From *The Rising Fire* to *Afterworlds*: the Visionary Circle in the Poetry of Gwendolyn MacEwen

by Brent Wood

> *Introducing poetry is ludicrous; poetry is surely only an introduction to something else . . .*
>
> —Introduction, *A Breakfast for Barbarians* (66)

> *beyond you, the image rising from the shoulders*
> *is greater than you, as the phoenix from the fire*
> *is risen, as the rising fore on the opening wings*
> *is greater than the stirring and potential pyre.*
>
> —Epigraph, *The Rising Fire* (63)

Gwendolyn MacEwen died on November 30, 1987, leaving many wondering why she had died "prematurely" or in an "untimely" way (Sullivan 1995; Potvin 1991). As her biographer Rosemary Sullivan discovered, there were many reasons why her life lasted just as long as it did, and no longer. Despite her reserve and tendency toward solitude, MacEwen lived a peculiarly intense life; in many ways it was the life of the visionary who, in the words of her visionary predecessor Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "cannot choose but hear." If this image of an "auditory visionary" constitutes a mixed metaphor, this is appropriate to the overpowering qualities of the experience which MacEwen was able to allow into her being, experience that overflowed the mind's ability to compartmentalize sensation. The visionary MacEwen shared this vividness of experience with not only poets but with mystics of many kinds, including psychedelic experimentalists, vision seekers of North American First Peoples, and shamans from polytheistic cultures around the world. What she left is a body of work which forms a circle, and in which smaller circles appear and reappear. The circle is a figure in which the infinite and the finite become one, and which can symbolize the unbroken path of life and death. MacEwen's final volume of poetry,

Afterworlds (1987), points to the ends of her life and her writing career, but also back to the beginning of that career, and onward to life in a different form.

This paper will show how the poems from *Afterworlds* offer an explicit commentary on MacEwen's visionary experience as expressed in the themes of time travel, the transcendence of death, the primacy of experience over poetry, and the expansion of the self beyond the limitations of the ego. The paper will also show how the seeds of these motifs are present in MacEwen's first major collection of poetry, *The Rising Fire* (1963). In meeting these goals the paper will explore the motif of the circle as it occurs in MacEwen's poetry and offer a brief analysis of the nature of visionary experience, with attention to Aldous Huxley's account of mysticism and the possible roles of alcoholism and hypoglycemia in MacEwen's experience. The concluding section of the paper will offer a reading of the poems in *Afterworlds* along with their companions in *The Rising Fire*.

The Circle as Finite Embodiment of the Infinite

The majority of MacEwen criticism to date focuses on her novels and on the poetry from *A Breakfast for Barbarians* (1966), *The Shadow-Maker* (1969) and *The Armies of the Moon* (1972). Passing reference to poems from *The Rising Fire* is occasionally made, but often the view expressed is that *The Rising Fire* is an inferior work of an immature poet. *The Fire-Eaters* (1976), a slim, scattered volume, receives slight attention, as does *Afterworlds*. Rosemary Sullivan, in her introduction to Exile Editions' 1994 issue of MacEwen's selected poems, writes that "*Afterworlds* seems to offer an uncanny sense of looking back and summing up. No doubt this is a delusion simply because we know it was her last" (MacEwen 1994: xi). Indeed a significant number of the poems are devoted to or addressed to specific moments or people from MacEwen's past. Other poems seem to re-work earlier material, and the volume also includes "Terror and Erebus," a verse-drama written originally for CBC radio in 1965. It is perhaps tempting to view *The Rising Fire* and *Afterworlds*, then, not as vitally important parts of MacEwen's poetic *oeuvre*, but as overture and coda to her poetic career. I must confess, however, that I find *The Rising Fire* and *Afterworlds* to be MacEwen's most inspiring and illuminating works precisely because they contain her

beginning and her end and because, true to MacEwen's visionary principles, they are not separate but form a circle which contains and illuminates the whole of her poetry. The key here is an understanding that, in addition to its role as a figure of enclosure, the circle is a shape which offers a way of observing the infinite in the body of the finite. The circle is endless, yet we can see it all at once. This representation of the infinite in a limited material reality is one of the major functions of poetic language, and probably the deepest fundamental force underlying Gwendolyn MacEwen's poetic life.

Before considering the circle as a figure embodying the infinite, let us first explore its enclosure dimension. Ellen Warwick's essay "To Seek a Single Symmetry" (1977) offers a case in point. Warwick, reviewing *The Rising Fire*, interprets the circle as "a figure that encloses," and finds it in "such diverse guises as a ferris wheel, a conical hat, the sun, the moon, the earth, and orbiting path, an egg, a man's eye and even the movement of neutrons and protons around an atom" (Warwick 22). Warwick sees the enclosure motif also in the introduction to *Breakfast for Barbarians*, MacEwen's second major collection of poetry, where the poet made her theoretical position explicit:

> I'm basically concerned with the sense of appetite, even though it be satisfied with such diverse first courses as kings, dancers, sperm whales, astronauts, escape artists or fruits from algebraic gardens.
>
> The particular horrors of the present civilization have been painted starkly enough. The key theme of things is alienation, the exile from our own inventions, and hence from ourselves. Let's say No—rather, enclose, absorb and have done. The intake. Surely the mind deals with its pains in its own time, as the body does.
>
> I believe there is more room inside than outside. And all the diversities which get absorbed can later work their way out into fantastic things, like hawk-training, IBM programming, mountain-climbing, or poetry.
>
> It is the intake, the refusal to starve.
> And we must not forget the grace.
>
> (*Breakfast* xi)

This introduction puts forth a position essentially identical with that evident in "The Breakfast," the first poem in *The Rising Fire*. In "The Breakfast," MacEwen urges the reader to fight insecurity, hysteria, and alienation by eating "leviathans," "bestiaries and marine

zoos and apples and aviaries." She assures her readers that "by eating the world you may enclose it" (*Rising* 3). In other words, MacEwen is advising us to seize our potential for experience, to bring the wonders of the material world into ourselves by encountering them in all their intensity. MacEwen's famous line "there is more room inside than outside" in this case implies that that we could potentially eat the entire universe and never be full. In other words, there are no limitations to what we can experience and make part of ourselves. Leviathans and bestiaries will fit inside you, MacEwen assures; the sum and the moon will fit too, if you "hold the spoon in your hand up to the sky / and marvel at its relative size" (3). It is critical, we are being warned, to avoid dangerous abstractions in favour of the real experience in the moment and from our own perspective.

