"This is the World as We Have Made It": Gwendolyn MacEwen's Poetics of History

by Mary Reid

> *In my poetry I am concerned with finding the relationships between what we call the "real" world and that other world which consists of dream, fantasy and myth. I've never felt that these "two worlds" are as separate as one might think, and in fact my poetry as well as my life seems to occupy a place—you might call it a kind of no-man's land—between the two. Very often experiences or observations which are immediate take on grand or universal significance for me, because they seem to capsulize and give new force to the age-old wonders, mysteries and fears which have always delighted and bewildered mankind. In my attempt to describe a world which is for me both miraculous and terrible, I make abundant use of myth, metaphor and symbol; these are as much a part of my language as the alphabet I use.*
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> *–Gwendolyn MacEwen, qtd. in Jan Bartley,* Gwendolyn MacEwen and Her Works *(1-2)*

> *[MacEwen] continues to insist that all times and places are one, and that this mystical apprehension of the world as one organism always rearranging itself could lead us to a higher sanity and harmony beyond the senseless violence that has been a chief occupation of the human race throughout the ages. Probably one of Gwendolyn's most valuable legacies to us is precisely this global sort of consciousness and conscience.*
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> *–Tom Marshall, "Several Takes on Gwendolyn MacEwen" (80-81)*

In the above discussion of her work, first published in the 1971 collection *Rhymes and Reasons: Nine Canadian Poets Discuss Their Work*, Gwendolyn MacEwen describes her understanding and experience of two "worlds" posited as distinct in dominant modes of Western thought: the everyday world of reality and lived experience, and the world of "dream, fantasy and myth." Not only does MacEwen experience these worlds as simultaneous, she also infuses her work with the sense that far from being temporally and experientially distinct, these worlds are rather coeval and thus the question of what it means to be human is also a question of what it means to be with gods, myths, and "age-old wonders."[1] This statement about her work is a useful starting point for the project of re-analyzing and

rehabilitating MacEwen's poetry for the present critical moment, a project whose groundwork I seek to establish in this paper. It is my conviction that MacEwen's conception of everyday experience and global events, the personal and the "grand or universal," as well as her vision of human histories and possible futures, has significant ethical and political implications. In his essay "Several Takes on Gwendolyn MacEwen," published two years after her death, Tom Marshall proposes that MacEwen's "global sort of consciousness and conscience" are the most significant aspects of her literary legacy. Furthermore, Marshall recognizes that her "life-enhancing global consciousness" (82) has lasting implications for the way in which readers and writers think about and act in the everyday social field of human relations. This paper will show that at the heart of MacEwen's poetic project is a deep investment in imagining ethically and politically engaged ways of being in the world. MacEwen's poetry offers ways of thinking through social ethics and global politics in the contexts of war and cultural conflict and imagines an ethical and a political global consciousness grounded in everyday life.

This paper attends to the treatment of history and human conflict in MacEwen's poetry so as to argue for the ethical and political significance of her poetic project as a whole. Her poems effectively rewrite the concept of history itself in order to imagine alternative ways of being and conceiving of what it means to be human. MacEwen's historical consciousness, I will show, reworks dominant notions of history in a way that is not only similar to Walter Benjamin's materialist historiography, but also contributes a perhaps more complex and suggestive way of understanding both the unfolding of human history and the position of the individual in global historical events. I suggest that MacEwen's poems articulate a form of ethical awareness in which the exploration of human conflict is not an attempt to eliminate differences but rather a recognition and acceptance of them as crucial aspects of human existence. Furthermore, MacEwen provides insight into what Slavoj Žižek identifies as the acceptance of one's "own vulnerability as part of this world" (49) and calls for individual responsibility in the context of global human histories and everyday social and political relations.[2]

MacEwen's poetry invites readers into worlds in which everyday objects and occurrences are imagined on mythical and universal scales. The mystical elements of her poetry are significant aspects of MacEwen's particular vision of human existence, and enable a redefined and an expanded notion of what constitutes reality, the world, history, and human relations. Notably, however, analysis that attends to the ways in which

MacEwen's poetry offers alternative ways of thinking through everyday life and politics is largely absent from critical consensus about her work. The criticism on MacEwen's work (which spans almost four decades, yet remains quite sparse) tends to focus on her mythical or mystical vision, and locates her within these respective traditions. Often criticism refers to the work of Robert Graves in *The White Goddess* and Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism*, as well as to Jung and to seventeenth-century German mystic Jacob Boehme, in attempts to situate and interpret MacEwen's articulation of mythical worlds or mystical experience in her poetry and prose. Critical interpretations are also often based upon her much-cited statement: "I want to construct a myth" (originally recorded in Gary Geddes' and Phyllis Bruce's *15 Canadian Poets*). Margaret Atwood, for instance, interprets this statement as follows: "MacEwen is not a poet interested in turning her life into myth; rather, she is concerned with translating her myth into life, and into the poetry which is a part of it. The informing myth…is that of the Muse, author and inspirer of language and therefore of the ordered verbal cosmos, the poet's universe" (31). Atwood's reading (from 1970) is indicative of the type of criticism that follows throughout the seventies, eighties and nineties, which interprets MacEwen's interest in myth and mysticism to be affirming a dialectical structure in which myth is oppositional to real life and from which synthesis may be achieved.

