

The Case of the Forgotten Electra: Pickthall's Apostrophes and Feminine Poetics

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In his *On Canadian Poetry* (1943), E.K. Brown ridiculed the poetry of Marjorie Pickthall with such malicious conviction that it is perhaps not surprising to find Lorne Pierce, whose loyal appreciation for Pickthall knew no bounds, rescinding his evaluation of the poet in the same year.¹ It was left to Desmond Pacey in 1953 and 1957 to deliver the *coup de grace* to her reputation, first by stating that she was the only poet of her generation "with any claim to artistic distinction," and then (having seen this *volte face* re-published as the introduction to Pierce's edition of Pickthall's *Selected Poems* in 1957) by dismissing her in an embarrassed paean to her unreadability.² Yet Pickthall is often a strong poet whose work might have produced prodigious anxiety in the generation of poets who succeeded her, had her career not been cut off by her death at the age of 39 in 1922. (Even so, one wonders what traces of her poetic may be present in the work of such poets as A.J.M. Smith, E.J. Pratt, Leo Kennedy, and others.) My purpose here, however, is not to write a critique of modernist poetry in Canada, but merely to do some of the basic work necessary to re-open 'The Case of the Forgotten Electra' in our time and in our terms. My interest is in the influence of Pickthall's milieu upon the quality and patterning of a young woman writer's poetic in the first decades of this century in Canada.

Pickthall's verse achieves that quality of poetic autonomy that Roman Jakobson called 'literariness.' Her verse might best be introduced as an intense apostrophe to literary beauty: a turning away from the trial to address the judges in impassioned language that an audience may only overhear. Her poems draw

¹ E. K. Brown, *On Canadian Poetry* (1943; rpt. Ottawa: Tecumseh, 1977) 67: "When she thought of what the war was fought to preserve she symbolized what she valued by a daffodil." Her "exquisite little details" could go no farther; she had worked "the last and smallest lode." Lorne Pierce, *Marjorie Pickthall: A memorial address given at Victoria University, Toronto, April 7, 1943, in commemoration of the twenty-first anniversary of the poet's death* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1943) 8: "With Marjorie Pickthall the old poetic tradition in Canada [came] to its foreordained end." She "carried the old tradition perhaps as far as it could go" (8).

² Desmond Pacey, *Creative Writing in Canada: A Short History of English-Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1952) 91, and "The Poems of Marjorie Pickthall," *Canadian Forum*, rpt. in *Essays In Canadian Criticism 1938-1968* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1969) 145-55.

upon a body of literary precedents in order to construct a coherent and fantastic defence against unsatisfied desire and what she perceived to be a fundamental incoherence in modern life. Pickthall's lyrics represent a species of early modern poetry which developed in Canada before the *New Provinces* poets privileged irony over beauty and truth. My purpose is to examine the concept and expression of beauty in her work, and its appeal to academic and popular readers before the audience of poetry in Canada split into two camps: 'serious' readers and everybody else.

Marjorie Lowry Christie Pickthall (1883-1922) was recognized as an important young poet even before her first collection, *The Drift of Pinions*, was published in an edition of 1,000 boxed copies that sold out in ten days in November, 1913. In Canada and the United States, her reputation stemmed from her appearance in American "quality" magazines—*Harper's*, *Scribner's*, and *The Atlantic Monthly*—and the prestigious, imperialist, and conservative Canadian magazines of the time: Andrew Macphail's *The University Magazine* at McGill and *The Canadian Magazine*. At the University of Toronto, she attracted the friendship and encouragement of the older poet Helena Coleman and Professor Pelham Edgar in her literary pursuits, and of A.E. Lang, the librarian at Victoria College, in the matter of an appropriate job. Pickthall assisted Dr. C.C. James, Deputy Minister for Agriculture for Ontario, in his annual bibliography of Canadian poetry, and, through the "personal solicitation of Sir Andrew Macphail," as Lorne Pierce records in the *Book of Remembrance* (1925), she began gathering verses for her first collection.³ Her initial audience was a small group of professorial gentlemen who elected to take her under their collective wing.

At the age of 17 in 1900, Pickthall attracted "unusual attention" among university people by winning a *Mail and Empire* Christmas competition with "O Keep the World for Ever at the Dawn." This precocious, popular poem defines a relationship between beauty and time in which beauty stands as a defence against whatever the millennium may promise or threaten:

Hold every bird with still and drowsy wing
 That in the breathless hush no clamorous throat
 Shall break the peace that hangs on everything
 With shrill awakening note.

³ Lorne Pierce, *Marjorie Pickthall: A Book of Remembrance* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1925) 56, 64. Hereafter referred to as *Remembrance*.

Keep fast the half-seen beauties of the rose
In undisturbed repose.

(*Remembrance* 37-38)

Time is excluded from consciousness in a waking dream that must remain forever, "Yet, keeping so, let nothing lifeless seem." Despite this anxious note, life in the dreamed reality is "breathless" with delight, for it contains beauty. The poem reveals that this imagined life is like a Chinese box which opens upon the pleasure of half-seen beauty, a pleasure which, in turn, opens to a further contemplation of beauty and excludes all else.