The breakfast metaphor is replayed in *Breakfast for Barbarians* in the title poem, in "Strange Breakfasts," in "The Peanut Butter Sandwich," and in "The Last Breakfast." "A Breakfast for Barbarians" in particular reads sadly in light of MacEwen's death and late-life loneliness. The poem, addressed to her "friends," her "sweet barbarians," concludes with an image of a group, a party, relaxing after a giant feast which has ended not because of satiation but because the feasters "are no more able to jack up the jaws any longer." The celebrants laugh, and "exclaim to each other over the table . . . by God that was a meal" (*Breakfast* i). One cannot help but contrast this with MacEwen's later years, when she could be found drinking alone, keeping her friends "in separate pockets" (Sullivan 381), finding loneliness harder and harder to bear, and with her choice of Ezra Pound's lines as an epigraph for *Afterworlds*:

> Be in me as the eternal moods
> of the bleak wind, and not
> As transient things are—
> gaiety of flowers.
> Have in me the strong loneliness
> of sunless cliffs
> And of grey waters.
> (*Afterworlds* 5)

These themes are cleverly and poignantly wed in *Noman's Land*, the book of interwoven short stories published in 1985, two years before MacEwen's death.[1]

In Warwick's view, MacEwen's belief that there is "more room inside than outside," together with the imaginary leaps into the past and into the future which are so common in her work, indicate a compulsion to synthesize, to make whole. "Only by taking the necessary step first," writes Warwick, "that of encircling and absorbing all, can the poet hope to transform reality into some significant whole" (Warwick 28). Warwick thus depicts the poet as a kind of "sense-maker" who is perpetually dissatisfied with the chaotic nature of experience and is compelled to consume as much as possible in order to find an underlying order.

An alternative version of this view is offered by Liza Potvin (1991), who reads a particularly feminine sense of spitit into MacEwen's fascination with internalizing. Potvin associates enclosure and absorption with "maternal protectiveness," and suggests that MacEwen's spiritual journey "follows a pattern of feminine interiorizing, rather than the more common pattern of androcentric exteriorizing" (Potvin 19). She sees a fundamental pair of contrasting metaphors in MacEwen's work in "the female devourer who consumes reality in order to transmute it" and "the male dancer/consort who entices the female toward a cosmic quest" (28). The circle, in Potvin's reading, functions as a "unifier of opposites," rather than as a simple symbol of enclosure.

Both these readings, despite their merits, clash with the open-ended nature of many of MacEwen's poems, with the urgent abandon of the insatiable barbarians, and with the easy shift from the consumption metaphor to other metaphors in her other work. While Warwick and Potvin both make convincing arguments, I do not believe that MacEwen's poetry, taken as a whole, offers much evidence of a compulsion to "make whole"; nor do I believe that the approach to life and to poetry that underlies her work are *necessarily* feminine, or represent a self-consciously feminist approach. I do, however, agree that the circle is a way of unifying opposites; specifically, a way of synthesizing the finite and the infinite.

Let us consider this in chronological terms. Just as light has its dual nature, behaving as both waves and rays, so does time move both linearly and cyclically. The sun and the moon are not only round, but they move around, or appear to. The orbit of the moon around the earth, for example, does not *enclose* the earth *per se*, but is evidence, rather, that the universe is comprised of cycles. The cycle repeats indefinitely, and allows identity between a moment in

one iteration of the cycle and its counterpart in another. The interconnection of moments this makes possible is a structural device in MacEwen's poetry as well as a common theme.

Afterworlds, for instance, is "book-ended" with matching pairs of poems: "The Grand Dance" and "The Tao of Physics." In both "The Grand Dance" and "The Tao of Physics" MacEwen speaks of hurling "breathless poems against my lord Death" (*Afterworlds* 13, 123), her words "careening into the beautiful darkness" (123). *Armies of the Moon* has the same form; in this case the "book-end" poems are "The Armies of the Moon" and "Apollo Twelve." These poems intensify the sense of circularity by employing on the narrative level the ingenious reversal of perspective which the moon can provide for us; the armies of the moon are "waiting for earthrise" when "earthlight floods lunar pools" (*Armies* 75). The poems in both *Afterworlds* and the *Armies of the Moon* are grouped severally by the poet under various rubrics, but the "book-end" poems nevertheless give the works circular forms. When we arrive at the end, we feel we are back at the beginning.

This circular motion is made explicit in the playful "Genesis 2" from *Afterworlds*

> In the Beginning was the End.
>
> And God saw the Beginning and the End and was pleased.
> And He asked the Beginning and the End to separate.
>
> And they said No.
>
> Then God was not pleased and threw a tantrum,
> And said Why Not?
>
> And the Beginning and End said We Cannot.
>
> And God said What Will You Do Then?
>
> And the Beginning and the End said Just Watch Us
> (*Afterworlds* 22)[2]

Just as "The Grand Dance" and "The Tao of Physics" combine to give a circular form to *Afterworlds*, so do "The Breakfast" (the opening poem of the first major collection) and "The Tao of Physics" (the concluding poem of the final) make companion pieces: "The Break-

fast" is the call of youth, "The Tao of Physics" the answer of age. In other words, the awareness of Siva dancing in the city streets is what results when we take seriously the urging of "The Breakfast." The fear of nuclear winter, the result of the misapplication of nuclear physics, has become an understanding that the physics that made possible death on a scale beyond normal human comprehension is the same physics that tells us that there are universes within universes, and that life and death are merely inspiration and expiration. The "difficult night" of "The Breakfast" (*Rising* 4) has become "the mighty night, the relative night, the dream" (*Afterworlds* 123). The final poem is implicit in the first; it is an evolution of thought and of poetic style; and at the same time it is a return to the moment of enlightenment of the atomic age, the enlightenment which underlies all of MacEwen's work.

MacEwen the Visionary

This fascination with experience, with the intensity and immensity of experience, is something poets share with musicians, artist and religious devotees. The line between the religious and artistic visionary, moreover, can be an arbitrary one. MacEwen is without question a poet who falls on the "visionary" end of the artistic spectrum, though she associates herself with no particular faith. This is considered self-evident by all her literary critics.[3] Frank Davey probably sums up this dimension of MacEwen's work best in his assertion that "all of her writing to date has involved inquiry into the process by which mystical enlightenment can be gained—by which the bland phenomena of the world can be induced to reveal arcane knowledge" (Davey 47). The conclusion of Davey's essay "Gwendolyn MacEwen: the Secret of Alchemy" (1973) makes theoretically explicit what is implied throughout MacEwen's work: "that the alchemical secret and the secret of art—that the god must reside equally in the phenomenal and numinal worlds—is in her possession" (71).