Frank Davey sees transformation from the everyday to the mythic as central to MacEwen's vision: he argues in a 1973 article that the characters in her novels seek "to link the divine and the actual, to transform the mundane into the miraculous" (5), and he interprets MacEwen's project as an "alchemical" quest of transforming one thing into another as part of the process of reconciling opposites. Ellen Warwick in 1976 suggests that the "mythic frame" MacEwen creates is based upon the notion that "in a divided but holy universe all things strain toward reunion" (21). Jan Bartley, in her 1983 book-length study of MacEwen's work, provides an excellent overview of readings of MacEwen's work up until that point, and agrees with the dominant consensus that "the task of transmuting the ordinary into the ethereal, of making the word flesh, the arcane incarnate, is MacEwen's primary task and the central theme in her prose and poetry." Furthermore, Bartley suggests that "[t]hroughout the corpus of MacEwen's writing, the unifying perception is one which seeks to uncover the mythological in the mundane" (*Invocations* 7). Gillian Harding-Russell, in a slightly different vein, argues that MacEwen's "'creative' myth typically reduces its material to archetypal essentials," and that her "mythological paradigm" (204) "follows the process of a self-cancelling synthesis in

which distinctions are eliminated as a result of the fanatic desire to discover universals" (215). While I disagree with the notion that MacEwen's work is driven by a form of fanaticism, I also take issue with Harding-Russell's suggestion that MacEwen seeks to "discover universals" in her work. Rather, MacEwen acknowledges that "universals" are always part of mundane or individual experience, and articulates an understanding of difference in which distinctions are not to be eliminated but recognized and accepted.

Somewhat more recently (1991), Thomas Gerry locates MacEwen's work within a tradition of Canadian mystical writers and suggests that MacEwen revises this tradition through her effort "to de-emphasize the disputing of opposites" (153). Gerry refers to Luce Irigaray's notion of the space between oppositions—"the forgotten transition" of negotiation between dualities (qtd. in Gerry 158)—to support his claim that MacEwen "modifies the legacy of Canadian mystical writers" (152) by "[writing] the language of mysticism with a feminist difference" (154). While this is a compelling use of Irigaray's notion of the space in-between oppositions (which, I should note, is an *ethical* space) to explain MacEwen's position, Gerry also attributes MacEwen's treatment of oppositions to a rejection of tensions or disputes between them. While MacEwen describes herself and her poetry as situated in "a kind of no-man's land," this imagined and experienced location is certainly not a site of escape from conflict and tensions. This paper expands upon the current body of MacEwen criticism to suggest the ways in which, rather than seeking to cancel or reject dualities, MacEwen's poetry attends to multiple forms of human belonging and experience, as well as the tensions, conflicts and possibilities produced by difference at the interpersonal, cultural and global levels.

As I have suggested, critical emphasis on synthesis as an erasure of difference fails to attend to the ethical and political dimensions that structure and sustain MacEwen's poetic vision. Rather than working from a set of binary oppositions from which to achieve dialectical synthesis, MacEwen produces a nuanced critique of dominant modes of thought that seek to reduce multiple forms of human experience and conflict to a two-sided either/or structure. MacEwen interfuses the mythic and the mundane so as to "brush history against the grain" (Benjamin 257) and provide insight into the way in which world historical events like war are already implicit in everyday interpersonal encounters and vice versa. Her conceptualization of the relationship between myth and reality is inextricably linked to her understanding of history and human conflict, local and global—or, in her words, "immediate" and "universal"—forms of human experience, and it

is this aspect of her poetry that is particularly significant for the expansion of critical discussions of her work.

MacEwen articulates her conception of time and history perhaps most clearly in *Afterworlds*, her final collection of poetry, about which very little has been written.[3] In the introduction to Margaret Atwood and Barry Callaghan's selections of MacEwen's work, *Gwendolyn MacEwen Volume Two: The Later Years*, Rosemary Sullivan describes the poems of *Afterworlds* as apocalyptic visions as well as "affirmations" (xi). In the following readings of particular *Afterworlds* poems, I demonstrate the ways in which MacEwen's apocalyptic and affirmative images are inseparable as central aspects of her poetic project in which visions of apocalypse are instilled with necessary hope. Her poetry both confronts the "terrible" and imagines sites of the "miraculous": it is at once a vision of where we are and where we might be. *Afterworlds* is structured by six sections, of which I will focus on poems from the third and fifth. The third section, "Apocalypse," consists of two longer pieces, the verse play "Terror and Erebus," which was originally broadcast on CBC in 1965, and the sequential long poem "Letter to Josef in Jerusalem."[4] The fifth section, "After-thoughts" is comprised primarily of short prose poems that are contemplative and personal in tone. I focus on the poems of these two sections, alongside certain poems from earlier collections, because of their formal distinctiveness from and thematic continuity with the rest of her poetry, as well as because of the clarity with which they articulate the ethical and political dimensions of her work. Sullivan rightly points out that although "*Afterworlds* seems to offer an uncanny sense of looking back and summing up," such a reading of it would be "a delusion simply because we know it was her last" (xi). Rather than "summing up" the rest of her work, *Afterworlds* expands upon and arguably more directly expresses MacEwen's ethically and politically engaged vision of human history.

