"Breasting Body": the Beginnings of Maternity Poetry by Women in Canada

by Wendy J. Robbins

1. Critical Contexts: Maternity Poetry in Canada

The *Globe and Mail* obituary (January 1, 1997) trumpeted: "Poet, feminist, received two governor-general awards: Dorothy Livesay claimed to be the first to write an English language poem about the birthing process."[1] Until then, Livesay's self-made claim had passed almost unnoticed, and it has remained, to my knowledge, uninvestigated. Critical attention has not been directed to the evolution of Canada's maternity poetry, not even to Livesay's important childbirth poem. Despite one early notice by Desmond Pacey, the poem and its significance have not been discussed by important Livesay critics such as Pamela Banting, Frank Davey, Paul Denham, Nadine McInnis, or Peter Stevens, and it is mentioned only in passing by Lee Briscoe Thompson (109). This paper is offered, then, as a preliminary mapping of early Canadian maternity poetry.

As a pioneering exploration of texts that have been relatively inaccessible or simply neglected until now, this survey carries a *caveat*. Before the end of the twentieth century, early Canadian womens poetry had begun to move out of the realm of *terra incognita*, but most of it still remains to be discussed widely, in detail, and in the interdisciplinary context required for its full understanding. As both womens studies and Canadian studies evolve, and as more literary archival material is made available to a wider audience through new Web sites, online discussions, search engines, and other new tools, this outline will undoubtedly need to be filled in or corrected.

2. "A Striking Change"

In the Preface to their anthology *MotherSongs: Poems for, by, and about Mothers*, Sandra M. Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and Diana O'Hehir point to "a striking change in our society": "poets have just in the last few decades begun to speak *as* mother and *about* mothers" (17).

Although *MotherSongs* presents primarily the work of American and British poets, it includes Canadian's Margaret Atwood and Dorothy Livesay, and the editors observations about literary maternity are generally applicable to Canadian literature and society. In *Slip-shod Sibyls: Recognition, Rejection and the Woman Poet* (1995), her mammoth study of mostly British and colonial womens poetry, Germaine Greer likewise registers a liberating change with respect to womens bodies, wombs and all. She begins by charting the constraints placed on pre-twentieth-century women poets by "characteristics associated with femininity, such as delicacy, modesty, charm, domesticity, hypersensitivity and piety." She emphasizes that "what the poetess does not aspire to is the revelation of gut truths of womanhood. . . . The poetess typically presents a sanitized version of herself; she and her poetry are deodorized, depilated and submissive" (xv, xvi). Greer later concludes with a passionate affirmation: "Surely things are different now! . . . We may speak now of wombs and blood and birth and bitterness, may we not, and be known for it?" (64). In Canada, too, until the middle of the twentieth century some of women's most profound and central realities remained almost entirely taboo.

Virginia Woolf noted just prior to mid-century, in her essay "Professions for Women," that the woman writer censored herself, both consciously and unconsciously, because of prevailing patriarchal norms which designated woman as Other, as deviant: "she had thought of something, something about the body, about the passions which it was unfitting for her as a woman to say. Men, her reason told her, would be shocked" (Woolf 152). In Canada at the same period, this kind of self-repression is exemplified by Audrey Alexandra Brown, whose writings typically deny female experience and identify the artist as male. (Brown earned the praise of male critics and the 1944 Lorne Pierce Medal from the Royal Society "for distinguished contributions to Canadian literature.") In a 1941 speech to the Vancouver branch of the Canadian Authors Association, subsequently published as *Poetry and Life*, Brown distances herself from what she terms "typically spinster poetry," which takes as its principal subject women's lost loves. If untrue, these reports are a "pathetic affectation"; if based on woman's personal experience, then "somewhat indelicate." Brown asks: "What interest has the public, or ought the public to have, in our love-life?"[2] Most of

woman's body-mind-spirit was simply beyond the pale, even for women writers.