MacEwen exhibits many of the traits of the shaman, the visionary-healer which figures prominently in polytheistic societies. Not only is she in contact with a greater reality in the present moment, but with a reality that transcends the limitations of time's arrow. MacEwen is in contact with both past and future, and her poetry implies a universe in which future events can affect past. She is also

keenly aware that death is never an ending, but rather a powerful transition in the natural cycles of life, and as such demonstrates a sense of self which reaches far beyond conventional bounds. Finally, although MacEwen defined herself as a poet from the very beginning of her adult life, and relied exclusively on her writing for her income, she knows that experience itself was more important than the poetry with which she mediated it. All these are evident in *Afterworlds*. True to her sense that beginning and end cannot be separate, a look back at *The Rising Fire* shows that the seeds were already planted in that first volume.

Before dealing explicitly with the poems in these volumes, however, it is well to put MacEwen's *oeuvre* into historical, cultural and biological context. The post-war period which left North Americans "under the knuckles of the warlord sun" also brought about a countercultural response in the form of the Beat culture into which MacEwen's first volume of poetry was published. Associated with the Beat culture was a fascination with Eastern mysticism and transcendence of everyday reality through meditation and psychedelic drugs. This fascination spread throughout North America in the 1960s, and has helped to promote a conception of reality like the one Davey attributes to MacEwen, in which "the god must reside equally in both the phenomenal and numinal worlds." MacEwen as a visionary falls into this emergent tradition in North Amercian poetry. Though there is no indication that MacEwen ever experimented with psychedelic drugs, there is every indication that she didn't neeed to, that the world for her was always a potentially overwhelming experience in which eternity could be experienced in an hour, or even in a moment.

Contrary to Davey's insight, the poet, as a visionary, is too often perceived to be in touch with dimensions of reality *other* than the material world in which most of us spend our days. As the material world has been steadily "profaned" by mainstream religious culture, science and capitalism, so has the visionary been excluded, and his or her experience felt to be idiosyncratic and increasingly irrelevant to the business of everyday life. Christopher Smart, like MacEwen a visionary poet, was imprisoned as a madman for his inability to suppress his own visions; the urgent vision of his counterpart William Blake was largely lost on his contemporaries, and the famous lines from "Auguries of Innocence" appear to us today as a "Romantic" rather than a practical notion:

> To see the world in a grain of sand
> And heaven in a wild flower,
> Hold infinitly in the palm of your hand
> And eternity in an hour.
> (Blake 431)

Today in the industrialized world it is unusual even for the most fervent believers in any faith or spiritual tradition to regard their material surroundings with reverence and awe except when confronted head-on with the power of natural phenomena such as storms and earthquakes. Even these are always immediately rationalized by media reports that detail their "human cost" and explain scientifically their geophysical origins. In the West, perhaps only the "new age" and feminist recouping of "pagan" approaches to the material world today encourage an engagement with everyday reality in spiritual terms, although the spiritual culture of the First Peoples of North America, to which many Canadian poets and visionaries (MacEwen among them) have turned, has shown a resilience to long-standing colonial attempts at its eradication.

As a starting point for a discussion of visionary experience, let us consider the experience brought on by the ingestion of the peyote cactus, a ritual performed by members of the Hopi of the southwestern USA. Peyote contains the mind-altering chemical mescaline, whose ingestion results in radically altered perceptions of time and space. As Whorf has noted, the Hopi language differs from European languages in at least two significant ways; it makes no allowance for the objective quantification of time, and spatial metaphors do not dominate as they do in European languages. The novelist and social theorist Aldous Huxley was among the first writers in English to experiment with the peyote derivative mescaline. Huxley recorded his first experience in the now-famous essay "The Doors of Perception," named after the Blake fragment which is generally published as the essay's epigraph:

> If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.
> (from *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Plate 14; Blake 154)

Huxley's documentation and theories of the psychedelic experience remain among the most cogent available, and make an intriguing counterpart to MacEwen's visionary poetry. During his first mesca-

line experience, Huxley recalled a typical Buddhist idea which before had seemed like nonsense to him, but in his state of heightened awareness made perfect sense:

> . . . I remembered a passage I had read in one of Suzuki's essays. 'What is the Dharma-Body of the Buddha?' (The Dharma-Body of the Buddha is another way of saying Mind, Suchness, the Void, the Godhead.) The question is asked in a Zen monastery by an earnest and bewildered novice. And with the prompt irrelevance of one of the Marx Brothers, the Master answers, 'The hedge at the bottom of the garden.'. . .
>
> It had been, when I read it, only a vaguely pregnant piece of nonsense. Now it was all as clear as day, as evident as Euclid. Of course the Dharma-Body of the Buddha was the hedge at the bottom of the garden. At the same time, and no less obviously, it was these flowers, it was anything that I—or rather the blessed Not-I released for a moment from my throttling embrace—cared to look at. The books, for example, with which my study walls were lined. Like the flowers, they glowed, when I looked at them, with brighter colour, with profounder significance. (Huxley 18-19)

Reflecting on his experience, Huxley felt that it could best be explained by a psychological approximation of Blake's poetic fragment, which he quotes from Cambridge philosopher D.C. Broad:

> The suggestion is that the function of the brain and nervous system and sense organs is in the main eliminative and not productive. Each person is at each moment capable of remembering all that has ever happened to him and of perceiving everything that is happening everywhere in the universe. The function of the brain and nervous system is to protect us from being overwhelmed and confused by this mass of largely useless and irrelevant knowledge, . . . leaving only that very small and practical selection which is likely to be practically useful. (21)

Huxley continues with his own theory:

> Most people, most of the time, know only what comes through the reducing valve and is consecrated as genuinely real by the local language. Certain persons, however, seem to be born with a kind of by-pass that circumvents the reducing-valve. In others temporary by-passes may be acquired either spontaneously, or as the result of delib-

> erate 'spiritual exercises', or through hypnosis, or by means of drugs. (22)

In Huxley's essay we see a highly prosaic version of the kind of experience that MacEwen both advocates and conveys through her poetry. The unselfconscious emphasis on intense colour, the visceral impossiblility of abstraction, the significance of objects and perceptions which we ordinarily take for granted, and the loss of the constructed self are all hallmarks of MacEwen's work. In Huxley's terms, MacEwen was one of those persons who are "born with a kind of by-pass that circumvents the reducing valve," as well as growing into one who conducted her own kind of "deliberate 'spiritual exercises'," and perhaps one for whom temporary by-passes were repeatedly granted "spontaneously."