This poem is characteristic of Pickthall's verse in that it employs conventional cadence, colour, and imagery for the sake of expressing a consciousness turned inward upon itself and self-enclosed. The expression of this awareness is limited to a metaphorical domain in which flowers, small animals, precious stones, metals, and the like predominate. This neo-Romantic posturing, in the manner of the English Aesthetes and the *Yellow Book* school, excludes all harshness in order to sustain a close relationship between beauty and the pleasing, a relationship much prized by readers of poetry in her time. Yet the poetry also lays a new emphasis on the subconscious processes of imaginative writing. Her work survives as a window on an unusual awareness, rosy panels of stained glass illuminated not by the plain light of day, but from within. Her poetic expresses neither a form of knowledge nor a search for truth, but, rather, it presents a completely self-sufficient world of fabulous beauty.

Pickthall's contemporaries—male and female—continued to affirm the belief that the truth lying beyond beauty was ineffable and inexpressible. Tom MacInnes's Tauism and Wilson MacDonald's theosophy, for instance, were intellectual and emotional affirmations of a coherence that might compensate for the sense of a fading transcendence. In MacInnes's "Ballade of Woeful Certainties" and MacDonald's "Song of the Undertow," the beauty of an ineffable truth mediates between two conflicting views of time: human history unfolding through mere chance, and history unfolding through God's purpose and design.⁴ Pickthall's concept of poetic beauty, by contrast, denies the inexpressible entirely. Faith modulates into a desire for an almost delirious timelessness, and exoticism constitutes a displacement of fading religious conviction. What Northrop Frye calls her "Biblical-Oriental pastiches . . . not so unlike the kind of thing that Ezra Pound was producing at about the same time," could

⁴ MacInnes, "Ballade of Woeful Certainties" *Complete Poems of Tom MacInnes* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1923) 250-51; MacDonald, "Song of the Undertow," *The Song of the Undertow and Other Poems* (Toronto: Saunders, 1935) 12-145.

be regarded as psychological deformations of the poet's historical sense.⁵ Her poems achieve a sense of timeless completeness or coherence by means of shoring up the ruins of her desire with the cadence and imagery of a poetic world that, in Freud's words, "owes its convincing power to the element of historical truth which it inserts in the place of the rejected reality."⁶

According to Pickthall's poetic, readers can choose not to refer to absolute values—such as transcendence, in either Emersonian or Baudelairean terms—in order to distinguish good verse from bad. Her preference for a literary timelessness, the elevation of artifice over history, on the one hand, and physical desire, on the other, represents a more modern reliance on the notion that a poem must not mean, but be. Canadian readers, moreover, saw the impersonal quality of her verse as its most important virtue. On her death, the Montreal Branch of the Canadian Authors' Association saluted her as one of the best poets in the English language, "having achieved in line after line that supreme miracle, poetry needing no signature but its own melody to declare the name of its maker" (*Remembrance* 147). Canadian readers in general approved of her detachment, as did her contacts among the academic élite. Perhaps the first stirrings of a modern attitude toward poetry in Canada may be sought in this response, which valued and took pleasure in the impersonal, ambiguous, and unparaphrasable nature of Pickthall's verse—well in advance of the New Critics, though not, of course, in New Critical terms.

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In 1912, Alfred Gordon, a young English poet and devotee of the English Aesthetes—Wilde, Dowson, Lionel Johnson, Symons, and the like—was so struck by Pickthall's "The Little Fauns to Proserpine" that he wrote her a warm letter of appreciation, thus beginning several years' correspondence. Pickthall felt that Gordon's poetic creed was entirely opposed to her own. "For instance," she wrote to him, "you hold the form of a poem of supreme importance; I believe in the supremacy of thought" (*Remembrance* 65-68). For Pickthall, the music of poetry was more important than the "heavy mechanism of verse." Strict adherence to form was "ruinous to the temper." One year before

⁵ Northrop Frye, "Letters in Canada," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, rpt. in *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (Toronto: Anansi, 1971) 86.

⁶ Sigmund Freud, "Construction in Analysis," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey. 24 vols. (London, 1953-1974) 23: 268.

her death in 1922 she was "more firmly rooted than ever" in her opinion that rigid schemes of construction and melody were "fatal" to poetry in the English language (*Remembrance* 131-32). In the context of her poetry, these remarks suggest that Pickthall conceived of poetic thought as a pleased and pleasing, yet exact and musical, manipulation of a wide range of literary contexts. W.E. Collin, her best critic, examined the range of this allusiveness in 1936.⁷ Here, I will only point out that composing a poetry of reverberating literary impressions is not quite the same thing as being merely imitative. What we could call her self-reflexive or intertextual literariness today, however, caused her to be dubbed "Pickthall the Obscure" by some of her more uncharitable contemporaries (*Remembrance* 67).

In this intensely lyrical "supremacy of thought," Pickthall aspires to the sense of a poetic music that would have the authority and autonomy to determine its own forms of presentation. Though not exactly the New Critics' organicist *fusion* of form and content, unity in her verse results from an act of sheer will that metamorphoses an aesthetic consciousness of the past and of present desire into a portal opening only onto itself. The element of desire, moreover, brings a certain tension to her poetic, which manifests itself in two related ways: a characteristic intensity and an uneasy ambiguous balance between freedom and form.

In her second volume of poems, *The Lamp of Poor Souls*, (1916), Pickthall had begun to experiment with free verse. "Improvisations on the Flute" concerns visitations of desire upon a sleeping awareness, and, though self-consciously enclosed by two rhyming quatrains, the poem suggests one direction her work might have taken had she survived:

She has gathered darkness to build her a nest
 And the little leaves of cloud.
 She crouches "within her breast" against darkness,
 And hides as a hare in the meadows of night.
 It covers her like long grass
 Whose blossom is all of stars;
 Crocus-stars, stars of anemone,
 Where cling the moths that are the longings of men.⁸

⁷ W. E. Collin, *The White Savannahs* (1936; rpt. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1975) 43-79.