In many domains, including literature, and in many countries, including Canada, the "second wave" of the women's movement ushered in a real "sea change." Not just in literature, but also in history, there has been immense change with respect to writing about the female body in the post-International Women's Year quarter century. As Nancy Schrom Dye noted in an article on the "History of Childbirth in America," published in 1980 in the influential interdisciplinary women's studies journal *Signs*, "despite the centrality of pregnancy and birth in womens lives, historians have only recently turned their attention to the changing customs and attitudes Americans have carried into the lying-in chamber and the delivery room" (97). My paper offers a survey of some Canadian women's maternity poetry in English—poems about the interrelated subjects of pregnancy, birth, and both infant and maternal death—up to and including Dorothy Livesay's landmark (but little discussed) birth poem "Serenade for Strings," a harbinger of major artistic change every bit as important as the socialist title poem of her 1944 collection, *Day and Night*, in which it appeared.

"Serenade for Strings" was written in 1941 for Livesay's first child, her son Peter (born April 19, 1940). The poem, curiously impersonal, even euphemistic, by twenty-first century standards of "writing" the female body, straddles the bodily work of labour, the sacred or mythic dimension of birth, and implicitly, the subject of creativity itself. When the poem was republished in *Selected Poems of Dorothy Livesay, 1926-1956*, its title was changed to "Nativity." The poem was termed "splendid" in the Introduction by the editor of the collection, Desmond Pacey, who added, with prescience if not fidelity to the facts at the time, that "many of the best of her later poems have dealt with child-bearing and child-rearing" (xvii). The poems original, and to my mind less compelling, title, which presumably Livesay favoured, was restored in the later collections, *Collected Poems. The Two Seasons* in 1972 and *The Self-Completing Tree* in 1986. My research into the beginnings of women's maternity poetry in Canada, initiated in the 1970s, was undertaken in an attempt to either validate or challenge Livesay's claim of primacy with respect to the subject of childbirth which she had made to me in a private conversation at the University of Guelph in 1975, when I was a new and visibly pregnant lecturer. At that time, there was no generic

term for the kind of poetry that I was investigating. I conceptualized it, by analogy to Betty Friedan's work on "the feminine mystique" (initially, "the problem that has no name") as "the genre that has [had] no name."

3. The Genre that Had No Name

Where does it all begin, Canadian women's maternity poetry? In a controversial comment in her Introduction to the *New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English*, Margaret Atwood wryly noted a scarcity of women poets in early Canada: "In the nineteenth century a woman Canadian poet was the equivalent, say, of a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant Innuit shaman—yet we have several of them" (xxix). Recent scholarship by Rosemary Sullivan, Carole Gerson, Gwen Davies, Lorraine McMullen, and Agnes Grant, for example, and the work of Lucy Sussex and others for the Canadian Institute for Historical Microreproductions, as well as new electronic archives which are being assembled online, have re(dis)covered many such poets, although neither a comprehensive annotated bibliography nor thorough literary analyses have yet been done, to my knowledge. Thus this paper is an exploration of still mostly obscure nineteenth-century poems by little-studied poets such as (roughly in chronological order) Ann Cuthbert Knight, Margaret Agnew Blennerhasset, Mary Eliza Herbert, Sarah Herbert, Augusta Baldwyn, Pamelia Vining Yule, and Rosanna Leprohon—all of whom precede both Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake) and Isabella Valancy Crawford, with whom anglophone women's poetry in Canada is usually said to start; it also includes reference to poems by Susanna Strickland Moodie, S. Frances Harrison, Agnes Maule Machar ("Fidelis"), Marjorie Pickthall, and Katherine Hale, as well as to some Native orature and a few poems based on Native material by Constance Lindsay Skinner and Hermia Harris Fraser.

One striking feature of pre-twentieth-century poems by women in Canada is the emphasis, not on childbirth but, rather, on child and maternal death. Except for rare renderings of Native perspectives, there is a huge silence about those quintessential and intense female experiences, conception, pregnancy, and giving birth. While some early Canadian women poets remained childless (Johnson, Crawford, Machar, Skinner, Pickthall), others were mothers, often of many children (Blennerhasset, Moodie). The tradition of Canada's maternity poetry needs to be named and made known, with

all its erasures, ellipses, and codes. Ironically, literary motherhood is no "motherhood issue."

