

# No-Man's Land: Mythic Crisis in Gwendolyn MacEwen's *The T.E. Lawrence Poems*

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Article abstract

In general, the contemporary thrust of poetry in terms of myth is not toward orthodoxy of belief and action but toward a plurality and constant evolution. Literary poetry today is an embodiment of a certain kind of myth-telling that is much more concerned with the introduction of new ideas, with cross-cultural mythological imagination, and with making a space for meditation. In *The T.E. Lawrence Poems*, Gwendolyn MacEwen seeks to illuminate the reader's own personal relationship with myth, and, through an investigation of T.E. Lawrence's pattern of identification with the Other, to explore how the poetic imagination copes with bringing cultural and personal myths to the surface.

# No-Man's Land: Mythic Crisis in Gwendolyn MacEwen's *The T.E. Lawrence Poems*

BRENT WOOD

G WENDOLYN MACEWEN'S POETRY makes abundant reference to myths of various types, offering commentary on them and at the same time creating imaginary mythical structures through the use of extended metaphor. MacEwen not only searched for pertinent myths from Near Eastern cultures to enlighten her own world and provide characters and stories around which to organize her translation of experience into literature, but also struggled with the impossible challenge of turning her own internal mythical stories into true myths by expressing them in published poetry. In composing *The T.E. Lawrence Poems* (1982), MacEwen developed the dramatic narrative potential evident in her earlier verse radio drama (e.g., *Tesla* in 1965 and *Terror and Erebus* in 1966) and broke away from the speaking persona typically adopted in her lyric poetry, a female often addressing a male "Muse" figure, as documented in Margaret Atwood's essay "MacEwen's Muse" (1982). She also tragically anticipated her own decline and death in assuming his voice, as she increasingly became, like her doppelgänger Lawrence, a character in a drama over which she had little control.

In working with the figure of Lawrence in his desert worlds as he searches the extremities of existence and awareness, MacEwen achieved more effectively the marriage of idea and object she had sought in the somewhat problematic use of metaphor in her earlier lyric work. Water and fire are the book's metaphorical yin and yang, complementary aspects of the cosmos, everything and nothing, the ultimate source of the physical and the ultimate source of the spirit. The interaction with a minimalist setting outside MacEwen's own inner sanctum creates a tug-of-war in the metaphorical realm between the real-life story and the use to which MacEwen wants to put it. The narrative structure allows her to evoke through extended metaphor an awareness of the power and danger of the imagination,

its role in creating what we conceive of as reality, and the ultimate unknowability of the real. MacEwen achieves a surprising variety of pitch — a range which mimics and exaggerates Lawrence's own discursive range as evident in his autobiography *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1926) — through clever editing, a greater attention to page layout than in her other work, and by subtly suggesting the speaker's attitude through diction. The quiet, short, sweet phrases of "A Farewell to Carcemish" (*TE* 25)<sup>1</sup> are one extreme of poetic attitude; another is the gruesome "Tafas" (52), whose line breaks stretch what may be two or three short stanzas across a whole page.

Where the focus of so many of MacEwen's lyric poems is on the complexities of love, the focus here is on its absence. Lawrence is the inspiration, yet MacEwen becomes Lawrence, speaking in his voice as if it were her own. In this, the relationship to the Muse is markedly different from that evident in her other work. Unlike MacEwen's real-life male partners, who with the exception of Milton Acorn were generally not articulate in English, Lawrence is a writer and can tell his own tale. The story of MacEwen's Lawrence is a tragedy of mythical chaos modelled on the Icarus motif, its hero ultimately a frustrated seeker only barely redeemed in death as he falls away from his moment of inspiration by the "solar wind." *The T.E. Lawrence Poems* offer MacEwen's readers an alternative perspective to that implied by her lyric poems, illustrating the dangers and origins of the martyr complex, focusing attention on the reader's own mythical orientation (or lack thereof), and highlighting the ongoing evolution of alienation, exploration and recombination of cultural mythologies. In confronting MacEwen's Lawrence, the reader is forced to confront her or his own inner tensions of belief, need for spiritual meaning, and place in the sociomythical flux of the modern and postmodern worlds.

The term "myth" is potentially a dangerous one, and it is worth clarifying just what is meant by the word, how myth functions in contemporary society, and the historical background against which both MacEwen and Lawrence played out their stories. A generation ago, classics scholar G.S. Kirk critiqued the full range of nineteenth- and twentieth-century theoretical perspectives on myth in order to show the folly of attempting a single overarching theory. Kirk took issue with the very term "myth" itself, arguing that it gives a false impression that myths in general possess some common essence which can be discussed apart from particular examples. Still less appealing, from Kirk's point of view, is the term "mythology," which (except when used in a different sense to denote the actual study of myths) attributes by implication a "comprehensiveness

or grandeur" (21) to sets of myths, which is more in the eye of the scholarly beholder than in the subject matter itself.

Kirk's analysis is useful as it directs away from the dangers inherent in relying on any singular theory as a basis for literary criticism and toward an understanding of the role of the mythic imagination in the interaction between literature and the "real world." Perhaps because Kirk is a classics scholar, however, his argument seems to imply that myth-making is not an activity engaged in by literate, modern, or technologically advanced societies. Another view suggests that the mythopoeic faculty of human minds and human societies has not fallen dormant in the wake of technological development, but has rather changed with the times, maintaining a psychic niche among other modes of thought or consciousness. Clearly, it is much easier to identify the stories and beliefs of cultures distant in time and space as "mythical" than it is the stories and beliefs in which we ourselves participate, but the general term "myth" may still be a useful one in suggesting some characteristic mental activity associated with certain *kinds* of stories and beliefs which may be evident to us in those ancient or "primitive" stories popularly defined as "myths": narratives or groups of narratives focused on "the activities of a culture's gods and heroes ... the product of communal and often sacred impulses to sanction and reflect the cultural order existing at the time of their creation" (Preminger and Brogan 806).<sup>2</sup>

