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OPEN SECRETS:
FETISHICITY IN THE POETRY
OF GWENDOLYN MACEWEN

by

Dorothy Shostak

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

at

Dalhousie University
Halifax, Nova Scotia
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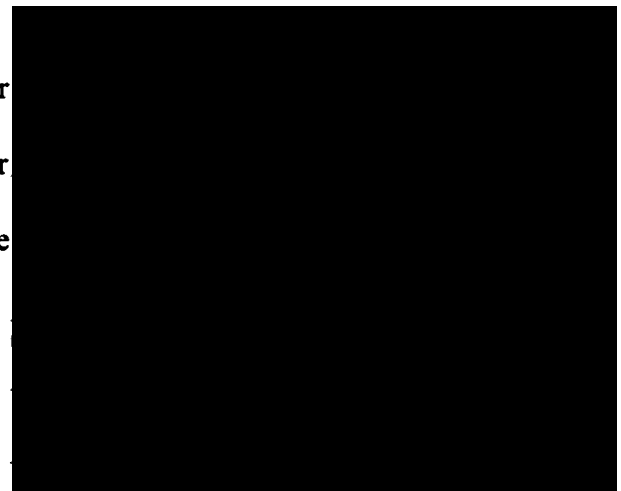
The undersigned hereby certify that they have read and recommend to the Faculty of
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of Gwendolyn MacEwen"

by Dorothy Shostak

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Dated: March 16, 2001

External Examiner
Research Supervisor
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Dedicated to Jessica, Seth, Ramona, Rhiannon, Torin,
and to my infant granddaughter, Helena Rosa, with love

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Abstract

Open Secrets: Fetishicity in the Poetry of Gwendolyn MacEwen

In contrast to those critics who see Gwendolyn MacEwen's poetry as structured by a dialectical logic which seeks to create a harmonious synthesis from the fusion of opposites, this study contends that MacEwen's poetry is more usefully understood as structured by a logic of disavowal: the simultaneous concealment and revelation of difference and the anxiety it generates. Disavowal is most apparent in those poems which are overdetermined by multiple fetish discourses -- particularly the discourses of sexual, material, aesthetic, and spiritual economies -- and endows those poems with a peculiar and noticeable uncanny energy. In Chapter One, I review the migration of the term "fetish" from its original use in the intercultural spaces of trade relations between Europe and West Africa, into disparate discourses, and drawing on Hal Foster's work on seventeenth-century Dutch still lifes, define the term "fetishicity" as the simultaneous overdetermination, by multiple fetish discourses, of a literary in contrast to a visual text. Chapter Two explores the beginnings of fetishicity in MacEwen's work and its relationship to her mythopoeic method by focusing on two groups of early poems: the unpublished series "Adam's Alphabet" and the "eden" poems from her first collections *Selah*, *The Drunken Clock*, and *The Rising Fire*, in which fetishicity is apparent in MacEwen's interest in exotic alphabets and in metaphors of eden, all of which are constructed using strategies of disavowal which suggest a haunting secret that the poet simultaneously desires to conceal and to reveal. Chapter Three analyzes MacEwen's use of a symbolic vocabulary derived from fetish discourses in poems from *The Rising Fire*, *A Breakfast for Barbarians*, *The Shadow-Maker*, and *Armies of the Moon* to satirize North American consumer culture based on the production and circulation of commodities and to explore the circulation of desire and its multiple disavowals in the material economy. Chapter Four continues the analysis of fetish discourses in an example of MacEwen's mature work, *The T. E. Lawrence Poems*, in which a traditional Orientalism, again signaling the attraction and repulsion of the fact of difference, is subverted by the logic of disavowal. I conclude that although MacEwen's oeuvre frequently thematizes myth, alchemy, and the exotic, the poetry's real power derives from the fetishicity of her texts, their embodiment of disavowal.

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Introduction
Mythopoeia to Fetishicity:
Gwendolyn MacEwen and Fetish Discourse

"To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to
invest it with the ability to look at us in return."
-- Walter Benjamin

When an object "looks back" at us, whether it is a commodity in the marketplace, a sexual fetish object, a primitive amulet, or a work of art, it is its haunting gaze that gives it, in Walter Benjamin's terms, a sense of "aura," of luminosity and energy. But of course such an object only appears to be gazing, because of the uncanny logic of the fetish, which both conceals and reveals our most secret fears and desires. Such a logic informs much of the poetry of Canadian writer Gwendolyn MacEwen, in whose work images of the eye, of seeing, and of the returned gaze are significant. MacEwen is probably best known as a "mythopoeic" writer, a categorization she did much to create by her famous claim, "I want to create a myth."¹ About her own work Gwendolyn MacEwen has said:

In my poetry I am concerned with finding the

¹ Margaret Atwood reports this remark in her 1970 paper, "MacEwen's Muse" (*Canadian Literature* 45: 23-32), but there is no earlier record of the remark appearing in print; perhaps it occurred in private correspondence. MacEwen repeats the remark in her 1986 essay "A Poet's Journey into the Interior," *Cross-Canada Writers' Quarterly* 8.3-4 (1986): 19.

relationships between what we call the "real" world and that other world which consists of dream, fantasy and myth. I've never felt that these "two worlds" are as separate as one might think, and in fact my poetry as well as my life seems to occupy a place--you might call it a kind of no-man's land--between the two.²

From the beginning of her career, MacEwen has been recognized by her peers as an important Canadian writer, but since her death in 1987 critical attention to her work has focused on only a few individual texts. Jan Bartley's valuable introduction, *Invocations: The Poetry and Prose of Gwendolyn MacEwen* (1983), is the only book-length study of MacEwen's work, but it does not consider *The T. E. Lawrence Poems* or *Afterworlds*, MacEwen's last collections of new poems written before her death. Bartley's *Invocations* explores MacEwen's use of the western alchemical tradition as part of her mythopoeic method. Bartley discusses MacEwen's work in terms of the poet's vision of a "binary structure of reality" and "desire to combine inherent opposites into a harmonious unity,"³ and she explores some of the recurring patterns of symbols and imagery in

² Gwendolyn MacEwen, statement, *Rhymes and Reasons: Nine Canadian Poets Discuss Their Work*, ed. John Robert Colombo (Toronto and Montreal: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971) 65.

³ Jan Bartley, *Invocations: The Poetry and Prose of Gwendolyn MacEwen* (Vancouver: U of British Columbia P, 1983) 34.

MacEwen's work, such as that of sun/moon, light/dark, waking/dreaming and poet/muse. Gillian Harding, the only critic to have published a scholarly article on the *Lawrence Poems*, has discussed MacEwen's development of an iconographic strategy in the series.⁴ She has identified clusters of "icons" in the poems -- one is "water," another is the group "desert"/"stone"/"mirage"⁵ -- and offered possible interpretations of their meanings, relying for her sources on standard dictionaries of symbols. Although the critical methods used by Bartley and Harding have produced useful insights, they are, however, inadequate for an understanding of the extraordinary psychological depth and complexity of MacEwen's early "alphabet" and "appetite" poems and the *Lawrence Poems*. For example, Harding's study of the *Lawrence Poems* concludes that "[t]he first section, 'Dreamers of the Day' [containing twenty-three poems], deals with Lawrence as a self-assured child and as an idealistic young man. . . ." ⁶ Although these poems do, indeed, represent the young Lawrence's idealism, iconographic criticism misses what I consider to be one of MacEwen's main

⁴ R. F. Gillian Harding, "Iconic Mythopoeia in MacEwen's *The T. E. Lawrence Poems*," *Studies in Canadian Literature* 9.1 (1984) 95-107.

⁵ Harding 95-97.

⁶ Harding 104.

purposes in writing this section, which is to highlight areas of Lawrence's psyche about which he revealed very little in his own public writing (as opposed to private letters): his conflicts surrounding the issues of his illegitimacy and his sexual orientation.

This study will take a different approach to MacEwen's work, showing how MacEwen augments her mythopoeic strategies with a method, related to Freud's discussion of "the uncanny" in literature, which I term "fetishicity." Freud's theorization of the uncanny in literature suggests that the uncanny is related to, but also different from, the sexual fetish.⁷ Foster summarizes what Freud means by an experience of the uncanny in literature: "animate and inanimate states are confused, things are subsumed by representations, once-homey images return as *unheimlich*, and a whiff or whisper of death hangs over the scene."⁸ Both the sexual fetish and the experience of the uncanny derive, according to Freud, from the pre-oedipal boy's fear of

⁷ Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" (1919), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Vol. XVII (1917-1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1955) 217-252. Subsequent references to the *Standard Edition* will be abbreviated as *SE*.

⁸ Hal Foster, "The Art of Fetishism: Notes on Dutch Still Life, *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, ed. Emily Apter and William Pietz (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1993) 254.

castration and both simultaneously affirm and disavow the presence of the maternal phallus; but the sexual fetish gives the subject sexual pleasure, whereas the experience of the uncanny does not necessarily do so. This thesis will argue that experiences of the uncanny in literature and popular culture are augmented when there are simultaneously present in the work traces of multiple fetish discourses, specifically the Marxian discourse of commodity fetishism, the ethnographic discourse of the fetish as object in the sacred economies of "primitive" societies, the Freudian discourse of sexual fetishism, and modernist aesthetic discourses which link the concept of the fetish to the spectacle and to the gaze. What these fetish discourses have in common is best articulated by Marcia Ian, who claims that

. . . whether used to name the overvaluation of certain commodities, a type of primitive idolatry, a sexual perversion, or a disingenuous confidence in the materiality of language, "fetishism" describes an act of idealization by means of which some "other" is endowed with the transcendental wholeness, autonomy, and power the self presumably lacks.⁹

Cultural products overdetermined by fetish discourses can appear, for example, in postcolonial spaces or in the

⁹ Marcia Ian, *Remembering the Phallic Mother: Psychoanalysis, Modernism, and the Fetish* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1993): 84.

intercultural spaces which open up when societies organized very differently in their material and sacred economies encounter each other, or in works created by traditionally marginalized voices. MacEwen's poetry is articulated in relation to fetishism in such a way as to problematize western valuations of sexual difference and gender relations, of spiritual economies, of spectacle, of race, and of a commodity exchange which sees the refusal to participate in capitalist market practices as primitive and/or infantile. Throughout MacEwen's work, this intercultural encounter occurs between the Canadian mainstream and MacEwen's vision of exotic alternatives, which can be lost edens or another Canada, "Kanada"; and in *The Lawrence Poems*, between the British and Arabic societies with their different religious, economic, and social values.

Derrida uses the term "metafetishism" in his essay "Economimesis," in which, according to Emily Apter, he "evokes a mimetic and infinitely specular chain of representations that refer in themselves to a libidinal economy of representation."¹⁰ Thus Derrida brings together the Marxian commodity fetish and the Freudian sexual fetish in a theory of representation. My use of the term

¹⁰ Emily Apter, *Feminizing the Fetish: Psychoanalysis and Narrative Obsession in Turn-of-the-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991) 11.

"fetishicity" expands on Derrida's metafetishism to include the anthropological definition of the fetish as a prime signifier in the discourse of the economy of the sacred object, and the use of fetish theory in aesthetic criticism. I use the term "fetishicity" to mean the overall effect of combining traces of the several kinds of fetish--religious, sexual, commodity, aesthetic--in one artistic production (a painting, a film, a literary work, etc.).

Symbols of castration anxiety, the secret fear which supposedly fuels sexual fetishism, have been present in literature and visual art at least since classical times, a presence that Freud acknowledges in his use of Greek literature and mythology to illustrate aspects of his theory of psychosexual development, such as the Oedipus myth and the story of Medusa's power to petrify her viewers. Since at least the beginning of the modern period, other fetish discourses have appeared as traces or symbols in the arts, indicating a general social uneasiness about how values are determined in a society's various economies, especially when a material object is made simultaneously to embody different kinds of value that are mutually contradictory. But the use of fetish discourses in the arts also has an uncanny ability to infuse a remarkable energy into the artistic work, an energy that has prompted critics such as Michel Leiris and

Hal Foster to investigate images of fetishisms in cultural production.¹¹ In his discussion of seventeenth-century Dutch still-life paintings and particular works of modernist sculpture, Foster gives us the most complete analysis of how a visual artwork can be overdetermined and thus energized by its representation of multiple fetish discourses.

It is not surprising that traces of very different kinds of fetish discourses should appear together in a single artistic work, for an investigation of the growth and development of fetish discourses shows that although the signifieds of the sign "fetish" vary enormously in their respective discursive communities, they all derive from the same cluster of associated ideas. Thus we get Freud's sexual fetishism, which masks anxiety about castration; Marx's commodity fetishism, which describes how material things and the labourers who make them are assigned value in the marketplace of commodity-producing societies; the ethnographic fetishism of objects that supposedly embody magical or spiritual values in primitive societies; modernist aesthetic theories of the art object as autonomous; and the colonial stereotype, all of which share

¹¹ Michel Leiris, "Alberto Giacometti" (1929), trans. James Clifford, *Sulfur* 15 (1986): 38-40; Hal Foster, "The Art of Fetishism: Notes on Dutch Still Life," *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, ed. Emily Apter and William Pietz, (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993): 251-265.

certain key features: first, an emphasis on materiality; second, the fixation in one material site of heterogeneous elements, not all of them material, and the repetition of such fixation; third, society's (and the critical observer's) consciousness that these values are socially constructed, not somehow naturally inhering in the objects; and finally, the power to influence the activities, desires, and sense of subjectivity of people who identify themselves primarily in physical terms, as bodies.¹² Equally important, all kinds of fetish both conceal and reveal anxiety about various kinds of differences: sexual, monetary, spiritual, aesthetic, racial, or ethnic. Especially at times when such values are being socially contested and renegotiated, writers, artists, and critics seem drawn to fetishism to energize their work, particularly work, such as Gwendolyn MacEwen's writing, which is interested in exploring boundaries and limits between cultures.

According to William Pietz, the concept of fetishism, which derives from the pidgin term *fetisso*, was never an idea developed by an individual society but has its historical origins in the intercultural spaces opened up by the sixteenth-century trade between Portugal and West

¹² William Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish" Part I, *Res* 9 (1986) 5-10.

African coastal nations. Later European theories of sexual, religious, commodity, and aesthetic fetishes all incorporate the four characteristics which were present in the concept of fetish from its beginning; however, as a strategy for the negotiation of radical differences, the fetish's most salient features are its ability to fix in a material object the simultaneous revelation and veiling of a difference or perceived lack; its embodiment simultaneously of different kinds of value, including spiritual, sexual, market, and aesthetic values; and society's overvaluation of this object.

In contrast, "fetishicity" is a symbolic vocabulary derived from the intersection of these various kinds of fetish in one text. Unlike fetishes, however, fetishicity is not a thing; it has no materiality except perhaps that of the text in which it appears. But the accumulation of the effects of fetish traces repeats, amplifies, and reinforces the effect of any individual fetish reference. Because the basic mechanism of the fetish is that of a signifier which depends upon yet erases its signification,¹³ fetishicity forms a text which reverberates with a sense of loss or emptiness and the simultaneous disavowal of that loss. This

¹³ Michael Taussig, "Maleficium: State Fetishism," in *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, ed. Emily Apter and William Pietz (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1993) 225.

strategy is particularly effective for texts, such as the *Lawrence Poems* and MacEwen's "appetite" and "alphabet" poems, which explore a subject's personal encounter with the Other, and the intercultural spaces of postcolonial histories and questions of self-identity.

The art critic Hal Foster has shown how fetish traces can appear in an artwork symbolically¹⁴: for example, castration anxiety is suggested in seventeenth-century Dutch *pronk*¹⁵ still lifes as sliced-open, ripe fruits, together with the sharp knives used to cut them, in the foreground of the composition. This interpretation of the fruit is reinforced by the presence in the same painting of other kinds of fetish: Foster claims that the emphasis on glossy, polished, reflective surfaces seen in the objects chosen for the composition suggests commodity fetishism, as does the depiction of raw materials from Dutch colonies. My thesis will extend Foster's work to explore how traces of fetishes, whether as explicit references or as symbols, can be used in a literary text.

Beyond Foster's contributions to criticism in the

¹⁴ Hal Foster, "Art" 251-265.

¹⁵ "*Pronken*" is a Dutch word meaning "to display, to show off" and these still lifes characteristically represent an abundance of extravagant foodstuffs and finely made objects informally displayed on a table.

visual arts, other critics and scholars of literature and cultural theory have begun to note how fetish discourses shape and inform literary texts. Most useful for a consideration of MacEwen's poetry, perhaps, is Homi K. Bhabha's theory of the colonial stereotype, mimicry and hybridity. Linda Saladin's work on how authors construct literary images (often of the muse or a dangerous Other) which they then fetishize in an attempt to authorize their writing, to imbue their texts with a literary authority they fear to have lost, is also useful. Fetishizing a verbal image may well have been a strategy used by MacEwen in writing *The T. E. Lawrence Poems*, although MacEwen would have reversed the gender relations theorized by Saladin, for Saladin posits the writer as always male, and the muse as always female. Lawrence is not the only figure fetishized by MacEwen, however. Even in her earliest writing, when she was exploring the western magic tradition and other esoteric systems of thought and belief as her themes, MacEwen created magic utterances and fetishized written signs from exotic alphabets, investing them through her poetry with spiritual and artistic power to change consciousness and create an uplifted, "mythical" sense of everyday life.

The roots of fetishicity as a cultural discourse illuminating the arts extend back to the early decades of

the twentieth century. In the late 1920's, Michel Leiris was the first art critic to associate fetishism with art objects. He described fetishism as

the really *loving* love of ourselves projected from the inside out and clothed in a solid carapace, thus trapping it within the bounds of a precise thing and situating it, rather like a piece of furniture for our use, in the vast foreign room called space.¹⁶

Leiris believed that the rare creative works which would fill the needs of this fetishism grew out of moments of "crisis," when "abruptly the outside seems to respond to a call we send it from within, when the exterior world opens itself and a sudden communion forms between it and our heart."¹⁷ Thus Leiris has implicitly recognized that all types of fetishisms grow out of an experience of gap, of difference, of spaces opening between otherwise closed boundaries, whether they be between consciousness and unconsciousness, self and Other, sacred and profane, capitalist and precapitalist modes of economic organization, or constructions of gender and race. For Leiris, the sculptures of Alberto Giacometti are precisely the sort of art objects to spring from such gaps, and they evoked in him an uncanny response by which he associated the "prodigiously

¹⁶ Leiris 38.

¹⁷ Leiris 38-39.

alive" artworks with "a fermentation...of so many memories," hollowness, "emptied fruit," movement between inside and outside, a "hidden wind," darkness, deliriousness, and an ambivalence he labelled "that tender sphinx."¹⁸ Leiris implicitly links fetishism to the evocation of the uncanny, of mystery, and of the play between the hidden and the revealed in these modernist sculptures.

Foster has borrowed Leiris' linking of fetishism and the uncanny in Giacometti's sculptures, a quality he characterizes as producing "a glow" or sense of energy surrounding the work, a "luminescence," "uncanny" and elusive,¹⁹ and he notes that the same quality is apparent in seventeenth-century Dutch still lifes. The focus of Foster's discussion²⁰ is the sub-genre of Dutch still-life painting known as "pronk" (from the Dutch verb *pronken*, "to display"). After the more monochromatic, restrained compositions of the 1620s and 1630s, *pronk* paintings began

¹⁸ Leiris 39.

¹⁹ Hal Foster, lecture, Dalhousie University, Halifax, N. S., Oct. 1991.

²⁰ Later published as "The Art of Fetishism: Notes on Dutch Still Life", in *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, ed. Emily Apter and William Pietz (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993) and, in a slightly modified version with illustrations, in *Fetishism. The Princeton Architectural Journal. Vol. 4*, ed. Sarah Whiting et al. (New York: Princeton Architectural P, 1992). I will refer to the former as "Art" and to the latter as *Fetishism* in subsequent notes.

to appear in the 1640s, when the Dutch trading empire prospered. *Pronk* still lifes include such works as Jan Davidsz de Heem's *Pronk Still Life With Shells* (1642) and others, as well as paintings by Pieter de Ring, Clara Peeters, Françoise Ryckhals, Nicolaes Gillis, and Floris van Dyck, which are characterized by their depiction of a lavish abundance of goods usually overflowing the table surface. A variety of foodstuffs, such as fruits, baked goods, shellfish, and sometimes meat or game birds, are often juxtaposed with exotic spices, tobacco, and other goods obtained through the widespread Dutch trading empire, or at least in the Dutch marketplace. The richness of the scene is further reinforced with the placement of these goods on tables covered with some of the best products of European artisanship: fine linen or lace, crystal goblets or those made of precious metals, and fine cutlery are also usually present to indicate both the economic prosperity and the good taste of the owner.

Foster believes that the uncanny luminescence or energy he senses in these paintings is created by the overdetermination of their images by fetish discourses, that "the very dynamics of fetishism structure this art."²¹ He finds in the paintings evidence of traces of three of the

²¹ Foster, *Fetishism* 7.

major European discourses about fetishism: the anthropological fetish as sacred object, the psychoanalytic fetish tied to castration anxiety, and Marx's commodity fetish. The anthropological fetish, the fetish as object in a sacred economy, is perhaps the least visible of the fetish discourse traces in the *pronks*, but it haunts the paintings as the inheritance of the Dutch takeover of the lucrative West African trade from the Portuguese, the intercultural spaces of which produced the European idea of the "fetish." The question of the status of an object embodying different kinds of social values was first confronted in these earlier mercantile relationships. The modernist concern with the status of the art object as autonomous was mirrored in the seventeenth-century Dutch still-life painters' concern for the first time with positioning their work in the marketplace, as objects embodying both aesthetic and commercial values at a time when traditional patronage structures of artistic production were shifting and even disappearing. Evidence of commodity fetishism is visible in the way that the objects in the foreground of the *pronk* painting are juxtaposed and arranged, suggesting their interchangeability as commodities in the newly developed mercantile early capitalist economic system. Moreover, Foster sees the emphasis on shiny, glossy surfaces in the

paintings as a return of the viewer's gaze: "It is as if we are seen as we see -- only it is objects that 'see' us."²² Marx noted that a symptom of commodity fetishism is that commodities seem to take on a life of their own, which Foster sees in the returned "gaze" of the objects in the *pronk* paintings. Castration anxiety, the root of sexual fetishism in Freud's theory, is suggested in the *pronk's* representation of the ripe fruits, shellfish, and baked goods, which are usually not whole, but are almost always depicted as cut open, sliced, peeled, or partially consumed. Frequently the implement of cutting is in the foreground, closest to the viewer, often with the handle pointing to the viewer as if in invitation to take it up and complete the meal, or as if implicating the viewer as the person responsible for the cutting. Fruits, in particular, are symbolic in Freud's theory of the female genitals, and thus the images in the *pronks* of fruit that is not whole suggest maternal castration. Maternal castration is, of course, the site of the male subject's primal anxiety. Foster claims that this kind of overdetermination of the images in *pronks* creates a reminder of loss which haunts the subject. A "ghost of a lack hangs over the abundance" depicted in the

²² Foster, "Art" 264.

pronks.²³ It is this ghostly quality, which operates fetishistically in its simultaneous affirmation and denial of loss, and its seeming interrogation of the very materiality of the products represented, which is responsible for the uncanny luminescence of the paintings.

The extent to which MacEwen made conscious use of fetish discourses is not clear; however, she was certainly aware of the symptoms of commodity fetishism identified by Marx, especially the sense that in late forms of capitalism commodities seem to become animated while people become reified, and in her poetry and short stories she frequently explored the subversive economies of non-productive expenditure.²⁴ Moreover, she was intensely interested in magic and spiritual values, in foreign cultures, and in the relationship between the genders. Even though she relied in her writing on a world-view which conceptualized phenomena in dualistic categories, bipolar opposites, she always searched for a way of dealing in her work with the differences implied by such bipolar opposites. Not always satisfied by attempts to represent the union or transcendence of opposites as one way to heal the fissures

²³ Foster, "Art" 264.

²⁴ MacEwen probably would have been familiar with Marxist thought by virtue of her first marriage, to Canadian poet and Communist Party member Milton Acorn.

or negotiate the gaps, MacEwen found in fetishicity a symbolic vocabulary for investigating the territory of the discursive gaps or fissures in the dualistic imagination.

Fetishicity is apparent in MacEwen's early poems in the theme of desire for a return to an Eden-like state of existence, in the interest in magic and transformation, and in the collage-like collection of material objects which appears in *A Breakfast for Barbarians*, all of which relate directly to the intersection of fetish discourses seen later in the *Lawrence Poems*. Fetishicity can be identified in *The T. E. Lawrence Poems* through the numerous symbolic and explicit references encompassing the full register of fetish discourses. MacEwen suggests religious fetishism in Lawrence's unearthing, during an archaeological dig at Carcemish early in his career, of an object which is played with as a "toy" during the day but which seems to take on sinister powers at night. MacEwen here implicitly locates Lawrence as supporting the traditional European discourse of Orientalism, as theorized by Edward Said, which sees the East as Europe's mysterious, irrational, dark Other. Sexual fetishism is present in Lawrence's emotional rejection of a father he sees as castrated and of his phallic mother, and their substitution in the image of a medieval crusader which hangs on the ceiling above his bed. Commodity fetishism

appears in Lawrence's attempt to translate his experiences into written text (and, by extension, in MacEwen's own rewriting of Lawrence's story), in Lawrence's complaint that he had been used as a pawn by the "Old Men" in power, as well as in his stated desire to bestow the result of his labour on behalf of the Arab Revolt as a gift to a person he loved and admired (but refused to identify). Commodity fetishism is also implicit in Lawrence's, and England's, veiled imperialist project in the Middle East, where their support for the Arab revolt supposedly masked their interest in gaining strategic control over the area's transportation links and oil reserves.

In order to establish how the idea of the fetish became a term in several very different kinds of discourses, Chapter One of this study, "Fetish Discourse and Fetishicity in Literature," will review how the term developed from the medieval European discourse about witchcraft and the control of women's sexuality to become the term for the material objects used by some West African societies in the swearing of oaths to cement trade agreements. From this early discourse of trade located between societies which were organized according to radically different material economies, the term entered the developing European Enlightenment discourse about the development of religion

among so-called "primitive" societies, as a small but important element in the definition of the primitive as lacking a rational social organization. The fetish, now seen as the material site of the fixation of contradictory values, then entered the Marxian analysis of capitalist material economies as "commodity fetishism," the mystifying logic by which labourers are alienated from the products of their labour. The term also migrated to the developing discourse of normative sexuality as Freud's sexual fetish, the logic by which the male subject disavows the possibility of castration, and to Bhabha's recent postcolonial discourse and Saladin's feminist discourse, already mentioned. In aesthetic theory, the idea of the fetish contributes to the logic of the spectacle, in which the viewer's gaze is fixated on its object in a complex disavowal of difference. Fetishicity, the symbolic vocabulary developed from these widely varying fetish discourses, would emphasize their commonalities, the simultaneous concealment and revelation of a perceived lack or loss, a lack or loss which originates at the moment of subject formation. Chapter One goes on to explore how fetishicity as an aesthetic theory can be used to read literary texts. Here I will review other work which uses fetish discourse theories to read literature in order to put my approach in context. I conclude Chapter One by

contextualizing my research through an examination of how fetish discourse theory can be used to examine literary texts, such as Gwendolyn MacEwen's poetry, that seek to explore the Other and the spaces that open up between subjectivities and between cultures.

The symbolic vocabulary of fetish discourses is particularly evident in one of MacEwen's earliest works, the unpublished series of poems "Adam's Alphabet."²⁵ These poems reveal MacEwen's fascination with sacred economies as they intersect with language, as the poet attempts to invoke the magic or mythopoeic power of an exotic alphabet. Chapter Two, "Sacred Alphabets and Lost Edens: The Phallic Mother as Muse," will show how this fascination portrays the exotic written word as both artifact and reification of sacred meanings, while it simultaneously reveals the veiled and haunting presence of the phallic mother as index of the fear of difference as it manifests itself in psychosexual economies. This chapter begins by discussing MacEwen's

²⁵ Gwendolyn MacEwen, "Adam's Alphabet" (MacEwen Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto: Box 1). Several of the poems were published posthumously in *The Poetry of Gwendolyn MacEwen: Volume One: The Early Years*, Ed. Margaret Atwood and Barry Callaghan (Ontario: Exile Editions, 1993) 17-26. There are several errors in this printing of the poems, as changes that MacEwen herself had clearly made to the manuscript were not incorporated; a later printing of the volume corrects some of these errors.

mythopoeia in such early works as selected poems from *Selah*, *The Drunken Clock*, and *The Rising Fire* which thematize a longing for lost golden ages, paradises, or edens, to show that this longing is another form of the desire for and fear of the phallic mother, the ultimate fetish object, which further registers the poet's deep-seated anxiety about the fact of difference and the existence of the Other, and anxiety about the implications of being a speaking subject. This analysis will show that the logic of disavowal structured MacEwen's poetry beginning with her earliest efforts, complicating her stated project to "create a myth" by revealing the fissures and gaps within MacEwen's poetic discourse. In other words, MacEwen's notion of myth was itself fetishistic. The poet eventually discovered in these poems that the synthesis or harmonizing of opposites that ~~the~~ she had been seeking is impossible, and thus the image of the Mesopotamian bisected goddess of chaos, Tiamut, and not eden, becomes MacEwen's defining metaphor for human experience. The territory of discursive clashes and gaps suggested by the metaphor of chaos is fertile ground for fetishicity. The "eden" poems link two fetish discourses in particular, that of the sacred economy in which objects in so-called "primitive" societies introduce the important question of how a material thing can embody different kinds

of value simultaneously (the sacred and the practical in the physical sense), and that of the psychosexual economy in which the sexual fetish caused by castration anxiety is a displacement of the more profound anxiety about sexual and other differences.

Chapter Three, "Uncanny Breakfasts: The Early 'Appetite' Poems," shows that fetishicity continued to structure MacEwen's poetry as she matured as a writer. This chapter continues the analysis of the early fetishicity in MacEwen's poetry by reading MacEwen's poems on the theme of appetite, "A Breakfast" from *The Rising Fire*, the poems collected in *A Breakfast for Barbarians*, and others. These poems incorporate a stronger emphasis on the problems of value in the commodity marketplace than do the eden and alphabet poems, by including in the symbolic vocabulary of fetishicity more significations deriving from Marx's discourse of commodity fetishism. The "appetite" poems show the poet maturing beyond a longing for an irretrievable, idealized past by learning how to live in the present with an appetite for all experience: rather than trying to create a synthesis or harmony from opposites, the poet chooses instead to consume metaphorically all experiences indiscriminately. The poet discovers, however, that an all-consuming appetite is not really a way to avoid the fear and

pain of Otherness: this philosophy of appetite itself functions fetishistically by revealing gaps and differences in the various symbolic economies that it was supposed to conceal. The metaphor of the all-consuming appetite implies an endless hunger that must be acknowledged before it can be filled. MacEwen begins with a satire of late-capitalist consumer culture, but moves through the poems, using metaphors of eating disorders, to problems of the sense of gap or loss that haunts the subjects in late capitalist societies and to a consideration of the less-sane dimensions of an all-consuming appetite.

In her book-length sequence of poems, *The T. E. Lawrence Poems*, MacEwen employs a more subtle, mature, and artistically integrated fetishicity to explore the twentieth-century Western male psyche as it confronts difference and the Other on sexual, political, economic, religious and aesthetic fronts. These poems extend MacEwen's interest in the desire for and impossibility of harmonizing differences by making T. E. Lawrence her subject, a man who apparently shared her belief in a world of meaning beyond the surfaces of life when he wrote: "I never saw men's features: always I peered beyond, imagining for myself a spirit-reality of this or that." In the *Lawrence Poems*, MacEwen creates a "no-man's land" or "spirit-reality" where

pairs of opposites cannot harmonize without often causing anxiety and fear. In this "no man's land" she discovers, in the unresolvable conflicts of life which produce religious, sexual and commodity fetishes, a powerful energizing source for her icons, symbols and imagery, and for her exploration of a complex figure within history. Chapter Four, "Desert Disavowal: Lawrence as Disguise, Lawrence as Muse," explores how in interweaving these and other traces of fetishes, MacEwen constructs an interpretation of T. E. Lawrence which reveals what she sees as key motivations in his career, motivations about which he is suggestive but circumspect in his own writings. She re-mythologizes a legend which has already been rewritten a number of times in this century, circulating as reportage (Lowell Thomas's journalism), as narrative (Lawrence's writing) and as spectacle (the film *Lawrence of Arabia*). This chapter suggests answers to the questions of how and why MacEwen rewrote the T. E. Lawrence legend in the form of a series of poems, by using theoretical methods developed in Chapter One to identify the role of fetishicity in MacEwen's version of the Lawrence legend, a version which reveals selected aspects of Lawrence's character while at the same time masking others.

An investigation of fetishicity in any text is necessarily a matter of revealing the text's multiple

overdeterminations by fetish discourses. Fetishicity functions accumulatively, each repetition from the symbolic vocabulary of fetishism strengthening the effects of previous ones. Overall, the simultaneous traces of multiple fetish discourses in MacEwen's "alphabet" and "appetite" poems reveal a subtext of desire and fear, the ambivalent response to the fact of difference, in MacEwen's early project of creating a sense of the mythic or sacred in the everyday world, a subtext which the mature poet would foreground in the *Lawrence Poems* in her re-creation of Lawrence as an icon for the twentieth century, a fractured subject constructed by multiple contradictions in the personal and social spheres, coping, sometimes heroically, with trauma; a man whose divided and fissured selves "conversed in the void."²⁶

²⁶ T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph* (London and Toronto: Jonathan Cape, 1936) 32.

Chapter 1

Fetish Discourse and Fetishicity in Literature

One day, though
the words will go on
by themselves

-- Dorothy Livesay,
"For Gwendolyn MacEwen"

The term "fetish" is most often understood today in its psychoanalytic sense as "a thing abnormally stimulating or attracting sexual desires": *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, Eighth Edition (1990) gives this as its first meaning. In psychoanalytical discourse the ultimate referent for the fetish is the phallus; however, this conception of the fetish, belonging to psychiatric discourses about normative sexuality, was articulated only in the late nineteenth century. The earliest fetish discourse, dating from European medieval times, concerned not the phallus as ultimate signifier but witchcraft and the control of female sexuality.¹ The appropriation of the concept of the fetish by psychiatric discourse was only one of a number of such appropriations in Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including those by historical,

¹ William Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish" Part I, Res 9 (1985) 6. For my discussion of the historical development of the term "fetish" I am greatly indebted to William Pietz's extensive study, which is continued in "The Problem of the Fetish" Part II, Res 13 (1987) 23-45; and Part IIIa, Res 16 (1988) 105-123.

Marxist, anthropological/ethnographic, and aesthetic discourses, and in each of these the term "fetish" meant something different. In order to understand how fetish discourse theories have entered into, and continue to influence, late twentieth-century cultural production, it is useful to turn first to the historical development of the term "fetish."

The Latin roots of "fetish," *facticius* and *factitius*, from *facere*, "to make," were words used exclusively in Roman mercantilist discourse for goods traded in the marketplace. The term had four distinct but related usages. First, it indicated materials which were produced for trade using some form of human intervention or manufacture, as opposed to being naturally formed and merely collected; second, the term could refer to the difference in appearance in such artificial as opposed to natural varieties of trading goods; third, this difference in appearance could indicate a difference in the value of the goods, and thus the term came to indicate this trading value itself; and finally, such a difference in appearance as an index of value could be artificially and fraudulently produced, and the term then referred to such fraudulent goods.² This does not mean that

² Pietz, "Problem" II, 24-25.

all artefacts traded in the Roman marketplace were considered to be fetishes as we have come to construct the term, because the "fetish" as a concept did not exist in Roman times. The etymology of the word "fetish" is useful, however, to an understanding of the development of fetish discourses because these usages brought together concepts of materiality, manufactured resemblance, fraudulence or masquerade, and value (in this case, market value), all of which would become important in the later development of the idea of the fetish.

The term was appropriated in the Medieval period to the early Church's understanding of witchcraft, as opposed to the concept of "idolatry," as it was developed in Christian theology and law.³ The Latin *facere* re-entered medieval Christian discourse when it became the Portuguese *feitiço*, *feiticeiro*, and *feitiçaria*, meaning the objects, persons, and practices of witchcraft.⁴ In medieval times, witchcraft

³ Pietz writes: "The Christian theory of witchcraft, as it related to fetish objects, was determined by theological explanations regarding the false sacramental objects of superstition. These explanations were integrated with only partial success into the church's general theory of idolatry, whose logic required that material 'idols' have the status of fraudulent manufactured resemblances. The descriptive inadequacy of the discourse of 'idolatry' led to the development of a distinct terminology of witchcraft. . . in the Middle Ages" ("Problem" II, 24).

⁴ Pietz, "Problem" II, 24.

was understood in Europe to have to do with the misuse of natural materials, but the definition of misuse was often problematic for a culture which understood "natural" properties of material objects according to a historical logic or episteme based in principles of resemblance and analogic correspondence.⁵

The idea of the fetish as it came to be formulated by Enlightenment and nineteenth-century scientific discourses "originated in a mercantile intercultural space created by the ongoing trade relations between cultures so radically different as to be mutually incomprehensible. It is proper to neither West African nor Christian European culture."⁶ When Portuguese explorers and traders reached the Senegal River on the west coast of Africa in 1436, they applied the Portuguese word for objects involved in witchcraft, *feitico*, to certain practices involving the use of materials by Africans to invoke magical properties for protection, the swearing of oaths, and healing.⁷ It is clear, though, that the meaning of the word was changing rapidly, for the Portuguese did not believe that the West Africans with whom they had established trade relations actually practiced

⁵ Pietz, "Problem" II, 35.

⁶ Pietz, "Problem" II, 24.

⁷ Pietz, "Problem" II, 36.

witchcraft.⁸ There are no records detailing exactly what these fifteenth-century Portuguese traders did understand of West African spiritual economies, however; what we do know about their views derives from later Dutch texts.

Dutch ships, belonging to a nascent mercantile capitalist economic system, began to arrive on the West African coast in the late 1590's, and encountered there an intercultural space that was already very complex. A variety of African societies, some Islamicized, some with a lineage system of social organization, had been trading with the Christian feudal Portuguese for one hundred and fifty years. The *Tangomaos*, a group of Portuguese resistant to the feudal system and in defiance of the Portuguese crown, had set themselves up as middlemen in trading transactions between Europeans and Africans. In this complex intercultural space

⁸ Whereas fifty years earlier anti-witchcraft laws in Portugal explicitly forbade a large number of activities related to the magical arts -- including using herbal potions, amulets, and incantations; summoning devils; casting spells; interpreting dreams; working enchantments; reading fortunes; and practicing divination -- when Portuguese trade with West Africa began there was only one law left on the books dealing with witchcraft, a law which forbade the use of magical means in the hunting for treasure. This reduction in categories of activities forbidden by anti-witchcraft laws suggests that witchcraft was no longer seen to be an important problem. Clearly the Portuguese traders did not fear the *feiticeiros* (witches) they encountered on the Guinea coast, for "one would not have traded with 'witches' as this term was understood during the witch craze" (Pietz, "Problem" II, 35).

the Portuguese term *feitiço* had become the *Tangomaos'* pidgin term *fetisso*. It is important to understand that this term was never part of the discursive communities either in West Africa or in Europe: it was a term that evolved exclusively in this space of intercultural trade. "*Fetisso*" described a variety of material substances which seemed to be collected and used by Africans for their magical properties. The term was also applied to the oath-taking which involved the consuming of foodstuffs or drinks containing these substances. Traders found that this form of oath-taking was essential to the making of trade agreements with West African societies, and it seems that the Portuguese tolerated these practices much as the early Church had tolerated "vain observances."⁹ Accounts by the later Dutch travellers and merchants, however, represent a shift in the European concept of *fetissos*. Texts by Calvinist Dutch writers Marees, Bosman, and others, as well as later English and French texts, make for the first time the explicit assertion of the identity between African *fetissos* and

⁹ Before the "witch craze" in Europe, the early Church had tolerated the use of herbal drinks and other "vain observances" involving the use of natural objects to protect health, ward off storms, and so forth, largely because Christian theology and law had difficulty, in the absence of rational science, in conceptualizing what were the "natural" properties of materials. It seems that the Portuguese had a similar tolerance in Africa for the *fetisso*.

Catholic sacramental objects¹⁰ (although negatively inflecting "fetisso"), which implicitly assigns to the *fetisso* a higher value in West African spiritual economies than it carried in the discourse of the *Tangomaos*.

Because the *Tangomaos* left no written descriptions of the *fetisso*, we have to rely on later Dutch accounts such as Willem Bosman's *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea*, first published in Dutch in 1704 and in English in 1705, for an understanding of what is meant by the term. Bosman reports on the substances making up the *fetisso* in an oath-taking ceremony:

...a great Wooden Pipe filled with Earth, Oil, Blood, the Bones of dead Men and Beasts, Feathers, Hair; and, to be short, all sorts of Excrementitious and filthy Trash, which they do not endeavor to mold into any Shape, but lay it in a confused heap in the Pipe...¹¹

Bosman's account was of primary importance in the European association of *fetissos* with worthless objects or trash, and

¹⁰ Pietz, "Problem" II, 39.