⁸ "Improvisations on the Flute," *The Lamp of Poor Souls and Other Poems* (New York, London: John Lane, 1916) 18-19. The other collections of Pickthall's poems, referred to in the text as *Pinions*, *Wife*, *Songs*, and *Selected* respectively, are as follows: *The Drift of Pinions* (New York, London: John Lane, 1913); *The Wood Carver's Wife* (Toronto: McClelland, 1922); *Little Songs: A Book of Poems* (Toronto: McClelland, 1925); *The Selected Poems of Marjorie Pickthall*, ed. Lorne Pierce (Toronto: McClelland, 1957).

Conceivably, a male reader could find the posture suggested by crouching within her breast, the vulnerability of hiding, and the sensuality of the long grass demurely seductive, but his response would be conditioned by the aesthetic distancing of the pleasing in this poem. Pickthall's metaphorical strategies insist upon the contrast between a 'feminine' poetic world and the comparative insignificance within it of the moths and men's desires. Hence, the poem effectively challenges the power of the male reader's gaze. Yet the force of this challenge disperses even as it is made possible. The woman's desire is a guest and a shadow born in the evening when "dead shepherds hear the sheep cropping," yet it is itself slain by morning. The poem is organized around a will to mortify a desire whose intensity threatens to overwhelm its own poetic, and repression translates into a will to lyricize reality in a form that must nullify or "make small" the object of that desire.

The experience of overhearing what Pierce called her "quietly beautiful thinking" had a remarkable effect on her male readers. To Pierce, it was a "deep aesthetic experience" to disregard any attempt "to account for or explain a poet's genius" and "behold here a shy, simple, lovable girl busy with paints and poetry" (*Remembrance* 52). And Pacey confessed "shamefacedly" in 1957 that Pickthall's mystique "still has the capacity to bring tears to my eyes and a choking sensation to my throat."⁹ At a time when few women participated in the criticism of Canadian poetry, Pickthall's intensity was at once deferential and challenging to the male ego. The protective parent in Pierce and Pacey interpreted this seductive "music" as a nostalgia for innocence.

Pickthall's most experimental poetic fantasy happens to be one of her best treatments of the literary stereotypes that she chose to work with: magic, dream-like settings; and allusions to exotic literature, and to Biblical, Greco-Roman, and Nordic myths that were reduced to "systematic and ultimately uninspiring allegories" by the time Yeats met Pound.¹⁰ "From a Lost Anthology" is a prose poem that belongs to a tradition stemming from the Symbolists—Baudelaire's *Spleen of Paris*, for example. As with many of Pickthall's fantasy poems, in tone, mood, and literary setting, "Lost Anthology" is reminiscent of Pound's earlier

⁹ Pacey, "The Poems of Marjorie Pickthall," *Essays* 147.

¹⁰ Jean Pierrot, *The Decadent Imagination 1880-1900* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981) 206. Baudelaire said of the prose poem in *Spleen of Paris*, "Which of us . . . has not dreamed of the miracle of a poetic prose, musical, without rhyme and without rhythm, supple enough and rugged enough to adapt itself to the lyrical impulses of the soul, the undulations of the psyche, the prickings of consciousness." Quoted by Michael Benedikt, "Introduction," *The Prose Poem: An International Anthology* (New York: Dell, 1976) 43.

poems on legendary themes. Like Pound's elided "Papyrus," the poem's ten pieces (in *The Wood Carver's Wife* 15-17) are fragments of an imagined literary experience.

THE ROSE

Above the ashes of me, Rhodora, they
planted a rose, but it died. Pity me that I died also
who was also a rose.

The intellectual pleasure of this small poem derives from the freedom of its allusiveness, the deft movement of mind across the abstract and evanescent background of its literary context. Yet the concept of beauty remains fully enclosed by the structures of apostrophe, the "turning away" from the audience to address a specific (imagined) reader.

A DEAF GIRL

Here lies Chryseis, my bride. She was
beautiful, but the gods of life denied her hearing.
Nor have the gods of the dead been kinder. In
proof whereof I come here daily and call
her,—Chryseis, Chryseis. Witness thou, O stran-
ger, she hath not heard me.

Not human love but the metaphorical dynamic that holds a poetic world together, and Pickthall's pleased and pleasing awareness of it, supports the representation of beauty in such essentially "overheard" forms.

"'Overhear,' is, I think, the right word," as Duncan Campbell Scott said on the occasion of her death, "for there was a tone of privacy, of seclusion, in her most individual poems" (*Remembrance* 152). Pickthall did not seek to represent reality, but rather to create a reverberation of images and literary contexts. This impressionistic textualizing of a self-conscious literariness expresses relationships between things imagined and the act of consciousness that brings imagined things into being. Such "music" demands much from the reader's understanding of her allusions and willingness to allow the music to reverberate in his or her mind. Nonetheless, the resulting poems are autonomous apostrophes in Scott's sense of an overheard poetry, or Merle Brown's more recent concept of "twice-told" poetry in contemporary American verse.¹¹ Like music-boxes, they require from the reader only an initial impulse to start them going.