One reason that the mythic faculty has not fallen entirely dormant with the rise of literacy and science is that the oral culture of which myths were an integral part remains active in even the most technologized society. Today's dominant social myths, at least in Canada, are naturally quite different in character from those of the ancient Greeks, the early Norse, the Australian Aborigines, or the First Nations of North America. Christianity is comprised in large part by interlocking myths which have played a dominant role in forming Western culture, and British and American societies no less than "primitive" cultures use foundational or "charter" myths to provide ongoing justification and reinforcement of their hierarchical and imperialist social organization. Canada, culturally sandwiched between these two imperial powers, is mythically conceived as "the true north strong and free" and usually defined by an ambivalent relationship to these imperial powers — a "distinct society" (as it were) in its own right. Today we see large-scale myth at work not only in churches and in the holiday ritual imagination, but in car ads, in hockey matches propagated by the CBC, in the national anthem, on editorial pages, in visits from the Royal Family,

and, of course, in the rhetoric of federal politicians. We are also still living inside the great myths of Progress and of Capital, both of which seem to stem in part from the Judaeo-Christian mythical heritage in which the mythic stories are not all set in some remote past, but ones which we ourselves are in one sense continually acting out as we travel along our paths of destiny to the Kingdom of God, the Great Society, a technological utopia, or some other ultimate goal.

Myth, argues Northrop Frye, tends to be associated with primary concerns (food and drink, sex, property, and liberty of movement), and ideology with secondary ones (“patriotic and other attachments of loyalty, religious beliefs and class-conditioned attitudes and behaviour”) (*Words* 42). Because secondary concerns have everything to do with manipulation of primary ones, however, myth has continued to mediate this manipulation into the present day for all socio-economic classes. Here we encounter Levi-Strauss’s theory that one of the functions of myth is to mediate contradictions such as those between “desire and reality, the attainable and the unattainable, the individual and society” (Kirk 82). To this Kirk adds that myths “effect an altered emotional response to an aspect of our experience” (83), and Frye that myth is “part of the imaginative insulation that separates us from [our] environment” (*Code* 37). Elsewhere Frye observes that “it is not so much the satisfaction of ... concerns that are featured mythically as the anxiety about not getting them satisfied” (*Words* 43).

Frye saw the primary cultural forces brought from Europe to Canada as Christianity, mathematics, and a Cartesian egocentrism locating the essence of the human in the power of reason. These, he argued, had the ultimate effect of putting colonials and their descendants at odds with the place they had come to inhabit. Frye characterizes the typical Canadian perspective as “a garrison mentality, a mentality of defeat, denial, withdrawal” (Sullivan, “Northrop” 10), and suggests that the antidote is to “create a primitive indigenous mythological imagination” (11). Frye suggests that writers of non-Native descent make use of the indigenous mythology, but as Rosemary Sullivan, among others, has noted, there are clearly great difficulties with this. Frye’s most direct influence on the field, as Sullivan and others have observed, can best be seen in Margaret Atwood’s *Survival* (1969), which attempts an inductive survey of all of Canadian literature. Ultimately Sullivan arrives at the same conclusion with respect to Frye: that his synoptic system of myth creates itself as a kind of “circle game,” with Frye himself subject to an ironic “garrison mentality.” In its almost Platonist abstraction of myth as liter-

ary "form," Frye's system downplays the fact that myth in a social context cannot exist as a mere abstraction but requires belief in order to have meaning. The solution for the writer is "to recover the human stance implicit in myth, to recover the mythopoeic mind for which myth is a living instinctual grammar" (Sullivan, "Northrop" 6).

Popular mythographer Joseph Campbell views myth as "'indispensable' to all humanity and especially necessary in the modern age" (151) and like Frye sees myth as strongly tied to the unconscious. Carl Jung, popularizer of theories of the relationship between myth and the unconscious, was an influence on both Campbell and MacEwen. Jung focused on the process of psychic maturation as a response to recurrent conditions, viewing myth as a real social force negotiating primal behaviour patterns with the existence of the cultural unit under given conditions. MacEwen highlights this in her version of Lawrence's life in *The T.E. Lawrence Poems*, showing how he moved through crises in his life by wrestling with the myths of Christianity, Islam, and other "desert creeds."

Campbell succinctly identifies the following four functions of myth: 1) to elicit and support "a sense of awe before the mystery of being"; 2) "to render a cosmology, an image of the universe which will support and be supported by this sense of awe"; 3) "to support the current social order, to integrate the individual organically with his group"; and 4) "to initiate the individual into the order of realities of his own psyche, guiding him toward his own spiritual enrichment and realization" (518-21).

In performing these functions, the mythic faculty must necessarily address the question of Self and Other. At the earliest moments of awareness as in later life, we must always be asking what is part of the self and what is other, what is within and what without. Eventually we must encounter relationships with beings or realities which are in some ways self and in some ways other, and recognize that any given being or phenomenon can be both self and other at once, and that therefore everything in the universe is both self and other in varying degrees. The relationship between these tensions is the very essence of experience itself. Campbell argues that one of the originary and most important functions of myth is to dispel the infantile psychology of childhood and replace it with a pattern suitable for participation in the society as an adult. Here the egocentrism of the child must be replaced with a belief that the individual is a part of a larger entity, and is at one with it. The imagination of childhood must modulate into an adult imagination with different ways of "locating" consciousness's image of itself. The sense of imagined location modulates through a series of nodes: family, home, nation, community

of friends and acquaintances, and the land we live on, for instance. These identifications are all species of self-consciousness: the identification of ourselves with our communities, their imagined centres, and their imagined borders. As Frye puts it, part of the function of myth is to “draw a circumference around a human community and look inward toward that community” (*Code* 37).