¹¹ William [sic] Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea: Divided into The Gold, The Slave, and The Ivory Coasts* (1705) (London and Edinburgh: Frank Cass and Co. Ltd., 1967) 150. Bosman goes on to describe the oaths taken and the remainder of the ceremony, which consisted of the pipe's contents being smeared on the swearer's head, arms, belly, and legs; then nail and hair clippings were added to the pipe's contents, whereupon the oath was made "firmly Obligatory."

is one of the discourses that introduced into European thought the important problem of how material objects can come to embody different kinds of values (physical, spiritual, social) simultaneously.

There was another reason why the *fetisso* began in the eighteenth century to take on a negative connotation in the discourses of Europe's Protestant north. In an often-quoted passage from his travel account, Bosman reported that an African's choice of *fetisso* or "god" in the land of "Fida" on the African Coast was determined by chance encounter alone.¹² Based largely on Bosman's account, Europeans came

¹² "I once asked a *Negroe*, with whom I could talk very freely, and whom I had also a good Opinion of...how they celebrated their Divine Worship, and what number of Gods they had?....He obliged me with the following Answer, That the Number of their Gods was endless and innumerable: For (said he) any of us being resolved to undertake any thing of Importance, we first of all search out a God to prosper our designed Undertaking; and going out of Doors with this Design, take the first Creature that presents it self to our Eyes, whether Dog, Cat or the most contemptible Animal in the World, for our God; or perhaps instead of that any Inanimate that falls in our way, whether a Stone, a piece of Wood, or any thing else of the same Nature. This new chosen God is immediately presented with an Offering; which is accompanied with a Solemn Vow, that if he pleaseth to prosper our Undertakings, for the future we will always worship and esteem him as a God. If our Design prove successful, we have discovered a new and assisting God, which is daily presented with fresh Offerings: But if the contrary happen, the new God is rejected as an useless Tool, and consequently returns to his Primitive Estate: He went on in these following Words, we make and break our Gods daily, and consequentially are the Masters and Inventers of what we Sacrifice to" (Bosman 367a-368).

to understand the underlying motive for the selection of *fetissos* to be caprice or fancy, and assumed that the entire social order of the African societies in which Europe came into contact was based on the element of caprice, which to the eighteenth-century European, who placed the highest value on rational thought, meant an absence of any social order at all. This in turn helped to constitute European notions of "the primitive." This misreading of African culture had far-reaching effects in European thought about other cultures, the nature of religion, and the human mind. It contributed to the conceptualization of Africa as the site of the most primitive societies in the world, and continued to influence anthropological discourses well into the twentieth century.

What is even more important for my own use of fetish discourses as tools of literary critical analysis is that Bosman's version of the *fetisso* came to him via an African who was himself a figure who belonged fully to neither African nor European society, but to a middle ground between them. This informant actually ridiculed the practices of other Africans, but whereas he had had some exposure to Christian beliefs, he was reluctant to embrace them fully.¹³

¹³ Bosman writes: "But having conversed with him for some time, I observed that he ridiculed his own Country Gods; for having in his Youth lived amongst the *French*,

Thus Bosman's source for information about African religion was a doubly ambivalent and displaced subject, seeking at various times both to affirm and deny his allegiance to "his Country Gods" and to Christianity. Moreover, either Bosman or his informant seems to have conflated spiritual and material values when he would measure the degree of his faith by the "Loss of Goods." In order to function effectively within the intercultural space of West African trading, Bosman's informant was forced into disavowal of his religious and cultural beliefs, and in doing so became a split subject. The subsequent development of the concept of the fetish throughout European discourses, and especially in psychiatric discourses about normative sexuality, saw the term later reassume this sense of disavowal, the split or fractured ego that arises from the simultaneous assertion and denial of a loss or lack. Another interesting point is that Charles de Brosses mentions an instance of the fetish

whose Language he perfectly understood, and spake, he had amongst them imbibed the Principles of the Christian Religion, and somewhat towards a just Notion of the True God, and how he is to be Worshipped; to whom, and not to his Country Gods, he ascribed the Creation of all Things: Wherefore he no farther concerned himself with the Gods of his Country, than as engaged to it for quietness sake, or to make his Friends easie; to whom he durst not reveal his Opinion, fearing (what would certainly have happened) the falling into some dangerous Circumstances; for as strong as his Faith was, it was not arrived to that Pitch as to oblige him to suffer Loss of Goods on that account" (Bosman 368).

being believed to have a Medusa-like power of returning the viewer's gaze, thereby striking the viewer dead.¹⁴ Although this threatening gaze did not become an important component of subsequent European Enlightenment theories about fetishism, it does reappear later in Freudian and Lacanian discourses about sexual fetishism, in the returned gaze of the Other.

By the mid-eighteenth century, Europeans understood *fetissos* to be neither deities nor mere charms or amulets, but rather to represent a "natural propensity toward nonallegorical personification of material powers,"¹⁵ which prompted de Brosses to invent the term "*fetichisme*" in 1757.¹⁶ In *Du culte des dieux fetiches*, de Brosses conceived of "fetishism" in contrast to polytheism, and proposed that

¹⁴ "There are men among them who out of respect and fear abstain from ever seeing their fetish," he writes. He recounts the story, heard from other merchants, of an African king whose "fetish" was the sea, and who therefore refused to visit merchant ships for the purpose of trade: ". . .the belief was widespread in that religion that whoever set eyes on his god would die on the spot. . . ." Charles de Brosses, *Du culte des dieux fetiches*, 1760. Excerpted and translated as "On the Worship of Fetish Gods" in Burton Feldman and Robert D. Richardson, *The Rise of Modern Mythology 1680-1860* (Bloomington and London: Indiana UP, 1972) 174-75.

¹⁵ William Pietz, "Fetishism and Materialism: The Limits of Theory in Marx", in *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, ed. Emily Apter and William Pietz (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1993) 138.

¹⁶ de Brosses, "Worship" 170-76.

fetishism existed historically prior to polytheism.¹⁷ De Brosses (nicknamed "the little fetish" by Voltaire), claimed that fetishism was the universal first stage of human religion,¹⁸ and this idea later influenced Auguste Comte's formulation of the concept of a historically linear development of human societies. In only a few pages, de Brosses creates a nexus of terms which were to construct Europe's definition of "primitive" societies.¹⁹ This very negative misreading of African society continued throughout European anthropological writing about the "Dark Continent" well into the later part of the nineteenth century. In proposing a "natural propensity" in human societies to personify material powers non-allegorically in fetishes, de Brosses wrote against eighteenth-century universalist views of Christian theologians, who tended to interpret ancient myths and cult beliefs as allegories of New Testament

¹⁷ In other areas this text extensively plagiarizes Hume's *The Natural History of Religion* (1757).

¹⁸ "It is established that among the most ancient nations of the world, those which were completely savage and coarse forged through an excess of superstitious stupidity these strange terrestrial divinities. . ." (de Brosses 172).

¹⁹ De Brosses characterizes African peoples as "savage," "coarse," "superstitious," "stupid," "senseless," "ignorant," "fearful," "diseased with passion," "infantile," "barbaric," "deceitful," in "perpetual childhood," and seemingly "never more than four years old"; he claims that their beliefs and customs are "absurd," "ridiculous," and "foolish." ("Worship" 175-76).

events, and against secular Neoplatonists, who saw in those same myths and cults rudimentary forms of western philosophical ideas.²⁰ Pietz assesses de Brosses' contribution to Enlightenment thought as important because he proposed fetishism as a radically novel category, one that ". . . offered an atheological explanation for the origin of religion. . . [and] accounted equally well for theistic beliefs and nontheistic superstitions."²¹ Most important, De Brosses' concept of the fetish made people's relation to material objects rather than to God the key question for historians of religion and mythology,²² an important step in moving the discourse of fetishism away from that of spiritual economies and toward that of commodities.

The European Enlightenment's development of the concept of the fetish did not proceed in an ivory tower or social vacuum. Just as the original use of the term by the Portuguese had come from a complex and unstable intercultural space, the further expansion of the term's meaning during the eighteenth century must be seen in the context of what V. Y. Mudimbe terms an "atmosphere of

²⁰ Pietz, "Fetishism" 138.

²¹ Pietz, "Fetishism" 138.

²² Pietz, "Fetishism" 138.

intense and violent exchange"²³ which characterized African societies and their intercultural trading spaces with Europe and America.²⁴ This atmosphere of "intense and violent exchange" underscores the rising stakes in these economic exchanges. Although African societies differed in the beliefs and practices related to *fetissos*, European travellers and merchants tended to lump them all together, and the conflation of the notion of fetishism with racist ideologies became common throughout nineteenth-century travel and settlement narratives of Europeans in Africa. Thus in the nineteenth century, the term "fetishism" developed "a much wider range of references outside the anthropological, and comes in fact to suggest itself as the word or concept most suited to describe the operations of a

²³ V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington and London: Indiana UP and James Curry, 1988) 10.

²⁴ Beginning in the eighteenth century, there was an enormous increase in the slave trade, which contributed to the profitable trans-Atlantic economy which involved most western nations. This century also saw power balances change in Africa, when in West Africa Dahomey became a strong trading partner for Europeans, and the Ashanti empire expanded into the east. Further destabilization occurred during the period when Europeans encouraged the settlement of freed African slaves and impoverished Africans in the area known today as Sierra Leone. War broke out in 1729 when Africans expelled Portuguese traders from their forts in northern Mozambique, and the first war between the Dutch and the Bantu people began in 1770. The end of the century saw a turn-around in the slave economy as Britain declared slavery illegal in 1772 (Mudimbe 10).

misguided and miscreating society."²⁵ Moreover, fetish worship was still often associated with negative perceptions of the so-called African character,²⁶ as the emerging anthropological discourses continued to replicate concepts of "the primitive" as inferior and even sub-human. Anthony Shelton writes, "[s]o persuasive had the imagery and significance of 'fetishism' become by the early twentieth century that it assumed a rhetorical value that could impute the sense of 'savagery' to whatever context it was applied."²⁷ Thus "fetishism" became a small but important component in a "clearly visible power-knowledge political

²⁵ David Simpson, *Fetishism and Imagination: Dickens, Melville, Conrad* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins UP, 1982) 9.

²⁶ Monteiro describes the "negro character" as "deficient," and the "negroe" as having "an organically rudimentary mind, and consequently capable of but little development to a higher type"; "negroes" are "mere peaceable, vegetarian, prolific human rabbits and guinea pigs, in fact" and although "they may be tamed and taught to read and write, sing psalms, and other tricks, but negroes they must remain to the end of the chapter." Joachim John Monteiro, *Angola and the River Congo*, 2 vols. 1875 (London: Frank Cass and Co. Ltd., 1969) 247.

²⁷ Anthony Shelton, "The Chameleon Body: Power, Mutilation, and Sexuality", in *Fetishism: Visualizing Power and Desire*, ed. Anthony Shelton (London and Brighton: The South Bank Centre and Lund Humphries, 1995) 23. Shelton sees a change toward the end of the nineteenth century, whereby superstitious beliefs were not seen to be the product of innate mental deficiencies but rather of ignorance, which could be remedied by such European interventions as missionary work (15-16).

system"²⁸ which rationalized European colonial expansion throughout Africa, principally because the term was still frequently negatively inflected, both as an index of evil practices and beliefs and of the African's supposed inferiority.²⁹

Despite the attempt during the nineteenth century by historians of religion to preserve the distinction between fetishism and idolatry, many nineteenth-century writers mistakenly conflated fetishism and idolatry, so much so that their descriptions of fetishes became fixated on the idea that the representation of the human body or a part of it (especially the head) was a defining characteristic of fetishes.³⁰ But as the century progressed, social scientists were becoming increasingly sceptical of the concept of fetishism. Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, for instance,

²⁸ Mudimbe 16.

²⁹ An example is taken from an account by Joachim Monteiro: "The negro has no idea of a Creator or of a future existence; neither does he adore the sun nor any object, idol, or image. His whole belief is in evil spirits, and in charms or 'fetishes': these 'fetishes' can be employed for evil as well as counteract the bad effect of other malign 'fetishes' or spirits" (247).

³⁰ Leo Frobenius, for example, noted that the term "fetish" would often be assigned to a wide variety of objects in his personal collection -- such as clubs, pickaxes, pipes, bells, and snuff boxes -- merely because they contained representations of the human figure (Shelton, "Chameleon" 16). Frobenius was critical of such non-discriminating usage of the term "fetish."

avoided the term, partly because they discredited Comte's work in sociology, and partly because the term was becoming appropriated to new sexological discourses, and in 1906 Marcel Mauss finally rejected the use of "fetishism" in anthropological and ethnographic study, preferring to replace it with the new term "mana."³¹ Western social science was beginning to understand that it had misread "fetishism" and the societies where it was believed to exist. Mauss wrote: "[Fetishism] corresponds to nothing but an immense misunderstanding between two civilizations, the African and the European."³² Throughout this development, the concept of fetishism has taken on a spectrum of meanings, from very particular substances used in prescribed ways as part of a particular belief system, to all objects used in religious practices in primitive societies. In particular, whether or not "fetish" refers to human figures, that is, "idols," has been contested since the beginnings of the term's use. From the beginning the fetish was the site of the problem of the status of the material object and its capacity to take on different kinds of values -- social, economic, sexual, religious, aesthetic. Pietz identifies

³¹ Marcel Mauss, "L'art et le myth d'après M. Wundt," *Oeuvres*, vol.2, ed. Victor Karady (Paris: Minuit, 1968) 216-17.

³² Mauss 244-45. Quoted in Pietz, "Fetishism" 133.

four features of the fetish as it has developed in this discourse of sacred economies: first, the fetish is always associated with an "unmitigated materiality"; second, the fetish has "a fixed power to repeat an original event of singular synthesis or ordering" of heterogenous elements; third, the fetish points to the awareness that the value of material objects (whether for trade, religious purposes, and so on) is constructed by institutions and is therefore not inherent in the objects, nor is this value universal; and fourth, the material fetish exists in "an intense relation to, and with power over, the desires, actions, health, and self-identity of individuals whose personhood is conceived [by them] as inseparable from their bodies."³³ These are the features of the concept of the sacred or magical fetish which allowed the term to migrate into other discourses. "For Marx, the term was useful as a name for the power of a singular historical institution to fix personal consciousness in an objective illusion."³⁴ The fixating function of the fetish was also useful for Freud's concept of the sexual fetish, as was the fetish's power to use this fixation as the source of a repetition compulsion. For modernist aesthetics, the idea of a unity forged from a

³³ Pietz, "Problem" I, 10.

³⁴ Pietz, "Problem" I, 9.

chance encounter of heterogenous elements is fundamental, and is thematized, for example, in MacEwen's "breakfast" poems.

In aesthetic discourses, the idea of the fetish becomes important during the early nineteenth century. Received ideas inherited by the Romantic period from Enlightenment philosophy included an emphasis on the choice of the fetish as contingent upon the caprice or fancy of the fetish believer. Nineteenth-century thinkers saw both fetishism and idolatry as "the most reductive and inert extremes of a habit of mind which in its higher manifestations was held to be absolutely essential," such as in poetic genius.³⁵ This of course presented a dilemma, in that one had to guard against the dangerous tendency to become obsessed by or absorbed in the seeming reality of the imagination's constructions, but one could not entirely repudiate the imagination. For thinkers such as Coleridge, the problem of the material object's capacity for representation became articulated in his aesthetic theory in the problem of the human mind fixating upon the objects of its own creation. Coleridge and Wordsworth believed that there exists in the human mind a tendency to allow this fixation to overcome the memory of the original creation of the representation; the

³⁵ Simpson 13.

mind forgets that it has given to the object in question its "life," its sense of correspondence to a living spirit somehow existing elsewhere than in the material substance.³⁶ The mind then believes that the substance itself has divine or magical properties. This belief among Europeans in the contingency of fetish choice, and the apparent forgetfulness of the believer who had given the fetish its powers in the first place, were to be important elements in the conception of the fetish as Marx inherited it and used it in his theory of the development of commodity-based economies, and even later, in Saladin's theory of the "textual fetish," the figure of a seductive but dangerous Other created by writers who fear the loss of textual authority in their texts. Such a textual fetish both conceals and reveals the author's deepest fears even as it reassures the writer that he still possesses the power and inspiration of authorship.³⁷

In his analysis in *Capital* of the genesis of the commodity form in capitalist economies, Karl Marx introduces the commodity as having a "mystical character": "A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing,

³⁶ Simpson 13.

³⁷ Linda Saladin, *Fetishism and Fatal Women: Gender, Power, and Reflexive Discourse* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993).

abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties."³⁸ Marx signals at the very beginning of his discussion of the commodity form of exchange that he intends to subvert common-sense notions of the commodity as a simple, straightforward object; nevertheless, the continuation of the discussion takes a startling turn, as Marx imputes to the commodity its own brain capable of evolving "grotesque ideas":

The form of wood, for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous [perceptible to the senses] thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will.³⁹

Now, more than a century later, when western societies have become long accustomed to advanced forms of capitalist commodity exchange, the image of a wooden table with its own brain is far less startling than it was for Marx's contemporaries. We are used to seeing images of every possible commodity animated on our television screens, for

³⁸ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Vol.1. 1867 (New York: Vintage, 1977, trans. Ben Fowkes) 163.

³⁹ Marx, *Capital* 163-64.

example, from "California Raisins" to bottles of cleaning liquids to appliances. This proliferation of images of animated commodities is a symptom, not, of course, that we actually believe that a cardboard box of breakfast cereal can dance on the table, but of a vague sense that commodities -- and especially the "purest" form of commodity exchange, money -- accrue value all on their own. "Commodity fetishism," according to Marx, does not mean that all commodities are fetishes, so that in his theory, in contrast to the discourse of the ancient Roman marketplace, it matters little whether such objects are produced by hand or machine. What does matter is that in this production, the specific social relations which made the production possible are "forgotten" or veiled by the marketplace's emphasis on labour-time as itself a commodity, while at the same time but more invisibly, labour-time becomes a use-value for the capitalist, resulting in the exploitation of workers. This process of forgetting resembles, in Marx's view, the process, imagined by eighteenth-century European Enlightenment discourse, by which the primitive tribesperson forgets that he or she was the agent who endowed a fetish of his or her own manufacture or creation with supposed spiritual powers, and thus supposes those spiritual powers to be inherent in the object. What follows is a summary of

Marx's theorization of labour, time, and labour-time as a use-value, perhaps his most important contribution to economic and fetish theories.

In Marx's theory of the commodity form of exchange, a product becomes a commodity precisely when the social relations which are part of its production become forgotten by the society which produces it; in this case the social relations involved in the production of commodities which circulate in an economy governed by a general equivalent of value (gold) seem "natural." Those who are long accustomed to capitalism arrive at a point at which their familiarity with this economy persuades them that this cultural form is ahistorical, asocial, not human, but natural, in the sense of "thing-like" and physical.⁴⁰ The specific social relation which becomes "forgotten" in the production of commodities is that of labor in the life of peoples, which in commodity-based economies becomes abstracted into "labour-time." Labor is an activity of life itself; there can be no life without labor. Labor-time, in contrast, is an abstraction, just as time itself is an abstraction. Taussig sees the example of time to be a prime illustration of commodity fetishism, "whereby the products of the interrelations of persons are

⁴⁰ Michael Taussig, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (Chapel Hill: U of South Carolina P, c. 1980) 3.

no longer seen as such, but as things that stand over, control, and in some vital sense even may produce people."⁴¹ Time in capitalist societies is first an abstraction, which in turn becomes reified as a substance traded in the marketplace for wages, and then animated, as if it had a life of its own.⁴² Quoting Evans-Pritchard's account of how the category of time is conceptualized by a non-commodity-producing society, Taussig cites the Nuer⁴³ to support his claim that time is indeed a social construct, the "product of the interrelations of persons."

In commodity-based economies, labor and time are at first further abstracted into the concept of labor-time, which itself then becomes a commodity which can be bought

⁴¹ Taussig, *Devil* 5.

⁴² "Time....For us...it is an abstraction, but also a substance, it passes, it can be wasted, it can be saved, and so forth....Moreover, it is animated: so we speak of fighting against it." Taussig, *Devil* 5.

⁴³ Evans-Pritchard writes, ". . . the Nuer have no expression equivalent to 'time' in our language, and they cannot, therefore, as we can, speak of time as though it were something actual, which passes, can be wasted, can be saved, and so forth. I do not think that they ever experience the same feeling of fighting against time or having to coordinate activities with an abstract passage of time, because their points of reference are mainly the activities themselves, which are generally of a leisurely character. Events follow a logical order, but they are not controlled by an abstract system, there being no autonomous points of reference to which activities have to conform with precision." E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1940) 103. Quoted in Taussig, *Devil* 5.

and sold in the marketplace. Labor becomes abstracted from the human being who performs it, because a person's labor-time may be replaced in the often automated or semi-automated production processes of industrial capitalism by another person's labor-time, supposedly without affecting the value of the commodity produced. Labor-time then appears as a commodity to be "substantial and real," no longer an abstraction but something self-evident, commonsensical, "natural" and "immutable," "even though it is nothing more than a convention or a social construction emerging from a specific way of organizing persons relative to one another and to nature."⁴⁴ In capitalist societies, then, labour-time is conceived as a quantifiable substance to be traded in the marketplace for wages. One hour of labour time is equivalent in wages to another hour of labour time, regardless of *who* does the work.⁴⁵ This concept of labour-time contrasts sharply with a peasant-based economy's view of the labourer and his or her relation to the thing produced, in which

⁴⁴ Taussig, *Devil* 4.

⁴⁵ For simplicity's sake, I assume that the work is in the same industry. In fact, in late capitalist economies such as ours, there is considerable difference in hourly wages paid for different "kinds" of work, as if the market recognizes at least some portion of the worker's creative human input into the commodity produced by his or her labour. The full value of this contribution is not recognized in the form of wages, however, but accrues to the employer as profit.

something of the unique character of the worker -- even in some societies, a part of his or her own soul -- becomes incorporated into the made object.⁴⁶ In commodity-based economies, however, it is only the labourer's *time* which is exchanged for wages in the marketplace. Workers are treated as interchangeable parts, mere things, in the production process, their humanity and uniqueness irrelevant, and thus they become alienated, "sundered" from the products of their labour.

For Marx, the problem with the supposedly common-sense notion of labour time as a commodity is that it allows another entirely different dimension of labour to be made invisible, leading to the exploitation of workers. What is not accounted for in the usual view of labour time is that the employer uses labour time as a use value, to add value to the materials used to manufacture the commodity. Labour time is thus both a commodity itself, and a use value for the employer, in the sense that it involves human creativity, thought, skill, and so forth; but the labourer is paid only on the basis of the exchange value of his or her labour-time, and not on its use value (time being

⁴⁶ Taussig mentions the Maori's notion of the life-force or *hau*: the *hau* of the maker and the *hau* of the natural materials from which a thing is made are both conceived of as becoming part of the made object (*Devil* 28).

directly exchanged for money). The use value of labour-time is not accounted for in the theory and practice of the marketplace in which the labourer sells labour, but it contributes value to the commodities produced. Because the marketplace tends to make the use value of labour-time invisible, it appears that commodities accrue value all on their own, as a natural property of commodities. Marx called this the "fetishism of commodities" because the process is analogous to the attribution of life-like properties to material things in the European discourse of the fetish as sacred or magical object in primitive societies. A material object appears to have a life of its own while the real process by which that sense of "life" was created in the human imagination is forgotten, elided. Marx writes:

The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things.⁴⁷

Therefore the "mysterious character of the commodity-form" also reflects the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labour as a social relation between objects, which exists apart from and outside the producers. "Through

⁴⁷ Marx, *Capital* 164.

this substitution, the products of labour become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time supra-sensible or social."⁴⁸ Taussig explains that, of necessity, a commodity-producing society produces a phantom objectivity by which it "obscures its roots -- the relations between people." This process creates "a socially instituted paradox with bewildering manifestations, the chief of which is the denial by the society's members of the social construction of reality."⁴⁹

A symptom of this paradox was noted by Marx in his appropriation of the term "fetishism" from Enlightenment discourses about the history of religion to the attitude of people toward commodities:

In order, therefore, to find an analogy we must take flight into the misty realm of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities, with the products of men's hands. I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.⁵⁰

The eclipse of the real social relations of people involved

⁴⁸ Marx, *Capital* 164-65.

⁴⁹ Taussig, *Devil* 4.

⁵⁰ Marx, *Capital* 165.

in commodity production evolves gradually from the simple exchange of objects to the universal or money form of exchange (gold), which Marx calls the "finished form of the world of commodities," and it is this form in which commodity fetishism finds its mature expression. In the "universal form" of commodity-based economies, the monetarization of social life is complete: any and every social value has an equivalent form as money. Pietz writes that the "magical moment of fetish formation" in the process of the monetarization of social life is the transition from the general form of exchange into a universal form, with its concomitant "modal shift from existence and possibility to necessity."⁵¹

A symptom of a fully developed economy based on commodity exchange is the seeming exchange of status between material objects and persons. Objects seem to take on a life of their own, as in Marx's example of the table evolving grotesque ideas out of its wooden brain, a situation which Taussig terms "deeply mystical." Society confronts the "phantom objects" which have been abstracted from social life with a "schizoid attitude," both cherishing these abstractions as objects akin to inert things, and simultaneously thinking of them as being animated by a life-

⁵¹ Pietz, "Fetishism" 146-47.

force of their own, akin to spirits or gods. "Since these 'things' have lost their connection with social life, they appear, paradoxically, both as inert and as animate entities,"⁵² while at the same time persons become reified when they seem to be mere interchangeable parts in the great machine of the production process.

Commodity fetishism obscures or veils the real social relations which produce commodities. Those who work in commodity-based economies feel alienated because they are treated as objects rather than as people. In this type of economy, personified things, such as land, labor, and capital, appear to have the person-like power to produce value; particularly money, in its form as interest-bearing capital, is the pure fetish form: "Capital -- as an entity -- appears here as an independent source of value; as something that creates value in the same way as land rent, and labor wages....The transubstantiation, the fetishism, is complete."⁵³ Capitalist society's view of the money form as being somehow alive, and capable of accruing added value as a seemingly natural property of this aliveness, has often been noted as appearing in metaphorical descriptions of

⁵² Taussig, *Devil* 4-5.

⁵³ Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, part 3, trans. Jack Cohen and S. W. Ryazanskaya (Moscow: Progress, 1971) 494, 498, quoted in Pietz, "Fetishism" 149.

money, beginning with Marx's trope of money being like a pear tree. It is nevertheless instructive (and amusing) to glance at a random selection of newspaper business pages to see the almost incredible extent to which this is still the case, particularly with the more abstract form of the universal equivalent, money in the form of stocks and bonds. For example, the *Globe and Mail's* business section (March 1996), yielded several sanguinary metaphors ("weekly fund pulse," "the fund's returns are likely to remain anemic," "junior stock...gets propelled to nosebleed levels"); many references to money (and its equivalents) as having the ability to propel itself through space ("assets climbed," "asset jump," "stock takes a run," "bank...should take a breather," "bond subindexes continued their roller-coaster ride," "factories regained their footing...after stumbling") and to money as sportsman ("the biggest loser," "lost ground"); money in all its forms as having sexual and procreative abilities ("funds . . . have outperformed all their peers," "finds a home for its orphan goods," "[t]here's nothing very sexy about Dupont," "corporate progeny"); as well as to being "lousy with cash" (having a lot of it) and the usual vegetative symbols ("flowering of the high-tech industry," "venture capital investments take years to blossom"). At the same time, people are perceived

as reified identities that personify the factors composing capitalist production: landlord, wageworker, capitalist. Finally, that which mediates between personified things and reified persons are forms of money-capital: rent, wages, profits.⁵⁴ Taussig shows how, when a pre-capitalist economy, organized according to the circulation of goods based on their use values, encounters a capitalist economy for the first time, members of the "peasant" economy perceive that the new kind of work robs them of their lives, turning them into walking dead. The capitalist is perceived as evil.⁵⁵ In contrast, those of us who have become accustomed to capitalism perceive only a vague sort of alienation, because we have come to accept the status quo as natural and cannot conceive of an economy operating in any other way (except for "primitive" economies to which we would not wish to return).

I am interested in the symptoms of commodity fetishism which appear in literature. Whatever one may think of Marx's theory of value, it is indisputable that images of things as animate entities, and conversely of persons as reified objects, appear in the public discourses of capitalist societies. The proliferation of such images suggests a

⁵⁴ Pietz, "Fetishism" 148.

⁵⁵ Taussig, *Devil*, Introduction and Chapter One.

widespread uneasiness or alienation or confusion about subjectivity as it is construed by the market relations of advanced capitalism. Gwendolyn MacEwen, although not an avowed Marxist or even politically active in the usual sense, produced work in which these symptoms seem inevitably to appear, aware as she was of conditions of existence for a western subject of twentieth-century capitalism. Moreover, in her appropriation of the voice of T. E. Lawrence, MacEwen creates a space in which to give voice to an awareness of such alienation as it is first encountered by a pre-capitalist society, that of the Arabian kingdoms as they struggled for political independence from the Ottoman Empire during World War I. MacEwen's strategy not only intensifies the depiction of the alienation which has come to characterize twentieth-century experience, but it also interrogates twentieth-century constructions of subjectivity. Subsequent chapters of this study will show how MacEwen's work constantly argues for social relations between people to be based on recognition of real, human being-ness, not disguised as the objective or natural relation between things, and in this sense her work implicitly, and occasionally explicitly, questions capitalist values.

Marx's theory of commodity fetishism theorizes one form

of subjectivity but need not be read as precluding other forms, and indeed encourages subjects to question the social constitution of the individual as both the effect of and the precondition for market relations under conditions of generalized commodity trade, and also as it is constituted by non-economic factors such as gender, sexuality, and family relations.⁵⁶ Interestingly, the concept of fetishism surfaces once again in the most influential work in theories of the mind and of normative sexuality in the twentieth century, the psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud.

The late nineteenth century saw the growth of an interest in developing a discourse of normative human sexuality, and this discourse appropriated the concept of fetishism both to describe a particular type of behaviour and to assign that behaviour to the category of the abnormal, aberrant, or deviant. Alfred Binet, in 1887, was the first to use the term "fetishism" to describe behaviour in which a part of a person, or a thing associated with that person, rather than the person himself or herself, becomes the object of sexual arousal for a lover.⁵⁷ Hair, feet,

⁵⁶ See, for example, Jack Amariglio and Antonio Callari, "Marxian Value Theory and the Problem of the Subject: The Role of Commodity Fetishism", in Apter and Pietz, eds., *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, 186-216.

⁵⁷ Robert A. Nye, "The Medical Origins of Sexual Fetishism", in *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, ed. Emily

lingerie, and shoes are well-known examples of such sexual fetish objects. The use of the term "fetish" for such an object is apt because of the seemingly worshipful attitude with which the fetishist approaches the object, similar to the attitude of African tribespeople who, according to the misreading of "primitive" societies by European theory, worship material objects of their own making or discovery.

Sigmund Freud adopted Binet's terminology, and his subsequent theory of sexual fetishism is probably today the most widely-known and influential of any fetish discourse (although the theory of fetishism itself plays only a minor part in Freud's overall theory of human psychosexual development). Freud's theory of sexual fetishism has to be pieced together from a number of essays written over a considerable period.⁵⁸ According to Freud, sexual fetishism occurs because of a boy's anxiety about castration (Freud's theory assumes a male subject). The boy child assumes that the mother possesses a penis, just as he does, and his first

Apter and William Pietz (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1993) 13.

⁵⁸ Freud develops his theory in "Fetishism," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Ed. and Trans. James Strachey, Vol. XXI, (London: Hogarth, 1955-74) 152-57 (the *Standard Edition* is hereafter abbreviated as *SE* in the text and the notes); "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality," *SE* Vol. VII; "The Uncanny," *SE* Vol. XVII, 217-52; and "Medusa's Head," *SE* XVIII, 273-74.

glimpse of female genitals is supposedly horror-filled at the discovery that her "phallus" is missing. According to the theory, this glimpse introduces to the child the possibility that he himself is at risk of castration, since his mother has already experienced it. Most male children successfully resolve the dilemma of the missing maternal phallus through the oedipal process, in which the mother's (and by extension, all females') sexual difference is accepted. But a small number of boys cannot let go of the mother as the primary object of desire, and they must maintain, somehow, the fiction of the maternal phallus. For them, the fetish object becomes a libido-invested talisman which both obscures and reveals the "fact" of the mother's castration. The mother had previously been the object of the boy's sexual desire, but now he averts his gaze and invests his desire in a substitute object for the maternal phallus, which both reassures him that the mother "has" the phallus and paradoxically signals that she does not. This dynamic is then repressed and only the sexual desire for the fetish object remains in consciousness.

Fundamental to Freud's theory of the fetish is his concept of disavowal. Disavowal is a psychic defense mechanism against the threat of castration which Freud saw as particular to the fetishist. Disavowal allows the

fetishist to "have it both ways": to believe in the mother's phallus while simultaneously substituting another part of the body, or a material thing, for its loss (which is implicitly recognized). It is important to distinguish disavowal from the other psychical defenses against castration: repression, negation or denial, and repudiation or foreclosure. Negation and repression are similar in that both first register psychical contents, but repression allows the subject to forget these contents as they are shifted into the unconscious. These repressed contents then become the source for neurosis. Negation or denial allows the subject to consciously say "no" to the psychical contents. Negation "allows a conscious registration of repressed content and avoids censorship."⁵⁹ Repudiation is associated with psychosis and occurs when a subject fails to register an impression which emanates from the external world, rejecting or detaching from a piece of reality. It takes a hallucinatory rather than a projective form.⁶⁰ Elizabeth Grosz explains that repudiation is not the return of the repressed, that is, the return of the signifier, but

⁵⁹ Elizabeth Grosz, "Lesbian Fetishism?", *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995) 147. This essay is a revision of an essay of the same title which appeared in Apter and Pietz's *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, 101-115.

⁶⁰ Grosz, "Lesbian" 147.

the return of the Lacanian Real that has never been signified.⁶¹ Like repression and negation, disavowal involves a psychological registration of an impulse, and like repudiation, it refuses the contents of a perception or a piece of reality, but it does not rely on or utilize the unconscious, because it predates the separation of the conscious from the unconscious. Like repudiation, disavowal results in a split in the ego, but it does not involve a failure of representation. Thus disavowal preserves the fetishist from neurosis and psychosis.

Disavowal is fundamental to the functioning of all kinds of fetishes, and could be added as a fifth feature to the list of defining characteristics of the fetish, as developed by Pietz. In the discourse of sacred economies, disavowal appears in the fetishist's apparent forgetting that he or she created the fetish, gave it its life and magical powers, at the same time that he or she is aware

⁶¹ The "Real" is one of three key terms in Lacan's topology of subjectivity; the others are the Imaginary (related to the mirror-stage of development, in which a subject, enabled to perceive an image of itself, becomes an object, internalizing a principle of otherness and thus becoming enabled to form external relations) and the Symbolic (the realm of language). The Real is that which cannot be symbolized or imagined; it is outside of symbolization, outside of language: in Žižek's words, "something that cannot be negated . . . because it is already in itself, in its positivity, nothing but an embodiment of a pure negativity, emptiness." Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989) 170.

that this is the case. In commodity fetishism, disavowal appears in the obscuring of the social relations, specifically the use-value of labour-time, which contribute to the surplus value accrued by commodities, even while labourers simultaneously know that their labour is responsible for this value. As Laura Mulvey shows, these different kinds of disavowal are not directly linked, but are "homologous psychic strategies" which are linked topographically, "psychic mapping as spatial mapping."⁶²

Disavowal is a paradigm which proves far too useful to discard merely because Freud's theory of psychosexual development has been under attack in recent years. Recent feminist revisions of Freud make it possible to see some of the more contentious of his theories, such as penis envy and fear of castration, as themselves fetishistic displacements in his writing of more primary anxieties about sexual difference, and indeed, about difference altogether. Two critics, using different theoretical perspectives, have recently discovered fetishistic structures in Freud's writings about fetishism. E. L. McCallum deconstructs Freud's essay "Fetishism" and other texts on human sexuality to read his analogy of the clitoris to the penis as

⁶² Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1996) 7.

sustaining "a fetishistic structure by both claiming and denying difference."⁶³ Marcia Ian presents a new feminist reading of Freud's theory of fetishism and castration anxiety by turning psychoanalytic discourse back upon itself, subjecting Freud's writings to the sort of analysis done in the dream work.⁶⁴ It is not surprising, then, that Ian finds in Freud's theory evidence that castration anxiety is itself a displacement and that the emphasis on the phallus in psychoanalytic theory is itself a form of fetishism. She notes that there persists in fetish discourses the determination to view the fetish as a mere penis substitute. But Ian, extending Lacan's logic, sees fetishism as an embodiment of the denial of not just sexual difference, but of the very possibility of any difference, any uncategorizableness, of the "me and the you who may not form a we."⁶⁵ Ian further supports her argument by noting that in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud unconsciously reveals the fact that castration anxiety is a displacement of a more fundamental uneasiness: here he refers to the part

⁶³ E. L. McCallum, "How to Do Things with Fetishism" (*Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 7.3 [1995]) 34.

⁶⁴ Marcia Ian, *Remembering the Phallic Mother: Psychoanalysis, Modernism, and the Fetish* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1993).

⁶⁵ Ian 90.

of every dream which resists interpretation as the "navel" of the dream, which suggests that the part of the body from which he must avert his gaze is not the mother's genitals but the site of the severed umbilical cord.⁶⁶ Ian explains:

Invoking the "navel" as the privileged figure of the uninterpretable cannot fail to be significant in the discourse that above all others finds anatomical detail significant. Given the phobic unknowability of the mother in psychoanalysis, given the fishy silence on the part of these erudite physicians concerning the organ that connects mother to baby, it matters that Freud chooses the "navel" as the figure of the unknowable, the untouchable, the untranslatable "spot" in the psyche. Even when Freud does not know he knows better than anyone. He puts his finger on the very spot he has spotted with utmost clarity as unrecognizable: the spot where psychoanalysis stares blankly at what it chooses not to know.⁶⁷

I believe that Ian's work is of great importance in the feminist project of critiquing Freud, and her resituation of the phallic mother as "the archetypal object of all desire"⁶⁸ and the source of sexual fetish production is of importance to my reading of fetish discourse theories and of MacEwen's poetry. For Ian, the phallic mother is a "symptom of the compulsion to resolve ambivalence into a (specious)

⁶⁶ Ian 39-40.

⁶⁷ Ian 40.

⁶⁸ Ian 1.

equivalence,"⁶⁹ and the most compelling evidence that Freud's theory of castration anxiety is really a fetishistic displacement of anxiety about difference per se.

An association between the anthropological and psychoanalytic notions of fetishism is implied by Freud in his essay "The Uncanny," but he seems unaware that this essay also reveals his own personal fear of and desire for the phallic mother. Freud is concerned in this paper with certain effects of experiences, including encounters with works of art, which provoke an unusual affective response, a sense of "uncanniness." Freud provides extensive quotations from Schelling's dictionary, which lists several, sometimes mutually exclusive, definitions for the German *unheimlich*, for which there is no exact translation in English, but which is usually rendered as "the uncanny." He writes that *unheimlich* "is the name for everything that ought to have remained . . . secret and hidden but has come to light."⁷⁰ Freud unproblematically accepts his society's understanding of the "primitive" in social evolution as involving belief in an animistic universe, a conception which we have already seen is itself the result of Enlightenment discourse's interpretation of Portuguese

⁶⁹ Ian 6.

⁷⁰ Freud, "The Uncanny" 224.

traders' encounters with the societies of the West African Coast in the fifteenth century, and in particular, with interpretations of those objects known as "feitiços." Freud associates the sense of the "uncanny" with that same kind of animism:

It seems as if each one of us has been through a phase of individual development corresponding to this animistic stage in primitive man, that none of us has passed through it without preserving certain residues and traces of it which are still capable of manifesting themselves, and that everything which now strikes us as "uncanny" fulfils the condition of touching these residues of animistic mental activity within us and bringing them to expression.⁷¹

Since these "residues and traces" of animistic beliefs originate in "primitive" societies' use of material objects believed to contain magical properties, fetishes, we can infer that fetish use produces a sense of the uncanny in contemporary subjects. In fact, Freud specifically cites "mana" ("the attribution to various outside persons and things of carefully graded magical powers"⁷²) -- the later anthropological term for fetishes -- in his description of instances of the uncanny as one of the several sources for that feeling. Although Freud identifies several sources of

⁷¹ Freud, "The Uncanny" 240-41.