Pickthall chose the stereotypes of the Aesthetes' fantastic poetry as rough material for her poetic world, and bent those

¹¹ Merle Browne, "Poetic Listening," *New Literary History*, 10.1 (1978): 128-39.

conventions to a creative will determined to preserve moments of literary beauty from the flow of time and change. By making her poems pleasing, she rendered these intervals accessible to the reader, while at the same time denying any possibility of a higher meaning prior to the text. The intensity behind this process, moreover, amounts to a species of literary eroticism in which the text has become an unravished but veil-dropping bride of quietness. Yet her verse was regarded in her time as having house-trained the decadent imagination so that it could be accepted into punctilious, middle-class living-rooms.

Perhaps this discrepancy can be explained by the fact that her most popular poems exploited her readers' wish to experience vicariously the "elasticity of probability" of the fantastic strain in Aesthete or post-Symbolist literature, which sought escape in the life of the imagination. Her literary, exotic and legendary settings, the childlike decor of flowers, small animals and silver, "echoed the deepest desires of the fin-de-siècle soul," as Jean Pierrot says of the French decadents, "because they are always located in a distant or long-past world, at once unreal and vague, [which] satisfied the desire for escape experienced so intensely by the collective spirit of the age."¹² This nostalgia denied the real past and avoided the future by preferring the presence of literary experience.

Moving beyond this, Pickthall creates a unique freedom song of libidinous desires which, as we have seen, has been interpreted as a nostalgia for innocence in Canadian literary history. Hers is a poetry of consciousness in the sense of Pater's "swarm of impressions," in which the individual mind keeps "as a solitary prisoner its own dream of the world." Her poetic retains traces of what Pater called "speculative culture," which must perceive and disseminate a reality of "the inward world of thought and feeling" where the flame of perception burns "more eager and devouring." Readers took delight in these traces of an inward world which reflected those intervals between things and the principles of things that Pater had called beauty. From Emerson to Pater, Bachelard and Poulet, however, the inward world of the imagination has gradually come to be understood in material or substantialist terms. The fantastic settings of art-for-art's-sake poetry eventually became purely structural frameworks for the expression of psychological states in which mimetic representation of nature was rejected.¹³ But Pickthall

¹² *The Decadent Imagination* 147, 183.

¹³ Walter Pater, "Conclusion," *The Renaissance* (Cleveland and New York: World Publishing, 1961) 220-24. I want to stress that, since Pater, poetic consciousness has not been regarded as other-worldly or transcendent. Gaston Bachelard's "trans-subjectivity" of the poetic imagination,

was successful in her time, perhaps because of the intense bond between literariness and desire in her verse.

In "The Immortal," Pickthall depicts the re-creation of the world by Beauty following an undefined apocalypse. Beauty is personified as an artist upon whose grace the creative power of God entirely depends,

Beauty that rosed the moth-wing, touched the land
 With clover-horns and delicate faint flowers,
 Beauty that bade the showers
 Beat on the violet's face,
 Shall hold the eternal heavens within their place
 And hear new stars come singing from God's hand.

(*Pinions* 12)

A post-Symbolist artificer is always behind her descriptions of nature; in her poetic world, God is displaced by the creative power of the artistic imagination. In "The Tree," the poet identifies with a tree that overtops the forest, a "lovely thought" of an unnamed beloved, "Unknown of anyone," seemingly, and a guardian of an "enclosed ground,"

By the cunning seasons builded fair
 With rain's masonry
 And delicate craft of air. (*Wife* 12-13)

The tree is capable of towering to the stars, the "lovelier need," not because it has grown above the "lowly stuff" of nature, but because it is not a tree at all. As a crafted poetic figure it denies both mundane and more "spiritual" perceptions of reality. Today, we might overhear the poem saying "This is not a tree," if we recall Diderot's story "*Ceci n'est pas un conte*" or Magritte's famous design of a brier.

Pater had said of Rossetti that "dream-land" is "a real country," placing an increasingly solipsist "emphasis on the power the artist may exert over nature" in his later writings.¹⁴ When writing, Pickthall felt "a queer sort of thing sometimes . . . a sort of flood of power. . . . Sometimes it used to seem that the very clay was molten in that fire, and then,—'I saw that it was good'" (*Remembrance* 76). After the Great War, Pickthall settled in British Columbia, and the rain-

which is based on a psychoanalytic and phenomenological model, is relevant here: Bachelard, "Introduction," *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (New York: Orion, 1964). Georges Poulet analyses this idea in "Gaston Bachelard et la conscience de soi," *Revue internationale de philosophie*, 86 (1983): 492-504. On artifice and the unconscious, see Pierrot's *The Decadent Imagination* 166-70. D.C. Scott's and Merle Brown's concepts of apostrophic verse also suggest a substantialist view of the imagination.

¹⁴ Anthony Ward, *Walter Pater: The Idea of Nature* (London: MacGibbon, 1966) 91-92.

forests quickly became a dream-land in her imagination. In poems such as "The Sleep-Seekers" and "The House" (*Songs* 75-76, 77), Pickthall writes of sleep and dream as women who live only within a creative, as opposed to a created, forest—an imaginary place accessible to the "you" of the poems only by means of the threshold of art. Though she writes of affection and desire for the addressee, the "you" must clearly be changed into a dream-figure before she can respond. In "Adam and Eve," Pickthall suggests that after the Fall mankind was redeemed from "the clear silence" by Beauty, who "taught them heavenly words" (*Wife* 19). These words and no other provide the world-parents their only light, their only bond and their only grace, as they cool their passions at her stream. Adam and Eve sleep "as the beautiful must," but only once they are dead does beauty blossom in "their dust." For Pickthall, as for Swinburne or Beardsley, beauty is often a matter of cosmetics applied to a fantasy-world whose boundaries are marked by a denial of modern realities and normal human relationships.