MacEwen's understanding of history is neither linear nor teleological; she instead conceptualizes time as a "constellation" (Benjamin 263) or totality in which all moments and events are implicit in each other. The prose poem "Sunlight at Sherbourne and Bloor," which is the first poem in the "After-thoughts" section of *Afterworlds*, describes MacEwen's complex notion of temporality and human existence in deceptively simple language. It begins:

> Late afternoon my bike takes me across the city. I wonder how we fashion our lives, these brilliant disorders, these fine, inspired errors, when – look – the future is utterly implicit in the present, the present is the logical outcome

> Of all points in the past, and that building going up across the street has been going up *forever*. Everything we do now contains the seeds of its own unfolding. (87)

The notion of time expressed in her conceptualization of the future as "utterly implicit in the present" and the present as "the logical outcome / / Of all points in the past" suggests not only the continuity of human history and endeavours, but also the connection between diverse "points" across past, present, and possible futures. In other words, each moment, event, or action in history is connected—not as linear evolution, but as a totality—so that human action also always "contains the seeds of its own unfolding." Moreover, the description of human lives as "brilliant disorders" presents the chaotic aspects of human life as beautiful and necessary parts of a unified field of existence throughout history. These connected notions of temporality and human action suggest that it is necessary to recognize that the individual is always implicated in world historical events. Not only is individual human action complicit in the broad currents of history, it is also "vital," "profound," "perfect," and "necessary" (87). I read this conceptualization of individual action in relation to historical temporality as a profoundly political statement about being in the world in an ethical and responsible way and as a call for recognition of one's own actions in the present moment as historically significant.

MacEwen's global historical consciousness is grounded in and arises from everyday life experiences such as riding a bike across Toronto or, as in the following poems I address, writing a letter. "After-thoughts" closes with another prose poem, "The Letter," that takes the form of a letter from MacEwen to the reader. Similarly to "Sunlight at Sherbourne and Bloor," "The Letter" describes a vision of history in which MacEwen articulates an ethical acceptance of the disorder and intricate complexity of human existence within the broader sphere of cosmic "indifference" (104). In what she calls "Worldmind," a contemplative, connected state of being in which "the planet itself is lost in thought" (104), MacEwen posits an ethical connection between herself, others, and the universe: "I / eavesdrop on a thousand secrets, share a thousand lives. The past / and the future are now, nothing is ever lost, and everything exists in / a quiet, passionate rightness" (104). The notion of "passionate rightness" suggests an awareness of the connectedness of all things, and it is this belief that grounds the ethics at the heart of MacEwen's project. Belief in connections between all human beings across history leads, potentially, to more ethical ways of being in the world and with others. In this vision of human belonging within the universe, space and time are reconfigured so that past and future

are part of the present as "fluid parts of / a conscious whole" and "[t]he city becomes all cities, the streets are all streets everywhere" (104). Each of these "After-thoughts" poems describes a form of historical awareness in which the past not only informs, but is also part of the present and in which all human action is part of a shared temporal and spatial field. MacEwen thus unsettles teleological notions of human history that rely upon "the concept of its progression through a homogeneous, empty time" (Benjamin 261) and instead articulates a vision of history in which pasts, presents, and futures are always multiple and simultaneous.