⁷² Freud, "The Uncanny" 240.

the feeling of the uncanny, including the sense of "doubling" and involuntary repetition, ghosts and the fear of the dead, a belief in the omnipotence of thoughts and the consequent practice of magic, fear of the evil eye, and the castration complex, he does not discuss in this essay how the fear of castration results in feelings of the uncanny. However, Freud's association of repression with the uncanny enables the reader to deduce the relationship, only alluded to by him.

Even though Freud does not discuss the fear of castration specifically in "The Uncanny," his description, cited by Ian, of his own personal experience which resulted in a feeling of the uncanny sheds an interesting light on Ian's association of the castration complex with the phallic mother. Freud relates an instance of "involuntary repetition" in his own life, when he was lost in an Italian town. As he wandered through it during a visit, he kept coming back to the same neighbourhood, one deserted of inhabitants except for the "painted women" hanging out of their windows. The experience of uncanniness was intensified by Freud's fear that his repeated appearances on this street were beginning to attract unwanted attention to himself.⁷³ Although Freud's emphasis is on the repetition of finding

⁷³ Freud, "The Uncanny" 237.

himself in the same street despite his attempts to move away from it, Ian suggests that perhaps the real source of his sense of uncanniness experienced here is not so much in the repetition of the events as in the threatened encounter with sexually attractive, and aggressive, women: figures for the phallic mother, who excites both fear and desire, and who reveals not only sexual difference, and thus the fear of castration, but the more primal differentiation of the ego from the mother, and thus the fear of parturition⁷⁴ and of all difference.

Another essay important for understanding how sexual fetishism and castration anxiety can appear in cultural products is Freud's "Medusa's Head."⁷⁵ Here Freud writes about an early mythological image of the phallic mother, Medusa:

To decapitate equals to castrate. The terror of the Medusa is thus a terror of castration that is linked to the sight of something. The hair upon the Medusa's head is frequently represented in works of art in the form of snakes, and these once again are derived from the castration complex. It is a remarkable fact that, however frightening they may be in themselves, they nevertheless serve

⁷⁴ ". . . for it is the umbilical cord after all, and not the penis, which constitutes the historic 'locution and link of exchange' from which the subject must be 'missing' if he is to be a subject and not a permanent appendage of the mother." Ian 21-22.

⁷⁵ Freud, "Medusa's Head" 273-274.

actually as a mitigation of the horror, for they replace the penis, the absence of which is the cause of the horror. This is a confirmation of the technical rule according to which a multiplication of penis symbols signifies castration.⁷⁶

Moreover, in mythology, the sight of the Medusa turned men literally to stone. Freud comments that this, too, is another indication of castration anxiety:

The sight of Medusa's head makes the spectator stiff with terror, turns him to stone. Observe that we have here once again the same origin from the castration complex and the same transformation of affect! For becoming stiff means an erection. Thus in the original situation it offers consolation to the spectator: he is still in possession of a penis, and the stiffening reassures him of the fact.⁷⁷

Medusa, then, is both an object of fear, threatening castration, and a symbol of reassurance, reassuring the subject of his possession of the penis, and thus she operates fetishistically as an early image of the phallic mother. She is also the original spectacle, paralyzing the viewer who is unable, in his stony formation, to look elsewhere but at her.

Medusa's importance as a mythological, literary, and artistic figure since classical times illustrates that ideas

⁷⁶ Freud, "Medusa's Head" 273.

⁷⁷ Freud, "Medusa's Head" 273.

which were later articulated and organized in the various fetish discourses were already appearing in artistic production in times historically prior to the actual development of these discourses. More recently, the vocabulary and insights of the specialized fetish discourses have been turned toward an investigation of a wide range of cultural production, including Marxist economic theory, Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and their feminist revisions, anthropology, ethnography, visual culture, and literary and critical theory. For example, in the area of postcolonial studies, Homi K. Bhabha draws on fetish discourses to develop a theory of the colonial stereotype. In his influential essay "The Other Question,"⁷⁸ Bhabha borrows key features of Freud's psychoanalytic theory of the sexual fetish to develop a theory of the colonial stereotype as "a complex, ambivalent, contradictory mode of representation, as anxious as it is assertive,"⁷⁹ redeploying the notion of fetishism to subvert the very colonial discourse to which it had contributed a small but significant element.

⁷⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, "The Other Question," *Screen* 24.6 (1983) 18-36. Reprinted in a revised form in Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) 66-84. Subsequent references are to the earlier version of the essay, unless otherwise noted.

⁷⁹ Bhabha, "The Other Question" 22.

Bhabha contends that the view of the relationship between colonizer and colonized, as seen by the ideologies of colonizing nations, incorrectly assumes that their relative subject positions are fixed, discrete, unchanging, and, as binary opposites, necessarily in conflict with one another. He believes that this view is too simple. He sees that the colonial relationship is, in contrast, structured *on both sides* by "forms of multiple and contradictory belief."⁸⁰ This is because it is not only the fear of the Other that circulates in colonial relations in contradictory, conflicting patterns, but also the desire for the Other, creating complex crossings and re-crossings.

"The Other Question" shows that colonial discourse mistakenly considers the identities and qualities of subject peoples to be fixed, assumed to be stable and unchanging. The most obvious form of this solidification of identity is the colonial (racial or ethnic) stereotype. But, contends Bhabha, such fixing of the colonial subject's identity is wrong, not only because no one's identity is ever fixed and solid, but because the logic of the stereotype points to the contradiction at its root. The stereotype implies that the colonial subject can be, and is, completely known and knowable, but at the same time the compulsive repetition of

⁸⁰ Bhabha, "The Other Question" 27.

the stereotype's use in colonial discourse points to a doubt that the colonial subject is knowable -- the stereotype's validity must be anxiously reconfirmed through seemingly endless repetitions. Bhabha gives the example of "the *same old* stories -- of the Negro's animality, the Coolie's inscrutability or the stupidity of the Irish" that must be told again and again, each time seeming to be freshly gratifying and terrifying.⁸¹ What is believed to be known about the colonial subject, then, is not really known, and Bhabha claims that this points to a "lack" in the colonizing subject's psyche, to something missing in the supposed ability of his system of knowledge to constitute or describe the world. This "lack" is also seen in the colonizer's necessity to define himself negatively in terms of the Other, in the sense that he defines himself *against* the colonized Other, as that which the Other is *not*. Thus even when the Other is threatening or confrontational, the colonizing subject must depend on that supposedly negative Other for his self-definition.

This dimension of the stereotype, that which paradoxically signifies that the colonial subject both can be and cannot be completely known/possessed/controlled, relates to the role that the sexual fetish, according to

⁸¹ Bhabha, "The Other Question" 29.

Freud, plays for the fetishist. In Bhabha's theory, the stereotype operates according to the fetish's metonymic and metaphoric structures of representation:

For fetishism is always a "play" or vacillation between the archaic affirmation of wholeness/similarity -- in Freud's terms: "all men have penises"; in ours "All men have the same skin/race/culture" -- and the anxiety associated with lack and difference -- again, for Freud "Some do not have penises"; for us "Some do not have the same skin/race/culture." Within discourse, the fetish represents the simultaneous play between metaphor as substitution (masking absence and difference) and metonymy (which contiguously registers the perceived lack). The fetish or stereotype gives access to an "identity" which is predicated as much on mastery and pleasure as it is on anxiety and defence, for it is a form of multiple and contradictory belief in its recognition of difference and disavowal of it.⁸²

Thus for Bhabha, the contradictory, ambivalent structure of the colonizer's relation to the colonized manifests in a consistent pattern of conflict in colonial discourse: the colonized subject is simultaneously considered to be unknowable, beyond comprehension (the "inscrutable Oriental") and also completely knowable as the object of an all-seeing colonial gaze.

Bhabha is careful to avoid the de-politicization that a strictly deconstructive approach to the stereotype and to colonial subjectivity would create. He wants to consider not

⁸² Bhabha, "The Other Question" 27.

merely the tendency of textual meanings to slip, the effects of repetition and *differance*, but also the very real material effects of particular social and historical sites and contexts of colonial enunciation and address. He focuses on how the discourse of knowing the colonial subject becomes grounds for the political control, surveillance, and repression of the colonial Other, but also on how the colonized subject uses strategically the fractures and gaps within colonial discourse itself, to subvert the knowledge and authority produced by colonial discourse for the colonizer's use. For Bhabha, colonial discourse's claim to be authoritative and unified is specious, owing to the semantic slippage of meaning within a text and, moreover, to the effects of "translation." A discourse's claim to be unified, self-contained, complete, and authoritative, according to Bhabha, is revealed as incomplete, fractured, and contradictory when it is "translated" (repeated) in another (colonial) context. This process produces destabilization, a "lack" in the original discourse, and therefore colonial discourse is always, in Bhabha's words, "less than one and double."⁸³ In a vivid example of such "translation," Bhabha cites the Bible as such a text,

⁸³ Bhabha, "Sly Civility," (October, Winter 1985). Reprinted in *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) 97.

perceived by Christians in the West as an ordinary, unified, and authoritative text, but whose teachings on Transubstantiation and the Last Supper seemed horrific to the vegetarian Hindus who first heard Christian missionaries speak in India.⁸⁴ When such master narratives are translated and absorbed into the culture of the Other, they become changed, "hybridized": "There, the hybrid tongues of the colonial space make even the repetition of the *name* of God uncanny. . . ."⁸⁵ Thus "translation" and "hybridity" are largely responsible for the semantic slippage within the texts of colonial discourse, which then opens up, frees the play of differences from the stereotype's fixation. But colonial discourse cannot transcend somehow the stereotypes of its own construction: when the stereotype breaks down, it reveals not a true identity of the Other, but the fractures and gaps within colonial discourse itself. Bhabha creates a riveting image of this dynamic:

Black skin splits under the racist gaze, displaced into signs of bestiality, genitalia, grotesquerie, which reveal the phobic myth of the undifferentiated whole white body. And the holiest of books -- the Bible -- bearing both the standard of the cross and the standard of empire finds itself strangely dismembered

⁸⁴ Bhabha, "Sly Civility" 99-101.

⁸⁵ Bhabha, "Sly Civility" 101.

when it is sold as a curio or used as wrapping paper in early nineteenth-century Bengal.⁸⁶

Another area in which the logic of disavowal contributes to the complex construction (and deconstruction) of the colonial subject is in the operation of a form of self-definition for the colonized subject and control for the colonizer which Bhabha terms "mimicry." Bhabha writes:

. . . colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. The authority of that mode of colonial discourse that I have called mimicry is therefore stricken by an indeterminacy: mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal.⁸⁷

From the point of view of the colonizer, mimicry is a form of colonial control that operates according to the logic of the panoptic gaze of power theorized by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*.⁸⁸ Mimicry occurs when the colonized

⁸⁶ Homi K. Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October: Anthology* (Boston: MIT Press, 1987). Reprinted in *The Location of Culture* 85-92, 92.

⁸⁷ Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man" 86.

⁸⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), Trans. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Peregrine, 1979).

subject meets the expectations of the colonizer by adopting the outward forms of the metropolitan centre and internalizing its values and norms, thus repeating or copying the imperial society. Mimicry is one of the most subtle and elusive of the strategies to fulfil "the epic intention of the civilizing mission" of the colonizing culture,⁸⁹ by maintaining colonial control without relying on overt violence. Bhabha further claims that, at the same time, this disciplinary gaze of the colonizer is destabilized by a crucial difference maintained by colonial discourse between the colonizer and the colonized. While it is possible, and desirable, according to colonial discourse, for the colonized subject to become "Anglicized," for example, it is never possible, or desirable, for him or her to become "English."⁹⁰ Thus one side of colonial discourse envisions the potential of the colonized subject to be reformed, gradually to become as "civilized" as the colonizer, through the guidance exercised by the benevolent imperial power, while the other side of the discourse conceives of a fundamental, ontological difference of the colonized subject that, because this difference signifies his or her supposed inferiority, makes full reformation and civilization

⁸⁹ Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man" 85.

⁹⁰ Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man" 90.

impossible. At the heart of mimicry, then, is a destabilizing, ironic compromise, "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite.*"⁹¹

The desire for a colonial Other who is almost the same, who mimics the values and norms of the colonizer, is analogous to the desire, in sexual fetishism, for the fetish, that which stands in for the maternal phallus, the reassuring metaphoric substitution which veils its absence; but the ontological difference conceived in colonial discourse between the colonizer and colonized points to the fear of the recognition of loss and difference also seen in sexual fetishism, in the metonymic dimension of aggression that psychically registers the phallus's absence. Bhabha's theory of the stereotype shows that the tendency of colonial discourse to freeze or fix subjectivities in such bipolar terms is "an arrested, fixated form of representation" which disallows

that form of negation which gives access to the recognition of difference in the Symbolic. It is that possibility of difference and circulation which would liberate the signifier of *skin/culture* from the signifieds of racial topology, the analytics of blood, ideologies of racial and

⁹¹ Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man" 86.

cultural dominance and degeneration.⁹²

Probably Bhabha's most important contribution to colonial and postcolonial theory is his insight that the dynamics of mimicry, hybridity, and the colonial stereotype do not work in only one direction, but that the relationship between colonizer and colonized is informed by the multiple crossings and recrossings of fear and desire on both sides. These ideas are especially illuminating for Gwendolyn MacEwen's work when it is considered as situated at the interstices of such crossings and recrossings of subjectivities. As a writer originating in a Western nation, MacEwen might at first glance seem to be aligned with the side of colonizing power, but as a woman marginalized or excluded from the site of writing, she uses mimicry and the stereotype to both fetishize and subvert the artistic and spiritual norms of patriarchal society and to establish her own authority as a writer. In her earliest poetry, MacEwen invokes, studies, and rewrites the sacred discourse of the most stereotypically "Other" society she could imagine as a young woman poet: the Caballa, an esoteric, Semitic, and patriarchal text, mimicked but also revised /revised /rewritten in her series of poems titled "Adam's Alphabet,"

⁹² Bhabha, "The Other Question" 27-28.

disussed at length in Chapter Two. In these poems, MacEwen seizes a form of Hebrew poetry for her own use, appropriating the form but creating her own meaning. This early work is transgressive, for she utters the supposedly unutterable and in doing so enunciates and authorizes her own subject position as a woman poet.

In addition to Homi K. Bhabha, another critic who uses fetish discourse theory in a way that illuminates MacEwen's work is Linda Saladin, who, in drawing a tenuous relationship between metaphor and what she terms "the mimetic drive towards language used for human procreation,"⁹³ attempts to show that literary images of women function as textual "fetishes" for the author in search of authority for his writing. Saladin considers only a male author, but her theory, if valid, could prove illuminating for teasing out the multiple and contradictory patterns of belief that underlie MacEwen's creation of an image of a male -- T. E. Lawrence -- which then functions as a textual fetish that authorizes her own writing. The dimension of fetishism is further augmented or overdetermined by MacEwen's appropriation of Lawrence's voice in order to create this image.

⁹³ Saladin means that we have a tendency to want to use in other contexts terms that describe human reproduction.

Saladin begins her discussion by asserting the growing importance of metaphor for writers in a world devoid of metaphysical certainties, especially in the post-structuralist era, a time when we are

. . . no longer buttressed by an unerring belief in nature as a universally fixed referent. As theoretical questions about origins, centers, and teleologies proliferate, the metaphoric elements in language take on more significance than ever.⁹⁴

Saladin claims that in this "conceptual morass" it is more difficult than ever for a text to claim "authority," and thus language relies more heavily on metaphor: "The text finds it necessary to rely on metaphors which give the illusion of grounding and authority. One obvious choice is to find tropes that evoke 'natural' creation,"⁹⁵ that is, human procreation. Saladin asserts further that human procreation is evoked whenever the artist calls upon the muse for inspiration or represents an image of the *femme fatale* in his text. Because female sexuality is so frequently linked to intellectual creativity, these images are "fetishized" by the artist, in that they allow him to claim some textual authority for his writing.⁹⁶ Apparently,

⁹⁴ Saladin 2.

⁹⁵ Saladin 2.

⁹⁶ Saladin 5.

such textual authority relies, then, on a metaphoric relation between author and muse, or author and fetishized feminine image, whose union or collaboration produces -- gives birth to -- the literary text. In claiming that textual images can function fetishistically, Saladin relies on Freud's notion of the sexual fetish and assumes that this hypothetical "textual fetish" functions analogously to the sexual fetish. Just as the sexual fetish disavows castration, the textual fetish both affirms an ontological ground by granting the text an "authority," albeit temporary and illusory, while at the same time it represents the very loss of ontological certainty, in the form of the threatening feminine. "By shrouding the text's origin in the already mystified structure of femininity, the feminine image defends the text against threats which take the form of questions as to its authority or right to existence."⁹⁷ Saladin does not fully explain, however, who might ask these questions, or what form the questions take. She also claims that allegory and irony provide the best illusory grounding for writers of the late nineteenth century. One problem is that she does not account for the fact that allegory and irony are both forms which have flourished in other, presumably less uncertain times. For example, allegory was a

⁹⁷ Saladin 30.

principle mode for medieval writers, and irony for writers of the European Enlightenment. Further, Saladin ignores that images of women, from the muse to the *femme fatale*, have been present in western literature at least since the time of the Homeric poets. (One thinks of the invocation of the muse at the beginning of *The Odyssey*, and of Circe, Calypso, the Sirens, and others.) Saladin leaves unclear whether these images served the same or similar functions throughout history, or whether they have been adapted to the function of fetishism only within the last century or so. I think that it is doubtful that the Homeric poets suffered from the kind of ontological uncertainty that Saladin claims for writers of the more recent past; hence the ancient bards would have had no reason to search for textual authority for their accounts in exploitative images of woman.

Saladin uses the term "fetish" to mean "a displacement of threatening elements which gives the illusion of control since, in psychological terms, a fetish substitutes for something feared lost or non-existent."⁹⁸ Underlying Saladin's transfer of this process to the site of textual production is the assumption that writing, or any creative activity, is by nature threatening to the artist. Although Saladin does not clarify exactly what the artist fears to

⁹⁸ Saladin 27.

lose in the creative act, and thus what he must compensate for by fetishizing a textual image, in the case of MacEwen one might hypothesize that it is not the creative act itself which is threatening to the artist, but the possibility of its loss, the loss of the writer's inspiration and/or ability to write. MacEwen experienced a period during which she was uninspired for some time to write poetry,⁹⁹ but she produced two new collections of poems after this seemingly arid period: *Afterworlds*, which was published posthumously in 1987, and before that, *The T. E. Lawrence Poems* in 1982,¹⁰⁰ the collection in which MacEwen does seem to rely for both inspiration and authority on a fetishized image that could be her male muse. To read MacEwen's work in this way would require a gender reversal of Saladin's theory, however, because it is important that for Saladin, the artist is always male: she takes the theoretical position that woman, by definition, is excluded from the site of

⁹⁹ MacEwen said, "I find myself now more and more drawn to prose than I am to poetry. In fact, I haven't been writing poetry for quite some time." Bev Daurio and Mike Zizis, "An Inner View of Gwendolyn MacEwen" (*Intrinsic* 5 & 6: 1978) 61. Although MacEwen wrote no poetry during this time, her writer's block did not extend to other forms of writing, and she continued to work successfully on several prose projects, dramas, and translations.

¹⁰⁰ Gwendolyn MacEwen, *Afterworlds* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1987); *The T. E. Lawrence Poems* (Oakville, Ont.: Mosaic Press/Valley Editions, 1982).

writing.¹⁰¹

Saladin writes about "the feminine image" in a text as if referring to a general representation, or any representation of the feminine; however, her specific examples are always of the muse or the "fatal woman," as if no other literary representations of women exist. Nevertheless I would like to accept Saladin's thesis that fetishism and the construction of gender and power, as seen both in texts and in society at large, are related, that it is possible for writers to fetishize verbal images of their own creation, and that they tend to do so in uncertain times as an attempt to claim authority for their work. In relation to Saladin's analysis, one thinks of Pietz's insight that the roots of the term "fetish" refer to the social and legal control during medieval times of women's sexuality. Thus Saladin's discussion of the relationship between various kinds of fetishism and the representation of woman in texts of

¹⁰¹ Referring to Lacan's interpretation of Freud, Saladin writes: "Woman is positioned outside of language yet she catalyzes it. Language has been a masculine prerogative -- 'the Law of the Father' -- and constructed from one point of view" (37). This is a misreading of Lacan, for it is the father who catalyzes the entry into language or the Symbolic, not woman. On the other hand, Lacan intends "the Law of the Father" to be understood as abstract, and as available to all humans. Woman is not excluded literally from speech in his theory, although I agree with feminist theorists that there are gender-biased ramifications in making the phallus the universal signifier.

the past hundred years directs us to the very origins of the western concept of fetishism. Once one clears away the problem of her acceptance of the notion that only men are creators, and only women function as the muse or fatal other, her theory could illuminate the praxis of a poet such as MacEwen, who often invokes a male muse or writes of seductive, dangerous males.

Saladin's theory depends upon a gender differentiation which excludes women from artistic production, always instead relegating her to the subordinate role of muse. This view is in accord with that expressed by the poet Robert Graves in *The White Goddess*, a work that, at the time that MacEwen began writing, was for poets both important and controversial. Margaret Atwood remembers meeting in coffee houses in the early sixties for poetry readings, when the young women poets discussed Graves' view that a woman could not write poetry.¹⁰² A woman writer, according to Graves, had only two choices: she had to take on the role of muse or goddess. Atwood and MacEwen ultimately rejected Graves' limiting vision of creativity as being a male prerogative. They both seem to have been able to invoke a male muse without fetishizing this figure (although Atwood's muses

¹⁰² Rosemary Sullivan, *Shadow Maker: The Life of Gwendolyn MacEwen* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 1995) 105.

were most often female). In her later career, however, MacEwen certainly does fetishize the figure of T. E. Lawrence.

As a verbal image of MacEwen's own creation, Lawrence functions fetishistically on several discursive levels. He is a reminder that sexual difference became an obstacle for MacEwen when she tried to study and travel in the Middle East, but simultaneously the figure of Lawrence veils this difference when MacEwen appropriates his voice and becomes Lawrence -- a man who was able to study, live in and explore the Middle East in ways that she, as a woman, never had available to her. In another register, Lawrence the Englishman who becomes *almost but not quite* Arabic underlines racial and cultural differences between the West and the Arabic world. As a man who could function in both the British and Arabic worlds but, paradoxically, only by never actually being fully comfortable in either one, always inhabiting instead the intercultural spaces between them, Lawrence conceals and reveals MacEwen's own alienation from Canadian society and her fears and desires to locate herself in or between other cultures. As a man who had to veil England's true motivation for its intervention in the Arabs' struggle against the Ottoman Empire -- an economic interest in the oil reserves of the Middle East -- in the guise of

rhetoric about Arabic independence, the figure of Lawrence points to differences in economic values and customs between a capitalist and a pre- or non-capitalist culture and seems to value the idealized, pre-capitalist culture, an impulse similar to MacEwen's idealization of a lost golden age in her "eden" poems. Finally, by appropriating the voice of the accomplished writer who created *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, a unique, genre-bending masterpiece of twentieth-century literature, MacEwen both conceals and reveals her lack of confidence at this time in her own poetic powers.

The overvaluation, fixation, and disavowal embodied in MacEwen's version of T. E. Lawrence as a fetishized literary figure is only one strand (albeit one that signifies several fetish discourses) of the fetishicity evident in many of MacEwen's poems. Not all of these poems fetishize a verbal figure, but many reveal other traces of the fetishisms that function in sexual, commodity, ethnographic/spiritual, and aesthetic economies. MacEwen was always drawn to explore the personal and cultural Other: the exotic, the lost ideal society as figure for the phallic mother, the esoteric and transgressive systems of knowledge such as magic and alchemy as seen in the "eden" and "alphabet" poems, and the subversive economies of expenditure as seen in her "appetite" poems. These poems do the same sort of cultural

work for the second half of the twentieth century in Canada as did the *pronk* still lifes for seventeenth-century Dutch society. They originate in, inhabit, point to and illuminate the discursive gaps and fissures everywhere opening during this time of immense global social, cultural, and economic change, and thus signify areas of social and personal uneasiness, of the fear and desire that circulate between and across these gaps. The energy that fetishicity adds to a cultural product proved to be a useful strategy for MacEwen's earliest project to transform Canadian society through poetry, to infuse everyday reality with a sense of the sacred or mythic. As MacEwen's interest in exotic alphabets and lost edens, in gigantic, omnivorous barbarian appetites and eating disorders, and in T. E. Lawrence as intercultural and transcultural icon are explored, the interplay between mythopoeia and fetishicity will suggest the uncanny, sometimes haunting sense of energy and life found in MacEwen's poetry, what MacEwen calls "the magical power of language, of things being revealed and understood through language and only through language."¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Bruce Meyer and Brian O'Riordan, "Gwendolyn MacEwen: The Magic of Language," Interview, *In Their Words: Interviews with Fourteen Canadian Writers* (Toronto: Anansi Press, 1984) 103.

Chapter 2
Sacred Alphabets and Lost Edens:
The Phallic Mother as Muse

Language is haunted by myth, and the act of defining
myth is an act of something like exorcism.

-- Albert Cook, *Myth and Languages*

Gwendolyn MacEwen is perhaps best known as a mythopoeic writer, a writer who draws on traditional myth as inspiration for her writing, but who also envisions her work as creating a new sense of the mythic in everyday twentieth-century life. What is less understood about her work, however, is that her mythopoeic strategies are often fetishistic. Albert Cook's comment that "[l]anguage is haunted by myth, and the act of defining myth is an act of something like exorcism"¹ is helpful in identifying the similarities between fetishicity and mythopoeia. Even though he does not use the vocabulary of fetish discourses, Cook sees the relationship of myth to language in terms analagous to the logic of fetishism. Myth is present and implicated in language, in that it "haunts" language, but it is simultaneously absent, in that it cannot be grasped and defined; in other words, myth is both a haunting presence

¹ Albert Cook, *Myth and Language* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana UP, 1980) 10.

and an elusive absence within language, inhabiting a bit of that slippery territory of difference concealed and revealed by various fetishisms. He suggests that to define myth is to "exorcise" it, to drive out its power; thus myth is most effective when it remains undefined, "haunting" the writer's work in a sort of present absence that is fetishistic.

MacEwen was committed from the very beginning of her career to mythopoeia and to the investigation of all aspects of human consciousness and experience, and her early work, haunted by a sense of the fissures and gaps behind dualistic categories of thought, illuminates the fetishistic dimensions of myth.

Fetishicity as I have defined it, in which several fetish discourses appear together, overdetermining the circulation of desire represented in an artistic work, is apparent in Gwendolyn MacEwen's poetry beginning with her first publications, especially in the early collections *Selah*, *The Drunken Clock*, and *The Rising Fire*, in which representations of the circulation of desire appear most often in her interest in exotic alphabets and in metaphors of eden and appetite, all of which are constructed using fetishistic strategies which suggest a haunting secret that the poet simultaneously desires to conceal and to reveal. Most prominent in the earliest poems are a fascination with

sacred economies as they intersect with language, especially the written word as artifact and reification of sacred meanings; the veiled and haunting presence of the phallic mother, representing the fear of difference as it manifests itself in psychosexual economies, seen in the longing expressed in many poems for a different geographical location and/or time, especially "Eden"; a traditional Orientalism, again signalling the attraction and repulsion of the fact of difference; and the parody of North American consumer culture based on the production and circulation of commodities. Thus MacEwen's earliest poetry is shaped by a symbolic vocabulary developed from numerous fetish discourses which both conceal and reveal, in different registers, the poet's anxiety about difference, signalled by discursive gaps. In later writing, particularly *The Shadow-Maker* and *Armies of the Moon*, MacEwen would seize on the archetypal theory of Carl Jung as she moved to work more self-consciously with symbolism to describe the psychic journey in her poetry. Eventually, however, the mediations of myth and Jungian theory were perhaps no longer congruent with MacEwen's vision, and by the time she was writing *The T. E. Lawrence Poems* in the early 1980's, disavowal would become the most efficient strategy available to her, and the fetish discourses shaping the early poetry would become more

evident and more artistically coherent than in the earlier work. But more often in the early poems, she perceived phenomena dualistically and strove in her poetry to unite those dualistic categories, only to realize eventually that a lasting synthesis that erased or subsumed their differences is perhaps more difficult than her early idealism would admit. A different strategy was needed to account for the poet's experience: disavowal, the impulse to simultaneously deny and affirm difference in its many guises, provoked traces of fetishicity to reappear in the poetry as it developed. MacEwen's early audiences seem to have responded to the cumulative effect of all the fetish discourses apparent in her work; these audiences seem to have felt a peculiar power in MacEwen's writing, analagous, perhaps, to the "luminescence" sensed by Foster in modernist sculpture and *pronk* still lifes. MacEwen's early readers associated this peculiar power not with fetishicity, however, but with mythicity, mythopoeia, the creation of myth through poetry. MacEwen's first experiments with mythopoesis were influenced by her reading of Frazer and Graves on myth, and appear in *The Drunken Clock* in several poems exploring Frazer's monomyth of the ritual killing of the king. In addition, the unpublished series of poems "Adam's Alphabet" and numerous other early poems employ the

biblical myths of Eden and the Fall as underlying metaphors. Both the longing for a lost eden expressed in these poems, and the impulse to fetishize exotic alphabets, derive from the same desire for the phallic mother as muse, a desire which is the subtext for MacEwen's mythopoeic strategies.

When Gwendolyn MacEwen wrote in the nineteen sixties, "I want to construct a myth,"² "mythopoesis" was a familiar signifier within the discourses of the Canadian literary milieu. Because MacEwen claimed that she wanted "to create a myth," she was slotted as a "mythopoeic poet" -- a category she made fun of in *Noman and Noman's Land*, her collections of short stories. Nevertheless, as a self-proclaimed mythopoeic poet, MacEwen would seem to be an obvious candidate for critics who practice myth criticism, but mythopoeic strategies in the writing of poetry, and myth criticism, are very different. The "myth" which MacEwen wishes to construct through and in her writing does not necessarily have to do with historic myths, either with their retelling or with making parallels to them (although this happens), as much as it has to do with communicating

² Atwood, "MacEwen's Muse" (*Canadian Literature* 45: 23-32).

that sense of a sacred world, a "highly charged" everyday world of "mythical proportions," as opposed to the mundane. Whereas some of her poetry does draw on traditional myth, much of it attempts to create a new sense of the mythic in everyday life: "For me, the smallest events can assume mythic proportions--and conversely, the universe can turn into a puddle of quicksilver in the hand...."³ The praxis of a myth criticism intent on finding references, allusions, or parallels to traditional myths is thus limited in what it can understand of MacEwen's work.

Nevertheless, most of the critical work published on MacEwen is conditioned by the emphasis in the nineteen-sixties on myth criticism. In fact, all but one of the critical articles and books published about her work read the poetry through the lenses of myth criticism. For example, in the 1970's, critics D. G. Jones, Margaret Atwood, Frank Davey, and Ellen D. Warwick all focused on the mythopoeic dimension in MacEwen's poetry, and this approach was continued in the 1980's by R. F. Gillian Harding-Russell.⁴ When these early critics used the methods of myth

³ Gwendolyn MacEwen, interview, *Poetry Canada Review* 4.3 (1983): 8.

⁴ See, for example, Margaret Atwood, "Canadian Monsters," *The Canadian Imagination*, Ed. David Staines (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1977) 97-122; Frank Davey,

criticism to analyze MacEwen's work, they were able to offer valuable insights but did not take into consideration the specific historical context of the poetry or its criticism, particularly the problems inherent in finding universal symbols and meanings in the work. Moreover, myth criticism missed the underlying significance of the "eden" poems: their fissures and gaps and the strategies used to conceal them. And unfortunately, when myth criticism went out of fashion with the advent of the various poststructuralist theories, critical interest in MacEwen's work seemed to wane, as if the poetry could yield meanings only if read as "myth." The only scholarly article published on MacEwen's poetry in the 1990's is also the only critical work that does not approach the writing using myth criticism: Thomas M. F. Gerry's analysis reads MacEwen, somewhat unconvincingly, as a mystical writer in the tradition of early Canadian mystical writers Henry Alline and David Willson.⁵ More useful, perhaps, is Gerry's discussion of

"Gwendolyn MacEwen: The Secret of Alchemy," *Open Letter* (second series) 4 (1973): 5-23; D. G. Jones, *Butterfly on Rock: A Study of Themes and Images in Canadian Literature* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1970); Ellen Warwick, "To Seek a Single Symmetry," *Canadian Literature* 71 (1976): 21-34; and R. F. Gillian Harding, "Iconic Mythopoeia in MacEwen's *The T. E. Lawrence Poems*, *Studies in Canadian Literature* 9.1 (1984): 95-107.

⁵ Thomas M. F. Gerry, "'Green Yet Free of Seasons': Gwendolyn MacEwen and the Mystical Tradition of Canadian

MacEwen's work as an original, feminist revision of the thought of Jacob Boehme, but the evidence he offers is scanty. Otherwise, the decline of myth criticism seems to have meant the diminishing of critical interest in MacEwen, whose subtle, outrageous, richly-layered poetry deserves, and would richly reward, wider critical approaches.

A poststructuralist reading of the early mythopoeic poems, with attention paid to their contradictions and disavowals, opens up the methods of myth criticism to enable the discovery, in the identification of MacEwen's language, themes, and images, of their underlying fetishistic preoccupations, that is, their sense of gap and the strategies of disavowal engendered by that sense of gap. However, given MacEwen's stated allegiance to myth and dream, a structuralist analysis of her work in terms of the insights of psychoanalysis into the operation of the dream-work might seem like an obvious critical strategy. I want to distance myself, however, from the universalist tendencies of structuralist analysis. I would argue, rather, that the particular overdeterminations in MacEwen's poetry in terms of fetish discourses is contingent on a particular social formation and historic situation: the emergence in the mid-

Poetry," *Studies in Canadian Literature/Etudes en Litterature Canadienne* 16.2 (1991): 147-61.

twentieth century of a "postcolonial" social consciousness (or the social awareness of an emerging postcoloniality) both in Canada and world-wide.

As the former colonies of nineteenth-century European empires sought independence at this time, either through violent or non-violent means, the world was becoming more conscious of the discontinuities between the metropolitan centres and the colonial margins, between the developed and the developing nations, and between capitalist and pre- or non-capitalist organizations of material economies. Awareness of such discontinuities seemed to pervade nearly all dimensions of social discourse, however, and not merely the political and economic. In the realm of spirituality and religion, for example, traditional Christian beliefs had to compete seriously in the West with various Asian spiritual traditions as well as many indigenous and tribal beliefs as equal and viable religious systems widely accepted by the populace. The "Sexual Revolution" and "the pill," the movement for gay and lesbian rights, and medical breakthroughs in transsexuality brought competing values regarding sexuality and gender to new social prominence. In political discourse, fissures and gaps were seen in perceptions of Canada's identity as a nation, as it matured and moved toward political independence from Britain, and

were also seen in the controversy in North America and abroad over the Vietnam War, to cite only two examples. Aesthetic discourse saw a heightening of the clash between so-called "high" and popular culture. In scientific discourses, such gaps were apparent as citizens began to comprehend the dangerous impact on the ecosphere of industrialism and new technologies, and the new possibility of the moon and planets as locations of human exploration and even habitation. Psychology and philosophy introduced new ways of perceiving the mind and consciousness, including an awareness of the limitations of dualistic habits of perception and thought.

Even though it would be impossible to summarize an entire era in a few pages, and it is certainly beyond the scope of this study to attempt to account for the influence on MacEwen's poetry of the vast social, economic, and political forces at play in North America and globally during her career, the preceding factors are mentioned because I believe that it is hardly surprising, in such a world, that fetishistic strategies of artistic production should emerge, given the fetish's primary function of negotiating differences or mediating gaps between various competing kinds of value. MacEwen's location as a writing subject attuned to her world was thus necessarily

determined, and overdetermined, by the intersections of these discourses and by their inherent gaps. Elements of fetishicity are implicated in, and contribute to, the development of MacEwen's poetry from the mythopoeic strategies of her earliest work through to her last works. A close reading of poems from the early volumes *Selah*, *The Drunken Clock*, and *The Rising Fire* that identifies the fetishicity of the work, creates a critical space for an understanding of the later poetry, especially *The T. E. Lawrence Poems*, as much more than a mere rewriting of a contemporary legend or myth, but as a complex response to a time of enormous change. Such a reading could invest new cultural value in the work of a poet who is beginning to be forgotten. First, however, it is necessary to define myth as the term was understood when MacEwen began to write, to establish a sense of the literary milieu of the sixties in Canada and the intense interest it had in myth.

MacEwen has said,

In my poetry I am concerned with finding the relationships between what we call the "real" world and that other world which consists of dream, fantasy and myth. I've never felt that these "two worlds" are as separate as one might think, and in fact my poetry as well as my life seems to occupy a place -- you might call it a kind of no-man's land -- between the two.⁶

⁶ Gwendolyn MacEwen, statement, *Rhymes and Reasons: Nine Canadian Poets Discuss Their Work*, ed. John Robert

William Doty writes of myth that it is most often supposed to take place in a "foundational time", by which he means "the primal times, the times of beginnings and creations; times when new patterns are established and old ones reformulated -- times that need not be chronologically distant but usually are."⁷ The social ferment of the sixties made fertile ground for experimentation. In North America it signaled a kind of mini-renaissance in the sense that as one response to the rapid social changes taking place, a group of writers looked to the past, to the worlds which created myths, in much the same way that poets during the earlier Renaissance looked to classical writings as inspiration and models. Doty writes: "Mythic accounts, especially those that relate beginnings, embody ideas of wholeness, of order replacing chaos. Hence they may be emphasized strongly during periods when fragmentation or attenuation threaten social structures."⁸ The nineteen sixties were such a time, and, as a young poet just beginning to publish her work, MacEwen responded to the fragmentation and attenuation

Colombo (Toronto and Montreal: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971) 65.

⁷ William Doty, *Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals* (University, Alabama: U of Alabama P, 1986) 8.

⁸ Doty 26.

threatening social structures with a strongly expressed desire to establish order out of chaos. In an interview, MacEwen claimed that she tried to read to audiences from a "calm centre" in herself, the same "calm centre" from which she writes, "because life is so chaotic and terrifying" for the ordinary people in the audience.⁹

When MacEwen precociously began to publish her poetry in her late teens, she burst upon a literary milieu in Canada in which the practice of mythopoeia was well established and had already sustained a generation of writers, such as Jay MacPherson and James Reaney. The mythopoeic practices of these writers ranged from the direct retelling or use of classical and western and biblical mythology in MacPherson's work, to Reaney's praxis of "iconography," the serendipitous juxtaposition of texts in order to discern underlying mythic parallels, seen for example in the small magazine which he edited, *Alphabet*, which first appeared in 1960.¹⁰ MacPherson's mythopoeia was a very conscious use of mythic materials in her work, whereas, in contrast, Reaney's praxis did not suppose that a writer had to be conscious of the mythic patterns in his or

⁹ Bev Daurio and Mike Ziziz, "An Inner View of Gwendolyn MacEwen," *Intrinsic* 5-6 (1978): 57.

¹⁰ *Alphabet* (London, Ont., Sept. 1960-1971) nos. 1-18/19.

her own writing. Like MacPherson, MacEwen used myth consciously, but she has said very little over the years to explain exactly what she meant by "constructing a myth" and her motivations for doing so; nevertheless, readers of her early work were familiar with ideas associated with myth-making in literature and were quick to identify the mythopoeic dimensions of MacEwen's texts.

MacEwen desires to construct a myth because past mythological traditions have no adequate myths to describe or explain her contemporary experience. The myth she writes strives to be entirely new. Words which may have been used as symbols in historic traditions do indeed appear in her work, but she has not retained their old meanings. For example, one reason that MacEwen is generally considered to be a mythopoeic writer is because her work employs imagery and symbolism taken from the myths and history of Egypt, Greece, Israel and other eastern Mediterranean regions, as well as from the western magic tradition.¹¹ In *From There to Here*, Frank Davey writes that MacEwen's work, "more than

¹¹ No critic, however, has yet commented on MacEwen's Orientalism: the cultural emphasis on mythopoeia seemed to blind early critics to MacEwen's seemingly unproblematic assimilation of received ideas associating the orient with the exotic and the irrational, with excess, passion, lack of inhibition, childishness, and otherness. The positive inflection she gives to these categories is directly in the tradition of the surrealists.

that of any other writer, has restored the value of mythology to Canadian poetry."¹² Significantly, Davey sees this poet as actually living the myths about which she writes, and thus her unique achievement is in uniting myth with personal experience.¹³ Yet Davey does not make clear exactly what he means by the term "myth."

Generally, literary critics use the word "myth" to mean the expression or embodiments of recurrent patterns or structures, or of timeless archetypes. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (1991) defines myth when used in a literary sense as "a superior intuitive mode of cosmic understanding."¹⁴ In this sense, myths may have a universal dimension, that is, a meaning which crosses cultural and temporal lines. MacEwen's work is mythopoeic in the sense that it resembles myth in its subject matter and themes, but MacEwen also follows the Romantic poets in expecting her poems will respond to, and in turn stimulate, such a superior intuitive mode of cosmic understanding in her readers. It is therefore not surprising that MacEwen's work has attracted the notice of the critics who, following

¹² Frank Davey, *From There to Here* (Erin, Ontario: Press Porcepic, 1974) 178.