The role of myth in poetry may be discerned not only by analysis of the structure of its text, as in Frye’s model, but also by examination of what it does, and what role it plays in a community that includes the poet herself. In a mass-mediated society, this is a complex issue. Since the development of print, English literary poetry has used myths from ancient Greece and the Near East for purposes lying far outside the referenced myth’s original context. Christian myth, widely developing in Europe around iconography and testament originating in an oral culture of the ancient Near East, has been overlaid, distorted or replaced by non-Christian and atheological layers of myth, many of these not easily visible by either poet or reader. As electronic communication technology has assumed a dominant role in providing a forum for the social imagination and thus for myth, the role of poetry with respect to myth has changed drastically. Moreover, as we now have far greater access to ideas from other cultures and times than humans have ever had before, in general the potential level of involvement in any more-or-less unified cultural “mythology” (apart from the myths of capitalism) is apt to be lessened as a result of the saturation of ideas in the mythological marketplace. Modern poets cannot make use of Classical, Eastern or even Christian myths with any guarantee that their readers will have familiarity with either the figures or the contexts. Even if they could, the demand for irony in such a society makes it very difficult indeed to make such references without taking some kind of ironic critical position into which the myth must play.

In general, the contemporary thrust of poetry in terms of myth is not toward orthodoxy of belief and action but toward a plurality and constant evolution. Poetry is a generator of possibility that energizes the circulation of ideas and keeps myth from degenerating into dogma in the service of ideology. Thus the community formed around a poet or around poetry recognizes itself largely through a recognition of the power of myth and metaphor in and of themselves, rather than in any particular myth or metaphor. On the one hand, then, literary poetry today is an embodiment of a certain kind of myth telling which is much more concerned with the introduction of new ideas, cross-cultural mythological imagination, and with making space for meditation, all more-or-less self-con-

sciously. The imaginary worlds inspired by poetry spark realignment of the reader's (or listener's) conceptions of reality, and these will in turn bring about a realignment of the ways the self is imagined in relation to that reality. On the other hand, a poem may still be subconsciously propagating myths on other levels, myths which are so much a part of our contemporary thought-systems that we may be unable to understand them as such.

As Gordon Johnston observes, "MacEwen means both to charge reality with significance and to humanize myths" (42). Frank Davey calls MacEwen's early work an "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" (47). MacEwen clarified her own intentions by using the "no-man's land" motif which became the title of her final book of fiction: to create by *living* in a world in which myth is incarnate. Both dreams and everyday life are imbued with a sense of wonder by MacEwen's employment of myth, as they give form to and mediate MacEwen's inner battles and search for identity and wholeness.

As MacEwen herself belonged to no specific community of belief and largely rejected the traditional stories of her own cultural heritage, her primary source of mythic community is through the connection with readers who can relate to her ongoing search for myth to enlighten the everyday world and buffer potential psychic turbulence. The connection with the reader here is as central as the male "Muse" to an understanding of MacEwen's poetry because the desire for union with the male partner is at some level coordinate with the desire to connect with her readers. As she puts it in "Written After Coming Out of a Deep Sleep," "You are the eyes of my Mind, and you are here to help me see my Dream" (*AM* 62). The Muse, for MacEwen, clearly plays a psychic role as per the functions of myth outlined above. There are elements of the sublime, of repeating life patterns, and of identity formation and the definition of Self and Other in her many poems in which the Muse is featured. Ultimately, there is a union in MacEwen's vision of this relationship, an ideal harmony where matter and form become indistinguishable, where the poetic persona and her imaginary lover are united, reflected in one another's eyes. In *The T.E. Lawrence Poems*, this ideal is approached ironically as Lawrence, a man who avoided women, becomes an ironic animus for the poet.

Sullivan concludes that MacEwen "found in Lawrence an embodiment of the schizophrenia of his culture" (*Shadow* 321), the brutality of imperial policy and nationalist warfare against the idealism of European



thought; as Lawrence himself put it, “civilization has always paid the mind from the body’s funds” (322). Her biography notes that MacEwen’s ex-husband Nikos Tsingos has a photo of MacEwen clowning with a towel on her head on the Greek waterfront pretending to be “Lawrence of Antiparos” (268). Here MacEwen is imitating Lawrence imitating an Arab (or Greek), each looking with a sense of romance at the figures of the past. Sullivan refers to Lawrence as MacEwen’s “chosen twin.” Comparing pictures of the two, she observes that “the faces fit: the eyes have the same guarded and desperate intensity and the mouths the same delicacy. They are both intensely androgynous” (317). Both were slight of stature, intensely introspective, born of problematic marriages, and aware of their own potential for psychological dysfunction. Both remained childless, lived frugally, and wrote prolifically. Both blossomed early in their careers as a result of the way they met their psychological challenges using their powerful imaginations, but in spite of these successes spent their later lives wrestling with depression among the lower social strata. Lawrence died at the age of forty-seven, MacEwen at the age of forty-six. Both sought to find a place for themselves in living out their imaginations, hoping to redeem the present by actively illuminating it with the past.

Assuming the voice of a real-life character similar to yet more tortured than herself allowed MacEwen a unique opportunity to express her gift for dramatic monologue. Following precedents set by Atwood’s *Journals of Susanna Moodie* and Michael Ondaatje’s *Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (both 1970), in the Lawrence poems the relationship of poet to persona is one of dramatic irony. As Stephen Scobie observes, “the Lawrence poems are clearly personal as well as historical” and Lawrence “enables MacEwen to explore the psychological attractions of violence in very much the same way as Billy the Kid did for Ondaatje” (278). Despite the apparent relationship of dramatic irony, however, MacEwen does not, in Scobie’s view, get to the bottom of her subject; Lawrence, like the stone in “The Story of a Stone” (*TE* 23), refuses to give up all his secrets. Regardless, the resonance provided by the overlaying of Lawrence’s and MacEwen’s voices is clearly a major part of the work’s appeal. Not only is MacEwen’s life illuminated through its connection with Lawrence’s, but MacEwen’s poetry is given an added resonance by virtue of its interaction with Lawrence’s own writing. At another remove we find an analogous relationship exists between the reader’s own voice and that of MacEwen’s in the reading process itself. The triple-layer relationship makes reading the poems an especially rich “polyphonic” experience and is one reason for the success of the work.