If, as I am suggesting, a significant aspect of MacEwen's poetic project is to "blast open the continuum of history" (Benjamin 262) so as to enable alternative ways of thinking through what it means to be human at interpersonal, local and global levels, "Letter to Josef in Jerusalem" is one of the richest poems in which this project is articulated. "Letter to Josef" addresses histories of cultural conflicts and war in the Middle East so as to argue for a reconfigured notion of history as necessary to the survival of humanity. As in her two books of poetry that deal explicitly with war as historical event, *The Armies of the Moon* and *The T.E. Lawrence Poems*, "Letter to Josef" treats war as a specific form of human conflict in which relationships between the individual and the social, the local and the global, self and others are brought under scrutiny. The ethical and political insights of MacEwen's poetry are perhaps most complexly and clearly articulated in this long poem. While "The Letter" focuses specifically on the connection of all things, "Letter to Josef" complicates this notion of connectedness by addressing the complexities of individual and cultural conflicts within the totality of human history and existence. Rather than promoting a liberal humanist stance reliant upon an untroubled notion of the supposedly universal human, MacEwen envisions a connectedness that recognizes and accepts differences as crucial aspects of the constellation of human life, without falling into the problematic position of cultural relativism. Whereas the liberal humanist and cultural relativist positions, popular in current debates over global economics and cultural conflicts, posit the abstract property-owning citizen with rights as the political subject, MacEwen envisions the human as an ethical and a global individual, connected to others through shared histories for which each of us is responsible and to which each of us must answer. It is in her notion of human connectedness and global responsibility that MacEwen's vision has the potential to intervene in or inform current debates over global politics and cultural conflict. Indeed, MacEwen's work almost eerily foreshadows the current state of the world, from Middle Eastern conflicts and U.S.-led imperial warfare

to environmental devastation and depletion of natural resources. "Letter to Josef" in particular, envisions apocalypse so as to call for individual and collective responsibility in creating and imagining the world as it might be otherwise.

The nostalgic yet foreboding tone, the use of repetition, and the fragmentation of line breaks throughout the eight-part sequence of "Letter to Josef" create a sense of time as expanded, stilled, held in a series of moments that all occur simultaneously. The sequence begins:

> Josef, twenty years have passed since we sat in the cemetery close to No Man's Land, on somebody's gravestone, in a garden of death in Jerusalem, and the ancient night contained our youth. Though we were younger and older than death, and wise as the night was. All wars, we said, are born here in the City of Peace, and Jerusalem is not a city but a whore; thousands have taken her but she has only changed hands.
>
> Do you remember (58)

The structure of prose-like stanzas offset by individual lines repeats throughout the sequence and creates a sense of fragmentation that emphasizes themes of dislocation, disruption and conflict in the context of war. The pause before and after the lines that appear individually generates spaces of reflection in which the political implications of each prose section, on its own and within the sequence as a whole, become clear. It is a politics in which the individual is positioned within a complex totality of events that cannot be understood without careful attention to difference at local and global levels. It is a politics of both hope and dread, in which MacEwen envisions both apocalypse and possibility as the result of individual and collective actions. The shifting tone of longing, dread, despair and hope created by the line breaks is also achieved through repetition of particular images and phrases throughout the poem. For instance, the image of MacEwen and her friend Josef sitting in a graveyard in Jerusalem is repeated, with a difference, at the end of the first section, as well as at the end of the final section of the poem. The poem thus ends with the same image with which it begins, giving the sense of all moments and events, including war, interpersonal conflict, and apocalypse, as implicit to each other as part of the constellation of human history. Rather than positing some form of resolution, the sequence ends with the same image of two individuals in a shared space and time, contemplating the death and devastation wrought by war: "Twenty years have / passed and we're still sitting

there, Josef, younger and older than / death, looking out over the vivid darkness of No Man's Land / / To the divided city" (67). The lack of resolution invites the reader to consider the implications of understanding historical events such as war and everyday individual actions as connected. Repetition also enables the reader to reconsider the causes, effects and possible outcomes of past and current forms of human conflict. If Jerusalem, at the beginning of the poem "is / not a city but a whore" (58), and by the end "is not a city but a meaning; it is the con- / science of the world" (66), then the reader is asked to reflect upon the meaning posed by conflict in that particular location, and the way in which each individual is affected by and complicit in "the conscience of the world," which that site represents.

The imagery of the poem also creates a sense of time and place in which mundane experiences of everyday life are layered and juxtaposed with global historical events so as to suggest the simultaneously fragmentary and continuous nature of human history. Everyday images are contrasted with a sense of eternal time, as in the first section in which "washing which had hung for centuries on the / clotheslines was still not dry" and "crackling static from a dying radio filled the night with / rumours of wars fought and yet to be fought – all that old news, / that up-to-the-minute history. Sandbags and barbed wire divorced / the Old and New Jerusalem, and history was a veil the colour of old / blood over the valley between" (58). Images of the collectivity of everyday life also appear in section six, which begins with images of the mundane in Middle Eastern cities:

> In Jerusalem and Tel Aviv and Beirut there are children at recess wearing many colours, there are beggars with the world scooped out of their eyes, there are khaki-coloured walls, Yemenites selling thread, matches, combs, soap, needles, ribbons; everyone is hammering or cooking or selling beer and halvah and kebab and falafel. There are pink and gold walls and everything is full of the sweet conflicting smells of leather, and bread baking
>
> Thousands of years. (64)

While the images of this first stanza give a sense of the fluid and changing rhythms and patterns of everyday human life at local levels in the broader historical context of "thousands of years," the following stanzas reveal the "truth":

> Over Beirut jets send out bright globes of heat to disperse the missiles, as they dive into the pink and gold morning. This day esca-

> lates into Nuclear Night. Things do not fall apart; it is worse: everything is fused in an awful centre. The people of Hiroshima did not have time to die; they melted. In Jerusalem and Tel Aviv and Beirut the street vendors have nothing left to sell, and all the colours of the many-coloured children
>
> Burn into one. (64)

Moving between scenes of daily life and warfare in the Middle East and the memory of the complete annihilation of Hiroshima, this section links the destruction of war with everyday life, and collapses distinctions of time, place and historical event. The juxtaposition of images in this section and in the sequence as a whole, suggests that all historical events, including war and the mundane acts of individuals, are mutually implicated and must be understood as belonging to the same temporal and global field of shared human history.