In "Quiet," we eavesdrop on the dreaming poet's creation for herself of a beautiful world where, "in the immortal empire of the grasses,/ Time, like one wrong/ Note in a song,/ With their bloom, passes" (*Wife* 25). This purely literary world, however, goes somewhat beyond Pickthall's sources and precedents in the poets of the Rhymers' Club, who paid no heed to Pater's warning that "gathering all we are into one desperate effort to see and touch, we shall hardly have time to make theories" or acquiesce in any orthodoxy, including Pater's. Pierce explains that,

As for her contemporaries who boasted every conceit, and raucously descanted, saying that they have "lived," she had no use at all. . . . she took no part in the established systems of politics, sociology or religion . . . her chief desire was for liberation from all abstract ideas, systems and forms.

(*Remembrance* 155-56)

Pickthall attempted to free poetic artifice from the idealism that spawned it by liberating artifice from the moral and social concerns implicit in the decadents' assault on the complacency of the middle-class. And if the decadents eventually found themselves in Yeats's foul rag-and-bone-shop of the heart, Pickthall became enclosed by the heaped texts of her reading—a closure that, toward the end of her life, she attempted to re-open by violent means.

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Though Pickthall adopted the medievalism and eroticism characteristic of the Aesthetes, she adapted their method to her own ends. Baudelairean correspondences between a "forest of symbols" drawn from the natural world—and the source of their beauty in an essentially Platonic spirituality—were displaced in Pickthall by correspondences between the same symbols and an awareness of literary resonance. She was regarded as "a singer of spiritual songs" in her time; other literature was, ultimately, the first cause of these songs. She read the Old Testament for the same reasons that she read Homer, nineteenth-century English verse, Islamic and Japanese literature, Canadian history, and "creepy" stories about vampires—"a lovely one about a French-Canadian priest turning into a were-wolf": for setting (*Remembrance* 54). Based on a principle resembling Shklovskii's "making strange," her poetic relinquishes any program of moral self-development and allows no in-roads into the social arena in which moral qualities are tried. Nonetheless, her *œuvre* provides some sense of a personality struggling toward an understanding of her failings. Her writing is marked by a certain progressive drift toward fallen nature and waking life, a prospect viewed, from the beginning, in terms of silence, dust, poverty, and death.

In "The Lamp of Poor Souls" (*Pinions* 42-43), Pickthall writes of the grief of a poor woman over the death of a small child. The speaker's prayer, as a song of the poor, can be beautiful, and hence worthy of poetic expression, only because the speaker is asleep and dreaming. In "St. Yves' Poor" (*Pinions* 34-37), a saint's reverie renders his Christian compassion for the poor as art. In a later poem, "Sleep," which offers a vision of Christian brotherhood, Pickthall beholds all mankind asleep in a dream-vision. The dreamer within the dream envisages mankind dreaming of oneness under God, contemplating "the Lamp that gave them light." This light, however, though "lovelier than the dreams of night," still needs Christ's grace, "Christ's own heart, laid here to heal it" (*Wife* 23). The light that enables the dreamers to dream of brotherhood is the poet's own flawed imagination. Wounded or sick, it cannot emanate from a transcendent source.

This diminution of the "spiritual" in Pickthall's verse at least partially explains why she found faith in Christ's redemption unsatisfying. In "The Chosen," she admits that the Christian path is "a way too high for me,"

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." (*Wife* 11)

Thus, in her best-known religious poem, "Resurgam," Pickthall imagines that she will be re-united with Christ after death, when it is music, it is morning, "Song that is fresh as sunrise, light that sings."

I shall say, Lord, "I remembered, working, sleeping,
 One face I looked for, one denied and dear.
 Now that you come my eyes are blind with weeping,
 But you will kiss them clear."

I shall say, Lord, "Touch my lips, and so unseal them;
 I have learned silence since I lived and died."
 I shall say, Lord, "Lift my hands, and so reveal them,
 Full, satisfied." (*Songs* 19-20)

But why is Christ denied to her? Who or what has put her love of Him in bondage? She will know Christ only once He is translated into her own supremacy of thought, and artist and savior are lovers finally enjoying the after-languors of her poetic world. Death is the "gate" to this happy land. On this side of death (in the world outside of books), she may know only her guilt and an absence of satisfaction.

Pickthall could not face the reality of poverty and suffering in the world without transmuting that reality into fantasy. "Wanderlied," and "The Pool" (*Pinions* 8-9, 24-25) apply natural imagery cosmetically to the surface of an imaginary world where questions of morality and self-realization are irrelevant. In "The Gardener's Boy," the boy feeds on lilled thoughts of a loved one, falls asleep, and dreams "on the sunburned sod, / Smiling beside the agony of God" (*Wife* 26). Her search for intense literary pleasure eventually produces a poetic world in which death alone offers reconciliation of unconscious conflict. In the later poem, "The Naiad," she laments that she is sick with grief, for life has diminished her dreaming to "an undesigned despair,"

Sad smoke of sacred fires along the lands,
 The burdened vine, full gourd and goldening ears,
 The labourer's song among his olive trees,—
 What care I for these? (*Selected* 95-96)

The naiad wishes that her banks would break open to release her sadness in the sea. She wants to die and to "know no more."