Historically, Lawrence is a transitional figure, a pseudo-Modern lauded as an imperialist hero even as he lived a life of hypocrisy and made himself an anti-hero by telling the world about it in graphic detail. One might see Lawrence's experience reflected in "The Waste Land," in which T.S. Eliot seems to point the way out of the limbo he perceives in the aftermath of the First World War by looking back through the evolution of Western myths to their roots in the Middle East, and then through those to ancient India for the message from the Upanishads that organize the poem's resolution. The alienation from one's own cultural background was much more the norm for MacEwen's generation than for Lawrence's, but even then the search for alternatives in other cultures was just beginning to become a widespread phenomenon. As a North American, MacEwen is displaced as part of a permanent colonization, rejecting her own inherited cultural mythology even more than Lawrence did. As MacEwen writes in "Reviresco: In Memory of Padraig O'Broin,"

I never went to the land of my Scotch fathers  
 The snows of Canada long ago claimed me,  
 I went east and south but never greenward,  
 I went in and out but there was no road homeward. (*SM* 26)

MacEwen achieves a unique effect in reaching back only so far as Lawrence, rather than trying to take the contemporary Canadian reader all the way across the divide to ancient Babylon, Egypt, or Greece by herself. She has only half as much work to do, and gains an advantage by exploiting as subject matter the mythic trap in which Lawrence finds himself. The reader's own personal relationship with myth, belief, or cosmology is here doubly illuminated, and a de facto line traced through the history of the crisis of myth in the twentieth century West.

Lawrence is a tragic figure trapped in a kind of limbo between two lives, not unlike MacEwen herself: a modern seeking to combat alienation with a search through the cultures of other times and other places, ultimately becoming caught, like ourselves perhaps, in another kind of no-man's land. The ability to reside in no-man's land has with postmodernity become a virtue which ultimately may ensure our survival. But the postmodern ideal no-man's land is not the same as that inhabited by Lawrence, or the one formed by MacEwen's confluence of life-worlds and myth-worlds, for theirs is tragic with little emphasis on the regenerative. We may look with a certain distance on MacEwen, as well as upon Lawrence, having accustomed ourselves to multicultural society and an accordant

pluralism of belief in which pragmatism, negotiation, and difference are the key terms of the day.

MacEwen offered the following comments on Lawrence in a radio interview transcribed in Sullivan's biography:

Lawrence was fascinated with Arab mysticism, with Semitic mysticism. He was drawn to the desert Arabs, to the Bedouin in particular, among other things by the fact that they felt such great joy in renouncing the treasures of the world. It was almost a voluptuousness in not having anything, and the relationship to their God was a passionate one, intense and passionate. Lawrence was constantly in awe of this but he could never achieve it in himself and I feel the same way. This is one of the reasons why I wrote this book in the first person, myself as Lawrence. I feel that way myself looking upon this marvellous religious phenomenon and not being able, quite, to participate in it. Knowing however what it means. I feel much more of a mystically minded person than Lawrence was. I feel perhaps closer to the kind of passionate fervour the desert Semites felt towards the God in this vast nothingness and a feeling of identification with the infinite, the one, the all, and the nothing, however one wants to put it. I feel that to Lawrence these were only words that fascinated him, concepts that fascinated him, but didn't quite touch him. (330-31)

Lawrence's life and psychology make compelling material, as indicated by both the vast number of books on the subject and recurring periods of popularity with the Anglo-American public. *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* is an intriguing and formidable document, and a survey of biographical accounts indicates that the private Lawrence was just as fascinating and complex a character as the public persona he cultivated and then grew weary of. Lawrence was one of five illegitimate children of a landed aristocrat who had given up much of his entitlement in favour of a relationship with Lawrence's mother. Lawrence's mother's guilt grew into an antagonistic relationship with her religious fervour, and the fact that the parents weren't legally married was kept from the public and the children alike. Lawrence makes an exemplary case of the repressed neurotic Victorian in whose upbringing guilt and shame played an integral part. He avoided touching people, and there appear to have been psychological issues manifest in difficulties on the parts of Lawrence and other family members in expressing emotions and in giving and receiving love.

Lawrence's relationship with religion, prophecy, and myth is a

complex one, and MacEwen takes full advantage of this in the poems. Mrs. Lawrence and T.E.'s elder brother Robert were devout Christians who evidently denied or ignored those aspects of reality that didn't fit with their beliefs (Mack 9-15). Although Lawrence refers to himself as Christian in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, he was apparently more of a skeptic. Nevertheless, one of his fellows from his Oxford student days remarked that Lawrence "had the mind of a medieval monk" (58). His youthful interests lay in the romantic literature that supplied Christian Crusaders "an ideology that could ennoble, if not the deeds themselves, at least what motivated them" (38). Lawrence took part in Bible readings as a young man, but his later life was increasingly secular, and the time spent "in the ranks" a kind of secular monkhood. MacEwen's Lawrence is contemptuous of his mother's God: in "My Mother" (TE 5), he states, "She helped God / to erase all sins but her own." His mother is likened here to an Arab version of "Mother Eve," a three-hundred-foot-tall green giant, and her Christian message referred to as "fairy tales" in "My Father" (6).

MacEwen's Lawrence offers some alternatives to the received family cosmology, putting himself in the role of prophet in the process:

The child leads the parents on to bear him; he demands  
to be born. And I sense somehow that God  
Is not yet born; I want to create Him.

...

God is not yet born, and we await the long scream  
of his coming. We want the water to break  
So we can say: *In the Beginning was the Word.*  
Meanwhile, if one must die for something,  
there's nothing like a cross  
from which to contemplate the world. (TE7)

The notion that it is the child who brings about her or his own birth, a figure also described in "The Parents," is "a powerful poetic idea" (Sullivan 324). Here the formless one asks to be given form, and so brings about a union of the male and female to enable the incarnation. MacEwen's Lawrence here positions himself as a prophet who must create God, guided by an imperative not unlike MacEwen's to "create a myth." In "The Desert" (20), there is an implicit equation of the process whereby the desert God says to the prophet "Tell Me who I am" with a contemporary perspective on religion according to which the seeker uses his imagination and knowledge to create his or her own religious world.