As the earlier quote by Rosemary Sullivan indicates, MacEwen's poetic vision is infused with images both apocalyptic and affirmative. It is in "Letter to Josef" that the tension between apocalypse and affirmation, despair and hope is articulated in all its complexity so as to envision human history and possible futures in alternative ways. The final section of the sequence begins with the possibility of the end of history: "History is wearing thin, Josef; soon there may be no more history" (66). This statement may be interpreted both as a warning that if humans continue on the path of war and destruction, human history will end in total annihilation—"the coming of a terrible kingdom," described in section five (63)—and an affirmation that history as it is conventionally understood in Western thought—linear and progressive—is to be replaced by the fluid conception of time and space that is illustrated throughout the sequence, thus enabling new ways of thinking about history and human relations to emerge. Part of MacEwen's extraordinary achievement in "Letter to Josef," and in her poetry as a whole, is the balance she maintains between images of destruction and creation, apocalypse and hope. Section five, for instance, consists of apocalyptic visions in which "[t]he stars retreat, the trees fall into fire, the bones of antelopes are / found among the rivers, the waters flow backwards, the spines of / the sea are broken. The universe disowns us; through forests of mis- / siles / / We come to the Dead, the speechless Sea" (63). Furthermore, MacEwen identifies our collective responsibility in bringing about our own destruction: "Unable to love the smallest things we let fall / singing through our hands – lucid animals and birds and flowers – / to cherish life after birth, we gave birth to this death" (63). Human beings are

not only complicit in the devastation of nature, but also in the destruction of each other: "Enraged by wounds we / cannot heal, and blind with fear which has become as true and usual / as breath, we give ourselves over to the lords of death" (63). These visions of apocalypse are significant for the way in which they implicate individuals in the devastation caused not only by warfare, but also by everyday acts. The drive to "cherish life after birth"—to live for the present without regard to possible future consequences of our actions—is destructive in its nearsightedness and positions us as subservient to "the lords of death," those who profit from death and war. These lines, read in actual historical contexts of war, imperialism and capitalist expansion, whether in MacEwen's time or our own, establish a connection between individual acts and the acts of nations. MacEwen suggests the need to recognize our own responsibility at the individual level so as to effect change in the ways we conceive of ourselves and act as citizens and agents in national and global contexts.

While MacEwen's apocalyptic visions expose the complicity and responsibility of individuals for collective suffering and global destruction, she also articulates a vision of hope through images of "moments" in which peace seems possible. Section seven begins with a tentative declaration of hope: "But there are moments when we dare to believe Peace—" (65). The "moments" MacEwen describes share similarities with Benjamin's notion of the formation of "a conception of the present as the 'time of the now' which is shot through with chips of Messianic time" (Benjamin 263). As illustrated in the previous discussion of the historical consciousness generated in her poetry, MacEwen understands the present to be in constellation with all other moments and events in history. Thus the "[m]oments held in the spaces between other moments, like the blue / and red glow in the sections of Chagall's windows in Jerusalem, mo- / ments when the world is in holy communion with itself" (65), like Benjamin's "chips of Messianic time," are images of redemptive potential in which peace (for MacEwen) and revolution (for Benjamin) become possible. MacEwen concludes this section with a suggestive image that might be read as a metaphor for Benjamin's idea of blasting through "the continuum of history" (262): "All these moments, and the sun blasting through the windows in Jerusalem, / Breaking the glass into perfect nuclei of light" (65). In the context of the "blasting" and "breaking" of violence and warfare, MacEwen's "moments" are visions of hope for possible futures in which individual and collective acts generate new forms of ethical and political relations.