The only psychoactive substance that we know that MacEwen did employ, unfortunately, was alcohol. Though the effects of alcohol are generally understood to be the result of its ability to travel through the bloodstream to the brain and actually destroy nerve cells, another major effect is on the body's regulation of blood sugar. The first drink sends the blood sugar level skyrocketing, increasing the glucose supply to the brain and giving the familiar "rush" of mild drunkenness. The high blood sugar level demands that the pancreas produce insulin immediately to counter the glucose surge, which in many individuals results in just as sudden a drop in blood sugar level, reducing the glucose supply to the brain, and replacing the sensation of bliss in many cases with equally exaggerated sensations of mental confusion or intense awareness of one's own feelings. According to the dietary authority Dr. Paavo Airola, the behaviour of many alcoholics can be simply explained by hypoglycemia. Hypoglycemia, Airola writes, is a very common condition which describes the metabolism of an individual who is extremely sensitive to shifts in blood sugar level and whose pancreas routinely over-produces insulin to compensate for sharp increases, resulting in equally sharp and prolonged plunges, which in the case of alcoholic behaviour are quickly countered by the ingestion of still more alcohol, creating a vicious circle of dependence.

Given that hypoglycemia is not a disease but a widespread phenomenon, and given that her father had succumbed to alcoholism, it is likely that MacEwen herself had a hypoglycemic metabolism. This is significant because the effect of low glucose supply to the brain over a prolonged period, or in momentary extremes, is to

deny the brain the energy to maintain the filters with which we maintain "everyday reality." It is well-known that people fasting over a prolonged period, having used up the energy stored in their body fat, begin to "hallucinate" or receive visions. Fasting to receive visions is a long-standing practice of most of the First Nations of North America, and the visions which are granted in the way carry spiritual significance according to tribal tradition. Huxley theorized that the chemical action of mescaline is analogous.[4]

Afterworlds contains many poems indicating that MacEwen's sense of reality was very similar to the one advanced by Huxley. A line from "The Grand Dance" echoes Broad's idea that "each person is at each moment capable of remembering all that has ever happened to him and of perceiving everything that is happening everywhere in the universe":

> They say that somewhere out there in space
> Every word uttered by every man
> Since the beginning of man
> Is still sounding. Afterthoughts,
>
> Lethal gossip of the spheres.
>
> (*Afterworlds* 13)

The epigraph to "Manitou Poem," from Selwyn Dewdney's book *The Sacred Scrolls of the Southern Ojibway,* confirms the sense that it is the limited everyday world which is the "hallucination," rather than the spiritual: 'To enter this world was to step into, not out of, the real world" (71). The final stanza of the poem shows MacEwen's positioning of herself with respect to these levels of reality:

> And I am become the powerful dreamer who dreams his way through
> To reality, to enter and ignite the stone, to illumine
> from within
> Its perfect paradox, its name.
>
> (71)

The kinship between MacEwen's and Huxley's views are most clearly expressed, however, in "The Letter":

> Hello.
>
> The light is wandering around inventing everything, and I've entered

> once again this thing I call Worldmind. Let me explain. Under these easy trees I catch sight of an indifferent and wonderfully intelligent world; I think it is the planet itself considering its own existence, its own destiny. But it doesn't matter what I think. What matters is the beauty of this place—a beauty existing within indifference, if you can imagine, the beauty of a lover never quite possessed, the beauty of a god who distances himself and demands to be adored with reason as well as passion. Here, within Worldmind, I have access to the past and the future as fluid parts of a conscious whole, a mind that is the planet itself lost in thought. The city becomes all cities, the streets are all streets everywhere; 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. Cosmic dust contains platinum and iridium, in case you should ever need to know. Certain stars are imploding right now, and it looks like rain. I'll write you again tomorrow.
>
> Regards,
> Gwendolyn (104)

This poem has all the artlessness of a high-school journal entry, and it is impossible to know when it was written. MacEwen's actual early poetry is overwrought rather than underwrought, and this poem attests to the simplicity of voice generally achieved by mature poets. But it is a simplicity in which the tone of *naiveté* is raised to an artform in itself, the final few statements and the "letter" frame creating a sense of humour which makes the poem delightful and humourous rather than an indulgence in New Agepedantry.

I am not attempting to argue that MacEwen's sole source of inspiration was low blood sugar, or that she was self-consciously seeking to duplicate the kinds of visions achieved by psychedelic experimenters like Huxley or by the vision-seekers of the First Nations. Clearly, MacEwen possessed from the beginning a powerful imagination, a strong sense of discipline, a talent for language, and an intellect able to make connections between ancient mythology and contemporary experience. As confirmed in "The Letter," MacEwen always held that her intellect was necessary to mediate between the profundity of her experience and the sense of self required to function in the everyday world. Indeed, perhaps that is the essential role of the mythic imagination anywhere. I do, however, to put it at its most prosaic, argue that MacEwen occupied a kind of reality traditionally occupied by visionaries in a variety of

cultures, and that her ability to inspire the reader lies in her ability to open herself up and let a portion of the infinite universe come through the everyday "reality" and inhabit her, and then to employ her imagination, her intellect and her linguistic skills to negotiate between the indefinite universe and the finite set of words which comprise the poem. This is hardly a revolutionary thesis in the realm of poetics, but for whatever reason it has become more difficult to make such a statement about a contemporary poet, and yet it remains essential to any understanding of MacEwen's poetry.

The Circle: from *Afterworlds* to *The Rising Fire*

MacEwen's relation with the infinite, which is foregrounded in *Afterworlds*, offers a stark contrast with her corporeal life during the period in which the book was prepared, published, and sold. Sullivan's *Shadowmaker: The Life of Gwendolyn MacEwen* (1995) paints a picture of MacEwen's world as shrinking, collapsing in on itself, even as her final book of poetry implies a sense of self expanded far beyond the boundaries of that corporeal existence. MacEwen prepared *Afterworlds* for publication during the final year of her life while she was Writer-in-Residence at the University of Toronto. Her acquaintances speak of a person increasingly beset by loneliness and alcoholism and whose world was collapsing around the focus of liquor, leaving aside even literary endeavors. At this time, MacEwen could be found drinking alone in an empty club, or taking liquid lunches with her homeless friends, spending what little money she had on liquor to the exclusion of proper food.

One especially poignant anecdote recounted by Sullivan is emblematic of MacEwen's collapsing world. MacEwen had met a musician named Ricardo Rivas who sometimes played at The Trojan Horse, the restaurant which MacEwen and her former husband Nikos Tsingos had opened on the Danforth years before.