MacEwen's Lawrence is caught in a mythic trap. He begins as a psychological victim of guilt as a result of the Christian doctrine of original sin, then rejects Christianity and discovers, like the prophets he discusses, the God of the desert, whereupon his "head implodes into pure light" (20). Unfortunately, he cannot assume the desert creed any more easily than he could his original one. In the meantime, he has put himself in the position of martyr and saviour in his very attempts to escape Christianity. In this he is like MacEwen's Julian (*Julian the Magician*, 1963), who finds himself unintentionally acting out the life of Christ, and even more like an inversion of her Akhenaton (*King of Egypt, King of Dreams*, 1971), a dreamer whose parents resemble Lawrence's and who undermined his own attempts at creating a new myth, likewise putting himself in the very position he had first sought to avoid.<sup>3</sup> Having thus suffered a tragic revenge of the gods and psychological wounds from the war, Lawrence following his return home became a regular member of the armed forces, that orderly, secular discipline he had derided during his time as an intelligence agent in the Middle East.

The real Lawrence was greatly attracted by the mythic world of the Bedouin Arabs with whom he lived and worked in the desert. He was also an analyst of human psychology and sociology. *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* describes the pattern of the Semitic prophets of the Middle East: leaving the settled areas for the desert, arriving at a conception of God particular to the desert, sensing enlightenment, and then returning to town to share their lessons (37). Lawrence notes that "the founders of the three great creeds fulfilled this cycle," and that "their possible coincidence was proved a law by the parallel life-histories of the myriad others, the unfortunate who failed" (37). In Lawrence's view, the "common base of all the Semitic creeds ... was the ever-present idea of world-worthlessness" (38), an idea consistent with Lawrence's own ascetic tendencies. In Lawrence's view, the Bedouin God "is not anthropomorphic, not tangible, not moral or ethical, not concerned with the world or with him, not natural ... . The Bedouin could not look for God within him: he was too sure that he was within God" (39). Lawrence observes that this special and intense relationship with God was not possible in the cities, dependent as it was on the desert dweller "shutting his eyes to the world." This resulted in a loss of compassion, writes Lawrence, turning "his human kindness to the image of the waste in which he hid" (40), and occasioning a subsequent "delight in pain" (40). In this latter observation we see an image of Lawrence himself.

In illustration of this asceticism, Lawrence tells a story MacEwen

herself treats in "The Absolute Room" (*TE* 21). On a trip to a Syrian ruin during a pre-war archeological excursion, Lawrence encountered a building whose clay "was said to have been kneaded for greater richness, not with water, but with the precious essential oils of flowers" (Lawrence 38). Dahoum at last invites Lawrence to "'come and smell the very sweetest scent of all'" in a room whose window opens to the desert at which they "drank with open mouths of the effortless, empty, eddyless wind of the desert.... 'This,' they told me, 'is the best: it has no taste'" (38). In MacEwen's poem, Dahoum says "we call / this room the sweetest of them all," and Lawrence responds, "Because there is nothing there" (*TE* 21). This is then employed as a metaphor for his relationship with Dahoum, one in which neither is supposed to possess anything of the other. In the poem's final stanza Dahoum observes that, because Lawrence's eyes are blue, he can see right through to "the quiet, powerful sky beyond" (21). It is implied that Lawrence's soul, to which the eyes ought to be windows, is itself transparent; this is a compliment to the success of Lawrence's asceticism and/or assumption of ascetic Arab ways.

An anecdote later in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* serves as a kind of ironic comment on the position of the prophet, and of Lawrence's own ambivalent relationship to prophecy, love, and Christianity. In a passage which provides comic relief, human interest, and an opportunity to shift gears from war narrative to the kinds of sociological analysis he likes so well, Lawrence describes an unusual moment in which he believes he has encountered a prophet while bathing. He is struck by the man's exclamation, "'The love is from God; and of God; and towards God,'" which strikes Lawrence as highly uncharacteristic of Arab theology:

I had believed Semites unable to use love as a link between themselves and God, indeed, unable to conceive such a relation except with the intellectuality of Spinoza, who loved so rationally and sexlessly, and transcendently that he did not seek, or rather had not permitted, a return. Christianity had seemed to me the first creed to proclaim love in this upper world, from which the desert and the Semite (from Moses to Zeno) had shut it out: and Christianity was a hybrid, except in its first root not essentially Semitic. Its birth in Galilee had saved it from being just one more of the innumerable revelations of the Semite. (364)

Lawrence goes on to muse about the evolution of Christianity in the Greek culture dominant in Galilee and its transformation as it adapted

itself to Europe. Returning to the anecdote, he recounts how he found himself “in fear of revelation” and so ended his bath and persuaded the man to come share a meal with his party, hoping “to make him utter doctrine” (366). The scenario comes to a comically ironic end as Lawrence discovers that the man is well known to his Bedouin companions as “an afflicted man,” one treated as a mad beggar, who never spoke “except when abroad by himself or alone among the sheep and goats” (366).

William Chace has observed a tendency for Lawrence to be moulded to fit the needs of those who write of him to fashion a hero in their preferred images, noting particularly how Liddell Hart, one of Lawrence’s early biographers, drew tacit comparisons between Lawrence and Christ, making of Lawrence an initiate of wisdom humbly leading a people to freedom. Of Lawrence’s role in Damascus, Hart wrote “For three days he ruled it: on the fourth he left, driven out by his own perception of the danger to his wisdom, and to the freedom this implies” (qtd. in Chace 131). He left behind “a message that could not die,” one that

gained strength by virtue of its emanating from one who had freed himself of all normal desires, a being who was “perhaps in far more than normal measure . . . both masculine and feminine,” and a being who fused in himself a cluster of specific virtues: “fundamental goodness,” “intense kindness,” “unstinted generosity,” “fairness,” “compassion,” “purity of motive,” “scrupulousness,” “thirst for truth” and “a high courage.” (qtd. in Chace 131)