¹³ Davey, *From There to Here* 180.

¹⁴ *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, ed. Chris Baldick (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1991) 143.

Frazer, Jung, and Frye, attempt to see in her work elements which connect it with a universal scheme or order, such as the cyclic fertility pattern elaborated by Frye or the western story of the Fall.

Even though MacEwen herself has said repeatedly, "I want to construct a myth," it would be a mistake to approach MacEwen's poetry with one of the "dictionaries of symbols," in order to translate her work into a re-telling of a well-known myth or to decode her symbols according to perceived universal meanings. MacEwen herself seems to oppose this approach when she writes:

The truth is of course that poems mean exactly what they mean -- in the same way that dolphins leaping above the waves mean that they are leaping about the waves. And poets are never *trying* to say something; they've either said it in the poem or the poem doesn't get written. Nor is there, as we're often tempted to think, some secret hidden meaning in the poem that we're supposed to uncover after a lot of struggle. It's true that poets are more complex than others, but poets have better things to do than to be deliberately difficult and play hide and seek with the reader.¹⁵

MacEwen has reinterpreted ancient symbols and invented new ones in order to write a fresh, contemporary western woman's myth of late-twentieth-century existence.

A critical approach which attends to the mythopoeic

¹⁵ Gwendolyn MacEwen, "A Poet's Journey into the Interior," *Cross-Canada Writers' Quarterly* 8.3-4 (1986): 19.

tendency of MacEwen's poetry would be most useful, I believe, if it were to regard myth in the poststructuralist sense, rather than as the content of a system of communication through virtually universal symbols such as the elaboration of myth seen in the work of Frazer and Frye. A structuralist approach to myth sees that "the properties common to all myths are not to be sought at the level of content but at the level of a structure necessary to all forms of communication."¹⁶ This view sees mythic thought as being about "insoluble paradoxes of experience" which appear as "gaps," but it emphasizes the resolution of the paradox through myth. Myth attempts to negotiate or mediate these gaps, the most important of which is that between nature and culture.¹⁷ A poststructuralist view of myth, in contrast, foregrounds such gaps between dualistic categories of thought, which links mythopoesis with fetishicity, in which multiple fetish discourses disavow, simultaneously affirm and deny, all such gaps which signify difference. Traces of multiple fetish discourses structure MacEwen's earliest poems which are written from and about the territory of the gap, even when she is consciously employing elements of

¹⁶ Michael Hollington, "Myth," *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms*. Revised and enlarged, ed. Roger Fowler (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987) 154.

¹⁷ Hollington 154.

traditional myths as a mediating strategy to negotiate such gaps.

When MacEwen writes that she wants "to construct a myth," she is not announcing her intention to concentrate on fiction: that is, on storytelling and make-believe. But the meaning of the term "myth" has become so diluted over time as to be almost meaningless. An etymological approach to the term, however, reveals that its association with the fictive or false has developed gradually. MacEwen's use of the word "myth" derives from its earlier meanings. The Proto-Indo-European root of the word is "*ma," an imitative root meaning the cry of the child for the mother's breast¹⁸; the implications of this fact link myth at least analogously to the phallic mother of feminist revisions of psychoanalytic fetish discourses, although the drives involved are not identical. The roots for "mother" and "myth" are very close: *ma-* and *mu-*, respectively, and thus the early Greek word "mythos" came to be "a term for what was made as a sound with the mouth," that is, a word.¹⁹ It later came to refer to a particular organization of words in story form, and in the time of the Homeric poets signified "the ways words are treated on the surface level of the text, i.e. the

¹⁸ Doty 3.

¹⁹ Doty 3.

ornamental or fictional use, or the beauty of arrangement of the words in a literary work."²⁰ This stress on the ornamental or fictional use of words eventually pitted myth against *logos*, at first the term for the use of words making up doctrine or theory, and therefore science.²¹ Doty's overview of the historical development of our understanding of myth notes that "later phases of a myth's situation within culture are marked by increasing rationalization."²² Thus the usual approaches to myth now derive from the tendency "to rationalize, to substitute abstract social or philosophical-scientific meanings for graphic imagery of narrative myths and performed rituals."²³

MacEwen must have wanted to write against this tendency toward rationalization, substitution, and abstraction of myths in order to reinfuse poetry with a sense of the sacred. In this she is an inheritor of the romantic tradition within English poetry which values the imagination above rational consciousness and the historical. MacEwen means by "myth" something similar to Henry A. Murray's understanding of myth:

²⁰ Doty 3.

²¹ Doty 3.

²² Doty 4.

²³ Doty 4.

Myths are the instruments by which we continually struggle to make our experience intelligible to ourselves. A myth is a large, controlling image that gives philosophical meaning to the facts of ordinary life; that is, which has organizing value for experience. . . . Myth is fundamental, the dramatic representation of our deepest instinctual life, of a primary awareness of man in the universe, capable of many configurations, upon which all particular opinions and attitudes depend.²⁴

MacEwen seems to confirm this understanding of myth. She claims, "I write . . . in order to make sense of the chaotic nature of experience, of reality."²⁵ For MacEwen, "constructing a myth" means that her writing would be a bridge between ordinary reality and one which partakes of the mysterious or sacred or dream or the unconscious: ". . . I also write in order to construct a bridge between the 'inner' world of the *psyche* and the 'outer' world of things."²⁶ She does not mean "myth" in the sense of "a widely held but false idea" but as the way into an apprehension of lived reality as sacred world. As a young poet, MacEwen would concur with Robert Duncan when he writes:

²⁴ Henry A. Murray, *Myth and Mythmaking* (Boston: Beacon, 1968) 355-56.

²⁵ MacEwen, "Journey" 19.

²⁶ MacEwen, "Journey" 19.

In myth we are close to the inventive primacy of the imaginal, close to the poetic seizure of truth, which as Martin Heidegger emphasizes is an *aletheia* (the Greek term for truth that means literally an uncovering, a disclosure) of what makes itself present to us as significant.²⁷

As a mature writer, MacEwen would learn that such seizure of "truth" was highly problematic in a society which was learning to be suspicious of all such hegemonic conceptions, yet the notion of uncovering or disclosing what must already be present, although secret, strongly links MacEwen's mythopoeia to fetishistic strategies of cultural production.

The most inclusive and insightful contemporary definition of myth comes to us from William Doty, and it is worth quoting in full because it illuminates several dimensions of myth which are important for an understanding of MacEwen's work:

A mythological corpus consists of (1) a usually complex network of myths that are (2) culturally important (3) imaginal (4) stories, conveying by means of (5) metaphoric and symbolic diction, (6) graphic imagery, and (7) emotional conviction and participation, (8) the primary, foundational accounts (9) of aspects of the real, experienced world and (10) humankind's roles and relative statuses within it. Mythologies may (11) convey the political and moral values of a culture and (12) provide systems of interpreting (13) individual experience within a universal perspective, which may include (14) the intervention of suprahuman entities as well as (15)

²⁷ Robert Duncan, *The Truth and Life of Myth: An Essay in Essential Autobiography* (Fremont, Mich.: Sumac, 1968) 5.

aspects of the natural and cultural orders. Myths may be enacted or reflected in (16) rituals, ceremonies, and dramas, and (17) they may provide materials for secondary elaboration, the constituent mythemes having become merely images or reference points for a subsequent story, such as a folktale, historical legend, novella, or prophecy.²⁸

Three features of myth, in particular -- the value placed on the role of the imagination in myth-making, myth's interpretive function, and its cultural value -- are all important for MacEwen. When asked whether it is "the role of the writer to identify, to describe, the mythic within the realm of the everyday," MacEwen responded "I don't know if it is the role of every writer, but it is my role as a writer."²⁹ On the role of imagination in her life and work, MacEwen has written:

I make very little distinction between certain states of consciousness. I make very little distinction between "this" reality and the reality of the dream, the reality of what I'd like to call the super-consciousness. For me life is a dream, for me the dream is life, for me reality is a multi-levelled thing....What my imagination chooses to make out of that reality is my world, my universe.³⁰

²⁸ Doty 11.

²⁹ Gwendolyn MacEwen, "The Magic of Language," *In Their Words: Interviews with Fourteen Canadian Writers*, ed. Bruce Meyer and Brian O'Riordan (Toronto: Anansi, 1984) 105.

³⁰ Gwendolyn MacEwen, "An Inner View of Gwendolyn MacEwen," *Intrinsic* 5 & 6 (1978) 57.

For MacEwen, then, an apprehension of the mythic within every state of consciousness is fundamental to her lived experience and to her work. Not only her subjective experience of reality, but also her social role as artist primarily derive their value from the making of myth from the materials of everyday life.

Moreover, MacEwen believed that a fundamental role for myth is to create meaning out of chaos: "I write, first of all, in order to make sense of the chaotic nature of experience, of reality".³¹ This creation of meaning, order, and pattern out of chaos has a therapeutic as well as interpretive function, in the sense that it keeps the poet and reader from "going mad," a phrase which recurs frequently in MacEwen's writing and which has a profound personal resonance stemming from the mental illness of her mother, and the secrecy surrounding that illness during MacEwen's childhood. She writes: "Certainly in writing you're gaining a sort of control over reality, and it is that control that might keep one sane, keep one from becoming neurotic."³² Thus the need to create order and pattern out of chaos registered in both social and personal dimensions for MacEwen. If she believed that the control

³¹ MacEwen, "Journey" 19.

³² MacEwen, "An Inner View" 57.

which writing gave to her protected her sanity, she was perhaps unaware that it also tended toward a fetishistic way of apprehending the phenomenal world. David Simpson shows that fetishism has a "double motivation," that it is "inspired by an aspiration toward control which is based on fear: fear of the unpredictability of experience."³³ The fetishicity apparent in MacEwen's mythopoeia both conceals and reveals this fear.

As well, for MacEwen the cultural importance of myth is paramount to her writing. Doty notes that in many societies the inspiration of the individual mythmaker or dreamer or prophet is tested in public for its corporate significance before it becomes widely accepted: "Living myths are marked by their social consensus as to their importance and often their implications."³⁴ As Herbert Mason writes, "Instead of leading us on a journey to self, as some believe, [myth] leads us on a journey out of self. We leave the isolation of our perspective and enter the larger if ultimately limited, universe in which others see what is true to them."³⁵

³³ David Simpson, *Fetishism and Imagination: Dickens, Melville, Conrad* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1982) 32.

³⁴ Doty 13.

³⁵ Herbert Mason, "Myth as an 'Ambush of Reality'," *Myth, Symbol, and Reality*, ed. Alan M. Olson (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1980) 16.

Society affirms myth as culturally and corporately important because

[m]yth has this value: it unites rather than separates or divides; it provides ways other than the purely sequential to grapple with undifferentiated experience; it preserves instead of eliminating unfathomed reaches and the discoverable/decipherable spaces that make up at least in part the totalities of our existence (i.e., there are mysteries after all; it is not "all there").³⁶

Of the creative process for an artist, Wellek and Warren write that "[t]o speak of the need for myth, in this case of the imaginative writer, is a sign of his felt need for communion with his society, for a recognized status as artist functioning within society."³⁷ MacEwen seemed to crave this affirmation by her community that her dreams and myths, her poetry, had meaning and importance for society as a whole, and on the whole, this affirmation was immediately forthcoming. She entered into a writing milieu which accepted and understood the mythopoeic impulse in an artist, and recognized not only her individual talent but her mythopoeic vision. Unfortunately this same affirmation seemed to die away as the decades passed and poetry began to

³⁶ Doria and Lenowitz, *Origins: Creation Texts from the Ancient Mediterranean. A Chrestomathy* (Garden City, N.J.: Anchor/Doubleday, 1976) xix.

³⁷ Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1956) 192.

lose its importance as a major cultural discourse for late twentieth-century western societies.

When MacEwen wrote of her desire "to construct a myth" she may have been motivated by a need for a special relationship with her society, but her journey had to be double: the outer journey, out of self, ultimately had to lead back to the inner journey, into the psyche, the territory MacEwen most desired and most dreaded to explore. Jan Bartley writes that for MacEwen ". . . knowledge is discoverable primarily through inverse means."³⁸ Thus it is not surprising that on a trip to a distant continent to do objective research for a well-defined project (*King of Egypt, King of Dreams*), MacEwen discovered instead her darkest inner secret.³⁹ Doty writes that

. . . it is not easy to operate both within and without the mythic perspective, to have additional and alternative visions of what a culture says about itself. This work is the analytic work of a critic -- but also the creative work of a poet, whose double vision exposes, repositions the language through which

³⁸ Jan Bartley, *Invocations: The Poetry and Prose of Gwendolyn MacEwen* (Vancouver: U of British Columbia, 1983) 46.

³⁹ MacEwen's biographer, Rosemary Sullivan, discusses MacEwen's traumatic research trip to Cairo, including a dream she recorded at the time and later analyzed, in *Shadow Maker: The Life of Gwendolyn MacEwen* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1995), especially "Chapter 14: To Cairo" 186-96.

a culture speaks its meanings.⁴⁰

Thus as a mythopoeic poet MacEwen had to write from a double perspective, both from within her culture as a spokesperson or interpreter, and from without it, having a wider vision enabling her to invent new contexts for society's project of creating its meaning.

Doty avoids mention of religion or the spiritual realm in his definition of myth, but myth as a way into an apprehension of the spiritual is essential to MacEwen's understanding. Her view that poetry should illuminate the "sacred world" aspect of quotidian reality is similar to Robert Graves' view of the earliest function of poetry in civilization, as a means to invoke the mysterious forces which affect human lives. In a well-known passage from *The White Goddess*, Graves writes, "The function of poetry is religious invocation of the Muse; its use is the experience of mixed exaltation and horror that her presence excites."⁴¹ MacEwen marked this passage in her own copy of the text,⁴² as well as this one: ". . . a true poem is necessarily an

⁴⁰ Doty 14.

⁴¹ Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (1948), amended and enlarged edition (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1961) 14.

⁴² Gwendolyn MacEwen, *Gwendolyn MacEwen Papers*, Item 35, Fisher Rare Books Library, U of Toronto.

invocation of the White Goddess, or Muse, the Mother of All Living, the ancient power of fright and lust -- the female spider or queen-bee whose embrace is death."⁴³ The terms "Mother of All Living, the ancient power of fright or lust" identify a certain aspect of the White Goddess, the Hecate aspect, with the phallic mother of psychoanalytic theory, and thus MacEwen was obviously aware of a view of poetry as the attempt to fulfill desire for the phallic mother. She would always strive to incorporate into her writing both the light and the dark, positive and negative, as embodied in Graves' concept of the White Goddess.

Many of MacEwen's most important early poems veil the desire for the phallic mother as muse with the mytheme of the biblical eden and humanity's fall from divine grace, but MacEwen was also strongly influenced by another important text for writers of the period, Frazer's *The Golden Bough*.⁴⁴ This text provides MacEwen with the mytheme of the ritual killing of the king that is seen in a number of her early poems, and an analysis of this mytheme as it appears in her work illuminates MacEwen's mythopoeic method, but also the fetishicity of the poems. For example, "In Defence

⁴³ Graves 24.

⁴⁴ Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (1890; enlarged 1907-15), Abridged ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1923).

of Magic," from *The Drunken Clock*,⁴⁵ figures this ritual killing in the image of the "pineyed boy" "throwing silver horseshoes / At the crucifix," although the myth is further complicated by the fact that this king, having been crucified, is already dead. What is really happening here is that the influence of the "myth" of Christ's death and resurrection is made a target; it is not literally a king who is being killed, but his legacy destroyed, as the congregation succumbs to the influence of the devil, disguised as Bob Beezle. Here the ritual death moves from the mythic plane to the personal as each individual achieves the status and power of a deity:

we were happy, we controlled the world at last;
 in the morning from our windows we puffed and blew
 together and made the sun rise,
 through our efforts, in the east.

This congregation's problematic affirmation of the creative power of the human imagination (science tells us that the sun would rise in the east anyway, regardless of their actions) complicates MacEwen's position as a late-Romantic poet. Here it is not the creative power of the human imagination which is ultimately valued, but the creative

⁴⁵ Gwendolyn MacEwen, *The Drunken Clock* (Toronto: Aleph P, 1961) n.p. Additional poems from this collection will be cited in the text by title only.

power of illusion. Another way to read this poem is as a warning against the dark, evil, or demonic dimensions of the human imagination -- or at least a reminder that such dimensions exist.

The monomyth of the ritual killing of the god reappears in *The Drunken Clock* in the poem "Bow Broken." The "beautiful bow," associated with "princes," is dead, and with it, innocence: "but the wood as new / as new cut wood / broke." The poet moves from youth and innocence, as imaged in the edenic "apple happy orchards" and "new cut wood," through an experience of the fallen world imaged as "iron rain," through the sheer force of an "iron shod will" to a final transcendence, breakthrough, or resolution, "armageddon." "God with bellyful arrows" is killed and the individual creative mind is all that is left, facing its own implication in the god's death, its own terror and guilt, and the necessity of assuming the burden of kingship.⁴⁶

The sense of violence or transgression, seen in the "rape" of time in "Wristwatch and Nile Time" (discussed below) and the blood and arrows of "Bow Broken," which seems necessary in order to recover lost time or lost memories, continues in other poems from *The Drunken Clock*. For

⁴⁶ This poem also attempts to fix its meaning in material form in the shape of the poem's lines on the page, which are indented to suggest the curve of a bow.

example, it appears in "Explodes, For Instance" in imagery of explosion, fire and loud sound, and in the "red electric" wires which prop up the edenic "old rose." Here the past is the "old / slush of tradition" dragging dirt over "the covers of all the books," and the myth of eden is only obliquely alluded to in the figures of the "old rose" and "dead gardens"; intertextual play with other poems in the collection allows these figures to take on their edenic associations. The poet harbors an ambivalent attitude toward the past and what it represents in this poem. When she speaks in the first-person plural, as if a spokesperson for her people, about recovery of the past or the unconscious or instinctual life, the language used suggests that the new people may wish to reinvigorate the past, or to destroy it, just as the king was destroyed in the poems previously discussed:

our blood fires them
 through, explodes, for instance,
 the critical mesh
 of gone days,

for we are loud
 and our lung-loud songs
 call up dead gardens (inverted seed)

MacEwen continues to explore Frazer's monomyth of the ritual killing of the king or god, and the new king taking his place, in "Certain Flowers." Here the king is "some

unthinking god" and is associated with a garden and flowers, and the prince with rain. In "Bow Broken" the dying king/god had exhorted the poet to recognize her own implication in the slaying, but here the "unthinking god" requires the poet to "chalk out the peril of beauty," to "define a certain fear in flowers," to recognize the fear and danger of creativity, of the urge to return to primal processes. Further, in "Certain Flowers," in which it is not the ritual killing of the god itself, but the desire for this ritual killing which is emphasized, a startling image of castration appears:

some unthinking god
 is made of towering flowers; his eye
 in the tall blue tulip sky,
 a profound petal there; I arrest its blooming.

!I want the flowers beheaded,

Again, having accomplished the ritual slaying, the poet is left alone in emptiness: "I [. . . .] stand in a garden of void / applauding" with only the creative power of the human imagination left to her: "capturing the moment of bloom / in a cage of my own sunlight." The poet has achieved a certain connection with the edenic source of creation in the unconscious, but the poetic imagination defines and limits as much as it frees because it functions through language. This poet's "cage" of her "own sunlight" is reminiscent of

Fredric Jameson's description of language as a "prison house,"⁴⁷ the fallen or corrupted version of the paradisaical languages which fascinated MacEwen in her earliest poetry. In fact, for MacEwen one way out of the prison house of language would be to fetishize exotic alphabets, in order to infuse the inscribed letter or uttered syllable with highly charged energy and meaning.

MacEwen was always interested in projecting in her writing a certain quality of energy, a charge, a magical power which would communicate to her reader that the world as it is, the quotidian reality of everyone's lived experience, is really a sacred world. And many of MacEwen's first readers seem to have noticed this quality of energy. Robert Kelly wrote to her: ". . . you discover the charge-of-power in daily event in yourself, in your own body moving outward to the eucharist of the Event."⁴⁸ And Frank Davey addressed her work's "obviously compelling energies" and the way her "vision inside [herself] seems now to be successful in opening up long vistas into reality itself."⁴⁹ MacEwen,

⁴⁷ Fredric Jameson, *The Prison House of Language* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972).

⁴⁸ Robert Kelly, letter to Gwendolyn MacEwen, 14 Aug. 1964, Gwendolyn MacEwen Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.

⁴⁹ Frank Davey, letter to Gwendolyn MacEwen, 21 Aug. 1969, Gwendolyn MacEwen Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book

following Graves, explained it this way:

For me, language has enormous, almost magical power, and I tend to regard poetry in much the same way as the ancients regarded the chants or hymns used in holy festivals--as a means of invoking the mysterious forces which move the world, inform our deepest and most secret thoughts, and often visit us in sleep.⁵⁰

She claims that, for her, the world is always this powerful: ". . . nothing for me is mundane. Everything is so highly charged, everything is so exciting all the time that I can hardly bear it. So I don't know what mundane is."⁵¹ This sense of the world as highly-charged, powerful, includes all that is negative and painful: "I write in order to communicate joy, mystery, passion. . . not the joy that naively exists without knowledge of pain, but that joy which arises out of and conquers pain."⁵² MacEwen often associated this quality of energy or sacredness with myth in the sense that "myth" refers to narratives from a past so distant that their origins cannot be determined, from cultures with

Library, University of Toronto. Not every reader noted this quality of energy, however: Louis Dudek wrote to MacEwen that her poems "lack substance, relevance of any kind, life-energy." Letter to Gwendolyn MacEwen, 21 Sept. 1961. Gwendolyn MacEwen Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.

⁵⁰ MacEwen, "Journey" 19.

⁵¹ MacEwen, "An Inner View" 59.

⁵² MacEwen, "Journey" 19.

different sacred economies from our own, so distant historically and geographically as to seem exotic and mysterious. One of her important strategies for infusing her writing with the sense of the sacred, then, is to "construct a myth" in and through the writing. MacEwen's experiments with mythopoeia in both her poetry and prose became more sophisticated and subtle as she developed as a poet, and range from the direct use (almost the re-telling) of well-known myths incorporated into her poetry, to allusions to myths and to exotic locales in her texts, to the use of western alchemical symbolism to infuse poems about quotidian reality with a sense of what MacEwen sees as the mythic dimensions of everyday life, to an acknowledgment of the "gap" within language as the origin of the sense of mystery and magic. Always more interested in questions than in closure in her poetry, MacEwen gradually learned that a prophetic voice or incantatory tone, or direct references to magic or to the fusion of opposites, were not necessary to communicate a sense of magic; the "gap" in language itself could serve her purposes. But some of her earliest experiments in poetry implicitly tried to bridge that gap by fixing spiritual and aesthetic values on the material form of the inscribed letter or the uttered syllable, especially

in the series of poems titled "Adam's Alphabet."⁵³

Early critical attention to MacEwen's poetry was unable to comment on "Adam's Alphabet," one of her most interesting poetic efforts, because it remained unpublished (only excerpts have been published posthumously⁵⁴). "Adam's Alphabet" was written when MacEwen was only eighteen and still a high-school student. At this time she had begun her studies at a Hebrew *cheder* where she investigated the Hebrew language and the mysticism of the Cabala. This interest in Hebrew would be only the first of a lifelong fascination with exotic languages, esoteric alphabets and paradisaal naming.⁵⁵ For MacEwen, both the inscribed sacred letters and the uttered syllables of Hebrew mediate between sacred and aesthetic values, and she seeks to recreate something like this in her poems. Strangely, however, the poems seem to be

⁵³ Gwendolyn MacEwen, "Adam's Alphabet." Gwendolyn MacEwen Papers, Box 1, Thomas Fisher Rare Books Library, University of Toronto.

⁵⁴ Gwendolyn MacEwen, "Adam's Alphabet," *The Poetry of Gwendolyn MacEwen: Volume One: The Early Years*, ed. Margaret Atwood and Barry Callaghan (Toronto: Exile Editions, 1993) 17-26.

⁵⁵ Eventually MacEwen would become fluent in Arabic and Greek (ancient and demotic) and would do translations from these languages as well as from French. She also taught herself the rudiments of Egyptian hieroglyphics and even published two poems written in hieroglyphs, along with their English "translations": "Everything Remembers You," *Prism International* 6 (1966): 17; "When You Speak," *Prism International* 6 (1966): 18-19.

invaded by images of blood, birth, and violence, fetishistic fixations on and displacements of the primary scene of terror and longing. The logic of fetishicity explains this strange invasion, and "Adam's Alphabet" becomes an important first work in which the major fetish discourses intersect. Fetishicity imparts to the poems an attractive energy, despite the obvious weaknesses of these apprentice poems. For example, Jay Macpherson found "Adam's Alphabet" to be "exciting," having great "force" and "interest" and making "a very strong impression," although they seemed both to her and to James Reaney to be "unfinished."⁵⁶

In order to understand "Adam's Alphabet," it would be useful to consult MacEwen's Introduction to the work, in which she explains the concept of sacred alphabetical letters and Hebrew acrostics. "Adam's Alphabet" comprises a series of poems which reconceptualize, rather than merely translate, Psalm 119. The genesis of the poems was MacEwen's discovery that the original Hebrew of Psalm 119 knit together the psalm using not only the well-known rigid acrostic structure, but also by linking the content of each strophe with the meaning of its defining letter. A letter of the Hebrew alphabet begins each strophe which consists of

⁵⁶ Jay Mcpherson, letter to Gwendolyn MacEwen, 23 Sept. 1962, Gwendolyn MacEwen Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.

eight verses, and each verse begins with the same letter which introduces the strophe. MacEwen writes in her Introduction to "Adam's Alphabet" that she noticed that the meaning assigned to the defining Hebrew letter echoed in the content of the strophe. For example, in the strophe for the letter *yod*, meaning "hand," some of the verses refer to hands: "--Thy hands have made me and fashioned me 78" [sic: the verse is 73] (*PGM1* 19). This repetition of the letter and its meaning imitates the creative power of the sacred alphabet as it was understood in the Cabalistic teachings. MacEwen's rewriting of the psalm rejects the acrostic structure but retains and expands on this echoing of meaning of the title letters. She also retains the theme of praise for the deity, and some of the governing images, but does not include the praise for the deity's law seen in the biblical version.

Like the original psalm, MacEwen's version contains twenty-two strophes, but only six have been published posthumously. The first of these is "Daleth / The Door" (*PGM1* 21), in which the poet announces her desire for birth using concrete imagery which emphasizes the colour of blood and birth's violence as a "split":

for I wish width, the door of self
mouthed open. Let broaden,
let the heart groan its scarlet

hinge-s
and split the red air wide

At a time when, according to patriarchal discourse, women were supposedly unable to occupy an originary subject position, this work from MacEwen's juvenilia is extraordinary, and points to the later birth poem when such an originary position is announced even more emphatically, "Child of Light" from *Selah*, discussed below. But MacEwen's claim of an originary subject position is complicated by the fact that she takes a distinctly phallic position as speaker in several of the strophes. She writes, "The whip's / affliction stiffened me / for things of a slippery eden," ("Adam's Alphabet: Teth / The Snake" *PGM1* 23) and "in my hand a spear sleeps [. . .] I quiver" and "thrust -- / return with a slice- / d hallelujah singing" ("Adam's Alphabet: Gain / The Weapon" *PGM1* 24). If MacEwen's birth poems can be read as claiming for women an origin as speaking subjects, we must also read this speaking woman as phallic. The subject position claimed by MacEwen here is that of the phallic mother, her muse.

"Daleth / The Door" illustrates MacEwen's association of the discovery / construction / definition of a self with images of blood and cutting, the birth scene which is the origin of psychosexual fetishism. Such images are repeated

in "Yod / The Hand" (PGM1 26), in which violent birth inserts a new term in the chain of metaphors which includes the biblical Fall:

-- my structured self,
 the molded embryo blinking
 still was bludgeoned
 with cain's hand
 before birth . . .

Here the poet is "wombwounded," and suffers "a torn head," but is soothed after birth by the deity's comforting fingers, whose "thumbs / smooth the stubble of brain." Given MacEwen's "Introduction" to "Adam's Alphabet," in which she draws the reader's attention to the value -- we would say the overvaluation -- of the written sign in sacred alphabets and spoken syllables, we would expect to find lines such as "the house / holds the word that guards a license / of flight" ("Adam's Alphabet: Beth / The House" PGM1 22) or

nor the silver serpent
 count among riches --
 only the fat light,
 the goldgrain syllables
 Your mouth imparts . . . ("Adam's Alphabet:
 Teth / The Snake" PGM1 23)

That vivid descriptions of the primal birth scene which emphasize the cutting of something would erupt into a poem ostensibly "about" sacred language, however, is evidence of

the link between different kinds of value, and of the anxiety that arises when we try to negotiate between radically different kinds of value, especially when those values appear to be invested or fixed in the same site: in this case, material, aesthetic, and spiritual values fixed in a letter, a syllable, or a word. Not coincidentally, "gold," the universal equivalent in commodity-producing economies, is overvalued here as the sign of the most sacred utterance, that made by the deity. Here the economy of the marketplace intersects with sacred, aesthetic, and sexual economies, making the poem a good example of fetishicity in literature, but for the most part MacEwen's engagement with the fetishicity of the commodity marketplace would develop later, in the "appetite" poems. Even as a very young poet, though, MacEwen has discovered the treacherous territory of the "gap" -- the fissure that opens between genders, cultures, thoughts -- which will become her most fertile area of investigation in later work.

Even though images of violent fissures recur frequently in the early poems, "Adam's Alphabet" is more concerned with the exploration of sacred economies and their links to language. The sacred and the secret are always linked in these poems deriving from the esoteric teachings of the Cabala: "the house harbors / the Unknown;" "I hid my lit

mind here" ("Adam's Alphabet: Beth / The House" *PGM1* 22). In MacEwen's later work, the secret would become an important theme, inspired by her study of esoteric traditions. Ironically, though, esoteric knowledge, by definition, cannot be transmitted verbally. In the tantric and other esoteric traditions, such knowledge is transmitted directly from the mind of the teacher to that of the student, without reliance on verbal languages⁵⁷ -- hence, this is one reason that a person cannot travel successfully for long on the esoteric path if he or she is alone. Nevertheless, MacEwen sought in her first poetry to realize the sacred world through the inscribed word. "Adam's Alphabet" shows us that she is attempting to see the inscribed letter and uttered syllable as autonomous and powerful even as she realizes that it is she herself who ascribes these qualities to them.

MacEwen's work begins by treading some of the same ground explored by earlier Romantic poets and nineteenth-century theorists. David Simpson points out that Coleridge often cited the Hebrews in the context of their conviction that material representations of divinity should never be allowed because of humanity's supposed propensity toward

⁵⁷ Chogyam Trungpa, *The Heart of the Buddha*. Ed. Judith L. Lief. (Boston and London: Shambhala, 1991) 81-82, 138-39, 145.

fetishism and idolatry.⁵⁸ Coleridge apparently approved of the Hebrew strictures against representation, but Simpson shows that Hegel was aware of another problem in using the Hebrew as a model, because their tradition allowed for the praise and exaltation of the deity through language. If the deity is indeed imageless, however, then Hebrew poetry of sublimity has a problem in communicating the deity's identity:

The poet [. . .] must use partial, limiting forms to excite the mind of his hearer, but in such a way as to demand reference back to the wholeness in which the parts have their life and purpose. The question is, how can this be done without incurring the risk of fixation upon the part, which would then become a species of idolatry or fetishism?⁵⁹

In this early stage of her career, MacEwen probably did not fully understand the role of the poet in the Hebrew tradition, or the problems with representation inherent in this tradition of sublime poetry. She seems to have understood the esoteric value of the Hebrew alphabet fetishistically, as her comments on the Tetragrammaton indicate; the inscribed letters and uttered syllables alike were a kind of fetish for her, fixing a spiritual value, an overvaluation, in a material sign. Yet she also strove in

⁵⁸ Simpson 18.

⁵⁹ Simpson 19.

her writing to attain something like Coleridge's "symbol."
Simpson's explanation of Coleridge's concept of the symbol
is illuminating and worth quoting in full:

Coleridge's idea of the "symbol" [. . .] is designed to try to preempt the separation of part from whole, letter from spirit, vehicle of meaning from act of making meaning itself. The symbol is "an actual and essential part of that, the whole of which it represents." It is "not a metaphor or allegory or any other figure of speech or form of fancy," but "a living part in that Unity, of which it is the representative." Such emphasis on the living process means that any contemplation of the symbol should also involve awareness and experience of self-consciousness. Coleridge's use of this model as an ideal occurrence in all modes of communication, from the perceptual to the political, means that fetishism, or concentration upon the mere image, is as far as possible discouraged.⁶⁰

MacEwen's mythopoeia attempts to understand the poem both as artifact and process, as a vehicle for meaning and the act of creating meaning, resisting separation and difference. MacEwen's work, then, is located in the gap between fetishistic impulses in her writing, and the resistance to them in a transcendence that understands the awareness of both part and whole as living creative process. MacEwen seems to have been pulled both ways, sometimes with fetishicity shaping the work, sometimes forms of transcendence, and this dual impulse would continue throughout her career.

⁶⁰ Simpson xiii.

Related to the problem of overvaluation in sacred alphabets is the impulse to project images of our own human awareness onto whatever is perceived by the senses, including alphabets and languages. Walter Benjamin also realized this fetishistic nature of idealized languages. He writes that the

motif of endowing nature with an answering gaze is prefigured, acoustically and metaphysically, in the problem of translation, the disjunction between the mute language of nature and the multitude of human languages, and the fragmentary relationship of either to a paradisaal language of names.⁶¹

Miriam Hansen makes the explicit connection between the answering gaze, with which the material object or sign is invested, and the "daemonic," especially Freud's notion of the "uncanny,"⁶² that which arises out of and points to the fetish. MacEwen's fascination with Cabala, with "paradisaal languages," with mystical naming, as well as with translation, links her to this motif of investing "nature" ("the world") with an answering gaze -- a foundational fetishistic practice which is one equivalent in literature to the glossy surfaces of objects depicted in *pronk* still-

⁶¹ Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and the Language of Man" (1916), quoted in Miriam Hansen, "Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: 'The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology,'" *New German Critique* 40 (1987): 188, n.15.

⁶² Hansen 188.

lives. MacEwen shows she was conscious of this investment of the inscribed letter of mystical alphabets with a returning gaze when she writes in "Poems in Braille":

they knew what it meant,
 those egyptian scribes who drew
 eyes right into their hieroglyphics,
 you read them dispassionate until
 the eye stumbles upon itself
 blinking back from the papyrus

outside, the articulate wind
 annotates this: I read carefully
 lest I go blind in both eyes, reading with
 that other eye the final hieroglyph⁶³

This literal presence of an eye returning the reader's gaze is not, of course, present in the same way in the Hebrew alphabet, but the Cabala ascribes to these letters functions beyond the merely signficatory. MacEwen writes in her Introduction to "Adam's Alphabet": ". . . in the books of the Cabala, the mysterious writing of the Jews . . . we find

⁶³ MacEwen, "Poems in Braille," *A Breakfast for Barbarians* (Toronto: Ryerson P, 1966) 4.

a sense of alphabet, a sense of letter which is a more significant one. The 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet are given definite interpretive function. . . the world was created by these 22 letters" ("Adam's Alphabet: Two / Psalm 119" *PGM1* 18). The elements of the fetish are evident here: the inscribed letter as material sign, which both conceals a secret truth and reveals it to the initiated; an embodiment that becomes the locus for the fixation of previously heterogeneous elements into singularities (such as the four elements of creation: fire, water, earth, air; four metaphysical categories: life, fire, truth, love; four animals: lion, eagle, man, ox); the overvaluation of these same letters in the spiritual economy as "creative" or "sacred" in the form of the "eternal Tetragrammaton," YHWH, the name of the deity; and the material sign of the embodied letter as mediating simultaneously both sacred and cultural values over centuries of use of the Hebrew letters in Cabala and later Christian Gnostic literature. On the latter, MacEwen notes that "[i]t is perhaps only in the Hebrew language that the value of letters is so extensively, so intrinsically, a part of both religion and culture" ("Adam's Alphabet: One / The Cabala" *PGM1* 18).

As a poet, MacEwen views her relationship to the esoteric nature of the Hebrew alphabet as transgressive: in

She speaks not of bones in the abstract, not of the truth of the body, but of what the body can be bent to say. The body itself becomes the sign in a physical language. Ironically, to concretize her vision in images of the body and the material world that impinges on it is not to free herself from fetishistic fixations but to cultivate them in areas other than that of the inscribed sign of the sacred alphabet. In general, MacEwen found other interests to be equally fertile ground for her exploration of desire and the uncanny.

In later work MacEwen also takes the notion of investing whatever is outside the poet's mind with a returning gaze -- whether it be nature or culture -- beyond the sacred alphabet into her further explorations of space and time. Eventually, the trope of the returned gaze reappears in the poet's inner journey into the psyche. Bartley points to two later poems which share this image of the returned gaze, in which the inner journey toward the psyche is figured as diving into an ocean, "The Sperm King" and "Eyes and Whales"⁶⁵; in the latter MacEwen asks: "(how often have I looked inward / to find my own bleary eye / looking back out?)" (ABB 43,44). But in the earlier work,

⁶⁵ Bartley 46.

the eye gazes back at the poet from the farthest margins of the physical universe. For example, she sees the eye "of some unthinking god . . . in the tall blue tulip sky" ("Certain Flowers," DC). And one of her two astronauts, Nikolayev or Popovich,

. . . swims
 through yellow yolks of total suns
 towards the ultimate inquiry --

 and finds at the end of the universe
 not walls, but mirrors
 reflecting the question mark
 of his own face back in
 to study it ironically,
 like brothers, amazed
 at their own similarity.⁶⁶

That MacEwen finds the returned gaze both when she glances out into the world and also when she looks inward into the psyche suggests that her earliest fetishistic fixation on sacred alphabets and paradisaal utterance has been displaced onto other objects and experiences. There is much that is uncanny in a vision that sees itself reflected back from all directions: it problematizes the boundary between what is alive and what is not, pointing to the desire and fear of all difference embodied in the phallic mother, who is MacEwen's ultimate muse. As Hansen writes:

⁶⁶ MacEwen, "Nikolayev and Popovich: The Cosmic Brothers," *The Rising Fire* (Toronto: Contact P, 1963) 11-12.

The gaze that nature appears to be returning . . . does not mirror the subject in its present, conscious identity, but confronts us with another self, never before seen in a waking state. Undeniably, this kind of vision is not wholly unrelated to the sphere of the daemonic, in particular Freud's notion of the "uncanny"⁶⁷

Thus the universe functions more like a dream than a mirror that reflects back the gazing astronaut to himself; rather, he discovers another self, in the uncanny logic of the fetishistic gaze.

The title "Adam's Alphabet" alludes to the most important motif to preoccupy MacEwen throughout much of her early career, that of the biblical story of the Garden of Eden and the Fall, the lost paradise, a lost Golden Age, all of which represent the longing to return to an idealized mythic past by recreating it in the present. Psychoanalytic theory shows us that such nostalgia is related to the concept of the muse, a relationship explored fully by MacEwen. But her first explicit comments about her muse made use of other myths.

One of MacEwen's first mythopoeic strategies involved her poems about the muse. Here MacEwen adopted specific myths which provide her with analogies for the creative process, or with allusions to exotic settings with

⁶⁷ Hansen 188.

mythological connotations or to biblical or mythological stories, allusions which give her work a context from which she can build her own contemporary myths. In "Icarus," from her first book, the self-published chapbook *Selah*, the poet uses the first strategy by positing a parallel between the writing of poems and the experience of Icarus, the mythic figure from the Greek tradition. The story of Icarus' flight alternates in the poem with the poet's musings on her own situation as writer. She links herself to Icarus as her muse through the image of the "feather" as instrument, both for his "artful wings" and her "quill to write / white poetry over sky." The boy Icarus is a complex muse, for he embodies not the transcendent experience the poet is striving for in her poetry as much as the process of striving itself, as he seeks his own muse, his father Daedulus. MacEwen's description of the myth's "muscle flight" compares with her "mindflight"; both Icarus and the poet achieve a transcendence: "the boy loops up into tall cobalt, / his hair a swirl of drunken light," while the poet becomes "drunk / with beauty." But she strives for too much, as she tries "to / slay the sunlight" and ultimately fails as Icarus does when the sun, now figured as a female vampire (juxtaposing the world of Greek myth with a very different mythical world), "sucks the wax." As Icarus plummets into

the Aegean, leaving behind "globules of wax, / strands of wet light" the poet is left with

the lean poem's
flesh tattered
by a hook of vengeful
fire.