Once we get past the mystique that ultimately ruined Pickthall's reputation, we may overhear throughout her work the sad and disillusioned songs of speakers who are dead or old and spent. In later poems like "Exile," "The Foolish Brother," and "A Western Window," there seems to be a relinquishing of her pleasure in literariness; a recognition of her withdrawal from life—amounting to a desire for death; and an acceptance of her dream-song as "The song of the old dead dreams and the death of the dreams to be." Alongside such poems as these, others like "When Winter Comes," "Riding," "Again," and "Finis," written near the time of her death, appear to grasp at the life of the natural world she had so assiduously and meticulously excluded from her work.¹⁵ In "When Winter Comes" (*Wife* 35-36) the setting is free of the fantastic; the natural images are true to the British Columbia landscape; the rhythm is fresh and bracing; and the pleasure of the poem's optimism is real and strong. Toward the end of her life, as W. E. Collin noticed, reading Pickthall's notes for her last, unfinished novel, she had decided to "Can the fantastic."¹⁶ Her search for literary intensity gradually matured into the psychological paradox of a longing for death that was, at the same time, a desire for life.

From the beginning, however, Pickthall's attitudes toward art were conditioned by an understanding of the sort of craftsmanship and mystification that her audience expected of her. In her poetic tributes to Swinburne's Proserpine poems, the naughtiness that the reading public felt had scandalized the ideal of poetic beauty in Swinburne's "pagan" *Poems and Ballads* (1866) was not to be found. Like T. S. Eliot, who thought Swinburne would not have had so much fun with vice and sin had he known more about them, Pickthall was "dreadfully disappointed in Swinburne for his teacup wickedness. . . . "Words, words, words." But, oh, the "Hymn to Proserpine!!" (*Remembrance* 54). Thus, in her "Little Fauns to Proserpine" (*Pinions* 5-7), her fastidious playfulness and literary allusiveness were put to the task of achieving an appealing simplicity, which succeeded in attracting much critical comment in her time.¹⁷ The chief elements

¹⁵ "Exile," "The Foolish Brother," "A Western Window," *Little Songs* 38, 42-48, 80-82. "When Winter Comes," "Riding," "Again," *Wood Carver's Wife* 38-38, 37, 104. "Finis," *Little Songs* 87.

¹⁶ Collin, *White Savannahs* 77.

¹⁷ Archibald MacMechan praised "Little Fauns" as a "dulcet Swinburnian melody" in *Headwaters of Canadian Literature* (1924; Toronto: McClelland, 1974) 222. Lionel Stevenson, in *Appraisals of Canadian Literature* (1926; Toronto: MacMillan, 1977), saw it as an exquisite example of mystical and epicurean elements (with the mystical dominating) characteristic of Canadian poetry

of Pickthall's most ethereal poems are to be found here—sleep's displacement of life, silence, flowers, the "making small" of tropes, and deftly mesmerizing prosodic control that re-activates, at its richest, the suggestiveness of stock, Anglo-Saxon adjectives—but the profound religious doubt central to Swinburne's "Hymn" is deliberately concealed. There may be two reasons for this hiding behind a mask of nostalgia for a time when faith was less deprived of the marvelous and the splendid. The first is doubt; the second, dread.

Pickthall confronts doubt, as in "Imperfection," for example; she makes it clear that neither life returning in the spring nor "music echoing where the saints have trod" can teach her "What heaven may be." "The nipped bud," "the weak voices," "Lost vision, stammering prayer," and unhappiness in love make her think of God (*Songs* 79). In other words, she can accept that her poetry offers no affirmation beyond the text, but she dreads any dissolution of her will to create. Hers was not an adolescent fear of life, as Pacey expected "we must coldly state" after rubbing embarrassed tears from our eyes, but rather a dread of diminution of the life and power of the imagination. What she feared most was a short-circuit in the continuum between unconscious forces and anxieties, in the metaphorical resolution of these inner tensions, and in the grounding of her will to create in death.

Let me emphasize that the destruction of her reputation among a new breed of "serious" readers in the thirties and forties had less to do with her fear than her success—her popular mystique as a personable young woman writing strong poems. This reaction has led to her neglect in the assessment and evaluation of poetry in Canada, to the extent that the darker side of her work now requires further consideration. To this end, I shall discuss the second Proserpine poem, her substantial poem, "Mons Angelorum," and the lesser poem, "Inheritance":

I, before I fronted pain,
Felt creation writhe and strain,
Sending ancient terrors through,
My small pulses, sweet and new. (*Wife* 32)

(84). John Daniel Logan's monograph, *Marjorie Pickthall: Her Poetic Genius and Art. An Appreciation and an Analysis of Aesthetic Paradox* (Halifax: T. C. Allen, 1922), insists, echoing Pater's treatment of the "Mona Lisa" in *Style* (1888), that "her verse lacks style. I do not mean . . . the grand style. Technically her verse is free, flowing, musical . . . in a word, feminine. But . . . it lacks originality and substance of style—the subtle quality which gives us the sense of having met with beauty that is memorably, unforgettably fine and pervasive as a spiritual essence" (19). Using a method derived from Santayana but adhering to a Paterian Platonism, Pierce's *Book of Remembrance* arrives at the opposite opinion, regarding "Little Fauns" as one of Pickthall's most appealing poems (70), "transcendental without becoming lost in the stars" (167).