The tone MacEwen’s Lawrence adopts in discussing his martyr complex in the last line of “Our Child Which Art in Heaven” (*TE* 7) is sardonic. In other poems the feeling is more earnest. The sense that he is responsible for his parents is shown by his feelings of guilt around their original sin as depicted in “The Parents” (4). This guilt is intimately tied to the issue of illegitimacy, adding to its power in Lawrence’s psyche and in MacEwen’s poems. MacEwen’s Lawrence addresses the hero he wishes to be in “The Legitimate Prince,” comparing himself to a flea in that hero’s bed and falling off its edge “into Hell” (8). In “It Was Only a Game” MacEwen’s Lawrence tells of childhood play-scenarios in which he imagined himself “saviour of a whole race” (11), and he sleeps with a brass-rubbing of a Crusader on the ceiling in “In Bed” (12). The position of “On The Day of Resurrection” (44) in the book’s narrative structure is dependent on the animals in question being the spirits inside Lawrence. The animal resurrection is followed by the dreamlike “Morning Horses” (45), and follows “Solar Wind” (42), in which he receives a sort of inspi-

ration and assumes the position of authority in the society. The play at immortality is over, however, with "Deraa" (46).

The confluence of fear and love is recurrent in MacEwen's Lawrence, reflecting this common concern of poet and subject. Lawrence becomes identified with opposing forces in "It Was Only a Game" and "Animal Spirits" (15), in which he sees himself becoming the animal spirits he fears and which with he is wrestling.<sup>4</sup> In the opening line of this poem, he asks "Is it true, then, that one fears all that one loves?" In the subsequent poem, "The Child and the Cathedral" (16), MacEwen's Lawrence enters into a fear/love relationship with a child he sees outside a cathedral, then reveals his intense, even pathological tendency to identify himself with the Other in his tirade against the "damned little bird that dashed itself out" against his sidecar in a motorcycle accident. The end of this poem states clearly the inability to separate feelings of love and fear as MacEwen's Lawrence speaks of "horrible love that bashes its brains out against the light." The character Auda offers a warrior's take on this identity as he loves what he kills ("Auda" 33).

The kind of cosmology discovered in the desert by MacEwen's Lawrence is most plain in "The Story of a Stone" (23). The final line is indicative of a decidedly Eastern turn, as responsibility for the moving of the universe is given explicitly to a mysterious, silent god. Silence is everywhere in this poem: the stone will not speak, but within the stone live "Miracles, strange light"; that is, the incomprehensible bare essence of being itself. MacEwen's Lawrence's attempts at retrieving human quality from the stone fail as the stone proves to be the perfect contemplative self-sufficient ascetic, needing not even awareness of God. "Thunder-Song" (24) describes an experience of imaginative identification in Carcemish with the mythic desert past. A storm induces a hallucinatory experience in which MacEwen's Lawrence finds himself in Babylon "between twin rivers." The scene is a ritual in which two musicians, who, having sung of war and love and death before the storm broke, are now controlling thunder and lightning in the ancestral myth-world in which "the god" appears. As the storm and the vision subside, MacEwen's Lawrence imagines that when he dies he will encounter "a helmeted seven foot god coming quietly in blue light" toward him.

All the examples cited thus far from *The T.E. Lawrence Poems* are from the first of the book's three sections, "The Dreamers of the Day: for Dahoum." The last two examples stand out against the sometimes bitter or pathetic tone of the poems which describe the earlier family life. It does seem, from biographical reports, that Lawrence's pre-war engagement in



an archeological project at Carcemish near the Euphrates river was one of the happiest times of his life. MacEwen opts to say little about the social or archeological aspects of the experience, focusing instead on Lawrence's meeting with Dahoum and on the desert meditations shown in "The Story of a Stone" and "Thunder-Song," as well as in "The Desert" and "The Absolute Room."

The tone adopted in the book's second section, "Solar Wind: The War," is generally more cynical, in keeping with the secular focus of the military narrative. This attitude is announced at the outset with the poem "Apologies," in which MacEwen's Lawrence acknowledges his position in the mythic trap:

The reckless Bedouin and the civilized Englishman  
fought for control, so that I, whatever I was,  
Fell into a dumb void that even a false god could not fill,  
could not inhabit. (29)

In "What It's Like" (35) MacEwen's Lawrence reaffirms his position in spiritual "no-man's land," comparing a belief "in everything" with a snakebite "remedy" in which the victim is left to die while his companions recite verses from the Koran. Cynicism is transformed into an earnest recollection of a moment of enlightenment in the desert in "Solar Wind" (42) and the singular, odd attempt at prophecy, "The Day of the Resurrection" (44). In "Solar Wind," MacEwen's Lawrence reports an encounter with this dual-elemental force that burns past and future and melts the present "down the middle," leaving "everything gold, gold in its wake." Uncharacteristically speaking of himself in the second person, the protagonist realizes that

You must find a god to worship or you will die  
In that unholy moment just before darkness and the sound  
of guns.

This poem occurs at the high point in the speaker's campaigning spirits, after the successful strategic capture of Akaba and bombing of the Turkish railways, and before the successive disasters of Lawrence's capture and rape at Deraa, the deaths of his dynamic servant Daoud and of Dahoum, who had served as Lawrence's inspiration for taking on the role of "saviour of a race," and before the atrocities at Tafas. The question remains an open one: did MacEwen's Lawrence find a god to worship in that "unholy moment"?

In "On the Day of the Resurrection" he assumes momentarily the

mantle of prophet, mocking Christian expectations of the Resurrection with a scene reminiscent of Revelation. A monster is described rising out of the earth with distinctive attributes of eleven animals and with “the voice of an ass” speaking Arabic. In “The Real Enemies” (48), the protagonist voices his own impending retreat into nihilism as he calls “hope” an enemy, and champions failure as consistent with Islam:

Islam is surrender — the passionate surrender of the self,  
the puny self, to God.

We declared a Holy War upon Him and were victors as He won.

Here the acceptance of divine mystery and human powerlessness evident in “The Story of a Stone” has become the alignment of the self with the power of God as the enemy, continuing the pattern of identification with the Other. This is the opportunity for MacEwen’s Lawrence to martyr himself, and yet he avoids the hubris implicit in the self-conscious seeking of the role.