By contrast, death is a ubiquitous literary theme. Still, the macabre frequency of poems about the death of an infant and/or maternal death, recorded by female poets, suggests that special categories of death poetry exist and are worthy of being separately named and analyzed as infant elegies, maternal elegies. Early Canadian women's poems about the death of an infant are almost formulaic, as are their British counterparts. Infant elegies tend to depict the deceased child as a flower picked before it fully bloomed; as in poems about child-bed death of the mother, they register loss and grief, if in muffled and stoic ways; and they almost invariably move to an acceptance of the divine will and an affirmation of the spiritual world as superior to the sensual—the consolation of religion. Such poems conform to some of the expectations of the so-called sentimental tradition of women's writing, while working *against* the contemporary hypothesis that women's poetry tends to be more concerned with immanence than with transcendence.[3]

A second preliminary observation is that the sorrow and resignation of the elegies of white women writing in English contrast very markedly with the dramatic, celebratory tone of the creation myths and cradle songs of Canada's Aboriginal women, a few of which are available in English "translation" or in poems suggestive of Native perspectives.[4] In *Our Bit of Truth: an Anthology of Canadian Native Literature*, Agnes Grant draws attention to the centrality of birth in Native communities. She writes: "The birth of children was a joyous event in every tribal society, for without the birth of new members, tribal life could not continue. Children were loved and indulged" (110). The cultural centrality of women in Native ("Great Mother") societies is underscored again and again, for example in Paula Gunn Allen's *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (1986). The importance of children, and of the women who bear them, grounds the maternity poems of Aboriginal women, and as such it illustrates the central thesis of Maria Curro Kreppel's pioneering article "Books I've Read: Crosscurrents in Obstetrics and Literary Childbirth," published in *Atlantis: a Womans Studies Journal*; namely, that "cultural patterns and literary portrayals naturally reinforce one another" (4). Much more research by and about women from the diversity of racial, ethnic, and linguistic groups that make up the Canadian mosaic—interdis-

ciplinary research that uses the perspectives of women's history, women's health, feminist literary criticism, sociology, and demographics—is clearly needed for a full appreciation of Canada's maternity poetry, past and present.

4. A Socio-demographic Sketch

It is not possible here to sketch a detailed socio-demographic context for Canadian women's maternity poetry, sensitive to different demographic groups, geographic regions, and time periods. Furthermore, data disaggregated so as to reveal the situation of Native women and infants in earlier periods are elusive or unavailable. A few broad strokes, painted with some raw demographic statistics, may serve, nevertheless, as an instructive reminder of the importance of this dimension of the discussion of literary maternity. Overall, it is evident that maternal and infant mortality rates, as well as fertility rates, have declined dramatically in Canada; life expectancy nearly doubled between the middle of the nineteenth century and the latter part of twentieth century. For example, in the period 1720-1750, 25% of children died before reaching their first birthday, and almost 45% died before the age of ten. Moving forward in time, the table below compares 1851, 1921, and 1981.

Table 1: Fertility

	1851	1921	1981
Births per woman (Total Fertility Rate)	7.02	3.54	1.70
Children 0-4 per 100 women aged 20-44	120.3	68.7	37.5

Table 2: Mortality

	1851	1921	1981
Infant mortality	184.1	102.1	9.6
Life Expectancy at birth: Female	42.1	58.4	79.0
Life Expectancy at birth: Male	40.0	55.0	71.9

Whereas almost 1 in 5 children did not survive their first year in 1851, the figure is reduced to 1 in 100 in 1981. This was further reduced to approximately 1 in 150 in 1991 (6.4 deaths per 1,000).[5] These improvements are attributed to the reduction of infectious diseases such as cholera, tuberculosis, pneumonia, diphtheria, scarlet fever, typhoid, and smallpox, as well as better nutrition, which improves resistance to infection, and, in recent years, enhanced treatment of low birth-weight babies. In nineteenth-century Canada and earlier, effective methods of birth control were virtually unknown and complications of childbirth were a major cause of death for women. For example, statistics from the 1851 census indicate that "of deaths among women aged fifteen to fifty, two in ten were associated with bearing children."[6] Maternal mortality in Canada today stands at 1 in 7,300, so that with some justification it is said that "deaths in childbirth have been all but eliminated" for Canadian women.[7] Differing patterns for various racial groups within the country remain a cause for concern, however; and globally the rates are staggeringly high still.[8] In colonial times, almost every woman knew some woman who had died of child-bed fever or other complications of pregnancy and birth. This is the context in which women lived and women poets wrote, which may explain in part why these experiences—for non-Aboriginal women at least—are represented in literature as closely linked to suffering, anxiety, fear, tragedy, courage, despair, sorrow, and resignation. What follows is a brief overview of maternity poems by women in Canada, written in English or translated into English from indigenous languages, from pre-contact times to the 1940s, on conception, pregnancy, childbirth, child death, and child-bed or maternal death.