The final line of the poem, "Combustion of brief feathers," recognizes that to invoke creativity is also to invoke the possibility of destruction. Atwood sees this line as meaning that the poem is "later burnt,"⁶⁸ but "combustion" can also be read as positively inflected: a bursting into light, a transcendence. After all, the poem we read has survived and has been published. But even as the poem lives on to do its work of communicating the sacred within the mundane, the experience of writing the poem, the direct experience of sacred world, is over. MacEwen knows that she is playing with fire. This poem explores an early version of a theme central to MacEwen's work: that one must recognize and accept the dark side of human experience, both "inner" and "outer" experience, if one is to be creative. MacEwen is more inspired by Icarus' striving than by Daedulus' brilliance, and Icarus functions for her as muse because of the parallels she sees between them. For her, the muse is

⁶⁸ Atwood, "MacEwen's Muse" 25.

not a transcendent entity forever out of reach, but someone reachable, with whom the poet can identify.

Another of MacEwen's early approaches to developing a mythopoeic strategy is to simply suggest myth by alluding to exotic locales or to biblical or mythological stories from the western tradition. She writes "Poet vs. the Land," also in *Selah*, on the dialectical principle but without necessarily achieving a synthesis at the end. This poem is in the form of a dialogue between the poet and her muse. Whereas in "Icarus" the poet addresses the muse, this is a rhetorical device; the poet neither expects nor receives an answer. In "Poet vs. the Land" the relationship between poet and muse is more than a matter of one (the poet) perceiving a parallel in their work: the relationship has become a real dialogue as the poet verbally wrestles with her muse. The poet speaks first and addresses the muse, who appears in the form of the land of "Israel," personified as a "Queen" and "the Jezreel woman." What is significant in this poem is the struggle between the poet and her muse for the right to be a poet and for control of the poem. By naming the muse "Israel," MacEwen invokes rich mythological associations which are reinforced by her diction: "thy skirts this night are full / of fragrant folds," "precious land," "gilt paper." The muse has the last word in this poem, however, as

she repeats, "Child, child, I / am the only poet / here" Ending the poem with an ellipsis rather than with a synthesis, MacEwen manages to suggest both that further developments including synthesis are possible, and that conversely there is nothing left to say.

Later, in the manifesto-like "Poem," from *The Rising Fire*,⁶⁹ the poet has developed her voice enough to have wrested control of the writing away from the muse. Rather than a dialogue between muse and poet, this poem is monologic; the muse is addressed but does not speak. The phrase "I acknowledge you, I" is repeated five times in the short poem, always with the word "I" positioned prominently at the beginning or end (or both) of the line. The acknowledgment of the muse is subverted by the assertion of the poet's own power seen in these repetitions. This affirmation of the poet's subjectivity and poetic role contrasts sharply with the earlier poem, "Poet vs. the Land," in which the muse asserted, "Child, child, I / am the only poet / here." In "Poem" the poet frees certain of the terms in her eden nomenclature -- "trumpets," "elephant," "thunder" -- from their edenic associations, and attempts to infuse them with a more direct mythic energy:

⁶⁹ Gwendolyn MacEwen, "Poem," *The Rising Fire* (Toronto: Contact Press, 1963) 15.

I acknowledge you, I --
 fearfully in poetry or otherwise
 and my voice involves trumpets --
 an elephant's trunk
 or a trunk of a thunder tree --
 look how we live --
 with what outrageous energy -- (RF 15)

Thomas M. F. Gerry claims that in this poem the elephant's trunk and the tree's trunk are vaginal, "tubular passages," tropes for the birth canal, and that this poem claims for MacEwen a discursive location which patriarchal discourse sees as impossible for a woman writer: "a subject with an origin."⁷⁰ This reading makes sense when considered intertextually with "Eden, Eden," a poem from *The Drunken Clock* that was republished in *The Rising Fire*.⁷¹ In this poem "thunder" is an image that links the poet's voice with an obelisk and an elephant's trunk:

it is the thunder is
 the vocal monument
 to the death-wished rain;
 or obelisk in a granite sky
 that roarse [sic] a jawed epitaph
 through cut cloud (RF 28)

⁷⁰ Shirley Neuman, "Importing Difference," *A / Mazing Space: Writing Canadian Women Writing*, eds. Shirley Neuman and Smaro Kamboureli (Edmonton: Longspoon/NeWest, 1986) 402.

⁷¹ MacEwen, "Eden, Eden," *The Drunken Clock* n.p.; reprinted in *The Rising Fire* 28.

The obelisk is a strong image for the phallic power of the poet's voice, and this idea is reinforced when the thunder is associated with the elephant's trunk: "its trunk is vertical and thick as thunder; / the elephant stubs down the wrenched lightning." But then the trunk becomes a birth passage for a poem, "funneling a coughed verse." Thus the poem issues here from a source that is both phallic and vaginal, male and female, the phallic mother. A haunting sense of death is present in the images of "the death-wished rain" and "the suicidal rain / in the morning." This eden is troubling, disturbing, with its "warped tree / with heavy fruit falling" and "peaked rock fighting the ragged fern / in the other storm's center."

I agree with Gerry that MacEwen claims her poetic voice in "Poem," but the poet herself claims her birth as poet in the lines:

. . . I
 acknowledge you, I
 and the tunnels of our mouths
 being strange passages. (RF 15)

Moreover, she struggles to wrest the speaking position from the phallic mother / muse. It is a difficult passage through the birth canal, represented in images of "sensual tunnels" and "atrocious labyrinths." In an earlier poem, MacEwen had proclaimed her position as a subject with an origin, but

without the difficult birth passage:

At nine months I was enlightened.
 Under surgeon's eye and from mother,
 shifting, mountainous,
 I walked straight out of the womb
 and took my place in the land of no sunlight.
 ("Child of Light," S)

Not only does MacEwen claim here an originary subject position, but she also claims a supernatural birth similar to that ascribed to many great religious teachers and prophets, roles she adopts in many poems. Wresting her speaking position from the phallic mother/muse means that she attempts to subvert or transcend, rather than to support the gendered discourse that Gerry reads in her work and that Neuman reads in contemporary Canadian feminist writers in general. The phallic mother as muse is more complex as an object of inspiration and desire than is the male muse that Atwood sees in much of MacEwen's work, and MacEwen's identification with the phallic mother as speaking subject makes this poet's utterances more active and powerful than Atwood recognizes.

In the earliest published paper on MacEwen's mythopoeic strategy, Atwood claims that MacEwen's

. . . informing myth . . . is that of the Muse, author and inspirer of language and therefore of the ordered verbal cosmos, the poet's universe. In MacEwen's myth the Muse exists eternally beyond sense, but descends

periodically as winged man, becomes incarnate for a time as magician, priest-king, lover or all of these, then dies or disappears, only to be replaced by another version of himself.⁷²

Although Atwood's view is obviously influenced by the 1960's authority on myth, Robert Graves' *The White Goddess*, this "informing myth" is hardly specific to MacEwen and has little to do with the myth MacEwen herself wanted to construct. Atwood's view of the role of the poet is too passive for MacEwen's experience. Atwood writes, "The poet's function is to dedicate her life to the search for the Muse, and the poetry itself is both a record of the search and an attempt to reproduce or describe those portions of the song-dance which she has been able to witness."⁷³ But MacEwen does much more than "search," "witness," and "describe" the activity or being of the muse. She argues and struggles with the muse and she herself experiences the transcendence which the muse symbolizes, through the creative process of writing the poem.

It seems quaint in retrospect to reread the critical debate over the male-versus-female muse. When MacEwen first began to do public readings of and to publish her poetry, this was a "hot" issue among Canadian poets and critics

⁷² Atwood 31.

⁷³ Atwood 31.

alike. Rosemary Sullivan quotes Atwood reminiscing about the early days when poets gathered at the Bohemian Embassy in Toronto. Poets there were discussing Northrop Frye's lectures, Leonard Cohen's *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, Jay Macpherson's *The Boatman*, and especially Robert Graves' *The White Goddess*, "a brilliant book that at first seemed to offer something new for women poets like [Atwood] and Gwendolyn."⁷⁴ But the ancient misogyny that inspired Graves' book was obvious. Atwood, MacEwen, and other poets "were involved in an important dialogue: sorting out the nature of the muse for the female writer."⁷⁵ Atwood explained that "[a]ll the propaganda had it that creativity was male . . . not even the artistic community offered you a viable choice as a woman . . . Irving Layton informed everyone that women were 'genetically incapable of being writers and anyway it was an invasion of men's territory.'"⁷⁶ Atwood further muses about the nature of the muse for MacEwen:

I myself always thought the muse was female, but Gwen's way of handling it was to say, okay, my inspiration is this and I have this sort of male person who is a muse, not to be confused very much with real people, or at least not for a very long time. Because her lovers/muse

⁷⁴ Sullivan 105.

⁷⁵ Sullivan 107.

⁷⁶ Sullivan 103.

did come and go. But what she got from them was inspiration. In other words it was a mirror reversal. If the muse is a woman for the woman poet, unless the poet is a lesbian, the sexual connection gets removed, and it's more like a second self, a twin, a mother, or a wise old woman. It can be any of these things. I did a survey of people and their muses, which was very revealing, and most muses, for both men and woman, are women. So it turns out. Probably if you want to be psychological, it is the voice, and the voice is the mother's voice. That's how we learn to speak, usually from our mothers.⁷⁷

Although Atwood did not make this connection explicit in her article on MacEwen's muse, she has obviously discovered the possibility that the muse is the phallic mother, the source and object of human desire. The phallic mother as muse may manifest as one sex or another to different poets, but she is the same muse. MacEwen was inspired by the phallic mother's phallic power and so her muse most frequently manifested as male, but there are also female muses, for example in "Poet vs. the Land," and muses which do not take an obviously gendered form, as in "Poem."

Whatever the apparent fetishistic dimensions of the attribution to a muse figure of one's creative energies -- the projection, embodiment, and overvaluation of this figure -- MacEwen, even at this early stage, was less confused about the nature of her muse than was Atwood. In a letter to

⁷⁷ Atwood, Interview with Rosemary Sullivan (Toronto: 8 Aug 1993). Qtd. in Sullivan 107.

Phyllis Webb in 1963, MacEwen wrote:

My main contention with the strictly occult writers is that in their psychological wanderings, they forget that the source of their "voices" and "ghosts" is their own interior memory-experience bank. I mean that they try to give their own writings an exterior reference, and in this way deny the potential genius of man, and credit his brilliance to astral beings. It's like the poet saying (that old absurd cry) -- oh, I just write what I hear, as though someone else is dictating. I used to say that too until I realized that I and I alone was the dictator.⁷⁸

The muse, as embodiment of a fixation and overvaluation of aesthetic value, can become a fetish for the writer, and as such, is both revealed in the writing and concealed by it. The reader's attention to the traces of multiple fetish discourses in the text can help to uncover the veiled or hidden muse and provide clues about the writer's relationship with her muse. MacEwen's muse hides in the early poetry in exotic landscapes and lost edens.

While the nostalgia for a lost Golden Age is nothing new in English literature, the preponderance of this theme in MacEwen's work is remarkable -- it is present throughout the poems in the early chapbook *The Drunken Clock* -- and the sheer number of poems devoted to this theme is a signal that something significant is going on here. For example, in *The*

⁷⁸ Gwendolyn MacEwen, letter to Phyllis Webb, 1963. Qtd. in Sullivan 95.

Rising Fire ten of the poems refer to Eden, and another dozen or so to other exotic places or cultures. Such nostalgia for faraway, idealized exotic places is, in psychoanalytic theory, a displacement of the desire to return to the mother's womb. For example, in the first poem, "All the Fine Young Horses" (DC, RF 17), MacEwen associates eden with the young horses, and establishes a pattern of imagery which links horses, dancers, fire, apples, and the heart with eden as representative of the unconscious, instinctual life. In dialectical opposition to "eden" she places "clocks", associated with the rational, conscious life and the post-edenic, fallen world. The unconscious, instinctual life of eden is threatening to erupt but is held in check by the repressive forces of the rational mind, symbolized by the clocks. MacEwen is solidly on the side of the subconscious mind, and values the eruption of previously repressed instinctual energy, seen in the "fine young horses" and dancers, yet the problem is how to deal with the effects of the rational. The horses "crumble when the clocks leap / and clocks will not sleep / to let them pass." Dance, the celebration of instinct, is associated with childhood, and then with life in the womb, and signals that MacEwen's solution to repression begins with a regression:

O my dancers (red and quick

.
 [. . .] run
 where the sun is ten years old,
 where your world is a foetus
 in fire -- (RF 17)

Such a regression in time takes the poet inevitably back to eden: "Where eden is eaten / in the bite of an apple." The synthesis of the dialectic between eden and clock time is found in the image of the dance, which is a way of expressing the instinctual energy of eden while simultaneously taking time into account: the measured, calculated clock time of the rational mind becomes the rhythm of the dance. The transformation of measured time into rhythm happens by surrendering, moving ahead beyond hesitation:

my fine young horses, O
 my dancers with the quick apples, O
 my young clocks, unused to timing --
 give up and dance (RF 17)

In "Evidence of Monday" (DC, RF 27), eden reappears in the image of a young boy who enters "with apples" into the rational, post-edenic "room of the quick clean line." He originates from "the brief earth," "the brief green world" where he knows flowers "nude," not painted or gilded as he finds them in "the narrow vase" inside the room. Here mystery enters explicitly into the poetry, but not as

associated with the remote and exotic eden, but with the motives of contemporary life. The boy is "stumped / by those who paint lilies / in a bright innocent science" -- innocent because it does not know the extent of its own ignorance, nor the extent of the "hurricane want / that outwipes / the painted skin of each flower," the human desire to return to eden, either as the place known in the womb, or as discovered in sleep or dream. The boy returns to "the most old garden, / . . . eden under the tugging years, / . . . eden at the end of days."

The dialectic between ancient and contemporary, unconscious and conscious, instinct and rationality continues. In "Wristwatch and Nile Time" (*DC, RF 29*), for example, contemporary life is imaged in the wristwatch; its emphasis on limits is seen in its "circumference" and "structures," and in its re-forming of time: "to condense great snake time / to a face of glass and two tongues / licking the hour in circumference." "Nile time" takes the place of eden in this poem, as the ancient, exotic setting for a more organic life in which life's rhythms are measured by the cycle of flow of the great Nile River, where time is a "great snake" and the edenic color green is emphasized: the Nile has "snakegreen shoulders," and "green Nileblood." But unlike the psychic journey in "All the Fine Young

Horses" and "Evidence of Monday," in this poem the passage back into the past, or rather a state of mind represented by images of the past, is not easily achieved. To get back to the "Nile," violence is necessary: "But rape time 'til the structures [sic?] shudders; / the frescoed skeleton turns its hinges / like so many bone doors." Such violence suggests a struggle within the poet herself regarding her apparent need to reject the ordinary world, and also speaks to the violence and guilt which are a part of the creative act.

In "Exploration and Discovery" (RF 6), eden reappears as an idealized pastoral scene. The poet claims here that "we" can "be bards ever / on green earth under / clear-cut sun cutting yellow dolls of us." This ideal garden suggests a split as other edens have done, but here the split is not violent, but part of an organic process: "All gay seeds are split for primordial light / to enter." This light, a figure for awareness, a new level of integration with the cosmos, is another form of union with the phallic mother, albeit displaced, as if such a split is veiled behind an idealized version of this world.

In her essay on Benjamin's theory of the "aura," Hansen illuminates the connection between desire for distant, exotic utopian worlds and the investment of the phenomenal

world with the capability of returning the gaze.⁷⁹ In other words, there is a deep connection between MacEwen's nostalgia for lost edens and her interest in sacred alphabets, and that connection is related to Freud's uncanny and fetishicity. All such expressions of desire for distant and exotic places such as the edens and oriental lands of MacEwen's poetry, are, when read as informed by Freud's psychoanalytic theory, displacements of the desire to return to the mother's body, to the womb. But for MacEwen, such desire is always complicated by the threat of madness -- that return to or identification with the mother would mean becoming enmeshed in a madness like her mother's. Her biographer, Rosemary Sullivan, sees the young MacEwen as resolutely deciding to reject any version of the world that cannot contain her parents' realities (madness, alcoholism).⁸⁰ MacEwen was determined to stretch the limits of experience in order to accommodate these possibilities; she would face them.⁸¹ But throughout the writing, the multitude of references to madness in particular (every story in *Noman* and *Noman's Land* makes some reference to madness) strongly suggest not only madness's attraction for

⁷⁹ Hansen 213.

⁸⁰ Sullivan 44.

⁸¹ Sullivan 46.

MacEwen, but her fear of it as well. Such longing to return to the uterine existence of union with the mother's body, and thus to unify all opposites and resolve all differences, was complicated for MacEwen by her mother's early rejection of her and later institutionalization for mental illness. For MacEwen, then, the ideal of union with the mother was itself threatening. The unconscious desire we all have for union with the cosmos, as represented by the uterine existence within the mother, the fusion of self and world and the loss of all problematic boundaries between self and other, always threatened MacEwen with possibility of the simultaneous loss of sanity.

MacEwen was later able to make much more explicit the desire for the mother's body, which she recognized as a figure for the phallic mother. In her dream journal she recorded a dream on April 9 (probably 1969): "Later Mom & I in bed -- I consciously think -- this is the phallic woman, for we seem to be joined by a long phallus -- I regret it is not a man or a lover -- I see 2 water wings suspended above & she mentions I should have sea-wings."⁸² This account of the dream provides corroboration of Marcia Ian's contention

⁸² Gwendolyn MacEwen, "Dreams/Visions/Musings; the sixties, seventies, and eighties," Notebook and additional notes. Gwendolyn MacEwen Papers, Box 1, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.

that in castration anxiety the phallus is a displacement of the umbilical cord, and that therefore castration anxiety is really anxiety about separation at birth, the severing of the umbilicus, and that this is, in turn, a figure for the fear of all difference.⁸³ MacEwen's dream, then, is of the ultimate fetish object, the ultimate embodiment of the disavowal of difference. However, the strength of her desire for and fixation on such an embodiment eventually caused her to seek beyond the biblical myth of eden for other sources of myth to represent such a disavowal of difference.

The myth of eden defines humanity's longing for completion, for unity, and it promises the eventual accomplishment of the longed-for union, figured as the union of humans with the deity, in the afterlife of Paradise--but only for those who are worthy. Western humanity's propensity for dualistic thinking is preserved in this concept of an afterlife, in the supposed existence of hell as the polar opposite to paradise. Such a metaphysics of promise of fulfilment offers the poet a descriptive explanation for human desire, but the promise is never fulfilled. MacEwen uses the eden myth to account for the situation of the poet, for whom the experience of successfully writing a poem is

⁸³ Marcia Ian, *Remembering the Phallic Mother: Psychoanalysis, Modernism, and the Fetish* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1993).

heavenly, but transitory. The myth cannot account for the transitoriness of this fulfilment, for the necessity for repetition, seriality. The poet must continue to strive to write more poetry always, for the "loud songs" provide only temporary relief from the hunger for completeness, unity, and transcendence.

MacEwen turned away from the eden myth and looked even further back into history to find a pre-biblical myth which would account more accurately for her experience as a mid-twentieth-century poet. She found the myth she needed in the Babylonian genesis, the story of Tiamut and Marduk. Her poem "Tiamut," first published in 1961 in the literary magazine *Alphabet*,⁸⁴ and later as the second poem in the collection *The Rising Fire*,⁸⁵ becomes the informing myth of much of MacEwen's writing until the publication of *The Shadow-Maker* in 1969. Early reception of this poem was mixed. Milton Wilson, in his review of *The Drunken Clock*, recommends this poem to readers, even though it is not as yet published in a collection⁸⁶; but Ian Sowton, in an otherwise very positive review of *The Rising Fire*, hopes that "Tiamut" will not be

⁸⁴ *Alphabet* 3 (1961): 75.

⁸⁵ MacEwen, *The Rising Fire* 5.

⁸⁶ Milton Wilson, "Poetry," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 31 (1961-62): 448.

republished juxtaposed with the same poems it appeared with in that collection again, because of its "generalized, violent, bare-assed anthropology," which seems to him "quite text-bookish and out-of-touch with the very personal sensibility that presides over the rest of the collection."⁸⁷ Sowton seems to miss the value of the poem, a poem which is, on the contrary, very much a part of MacEwen's personal sensibility as she tried to understand the attraction of the phallic mother as muse.

The poem "Tiamut" refers to the Babylonian story of creation in which Marduk bisects the body of the goddess Tiamut, creating the earth out of one side of her corpse and the heavens out of the other. MacEwen's version stresses the violence of this creation as it is constructed along gendered lines:

Woman, she winced at the coming of Marduk;
his hands laid her flat and angry on a bed of void,
Marduk stretched her out, and Tiamut lay,
coughing up black phlegm.

and Marduk flattened her belly under one hand
and sliced Tiamut down the length of her body --
the argument of parts, the division of disorder --
and made the sky of her left side
and fashioned the earth from her right. . . (RF 5)

Both the biblical myth of eden and the Babylonian myth of

⁸⁷ Ian Sowton, "To Improvise an Eden," *Edge* 2 (n.d.) 124.

creation depend upon the concept of a primal rift. In the case of eden, this primal rift is figured as the expulsion from the garden, the split between eden and the "fallen" world, between good and evil, between the innocence of eden's inhabitants and the knowledge of good and evil experienced by them after the expulsion. The rift is figured both materially / geographically, and psychically as a difference in consciousness. In the case of the Babylonian myth the primal rift is more literal: the goddess's own body is sliced in two. What makes this myth more workable for MacEwen's purposes is the important fact that Tiamut is the goddess of chaos; it is chaos which is divided, not the idealized pure, innocent state of unity and bliss which is eden. Employing vivid imagery, MacEwen uses the first nine lines of the poem to establish Tiamut as Chaos:

A woman called Chaos, she
 was the earth inebriate, sans form,
 a thing of ripped green flesh
 and forests in crooked wooden dance,
 and water a wine drunk of itself
 and boulders bumping head-on the fool clouds.

Tiamut, her breasts in mountainous collision,
 womb a cave of primeval beasts, thighs torn
 greatly in the black Babylonian pre-eden -- (RF 5)

Although as Chaos she has no form, Tiamut is described as a crazy collision of forms, but is always already not whole: "a thing of ripped green flesh," "thighs torn / greatly."

The myth accounts for the human desire for unity, for transcendence, as the parts of the goddess strive to become rejoined: "moon pulls sea on a silver string," "earth will not leave the gold bondage of the sun," "all parts marry, all things couple in confusion." A final transcendence, however, is not possible in this myth, for there never was an order, a unified cosmos to begin with. If the parts of the universe rejoin, as they strive to, the result will be only chaos, not a return to an edenic state or paradise. A feminist reading would see this myth as a description of primeval male violence as well, emphasized in MacEwen's diction, especially her use of gendered pronouns.

This desire, expressed in "Tiamut," for the two parts of creation to rejoin, this desire for wholeness, completeness, is nothing other than the desire for the phallic mother in another guise. Ordinarily, we think of the castrated boy as the opposite of the phallic mother, but MacEwen has found in the ancient Mesopotamian myth another reversal of the phallic mother, an "other side of the coin" that does not require a gender reversal. As the phallic mother represents an inhuman completeness, always already whole, Tiamut represents the female goddess as split, graphically cut, from the beginning of time divided. She figures and embodies the possibility of castration and any

other division that signals difference. The phallic mother of edenic longing becomes obscured by the new figure of Tiamut: MacEwen changes her focus and does not look behind the veil that Tiamut becomes, as if the poet is averting her eyes from the images of wholeness which the phallic mother so graphically shows us. Simultaneously, though, Tiamut represents the possibility that the primal goddess can be divided. She is thus both the phallic mother, representing wholeness, and a symbol of castration, as she figures division and difference. Our reading of this poem has to be fetishistic. Our attention on Tiamut disguises but also reveals that the object of our desire is ultimately the figure who signals the possibility of unity, and yet also at the same time remains the source of our primal fear, the figure who signals difference. The achievement of this poem is that MacEwen looks more directly at the source of her fear. The earlier desires for edens seem naive in comparison. The phallic mother, archetype of all human desire and also of the fear of difference, the unexpected or the unknown, the ultimate fetish object, is thus everywhere in MacEwen's early poetry. She appears in many guises, including that of Tiamut, and is sometimes hidden. Sacred alphabets, lost edens, ancient myths, exotic geographies all point to her. So do more displaced fetish discourses. She is

muse, lover, demon, the reflection of the poet's own mind.

Thus early evidence of fetishicity in Gwendolyn MacEwen's poetry provides an alternative or other reading of the mythopoeia of her "alphabet" and "eden" poems, which are among her first works. MacEwen's mythopoeic praxis involves not only the appropriation and revision of traditional myths and the creation of new ones, but also the energizing of those myths through the juxtaposition of multiple fetish discourses. The energy of this poetry and its strange, even exotic mystical allusiveness, qualities admired by MacEwen's early readers, can be attributed to the cumulative fetish discourses which shape and inform the work. From the very beginning, fetishicity points to the simultaneous desire for union with the Other and the fear of difference, which is experienced as the absence or loss of that union. Beginning with the juxtaposition of sacred, aesthetic, and material economies seen in the poet's overvaluation of the inscribed letter or sacred utterance of paradisaal languages, fetishicity draws our attention to the sense of loss and its disavowal which haunt these poems. This loss is always figured as that of an ideal state, a paradise or eden that symbolizes the transcendence of all difference in a primordial unity like that of the infant in the womb with its mother. MacEwen's "eden" poems extend the representation

of this desire and its disavowal in more detailed imagery, introducing the motifs of the poet's longing for geographical spaces and histories that are often specific, but always remote. The motif of a biblical eden or its substitutes eventually was too confining, however, not adequate to represent the poet's lived experience, and therefore MacEwen sought a pre-biblical myth that could be made to represent a sense of universality, of sacred world amidst the social chaos of the twentieth century: the myth of Tiamut, the bisected goddess of Chaos, who becomes an important figure for the phallic mother, MacEwen's muse.

The myth of Tiamut and Marduk establishes again for the modern world the idea of the underlying instability of the phenomenal world and human perception, experienced and figured by the poet as a sense of loss, void, fissure, or gap, and humanity's futile but ever-present longing to create order and stability out of this fundamental chaos. Such an understanding is a more sophisticated account of the circulation of desire than is provided by the longing for the perfection of a lost eden.

This desire for what seems to have been lost, figured in MacEwen's early poetry in its fetishistic fixation on and overvaluation of the exotic inscribed letter or uttered syllable of the "alphabet" poems as artifacts and

reifications of sacred meanings, and in the veiled and haunting allusions to the phallic mother which underlie the "eden" poems, is refigured in other poems as a perpetual appetite for perceptions, experiences, and material things. As MacEwen moved away from the focus on the yearning for a lost golden age or paradise, she concentrated instead on an investigation of other methods to negotiate the sense of emptiness or gap left by the supposed loss of eden or the recognition of chaos as the foundation of human existence and perception. In particular, she began to parody late-capitalist consumer culture in her poems which take hunger and appetite as their defining metaphors. These poems link a new dimension of fetish discourses to MacEwen's work: the commodity fetish of material economies based in the capitalist marketplace. The presence of the phallic mother is still suggested in these later poems, which associate the consumption-based commodity marketplace with the psychosexual economy of the desire for the phallic mother which veils but also reveals an anxiety about difference. The "appetite" poems most frequently represent such anxiety concerning difference through the reification of conflicting ideas, philosophies, ideologies, spiritual traditions, and material objects, all of which are equated as consumer items for the hungry poet. Even though these poems are frequently

spoken in a new satirical tone which pokes fun at western consumer lifestyles, the fetishicity of the texts points to MacEwen's continuing representation of a concern for and discomfort with the disjunctions in several areas of mid-twentieth-century social discourse.

Chapter 3
Uncanny Breakfasts:
The Early 'Appetite' Poems

If myth seeks to achieve understanding, to reach an
unconcealed presence, to recover the numinous, to
locate the universal in the Beingness of beings, then
it must cope with the Nothing of the moderns.

-- Eric Gould

In his analysis of myth in modern literature, Eric Gould has written that "[t]he process of humanization cannot ignore that words are not things, and that as we use words we are psychologically decentred . . . in order to allow concealing as well as revealing meaning to emerge."¹ Ironically, the very use of language itself is, on the most fundamental of levels, threatening to the ego, the selfhood, of the speaker, which risks becoming "decentred" when speaking. Moreover, language itself is a kind of disavowal of the concept that linguistically encoded meanings can be retrieved, in the sense that some meanings are "concealing." In her poems, Gwendolyn MacEwen always resisted this view of language. In MacEwen's understanding of the vocation of the bard, forging a poem out of words is a path to sanity in the broadest sense, to spiritual wholeness and growth, and to a way of living in the world. (That MacEwen also valued the frenzy of divine madness even as she was haunted by the

¹ Eric Gould, *Mythic Intentions in Modern Literature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1981) 39.

threat of insanity perhaps inherited from her mother -- "I fear I shall go mad -- or not" -- is not a contradiction because she believed that such divine madness is valuable, even essential at times, to spiritual and artistic growth.) At the same time, part of the affirmative power of language is that it does allow for the "insight into absence as central to understanding."² MacEwen tried to cope with these discrepancies in a series of poems which figure that central absence as "hunger" and the desire to disavow that hunger as "appetite."

Gwendolyn MacEwen's "appetite" poems are among the most distinctive works of her early career. At the same time that she was exploring a fascination with sacred alphabets and paradisaic naming in which the inscribed letter or uttered word embodies different kinds of values as the disavowal of a loss or difference, MacEwen began to work toward a praxis of openness to all experience in her life and work that is expressed metaphorically as an all-inclusive physical, emotional, artistic, and spiritual appetite. MacEwen's early poetry begins with a desire to include every aspect of existence within the scope of her poetic vision, even those "dark" aspects which are often hidden, marginalized, or repressed: "I don't think myth and reality are separate, and

² Gould 43.

I have to see everything."³ The necessity "to see everything" becomes expressed in poems from her second and third major collections, *The Rising Fire* and *A Breakfast for Barbarians*, in the metaphor of an omnivorous appetite. MacEwen singles out breakfast in particular as the most "sacramental" of meals, "because after all it's the first meal, it's the pact you make with yourself to see the day through."⁴ In her "breakfast" poems and others linked thematically to them, the poet expresses her wish that all objects, all experiences, be consumed and thus transformed into poetic inspiration and the "sacred world" which she longed so deeply to manifest in everyday life. But paradoxically, appetite implies an absence, a gap, a void that must be acknowledged before it can be filled.

This group of poems, in which appetite is the defining metaphor, develops another strand of the fetishicity that is the unconscious ground for so much of the early poetry, one that contends more fully with the materiality of experience and with the intersection already seen in the "sacred alphabet" and "eden" poems of spiritual, aesthetic, and sexual economies. The "appetite" poems add the commodity

³ Lisa Potvin, "Gwendolyn MacEwen and Female Spiritual Desire," *Canadian Poetry* 28 (1991): 20.

⁴ Gwendolyn MacEwen, *A Breakfast for Barbarians* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1966) vii.

fetish to the mix. They foreground material values as they are determined in the commodity marketplace, and the clash of material values of exchange as they compete with other kinds of value. Consumption and transmutation are frequent themes in the appetite poems, which are also haunted by a sense of sacrifice and loss and the disavowal of that loss, fetishistic strategies that point to the unconscious anxiety about all difference. Just as the group of poems on the theme of paradise and sacred naming links two fetish discourses, the ethnographic discourse of the sacred object in "primitive" societies and the psychoanalytic discourse of castration anxiety as a displacement of deeper anxieties about difference and differentiation, the "appetite" poems most frequently link two fetish discourses as well, that of the sacred object with that of the commodity in economies of material exchange.

The title poem of *A Breakfast for Barbarians*⁵ sets out MacEwen's appetite theme most directly of all the appetite poems. MacEwen begins the collection with an epigraph from Hart Crane, one of the poets whose work she claims most influenced her⁶: "Thou canst learn nothing except through

⁵ Gwendolyn MacEwen, *A Breakfast for Barbarians* (Toronto: Ryerson P, 1966).

⁶ The other poet was William Butler Yeats. Patricia Keeney Smith, "WQ Interview with Gwendolyn MacEwen" (Cross-

appetite," a fitting motto for her philosophy in these poems. The second epigraph, two passages from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*,⁷ posits a feast in which the foodstuffs and eating implements converse, move about, and are capable of emotion, much as Marx envisioned a wooden table as capable of evolving "grotesque ideas" out of its "wooden brain," a sure signal that the feasting thematized in the title poem and others must be understood in the context of commodity fetishism. MacEwen's satire of late capitalism's consumption of commodities in this poem links spiritual and aesthetic economies to that of the material object, and thus the poem is one of the best single examples of fetishicity in her early work.

In "A Breakfast for Barbarians," the poet identifies a "hunger which is not for food" (BB 1) -- it is a spiritual hunger, and its imagined object, "some fabulous sandwich," is "the brain's golden breakfast," an allusion to the esoteric teachings of Jacob Boehme, the fifteenth-century

Canada Writers' Quarterly 5.1 [1983] 17.

⁷ " 'Make a remark,' said the Red Queen; 'It's ridiculous to leave the conversation to the pudding!'" and "There was not a moment to be lost. Already several of the guests were lying down in the dishes, and the soup ladle was walking up to the table towards Alice's chair, beckoning to her impatiently to get out of its way."

Protestant mystic writer. Jan Bartley has identified MacEwen's "golden breakfast" as Boehme's *lubet*, or "energy of free will" seen in the "desire to seek salvation through the union of opposites."⁸ This strong desire to achieve a harmonious unity from the combination of opposite qualities is certainly very apparent in much of MacEwen's work; a reading attentive to the fetishicity of the poems notes an underlying unease, however, a recognition and at times a disavowal of the precarious and provisional nature of any such harmony, especially in works written after "Tiamut." As shown in the previous chapter, this pre-biblical myth, unlike the edenic myths, teaches MacEwen that opposites might strive to join, but their unity might not necessarily be harmonious. MacEwen does not deny that the human mind seems to structure reality dualistically, but her striving to create or represent a synthesis from cosmic opposites

⁸ Jan Bartley, *Invocations: The Poetry and Prose of Gwendolyn MacEwen* (Vancouver: U of British Columbia P, 1983) 39. Her reading of the appetite poems focuses on their references to Christian mystic and alchemical teachings in order to show how MacEwen attempts to portray the fusion of opposites into a harmonious whole. Bartley sees the metaphor of appetite as a particularly apt representation of the "basic connection between destruction and divinity," explored earlier by MacEwen in the novel *Julian the Magician* (36). Bartley finds in the "breakfast" poems the "desire to combine inherent opposites into a harmonious unity" (34) that she believes structures and motivates all of MacEwen's poetry from *The Rising Fire* (1963) to *The Fire-Eaters* (1976).

becomes increasingly problematized as she discovers the fragility and provisional nature of any such synthesis. Bartley claims that the "breakfasts" of the appetite poems hark back to their original meaning of breaking a religious fast and are thus "reminiscent of the eucharist,"⁹ but this interpretation does not account for the elements of the poem which undermine such an identification. If MacEwen wishes to invoke the eucharist of the Last Supper, it is only to parody it in her breakfasts. MacEwen's barbarians "consume their mysteries," it is true, but these mysteries constitute the entire western exoteric and esoteric traditions, represented in the poem by "chimera," "apocalypse," "arcana," "the bible," and "dictionaries." Surely much of this material is apocryphal, but the barbarians happily absorb it along with all the rest: it is all merely food, or fuel for some transformation or inspiration. In fact, the connection to poetic inspiration and to breathing in as a form of consumption is mentioned in MacEwen's Introduction, in which she writes,

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.

⁹ Bartley 36.

It is the intake, the refusal to starve.
And we must not forget the grace. (vii)

The barbarians' identification with divinity is humourously hinted at in the poem's final line, "By God that was a meal," the kind of meal that, according to Bartley, can best satisfy Boehme's and the poet's "golden hunger."

The poem is best understood, however, as more than a reflection of Boehme's teachings. MacEwen positions her images of Boehme's esoteric knowledge within a consumer culture devoid of spiritual values. She playfully figures as foodstuffs images from the western traditions of knowledge in order to question the universality and even the very notion of spiritual value as it is embodied in material objects in a late capitalist culture. After the image of the "fabulous sandwich," the poet imagines a number of possible comestibles to "slake the gaping eye of our desires": "boiled chimera," "apocalyptic tea," "an arcane salad of spiced bibles, / tossed dictionaries" (BB 1) -- all of which confirm that the hunger experienced by the poet is a hunger for knowledge and esoteric spiritual teachings. To figure desire as a gaping eye is to ask what object would satisfy a desiring eye / "I": presumably light or vision, metaphors for spiritual experience, would fulfill an eye's desires. Similarly, MacEwen deploys several of the meanings of

"gape": "to open (a mouth) wide, in amazement or wonder; to gaze curiously or wondrously; to split or part asunder." The poet's "gaping eye" desires to be amazed by the sacred world, but at the same time the very words used to express this desire hint at the split, sundering, or gap that problematizes all desire. Fetishicity surfaces in the poem in this hint at a sundering or break, and also in references to the secret nature of this desire, to desire's double edge: its articulation and its interdiction. The poet is advocating a non-discriminating consumption, as if any and all teachings, any and all knowledge, could satisfy this kind of appetite or appetites, which are "most unspeakable," literally unspeakable because they are unconscious desires, but also figuratively because they are secret. The poet knows that "[i]n the sense that fantasy is a setting out, a staging, or a plotting of desire, part of that plot, in the dynamic play of desire, is the prohibition of desire."¹⁰ Whether the desires of the poet and guests are unspeakable because they are sacred or forbidden (or both), the poet is non-discriminating in her choice of objects to fulfill her appetite: all knowledge, all teachings are reduced to the same status by the poet, as things to be consumed. The

¹⁰ Jennifer Harvie, "Desire and Difference in Liz Lochhead's *Dracula*" [*Essays in Theatre Études théâtrales* 11.2 (1993)] 133-43.

poet's naming of desire as "unspeakable" also reminds the reader of the poet's fascination with sacred alphabets and unspeakable utterances in the "eden" poems: just as the poet's utterance of "Yahweh! And Yahweh! And Yahweh!" in *Selah's* "Child of Light" is transgressive, so too is her attempt to name the forbidden desires of "A Breakfast for Barbarians."

The poet assumes a prophetic voice in this poem, addressing the "barbarians" as "O my insatiates" (*BB* 1): the term "insatiates" puns, of course, on the "initiates" of esoteric traditions and thus further links this feast with spiritual hunger. Moreover, although the term suggests that for the poet's interlocutors this hunger can never be satisfied, the last stanzas of the poem indicate the opposite: the feasters will "no more complain of the soul's vulgar cavities" but are "bursting, bleary" as they laugh and celebrate the meal. This is a complex disavowal: the hunger is acknowledged but also hidden or destroyed when it is satiated.

Presumably, those called to this exotic feast must be "barbarians" in the sense that they are outsiders, "friends" who do not necessarily subscribe to any of the belief systems of western civilization and thus are more apt to find the non-discriminating consumption of all belief

systems unproblematic. Or perhaps their status as outsiders renders them more capable of seeing the inherent weaknesses in these systems, for it would seem that only unbelievers would be able to find every offering delectable, while only those who desire to believe in *something* would even want to attend this breakfast.

Even though Bartley reads the "barbarian" of the title poem as double, as both a primitive, instinctual subject and as a "civilized barbarian," who is a "blind consumer in an age of uncontrolled consumerism,"¹¹ my reading adds another meaning to the figure of the barbarian, one based on the term's etymology: MacEwen means the barbarian to be understood as the outsider, a figure who can share her critique of western consumerism, much as the barbarian invoked by the surrealist Robert Desnos was an outsider to mainstream French culture.¹² In both MacEwen's and Desnos's case, the barbarian is invited by the artist to help to destroy the decadent mainstream civilizations of the time by subverting their values. Thus "the instinctive barbarian, sensitive to the rhythms of a mythical reality"¹³ is the

¹¹ Bartley 35.

¹² Maurice Nadeau, *The History of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Macmillan, 1965) 106-07, 113-14.

¹³ Bartley 35.

perfect guest for the poet's uncanny breakfast.

Bartley's link of the book's epigraphs with the title poem is especially insightful. She identifies Hart Crane's "appetite" with "desire, a particular kind of hunger or emptiness which man seeks to fill through knowledge or experience,"¹⁴ exactly the kind of appetite figured in MacEwen's poems. The relationship of the second epigraph to MacEwen's appetite poems and particularly to "A Breakfast for Barbarians" is even stronger: both MacEwen and Lewis Carroll "create and sustain worlds characterized by a wise absurdity" -- they are more than mere "delightful nonsense."¹⁵ The barbarians invited to MacEwen's breakfast feast share with Alice a certain quality of experience, as their simple expectations of sharing a meal are "exploded." MacEwen's barbarians,

[a]lthough . . . not accosted by the food [as Alice is], . . . are alarmed by an awareness of their subjective starvation, of their inner hunger which cannot be satiated by mundane objectivity. Alice, at least, has the fortune (or misfortune) to cross the barriers of time and space, to exist momentarily in an upside-down world where objective identity is confused, before returning to the surface security on the familiar side of the "Looking Glass." Such an opportunity is offered to the barbarians who partake of MacEwen's sacramental meals. Those who eat have a chance

¹⁴ Bartley 36.