This position of humiliating self-sacrifice is carried through to the concluding section of the book, “Aftermath: Necessary Evils.” “In the Ranks” describes the ongoing penance MacEwen’s Lawrence undergoes, keeping his “soul in prison” (61) for its own safety through a life of enforced subservience and masochism. In “The R.A.F.” he celebrates the entirely “masculine,” “logical” system of men and military technology, calling it “the Machine” (62). Ironically, here the soul is allowed to fly temporarily, “on smoky, blackened wings” not unlike those of MacEwen’s “motorcycle Icarus.” (“Poem Improvised Around a First Line”, *BB*6). “The Void” (64) relives the helpless moments in the past life of MacEwen’s Lawrence from the perspective of early retirement, and in “There Is No Place to Hide” he calls his soul “irresistibly foul” (*TE*67). At the end of this poem, the image of the suicidal bird is brought back and implicitly likened to Lawrence himself:

Outside my window, a small tit bird bashes itself  
against the glass. At first I thought  
it was admiring itself in the window.  
Now I know it’s mad.

MacEwen’s Lawrence here makes the jump from a pathological identification with the Other to self-conscious metaphor in which he characterizes his own behaviour in terms of the bird’s. The implication is that his own martyrdom, evident in the years in the war and in the ranks, might once have been viewed as a kind of narcissism, but is now seen as simply

an indication of insanity. One may also see the bird as MacEwen the poet looking through her imaginary window at the imaginary Lawrence inside, and the response that of the imagined Lawrence looking out at her as she bashes herself against the glass. Given the great bird imagery which occurs throughout MacEwen's work (evident, for example, in "The Red Bird You Wait For" (*SM* 1) and "Invocations" (*SM* 6)), the identification of Lawrence/MacEwen and the small bird is especially pointed.

Since the vicious circle of self-abnegation is already in full swing, this realization serves only to inspire further self-abuse in MacEwen's Lawrence. In "Hot Baths," he states, "All I want now is to boil the Hell out of myself," and hints at suicide with an anecdote about Arabs leaping to their deaths down a well said to be a "direct route to heaven" (*TE* 68). At last death comes, and the final two poems are spoken from just beyond the grave. He has died in an attempt to save two young cyclists from his speeding motorcycle, he states in "Notes From the Dead Land" (69). The final poem, "Departures" (70), implies that a peace has been found at last, but makes no mention of God, focusing rather on images drawn from his time with Feisal in the desert, a recollection eerily foreshadowing similar recollections in *Afterworlds* (1989), MacEwen's final volume of poetry, published immediately after her death.

It is clear that MacEwen experienced some substantial psychological trauma in her youth, brought about by her mother's mental instability. There followed a further deterioration of her parents' respective conditions as MacEwen matured; later, she herself began to exhibit her parents' traits, becoming a closet alcoholic and visitor to addiction counsellors, increasingly estranged from social networks. MacEwen's battles with alcoholism and with the psychological dimensions around which it grew can be seen as a kind of "hot bath" in which MacEwen wanted to "boil the hell" out of herself. MacEwen's inner wars are reflected in the power struggles of the Middle East, which today continue and trace their character and issues from decisions made in the wake of Euro-American occupation of the area during Lawrence's time.

MacEwen becomes a kind of tragic heroine as she identifies herself with the narcissistic Muse of Lawrence, who ultimately finds himself a sacrifice as well as a casualty. MacEwen, too, is seen as valiant in her attempts to empower herself and her world using the mythic imagination actively, but ultimately both the poet and her subject are trapped, like many of us, in no-man's land. Lawrence the modern may be seen to embody the schizophrenia, the wilful contradictions of behaviour and thought, typical of his colonial culture. MacEwen typifies her own cul-

ture: a nomad of myth and history, she is unable to escape the myths into which she was born and unable to fully embrace any given imaginative belief system. But she succeeds in turning her struggles into art, showing us the crisis of myth emblematic of twentieth-century cross-cultural evolution and pushing us onward. MacEwen the poet becomes a heroine in refusing the secular, rationalist alternative to received myth and ideology, sacrificing herself to the exploration which we must not imagine is over as we learn how to understand identity, Self and Other, in ever-changing ways, with the future of humanity ultimately at stake.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The four books by MacEwen most frequently cited in this essay are abbreviated as follows in parenthetical references: *BB* (*Breakfast for Barbarians*); *SM* (*The Shadow-Maker*); *AM* (*Armies of the Moon*); *TE* (*The T.E. Lawrence Poems*).

<sup>2</sup> Kirk and others have shown that the category "myth" cannot be a rigidly defined one, and that elements of folktale and legend are found in many myths, and mythic qualities are found in folktales and legends. Although Kirk successfully shows the critical insufficiency of the theories of Franz Boas, Claude Levi-Strauss, James Frazer, Mircea Eliade, Bronislaw Malinowski, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Ernst Cassirer, he admits that the failure in each case results not from theoretical incoherence but from the attempt to force a unified theory onto a disparate mass of material. Some myths, Kirk concedes to the theories he criticizes, are "nature" myths, reflecting cyclical patterns or violent eruptions of the natural world; some are "charter" myths, providing an imaginative foundation for the society in which the myth grew; some do recall the "creative era" or supernatural "pre-history" of a society, or provide illustrations of social rules and regulations regarding sexual and other customs. Dreamlike elements can be observed in some myths; some that do reflect patterns of behaviour that might be related to a "collective unconscious," and some do mediate perceived contradictions or interpose an imaginative buffer between subject and an otherwise incomprehensible reality.

