstrate the enormous difficulties confronting women poets in the Romantic tradition. But a few of these lyrics move beyond Pickthall's failure to establish poetic identity in terms of Romantic convention; they 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."<sup>15</sup> The "I" in Pickthall's "Inheritance" knows what it is in terms of the conventions which define it:

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

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

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

It would be difficult to deny the "I" in this poem; the word is repeated seven times. It is no coincidence that the thrice repeated phrase "I, before I" is a poetic rendering of "self-definition" before "self-assertion." What this poem is saying is that the poet, having found out how her self is defined, is now, for better or worse, asserting that self. It is, of course, a poetic or fictive self — the self as defined by the conventions of the tradition in which she has been trying to locate herself all her poetic life. But personal experience in the wider sense is also integrated here, for the poem, written within five years of Pickthall's death, looks back to the period in her life in which she became defined by the oppressive culture in which she was raised. This period was indeed a period — her first one — for this is a poem clearly 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 menses brings: with the sudden appearance of strange and unstaunchable blood comes dizzying insight into “the grief of all the years” which lie ahead: the tears to be tasted, the pain to be confronted as one’s biological destiny unfolds. 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 is via this journey back through memory that the poet connects with an understanding of both her cultural and literary identity. These stanzas clearly articulate what it is to be female in patriarchal culture and a female poet in a patriarchal tradition: to be female is to be identified with nature, to feel one’s “body change to earth”; it is to be identified with fatality and decay, to learn that time is one’s greatest adversary. For time — to borrow horticultural terms used to describe the decaying effects of time upon woman — robs her of her “bloom” and “ripens” her to maturity. In short, time erodes her sexual attractiveness, her only power in patriarchal culture.

The most significant thing about “Inheritance” is that, like much of Emily Dickinson’s poetry, it is not primarily a landscape poem; communion with nature is not its poetic intention, although it is clearly informed by the poet’s experience of that convention. Its primary intention is to get in touch with the poetic self by focusing not on nature but directly on the “I.” Consequently the convention is thrown into something resembling photographic reverse field: the poet half of this poet/nature configuration comes to the forefront; the nature half recedes. The poet does not *lose* herself in nature but rather *finds* herself there. And finding herself there means reconnecting with her long matrilineal heritage; 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 we are 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; it is better even than “Persephone Returning to Hades.” It contains no pathetic fallacy, no overripe diction, no archaic language, no awkward syntactical inversions. The presence of a strong poetic voice is directly related to the absence of these irritating affectations; when Pickthall’s poetic mask is securely in place, she has no need of them.

“LOVE UNFOUND” was written one year later than “Inheritance” but unlike that poem it focuses primarily on landscape and as a result risks

falling into the trap laid for the woman poet by Romantic convention. Nevertheless, the poem does seem to throw the convention into some kind of reverse field in that the convention does not exploit the poet, the poet exploits the convention. The poem is an intense search for a lost female ancestor and, as the title suggests, the search fails; in this way it dramatizes both the poet's literary experience and female experience in the larger sense:

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

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

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

Although the poet avoids use of her characteristic affectations, the poem nevertheless has a fuzzy quality about it, which suggests that she is not fully conscious of what she is trying to say. The poem operates on several levels, not the least of which is the biographical: it is one of the many short lyrics in which she appears to be expressing the loss of her mother, Lizzie Pickthall. But text and subtext are not fully integrated; poetic intent is being sabotaged by unconscious intent. The experience of reading the poem is one of seeing double, of seeing two seemingly identical images out of focus with one another. The image that appears to be related to the subtext is the more interesting of the two. The poem is subtitled "*A Portrait*," but clearly the image of this dead female ancestor is not a painted portrait but a landscape painting. A hundred years after her disappearance from memory, traces of her image are still recognizable in the landscape which has absorbed her. Perhaps the glimpse of this foremother's image which the poet catches in the rippled pool is a reflection of the poet's own face. As the last stanza suggests, even if the poet could exchange her female powerlessness for the male power to change the world, she could still not reclaim her lost matrilineal heritage. Indeed, so irrevocably lost is the identity of this ancestor that it is beyond even the highest order of male power to recover it.