¹⁵ Bartley 37.

to experience deeper appetites, to imagine and digest fantastic dishes, and then to return to an objective world with a renewed subjective strength.¹⁶

But there is a profound irony, even a contradiction, in Bartley's view that subjectivity can be strengthened by attempting to fill the sense of lack or loss with a feast that only further deepens that lack by allowing the experience of "deeper appetites." Moreover, there is no evidence in the poem that the feasters return to the world with a "renewed subjective strength." Instead, MacEwen's barbarians complete their meal as split subjects. They may superficially feel a sense of satisfaction, but the fetishicity of the poem leaves readers with a profound sense of the limits of any attempt to deflect consciousness from the sense of gap. The barbarians, who may feel divine as their appetite is temporarily hidden by a sense of fullness, are surrounded at the end of the feast by images of destruction and decay, indicating death: "bones," "scrap metal," "the gigantic junk-heaped table" (BB 1), all of which represent the barbarians' vulnerability to further ravages of appetite, to further experiences of being sundered from reality. There is no transcendence here, but only the problematized self-satisfaction of the poem's final

¹⁶ Bartley 37.

line; no transmutation, except for the spiritual foodstuffs into the haunting presence of decaying material.

There are thus limits to what a reading of the poem according to MacEwen's interest in alchemy and Boehme can give us. A more fruitful approach would read the appetite poems against the economic theory of Georges Bataille, whose theory of non-productive expenditure has much in common with the disavowal that is central to fetish discourses. Bataille's theorization (discussed below) of a shadow economy to that of the consumption of commodities in a capitalist marketplace illuminates the fetishicity of MacEwen's "appetite" poems, but first the fact that these poems are indeed overdetermined by multiple fetish discourses must be established.

Fetishicity posits the sense of a haunting by an underlying lack or loss that must be disavowed in whatever discourse it appears. The "hunger which is not for food" (BB 1) of the second line of "A Breakfast for Barbarians" is a strong image for this sense of lack or loss, later referred to in the poem as "the soul's vulgar cavities." The poet's juxtaposition of several images of diverse objects of non-discriminating consumption in this poem parallels the status of objects in commodity-based systems of material exchange. Marx identified the tendency in such societies for the

values of all commodities to become interchangeable, especially once a universal equivalent of value is established. MacEwen's barbarians are invited to consume knowledge and esoteric systems in a parody of capitalist consumerism. The notion that any and all knowledge, arcane or otherwise, can satisfy the poet and guests raises the troubling question of the value of individual systems, of any knowledge, much as commodity fetishism raises questions of the relative value or status of commodities and labourers. Further, MacEwen's feast leaves unasked, but implies, the question of the nature of the "soul's vulgar cavity," if any and all commodities can fill it (or veil it). The hunger metaphor implies that whatever satisfaction is obtained by this barbarian feast will ultimately be temporary, and the experience and question of the nature of this hunger, this soul's cavity, this gap in the sense of self, will recur and haunt the poet. The feast veils the hunger, but the very tropes of hunger and feasting disavow this gap in the self.

In her "Introduction" to *A Breakfast for Barbarians*, MacEwen writes: "The particular horrors of present civilization have been painted starkly enough. The key theme of things is the alienation, the exile from our own

inventions, and hence from ourselves."¹⁷ Bartley identifies this alienation with "man's perverse appetite for violence and destruction,"¹⁸ which particularly makes sense intertextually when the poems in this collection are read with "The Breakfast" from *The Rising Fire*, which sees an "atomic war" as a very real possibility in humanity's near future (see discussion of "The Breakfast" below). But more than this, the alienation that MacEwen writes of is the particular kind of alienation which Marx identified as resulting from commodity production: it is an "exile from our own inventions,"¹⁹ the sundering of producers of commodities from the products of their labour which gives rise to commodity fetishism and to the corresponding loss of subjectivity as labourers are reified as interchangeable parts of the production process. Moreover, MacEwen makes explicit that the "exile from our own inventions," from our products, is also an exile "from ourselves." MacEwen's "exile" is precisely the sundering of the relation between producer and product in commodity-producing economies identified by Marx. Thus MacEwen's "appetite" poems

¹⁷ MacEwen, *A Breakfast for Barbarians* vii.

¹⁸ Bartley 35.

¹⁹ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 1 (1867), trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage, 1977).

articulate an awareness of alienation and commodity fetishism as the ground for contemporary life in developed societies.

The title poem of *A Breakfast for Barbarians* fuses images from the sacred economies of esoteric western teachings with images of material commodities. The seeming reduction of all esoteric traditions to objects which are consumed by an undifferentiating appetite links them to commodities in a capitalist society, whose values become interchangeable. Thus the barbarians' feast is like a verbal *pronk* seventeenth-century Dutch still-life painting, in which the objects painted function as the location of the intersection of radically different economies, haunted by a sense of lack or loss. The figuration of desire's double edge appears in both the poem and the seventeenth-century Dutch still-life as foodstuffs to be consumed, but always haunted by the awareness of loss. Just as the *pronk* still-life is characterized by a profusion of consumable objects, whose display suggests the interchangeability of commodity values in a developing capitalist system, the juxtaposition of many wisdom-traditions-as-foodstuffs in MacEwen's poem also suggests questions about the values of these traditions. Just as the reflective surfaces of the *pronk* still-life suggest an emphasis on superficial appearance, in

which the gaze of the viewer cannot penetrate its object in order to claim an ownership or understanding of it, but is instead turned back upon itself in its own reflection, so too does the poem suggest the returned gaze, in the gaping "eye" of the barbarian. MacEwen's poetry so frequently puns "eye" with "I," and so frequently thematizes inner psychic journeys, that the barbarians' gaping eye is obviously a gaze which is double, turning inward as well as toward the world. And just as the *pronk* painting suggests castration anxiety in its depiction of sliced open, partially consumed fruits, seafood, or baked goods, and sometimes in images of decay (over-ripe fruits, insects devouring them), "A Breakfast for Barbarians" emphasizes that the dictionaries are "sliced," and the meal ends with images of fragmentation, particularly in "bones," "scrap," and "junk." Finally, just as the *pronk* still-life owes the origins of the pictured excess to the lucrative Dutch trading empire which flourished in the intercultural spaces opened by its trade with West African societies and others, so too does the verbal feast of the poet take place in an intercultural space, one shared by the civilized poet and the barbarian. The fetishicity of the *pronk* still-life gives to it an "uncanny" glow, a seductive power that fascinates viewers even today. Similarly, the fetishicity of MacEwen's

breakfast poem manifests and articulates the uncanny power of the traces of multiplied fetish discourses. Most of all, the poem is a poet's version of a *pronk* still-life painting, a lavish display created out of words, as uneasy as the painting in its juxtaposition of materials that embody different kinds of values, in its subtext of loss and disavowal. And finally the poem, like the *pronk* still-life, embodies the uneasy clash of different kinds of value: as an object of both aesthetic and material value, it is a work of art that must be judged by aesthetic criteria but also a commodity produced for sale in the publishing marketplace.

The strongest fetish discourse in "A Breakfast for Barbarians" is located in MacEwen's critique of commodity fetishism. At the same time that she parodies late capitalist consumer culture in the "appetite" poems, MacEwen is also positing the possibility of a different economy, one that subverts mainstream consumerism. MacEwen's subversive economy stresses the destruction side of the commodity equation, rather than the production and hoarding of commodities stressed by the mainstream bourgeois culture, for which "consumption" usually means accumulation of material things as a sign of wealth. MacEwen's outsiders consume and thereby destroy the wealth offered to them in the breakfast feast. For them, wealth means both

accumulation, in the sense that wealth is incorporated, literally, into their bodies, but also loss, in the sense that this wealth ceases to exist as material things. By incorporating their wealth, the barbarians transmute it into their very bodily substance, and, as MacEwen's "Introduction" envisions, into "fantastic things, like hawk-training, IBM programming, mountain-climbing, or poetry."²⁰ But a sense of mortality, unspoken yet implied, haunts the poet's vision: some of the foodstuffs will inevitably become excrement, which Freudian psychoanalysis associates symbolically with death, and Jungian theory with the *materia negra* out of which the self is derived. This feast, then, has associations with the entire cycle of birth and death. The economy of excess figured in the barbarian feast, including the mystical or magical transformations associated with unmediated consumption, thus acts to deflect attention away from the awareness of death's inevitability as part of the cycle, but death is always already uncannily present at the feast.

MacEwen's appetite poems represent and celebrate a subversive material economy outside of that encompassed by the practices, values, and strictures of capitalist social production, conservation, and accumulation. In fact, almost

²⁰ MacEwen, *A Breakfast for Barbarians* vii.

all of MacEwen's poetry written before *The T. E. Lawrence Poems* takes as its subject elements of this subversive economy: her themes include the carnival and circus, magic and magicians, dance, poetry, dreams and dreaming, war, mourning and death, gifts and feasting, and journeys toward a spiritual knowledge. MacEwen's subversive economy of all that is excessive and valueless in a consumer society is analagous to Georges Bataille's economy of *dépense*, or "nonproductive expenditure." Bataille has pointed out that many pre-capitalist societies based their systems of material exchange on "non-productive expenditure" rather than on the hoarding of material wealth which characterizes the Christian bourgeoisie which arose in the west with the decline of feudalism.²¹ Non-productive expenditure consists of the activities which spend a society's energies on objectives that have nothing to do with conservation or with maintaining that society's physical existence. Indeed, the value of the activities which comprise expenditure rests on their uselessness, according to Bataille. Thus "expenditure"

²¹ Georges Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," originally published in *La Critique sociale* 7 (Jan. 1933): 7-15; in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1985) 116-29. As examples of nonproductive expenditure, Bataille lists luxury, war, cults (because they are associated with human sacrifice), mourning, the construction of sumptuary monuments, games, spectacles, sports, the arts, and perverse (i.e. non-reproductive) sexual activity.

in Bataille's sense is based on loss and sacrifice, on an absence or lack.

Even though Bataille did not use the language of fetish discourses to develop his theory of expenditure and the general economy, there are nevertheless very strong similarities between nonproductive expenditure and fetishism.²² Just as the fetish, in whatever of its discourses it may appear, is characterized by the sense of loss or lack which must be disavowed, so too are the activities in the economy of expenditure characterized by a sense of loss or lack, "a loss that must be as great as possible in order for that activity to take on its true meaning."²³ Inspired by his reading of Marcel Mauss's essay "The Gift,"²⁴ Bataille claims that such a loss is seen most directly in the *potlatch* ceremony of the native peoples of the Pacific Northwest, in which great wealth is ritually sacrificed by being given away or destroyed in order to augment its value, the social status of the giver, and to

²² Indeed, as a form of "perverse sexuality," sexual fetishism would be included in Bataille's categories of non-productive expenditure.

²³ Bataille 118.

²⁴ Marcel Mauss, "Essai sur le don, form archaïque de l'échange" in *Année sociologique*, 1925. [Translated as *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. I. Cunnison (New York: Norton, 1967)].

humiliate the recipient, his rival. MacEwen was very aware of the *potlatch* ceremony as an inversion of the usual emphasis seen in capitalist societies on production and accumulation. In her short-story collection *Noman*, MacEwen writes about the *potlatch* in the first story, "House of the Whale":

Remember, Aaron, how amazed you were when I first told you about the *potlatche* [sic]? 'Why didn't the chiefs just exhibit their wealth?' you argued, and I told you they felt they could prove their wealth better by demonstrating how much of it they could *destroy*. Then you laughed, and said you thought the *potlatche* [sic] had to be the most perfect parody of capitalism and consumer society you'd ever heard of.²⁵

Thus a notion of wealth that defines its value negatively, in terms of loss, destruction, or the absence of accumulation -- such as the *potlatch* and other forms of non-productive expenditure -- subverts commodity values and must be disavowed by capitalist economics by being marginalized in its discourse.

Expenditure does more than merely subvert economies based on production and conservation, however. It also supports such economies because it is absolutely necessary

²⁵ Gwendolyn MacEwen, "House of the Whale" in *Noman: Stories by Gwendolyn MacEwen* (Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1972: 5-17) 9. "House of the Whale" was originally published in *Fourteen Stories High* (Oberon).

to their survival. According to Bataille, "the fundamental drive in all human life is towards glorious expenditure rather than prudent conservation,"²⁶ and thus it is *because* the economy of excess is still able to operate on the margins of advanced societies' material economies that commodity production is possible. An economy of excess is, therefore, fundamental to the existence of societies which officially sanction production and accumulation. At the same time, from the point of view of mainstream capitalism, an economy of excess is subversive to the extent that its very existence de-naturalizes the commodity mode of production by providing an alternative to it, and thus to the alienation caused by commodity fetishism, at least for the few who choose to analyze expenditure.²⁷ In a sense, nonproductive expenditure itself operates fetishistically with respect to commodity production by both ameliorating (concealing) the absence or loss, the sundering of self from products in advanced forms of capitalism, and revealing that loss by the necessity of its existence. MacEwen's "A Breakfast for

²⁶ Steven Connor, "Georges Bataille," *A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory*, ed. Michael Payne (London: Oxford UP, 1996: 48-50) 49.

²⁷ Bataille would argue against this mainstream understanding of expenditure, of course. For him, it is capitalism's emphasis on accumulation and hoarding which has subverted and repressed expenditure, which is an activity more fundamental to human life than is accumulation.

Barbarians" and other "appetite" poems similarly subvert such alienation by representing and enthusiastically supporting an economy of excess and by questioning the values placed on material things by commodity-producing societies and the values of traditional western belief systems.

"A Breakfast for Barbarians" is a remarkable poem on its own, but MacEwen expands on its message and explores other dimensions of the theme of appetite in a group of poems linked to it thematically. Even before the publication of "A Breakfast for Barbarians," an earlier poem had used the same tropes of appetite and non-differentiating consumption as metaphors for the poet's attitude toward life. The first poem in *The Rising Fire*,²⁸ "The Breakfast" (RF 3-4), announces MacEwen's intention to give up the destructive, polarizing movement, seen in the earliest poems, away from contemporary life and into an edenic state. In "The Breakfast," the poet decides to live fully in the real world, to experience everything, to absorb every influence, and appetite becomes her defining metaphor: "come, come -- eat leviathans in the breakfast wastelands / eat bestiaries and marine zoos and apples and aviaries" (RF

²⁸ Gwendolyn MacEwen, *The Rising Fire* (Toronto: Contact Press, 1963).

3). MacEwen places the same emphasis on omnivorous consumption in this poem as in "A Breakfast for Barbarians." But here the breakfast menu includes all creatures from the earth, water, and air, and the breakfast guests are invited specifically to consume "leviathans," biblical sea monsters or possibly anything too large, unwieldy, and difficult to manage ("leviathans" may even allude to Hobbes' autocratic State). The suggestion is that everything monstrous or difficult can be consumed. If, as "Tiamut" had claimed, it is not possible for the poet to establish a lasting order from the chaos of the modern world, then this incorporation of the monstrous and difficult makes at least a measure of control, of limitation, possible: "by eating the world you may enclose it." But the poem ends with an acknowledgement that such an attitude toward life is fraught with pain and danger: "deal, infidel, the night is indeed difficult." "The Breakfast" can be read as an exploration of the ways in which some aspects of the world and the poet's vision of creating order within it are difficult indeed.

The world of "The Breakfast" is a fallen world, a world in which atomic war is possible, where one has "to improvise an eden"; the line "snakes and the absence of doves" links the notion of the fall from Paradise to that of the possibility of a war of annihilation, seen also in the

images of an "atomic breakfast" and a "twilight of purple fallout" (RF 3). Such a war would create the metaphorical "twilight" of the human race and perhaps of all life. The poet begins the poem wondering when the end of humanity will come: "under the knuckles of the warlord sun how long do we have / how long do we have, you ask, in the vast magenta wastes / of the morning world when the bone buckles under for war." The morning evoked here paradoxically suggests the beginning of the end of the world, and not the traditional metaphorical beginning of existence, of all life. The snake as a traditional phallic symbol locates the cause of the possible annihilation of humanity in the aggression of a patriarchal culture, and the suggestion of patriarchy is augmented by the reference to the sun as "warlord." Living under such conditions is apt to create "a breakfast hysteria." To begin the first, the most sacred meal of the day is thus a weighty matter: "perhaps you have felt it, / the weight of the food you eat, the end of the meal coming / before you lift the spoon." One response is to retreat into nostalgia, to "eat only apples / to improvise an eden." But the poet now knows the cost of such retreat and does not support the repression of the difficult in life; she disapproves of those who let the "breakfast hysteria" cause them to "forget the end takes place / in each step of

[their] function." In other words, the poet admonishes the breakfast guests not to allow their style of consumption to veil the reality of death, but to eat and live with an awareness of the entire cycle of life and death, a larger vision which sees personal death as part of a natural process. Here MacEwen raises the question of whether civilizations must be seen to conform to the same sort of cycle, and she asks whether the death of the world is inevitable. The poet seems to want to celebrate an affirmative answer to these questions, yet she also seems uneasy with this vision of the end of all life on the planet. The fetishicity of the poem underlines this unease by pointing to areas where the poet's discourse cannot veil or mask its own fractures.

Despite the poet's admonishment of those who would retreat into self-made edens of the imagination, she herself communicates an experience of immense tension between the strong desire she feels for a simpler world and the acknowledgement of the necessity to accept the complexities of contemporary existence. The tension of "The Breakfast" comes from the poet's temptation to succumb to the "breakfast hysteria" or to retreat into an "improvised eden" (RF 3), against her better judgement, which tells her to keep to the cosmic view of events. This tension is figured

most strongly in two human artifacts juxtaposed as polar opposites: the breakfast spoon and the atomic bomb. The lifting of the breakfast spoon to the mouth is a figure of the simple life; but the spoon moves "halfway" through the abstract spaces of contemporary thought. The breakfast table is both a physical piece of furniture and, in the line "invisible tables / of dangerous logarithms" (RF 3), a figure for the abstractions of mathematics and technology, aspects of the more complex modern human life which have made "atomic" war possible. The table and the spoon are thus sites for the fixation of competing discursive values, those of the nostalgic movement toward a simpler, more primitive existence, with an emphasis on physical survival and the senses, and those of the more complex worlds of twentieth-century science and technology and the terrible destructive potential they bring to the modern world.

The poet attempts to remind herself and her interlocutors of the scale of her envisioned possibilities -- and at the same time she exhorts us to value simplicity -- when she resorts to a kind of child's play, to blot out the "warlord" sun by holding up a hand, or the breakfast spoon, close to the eye. She asks us to "marvel at [the] relative size" of the simple human hand or spoon, to take "comfort . . . with the measures of a momentary breakfast

table" (RF 4). But the poet knows too well that such a game is delusional and affords only "momentary" comfort. In "The Breakfast" any retreat, any game, designed to provide comfort is always haunted by the sense of loss and sacrifice that underlies the technology's potential. Yet later in the poem the poet affirms or remembers that the cosmos "has no ending," a further disavowal of the loss entailed by mortality through an identification of the human with the macroscopic scale of the universe.

Given that the subject matter of the poem is such somber food for thought, the reader might expect anything other than the mystical, playful, celebratory tone of the poem. For the poet with a vision that is cosmic in scope, war is a game of chance, as is existence itself: the possibility of war is seen in the context of a card game, a "last deck of evening cards" (RF 4). Yet the tone of "The Breakfast" is also dark and challenging. Seeing future vistas of "vast magenta wastes," the poet's vision is of creation and destruction as parts of a cosmic dance or cycle. "Magenta" is the colour of sunset and of spilled blood, both of which haunt the poet with the reminder of the possible end of human and planetary life in a violent war of total destruction. The end of humanity's existence -- and perhaps that of all life on the planet -- is figured as a

game of cards that has not yet begun, a "pack of possibilities" that will unfold once the infidel deals. It is significant that the agent of destruction in this poem is someone on society's margins, the "infidel" or unbeliever, just as it is the barbarian, the outsider, who assists the poet in detroying mainstream culture in "A Breakfast for Barbarians." The poem which had urged readers to indulge a cosmic appetite ends as it had begun, with unease about endings.

"The Breakfast" and "A Breakfast for Barbarians" are the two most significant of the "appetite" poems. In them, MacEwen sets out the parameters of the "appetite" theme and says most of what she has to say about the necessity to feed spiritual, aesthetic, and bodily hungers. Although she is proud to follow philosophically in the footsteps of the Christian gnostics, she discovers that in practice it is "indeed difficult" to relish both the light and the dark sides of experience. She charts those difficulties in poems related thematically to "The Breakfast" and "A Breakfast of Barbarians." The poet represents her discovery and exploration of the territory of appetite's extremes by linking this theme with several of her other frequent motifs: myth, the dance, the muse as flying being, vision and sight, and even sacred alphabets. The ramifications of

a non-discriminating appetite eventually cause the poet to rethink the necessity for limitations, but a sense of unease, made apparent by the fetishicity of the poems, haunts all stages of the poet's project.

Several poems in the collection *The Rising Fire* show the results of the poet's announced determination to consume all experience, the light as well as the dark, to live in the world with appetite for whatever experience has to offer. The third poem in the collection, "Exploration and Discovery," for example, takes the first steps into a world that is a contemporary, lived-in world and, simultaneously, a world created by the poetic imagination:

We must sing much to master wind's loud
love of land
in insistence of dimension,
and be bards ever
on green earth. . . (RF 6)

The poet fully assumes her poetic voice here in order to attempt to construct an ordered world out of chaos. Although it seems as if the world exists within a natural, organic order, "clear-cut sun cutting yellow dolls of us / in the morning," it is the poet's voice which orders the images of sun, pastoral and urban landscapes, and the simple human activities of music-making, pipe-smoking, knitting and children's playing. At the same time, the reduction of the

humans in this pastoral landscape to cut-out paper "dolls" adds the note of haunting alienation that originates in the modern world of the poet. The poem uses the traditional device of associating poetry with music in a pastoral setting: "We must sing . . . and be bards ever," "boys blow reed pipes where the water is." The poem ends with a welcome: "All gay seeds are split for primordial light / to enter. / Welcome to the earth." Here birth is figured as the light of illumination entering the split seed, as part of an organic process; yet the celebratory tone and emphasis on the light and earth cannot deflect attention from the fact that a "split," a sundering or gap, is the ground for any birth. It is not MacEwen's intention here to deceive the reader about the nature of creativity and the imagination or to re-imagine an eden that had been previously rejected. The real world, apprehended by the poetic imagination, contains pain and even in the most pastoral of settings, she cannot forget this. Traces of sexual fetishism, pointing to anxiety about difference, surface in the images of splitting and cutting, and traces of commodity fetishism in the exchange of paper dolls for people. The poet's attempts to imaginatively retrieve an ancient golden age, suggested by the pastoral landscape, the life of ease and music, and the "yellow" colour of the sun and dolls are fraught by

fetishistic reminders in the poem that the anxiety and dis-ease of the modern world, which are responsible for provoking the desire for a return to lost golden ages, are rooted in the confusion of values and basic anxiety about difference and differentiation, conditions which would follow and haunt the poet anywhere she would try to escape them.

In "The Death Agony of a Butterfly" (RF 16), MacEwen re-examines, through the use of organic metaphors seen in "Exploration and Discovery," both the nature of the world and the nature of making poetry. Once again poetry is imaged as music, but here it is a "violent music," and the light of illumination has become "the cold light." The poet identifies with the monarch butterfly's painful and ultimately deadly striving for the light as a parallel to writing, just as she had identified with the winged boy Icarus in the earlier poem of that name (*Selah*). The muse's exhortation to the poet is cruel, although the muse professes love: "dance you, dance / you bitch." It is possible that this violence and pain are meant to be understood as a part of organic nature and of the creative process; it is also possible that in celebrating appetite and excess, MacEwen has discovered the transgressions of sadism and masochism. If so, this is territory that she

resolutely consigns to the "unspeakable" until she assumes the persona of Lawrence in *The T. E. Lawrence Poems*. In "The Death Agony of a Butterfly," MacEwen attempts to give an ordinary, real moment the mythological weight of the Icarus story, while at the same time making the pain involved more explicit and immediate. Although "appetite" is not mentioned explicitly, it is clear that the poet's unflinching gaze at the pain as well as the joy of life is the putting into practice of the exhortations of "The Breakfast" and "A Breakfast for Barbarians."

MacEwen is always aware that it is not easy to maintain the poetic vision which constructs the cosmos and gives meaning to events, and is determined to confront each difficulty. "The Mountain: A Study in Relative Realities" (RF 7) begins with an image of hunger which resembles the sounds of violent weapons: "the staccato from the gut / like sunset guns." This image works intertextually with "The Breakfast" to link appetite with warfare: "sunset guns" reminds us of the "twilight of purple fallout," the landscape of the "atomic" war of annihilation envisioned by the poet as possible in "The Breakfast," and it also reminds us of her attempt in that poem to encompass in her mystic or mythopoeic vision such a destructive outcome of economies of excess. Many earlier poems had validated the body and

sensory perception as a means to knowledge, but in this poem MacEwen begins to voice doubts about the reliability of the "smashed senses": "eyes / like screens, ears like blocked harbours, skulls / like tonal caves which echo altogether too much." Again the notion of a gaze reflected back to the viewer, and of a wisdom that can be found only by looking inward, is suggested by the image of an "eye" which is here like a "screen." The poet cannot trust in her sense of sight: what she "sees" is not the actual physical world, but the projections of her own desire. Significantly, the other sense emphasized here is the sense of hearing. Ears "like blocked harbours" cannot hear or respond to the sounds of poetry. Instead of the "green earth" which welcomed the bards' songs in "Exploration and Discovery," now the poet experiences only multiplied absences, figured as "tonal caves" and "echoes." In "The Breakfast" and "A Breakfast for Barbarians," the sheer range and number of material objects available for consumption had been a cause for the poet's celebration of the feasters' power, but now the inverse of such consumption, the multiplied absences, is "altogether too much." The poet is once again considering that it may be necessary or desirable to limit the expenditures of excess, and seems less confident than in "The Breakfast" that "by eating the world, you may enclose it" (RF 3).

Having problematized the body and its senses as the ground for poetic vision, MacEwen turns to the mind, or the "mind's eye," in the next poem in the collection, "Universe And": "something we know of mountains / and craters within craters-- / big braille under a blind God's hands" (RF 9). Through the images of blindness and of "craters within craters," suggesting the *inverse* of worlds within worlds -- another trope for multiplied absences -- the poet tells us that the knowledge of our world derived from the body is only a partial knowledge; we are not using all of our senses until we acknowledge that the sense of sight has to be double, turning both outward and inward. At the same time, she warns against a cowardly inner vision, one which halts before its desire is satisfied, one that is motivated by fear and is willing to accept limitation:

. . . our little timorous temples turn
inward, our introverted temples
turn as the flyer hoists our vision
higher.

Such a limited inward vision is dangerous because it means we are not listening to the Icarus-like winged creatures which are tropes for our poets, the "flyer[s]" who try to "hoist[] our vision higher," and our myths are therefore becoming meaningless: "on earth the machines of our myth / grind down, grind slowly now, rusting / the wheels of human

sense." "Rust," which had been valorized as the remains of the barbarians' celebratory feast, here receives a negative inflection, for it is "human sense" which is deteriorating, through the slow grind of myth. A rationalizing view of myth sees it as deriving from a less developed, "primitive" stage of human social evolution, and here MacEwen remains ambiguous about whether she can value myth for a contemporary society. On the one hand, she appears to subscribe to the view that the creation of myth is the result of an infantile hunger as she claims that we drink milk, the food of infants:

we drink white milk while
 high galactic fields open
 their floodgates open

and the terrible laughter of our children
 is heard in that pocket, that high
 white place above our thunder

This metaphor may be claiming that if we allow myth, the food of infants, to satisfy our spiritual hungers, we will remain childlike, immature and unable to evolve further. We seem to be shut out of the "high galactic fields" from which we hear the "laughter of our children" who have succeeded, paradoxically, in entering "that high / white place." Moreover, the children are "above our thunder," beyond the sound of our ancient myths and the seductions of our lost

golden ages. On the other hand, the poet may be claiming that we must become childlike and innocent in order to enjoy the mythical world fully. The value she places on being childlike is thus unclear, and this ambiguity points to MacEwen's deeply-felt conflict about valuing lost worlds of imagined innocence over the complex world of everyday contemporary reality. Her stated purpose of consuming *all* experience is complicated by the knowledge that haunts her of her own mortality, implied by the "rusting" of myth and the accession of the new generation to "that high / white place" and also complicated by a felt conflict regarding the necessity to place limitations on appetite.

The appetite theme is taken in a different direction in two juxtaposed poems, "Universe And: The Electric Garden" (RF 10) and "Nikoleyev and Popovich: The Cosmic Brothers" (RF 11-12). Here MacEwen makes the familiar comparison of the arrangement of the components on the subatomic level of the material universe with that of the orbits of planetary bodies and their satellites in a solar system. In the first poem, both the atom and the solar system are figured as "electric gardens" in an effort to comprehend the level of ordinary reality as part of a greater reality:

the protons and the neutrons move, gardener,
sire their suns, spirals of sense,
and servant their planets,

their negative pebbles
 in a pool of moons; electrons like
 mad bees

circle; (RF 10)

To see the garden's atomic structure as analogous to that of the solar system is a way to add value and mystery to ordinary reality, and to reveal a kind of perception that is usually secret in the sense that both the macroscopic and microscopic levels are unavailable to ordinary, unaided human perception. Thus MacEwen here enlists the aid of western science instead of mythologies, as she had done previously, to create an experience of reality that is sacred. MacEwen as the bard tries to infuse the ordinary garden with the mystery known to science, but she tries to feel the mystery rather than analyze it as an abstract concept, and thus make reality, figured as the garden, available as wondrous to her readers. Yet the glimpse of reality in such terms is so powerful that in the last line of the poem the poet confesses, "I walk warily through / my electric garden" (RF 10). The poet herself is implicated in some way, because a fourth level of reality, the psyche, is also part of intelligent and powerful patterning of the universe, although this is only hinted at here in the line "telescopes turn inward, bend down."

The second poem, "Nikoleyev and Popovich: The Cosmic

Brothers," again juxtaposes macroscopic, microscopic, and ordinary realities with the inner journey into the psyche, but here uses the metaphor of a cosmic feast. As in the previous poem, the poet sees repeated universal patterns in the orbits of satellites and in the "concentric circles / of crumbs and insects / on cosmic tablecloths" (RF 11-12). A meal is suggested by the "crumbs" which remain, and the metaphor of the tablecloth reminds us once again that the stuff of the universe is to be consumed by the poet. The presence of "insects" is reminiscent of the *pronk* still-lives, in which insects pointed to the overripeness of the foodstuffs, metaphors for decay and death. In MacEwen's poem, the juxtaposition of "crumbs and insects" accomplishes the same suggestion. The image of the "insects," however, adds a sense of the small scale and perhaps therefore insignificance of the poet in the cosmic order. Yet the poet seems to reconsider that view when she claims,

we have no dimensions and
the burden of thinking
in terms of size
is lifted from us;

She reiterates this view when she admonishes, "make no discrepancy / between the cosmic egg / and the eye's diameter." As in "The Breakfast," the poet once again attempts to avoid the uneasiness of the haunting presence of

reminders of differentiation and death by juxtaposing the body's scale with that of the cosmos, to place the body, its individuality and its mortality, in a context which diminishes the very consequences of the body's materiality. It is a crazy inversion which simultaneously denies the body's materiality ("we have no dimensions") even as that materiality is invoked. In this poem the cosmic brothers, one of whom searches the material universe and the other of whom investigates the psyche, both discover at the end of their explorations that they are ultimately thrown back on the human mind and must understand its mode of perception as structuring any reality that is available to them: ". . . the introverted eye looks inward / to find the inward Eye looking out" (RF 11-12). The poet as split subject disavows the loss of wholeness through the figures reflected back at her of the double, twinned astronauts, multiple representations of the winged muse. There is more, then, to understanding the universe than to do so by merely consuming any and all experience: the poet's appetite can be satisfied here only through self-understanding, which must include the acknowledgement of difference and of the fractured self.

Many of MacEwen's "appetite" poems link the theme of appetite with the motif of seeing. The hunger is metaphysical, and thus the right kind of "seeing" can

satisfy that hunger. Seeing the light, being enlightened, is part of the right kind of seeing, but the poet must also account for the darkness, rather than deny it: "The Black Light: The Eclipse" (RF 20) continues MacEwen's use of astronomical imagery to represent both ordinary reality and the inner, psychic journey. Here the figure of the solar eclipse is a metaphor for whatever is hidden, secret, and/or unacknowledged in experience, what the poet calls the "inverse" of experience:

The Black Light: The Eclipse

occurs almost as an afterthought
 in the eye or otherwise, even
 larger lenses, as in sky
 retain that inverse quality,
 that light by which we see
 nothing and nothing
 is to be seen

The figure of "black light" as the *other* side of illumination is an intriguing and powerful reference to MacEwen's philosophy of inclusion. And yet when the poet describes the black light as "that light by which we see / nothing and nothing / is to be seen," she admits that the dark side does not offer itself up for analysis or direct experience: "nothing / is to be seen" by its light.

"The Breakfast" had announced the poet's intention to encourage the appetite for all human experience in the

ordinary world. Choosing to live fully in the world is the first step to creating order in that world, for the poet must first know the world. But this attitude toward experience is not without its dangers and difficulties, as the poem also acknowledges. One danger is that there is just too much data, too many images and too much strangeness to assimilate. Although the medical terms were not part of ordinary public discourse when MacEwen wrote "Black Light: The Eclipse," her exploration of a metaphorical appetite has led her to the discovery of the danger of entering a bulimic/anorexic cycle:

it is as though a vision
 were vomited back, undigested,
 or a breakfast of strange images
 squeezed the stomach for
 an interior darkness . . . (RF 20)

Here is an ironic twist on the concept of economies of excess: a surfeit of experience sickens one, but paradoxically by not digesting or assimilating experience one is left ominously empty: "and behind my eyes there is / a great ensuing blackness. . . ." When appetite goes this far, it becomes unhealthy. The experience of absence, of emptiness, is dizzying, sickening. The breakfast feast which began the volume has been unsuccessful, the food offered there undigested, unassimilated. The uncanny feast which was

to mask the poet's metaphysical or spiritual hunger is "vomited back," and the poet experiences only emptiness, the terrible void that the breakfast feast was meant to fill or at least to hide: "and behind my eyes there is / a great ensuing blackness"

MacEwen takes the exploration of the dangers of an unhealthy appetite even further when the sense of the void and the craving to fill it are associated in "The Room of The Last Supper: Mount Zion" (RF 21) with paranoia. The inward-turning poetic vision discovers instead of a mirroring "Eye," as it did in "Nikoleyev and Popovich," that "the enemy is watching us," but it is we who, having become "gnomes," creatures of the dark underground, are responsible for inventing this enemy, we who "substitute eyes between the pillars." The appetite willing to consume the metaphorical darkness along with the light is in danger of being corrupted by that darkness. "The Last Supper" of the title alludes not only to the Christian Eucharist but also to "The Breakfast" and "A Breakfast for Barbarians," but here "the Feast is negative." This poem inverts all of the transformations of those other meals: instead of experiencing a transcendence, the "gnomes" merely "burrow" and "goug[e] out darkness" in a strange consumption that leaves them hungry. Having exhausted the sustenance

available from the "dark" side of experience, they would devour whatever "the whiteness" has to offer in a final image of appetite-become-neurotic-craving: ". . . now we too are hungry and / hunt for crumbs in the whiteness."

The exploration of an unhealthy appetite is continued in "The Magician: Three Themes" (RF 30-31), which treats some of the same themes as MacEwen's novel *Julian the Magician*. The intense craving of the populace for transcendence through magic is at first "odd" and "irksome" for the magician, but it can become destructive when

. . . like penicillin from a mould
 his pretense breeds wonder
 at the throat of their belief
 like fingers or a strange bacteria

and they succumb to a kind of hypnosis. The poet questions the complicity of the audience in their own deception, and the possible limits to a world constructed from the body's senses and the imagination:

how
 much of him is theirs, how much of him
 do they recreate in the vast thunderous churches
 of their need. . . .

The image of thunder, associated in the early chapbooks with eden, here becomes an image for an appetite which has become extreme, because it desires the wrong thing: to escape from

the real world rather than to live fully in it.

In "Skulls and Drums" (RF 22) the poet discovers a possible solution to the dilemma of extremes of appetite. The poem presents new instructions for how to deal with the fullness of sensory data and experience in the world. The poet learns a new way to use her senses, a new way to construct the world. The poet, having invited the muse-as-dove to "anchor" in the world in the poem "Black and White" (RF 19), is now instructed by the muse in how to "anchor" sense, and the poem is the poet's repetition of these instructions:

you talked about sound, not
 footstep sound, shiphorn, nightcry,
 but
 strings collecting, silver
 and catgut, violas riding
 the waves of May like soft ships,
 yes
 and the anchoring senses,
 the range, the register,
 the index
 in the ear; the long
 measure from the drums of our skulls
 to the heart (and its particular tempo);
 the music anchored there, gathered
 in. (RF 22)

"Anchor" is repeated twice more in the poem, each time alone on a line, surrounded by white space, indicating the importance of the image. By the end of the collection the poet will need, and discover, a more permanent grounding in

the earth, but for now an anchoring -- suggesting the world of experience as a stormy sea -- is sufficient to make a new start.

In *The Rising Fire*, MacEwen continues to develop the metaphor first introduced in *The Drunken Clock* of the dance, which she combines here with the appetite metaphor. According to the poet's vision, dance is one way to give expression to appetite and to everything that satisfies it. Dance celebrates life and the body and communicates everything that is involved in being human, and is thus also a figure for poetry in much of MacEwen's work. Another figure for poetry, as we have seen in the previous chapter, is flight, as in the "Icarus" poems. The dance, like the flight of the butterfly in "Death Agony of a Butterfly," conceals but also reveals the ultimate causes of anxiety in fetish discourses: the Sunderings that occur at the mirror stage of subject formation and at death: ". . . always / behind me is / your violent music" (RF 16).

Combining the idea of dance with that of appetite and the inward-turning poetic vision, in "Two Themes of the Dance: Two: Adam is the Dancer in Reverse" (RF 42), MacEwen imagines a dancer turning himself inside-out, literally consuming himself:

but he dances into himself,

not outward,
dances down his own throat
in a strange muscular utterance

The surreal extreme of appetite figured here, in which the dancer swallows his own body by dancing down his throat, conveys the extreme hunger of the poet for self-knowledge, for spiritual wisdom, for the "sacred world." The tone of admiration and wonder saves the poem from being merely grotesque. This poem develops further MacEwen's double vision, the necessity to include the tendencies toward both introversion and extraversion, both the positive and negative aspects of all experience. Thus "Adam's" dance "down his own throat" is balanced by the dance of the god, "the one who dances outward" in the first part of the poem, "One: God is a Dancer" (RF 41). In "The Absolute Dance" (RF 43-44), the dance itself is an image of the synthesis between opposites, as it had been in the earlier poem "All the Fine Young Horses": "-- between the crib and total crypt -- / the dance which is the synthesis" (RF 17). MacEwen's conception of synthesis has become complex, however; she would have the reader remember the lesson of "Tiamut" and paradoxically claims that the synthesis she seeks is "a single symmetry" but also a "shattering symmetry":

but this: that more by will than circumstance
 we drink a cider more than sustenance
 and move towards the total power of the dance
 to seek a *single* symmetry, an hour of totality
 for *within* the dance lies its extremity.

.
 The ultimate power! The ultimate synthesis!
 The hour which smashes will and circumstance
 for suns to rise westward with absolute emphasis--
 the shattering symmetry; the absolute dance
 (RF 44)

The synthesis found only through the poet's vision confers
 on her mythic power over the very movements of the cosmos:
 "suns to rise westward."