5. Aboriginal Poems about Conception and Pregnancy

Women's maternity poetry in Canada surely begins with Aboriginal creation myths, such as the fabled Uvavnuks "Song," about origins, genesis, creation, conception:

> The great sea
> Has set me adrift,
> It moves me as the weed in a great river,
> Earth and the great weather
> Move me,
> Have carried me away
> And move my inward parts with joy.[9]

According to Inuit myth from the Northwest Territories, Uvavnuk received her shamanic powers in a fashion analogous to violent intercourse resulting in conception:

> It was particularly dark that evening, as the moon was not visible. Then suddenly there appeared a glowing ball of fire in the sky, and it came rushing down to earth straight towards Uvavnuk. She would have got up and fled, but before she could pull up her breeches, the ball of fire struck her and entered into her. At the same moment she perceived that all within her grew light, and she lost consciousness. But from this moment also she became a great shaman.
>
> (Colombo 21)

In an interesting parallel, the metaphor of sexual penetration is used by Germaine Greer when she speculates about the source of the Western male poets power, his muse; in *Slip-shod Sibyls*, she describes the traditional "conception" of the work of art as a consequence of "spiritual intercourse" between the male poet and female muse: "The act of inspiring or 'breathing into is a penetrative act; the female muse enacts a male function upon the receptive poet, who thus quickened goes on to utter the idea in physical form" (5). Such descriptions also recall the story in Genesis 1 of the "Spirit of God" which "moved upon the face of the waters," and of the mystery of the Word made flesh.

Not just metaphoric, but also literal, conception and birth are clearly not taboo as subjects in Native orature. A Haida Indian "Song of Welcome" from Canada's west coast, "translated" by Hermia Harris Fraser and anthologized in *Canadian Poetry in English* by Bliss Carman, Lorne Pierce, and V.B. Rhodenizer, depicts conception and birth in terms of a preexisting spirits being called into a womans womb.

> Ai, ai, my small red man,
> Why do you weep on my bosom,
> Here in the Hut of the Newborn,
> Fresh from the beak of the Raven,
> He who made earth from the rain clouds,
>
> • • •
>
> Long did you lie in a hammock
> Swung near the Hanging Horizons,
> Trailing your feathers of swansdown
> Blown through the masks of Divine Ones,

Hearing the Whistlers, the spirits,
Pierce the dense blueness of Starland;

Lost until my heart called to you,
Lost until my body bore you.
Wah, ah wah, my small red man,
Welcome, the journey is ended.[10]

Other significant maternity poems that explore a northwest coast Native setting are Constance Lindsay Skinner's "Song of the Young Mother," "Song of the Birth," and "Song of Cradle-Making," all from her 1930 collection, *Songs of the Coast Dwellers*. "Song of the Young Mother" is about a new mother's rocking her "chiefling" in a woven cradle on a cedar branch while recalling her pregnancy ("When thou wast still a seedling / Deep in mine earth, months deep," and waking her in the night with "Dancing in thy dark house to the doors that soon must open / On thy white shining dawn-shores of life" [15]). The poem also depicts her first experience of sexual intercourse, which not even her mother had told her might be painful: "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" (16; ellipses in original).

Skinner was born and raised towards the end of the nineteenth century in northern British Columbia, where her father was a Hudsons Bay Company factor. In her Foreword to *Songs of the Coast Dwellers*, she expressly denies that her "Indian poems" are translations or adaptations; since she remained single and childless, the representations of sex, pregnancy, and birth cannot necessarily be attributed to first-hand knowledge either. She states that her lyrics present "in primitive symbolism, the characters of an imaginary community" (ix). Skinner's "Song of the Birth" is not from a birthing mother's perspective; rather, it is a monologue by the priest of the male deity Kantsamiqalasoe, the Pure Maker, who gives life. "With His finger makes He the little picture on the earth, / With His breath He blesses it, smiles and is content— / So comes a man" (66). Skinner's "Song of Cradle-Making" is about the experience of pregnancy, specifically about "quickening," a woman's feeling her child stir in the womb. It is a passionate, exuberant celebration of fertility and pregnancy. Note the image of the sand sucking at the breast of the fecund, maternal sea.