> Once, she asked what happened to the paintings she and Nikos had hung on the walls of the Horse and Rivas explained that they were stored in the basement of the old building, which had been taken over by a co-op. She asked if she could have them. Painted on cheap plywood, they were conventional Greek images—a hunter and a deer, two warriors fighting, a portrait of Bacchus. Rivas brought them to Robert Street, nailing them where she asked, into the mid-frames of

> the windows, blocking the light. It felt as though she were asking him to board up the windows with them, so that she could surround herself with the memories she loved. (Sullivan 373)

Even MacEwen's passion for writing had completely evaporated. Her friend Judith Merril, also a writer, remembers her saying: "It's not that I can't write. I can write better than I ever did before. But I don't want to be bothered. It's not worth the trouble" (381). Mieke Bevelander, a painter, recalls hearing MacEwen make a similar statement: "I could just sit right down at that desk over there, right now, at my typewriter, and I could write another brilliant poem, but you know what it's really about. I don't want to write one more poem. It's over" (381).

Twelve of the book's sixty-four poems concern specific recollections: "Stones and Angels," for Yannis Ritsos, the Greek poet whose work she translated, originally written in 1976; "Letters to Josef," a man she'd met on her 1962 trip to Israel; "Seeing-Eye Dogs" for Barbara Bruce, her blind therapist at ARF; "The Park, 20 Years Later"; "The Yellow House" and "Fireworks" for the novelist Marian Engel, who died in 1986 from cancer; "Languages (2)," a memory from age 15; "1958," a memory from Western Technical, the high-school MacEwen attended; "The Wah-Mai Cafe"; "A Memory of Xaviera"; "Letter to an Old Lover," to Salah, her Egyptian lover of the mid-'sixties; and "The Garden of Thieves."

This literal re-collection of the moments and the people who made up MacEwen's life is one of the most eerie aspects of *Afterworlds*. *The Rising Fire*, however, also curiously shares this characteristic. There are six poems in the earlier collection which are dedicated or addressed to specific people from MacEwen's life: "The Phoenix (For D.)"; "For Mallory" and "The Hand (For B.M.)," both for Bob Mallory, a painter who was once MacEwen's lover; "Morning Laughter (To my mother, Elsie MacEwen)"; "For Alick MacEwen: d. 1960"; and "Poem for G.W.," which may be for herself.

The sense of future and past communicating is further heightened by MacEwen's decision to include the verse-drama "Terror and Erebus," originally written for CBC radio in 1965, as part of *Afterworlds*. Sullivan notes "how seamlessly it fits into the book," concluding that "Gwen had been in control of her vision at the age of twenty-three" (Sullivan 371). This is certainly true; yet one may also attribute its "seamlessness" to its subject matter. Rasmussen peering like God over the still-living yet doomed Franklin and Cro-

zier reads like an emblem of the relationship between MacEwen's future ghost examining her past life as a poet, attempting to break open the ice of the reducing valve:

> Now the great passage is open,
> The one you dreamed of, Franklin,
> And the great white ships plough through it
> Over and over again,
> Packed with cargo and carefree men.
> It is as though no one had to prove it
> Because the passage was already there.
> Or…is it that the way was invented,
> Franklin?
> That you cracked the passage open
> With the forces of your sheer certainty?
> Or is it that you cannot know,
> Can never know,
> Where the passage lies
> Between conjecture and reality . . .?
> (*Afterworlds* 56-7)

Other poems in *Afterworlds* echo poems from *Armies of the Moon*. "Death of the Loch Ness Monster," in which man is seen from the viewpoint of the monster, reprises the perspective-reversal which motivates "The Armies of the Moon." "A Coin for the Ferryman" is a sequel to "A Letter to Charos." In the earlier version, MacEwen asks the ferryman if her poetic life has been in vain, and wonders "into whose future am I moving" (*Armies* 45); in the later, she addresses her lover-muse and expresses not uncertainty about the past and future, but certainty that they are all one, and an appreciation for the ferryman's role in taking both her and her muse to the other side. Most of the addresses to the lover-muse from this section of *Afterworlds* operate in the same mode as "Nine Arcana of the Kings," especially "A Stillness of Waiting" and "Elemental," which rework the same set of images—the brother, salt, sand, the distant years of waiting, the beetle, the sun, and the lengthwise body.

Afterworlds is divided into six sections, each title beginning with "A." "Ancient Slang" is the first section, comprising eleven meditations on time and timelessness. "Anarchy" follows, consisting of two observations on characters and six observations on MacEwen's own writing.[5] "Apocalypse" is the third section, a telling title for the pairing of "Terror and Erebus" and "Letters to Josef in Jerusalem."

"Afterimages" is the fourth, consisting of three reflections on the encounter with First Nations culture, one chant, and several memory poems. "After-thoughts" is the penultimate section, made up of seventeen short prose-poems making candid observations on sundry events from the course of MacEwen's life, including "The Letter." The final section is titled "Avatars," a Sanskrit word meaning "manifestation," especially of deity or soul. In this case, the manifestation is of MacEwen's lover-muse, not a person but a tangible energy, and these poems make observations on her various relationships with these manifestations.

The ornate and incantatory style typical of MacEwen's earlier work, which had already begun to recede in favour of a colloquial style in the 1970s, is in *Afterworlds* reserved for particular moments. Major features of the earlier style such as high density of juxtaposed images, mythic settings, insistant use of repetition, assonance, and lulling rhythm, and dramatic interjections of "ah" and "o!," occur with much less frequency, leaving bare the experiences which inspired her earlier creations. The poems of *Afterworlds* are in the main not songs but fragments of conversations one might have had, or desired to have had, with MacEwen, and largely concern her own life, her lovers, her muse and her writing.

In a series of poems concerning writing in the "Anarchy" section, MacEwen echoes a statement first made in "The Aristocracies," the last poem in *A Breakfast for Barbarians*:

> Let it be understood, this is not art,
> this is not poetry; the poetry is
> the breathing air embracing you,
> the poetry is not here, it is elsewhere
> in temples, in territories of pure blue.
> (*Breakfast* 53)

Margaret Atwood commented in her 1970 essay "MacEwen's Muse" that "it is a temptation to become preoccupied with the original and brilliant verbal surface she creates, at the expense of the depths beneath them" (Atwood 67). Atwood reminds us that MacEwen "has been insisting for some time that it is 'the thing beyond the poem', the 'raw material' of literature, that above all concerns her" (67). In *Afterworlds* the "brilliant verbal surfaces" have been reduced to a minimal, tasteful gloss on the bare sculpture beneath,

and in the "Anarchy" poems MacEwen makes plain that her visionary poetry is a way of dealing with her visionary experience.

In "You Can Study It If You Want," MacEwen debates various answers she feels she ought to give to the question "Why Do You Write."