Kirk criticizes structuralist theories of myth such as those of Levi-Strauss on the grounds that they assume a more-or-less static culture for whose maintenance myth is responsible, and a fundamental human psyche which is more-or-less consistent from one time and place to another. This second point is also a major weakness of other models, especially those of the Cambridge school, which view myth as a proto-science undertaken by minds similar in nature to our own, but at an earlier stage of development. Yet Kirk himself seems also to assume that the minds of the Greeks or other myth-making cultures were not so very different from our own, nor was the phenomenal world of which they were a part. Kirk dismisses models such as that put forth by Lucien Levy-Bruhl which assume "a special kind of 'primitive mentality' ... according to which phenomena were connected by 'mystical participation'" (Kirk 42). The term "participation" should not be so readily dismissed, however. It has been used, for example, by philosopher Owen Barfield to characterize the active process by which phenomena are brought into being by the human psyche. Kirk, rejecting the condescending overtones of Levy-Bruhl's theory, has thrown the baby out with the bathwater in rejecting categorically the idea of "participation." Kirk's overall argument is thus undercut by his failure to take into account one of the aspects of Greek and other myths which is perhaps most fas-

cinating from the contemporary perspective: the way myths from oral cultures imply ways of perceiving the world that are seemingly alien to our own "modern" mental habits, yet also strangely familiar. Barfield's notion of "evolution of consciousness," apart from its Christian bias on certain points, is an important corrective to any theory concerning premodern human minds and the realities they perceive (or continue to perceive). For surely it is just as presumptuous, and misleading, to assume that the realities experienced by other psyches are not significantly different in kind from our own as it is to assume that they are both different and inferior.

Northrop Frye assumes that with the onset of the metonymic phase in ancient Greece and the attendant supercession of *logos* over *mythos*, "myth loses its ideological functions except for what is taken over and adapted by *logos*" (*Words with Power* 33). Frye argues that the Christian myths of the Bible were "translated into *logos* language" and that "before reading the Bible one had to learn how to read it from a structure of *logos*-formulated doctrine" (34). It is the main focus of Frye's project in *The Great Code* (1982) and *Words with Power* (1990) to undo this distorting effect and put us in tune with the real metaphorical and mythical structure of the Bible. Frye's usual bias as a literary scholar is as baldly betrayed here as anywhere in his work, as his focus on the text of the Bible (and more narrowly still the narrative portions of it) turns him away from the Christian myths that kept being created throughout the metonymic and descriptive phases of language and in fact are still being created today through song, ritual, custom, legend, and picture (as discussed, for example, in Alan Watts's *Myth and Ritual in Christianity* [1957]). *Anatomy of Criticism* (also 1957) was based in large part on Frye's theory that the myths that arose in the oral cultures of ancient Greece and the Near East during the metaphorical phase of language embody certain structural principles of narrative that allow them in the descriptive phase to become displaced into what we have come to call "literature." Just as Frazer saw ancient myth as an early form of conceptual thinking, Frye saw it as an early form of literature. In *Anatomy* Frye emphasizes the synchronic elements of myth over the diachronic, and argues that "the structural principles of literature are as closely related to mythology and comparative religion as those of painting are to geometry" (135). The success of Frye's argument depends to some extent on the sheer amount of textual material to which he refers. From the start, however, it is apparent that Frye's system is, in spite of its aims to universality, to some degree provisional. As Woodcock observes, *The Great Code* "comes out of the heart of the English dissenting tradition which, dispensing with liturgy, gave the Bible a centrality rivaled only in other puritan and book-obsessed traditions" (149-50).

<sup>3</sup> See MacEwen's novels *Julian the Magician* (1963) and *King of Egypt, King of Dreams* (1971). The conclusion of Atwood's essay alludes to a comparison of the Muse with Christ, "the Word made flesh" (76), a metaphor especially noteworthy in this case as human figures in MacEwen's poetry often become words, letters, names, and sounds. Though MacEwen occasionally speaks of God as if from a nominally Christian perspective, only in *Julian the Magician* is Christ a substantial mythical focus. Not surprisingly, MacEwen's Christ resembles the gnostic Christ much more than the Protestant. In gnostic understanding, subsequently influential in the formation of the Christian doctrine and visible in the Gospel of John, Christ is a type of *pistis sophia*, divine wisdom pre-existing in verbal form as an aspect of God before incarnation. Christ certainly can be said in Christian thought to inspire people to creative acts, but rarely is this inspiration seen as essentially artistic, as Christian dogma does not encourage a speculative employment of the imagination upon scripture. One may, however, see the Christ who is *pistis sophia* as a kind of Muse inasmuch as he may be potentially incarnate in more than one form, thereby becoming, like Marduk, the son of the great sky God, the wind that found its form in the previously chaotic earth.

<sup>4</sup> Of metaphor patterns receiving better treatment in *The T.E. Lawrence Poems* than elsewhere in MacEwen's poetry, the most prominent is that of animals-as-spirits. MacEwen's Lawrence is poised as an intermediary between spirit interior and spirit exterior. In many cases the interior is figured as bestial. "Animal Spirits" (TE 15), MacEwen's quintessential "wrestling with the angel" poem, is the most refined of her animal poems, identifying in Jungian fashion the contact with the spirit within as a meeting with animals. In contrast to his father, Lawrence's mind is "sudden and silent as a wildcat." In "The Child and the Cathedral" (16), he sees the child as an animal, then moves to the metaphor of the small bird which "dashed itself out" against the sidecar of his motorcycle, inadvertently making him responsible for killing the spirit he loves. MacEwen's Lawrence claims to like cats and camels in "Furthermore" (17) "because they chase their appetites". The lions come to life in "Thunder-Song" (24), laughing at Lawrence and his companion(s), signaling the shift from the momentary to the mythic that takes place there. The plethora of animal spirits which are indicative of God are paraded in "On The Day of the Resurrection" (44), playing on both Revelation and on the parable of the blind men and elephant. Horses are called "the custodians of our souls" in "Horses" (53), and celebrated in their various aspects, spirits we metaphorically ride. The horses of the war and the bicycles of his youth have become his motorcycles, "devil-horses," "sons of thunder" in "Boanerges" (65). His past has become "a tin can tied to the tail of a dog" ("The Desirability of El Aurens" 66) as his myth has overtaken him. Finally, we find the metaphoric identification with the small, mad bird that "bashes itself against the glass" ("There Is No Place To Hide" 67).

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