Thou has stirred!
When I lifted thy little cradle,
The little cradle I am making for thee,
I felt thee!
The face of the beach smiled,
I heard the pine trees singing,
In the White Sea the Dawn-Eagle dipped his wing.
Oh, never have I seen so much light
Through thy father's doorway!

(Wast thou pleased with thy cradle?)

• • •

Thou Little One under my heart!
For thou didst move; and every part of me trembled.
I will trim thy cradle with many shells,
And with cedar-fringes;
Thou shalt have goose-feathers on thy blanket!
I will bear thee in my hands along the beach,
Singing—as the sea sings,
Because the little mouths of sand
Are ever at her breast.
Oh, Mother-face of the Sea, how thou dost smile—

• • •

O Kantsamiqalasoe, our Praised One,
Let there be no more barren women!

(8-11)

Most observers of Native North American societies acknowledge a much more open and accepting attitude towards sexuality in their communities than in white communities. Skinner, acclaimed as a writer of history as well as of poetry, may well be making an accurate representation. She may also, to some extent, perhaps, be eroticizing or "libidinizing" the Other. At least one critic has suggested that Skinner sets the Squamish Indian experience in a role "secondary to female experience." According to Diana M.A. Relke, "what passes for a depiction of Indian customs and traditions is below the surface an exploration of sexual politics" (11). These interpretations are not necessarily mutually exclusive, of course, but it does mean that any generalizations about Native attitudes and customs based on this small sample of poems must be made with great caution.

6. Anglophone Poems about a Childs Birth or Childbirth

Some early nineteenth-century white women also wrote joyous, if rather more "modest" and circumscribed, poems of welcome to newborn children. One example is Augusta Baldwyn's "Lullaby" (Written for Mrs. H.B.), published in her *Poems* (1859), which describes the baby, "sweet Willie," as a "Gift from above, / Like an angel of joy / From our pure home on high / He has come, and shall claim our love" (79). A second example is Rosanna Leprohon's "To My First-Born," which is included in her *Poetical Works* (1881). It is a joyous poem, yet tinged with fear of loss through premature death: "For thee, my Babe, I only pray / Thoult live to bless thy parents' love / To be their hope, their earthly stay."[11] A similar ambivalence is discernible in Leprohon's "To a Young Mother on the Birth of Her First-Born Child." The poem registers joy, but also anxiety that the child will grow up to "suffring know, / Like all earth's children taste alike life's cup of care and woe" (*Poetical Works* 216).

If any poem, aside from those Native or Native-inspired, rivals Livesay's "Serenade for Strings" as the first Canadian poem written in English about childbirth it might be Marjorie Pickthall's "Mary Tired," first published in December 1919 in *University Magazine*, or Katherine Hale's "An Old Lady" from 1923. Like Milton's famed "Nativity Ode," Pickthall's concerns the events surrounding, not a normal human birth, but rather the birth of Christ. Moreover, the birthing process is not the main subject for Pickthall, as it is for Livesay. "Mary Tired" skips over the hours of the birth itself: "Through the starred Judean night / She went, in travail of the Light. / With the earliest hush she saw / God beside her on the straw." We are told that Mary "was tired of heavenly things," and we see her taking delight in baby kids, silken doves, sparrows, "sapphired flies," and a young mouse that "curled / Near the Ransom of the world." The realism of the poem is expressed in its precise observations of others, including this thumb-nail sketch of the mortal father—"Drowsing Joseph nodded near";[12] but it does not extend to those "gut truths of womanhood," except in its title perhaps, that feminist critics value today.

Katherine Hale's "An Old Lady," published in *Morning in the West: A Book of Verse* (1923), is a character sketch of an elderly Ottawa socialite who is the mother of seven. Briefly she reminisces about the frightening night of the painful birth of her first child, in Edmonton long ago. Her husband was away, and the family of her

"Indian maid" were revelling below the icy-cold bedroom where she "crouched" and "stifled" her cries. That recollected scene provides a vivid contrast to the elegance and ease of her current evening with its rendez-vous at the Chateau Laurier. The poem gives a stereotypically negative representation of Natives.