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

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

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

Unlike "The Sleep-Seekers," in which the poetic voice seems to emanate from two places at once, there is no confusion about where the speaker stands — or rather lies — in "Exile." The poem post-dates "Inheritance" by three years and can be seen as its companion piece. "Exile," however, is not as strong as the earlier poem, 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 which would identify her to future generations has fallen on deaf ears, for she lies in a remote and inaccessible place in an unmarked grave. In terms of Pickthall's place in Canadian literary history, this erasure, or "Exile," from civilization's memory is hauntingly prophetic.

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

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

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

This poem was written in 1915, two years prior to "Inheritance," and it has a kind of "pre-conscious" feel to it. Given that the female figure it depicts is

tragically lost to human history and her identity erased through merger with nature, the word “rejoices” is somewhat incongruous; here, once again, is a poem slightly out of focus. But negation, made explicit through the sixfold repetition of the word “no,” makes it difficult to deny that the intention is to emphasize the unequivocal silencing of this female figure. Whatever murky depths of the unconscious it emanates from, the universal fear of poets — the fear of leaving “No word,” “no following voices” — is undeniably present in the poem.

**T**HE IMAGES OF FORGOTTEN WOMAN and inarticulate poet are strongest in “Theano,” which was written in the same year as “Inheritance”:

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

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

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

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

As the cryptic nature of “Theano” suggests, it is silence rather than speech which calls for interpretation. As the daughters of inarticulate Mother Nature, both Pickthall and her literary foremother, Christina Rossetti, struggled against the silence which was their female inheritance. Like other poets working within the female tradition, they developed their poetry as an art of silence where it has historically been treated as an art of speech.<sup>16</sup> Both Rossetti and Pickthall seem to accept death as a female space, but rather than be condemned to the eternal

silence which death implies, they turn silence into a female aesthetic. Their poetry stands as evidence of their refusal to accept nature (and, by implication, themselves) as inarticulate. For example, the dead female figure in Rossetti's poem "Rest" is enclosed in the grave and held in "Silence more musical than any song,"<sup>17</sup> and the dead persona in "Echo" invites her lover to return to her "in the speaking silence of a dream" (p. 314). Similarly, Marjorie Pickthall's strongest and clearest voice emanates from the unquiet grave of "The Wife":

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

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

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

Living, I had no skill  
 To stay your tread,  
 Now all that was my will  
 Silence has said.  
 We are one for good and ill  
 Since I am dead. (p. 201)

Surely the most silent woman in patriarchal culture is the betrayed wife. This wife's failure to make her unfaithful mate stop and listen to her complaints is really his powerful refusal to stop and hear them. Alive, she is the victim of this total censorship; dead, she is a powerful reproach. Merged with the summer, the dawn, the hills, and the sky, this dead woman has absorbed the power of nature's silent speech. Through the eloquent silence of death she can finally exert the force of her will. Her sinister silence will forever haunt his shadow, his strength, the sound of his own voice. The penultimate line mocks their empty marriage vow, "till death do us part," for only her death has the power to make them "one for good and ill." The narrowness of the grave, like the narrowness of her life, is reflected in the shape of the poem on the page. But unlike her empty marriage,

this poem is densely crowded with language. It is a solid upright coffin of a poem: nothing opposes the force of its vertical gravity; the eye is convinced it can stand.<sup>18</sup>

"The concept of Mother Nature," Homans explains, "is only a fiction among other fictions" (p. 200), and as the more successful of the poems examined here suggest, when Marjorie Pickthall recognized Romantic convention for what it is — merely convention and not literal truth — she was able to create poems of more merit than literary history has given her credit for. On some level of consciousness she came to terms with Persephone's identity dilemma. She discovered that separation from Mother Nature means loss of identity through death and that reunion means the absorption of identity by Mother Nature. By turning this unresolvable dilemma into a metaphor for "woman's place" in the poetic universe, she managed — paradoxically — to articulate her sense of herself as inarticulate, to transform female silence into song.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> E. K. Brown, *On Canadian Poetry* (1943; rpt. Ottawa: Tecumseh, 1973), p. 65.