As I have suggested, MacEwen's poetry not only addresses connections between seemingly distinct historical events and locations, but also pro-

vides insight into the position of the individual as a subject implicated in human history and global politics. Her own awareness as a subject at the intersection of historical, political, sexual, and cultural differences is strikingly detailed in the second section of "Letter to Josef," in which she describes her struggle with an Arab boy on a beach at Jaffa:

> What time is it now on the beach at Jaffa?
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> Remember that Arab boy who knocked my breath out early one morning? He asked me the time and I told him, then he threw me to the ground and crashed to his knees and held me down until my wrists throbbed. I noticed his fine white teeth, and the old houses, deserted and two-dimensional like studio props against the turquoise backdrop of the sea. The sun did not shine on those walls – it roared. And the Mediterranean had a deep pulse
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> Like the beat of a giant clock. (60)

In this section of the sequence, MacEwen articulates the deeply rooted connection between an isolated act of aggression and the historical forces of war, as well as her own sense as a subject implicated in both. The body of the poet and the body of the world are figured as part of each other: for instance, the throbbing of the "raw nerve" of the world is aligned with the speaker's throbbing wrists, while the "deep pulse" of the sea, the "ancient pulse" of the world, and "the beat of a giant clock" are linked to the poet giving the time. The congruence of the throbbing, the pulses and the sense of time culminate in the realization that closes the section: "The sea is / booming out the real hour of the world: / / It is countdown; it is the same time everywhere" (60). Recognition that "real" time is "the same time everywhere" is significant for the way in which it situates seemingly isolated human conflicts within larger historical currents and locates them in a world in which all events occur simultaneously. Indeed, recognition of local and global instances of human conflict occurring within the same temporal and spatial field—the assertion that "[t]he first battle of this war has begun on the / beach at Jaffa. All battles begin on the beach at Jaffa" (60)—indicates the necessity of revising and expanding the terms through which individual responsibility is understood in relation to global politics.

A significant aspect of MacEwen's insight into relations between self and other, and of our mutual responsibility in the world, is the recognition of conflict and destructive potential at the heart of human relations. While she repeatedly asserts the oneness and mutuality of all things, and in turn

the connection of all human beings, she also recognizes and explores relations of conflict. Describing her encounter with the boy on the beach at Jaffa, she states: "The beach was crowded with fish-skulls, and how violent the sun / was! We kicked and thrashed and cursed, each in his own separate / tongue. All I did was give him the time and all Hell broke loose…" (60). In a single line, offset from her description of the conflict, she recognizes: "How easily one becomes the enemy" (60). Significantly, MacEwen then links this conflict with the throbs and pulses that ground her notion of temporality and historical connection in the sequence:

> Josef, have you noticed that a thin film has settled over everything? You peel it away and the world is a raw nerve, throbbing and throbbing, even the stones are throbbing. There is nothing but this throbbing, this ancient pulse. If you see that boy on the beach at Jaffa, tell him the time. It is two minutes to midnight, though it feels like morning. (60)

In her description of the violence of this instance of interpersonal conflict, MacEwen simultaneously recognizes the connectedness of all things and the conflicts that arise within that totality. The significance of this vision of human conflict lies not only in its acceptance of conflict as an integral part of human existence that must be recognized and addressed, but also in its acceptance of individual responsibility. MacEwen asserts the reciprocity and responsibility of individuals in our relations with each other and our implication in world historical events, and thus argues for a political stance, similar to that described by Žižek in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!*, that moves away from the antagonistic, defensive fantasy of the "I" to the humble recognition of the subject as implicated in and responsible to the world.

MacEwen's attentiveness in her poetry to human conflict asserts the need for recognition of the mutual implication of self and other, or "us" and "them," so as to call for individual responsibility and action within a context of global human relations. Moreover, she conceives of the position of the self not as simply antagonistic or defensive, but rather as an "illusion" resulting from "blindness." The poems "Polaris" from *Afterworlds* and "The Armies of the Moon," the title poem from the 1972 collection, critique the oppositional positions established in the context of Cold War politics, as well as the practices of imperial expansion. "Polaris," subtitled "Or, Gulag Nightscapes," contemplates the relative position of the individual within global politics. The second stanza begins: "You ask yourself are you / the fixed centre of this scene / and will you stand here forever wit-

nessing / the movement of stars, politics of the northern sky" (20). The reader, the imagined "you" of the poem, is asked to question her position in relation to the politics of Russia and America through an interrogation of the imperial discourse of "freedom." The third stanza begins: "You begin with freedom as a word" and arrives at the realization that "freedom is a prison; it is / Russia or America or the republic of your mind / where governments and constellations are endlessly rotating / and everything is a lie" (20). While Russia is figured as a constellation "turning / round and round," America is compared to "a giant crystal," which "is ever so slowly turning, deflecting starlight, / the real and imagined missiles of real and imagined enemies" (20). MacEwen's equation of two warring nations through the metaphor of cosmic rotations, as well as the way in which she implicates the individual in their movements, challenges the divide between them to suggest the illusory nature of such strongly-held antagonistic positions—what she describes in "Letter to Josef" as "the folly, Josef, the foolness of it all" (61). Her assertion in "Polaris" that "position is illusion" (21), that warring sides inhabit falsely oppositional or illusory positions—or, as Žižek argues, "that the two sides are not really opposed; that they belong to the same field" (50-51)—is a point made repeatedly throughout her poetry. It is not sufficient to either affirm or reject the existence of dialectical tension, rather, it is necessary to overcome the fantasy of opposites to recognize binary structures for their function as cultural, social and ideological myths that maintain the opposition of one side against another for political, economic, or imperial purposes.