Whereas Pickthall's sensuously-detailed religious poem in some small measure brings the divine birth down to earth, Livesay's "Serenade for Strings" moves in the opposite direction. Livesay's religiously inscribed childbirth poem likens the birthing mother's son to the godhead. Chapter 5 in Lee Thompson's book on Livesay is suggestively titled "Songs of Experience: Flesh Made Word."

> At nine from behind the door
> The tap tapping
> Is furtive, insistent:
> Recurrent, imperative
> The I AM crying
> Exhorting, compelling.
>
> At eleven louder!
> Wilderness shaking
> Boulders uprolling
> • • •
> The terrible knocking
> God at the threshold!
> Knocking down darkness
> Battering daylight.

The poem, more cerebration than celebration, continues with wordplay on "son" (Son) and "sun," and allusions to Genesis with the "firmament" described as "riven." The labouring mother ("Bare body wracked and writhing") seems to suffer the curse of Eve. She longs for a "green field" to "cover" and "shield" her, and she identifies with nature—"wilderness" and "cloudways" and the skies of "Heaven." As her son is born, it is as if: "Now double wing-beat / Breasting body / Till cloudways open / Heaven trembles." Afterwards, when "it is done," Livesay concludes with words that the New Testament God applies to Jesus, his Son: "Behold—a man!"[13] "Serenade for Strings," Livesay's muted nativity poem, had broken a huge silence.

7. Infant Elegies

Up until the middle of the twentieth century, maternity poems in Canada are almost always about child and maternal death. Virtually unknown today, they include: "On the Death of Miss Eliza Farquharson Cruden" by Ann Cuthbert Knight in *A Year in Canada and Other Poems* (1816); "On Visiting the Grave of my Daughter—for the last time" by Margaret Agnew Blennerhasset ("A Lady"), who lost two of her five children as infants, published in *The Widow of the Rock and Other Poems* (1824); "The Christian Mother's Lament," by Susanna Strickland Moodie, in *Enthusiasm and Other Poems* (1831); "The Dying Blind Boy's Address to His Mother" and "The Baby's Grave" by Sarah Herbert, and "On the Death of a Relatives Only Child" by her sister Mary E. Herbert, all in *The Aeolian Harp or Miscellaneous Poems* (1857); and "To My Sister Mrs. Egerton, On the Death of Her Little Boy" and "The Death of the First-Born in Egypt" by Augusta Baldwyn in *Poems* (1859). The latter poem, like Marjorie Pickthall's 1905 "Mother in Egypt," retells the story from Exodus 11. Baldwin writes: "Far oer the land the clouds of sorrow fall, / And friend to friend all sadly, vainly call. / How can they leave their own then dying one? / All, all have lost their own, their first-born son." A footnote explains: "This poem was suggested by the recollection of the Cholera season a few years since, when for nine successive nights our door was opened to receive the intelligence of some neighbour's calamity and the appeals of the poor; the accounts reaching us from other places being appalling in the extreme" (88).

Much less bleak, though still underscoring the high risks of childbearing, is "At St. Hilaire" by S. Frances Harrison in *Pine, Rose and Fleur de Lis* (1891). It runs, in part:

> *Combien des enfants?* Why, twenty-five!
> Now, by all the Gods and every Saint,
> I wonder the woman is left alive.
>
> To tell the tale! How many survive?
> She answers me, calm and without constraint,
> "*Combien? Mossieu?* Why twenty-five."

Not *one* ever lost? Not one; they thrive
Do little ones in this parish quaint.
I wonder the woman is left alive.
(59)

To this list should be added "The Madonna of the Entry" and "The Royal Funeral. January, 1891" by Agnes Maule Machar in *Lays of the True North and Other Canadian Poems* (1899); "To a Day-Lily," "Johanna," and "Palmer. Three Years Old" by Pamelia Vining Yule in *Poems of the Heart and Home* (1881); and "The Death of the Pauper Child," "The Childs Dream," and "Given and Taken" by Rosanna Leprohon in *The Poetical Works of Mrs. Leprohon* (1881). This last is, in my judgment, the best of its kind; it concerns a first-born child who is born in winter and dies in spring.