> You know the answer and I still have to say it.
>
> Poetry has got nothing to do with poetry.
> Poetry is how the air goes green before thunder,
> is the sound you make when you come, and
> why you live and how you bleed, and
>
> The sound you make or don't make when you die.
> (*Afterworlds* 35)

In the following poem, "Let Me Make This Perfectly Clear," she assures us that this stance is not "a posture or an act":

> You actually think I care if this
> Poem gets off the ground or not. Well
> I don't care if this poem gets off the ground or not
> And neither should you.
> All I have ever cared about
> And all you should ever care about
> Is what happens when you lift your eyes from this page.
> . . . .
> What matters is what is out there in the large dark
> And in the long light,
> Breathing.
>
> (36)

In the next poem in the sequence, "But," she continues this thought, beginning by repeating the final lines from "Let Me Make This Perfectly Clear," now implying that what is out there in the large dark and the long light is in fact "the breathless Poem" (37). This is the Poem in its unwritten form, the gift of vision from the muse to the poet; in the terminology of "The Garden of the Thieves," it is the source of "the Great Poem," "the one we all know / Never gets written" (30). In the final two lines of "But," MacEwen invokes the danger, the power and the responsibility of being a visionary:

"Beware! Now I know a language so beautiful and lethal My mouth bleeds when I speak it" (37).

MacEwen's relationship with acute experience is made plain in "The Red Curtains." The beginning of the poem is almost a lament, a plea to be freed of the intensity of life, a plea that probably led her to alcohol, which in turn probably made the acuteness of pain and loneliness all the more unbearable:

> Nothing is boring. If only something could be boring
> For once; if only everything weren't so keen
> All the time.
> (The dream is a nice place to visit
> but who wants to live there
> in those dark blue fields of midnight)
> (33)

The poem's banal images of a curtain rising and of workmen tearing up a sidewalk, even the fact that it is Thursday, for MacEwen become charged with significance. In the rise and fall of the red curtains MacEwen sees the frame of a drama unfolding in the dazzling "white" city.

Many times the drama she sees unfolding is not confined to the present, but extends back through historical time, or, more typically in *Afterworlds*, through her own past. The theme of time-travel is evident not only in the subject matter of the "memory" poems but underlies the entire volume, cropping up in poem after poem. MacEwen plays with an identity between one time and another based on a sense of cycles and the illusory nature of time. The contact between Rasmussen and Franklin is one instance, as is "Genesis 2." Other examples include "Stones and Angels," in which, as in North American First Nations mythology, "Stones are the faces of watches without hands / Stones are the masters of time" (23). In "The White Horse," the experience of a horse in the present moment becomes an experience of the first horse ever to exist. The timeless moment is also found in "Letters to Josef" ("Twenty years have passed and we're still sitting there, Josef, younger and older than death" [67]) and "Sunlight at Sherbourne and Bloor" ("that building going up across the street has been going up *forever*").

The Escher-like "The Garden of the Thieves" is the most thematically-developed example of this, one in which moments are

threaded through one another with no respect for linearity whatsoever:

> For years I have wanted to write a poem called
> *The Garden of the Thieves*.
> The title turns up in old notebooks with asterisks
> Surrounding it and arrows pointing to it, and
> Notes telling me to write it, write it, but
>
> It never got written until now because I never knew
> where the garden was, or who
> The thieves were, so the naked title lay there
> Between sheets of paper that seethed with reason
> And grand ideas, until one night I actually dreamed
>
> Of the garden where I played as a child, and it was
> invaded by *thieves*
> Who stole the Great Poem from me, the one we all know
> Never gets written, and I saw the title as they
> Whisked it away, and yes, it was beyond a doubt
>
> *The Garden of the Thieves*, written by Anonymous
> who was my favourite poet
> And who I thought was a Byzantine king. I have been
> Pondering over this for quite some time, and thought
> I'd better get it all down before the night falls.
>
> (30)

Here the thieves may be read as a figure for the reducing valve imposed by the conventional use of language, stealing away the innocence of the child who is capable of experience so profound it would inspire the Great Poem, which of course can never be written because of the Great Paradox, which is that once language is made available, the experience can no longer be had. In the dream, the poem is written by Anonymous, which is the basis for a humorous twist, but also indicates the irony of language as used in naming.

"Past and Future Ghosts" also makes explicit MacEwen's sense of intertwined time:

> Everything is already known, but we proceed as though we know nothing. I have lived in houses haunted by ghosts from the future as well as the past—ghosts of my future and past selves as well as ghosts of others. It's very simple; we all just move from room to room in these

> time-houses and catch glimpses of one another in passing. As a child in one house I used to see this older woman who was myself grown up, and thirty years later I went back there and met the child, who was waiting for me to come. Who is haunting whom? Right now some future ghosts are re-decorating the house I live in; I see them out of the corner of my eye, tearing down certain walls and inventing new ones. Look out—you who inhabit those rooms of my future—I'm coming after you. I'm starting to haunt you, I'm starting right now. (97)

This relationship to time is not exclusive to *Afterworlds*, as anyone who has even passing familiarity with MacEwen's work will realize. *Afterworlds* merely presents the most stripped-down, most personal version. Once again, the seeds are present in *The Rising Fire*, especially in "The Alabaster Jar, or Backward Archeology," "Inquiry into Time" and "Wristwatch and Nile Time." In "Inquiry into Time," a boy drops out of the safe and uninteresting present to play in the dangerous past, and time is portrayed as an illusion that one may "melt" through:

> You have given him scooters and embroidered pillows.
> It does not matter.
> He has centuried away from you
> to play ball in gold-toned Rome
> and sit with Caesar's song above the chariots.
>
> The hand on your clock melts like a Dali,
> the years chew their nails, worried that one boy
> has seen through their pretense.
> Then you must melt also, here in the one noon;
> melt like that clock, like that boy's clock
> to follow him
>
> (*Rising* 26)

This theme occurs also in "Wristwatch and Nile Time," where the poet urges us to aggressively break the restrictive structure of time and allow the past to flow through us:

> But rape time 'til the structure shudders;
> the frescoed skeleton turns its hinges
> like so many done doors . . . opening
> to the Nile who carries pitchers

on her snakegreen shoulders

(29)

The ability to transcend time's arrow is closely connected to an expanded sense of self, a self that is not limited to the personality constructed for the purposes of routine human interaction, to the limitations of the body, or to the moment of the poem's composition as a finite word-set. The idea of an "expanded" sense of self can appear to contradict the "ego-loss" which is traditionally associated with enlightenment and supplication to extra-ordinary forces outside the self, the state which Huxley describes as "the blessed Not-I released for a moment from my throttling embrace." In fact, the ego-loss, Huxley's "Not-I" and the expanded sense of self evident in "Past and Future and Ghosts" and other poems from *Afterworlds* are merely different ways of describing the same phenomenon. The ego is of course the limited self, the self which in Freudian theory evolves as the child discovers what she can control and what she cannot, a kind of defense mechanism against the sublime infinity of the world. The sense of limited self may be broken in two directions—by expanding outward through the material world, and by expanding past the limits of one's corporeal existence.