<sup>2</sup> Brown, p. 65.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Lorne Pierce, *Marjorie Pickthall: A Book of Remembrance* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1924), p. 157.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Pierce, p. 47.

<sup>5</sup> Pierce, p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Desmond Pacey, "The Poems of Marjorie Pickthall" (1957), rpt. in *Essays in Canadian Criticism, 1938-1968* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1969), p. 146.

<sup>7</sup> Desmond Pacey, *Creative Writing in Canada* (1952; rpt. Toronto: Ryerson, 1967), p. 101.

<sup>8</sup> *The Complete Poems of Marjorie Pickthall*, ed. by Arthur C. Pickthall (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1927), p. 143. All quotations from Pickthall's poetry are from this edition and further references to it appear by page number in the text. Dates of composition of Marjorie Pickthall's poems have been taken from the poet's handwritten manuscripts ("ms.") and autographed manuscripts ("ams."), which are held in the Marjorie Pickthall Collection, Victoria University (Box 1, Folders 1-12) and the Lorne Pierce Collection, Queen's University Archives (two manuscript books, Box 60, Folder 9; individual poems, Boxes 60-66). With the exception of "The Wife," all poems were first published in collections of Pickthall's verse. Dates of composition and place of earliest publication are as follows: "The Chosen," ms. 1917, *The Wood Carver's Wife and Later Poems* (Toronto: McClelland, 1922), p. 23; "The Sleep-Seekers," ms. 1905, *Little Songs* (Toronto: McClelland, 1925), p. 75; "Persephone Returning to Hades," ams. 1905, *Complete Poems*; "Inheritance," ms. 1917, *The Wood Carver's Wife*, p. 32; "Departure," ms. 1915, *Lamp of Poor Souls and Other Poems* (New York: Lane, 1916), p. 35; "Exile," ms. 1920, *Little Songs*, p. 35; "Theano," ms. 1917, *Complete Poems*; "Love Unfound," ms. 1918, *Complete Poems*; "The Wife," ms. 1920, *Smart Set* (June 1921), p. 13.

- <sup>9</sup> Letter to Helena Coleman, 12 June 1921, The Marjorie Pickthall Collection, Box 2, 21, E. J. Pratt Library, Victoria University.
- <sup>10</sup> Letter to Helen Coleman, 29 Dec. 1919, The Marjorie Pickthall Collection, Box 2, 20.
- <sup>11</sup> R. E. Rashley, *Poetry in Canada* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1958), p. 101.
- <sup>12</sup> Margaret Homans, *Women Writers and Poetic Identity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980). All further references to this title appear in the text.
- <sup>13</sup> G. B. Stewart, "Mother, Daughter, and the Birth of the Female Artist," *Women's Studies* 6 (1979), 132.
- <sup>14</sup> In her *Literary Women* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976), Ellen Moers 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 (p. 244).
- <sup>15</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1979), p. 17.
- <sup>16</sup> See Jeanne Kammer's theory of the strategies of silence in Emily Dickinson, Marianne Moore, and others ("The Art of Silence and the Forms of Women's Poetry," in *Shakespeare's Sisters*, ed. by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar [Bloomington and London: Indiana Univ. Press, 1979], pp. 153-64). Kammer's theory is equally applicable to contemporaries of Dickinson and Moore, including Christina Rossetti and Marjorie Pickthall.
- <sup>17</sup> Christina Georgina Rossetti, *Poetical Works*, ed. by William Michael Rossetti (1904; rpt. London: Macmillan, 1906), p. 325. All quotations from Rossetti's work are from this edition; further references appear by page number in the text.
- <sup>18</sup> My language is borrowed from Kammer; see her analysis of the visual impact of women's poetry, p. 162.

## MARCH: VERNAL EQUINOX

(for Maria)

Pat Jasper

Monday morning they will shave her head,  
pump sleep into her veins  
and wheel her into a white winter  
world she may never wake from.

Pump sleep into her veins . . .  
An hour ago I coasted to a stop —  
Oh, world she may never wake from . . .  
I doused the lights and sit here in the dark.