In "A Breakfast for Barbarians," the barbarian had
 consumed western knowledge traditions indiscriminately and
 thereby had achieved a slaking of the hunger for wisdom,
 albeit a temporary one. But in another poem from that
 collection, "It Rains, You See" (BB 5), even the answer to
 western science's biggest questions about the nature of the
 universe -- "it's all over, boys -- space is curved" -- does
 not satisfy: "you are hungry and your hunger multiplies by
 hundreds." This poem and the previous one in the
 collection, "Poems in Braille" (BB 4-5), mix MacEwen's
 interest in sacred alphabets and paradisaic naming with the
 appetite theme of the "breakfast" poems. Here the physical
 universe embodies a secret code, its "name": it is a code
 understood first by the body: "now you touch worlds and feel
 their names -- / thru the thing to the name / not the other

way thru" (BB 4). MacEwen as bard would like to use her medium, language, to explore the void which she suspects underlies all experience, by exploiting what Eric Gould has called "the text's metaphorical ability to suggest absent meanings."²⁹

The poet believes that, unlike modern languages which duplicate the primal fissure of subject and object in the split between signifier and signified, and sign and referent, ancient alphabets actually embody their "absent meanings" in secret codes. The poet's desire to crack the hieroglyphs' code is mirrored back to her in the pictured "eyes":

they knew what it meant,
 those egyptian scribes who drew
 eyes right into their hieroglyphs,
 you read them dispassionate until
 the eye stumbles upon itself
 blinking back from the papyrus (BB 4)

The poet associates these egyptian hieroglyphs with alphabets of the body: "with legs and arms I make alphabets / like those in children's books / where people bend into letters and signs" (BB 4). Both symbol systems embody secrets, but the secrets are ultimately unavailable to the poet: "yet I do not read the long cabbala of my bones /

²⁹ Gould 35.

truthfully" (BB 4). Similarly in "It Rains, You See" (BB 5), the physical world embodies a secret meaning tantalizingly close to the poet's comprehension, but ultimately unavailable: "and the rain is teaching itself its own name; / it rains, you see, but Hell it comes down cuneiform" (BB 5).

In "Poems in Braille," the esoteric meaning of existence is figured as the name, and the poet's preoccupation with uncovering the name or secret embodied in each element of the physical universe points to the overvaluation of material things in which spiritual, linguistic, and mathematical meanings collide or intersect with those of ordinary reality. The fetishistic assignment of so many values to material objects creates a sense of the longed-for sacred world. Allusions to the scientific or mathematical meanings of things is seen in the lines "the shortest distance between 2 points / on a revolving circumference / is a curved line" (BB 4) and

I name all things in my room
and they rehearse their names
gather in groups, form tesseractes
discussing their names among themselves (BB 5)

The material objects in the poet's room become abstractions through her action of naming them, even as they simultaneously come alive, just as commodities seem to take

on a life of their own according to Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism. But here the material object becomes animated not as a symptom of the invisibility or veiling of certain social relations of production, but through the poet's magical naming, a power that contradicts capitalist values -- or because the process is "thru the thing to the name," presumably the poet has uncovered the secret essence of the thing, which is uttered as its name. The poet seems deeply divided about the powers she assumes here. The poem's final stanza reiterates images of negation: "I will not say" is repeated twice, as is the poet's exhortation to herself: "I should . . . ," a reminder of duty, not desire. Finally, the poet ends with a warning about the loss of (in)sight: "with my fingers I should read them / lest I go blind in both eyes reading with / the other eye the final hieroglyph" (BB 5). "[T]hat other eye" refers to the mystical "third eye," the eye which is a metaphor for mystical "seeing" and inner vision, which the poet associates with esoteric teachings and with the eye drawn into the ancient Egyptian writing system. To attempt to use this inner eye to read phenomena with a mystical awareness is thus dangerous, and the sense of danger haunts the poem in its traces of fetish discourses.

In "It Rains, You See," the poet again links images

taken from the discourse of mathematics with the trope of an increasing hunger. She claims that "mathematics is tragic, there is pathos in numbers" and remembers when "you taught numbers / to jive under the complex chewing pencils; you talked / darkly of the multiplying world . . ." (BB 5). To attempt to see the world in terms of numbers, of measurements, leads only to an awareness of the measureless nature of the poet's hunger, which "multiplies by hundreds" and is signalled by the "chewing" of pencils. This poem similarly ends on a negative note, as the poet encounters a symbolic system she does not understand: "but Hell it comes down cuneiform."

The poet's breakfasts get stranger. In "Strange Breakfasts" (BB 6), the dawning awareness of a hunger that "multiplies" causes the poet to again name herself and her breakfast guest as "insatiate," repeating the comic allusion to initiates of mystical rites seen in "A Breakfast for Barbarians," while at the same time vividly illustrating the immense scope of her experience of emptiness. Here the poet has a hunger for life itself -- ". . . friend, we cannot live too long" (BB 6) -- and seems to be taking a stand against death, affirming life. Yet immediately she claims, "obviously we are preparing for some final feast," reminding us of the haunting presence of the possibility of planetary

annihilation seen in "The Breakfast," a threat of loss that must be disavowed. The nondiscriminating appetite of the barbarians in "A Breakfast for Barbarians" had received a positive inflection by the poet, but here that same quality is given an ironic twist in the necessary disavowal of loss: "we can stomach anything now, anything." Whereas once the poet had seen an all-consuming appetite as a sacrament to be celebrated (albeit a subversive, barbaric one), here that same appetite merely tolerates what may well be unthinkable or unspeakable, "anything now, anything."

In "Strange Breakfasts" the poet also voices her concern over being isolated from her past as well as facing an uncertain, troubling future: "these breakfasts have broken the past / hungers, hungers that were controlled, / controlled hungers . . ." (BB 6). The form of this utterance -- its fragmentation and repetition -- suggests the fragmentation of the poet's own subjectivity and her resulting anxiety. Past hungers were "controlled," there were limits to desire, but now the multiplying hunger is a symptom that she stands dangerously close to the edge of a void. Desire is never-ending: "the full belly means only / a further hunger." But what is even more troubling for this poet who had indulged in many fantasies of returning to a lost eden or golden age is the realization that "we can no

longer / eat the bright ancestral food." The tone in this part of the poem is one of lament tinged with a hint of hysteria. When the poet mourns that "we cannot now return / to younger appetites," she is thinking both of her own mortality and of the inaccessibility of ancient wisdom to nourish the soul of contemporary humanity. The sense of loneliness and isolation symptomatic of the alienation of late capitalism is forcefully expressed in a litany beginning with "that we alone . . .", a phrase repeated five times in the penultimate stanza, but paradoxically the pronoun is plural, indicating that the poet has again assumed a prophetic voice, speaking for her "people," and that the alienation is one of modern western society from other world cultures, especially historic ones. The poet resigns herself to a sense of dutiful responsibility, devoid of the celebration seen in earlier "appetite" poems: "that we alone must set our tables single-handed, / that we alone must account for the grease of our spoons." The pace and alienation of modern life reduce the opportunities for sincere communication, figured in images of eating and appetite:

that we alone will walk into the city at 9 o'clock
knowing that the others have also eaten
knowing there is no time to compare the contents
of our bodies in our cities

This long penultimate stanza ends with an image that fuses the metaphor of appetite with commodity fetishism's exchange of status between the human and humanity's products, machines: "that we eat and we eat and we know and we know / that machines work faster than the machines of our mouths." The figurative linking of knowledge with foodstuffs seen in "A Breakfast for Barbarians" is repeated here, but the barbarians' previous, seemingly ultimate triumph over the material realm, which they had reduced to rusted "junk," is now overturned -- the machines seem to be winning out in some unstated struggle with humanity. The poet is finally unable to arrive at any far-reaching conclusion in this poem about the state of events: she is able only to shrug and explain that all of the previously mentioned circumstances "is why our breakfasts / get stranger and stranger." This breakfast is uncanny in its effects, raising questions about the status of humans and material objects, and of ancient traditions of knowledge and spirituality.

Sacred and material discourses are brought together again in the trope of an object of consumption in "The Peanut Butter Sandwich" (BB 34). Once again breakfast is seen as a sacramental meal, in which the partaking of even the most mundane of foods makes transcendence possible: "solemnly eating our thick sandwiches / and knowing the

highest mysticism / in this courageous breakfast"

But the speaker opens the poem by claiming that she and her breakfast guest are "dangerous at breakfast." MacEwen knows that mystic knowledge is transgressive. It refuses to be limited by the boundaries of ordinary reality, but seeks to discover the underlying meaning of all existence, thus refuting or undermining the claims of ordinary reality to the highest value in a rationalist society which validates science and reason over mysticism and feeling.

Unlike so many of the "appetite" poems which investigate the difficulties of valorizing appetite as a mode of being in the world, "The Peanut Butter Sandwich" reconfirms the transcendent possibilities in experiencing appetite and its satisfaction. This poem presents the breakfast at its most sacramental, and the sacred is achieved by the poet's mystical awareness of the mythic dimension of ordinary reality. The peanut butter sandwich is fetishized here as the material object that is the locus in which competing discourses and multiple kinds of value are fixated: it has a physical value in nourishing the body; as a cultural sign it points to the "Kanadian" mainstream, especially the lower classes, for whom peanut butter is an inexpensive, nutritious dietary staple; it is simultaneously a eucharist-like object of consumption in a sacred economy,

even as it is the aesthetic object of the poet's discourse. It conceals, yet reveals, its multiple meanings: "[t]he peanut butter sandwich! / a symbol of itself only . . ." is nevertheless capable of producing "the highest mysticism" (*BB* 34). A Chinese teabowl similarly embodies multiple values in "Theme on a Chinese Teabowl" (*RF* 40) -- the aesthetic value of a beautiful object, the material value of providing the nourishment of tea, the spiritual value of suggesting access to lost traditions of knowledge in ancient, exotic civilizations.

Another strand of the fetishicity of "The Peanut Butter Sandwich" sees the poet and her guest imagine themselves as "freight train, sea-wind, and raspberry jam . . . snow, tiger and peanut butter" (*BB* 34). In another poem this series would be merely a list of metaphors, but because other traces of fetish discourses are present in the poem, this series takes on additional meanings: the poet here represents a jumble of material things which she makes equivalent, as interchangeable as the commodities of a capitalist marketplace. Moreover, because she includes herself in the string of substitutions, she raises the question of the relative values of subjectivity and of material things, echoing the problem of alienation disavowed by Marx's commodity fetishism.

The poet and her interlocutor and fellow-feaster are "dangerous" because they "investigate the reasons for our myths / viciously" (BB 34). We create myths, as William Doty has shown, in part to explain aspects of the world that cannot be explained satisfactorily by other means, and in part as sites "within which our self-constructions take place before the possibility of naming that Other, that Nothingness, that is created by language itself."³⁰ Another purpose for myth, which we have seen in MacEwen's early work as a whole, is to infuse the experience of everyday reality with a sense of the sacred. "To investigate the reasons for our myths" means, then, to consider the mysteries of life which have not been explained adequately by science and rationalist discourses, but also to consider the nature of the split between subject and object, self and Other. Explanations rooted in external systems, that is, in systems external to the poet, the thinking subject, are insufficient. What the poet seeks, that which will satisfy her "hunger," is an essence inherent in each thing, in each experience, just as in "Poems in Braille" similar knowledge was available only by going "thru the thing to the name /

³⁰ William Doty, *Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals* (University, Alabama: U of Alabama P, 1986) 189. Doty is summarizing Gould's argument in *Mythical Intentions* 86.

and not the other way thru" (BB 4). The speaker claims that "we need no reasons / for being; we are" (BB 34) -- the poetic line breaks there and white space intervenes before the thought is completed in the next stanza -- isolating "we are" as a statement of existence, of ontological being and mystical completeness. The speaker and her guest are "concentrating / conscious / of [their] outrageous reality" (BB 34), "outrageous" because they are "conscious," unusual, and transgressive. The poem ends with a humorous, ironic admission and question: "alas, we have too many myths / and we know that too. but it is breakfast. / I am with you. care for another?" Any anxiety about difference as signaled by the traces of multiple fetish discourses in this most successful of MacEwen's sacramental meals is finally masked by humour -- but it resurfaces in the poem immediately following in the collection, "The Last Breakfast."

Whereas other poems had thematized the disappointments and difficulties inherent in the indulgence of a nondiscriminating appetite to feed a multiplied hunger, none had overtly stated that the poet's vision is at times impossible to achieve -- but "The Last Breakfast" (BB 35) does just that. As another allusion to the Christian "Last Supper," this breakfast inverts the sacramental nature of the poet's other breakfasts: "sometimes the food refuses to

be sanctified." The poet reacts with humour in a parody of the stereotypical barbarian: "and you stand over the table beating your chest / and screaming impotent graces. . . ." The choice of the adjective "impotent" significantly points to the overdetermined nature of this meal, which combines the discourses of material and sacred economies with that of the sexual economy, but here the sacred and the sexual haunt the poem with a sense of their absence, not presence. Hypnotism replaces the transubstantiation of a sacramental meal, as the poet, using the second-person pronoun to distance herself from the experience, is

hypnotized by two fried yellow eggs, by this
altogether kanadian breakfast, realizing
your appetite is jaded and the plate is blue
and the food has become an anathema

Similarly to the gaze discovered by the astronaut twins in "Nikoleyev and Popovich" (RF 11-12), the gaze which reflects back to the viewer from the very ends of the universe, here the stubborn materiality of the two fried eggs hypnotize, seem to stare grotesquely at the poet. The eggs destroy the poet's volition and ability to act consciously just as the gaze of Medusa turns her viewers to stone, signalling castration anxiety and its origin in the impulse to disavow all difference. But the presence of other fetish discourses, particularly that of the sacred economy, is registered only

as an absence. The "unsacred bacon" and fried eggs of this breakfast are as mundane, as "kanadian," as the peanut butter sandwich as breakfast foods, but their ordinariness does not yield this time to an experience of "the highest mysticism." And there is no sense that material objects have some sort of special animating energy of their own, as they do in commodity fetishism: "the bacon has nothing to say for itself." After the mystical highs of "The Peanut Butter Sandwich," here the poet has plunged to the lows of the mundane, but seems to discover an antidote to both in a "just-do-it" approach: "but you eat the breakfast because it is there / to be eaten. . . ." As they eat, the poet and her breakfast guest, who is now a "delicate" barbarian, turn their imaginations not toward a lost eden, but toward an evolutionary view of ancient times: "you think of mammoths and their tons of frozen ancient meat, / you think of dark men running through the earth / on their naked, splendid feet." The economy of excess which had informed other "appetite" poems is still present here in the "tons of frozen ancient meat," but the context is one which resolutely refuses participation in a sacred economy. A representation of absence is, however, as significant for the fetishicity of a poem as is a representation of presence: "unholy" carries the same fetishistic weight as

"holy" in indicating the direction of desire. When transmutation is refused and the poet cannot recreate imaginary lost edens, she resorts to a daydream of prehistoric times more acceptable to scientific discourse to veil her anxiety about spiritual, sexual, and poetic impotence.

A meal which is not sacramental can reveal an appetite that is monstrous. In the prose-poem "Ultimately, Said the Saint, We Are All of Us Devouring Each Other" (BB 45), the vision of prehistoric men hunting mammoth meat on their "naked, splendid feet" gives way to other historic, legendary, or mythic appetites:

Goya's Satan devouring men like lollipops, the Moloch of Gehenna stretching his arms for the ultimate infant, the obscure Pope what's-his-name who had anemia and had the blood of little catholics poured into his veins, Saturn devouring his children. . . .Then there's the subjective vampire, sinking its fangs into its own neck.

The ultimate end of a nondiscriminating appetite, unrestrained by external limitations, is cannibalism. Again in this poem the sense of hunger or void is figured as being multiplied endlessly: "Break it down if you can into infinite categories of tables and spoons. Always these appetites within each other, cavities filled by forming other cavities elsewhere." The poet tries to break out of

the endless chain of metaphors of appetite by concentrating her awareness on the physical materiality of the house she has been repairing, but finds that thoughts of eating recur naturally as soon as she envisions relaxing. Musing on the cultural conditioning of her early childhood, conditioning no doubt shared by many readers, she remembers being taught to think of "the starving children of South America" as she ate, as if she could help them by eating by proxy: "Yes, they said, eat NICELY and THINK of that infinity of open mouths." In this allusion to an enculturation practice widely used by parents in North America to coerce their children to eat, the poet here deftly identifies the basis of consumer culture as the necessity to produce endless craving, but the displacement of this hunger onto others allows the consumer to disavow her own sense of emptiness. This prose poem, the last on the "appetite" theme in *A Breakfast for Barbarians*, ends with the startling image of an immense spoon coming out of the heavens:

Finally, the gigantic universal spoon like something from the cover of an SF magazine, dips down with the shining symmetry of a rocket's nosecone towards the earth, towards us here on our geographic tablemats at a sure, alarmingly sure angle

Phallic in shape, it threatens the splitting, chewing, and rupturing of the poet's physical body, and alludes to

castration anxiety, fear of differentiation, and death. Its reflecting surface returns the poet's gaze, raising questions of the boundaries that define self and other, questions which are reiterated when the poet exclaims that identities are interchangeable: "It seems that we the consumers are also the consumed." The spoon is simultaneously the aesthetic object of the poet's discourse, and thus the site of the intersection of sexual, material, and aesthetic economies, the location of competing kinds of values, a fetish object *par excellence*, and a fitting way to end MacEwen's ruminations on appetite. With the realization that the feaster is now finally the object of consumption in some greater cosmic feast, MacEwen has taken the appetite theme full-circle and exhausted its metaphorical possibilities.

After she wrote the poems for *A Breakfast for Barbarians*, MacEwen's work changed. She wrote fewer poems in which fetishicity is evident, as if she were backing away from the difficult and dangerous psychological territory of the "gap." Yet in the poems that do manifest traces of fetish discourses, the suggestions of psychic destabilization, danger, and loss are very strong. This change was probably catalyzed by several disturbing events in her personal life, causing her to experience a crisis in

self-confidence during which she feared she was losing her power as a poet.

During the years that MacEwen was working on the poems that were published in *The Rising Fire* and *A Breakfast for Barbarians*, and even some of the poems in *The Shadow-Maker*, she made two trips alone to the Middle East. The first was to Israel in July, 1962, shortly after she had married Milton Acorn. She was only twenty, had never travelled, but had developed a fascination with Israel and the Hebrew language, which she had studied at a *cheder* in Toronto. Probably part of the reason for the trip was to gain some distance from Acorn in order to reconsider her decision to marry him, for when she returned to Toronto, they separated. While in Israel, MacEwen had an unfortunate experience about which she wrote in her travel journal. While walking on a beach at Jaffa, she was accosted and nearly raped by a young man.³¹ The incident was physically and psychologically traumatic -- so traumatic, in fact, that it seems to have stimulated unwelcome thoughts or perhaps memories. Rosemary Sullivan quotes from MacEwen's travel journal:

Dizzy spells again. The marked *counterpointal* thought which accumulates unconsciously, then is

³¹ This incident is described in Chapter 9 of Rosemary Sullivan's biography *Shadow Maker: The Life of Gwendolyn MacEwen* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1995).

referred to somehow by a thing in conscious thought & blindly in a flash they try & fuse. The dizziness & nausea coming from terrible realization that that counterpoint thought is still with you.³²

MacEwen continued, writing about feeling "paralysed, totally numb."³³ After more on her illness and disorientation, the next fifteen lines are blacked out, completely unreadable. In all of MacEwen's papers, there is nothing similar: she was not in the habit of crossing out her work like this. We will never know what was encoded in this blackened text, but a strange dream associated with her second trip to the Middle East adds significance to this deleted journal passage.

The second trip was made to Cairo in March, 1966. MacEwen had won a grant to spend several weeks in Egypt to do research for the historical novel she was writing on the life of Pharoah Akhenaton, later published as *King of Egypt, King of Dreams*.³⁴ In the first few days she was in Cairo, MacEwen worked in the Egyptian Museum, and while there, she again received unwelcome sexual advances from local men,

³² Sullivan 130.

³³ Sullivan 130.

³⁴ Gwendolyn MacEwen, *King of Egypt, King of Dreams* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1971).

museum guards.³⁵ MacEwen was so upset by these incidents that she believed she could no longer work in the museum, nor could she handle her planned excursions to Thebes and Karnak. She cancelled the rest of her trip, returning home to Toronto after only eleven days of the research trip that was supposed to last two months. MacEwen wrote about her discomfort in Egypt in a letter to Margaret Atwood, in which she explains, rather unconvincingly, that she had to leave Egypt because it was dirty, tense, in "Very Bad Shape": "A strange air of pure tension hangs over Egypt, and affects one's psychological state very badly, if one is prone to that sort of thing, and I suppose I was" ³⁶ When she returned to Toronto, MacEwen recorded a dream that occurred in Egypt, which seems infused with suffering and terror. The dream contains multiple phallic symbols and symbols that would usually be associated with castration anxiety -- a tree being cut, a tree trunk "like a solid cylinder whose trunk was bleeding," a "last tree. . . lying on its side suffering from the hatch," "a tree. . . pushed to fall by a savage and his son," "octopus arms" -- but in her notes MacEwen associates these images with "defloration." She also

³⁵ Sullivan, Chapter 14.

³⁶ Gwendolyn MacEwen, Letter to Margaret Atwood, March 18, 1966 (Atwood Collection). Qtd. in Sullivan 189.

writes, "I cannot forgive. Means I cannot be forgiven? Blood 1 reference." She also writes: "'There was something I just remembered -- it happened long ago. But better to forget it.' -- 1965."³⁷ The date is circled and the passage is crossed out in a scribble. Once again, a journey caused MacEwen to think of something that she wanted to repress.

MacEwen's biographer, Rosemary Sullivan, believes that these two journeys to the Middle East, which had put MacEwen in an unusually vulnerable position as a woman -- unescorted and unprotected in a foreign culture in which men interpreted her presence as meaning that she was in some sense sexually available -- caused memories to surface of a sexual trauma from her past, memories which were the real cause of her extreme unease and almost neurotic reaction of fleeing Egypt. Sullivan has uncovered evidence that an uncle living in the house in which MacEwen grew up with her family had molested at least one of his foster daughters.³⁸ Sullivan thinks that it is possible that he had at least one opportunity to similarly molest MacEwen when she was very young, but since the principal figures involved are now

³⁷ Gwendolyn MacEwen, "Notebook and Additional Notes: Dreams / Visions / Musings; The Sixties, Seventies and Eighties," Gwendolyn MacEwen Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto, Box 1.

³⁸ Sullivan 193.

deceased, this hypothesis is unprovable. Whether MacEwen experienced a sexual trauma, or whether it was something else, it does seem plausible that some such deeply disturbing, even threatening, memories might have been what MacEwen was writing about in her travel journal and dream analysis, memories she preferred to try to forget again, but which caused her to behave very irrationally.

For a poet like MacEwen, who was determined, with a warrior's courage, to face both the light and the dark side of experience, and to use both in her work as an artist, the necessity to repress painful memories must have produced a profound conflict in her psyche. MacEwen wanted to use language to get at the secret and sacred levels of reality, wanted to consume all experience in an omnivorous appetite for knowledge and wisdom, but to have to repress something so dark she could not bear to be conscious of it went against everything she believed she stood for. The psychological cost must have been immense, including the fear that she was losing her potency as a poet. Sullivan concurs that the crisis became a crisis in creativity:

Up to now she had bashed forward with energy and astonishing confidence, evident to anyone reading *A Breakfast for Barbarians*, but the frenetic energy that had thrust her forward was suddenly damned up. She had now plunged into an equally astonishing crisis of self-

doubt."³⁹

The deep psychic conflict brought about by the appearance of the painful memories when MacEwen was at her most vulnerable, alone in another culture, had blocked her creativity. Instead of the warrior spirit, there is a more careful, more diffident, more abstract examination of life in many of the new poems in *The Shadow-Maker* and *Armies of the Moon*.⁴⁰ MacEwen had begun to read Carl Jung in May, 1968, and she incorporated many of his ideas into her work. During this period of her writing, fetishicity does not seem to shape the work to the extent that it had done previously. As MacEwen began to develop an interest in Jung's analytical theories, she wrote fewer poems on the theme of appetite, preferring instead to investigate consciously Jung's archetypes in her work. MacEwen seemed to be unconsciously avoiding any images that might point to fractures or gaps from which the really threatening material could emerge. However, when MacEwen does revisit the theme of appetite in a few poems from *The Shadow-Maker* and *Armies of the Moon*, it is evident that the poet is more fearful than in previous

³⁹ Sullivan 196.

⁴⁰ Gwendolyn MacEwen, *The Shadow-Maker* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1969); *Armies of the Moon* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1972).

poems, and the anxiety pointed to by the traces of fetish discourses in the poems is more evident as well. For example, in "Dining at the Savarin" (AM 12), which takes up the appetite theme once again, the notion of non-discriminating consumption is far more problematic than in the earlier work. Here guilt, secrecy, and fear enter into the mood of the feast as the poet appears to suffer from bulimia. Instead of experiencing a multiplied hunger, the poet eats obsessively, even when her hunger is satiated: she claims she is "determined to get [her] money's worth by going back again / and again to refill [her] plate even when / [she] no longer hunger[s]." Here the physical, emotional, and spiritual values of material food are problematized by the foodstuffs' status as commodities. The writer is thinking not only of nourishment, but about her "money's worth." Even more troubling, the poet both recognizes that a guilty secret fuels her compulsion to eat, but also denies this knowledge as she projects the situation onto another, a stranger:

I cannot wonder
 why the man at the next table eats so much, what
 secret doubt he soothes with the impossible
 pyramid
 of food before his eyes

because I cannot presume
 to know his pain, yet know it so well it is my own
 I eat in shame

Everything about this meal is secret and impersonal. The poet is not the hostess, as she was in "A Breakfast for Barbarians," but a guest in an impersonal restaurant, a public place filled with strangers, where she casts "furtive glances" at the other diners. Moreover, her unrefined, even barbaric, behaviour surprises her: "yet I'm amazed / with what venom I crack open the corpse of this white crab." The poet confuses her subjectivity with an identification with the commodities she consumes, as she "creeps back again / to the table," her movement mimicking that of the "primeval things" she consumes. The major elements of the *pronk* still life are figured here: a vast display of various foodstuffs ("smoked oysters, scarlet lobsters, shining shrimps"), a symptom of commodity fetishism; foodstuffs figured as split open and partially consumed, symptomatic of the castration anxiety of sexual fetishism; the emphasis on the returned gaze of the aesthetic object in the "furtive glances" cast by the poet at the other diners, apparently expecting that someone is watching her; the problematization of the values of a sacred economy, in the prayer offered by the poet to "the god of men and lobsters"; the longing for the phallic mother underlying the desire to return to exotic, distant places and times, in the sentimental nostalgia for the past

("the organist plays those old songs we know so well / we have forgotten . . ."). And the scene is haunted by a sense of loss: the old songs are forgotten, the poet is constantly reminded of the lost past of "some pre-human world." Even the boundaries between life and death seem unstable and troubling, as the poet "devour[s]" creatures which, in evolutionary terms long preceded her, yet "still survive," and there is a question of whether some things even die at all: the god addressed in the poet's prayer is "the god of men and lobsters / and all things that die and do not die." Freud had noted that objects whose status as living or dead is ambiguous, are one of the prime sources of the sense of the uncanny in literature and dreams.⁴¹ The poet's meal at the Savarin is the most uncanny, the most fetishistic, and the most fraught with anxiety about all differences of any her "appetite" poems.

In another example of fetishicity in a poem from this period, MacEwen assumes the persona of a "mad cook" whose food cannot nourish her loved ones in "Memoirs of a Mad Cook" (AM 14): "All my friends are dying of hunger, / there is some basic dish I cannot offer." The mystic inner vision is once again evoked here, figured in images of

⁴¹ Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," (1919), *SE* vol. XVII: 217-252.

"eyes" and "seeing," but in this poem the eyes search hungrily but can find no spiritual nourishment: "Everyone seems to grow thin with me / and their eyes grow black as hunter's eyes / and search my face for sustenance." The sense of a returned gaze provokes the poet's paranoia and hysteria: "but if anyone watches me I'll scream / because maybe I'm handling a tomato wrong, / how can I know if I'm handling a tomato wrong?" Traces of fetish discourses express the multiple anxieties of the poet: the *pronk's* vast array of foodstuffs is suggested only by its absence ("Wistfully I stand in my difficult kitchen / and imagine the fantastic salads and souffles / that will never be"); the reflected gaze finds only emptiness as the "hunter's eyes" search the face of the poet; sacred or esoteric knowledge is unavailable to the poet ("I suspect / there's a secret society which meets / in dark cafeterias to pass on the art"); the ontological boundaries of the speaking subject, of self and other, are problematized ("what can I possibly know / about someone's insides, how can I presume / to invade your blood?"); and the poet fears castration, differentiation, and death ("*something is eating away at me / with splendid teeth*"). The fact that, even as she is being devoured, the fascinated poet can still manage to evaluate the devourer's teeth aesthetically indicates a fetishistic

fixation that would disavow the threat of loss of sexual and artistic power, even of life. The poet's anxiety about being unable to cook nourishing food is thus a metaphor for her anxiety about being unable to write poetry, and the artistic strategy she develops in response is to keep a metaphorical "splendid wolf" always at her door, a reminder of the multiple disavowals that are now necessary to her survival as a woman and as an artist.

Artistic and even sheer physical survival became more difficult. MacEwen had to cope with divorce, poverty, and alcoholism. She wrote poetry about physical pain, poetry that she described in retrospect as "too flippant."⁴² Then she stopped writing poetry altogether for a while, concentrating instead on her novel *Noman's Land*, on translations of Greek, Arabic, and French writers, and on children's books. Although her work was still well received, she continued to have bouts of self-doubt, doubt in her powers as a poet and in her poetic vision. When she returned to writing poetry seriously, she took up a project that had been haunting her for many years: she would write about T.

⁴² Bev Daurio and Mike Zizis, "An Inner View of Gwendolyn MacEwen" (*Intrinsic* 5-6 [1978]) 57-65. MacEwen states, "A lot of the poems are flippant and that's one of the reasons *The Fire Eaters* is not one of my favourite books by any means. I find a lot of it is too flippant, and an attempt to laugh away pain" (63).

E. Lawrence, "Lawrence of Arabia." Once again, traces of multiple fetish discourses appeared in the poetry, but fetishism took on other dimensions as well in the writing of these poems. MacEwen wrote "in drag" and in disguise using the persona of Lawrence, borrowing his own words for her best lines. The collection is a masterpiece, but its fetishicity speaks of the poet's profound artistic anguish.

Chapter 4
Desert Disavowal:
Lawrence as Disguise, Lawrence as Muse

"Gwendolyn might release Lawrence from his ghosts,
but that did not mean she could exorcise her own."

-- Rosemary Sullivan

Gwendolyn MacEwen's *The T. E. Lawrence Poems*¹ is a narrative sequence of poems that retells the life-story of T. E. Lawrence, "Lawrence of Arabia." When MacEwen began the volume, the legend of Lawrence had already been well known for many decades from a number of sources, including Lawrence's own writing; several memoirs by others about Lawrence; a selection of his published letters; the account of the Arab Revolt published by journalists such as Lowell Thomas; the successful Hollywood film version of Lawrence's role in the Arab Revolt by David Lean, *Lawrence of Arabia*; and the psychoanalytic biography of Lawrence by John Mack, *A Prince of Our Disorder*. Moreover, there was a rather extensive scholarly interest in Lawrence. The historical T. E. Lawrence hardly needed another popularizer or apologist, therefore, but MacEwen's intention in rewriting the legend had little to do with retrieving a worthy story from possible oblivion or with adding new material to the body of

¹ Gwendolyn MacEwen, *The T. E. Lawrence Poems* (Oakville, Ont.: Mosaic Press / Valley Editions, 1982).

knowledge about Lawrence; rather, MacEwen needed the voice of Lawrence so that she could say through him what she could not say in her own voice about her own experiences. Her condensation of Lawrence's story into sixty short lyric poems highlights the contradictions and conflicts Lawrence experienced during his life regarding his family background, his sexuality, and his role in the Arab Revolt, and makes this complex material available in an easily accessible short textual form. Moreover, through Lawrence's voice and experiences, MacEwen could explore fractures, contradictions, and obstacles similar to those she faced in her own life. Of all of MacEwen's oeuvre, these poems are the most overdetermined by traces of fetish discourses. They fairly pulse with the uncanny energy of fetishicity, which is perfectly appropriate for the story of a man whose life involved complex negotiations between cultures, geographies, religions, economies, and identities.

MacEwen's telling of the Lawrence story comprises three parts, the poems of which, taken together, form a narrative of Lawrence's life: the first, "*The Dreamers of the Day: For Dahoum*" recounts Lawrence's childhood and early career as an archaeologist working at Carcemish; the second, "*Solar Wind: The War*" covers the material Lawrence wrote about in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* regarding his military career during World

War I as he worked for Britain to inflame Arab forces against the Ottoman Empire; and the third, "Necessary Evils: Aftermath" explores Lawrence's involvement in the peace negotiations after the war and his subsequent career and death. Because the volume is structured as a narrative sequence, the traces of fetish discourses accumulate throughout the reading of the text, overdetermining Lawrence as a conflicted subject, split over issues of his legitimacy, sexuality, and role-playing during the Arab Revolt. Traces of fetish discourses are especially prominent throughout Part One, as MacEwen establishes the parameters of her exploration of Lawrence's life and psyche; the poems of Parts Two and Three augment and reinforce the picture of Lawrence that emerges from Part One. Therefore, this study of *The T. E. Lawrence Poems* will carefully analyze most of the poems in Part One to illuminate their fetishicity and to show that the symbolic vocabulary of fetishism functions accumulatively throughout the narrative. Then the most important of the poems in Parts Two and Three will be similarly analyzed to show how MacEwen further uses fetishicity to illuminate aspects of Lawrence and of the poet emphasized by her rewriting of his story. This reading shows that MacEwen's version of Lawrence as located between geographies, cultures, religions, and sexualities provides

an excellent early example of the kind of mimicry theorized by Homi K. Bhabha.

In the only scholarly article published on Gwendolyn MacEwen's *The T. E. Lawrence Poems*, R. F. Gillian Harding analyzes the poems in terms of their symbolism, showing how the poems work in accordance with a dialectical logic.² She sees MacEwen's long-time use of binary opposites in her writing as once again structuring the poetry, and finds that MacEwen's version of Lawrence portrays him as achieving a form of transcendence by the end of his life. A reading attentive to the fetishicity of the poems finds that there is no dialectic and no transcendence, however. Instead, the poems portray a figure who veers constantly between affirmation and denial of sexual, political, social, economic, legal, linguistic, and spiritual differences until his death. There is no hint of an afterlife in the poems. MacEwen's version of Lawrence's life is structured by the logic of disavowal, not dialectic. Disavowal allows MacEwen to acknowledge and explore the tensions, inconsistencies, paradoxes, and contradictions in her own life and in Lawrence's, through her intense identification with Lawrence, without having to achieve a redeeming

² R. F. Gillian Harding, "Iconic Mythopoeia in MacEwen's *The T. E. Lawrence Poems*" (*Studies in Canadian Literature* 9.1 [1984]) 95-107.

transcendence in the end. This is precisely what makes Lawrence such a powerful heroic figure for the twentieth century and a fetishized muse for MacEwen. As Irving Howe and John Mack argue, Lawrence was able to confront the contradictions in his own life and society honestly, and to live with the knowledge that there is no redeeming solution for the paradoxes which he discovered in his own sense of selfhood as well as in his world.³ His courage in attempting to face these truths, to go on living even though he was irreparably damaged by psychic trauma, including but not limited to that of the war, makes Lawrence akin to the classical tragic hero, and is what makes Lawrence, in Irving Howe's words, "a prince of our disorder,"⁴ a hero for our time who unflinchingly confronts not his inevitable downfall, but the pain and contradictions arising from the clashes in values as radically different societies move rapidly toward globalization during the twentieth century.

MacEwen writes this series of poems entirely in Lawrence's voice, and in doing so seems to have profoundly

³ Irving Howe, "T. E. Lawrence: The Problem of Heroism," *A World More Attractive* (New York: Horizon, 1963) 20. Qtd. in John Mack, *A Prince of Our Disorder: The Life of T. E. Lawrence* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Co., 1976) 218.

⁴ Howe 39. This phrase was borrowed by Mack for the title of his biography of Lawrence.

identified with the Lawrence she comes to know and understand. When asked in an interview, "Is Lawrence the bridge then between the past explorations of exotic cultures and your own heritage? He was also someone who tried very much to understand and appreciate other cultures," MacEwen replied,

Yes, I identified with Lawrence from the very beginning for exactly these reasons. He was a sort of mad, poetic hero, rushing away, seeking his past elsewhere, seeking some kind of ancestral mythical thing. He also wanted to be a poet, but didn't manage to succeed.⁵

And when asked, "How did you get inside Lawrence?" MacEwen answered, "I think he got inside me."⁶ There is a sense, then, that for MacEwen the writing of *The T. E. Lawrence Poems* blurred and even broke down the boundaries between persona and writer, and the speaking voice is doubled. Disguised as Lawrence, MacEwen is enabled to articulate her own loneliness and despair. As Sullivan writes, "Gwendolyn found in Lawrence precisely the persona she needed to

⁵ Bruce Meyer and Brian O'Riordan, "Gwendolyn MacEwen: The Magic of Language," Interview, *In Their Words: Interviews with Fourteen Canadian Writers* (Toronto: Anansi, 1984) 101.

⁶ Gwendolyn MacEwen. Interview, *Poetry Canada Review* 4.3 (1983): 8.

explore what she herself had been through.”⁷ Sullivan is referring here to MacEwen’s self-destructive tendencies which manifested in alcoholism. MacEwen had struggled with this disease for several years when she began the *Lawrence Poems*. For the most part, MacEwen had kept this disease hidden from even her closest friends, until she needed to reach out to them to help her. One of these friends, Mac Reynolds, writes of this time:

I suppose it’s possible that the part of the brain that was the poet and was therefore liberated when Gwen was half-drunk was where she wanted to be. Because the act of picking up a drink is an order to change, to make yourself fit the circumstances that exist. To be half-dead is the goal sometimes. . . . I empathized, in a way, with Gwen’s desire to live in that sort of netherworld that is half-drunkenness, when passing out is really a relief. Trying to achieve a sort of non-existence. To be released.⁸

And thus when MacEwen turned to write the story of Lawrence, she “needed a voice to hurl her invective at the world at a time when her vision had become so black that being human didn’t seem worth the trouble.”⁹ Instead of the hero she remembered from her reading as a teenager, she found a

⁷ Rosemary Sullivan, *Shadow Maker: The Life of Gwendolyn MacEwen* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1995) 320.

⁸ John McCombe (Mac) Reynolds, personal interview with Rosemary Sullivan, Toronto, 5 May 1994. Qtd. in Sullivan 319.

⁹ Sullivan 320.

psychic "twin," "a man haunted by his own loneliness, driven by a ravaging sense of emptiness, exiled from both his own and from Arab culture."¹⁰ The logic of disavowal allows Macewen to admit and to explore her own inner darkness and ambivalence at this time, while simultaneously concealing it as the pain and confusion of another.

In addition to the multiple disavowals of fetishicity which inform the *Lawrence Poems*, the kind of colonial mimicry theorized by Homi K. Bhabha also informs these poems. Although MacEwen does not use Bhabha's critical vocabulary, she nevertheless illuminates through these poems the situation and condition of an early example of Bhabha's mimicry. In particular, MacEwen highlights how Lawrence's career fighting with the Arabs exemplifies the multiple directions that such colonial mimicry can take. Lawrence's situation was more complex than that theorized by Bhabha, because his presence in the Arab world during World War I was not as a representative of the colonial power that had oppressed the Arabs, but of a third party, one that supported (and even instigated) the Arab struggle for independence from their colonial masters, though not without an imperialist agenda of its own. The political freedom and dream of nationhood offered to the Arabs by Lawrence was

¹⁰ Sullivan 319.

part of a political ideology developed in Europe for European needs, and Lawrence was acutely aware that when this cause was enthusiastically adopted by the Arabs, they were in fact imitating inappropriate European models and would inevitably feel disillusioned and even betrayed when they learned of England's real motives.¹¹ At the same time, of course, Lawrence was mimicking the Arab way of life as he lived and worked in the desert during the war, and although he maintained that he never lost a sense of self, in that he never wholeheartedly desired to become an Arab, the influence of playing the role of an Arab for a few years meant that he could never again be completely comfortable with his own British culture. Thus, just as the Arab mimicry of European methods and ideologies would have unforeseen results for the Arabic world, Lawrence's mimicry of the Bedouin had unforeseen results for his sense of identity, undermining long-held values without supplying new ones.

Even though MacEwen claims to have been interested in Lawrence since her teen years, she did not begin the *Lawrence Poems*, according to her biographer, Rosemary

¹¹ It is worth noting here that Lawrence's unofficial biographer, John Mack, Suleiman Mousa (author of *T. E. Lawrence: An Arab View*), and others feel that Lawrence exaggerated the effect of his role and did not take into sufficient consideration the Arabs' ability to manipulate the sociopolitical situation of the Revolt to their own advantage.

Sullivan, until late in 1980, the darkest period of her life, a time in which she was suffering from "the secretive disease of alcoholism," "[l]iving more and more in that black vision" which is described by MacEwen's friend, Leon Whiteson:

It was as if she was the only one who understood how dreadful this whole human business is and at the same time how comic. It was absolutely black. A completely unsentimental view of the sort of idiocy of being alive. Nobody escaped. Everyone wallowing in self-pity.¹²

Chapter One of this study summarized Linda Saladin's theory that authors can fetishize literary images of their own creation. This is precisely what MacEwen did with Lawrence, who was a perfect figure to become a fetishized image for MacEwen during this vulnerable period in her life.¹³

"Lawrence was eternally engaged in struggles over value and

¹² Sullivan 314.