"The Transparent Womb" is the only explicit instance of the former in *Afterworlds*. Its title image confirms this interpretation of the poem, which, like "The Letter," is little more than a straight-ahead journal entry. "Here's why I never had a child," begins MacEwen, and she proceeds to list a series of encounters with the world's unwanted. In the line "because I collect kids and cats and strangers (or they collect me)" (94), MacEwen shows herself as a special member of the underclass, one who feeds strays of all sorts, who feeds herself by feeding them. She portrays herself as a mother toward many more people than she could be a mother to biologically; her womb is transparent because it is the city itself, even the world. "All the world's children are ours, all of them are already mine," she concludes (94).

This stretching of personal dimensions occurs also in two poems from *The Rising Fire*: "The Dimensions of a Tiger" and "Nikolayev and Popovich: the Cosmic Brothers." "The Dimensions of a Tiger" may be taken as an elegant paradigm for the "MacEwen moment," the moment in which gateways are opened to wider experience, and the self transcends its typical ego limitations, experiencing infinity in the moment before returning to the everyday:

the cat in the grass lengthens—
and your tendons reach widely
into seasons of wind and deltas—
you are suddenly aware that
you have no boundaries, that
you are a field with no fences.

hollyhock and frolic, you
are the width of wind and voices
until something, a microscopic irony
as laughter breaking from windows
or a diminutive rain shrinks you
and the cat in the grass curls under
(*Rising* 45)

In "Nikolayev and Popovich: The Cosmic Brothers" the dimensions of the mundane and the extraterrestrial are once again linked, as in "The Breakfast," but this time one sees the connection not through optic juxtaposition but through the relation of congruence.

all orbits complement
the logic we derive
from eggshell symmetry
of satellite or sweet
concentric circles
of crumbs and insects
on cosmic tablecloths;
we have no dimensions and
the burden of thinking
in terms of size is lifted from us
(11)

The relationship with the lover-muse is also indicative of MacEwen's expanded sense of self. Many of us tend to define ourselves against our lover of the moment; some, perhaps, in maturity, are able to look back like MacEwen and understand all our love-relationships as facets of our total love-being. MacEwen takes this process one step farther, by identifying her lovers with her poetic muse, and viewing each individual relationship as one aspect of a greater relationship with a muse who manifests himself in different ways at different times.[6] In order to have a relationship with this kind of being, MacEwen herself must take on a super-human existence.

In the "Avatars" section of *Afterworlds* are fourteen poems addressed to the lover-muse, plus "The Lion," a meditation on love dedicated to Robert Duncan, and the final poem in the collection, "The Tao of Physics," in which the position of the male dancer is occupied by Siva, who is introduced as "my lord." In "The Lion" MacEwen explicitly makes the connection between her love relationships and her connection with spirit:

> To love is to be remarkable, and flawless.
> It is to wear the yellow crown of a flawless beast
> Forever.
>
> It is to inhabit the flawless and exceeding universe
> Forever.
>
> (120)

Only Salah, MacEwen's Egyptian lover in the 1960s, is named; the rest of the poems address only "you." In "Breakfast at Midnight," the lover-muse is said at night to become both Merlin and Arthur, magician and hero-king. At other moments the poems read as if they were addressed to the supreme deity itself, as the inclusion of "The Tao of Physics" in the section seems to imply. In many ways the poems strongly recall John Donne in their elevation of human love to spiritual heights and the apparent ease with which the lover's place becomes the place of God. "The Timing" in particular recalls Donne's "Batter my heart, three-personed God," with the signature MacEwen motif of time substituted for the physical power of Donne's deity.[7]

On the whole, however, MacEwen's "Avatar" poems do not portray the avatar as vividly as they portray MacEwen herself, expanding and contracting with the rhythms of his intimacy. The poet depicts herself as an infinite web of secrets: "most of my secrets are doors that open onto other secrets— / (Vistas of fields and beaches and columns stretching on forever)" (107). In "Absences" and "A Stillness of Waiting" the muse is absent entirely, and the poet's response to that absence is expressed in detail. When they are together, MacEwen becomes part of a unified, magical being that can "wring the blood from stars" ("Elemental" [111]), drink "Celestial Tea" ("November" [96]), and live in "moments which exceed tomorrow" ("Halley's Comet, 1986" [117]); MacEwen's "bones turn gold" ("Daynights" [112]) and finally she becomes one with the

spirit itself: "All things are reproduced in me; My name is morning" ("Famous Secrets" [119]).

"A Coin for the Ferryman," the penultimate "Avatar" poem, works with two paradoxes which point toward the transcendence of death, which is the utter absence of the self. The poet feels herself in "this rain that lasts forever," and states that "The afterworld is the preworld, is this world" (122). Nevertheless, the trip with Charos must be made, and the river he pilots is referred to as "the final waters." "I embrace a loneliness like no other," writes MacEwen, "And live with it till it becomes my friend." There is an ambiguity of reference erected: can the lover who is then addressed two lines later be loneliness itself? Or is it once again the muse's absence to which the poet is speaking? Is this the absence of the muse which MacEwen knew she could not bear because she knew it would not abate; the absence which led her to abandon writing altogether in the last year of her life? Like all good poems, this poem remains powerful to the extent that it cannot be reduced to a single interpretation, and the principal reason that it cannot is the pair of crossed paradoxes. Charos's waters are final, but the afterworld is the preworld, is this world; death, the absence of life and body, is both end and not-the-end.

The three final poems in the "Afterimages" section explore this theme also. In "Fireworks (In memory of Marian Engel)," MacEwen sees Engel's death as a transformation rather than an ending:

> As I celebrate your life I celebrate your entry
> Into some unconditional kingdom.
>
> Friend, let your death be fireworks
> Like the pinwheels and burning schoolhouses
> (we have so much to unlearn)
> You had in your garden on the 24th of May
> (80)

In "Eva Braun Reflecting, 1987," the motif is treated comically:

> Marlene Dietrich told some guy who wanted her: I'll sleep with you when Hitler's dead. Then after the war the guy confronted her with her promise and Marlene said: Hitler's alive and well and living in Argentina. Goodbye.
>
> (80)

The most elaborate treatment, however, takes place in "In the Garden of the Chelsea Arts Club" (82). The paradox of death and life is played out in the garden in MacEwen's contemplation of Alastair the poet's statement that "*nothing dies*." MacEwen ponders this proposition, thinking "*But endless time is the enemy,*" and encounters that enemy in the guise of a tortoise, who moves toward her "sickeningly slowly." The tortoise is "Devoid of anything, even hunger," harkening back to MacEwen's fascination with the metaphor of consumption. He will live forever in the garden, but he can experience nothing; he is both "hideously sane" and "blind." Eventually a white petal falls on his back, however, and "its weight is enough to kill him." "*So beauty is your enemy,*" MacEwen exclaims, "*you* will *die*." Without death, there can be no life, MacEwen implies; life without death is a kind of death itself, which is itself annihilated by beauty, and thereby forced into the process of renewal and life again.