They laid his tiny garment
 In an attic chamber high,
His coral, his empty cradle,
 That they might not meet my eye;
And his name was never uttered,
 What e'er each heart might feel,
For they wished the wound in my bosom
 Might have time to close and heal.
(201)

Typical for the genre of the infant elegy, the bereaved mother's consolation is knowing that each passing day brings her closer to "that glorious Kingdom / Where we both shall meet once more" (201).

8. Maternal Elegies

Closely related to the infant elegy is the maternal elegy or poem on child-bed death. Poems by Yule and Leprohon illustrate the genre in early Canada. Pamelia Vining Yule's "To a Motherless Babe" reads in part: "Oh, wild are the storms of this wintry clime, / Dire are the ills that will meet thee in time! / Lamb, with no shelter when tempests are near, / Dove, with no resting place, why art thou here?" Worthy of note also are her "Lines On the Death of a Young Mother" and "At the Grave of a Young Mother" ("A transient day, /A troubled night . . ."),[14] The most distressing early Canadian maternal death poem written in English is arguably Rosanna Leprohon's "Voice's of the Death-Chamber." In it she compels us to

enter the consciousness of a mother lying on her death-bed while her own mother and her husband and band of children bid her farewell.

Now, they bring my children to me,
  That loved and lovely band,
And with wistful awe-struck faces
  Around my couch they stand,
And I strain each gentle darling
  To my heart with wailing cry,
And for the first time murmur,
  "Oh, my God, 'tis hard to die!"

But hark! those strains of heaven
  Sound louder in mine ear,
Whispering, "He, thy God, thy Father,
  Will guard those children dear"—
Louder yet they grow, now drowning
  All sounds of mortal birth;
In their wild triumphant sweetness
  Luring, bearing me from earth. [15]

9. Birth Pangs, Sutures, Celebrations

Leprohons line, "drowning / All sound's of mortal birth," sums up the relative importance of maternal and child death as compared with childbirth in poetry in English by women in Canada until our own lifetime—with the notable exception of translations of Native material and Native-based representations. While child and maternal death are frequent subjects in anglophone women's poems written prior to the 1940s, sex, pregnancy, and birth are not. Reasons for this may include the association, in the Western mind, of childbirth with Eve's sin and woman's punishment from Biblical times, through a puritanical distrust of the flesh, to Victorian concepts of feminine modesty; it may also be explained as a reflection of the sad reality of high incidences of child and maternal mortality. Whatever its genesis, the infant elegy needs to be considered as a genre which is more important than the love poem or nature poem in anglophone women's writing in Canada for some 150 years.

The 1940s are a watershed, with Dorothy Livesay writing and publishing, arguably, the first poem in English in Canada centered on the poet's own experience of giving birth. Tentatively at first,

then with increasing confidence, writers such as Dorothy Livesay, Kay Smith, Gwendolyn MacEwen, Margaret Atwood, and many others up to Claire Harris in the 1990s, bear witness to a "striking change" in Canadian society and literature in the latter part of the twentieth century: poets reclaim their woman's-eye and woman's "I."[16] MacEwen's 1963 volume bears the prophetic title, *The Rising Fire*; Smiths 1978 book, *When a Girl Looks Down*, takes its title from the first Canadian poem (to my knowledge) about the experience of breastfeeding; and Harris 1992 book of poems, *Drawing Down a Daughter*, not only features childbirth as a theme, but is also graced with a nude, pregnant belly on its cover. Concomitantly, by the end of the twentieth century, the silence or censure of critics with respect to women's writing about maternity, love, and female sexuality is ruptured by feminist literary critics seeking to understand the full spectrum of Canadas literary traditions.

Notes

1 Obituary, *Globe and Mail*, Metro Edition. 1 Jan. 1997. C1. The quotation in my title is from Dorothy Livesay's "Serenade for Strings."

2 Privately printed by the Macmillans in Canada, 9. I have referred to Brown's work more extensively in an article published under the name Wendy Keitner, "Canadian Women Poets and the Syndrome of the Female Man," in *Room of Ones Own* 8.4 (1984): 76-81.

3 See Germaine Greer's comments on poems by Mehetabel Wright ("Drooping sweetness! verdant Flower! / Blooming, withering in an hour!") and Caroline Symond ("The Blighted Rosebud") from Frederick Rowton, ed. *The Female Poets of Great Britain chronologically arranged: with copious selections and critical remarks* (London: 1848), cited in *Slip-shod Sybils* xv-vi, xxii-iii; see also Margaret Homan's, *Women Writers and Poetic Identity* (Princeton: Princeton UP) 1980.