As Lacan said, "In what could the unconscious be better recognized, in fact, than in the defenses that are set up in the subject against it, with such success that they appear no less real?"¹⁸ In "Inheritance," as in most of Pickthall's work, one eavesdrops on an aesthetic consciousness addressing an imagined reader. The repetition of the pronoun in the construction "I, before" in each of the three stanzas constitutes a defensive stand taken in the face of archetypal terrors. A tiny drama takes place, located at birth and "a few summers gone from birth." The drama is performed within the parameters of an overheard form, and the actual reader is aware that the "I" and the addressee of the poem are imagined constructs set up in the speaker's consciousness. We hear that the trauma has robbed the speaker's body of her will to live. Yet the complete poem functions as an affirmation of this loss, a re-appropriation of the creative power pressing upward from the unconscious and exerting pressure on the "I" of the poem. Pickthall exploits this pressure by translating it into an autonomous lyricism which postpones any epistemological interpretation. It is enough that the "I" stands as a defensive measure between life that diminishes creation and creation's terrifying power. The reader is only a witness; there is nothing he or she should learn.

Pickthall was preoccupied with death from the outset, but she came more and more to understand her art in terms of an interplay—always resisted and impeded—between her creativity and its origin in death. The fiat "let nothing lifeless seem" does not presuppose the body of life but a dreaming corpse, the life of the imagination confined and contained by the dead text. Yet the earlier poem, "Mons Angelorum," is one of the richest responses I have come across to the intellectual tumult that characterized the period (*Pinions* 79-92). Mankind's Edenic origin and transcendent destination having been challenged by science, Higher Criticism, and Darwin, early Twentieth-century poets in Canada felt a need to re-assert faith in the after-life.¹⁹ Not life after death, however, but life-in-death—as a literary state of mind—became the single most important challenge to the values of Pickthall's art. "Mons Angelorum" subtly challenges the authority of the law, represented by Moses, through the disillusionment of Joshua, who has been broken by the "burden of the Lord" and who represents on-going life.

¹⁸ Jacques Lacan, "The Freudian thing," in *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977) 118.

¹⁹ See my discussion of Enstace Ross's treatment of the after-life in "Canadian Poetry in the Twenties: Dialectics and Prophecy in W.W.E. Ross's *Laconics and Sonnets*," *Canadian Poetry* 18 (1986): 35-54.

Moses's knowledge of the law as a formal set of rules and conventions has robbed him of all his "desires and cares." As he nears death, he can only recollect the Egypt of his boyhood, "Full of warm buds" and Isis's dreams of love. Thus, knowledge of the law is reduced (or refined) to sensuous desire. By contrast, Joshua is a man of sorrows who takes Moses's sword but cannot aspire to the spirituality of the "Master of Law." Joshua is a warrior and carries a bright-burning flame of fury within him; Moses's wisdom amounts to "far-flung visions of despair." A darkness moves between them, and a sky "Full of vague voices," the wind of death, which terrifies Joshua. Joshua leaves, and the darkness unchains "the prisoned pinions" of the soul's "blind bird" and bids Moses's life recede, "A bubble before the advancing wave of death." The darkness has a "music in it," which the poem expresses.

Moses is visited by angels of darkness, light, and dreams. The first calls life a harp with no voice, the second considers himself above life, "less and greater," and the third calls life an errant affront to "Peace:"

Mine are the wings of silence
 Folded in silver sleep before my face;
 This in my hand is the golden fruit of Eden,
 Whose scent is sleep; its flame-white flower grew
 Along the glades where Adam walked with God.

The angels have come to prepare Moses for death, for he is troubled that in the darkness there will be no star nor "lingering love of day,"

But the soft dark
 Folds inward as a flower, enfolding me,
 My length of little days, wisdom and grief,
 Light as a drop of rain.

The angel of dreams demands surrender to the darkness, "This dream-encompassed city" whose limits are "tenderer far," and the angel of darkness offers to recognize the sovereignty of the law and Moses's right to wield that power. Moses argues that darkness, when it "Takes substance/ In domes and depths of mightiest design/ And seals him from the world," will deprive life of meaning, and the light of understanding will have "no name or place." The angel of light offers nothing in this exchange. Darkness, "the firstborn angel," triumphs, and the law is subsumed finally by an "eternal" darkness that veils the thoughts of God. Darkness, "the breath of chaos," relieves Moses of memory, hope, reason, happiness, and despair. Life for Joshua is now meaningless and the voices of Israel cry out that

there is nothing between them and their God. Nothing, that is, but an absence that may not be traversed.

"Mons Angelorum" dialectically engages the contraries of law and freedom, power and escape: the escape of imaginative freedom from the bondage of the law. Pickthall's awareness here fragments into a desire for death (darkness), the will to create (dreams), and a presumption of knowledge above and beyond life (light). At his passing, Moses escapes all in life that separates him from Isis' dreams of love. Yet the angel of darkness grants him the sovereignty of the law, and this move is seconded by the angel of dreams—Pickthall's poetic rationalization for unfettered creativity. At this point knowledge becomes irrelevant, and the angel of light bows to the power of darkness and dreams. The combined power of these figures incorporates the law, drawing Moses into the domain of their alliance, the soft enfolding dark of Pickthall's poetic world. Once this invagination of the law is accomplished, the separation between the world and the life of the imagination is total and irrevocable. Joshua will never know peace. Rather than challenging authority and convention by means of shocking or technical experimentation, the poem turns the tables on any who would judge its poetic power by becoming its own judge. The sentence pronounced, moreover, is almost ghoulish. Through a process of mimetic desire—the desire to become the other—Pickthall becomes the Father by appropriating his death to the source of her creativity. This is no Prufrock afraid to murder and create.