This is, as stated earlier, the underlying message of "The Tao of Physics." This awareness of the renewing power of death is merged with contemporary views of theoretical physics at the subatomic level:

> In the vast spaces of the subatomic world where
> Matter has a tendency to exist
> The lord of Life is breathing in and out,
> Creating and destroying the universe
> With each wave of his breath.
>
> (123)

The central image is drawn from Hindu theology, in which Siva's dance keeps the universe alive and in which the material world, the world of the avatar, is pure illusion:

> My lord Siva dances in the city streets,
> His body a fierce illusion of flesh, of energy,
> The particles of light cast off from his hair
> Invade the mighty night, the relative night, this dream.
>
> (123)

The lord of Life is one with the lord of Death, against whom MacEwen hurls her "Breathless poems." Here there is a pun on the word "breathless," implying both her excitement and the sense of cele-

bratory urgency in her poems, and the lack of breath, the lack of inspiration, which beset her in the end.

If MacEwen, in this poem, and in the entire construction of *Afterworlds*, seems to have foreseen her death, one might also say that it was her death reaching back through time and bringing about these poems: MacEwen the poet haunted by her own future ghost. For surely even as she fell into despair and loneliness she was aware that death was not the end. Atwood, ever insightful, concluded "MacEwen's Muse" with an observation on the final poems in the three collections MacEwen had published up to that point:

> Though the final poem in *The Shadow Maker* may look like a last word, each of MacEwen's previous collections has an ending which is really a beginning: the "growing" of *The Rising Fire*, the "unknown" alphabet of *A Breakfast for Barbarians*. Here the final word is "floods", chaos come anew, a chaos which invites the creation of a fresh cosmos. There is little doubt that the Muse will rise again from his ashes in yet another form. (Atwood 77)

It is perhaps it is not quite accurate to take "The Breakfast" as the beginning of MacEwen's publishing career. One might make an argument for the first poem in "Adam's Alphabet," for instance, the self-published pamphlet which is a paradigmatic beginning if there ever was one. But perhaps, given that "The Tao of Physics" was undoubtedly her last, it is the epigraph to *The Rising Fire* (the first verse of "The Phoenix" from that volume) that makes the link which joins end to beginning, completing the figure of the circle:

> beyond you, the image rising from the shoulders
> is greater than you, as the phoenix from the fire
> is risen, as the rising fire on the opening wings
> is greater than the stirring and potential pyre.
> (*Rising* 1)

Today MacEwen's poems careen not merely "into the beautiful darkness," but through the imaginations of all her readers. She has, like the poets before her, employed the durability of the medium of writing to transcend both time and her own mortality. She speaks; we can hear. Those poems going up across the street have been going up *forever*. Those images rising from the shoulders are the images of cats transformed into fields without fences, of swords

turned sideways, of the sun, a gold beetle, crawling down the sky. MacEwen has become our own absent muse: breath, anima, spirit, inspiration, the shaman who reaches across time to help heal a world with her breathless poems, greater than the body which stirs on its potential pyre.

Notes

1 In *Noman's Land*, MacEwen's alter ego, Kali, writes of her lover Noman's absences, "Let me assure you that thirteen years without him had the same texture as a day, and it was of little consequence how many moons passed, how many breaths. Time does nothing to you; you do things to time" (*Noman* 112). This relationship with time is key to understanding MacEwen. Noman, a "plural being with many lives", wanders through time, but keeps returning to Kali: "Torn out of time, memory-less, he could imagine himself a master of time, but when he realized that in truth he possessed neither the past nor the future, he returned to me. I do not need to master time; I contain it. I am his fixed point, his sundial; with me he can watch the shadow of himself turning and returning to the same position. I am his compass, I am his sanity" (112).

2 This theme also occus in two other poems in *Afterworlds*: "I told you our end lay in our beginning" ("Daynights" [112]) and "So we embrace our end in our beginning" ("Marino Marini's Horses and Riders" [121]).

3 Potvin, for example, saw her work as an emblem of "female spiritual desire"; Penn Kemp wrote of feeling MacEwen's spirit visiting her after her death, and of joining Anima, the energy of inspiration (Kemp 1988). Thomas Gerry sees her as inheriting a tradition of mystical poetry dating back to eighteenth century Baptist and Quaker leaders and writers Henry Alline and David Willson (Gerry 1991). Jan Bartley (1983) sees MacEwen as a mystic explorer, and Gillian Harding-Russell locates her as a maker of "creative myth" (1984, 1988).

4 Writes Huxley: "The brain is provided with a number of enzyme systems which serve to regulate its workings. Some of these enzymes regulate the supply of glucose to the brain cells. Mescalin inhibits the production of these enzymes and thus lowers the amount of glucose available to an organ that is in constant need of sugar. . . . When the brain runs out of sugar, the undernourished ego grows weak, can't be bothered to undertake the necessary chores, and loses all interest in those spatial and temporal relationships which mean so much to an organism bent on getting on in the world" (23-24).

5 The former are "The Lamb" and "Niagara Daredevil, 37, Buried Near the Falls"; the latter "The Garden of the Thieves," "The Wah Mai Cafe," "But," "Red Curtains," "You Can Study It If You Want" and "Let Me Make This Perfectly Clear."

6 Clearly the character of Noman is a representation of this multi-dimensional being.

7 Donne:

> Batter my heart, three-personed God; for, you
> As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
> That I may rise, and stand, and o'erthrow me, and bend
> Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
>
> • • •
>
> Take me to you, imprison me, for I

Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

MacEwen:

Some days I cannot look at you,
I am dizzy with wisdom, I am struck dumb. Stars
Are fossils in space, the clocks of the city
Wind down. I tell all my poems to go home.

You slide through the slits of these minutes,
The slim air sliced by your presence, your perfect
Timing.

Help. I am numb with your beauty, I am
Besieged by truth.
Your hands are as lean as the long hours
Before midnight. Time
Is speechless as it strikes your mouth.

These preposterous lines proceed no further.

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