4 Charles G. Leland, an American journalist and student of languages who began collecting lore among the Passamaquoddy Indians on Campobello Island, NB, in 1882, reported: "Very few persons are aware that there has perished, or is rapidly perishing, among the Red Indians of North America, far more poetry than was ever written by all the white inhabitants, and that this native verse is often of a very high order." Cited in John Robert Colombo, ed., *The Poets of Canada* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1978) 22.

5 Frank Trovato and Carl F. Grindstaff, eds *Perspectives on Canadas Population. An Introduction to Concepts and Issues* (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1994) 25, 37-38. See also Table 1. Female survivorship at ages 20, 45, and 65, Canada, 1831-1981, p. 80. See also Statistics Canada, *Deaths* (Ottawa: 1991), cat. no. 84-211, Table 7, p. 20.

6 Rosemary R. Ball, "'A Perfect Farmer's Wife: Women in 19th-Century Rural Ontario," in *Canada: An Historical Magazine* (Dec. 1975) 12. I am grateful to Dr.

Gail Campbell and Dr. Beverly Lemire, historians at UNB, for directing me to this source.

7 Roderick Beaujot, *Population Change in Canada. The Challenges of Policy Adaptation* (Toronto: McClelland, 1991) 49, 59. The only country with a better record on maternal mortality today than Canada is Sweden.

8 In the USA today, African-American women have more than three times the risk of dying in childbirth than do white women; see John R. Weeks, *Population. An Introduction to Concepts and Issues* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1994) 382. In Canada, there is a sizable gap in infant mortality rates for Registered Indians compared to all Canadians; see *Towards the XXIst Century: Emerging Socio-Demographic Trends and Policy Issues in Canada.* Proceedings of the 1995 Symposium of the Federation of Canadian Demographers (Ottawa: St. Paul University, 1995) Figure 11, p. 233. According to UNICEF, today nearly 600,000 women worldwide die in pregnancy and child-birth each year. And for every woman who dies, 30 more suffer serious pregnancy-related injuries. See "New Estimates on maternal deaths, child malnutrition," in *Population Today. New, numbers and analysis.* 24.9 (Sept. 1996) 8. I acknowledge the help of my UNB colleague, sociologist Dr. Hugh Lautard, in tracking down these statistics.

9 *The Poets of Canada,* ed. John Robert Colombo (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1978) 21. Uvavnuk is the mother of the shaman Niviatsian, who was the cousin of Aua, whose daughter Apak was the visionary artist who illustrated Knud Rasmussen's important study *Intellectual Culture of the Hudson Bay Eskimos. Iglulik and Caribou Eskimo Texts. Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition 1921-24* vol. 7, no. 3 (1930), rpt. New York: AMS P, 1976. Trans. W. Worster and W.E. Calvert.

10 Hermia Harris Fraser, *Songs of the Western Islands* (1945), rpt. Bliss Carman, Lorne Pierce, and V.B. Rhodenizer, eds., *Canadian Poetry in English.* 3rd ed. (Toronto: Ryerson, 1954) 4.

11 (Montreal: John Lovell, 1881) 199. I would like to acknowledge the work of my research assistant Anthony Oguntuase in searching out microfiche copies of many of the earlier poems cited in this paper.

12 Rpt. Bryan N.S. Gooch and Maureen Niwa, eds. *The Emergence of the Muse. Major Canadian Poets from Crawford to Pratt* (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1993) 281-82.

13 *Day and Night* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1944) 29-32; rpt. *Collected Poems. The Two Seasons of Dorothy Livesay* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1972) 131-33.

14 *Poems of the Heart and Home* (Toronto: Bengough, Moore, 1881) 21, 157. In her Introduction, Yule notes that her poems "have been written . . . in brief intervals snatched from the arduous duties of teaching, or the more arduous duties of domestic life" (iv).

15 In Edward Hartley Dewart, ed. *Selections from Canadian Poets,* 1864; rpt. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1973, 49-51.

16 Dorothy Livesay plays on words in this way in her 1974 anthology *Woman's Eye. 12 B.C. Poets.* Vancouver: Air, 1974.

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