The second Proserpine poem, "Persephone Returning to Hades" (*Selected* 72-73), probes the Eleusinian motif more deeply than "Little Fauns." Here, the "sad untimely flowers," the "Dread daffodils" that the daughter gathers in the "gathering-place" of shadows, "Slip from my hands and are but shadows too." As in "Mons Angelorum," the land of shadows is described as a city, "vast gray suburbs of the dead." The poem creates a poetic world out of the poet's unconscious defenses against dread, and within this fantasy she chooses to follow Persephone into the darkness.

Pickthall accepted the Eleusis myth as a gathering-place for her ideas on art and death in 1910, immediately following the death of her mother, which had inspired a melancholia from which she never completely recovered (*Remembrance* 52-62). She never married, had few close relationships, and never showed a great deal of affection for anyone except her father and the dream-figures of her verse. Pierce felt that melancholy marked most of her work and saw that it "must not be confused with mysticism" (*Remembrance* 162-63). In 1919 she wrote from

London, frustrated by her small contribution to the war effort and the slow progress of her second novel:

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—emotion with a foreknowledge of impermanence, a daring mind with only the tongue as an outlet, a greed for experience plus a slavery to convention—what the deuce are you to make of that?—as a woman? As a man, you could go ahead and stir things up *fine*.

(*Remembrance* 104)

In British Columbia a year later, Pickthall was struggling with a conflict in her fiction between ironic realism and romantic fantasy. The last two years of her life were years of illness and artistic crisis.

As Pierce says, Pickthall had begun to feel "that her true forte was in the field of the short story," in which she had enjoyed financial success (*Remembrance* 122). She had been disheartened by her second novel, *The Bridge* (1922), in which she attempted a sharper psychological characterization and a realistic style culled from reading Balzac. The setting she chose was that of her father's summer home on Talis Island, near Toronto. Sometime in 1920, two years before her death, she sent her father a booklet of verses tied up in green ribbons (Pierce later collected them in *Selected Poems*, 61-64). The speaker of the poems was Palome, one of the novel's characters. She wrote in the "Preface to this Very Private Edition,"

My dearest Daddy.

I am sending, for you, and you only, to see, some of the little poems left by Palome, and found long after by Adam Laurent and Jenny Hurst

Their place in the story I cannot show, but they will stand alone I am sending them to you, a little foretaste of "the Mountain."

I hope you will be pleased with them.

Your very loving

KITSY DAUGHTER

(*Remembrance* 110-13)

In the poems Palome cries, "Now we have back our heritage of Time." She tells her lover to be silent or "Death will hear"; he

kisses her and she "changed into story" as a "thousand blades had blossom on her mouth."²⁰

The mid-life crisis that culminated in her death coincided with a split in her commitment to art between a more assertive fiction responsive to life and the persistent exclusions of her defenses. Furthermore, the shift from making-small-and-strange to narrative order-making uncovered a level of terrific violence in her imagination. As a spin-off of her effort to find a reconciliation in her fiction between "curt matter-of-fact detail" and the "beautiful wild harvest" of a romantic, North American, "white man's myth" (*Remembrance* 118-19), she produced what Northrop Frye has called the "violent, almost brutal" verse play, "The Wood Carver's Wife."²¹ Written before she left England in the spring of 1919, the play had "rather made her gasp, . . . being so entirely unexpected!" (*Remembrance* 103). In this work, as in "Mons Angelorum," the deadly conflict between authority or the law and the freedom of dreams and desire is resolved in death. A patriarchal settler in the Canadian wilderness arranges for a beautiful wild Indian to murder his young wife for a minor breach of propriety. In poems such as "Isaac Jogues," "Two Souls," "Chanson de la Tour," and in the dramatic murder-party of "The Wood Carver's Wife," Pickthall's poetic world becomes increasingly violent as she approaches the world through the truth of her inner life.²² As Bachelard says, "culture complexes are grafted upon the deeper complexes which have been brought to light by psychoanalysis." Cultural sublimation prolongs an artist's "natural sublimation" because readers renew the latter in themselves and demand it from their authors. Thus, "a sublimated image never seems beautiful enough."²³

From the beginning of her career as a child-artist, Pickthall was self-consciously aware of the serious attention she received, first from a small group of fatherly academics, and later from a large popular audience. What effect might this reception have had on her poetic? What insights might reader-response criticism bring to the intellectual love-affair between the critic Lorne Pierce and the aesthetic consciousness that emerges from Pickthall's work? How would feminist critics or reception

²⁰ Regarding the strange image of blades blossoming on the mouth, see Marie Bonaparte, *Female Sexuality* (New York: Intl. UP, 1963) 32, 186-87.

²¹ Frye 86.

²² "Isaac Jogues," "Two Souls," "Chanson de la Tour," *Little Songs* 28-30, 32-33, 81-84. "The Wood Carver's Wife," *Wood Carver's Wife* 45-87.

²³ Gaston Bachelard, *L'eau et les rêves: Essai sur l'imagination de la matière* (Paris: José Corti, 1963) 26; trans. Colette Gaudin, *On Poetic Imagination and Reverie: Selections from the Works of Gaston Bachelard* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971) 17-18.

theorists respond to the trashing of Pickthall's reputation? Could the master-and-slave relationship between authority and artistic freedom in Pickthall's verse be a reflection of how other Canadian women writers viewed their art in the early decades of the century? I hope to have created an opening for questions such as these about psychological and cultural significance in this discussion of Marjorie Pickthall's poetic. I have also suggested that modern sensibilities in Canadian verse extend further into the past—and do so in a more cosmopolitan manner—than is often supposed.

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