In "The Armies of the Moon" MacEwen describes situations of conflict in the context of imperial expansion and indicates the need for recognition of mutual vulnerability. The leaders of the armies of the moon are described as "invisible and silver as swords turned sideways," but "they have always been there increasing their numbers," while the earthmen, in staking out new territories, "were so eager for white rocks and sand / that they did not see them" (1). To the leaders of the armies of the moon, the earthmen thus seem blind, and as a result of the lack of recognition on the part of the earthmen and misrecognition on the part of the armies of the moon, there will be war: "in the Lake of Death there will be a showdown; / men will be powder, they will go down under / the swords of the unseen silver armies / … / none of us will know what caused the crisis / as the lunar soldiers reluctantly disband / and return to their homes in the Lake of Dreams / weeping quicksilver tears for the blindness of man" (1). MacEwen uses the historical event of the American landing on the moon as a metaphor for processes of imperial conquest and colonization, in which the

colonizer's presumed right to territory and resources is asserted through ideological blindness (and actual violence) toward native inhabitants. Her description of the encounter between opposing sides in war and imperial expansion in this poem addresses the need to overcome the blindness and illusion that structure and maintain antagonistic and warring positions. The destruction that results from the "blindness" of nations in imperial expansion and cultural conflict emphasizes the need for acceptance of a position of "vulnerability as part of this world" (Žižek 49) at national and individual levels, and thus of reciprocity with and responsibility toward others. Recognition and acceptance of mutual vulnerability and individual complicity in global politics, as illustrated in "The Armies of the Moon," are crucial aspects of MacEwen's historical consciousness and understanding of war as a global form of human conflict. Her belief that "the past and the future are now" ("The Letter" *Afterworlds* 104) underlies her understanding of the individual as implicated in the "constellation" of all historical moments. As in her description of the "indifference" of the universe in "The Letter," the realization is made in "Polaris" that "there is no governing body, / there is nothing to direct you / on your course, there / is no right course, there is no guiding star" (*Afterworlds* 20), and this conclusion is ultimately a call for individual responsibility and engagement in the world.

As I have suggested, an examination of MacEwen's acute historical sensibility and her treatment of temporality are crucial to redirecting readings of her work in present critical contexts. Her understanding of the way in which the political and the historical are always at work in individual action and local human relations enables important insights to emerge about world history, human conflict, and global politics. As critic George Woodcock has suggested, few Canadian poets have had "a grasp as broad as MacEwen's of the poetic dimensions of history" (483). Like Benjamin's angel of history, MacEwen conceives of history in a way that is cumulative and unified, apocalyptic and affirmative, and resistant to conventional notions of progress that Benjamin links to ruling-class traditions and domination, which might also be linked to corporate and imperial interests in the current context of the global expansion of capitalism. In "Letter to a Future Generation," from *The Shadow-Maker* (1969), MacEwen articulates a vision of human history and future possibility, which is, like the poems of *Afterworlds*, at once apocalyptic and hopeful. Her poems in the form of a letter highlight MacEwen's attentiveness in her poetry to establishing a link between poet and reader, self and other, so as to reach across cultural, generational and political differences and imagine spaces of connection. "Letter to a Future Generation" is addressed to the "bright ones"

of the future—a younger generation that only some of MacEwen's generation noticed "kneeling behind our bombs" (36). MacEwen appeals to the future generation to "burn all you find to make yourselves room" and reminds us that "this letter was made / for you to burn, that its meaning lies / only in your burning it, / that its lines await your cleansing fire" (36). MacEwen figures herself in this poem as a prophet and guide, "[standing] with an animal at my left hand / and a warm, breathing ghost at my right," speaking to the future generation: "as that warm ghost at my right hand breathed / down my blood and for a moment wrote the lines / while guns sounded out from a mythical city / and destroyed the times (36). This poem is significant not only as an early articulation of the distinct ethical and political vision that grounds her poetic project, but also for its expression of MacEwen's awareness of her own implication in the destructiveness of her times, as well as her desire to provide a form of insight into her historical moment with the help of "a warm, breathing ghost" in her poetry. MacEwen's assertion that the meaning of the poem "lies / only in your burning it" argues for historical awareness as well as the necessity for moving forward—growing towards the future with anticipation, rather than remaining stuck in one place, "sowing our seed in the black fields of history" (36). She stands in this poem as the angel of history, looking toward the past and seeing not a linear "chain of events," but "one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage" (Benjamin 257). While she recognizes and describes the "pile of debris" (Benjamin 258) of her generation's history—"the objects of our doom"—she also urges her readers, the "bright ones" of a future generation, to "burn" her letter so as to create new meanings out of past destruction (36). The awareness of the mutual forces of creativeness and destructiveness in all historical events and human endeavours is central to MacEwen's vision of the world as both "miraculous and terrible"—a vision that grounds her ethical and political poetic project.

As a closing, but by no means final or definitive, example of the kind of historical consciousness and ethical awareness expressed in MacEwen's poetics, I conclude with another poem from *The Shadow-Maker*, entitled "The Name of the Place," the first line of which I have used for the title of this paper. It begins:

> This is the world as we have made it,
> As you and I together made it.
> Do not speak to me of evil,
> We know all the secret names of evil.
> Do not speak to me of sorrow,

We invented all the shades of sorrow.
In my heart unspeakable deeds are sleeping
And why I have not performed them
Is due only to the shifts of season.
This is the world as you and I made it
And we must enter it, endure.
There are unbearable things to bear,
There is a place I dare not speak of
And we have all been there. (16)

In this poem, MacEwen connects her conception of history with her understanding of human responsibility and ethical engagement in the world. She acknowledges "evil," "sorrow," "unspeakable deeds," and "unbearable things" as part of "the world as we have made it," a world for which we are all responsible. Moreover, MacEwen articulates the importance of accepting these aspects of our shared humanity, as well as recognizing that "none of us have been there alone" (16). We all take part, MacEwen suggests, in the creation of the world in which we live, and in the remembering of our shared histories; it is therefore crucial to accept responsibility for the "evil," "sorrow" and "unbearable things" in which we are complicit so as to imagine potential sites of change. "The Name of the Place" describes an ethics in which we are individually and collectively responsible for our histories and futures, as well as for each other's sense of belonging in the world: it is also a politics of communication and mutuality in which "[w]e each have a message to give to the other," yet the content of the message is less significant than the importance of affirming collective belonging: "it doesn't matter as long as you / Tell me I have not been there alone" (16). MacEwen's rendering of "the world as we have made it," in this poem and in her poetry more broadly, offers ways of thinking through global and local practices of human relations, as well as imagines alternative, ethically and politically engaged ways of being in the world and with others.

Notes

1. Similarly, Dipesh Chakrabarty's project of "provincializing Europe" challenges two ontological assumptions that sustain secular ideas of what constitutes the political and the social: first, the idea "that the human exists in a frame of a single and secular historical time that envelops other kinds of time," and second, the idea "that the human is ontologically singular, that gods and spirits are in the end 'social facts,' that the social

somehow exists prior to them" (16). In his critique of these two assumptions, Chakrabarty re-envisions historical time outside of the Hegelian/Marxist framework of linear development so that gods and spirits are "existentially coeval with the human" and "the question of being human involves the question of being with gods and spirits" (16). Thus Chakrabarty radically questions the notion that some human ways of being in the world are somehow "prepolitical" and do not belong to the category of the modern.

2. Žižek's notion of vulnerability, as discussed in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!*, is located in his critique of the political positions taken by the U.S. government, as well as by the Left, after 9/11. Žižek argues for an ethical stance in which the "inclusion of oneself in the picture" of global politics is the only stance to adopt (57). In this way, I see Žižek's critique of U.S. liberal democracy and global capitalism to be a useful critical tool with which to engage MacEwen's poems, particularly those that address imperial warfare and cultural conflicts. Implicit in her call for the individual to situate herself within and accept responsibility for the state of "the world as we have made it" (*The Shadow-Maker* 16), is a critique of U.S. imperial and capitalist expansion (see, for instance, "Polaris" in *Afterworlds* and the title poem of *The Armies of the Moon*). MacEwen's critique thus offers ways of thinking through cultural conflicts and global politics, both as they have taken shape throughout history and in their current forms.
3. Brent Wood analyzes the *Afterworlds* poems alongside MacEwen's first collection, *The Rising Fire*, so as to show the ways in which these poems express aspects of MacEwen's "visionary experience" (41). Wood argues for reading the "circularity" of MacEwen's work as a whole and her books as totalities in themselves, a notion that I find compelling as I also attend to thematic continuities throughout MacEwen's poetic project. Wood also subscribes to the critical consensus I seek to expand upon by arguing that the circle in MacEwen's work "is a way of unifying opposites; specifically, a way of synthesizing the finite and the infinite" (44).
4. The structure of this section is significant in the juxtaposition of these two pieces, the first a verse play about the nineteenth-century Franklin expedition in search of the Northwest Passage, and the second a long poem addressed as a letter from the poet to her playwright friend in Jerusalem. As Margaret Atwood notes in her introduction to "Terror and Erebus" in *Gwendolyn MacEwen, Volume One: The Early Years*, the Franklin expedition is an historical event that "has haunted the Canadian imagination for years" (99). I make this note to highlight the connection that is made by the placement of these two pieces in the "Apocalypse" section: by linking these pieces in this way, MacEwen brings into view the significance of certain historical events and/or locations as "ghosts" haunting the individual, national, or global imaginary.

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