¹³ There is uncertainty about the date of composition of the *Lawrence Poems*: MacEwen claims in an interview to have written the poems "in one winter, the winter of 1981-2" (Meyer and O'Riordan 98), but Sullivan claims they were begun "in early 1981" (317). Moreover, MacEwen's papers include typed early versions of several of the *Lawrence Poems* and is annotated in MacEwen's handwriting, "1st drafts of poems 1980-81 CBC? Used in finished book" (MacEwen Papers, Box 18).

self-worth"¹⁴ and became a site himself of conflicting values, always attempting to negotiate the fissures between sexes, nationalities, and material and sacred economies. By this time, MacEwen had given up any attempt to achieve a Boehme-inspired "golden breakfast," a transcendent meal symbolizing the sacred in the ordinary lived reality, to "construct a myth" through her writing. Instead, she turned to Lawrence, another myth-maker, and became so fixated on his life and writing that she identified with him profoundly. This identification was fetishistic because the figure of Lawrence both concealed and revealed issues that were the sources of MacEwen's most profound anxieties. He represented an ideal self for MacEwen, and simultaneously everything that she desired but could not herself attain. He was enough like MacEwen that she could identify with him: like MacEwen, he loved the cultures and geography of the Middle East, he was adept at languages and had learned several spoken in that part of the world, he was fascinated by the ancient history of the region, he had travelled there while young to do research, and he was a man who seemed to live by his ideals. As MacEwen read Mack's biography, she must have also realized that Lawrence was a man split or fragmented by trauma who nevertheless found a way to live a

¹⁴ John Mack 455.

useful and fulfilling life. He wrote about his pain, at least some of it, yet also kept the worst of it secret. He became an icon for our times, the split subject who tries heroically to live in the world. MacEwen too had her secrets: the trauma (possibly sexual) whose memories were triggered by her journeys to Israel and Egypt, and her alcoholism.

At the same time that MacEwen could find similarities between herself and Lawrence with which to identify, their differences meant that Lawrence was simultaneously a figure for all that was unattainable for MacEwen. Lawrence was able to achieve much that MacEwen could not. Whereas her researches into the ancient history of Egypt were short-circuited by the unwanted attentions of museum guards, and whereas she was unable to obtain a university education, Lawrence had the gender and the university degrees to enable him to work in the Middle East as a professional archeologist. In contrast, even though MacEwen learned the Arabic language, her reference points to Arabic culture were a lover and love affair that ended and a friend who went into exile, so the region and its people were not really available to her. Lawrence was able, on the other hand, to go to the region and live as a native, even passing for a native for brief intervals. MacEwen found that her gender

blocked her travels in the Middle East, either formally, in that areas of Arabia were not open to single women travellers, or informally, in the sense that harassment made travelling unpleasant. Lawrence was able to travel through areas seldom seen by westerners. Neither his gender nor his race prevented him from fully experiencing the place and its culture; at least it must have seemed so to MacEwen.

Lawrence's own deep ambivalence about his presence and about the secret agreements that he knew authorities had signed during the war, that would counterpose any victories achieved by the Arab Revolt with western interests in the region, meant that his presence in the Middle East was very complicated. Lawrence, nevertheless, was able to fight for what he believed would be freedom for the Arabs, a new world order for the region, a better world. MacEwen had always wanted to create a new world, but was confined to her writing to do so. Lawrence had achieved a lasting place in the literary canon with *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, a genre-bending, extraordinary book, but MacEwen had years' of experience of the reading public's growing lack of interest in poetry, her preferred literary mode, and of the writer's financial troubles that inevitably accompanied that lack of interest. Moreover, she was discouraged by her lack of financial success with the historical novel that she had

hoped would become a bestseller and establish her economic independence, *King of Egypt, King of Dreams*. Her place in the canon, despite her Governor-General's Award, must have seemed to her doubtful at times.

MacEwen's biographer, Rosemary Sullivan, also reports that during the time that MacEwen was writing the *Lawrence Poems*, she fell in love with an Irishman who uncannily resembled Peter O'Toole, the Irish actor who played Lawrence in the film *Lawrence of Arabia*.¹⁵ The transformations, the slippages from one reality level to another, suggest that Lawrence was a muse for MacEwen. She became fixated on Lawrence, who represented the embodiment of conflicting kinds of values in her professional and personal life more than on any other of her muses. Lawrence became MacEwen's fetish. Disavowal rather than dialectic structures the *Lawrence Poems*. There is no eden in these poems, no philosopher's stone, only a reality characterized by differences that are never resolvable. Through an identification with Lawrence, MacEwen could explore in a new way in her poetry the traumas and paradoxes she had lived through, which were in many respects similar to those in Lawrence's life.

When T. E. Lawrence published *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*:

¹⁵ Sullivan 343-54.

A Triumph, his account of his part in the Arab Revolt during the First World War, he dedicated the book "To S. A." and included a poem addressed to this enigmatic figure.¹⁶ Debate about the identity of "S.A." has continued over the decades, but no definitive conclusion has been reached. Lawrence seems to have enjoyed the ambiguity of this dedication, which both conceals and reveals his hidden desires and motives regarding his years in Arabia. In her rewriting of the Lawrence legend, MacEwen, speaking in Lawrence's voice, writes no dedication of her own, but incorporates Lawrence's into her poems. Without such a dedication, her volume lacks the provocative teasing of the readership and the ambiguity of Lawrence's opening pages. But MacEwen's work is ambiguous in a very different way from Lawrence's way of concealing and revealing his secrets. Because she assumes Lawrence's voice, the identity of the speaking voice is complex. Except for the lines which she took verbatim, or nearly, from Lawrence's own writing, one is never quite sure who is really supposed to be speaking. It is not quite Lawrence, although it is very nearly so; but there is always an element of MacEwen in the voice as well. Yet it is MacEwen disguised as another, as a great author and important figure

¹⁶ T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph* (privately printed, 1926; printed for general circulation, London and Toronto: Cape, 1935).

in his own right. In assuming this persona, MacEwen crosses lines of gender, culture, history, and ideology -- or rather, she seems to speak from the territory of the gap between genders, cultures, histories, and ideologies. Speaking from a trans-gendered, trans-cultural space, MacEwen is especially vulnerable to those discourses which both conceal and reveal the fissures that she claims here as her territory: the multiple fetish discourses of psychoanalysis, Marxian analysis of capital, ethnographic, aesthetic, and sacred economies. The evidence of fetishicity in the poems of this late collection underlines MacEwen's uneasy adoption of this voice, this territory. Ultimately the collection proves that she's still "got it" as a poet, but also questions whether she has indeed still "got it." After all, many of the best lines, the best images, are Lawrence's own words, not hers.

MacEwen uses material in her poems for this collection that Lawrence did not make public. His account of his experiences are contained in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph*, a work that transcends genre boundaries of travel narrative, autobiography, memoir, philosophical speculation, and reportage, and in *Revolt in the Desert*, a military history which is a shortened version of *Seven Pillars*, with all of the personal material pertaining to Lawrence edited

out. MacEwen supplements these primary sources with Lawrence's published letters to his brothers, to George Bernard Shaw and Mrs. Shaw, and to other intimate friends, and with material found in John Mack's biography of Lawrence, *A Prince of Our Disorder*.¹⁷ The addition of material about Lawrence's childhood and his years after leaving Arabia allows MacEwen to highlight aspects of Lawrence's identity that he may have preferred to remain hidden: his illegitimacy, his aversion to sexual relations, his homophilia, his conflicted response to his status as hero and his role in the Arab Rebellion, and his neurotic need for physical punishment after the war. The poems give us a version of Lawrence very much like Mack's version of the man, but in a compact, condensed form. Thus MacEwen rewrites the legend of Lawrence of Arabia that was available in many other forms, but not because she has new insights to add to our understanding of Lawrence that had not been provided by Mack's analysis. Instead, the poems allow MacEwen to say in the voice of another what she could not say as a poet in her own voice. Lawrence becomes her disguise and her muse, her fetishized Other and her twin.¹⁸

¹⁷ Mack 455.

¹⁸ Rosemary Sullivan entitles the chapter on Lawrence in her biography of MacEwen "The Chosen Twin." Sullivan 315.

MacEwen came to the writing of the *Lawrence Poems* rather late in her career, but the figure of Lawrence had haunted her for many years. She was inspired by *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* as a teenager and claims that from that time she knew she would someday write about him.¹⁹ The figure of Lawrence seems to have haunted her for years before she began the poems. Sullivan quotes Nikos Tsingos, MacEwen's ex-husband, as remembering her proclaiming herself to be "Lawrence of Antiparos" on their visit to Greece in 1971.²⁰ Also, in her Preface to the *Lawrence Poems*, MacEwen narrates a coincidental meeting, during her 1962 visit to Israel, with a man who rode with Lawrence during the Arab Rebellion, and who showed her a photo of Lawrence on his café wall. The figure of Lawrence also appears in MacEwen's *Noman's Land*, her collection of short stories, as a comic figure, a joke: in "Looking for the King," Jubilas claims to have started the "Lawrence of Newfoundland" joke.²¹ Lawrence's appearance here seems to signal both exoticism

¹⁹ Bruce Meyer and Brian O'Riordan, "Gwendolyn MacEwen: The Magic of Language." Interview. *In Their Words: Interviews with Fourteen Canadian Writers* (Toronto: Anansi, 1984) 96-105.

²⁰ Sullivan 268.

²¹ Gwendolyn MacEwen, "Looking for the King," *Noman's Land: Stories by Gwendolyn MacEwen* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1985) 63.

and absurdity, absurdity because the legend Lawrence represents had become almost a cliché. There is also a family connection: MacEwen had an aunt who had visited Lawrence at Clouds Hill, where he lived while he wrote *Seven Pillars* and later, and a cousin named after Lawrence.²²

There are probably several reasons why Lawrence's story appealed to MacEwen enough that she desired to rewrite it, one of which must have been the power of his own words, from which she borrowed so liberally. Another would have to be the paradoxes with which he struggled and about which he wrote so honestly. Lawrence's own opening for *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* is fractured with contradictions, many of which are illuminated by a reading attentive to the fetishicity of the text, and it is likely that MacEwen related to the fractured, conflicted nature of this text. In the first chapter of Lawrence's book, discourses about religion and warfare, politics, and government intersect throughout, as we see when Lawrence claims in the second paragraph that the desire for self-government held by both the Arabs with whom he was working and by himself became a religion, a "faith." Moreover, this was a faith to which all of the participants in the Arab revolt "enslaved" themselves. Thus Lawrence uses the discourse of material economies, a discourse in which

²² Meyer 98.

slaves, all of their labour, and also their human talents and characteristics are commodities owned by others, to represent the participants. About the paradox of this "ideal" of freedom, Lawrence writes:

We had sold ourselves into its slavery, manacled ourselves together in its chain-gang, bowed ourselves to serve its holiness with all our good and ill content. The mentality of ordinary human slaves is terrible -- they have lost the world -- and we had surrendered, not body alone, but soul to the overmastering greed of victory. By our own act we were drained of morality, of volition, of responsibility, like dead leaves in the wind.²³

The effect of the fight for the ideal is represented here in negative images; this is a discourse of absence and loss, about which the writer feels the deepest inner conflicts -- fruitful territory for fetish discourses. In the passage cited, the ideal of political freedom is valued as holy, and yet it is one which dehumanizes the rebels, making them "slaves" and taking away their volition, their morality, and even a sense that they are alive at all. This new religion for which they fight inverts the function of ordinary religions, undercutting in every possible sense the value of being human. Living, yet not feeling any more alive than "dead leaves in the wind," the men inhabit a psychological territory of this theatre of war that is ironic and uncanny.

²³ Lawrence, *Seven Pillars* 29.

The men live and die in a location between the real desert that they have known and the ideal human place of community which they desire to achieve, yet Lawrence makes this void a trope for their passion and commitment, underscoring the irony of giving up volition for political freedom. They are uncertain about whether they are alive or dead, living in a gap between cultures and histories where all values -- sacred, material, aesthetic -- are in flux: ". . . and the living knew themselves just sentient puppets on God's stage . . ." (29). This image of "sentient puppets" reminds us of "The Sand-Man" by E. T. A. Hoffman, cited by Freud in his essay "The Uncanny"²⁴ as an example of the kind of representation of the uncanny found in literature. In the story, the sense of uncanniness is created by the presence of the extraordinarily lifelike mannikin, and the uncertainty regarding its status as living or not-living felt by those who encounter it. Freud would go on, of course, to link the experience of the uncanny with castration anxiety and sexual fetishism. Lawrence, too, makes the association metaphorically when he describes the feeling of living "always in a stretch or sag of nerves," uncertain of victory, as "impotency." This is not an

²⁴ Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" (1919) (SE XVII) 217-252.

original metaphor for the experience of warfare, of course, but it is nevertheless significant. The importance of anxiety about sexual potency and even identity is underlined by Lawrence when he devotes much of paragraphs four and five of his introductory chapter of *Seven Pillars* to a veiled description of the homosexual practices of the Arabian soldiers during the desert campaigns, practices about which Lawrence feels deeply ambivalent. It is extraordinary that so much of the initial discussion of Lawrence's involvement in the Arab Revolt should focus on this relatively minor aspect of an Arabian soldier's ordinary life during wartime. The prominence of this description indicates its importance for Lawrence -- at least subconsciously -- and its presence in a discussion shaped by other fetish discourses overdetermines the fissures and gaps indicated by them in Lawrence's feelings regarding sexual difference.²⁵

In these passages, Lawrence is not writing about sexual

²⁵ It is important to note that Mack believes Lawrence's attachments with men were never sexual, but that he sought "nonsexual friendship or intimacy, even playfulness, surely companionship, and sometimes intellectual stimulation . . . rather than erotic contact" in these relationships (Mack 424). This material was available to MacEwen when she conducted research for the writing of the *Lawrence Poems*, and it seems that she adopted Mack's interpretation of Lawrence's sexuality, although she makes Lawrence a little more frank in confessing his love for Dahoum than is Lawrence himself. However, she has preserved the complexity of Lawrence's character.

fetishism, or about castration anxiety in its traditional form. However, his description does point to anxieties about sexual difference identical to those implied in sexual fetishism. In Lawrence's text, the body, especially the body of the Arab man, the Bedouin on the campaign, is the site of the fixation of conflicting kinds of value. As a material object, the body is devalued, just as *fetissos* were often seen by Europeans as having no material value: "The body was too coarse to feel the utmost of our sorrows and of our joys. Therefore, we abandoned it as rubbish. . ." (30). The term "rubbish" signifies the conflicting kinds of value located and fixed in the human body, and recalls Bosman's account of early European trading practices in West Africa, where material objects valued by Africans were perceived by Europeans to be "trash."²⁶ There follows a confession in which Lawrence makes excuses for the men's homosexual desires:

The men were young and sturdy; and hot flesh and blood unconsciously claimed a right in them and tormented their bellies with strange longings. Our privations and dangers fanned this virile heat, in a climate as racking as can be conceived.²⁷

²⁶ William [sic] Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea: Divided into The Gold, The Slave, and The Ivory Coasts* (1705) (London and Edinburgh: Frank Cass and Co. Ltd., 1967) 150.

²⁷ Lawrence, *Seven Pillars* 30.

Note that the men's "strange longings," influenced by the extraordinary circumstances of the war, were "unconscious." Lawrence describes the rare female prostitutes with a horror of women's bodies that is similar to the revulsion which is often a part of the male fetishist's response: "The public women of the rare settlements we encountered in our months of wandering would have been nothing to our numbers, even had their raddled meat been palatable to a man of healthy parts" (30). He sees his men's response to the prostitutes as "horror of such sordid company," and when they began "indifferently to slake one another's few needs in their own clean bodies" it is "a cold convenience that, by comparison, seemed sexless and even pure" (30). Lawrence offers no clue to this juxtaposition of women's bodies as unpalatable "raddled meat" and men's bodies as clean, convenient, and pure, but it is surely more revealing of his own attitudes than of his men's.²⁸ Moreover, it is especially

²⁸ MacEwen would have been familiar with Mack's revelations about Lawrence's sexual attitudes: Lawrence had jotted down in personal notes, never published, the following thoughts: "Occasionally my eyes seem suddenly switched on to my brain, and I see a thing all the more clear in contrast with the former mustiness, in these things nearly always shapes -- rocks or trees or figures of living things -- not small things like flowers . . . : and in the figures always men. I take no pleasure in women. I have never thought twice or even once of the shape of a woman: but men's bodies, in repose or in movement -- especially the

extraordinary that he gives it prominence by placing it on the second page of his long account of the war.

Lawrence's biographer John Mack relates Lawrence's revulsion of women's sexuality evident here to his relationship to his mother, and MacEwen follows Mack's lead to make this relationship one of the focuses of Part One of *The T. E. Lawrence Poems*. Lawrence sees sexual activity between men as a positive and necessary alternative to heterosexual encounters during the war in the desert for some, but he is quick to distance himself from these practices. He says in the very next paragraph, "I was sent to these Arabs as a stranger, unable to think their thoughts or subscribe to their beliefs If I could not assume their character, I could at least conceal my own, and pass among them without evident friction. . . ." (30). MacEwen draws attention to Lawrence's attitudes toward sexuality and the body as one of the many dimensions in which he existed as a subject riven by profound contradictions and ambivalence, in order to account partially for his motivations, failures, and achievements.

MacEwen condenses the six hundred and sixty pages of Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* into the twenty-five

former, appeal to me directly and very generally." Bod Res MSS, C52. Qtd. in Mack 425.

poems that comprise Part 2 of the *Lawrence Poems*, entitled "Solar Wind: The War." This section retells the most well-known part of Lawrence's story, the Arab Rebellion and his role in it, but gains meaning when read intertextually with the incisive psychological analysis of Part 1, "The Dreamers of the Day: For Dahoum." In this opening section of the book, MacEwen establishes Lawrence's character and provides plausible clues to the possible origins of his particular weaknesses, oddities, and failures, as well as to his successes. Perhaps because she adopts Lawrence's voice, however, MacEwen tends to emphasize the negative, just as Lawrence himself was more self-deprecatory than self-aggrandizing. She reveals aspects of Lawrence in these first poems that he remained secretive about in his own life, except in confidences to a small number of close friends. MacEwen's inclusion of this material gives her readers a much more complex and meaningful character in Lawrence than would a mere rewriting of the story he told in *Seven Pillars*.

The collection begins with "Water" (3), a meditation on the element water, that antithesis of the desert landscape and scarcest of commodities in it. In Lawrence's voice, MacEwen represents water as having no form or flavour in

itself, but taking on the forms and flavours of its surroundings:

In France it tasted
Of Crusaders' breastplates, swords, and tunnels of
rings
On ladies' fingers.
In the springs of Lebanon water had
No color, and was therefore all colors, [sic²⁹]

Water here is clearly symbolic of Lawrence's ability to adapt to Arabic society. More significantly, Lawrence claims in this poem that "[w]ater will never lie to you, even when it insinuates itself / Into someone's else's territory." Unlike Lawrence, water will never lie, and so becomes a reminder of Lawrence's failure and guilt, and a symbol of the ideal that Lawrence could not fulfill as he played his role in the war, constantly having to lie to the Arabs about England's motives and his own. Paradoxically, the water that will never lie also "has no conscience and no shame," further illuminating Lawrence's ambivalence about his conflicted subject position in Arabia. Lawrence reveals the split nature of his psyche when he seems to confirm his fundamental identity as an Englishman as he says of water that it "always / Knows its way back home," but he ends the poem with a bit of Bedouin wisdom, exhorting his readers to

²⁹ MacEwen noted in her copy of the text that the comma here is a misprint; it should have been a semicolon.

live as the Bedouin do in spirit: "When you want to travel very far, do as the Bedouin do -- / Drink to overflowing when you can, and then / Go sparingly between wells." This poem implicitly asks, in Lawrence's voice, what constitutes "home" and its location, and reminds us of the notion of *unheimlich*, the "unhomely" as a source of the feeling of the uncanny that is often associated with fetishism. Lawrence speaks both as an Englishman and as a Bedouin here, but MacEwen privileges the Bedouin by giving this identity the last word.

The first two lines of "The Parents" (4) introduce into the series one of fetishicity's important underlying themes, fear, and one of its important images, the reflected, returned gaze of the viewer: "Frightened people, they stared into cameras / and their souls came out in sepia tone." Here the parents as viewers gaze into the camera and their gaze is returned in the picture described verbally by the poem. By reading this verbal picture, we in turn gaze at them. But here, unlike in the reflective surfaces of the *pronk* still life painting, something more than mere surface is available for our gaze, for the camera has revealed something of the parents' souls. This image suggests the frequent belief of some so-called "primitive" societies that a camera image actually captures a part of the souls of the photographed

subjects. The parents' belief systems are thus interrogated by MacEwen's suggestion of an analogy to the belief systems of primitive tribespeople, problematizing our usual categorization of "civilized" and "primitive" that gained widespread support during the Victorian era, during which the parents lived. Subtextually these first two lines, purportedly about Lawrence's background, tap into the entire discourse of imperial domination and of Europe's justification for this endeavor, one in which Lawrence would find himself taking an ambivalent part as a young man.

The main thrust of "The Parents" is to illuminate Lawrence's sense of guilt, which he inherits from his parents' illegitimate sexual relations. It is possible that Lawrence feels far more guilt about his origins as a bastard son than his parents ever did. In the poem he tries to claim responsibility for his birth, as if to excuse the passion that he imagines his parents experienced, a passion he finds revolting:

But if it is true that the fault of birth rests somehow
with the child, and I believe it is so,
then I was the one who led them on to bear me;
I was responsible for all that tossing and heaving,
I the unborn one caused their flesh to itch and burn.

I was the bed on which they lay; their shy and awkward
crimes
were committed in my name.

It is significant that MacEwen has Lawrence repeat six times that he was responsible for acts which he believes should have caused his parents shame, although this is a subject which Lawrence does not discuss in *Seven Pillars*, because in doing so she emphasizes that this sense of shame and guilt probably had a great effect on Lawrence throughout his life. This view is, of course, taken directly from Mack's psychoanalytic biography of Lawrence. And in her own copy of the *Lawrence Poems*, MacEwen underlined the words "the fault of birth rests somehow / with the child" as a reminder to herself that these words were taken directly from Lawrence. On the flyleaf of her "corrected and annotated copy" of the printed volume, MacEwen wrote: "lines underlined are Lawrence's."³⁰ The poem also presents a possible motive for Lawrence's actions and for his need to remain sexually inviolable and "pure": as an embodiment of his parents, he "must give birth to them, redeem them / and restore them to a kind of grace." Although later he writes extensively in *Seven Pillars* about his desire to be a saviour to a people, which became an important ingredient in his motivation for working with the Arab rebels during the war, in fact here another dimension of that same desire is articulated. By living purely and heroically, Lawrence hopes also to

³⁰ MacEwen Papers, Box 18.

"redeem" his parents, and not incidentally, also himself, because they now figuratively live in him and he is the one who is really responsible for his birth and for their crimes. Although it is not known exactly when Lawrence learned about his illegitimacy, MacEwen emphasizes the tremendous impact on Lawrence of his discovery, whenever it might have happened, of his parents' secret. MacEwen thus augments in her poetic telling of the Lawrence story those elements of Lawrence's character and motivation about which he wrote, but did not entirely reveal to his readers. MacEwen has brought more of the secret out into the open. This is of course entirely congruent with her earliest wishes as a poet to write about the dark side of experience as well as the light, but it is much easier for her to reveal someone else's secrets, someone from another time and place, long dead, than to reveal her own, even to herself.

Next are two poems which consider the parents individually. These poems highlight Lawrence's deep ambivalence toward his parents, which he wrote about in a number of letters to Mrs. Shaw. The poem "My Mother" (5) does not mention Lawrence's mother by name, but refers to her as "The Holy Viper," an image of the woman as phallic and monstrous. Interestingly, this appellation is used indirectly: it is what "they" called her in Dublin, thus

letting Lawrence as the speaker of the poem figuratively off the hook. Similarly he compares his mother to "Mother Eve," but again it is what others, in this case the Arabs, say about Eve that he has in mind when he describes her as "a giant who stands / three hundred feet tall . . . green and powerful." In the third line of the poem, Lawrence claims, "Knowing her means I'll never make any woman a mother," a line paraphrased from a letter of April 4, 1927 to C. F. Shaw, in which he writes, "Knowledge of her will prevent my ever making any woman a mother, and the cause of children" ³¹ The letter is more ambivalent about Lawrence's mother than is MacEwen's poem, however, and the poem seems to highlight the most negative aspects of his feelings toward her. The poem shows Lawrence slipping easily from a fear of his mother to fear of all women: speaking of all women, he says, "Let them find someone else to devour besides / their own children." Mack had written about Mrs. Lawrence: "Those who knew her agreed that she seemed at times to suck or draw the vitality out of people. David Garnett called her 'a terror,' a person who devoured people 'like a lion.'" ³² In the poem, Lawrence's mother is

³¹ T. E. Lawrence, letter to C. F. Shaw, April 4, 1927. Qtd. in Jeremy Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia: The Authorized Biography of T. E. Lawrence* (New York: Atheneum, 1990) 32.

³² Mack 10.

monstrous because she devours her children, a metaphor for Lawrence's feeling that his mother dominated her children, making it difficult for them to establish a sense of a life of their own apart from her, their own space. Lawrence had written in a letter to Mrs. Shaw, "One of the reasons . . . why I am in the service is so that I may live by myself. She has given me a terror of families" ³³ But the image MacEwen uses here, in Lawrence's voice, is not the lion, but a Medusa-like figure, a woman associated with serpents, powerful and self-sufficient -- "She didn't care for girls in the house, they weren't her" -- who, at the end of the poem, allows her gaze to linger on her disempowered son, who claims, "[I]f I raise myself to my full height / Then I can see her, green and powerful, gazing at me still." As a phallic-mother figure, the mother of this poem is simultaneously the object of Lawrence's greatest desire but also of his greatest fear, yet MacEwen underlines the fear. The desire is relegated to the subtext in the mythical meanings of the images, whereas in the original letter, Lawrence had begun his musings on his mother with an expression of appreciation: "Mother is rather wonderful: but

³³ Mack 27.

very exciting"³⁴; and later he writes, "And yet you'll understand she is my mother, and an extraordinary person."³⁵ Lawrence's fear of his mother is rooted in his belief that she could understand all of his secrets, secrets that he would prefer himself not to delve into. In the letter he explains,

I have a terror of her knowing anything about my feelings, or convictions, or way of life. If she knew they would be damaged: violated: no longer mine. You see, she would not hesitate to understand them: and I do not understand them, and do not want to.³⁶

At this time in her life, MacEwen must have felt extraordinary empathy for Lawrence's attitude, his desire to keep his secrets mysterious, even from himself, which she expertly condenses into the beginning of the poem's second stanza: "I never let her see exactly who I was and what I loved, / for she would understand, and then I / would have to also."

Lawrence had also written in the letter to Mrs. Shaw,

. . . the inner conflict, which makes me a standing

³⁴ Lawrence to Charlotte Shaw, April 14, 1927. Qtd. in Mack 31.

³⁵ Lawrence to Charlotte Shaw, April 14, 1927. Qtd. In Wilson 32.

³⁶ Lawrence to Charlotte Shaw, April 14, 1927. Qtd. in Mack 31.

civil war, is the inevitable issue of the discordant natures of herself and my father, and the inflammation of strength and weakness which followed the uprooting of their lives and principles.³⁷

And in a later letter he elaborated: "I always felt that she was laying siege to me, and would conquer, if I let a chink unguarded."³⁸ MacEwen quotes Lawrence directly in the poem's third stanza:

I was a standing civil war for as long as I remember,
Trying to contain both her and my father, and now
I am a castle that she lays siege to;
She aspires to its tower.

The phallic mother holds terror for the son because her image reminds him of the possibility of castration. Here MacEwen has overdetermined the castration fear suggested in the image of the phallic mother by showing Lawrence's view of Mrs. Lawrence as assaulting the phallic "tower" of his integrity. As well as suggesting castration, Lawrence's mother is also a figure whom Lawrence deeply identified with even as he simultaneously tried to maintain a distance from her as an independent subject.³⁹ It is interesting, too,

³⁷ Lawrence to Charlotte Shaw, April 14, 1927. Qtd. In Mack 27-28.

³⁸ Lawrence to Charlotte Shaw, August 18, 1927. Qtd. in Mack 32.

³⁹ Mack 15.

that MacEwen's poem represents Lawrence as more confused about his subjectivity than he represents himself. In his letter, the historical Lawrence claims that his conflicts were the inevitable issue of his parents' discordant natures, but in MacEwen's telling of this part of Lawrence's life, he is once again an embodiment of the conflict between his parents. His mother in particular is both inside him and outside the "tower" that he has become, assaulting him. The traces of fetish discourses here point to Lawrence's anxiety about otherness, about differences altogether, and about becoming an independent subject. Lawrence conceives of his mother and himself as mingling their physical bodies, as they also did before his birth, but at the same time they are separate, and an aspect of the separation is threatening. MacEwen uses elements of fetishicity in this poem to highlight Lawrence's fears of his mother, in order to provide a possible psychoanalytic interpretation of his later actions as an adult.

In contrast to her portrayal of Lawrence's mother as an ever-present, castrating monster, always attempting with her stare to bore into her son's being and know his secrets, MacEwen portrays his father as a series of absences, the first again involving the gaze: "He never looked at anyone, not even me . . ." ("My Father" 6). Lawrence sees himself

as inheriting this aspect of his father's character when he claims, "I never look at a man's face and never recognize one."⁴⁰ Lawrence's father is the man who could step on his son's foot and "[keep] on walking into nowhere." Balancing the absences of this father, especially his absent gaze about which the son constructs his own identity, MacEwen emphasizes the upper-class father's money as a source of his identity, solidity, and the good breeding that went with it, the good breeding that makes it possible (and desirable) to "sail yachts / And shoot pheasants, and ride hard and drink hard" -- the stereotypical activities of the male gentry -- and to be able to "talk to you for hours without for a moment revealing / that [he doesn't] have a clue who you are." Lawrence blames his mother, however, for taking away his father's desire and means to engage in such a life. In a letter to Mrs. Shaw, he wrote, "To justify herself, she remodeled my father, making him a teetotaler, a domestic man, a careful spender of pence."⁴¹ She has instilled in him the careful accumulative and spending habits of the bourgeoisie, bringing him down to her economic and social level. His good breeding is partly about knowing when to

⁴⁰ "My Father," *Lawrence Poems* 6.

⁴¹ Lawrence to Charlotte Shaw, August 28, 1928. Qtd. in Mack 12.

conceal and when to reveal, when to keep secrets and when it is appropriate to share them. The family home reflects back the emptiness of the father's and son's gazes: "but the house had become a place / of thunder; it stared at us with square, / unseeing eyes. . . ." Here thunder is associated, not with the edens and poetic voice of MacEwen's earliest poems, but with the conflict between Lawrence's parents. If Lawrence saw his mother as castrating, as represented by MacEwen in "My Mother," here Lawrence's father is castrated: "I suppose he might have been a lion of a man, but / When you castrate a lion, all its mane falls out and / it mews like a cat." Castration is linked imagistically and symbolically to the hair of the head, just as it is in the figure of Medusa, important in the previous poem. Finally Lawrence as the fearless son, now very unlike his father, who is "afraid / of everything," encounters the dilemma that most frequently creates a sense of the uncanny in literature: the instability of the definition of a living organism versus a not-living material object: "Once as a boy I asked someone if a statue I stared at / Was alive. They said no, but they were wrong. It was." It is as if everything that Lawrence has said in this poem until this point now prompts him to reveal this memory. A reading of the fetishicity of the poem is not surprised by Lawrence's

association of the absence and castration of his father with a created representation of a living thing that seems, at least to him, alive and which, moreover, implicitly interrogates aesthetic values as well. Memories of his parents give rise to the feeling of uncanniness, which we know is related to a sense of uneasiness or anxiety about the relative instability of values, including those of subjective identities. Lawrence's boyhood, at least as portrayed by MacEwen, seems infused with experiences of such anxiety.

"Our Child Which Art in Heaven" (7) allows MacEwen to illuminate the hint of megalomania in Lawrence's character. Here the title, a play on the first line of "The Lord's Prayer," "Our Father Who Art in Heaven," exchanges the "child" Lawrence for the Father, God. And it is in this poem that Lawrence claims, about God, "I want to create him." Lawrence also sees himself as a saviour and Christ-figure in the poem's last lines: "Meanwhile, if one must die for something, / there's nothing like a cross / from which to contemplate the world." Note that Lawrence sees himself here as separate, removed from others. This very short poem juxtaposes the sacred economy in the allusion to "The Lord's Prayer" and to the Christian God; the aesthetic economy, because Lawrence wants to be able to say, "*In the Beginning*

was the *Word*," a quotation from the Gospels but also a reference to the word of the poet; and the sexual economy, in its Yeatsian images of birth: "God is not yet born, and we await the long scream / of His coming. We want the water to break." The birth of God is figured in language which emphasizes ambivalence about the birth process; the images of the "long scream" and of water breaking seem to indicate that the birth, the moment when one being separates physically from its mother and first established its separate identity, is a difficult and frightening process. Emphasis on this beginning as the "Word" also points to the importance of Lacan's mirror phase in subject formation, a moment as important to subject formation as that of physical birth.

The opening line of "The Legitimate Prince" (8), "I was a flea in the legitimate prince's bed," is a stunning metaphor taken from Lawrence's own words. He wrote to Lionel Curtis in 1926 about his ancestry: "Bars Sinister are rather jolly ornaments. You feel so like a flea in the legitimate prince's bed!"⁴² MacEwen has changed the tone of this remark: whereas the historical Lawrence tries to cover his resentment with wry humour, in MacEwen's poem his voice is less humourless, more anguished and bitter: "But I was born

⁴² Mack 29.

on the wrong side of the bed, which made me / Prince of Nothing, and I fell off the edge of it into Hell"; and full of longing: "All colours admired him, God / admired him, God how I longed to become him." The legitimate prince is Lawrence's Other, everything that Lawrence is not because of his illegitimacy. He is entirely imaginary, because Lawrence's father had no sons by his marriage. In the poem Lawrence idealizes this Other, and associates him with romantic past ages and chivalry: "He wore noble clothes, / and saved every damsel in distress / Within a hundred miles. His eyes and scabbard shone." The legitimate prince, whom Lawrence calls "He-who-was-not-me," owns phallic and class-based power. His sword and scabbard are both mentioned as images for his phallic power and prowess as a warrior and chivalric knight; his nobility is apparent in his clothing. Operating in a world of swords, scabbards, and damsels in distress, the legitimate prince is obviously located in a sentimentalized, idealized but not clearly defined chivalric past, yet another exotic time and locale, as the edens and other places were in MacEwen's earlier poems. Thus he is a figure of desire for the phallic mother. He has inherited one trait from his (and Lawrence's) father, the trait of "never look[ing] anyone in the eye," but the Legitimate Prince does so not out of fear or shame or breeding, as does

Lawrence's father, but because he is so powerful, attractive, and haughty, he wants to spare others the experience of drowning in the well of his gaze: "He never looked anyone in the eye for fear they would fall / Into the well of his gaze and drown there, thrashing around / like the fools, the pipsqueaks they were." The legitimate prince is an Other who can absorb and consume all of his other Others. He is so powerful that within his sphere of influence others cannot maintain their boundaries. In the presence of his medusa-like gaze, all subjectivities break down. He is like Medusa, threatening others with castration. The poem highlights his phallic power in the images of sword and scabbard, and also highlights the power of his gaze: "His eyes and his scabbard shone." The eyes, the gaze, and the phallic sword are linked in the image, and it is his gaze that has the power of reducing others to drowning fools.

Significantly, perhaps, the legitimate prince, the most powerful and explicit figure for Lawrence's desire -- "I longed to become him" -- chooses not to exercise the power of his gaze, but averts it to spare others. One might say that he is a figure of the phallic mother, at least in the sense that his gaze operates much as Medusa's does. To the extent that he is like Medusa, he is feminine, but his

masculine power is emphasized more in the poem because he has been given a masculine identity. In contrast, Lawrence is "Prince of Nothing." The legitimate prince is the alpha male, and Lawrence is as powerless here as he had figured his father to be in "My Father." Lawrence associates himself with absence and loss. The legitimate prince represents all possibilities of fullness, of satisfaction of desire, in Lawrence's world-view, and Lawrence himself experiences the complete negation of all satisfaction or fullness as the "Prince of Nothing." Chronologically, this poem supposedly comes during Lawrence's boyhood or adolescence, although technically it could have been spoken by a much older Lawrence, retrospectively. To have felt already defined by negation, gap, emptiness as a child was tremendously important in preparing Lawrence for his status and role as Prince of Arabia.

Fetishicity is apparent here in the imagery that suggests the phallic mother, the exotic, distant locations and times, and in the Medusa-like gaze of the legitimate prince; in the threat of castration represented by the legitimate prince's sword and scabbard and Lawrence's "Nothing"; in the problematization of the boundaries of subjectivity and otherness figured as others falling and drowning in the eye of the legitimate prince; and in the

thematization of difference as it is posited by the legal system, defining some as legitimately born, others as illegitimate. There is also a subtext of the clash of sacred economies: "God" is represented as admiring the legitimate prince, thus creating an intersection of the sacred and legal economies, but "God" is also invoked with a very different meaning when Lawrence exclaims "God how I longed to become him." We have the sense that this is not a prayer of a believer, but an exclamation of an agnostic: the term "God" embodies different values in the poem's two lines. Yet the agnostic ends the poem claiming "I fell off the edge of it into Hell," capitalizing "Hell" as if he believed in its existence. The line is ironic, but also truthful, as Lawrence's experiences in life were at times metaphorically, at least, hellish.

Although Lawrence seems to allow the legal word to define him negatively in terms of absence and loss here, his hellish experiences in life are partly a result of his struggle to resist such definitions which disempower him. It is clear that as much as the legitimate prince is *not* Lawrence, he also *is* Lawrence, because he is everything that Lawrence feels that he himself should be, if it were not for the unfortunate class-based legal system. It is interesting that in the next poem, "My Brothers" (9),

Lawrence makes the distinction that his brothers parted their hair on the left, whereas he parted his on the right. In the original comment made by Lawrence about being a flea in the legitimate prince's bed, he refers first to the heraldic "Bars Sinister," the popular sign of supposed illegitimacy. By highlighting that he is associated with the right, not the left, here Lawrence seems to be coding his desire to be seen as having a legitimate birth. Lawrence

became aware at an early age that his parents were not married, despite the strictness of their personal codes. This discovery became the source of irreconcilable conflict in Lawrence, perhaps even as it contributed to his unusual tolerance of contradiction, ambiguity, and oddness in others. Having had such a deception imposed upon himself, Lawrence became deeply troubled about his own later role in the deception of the Arabs, whom he had encouraged in the Revolt while possessing the knowledge that secret agreements might ultimately vitiate their accomplishments.⁴³

Lawrence's fixation on the issue of the legitimacy of his birth is continued in the poem "My Half-Sisters" (10): Lawrence refers to these sisters as "legitimate princesses" and, as if to offer an explanation for this term, he parenthetically continues: "my father was actually married to their mother." Lawrence uses the term "bastard" twice in the first stanza, to describe himself and his brothers. The word "half" is used five times, as if to indicate that the

⁴³ Mack 454-55.

sisters are not quite real to Lawrence. They are "odd, uncanny," and seem to haunt him with "their powerful and secret minds," always "lurking, waiting / to devour [him] just beyond [his] door." The poem associates these sisters with the upper class. They are imagined engaging in stereotypical activities for women of this class and time: crocheting doilies, embroidering needlepoint, taking blueberry scones for tea at ten past five. They are represented in stereotypical images because their class is inaccessible to Lawrence, who has never met them and can only imagine them. They are ghostly, uncanny, dwelling in the twilight, disturbing in their presence-yet-absence. They are the legitimate children of Lawrence's father, so present in the legal sense, moreso than Lawrence. But he only hears about them, they are forever off limits to him, and so are simultaneously absent from his life. Figures of presence and fullness, and of absence and loss, they remind Lawrence of his own position in society as not-quite-acceptable. The poem ends with an image of the sisters as "guarded by unicorns," again associating them with a mystical, fantastic past. Thus they, too, like their imagined brother the legitimate prince, are figures for, or at least reminders of, the phallic mother. Lawrence juxtaposes in a powerful image his own situation next to theirs when he ponders an

imagined question posed to the them by "a visitor or casual friend": "if their half-brother is really the uncrowned / King of Arabia." As King, Lawrence positions himself with royalty, perhaps where he imagines he would belong if not for the accident of his birth, but because he is "uncrowned," his illegitimacy is always foregrounded. Here Lawrence is clearly speaking about his family in retrospect. He imagines his half-sisters as already elderly women. The poem is fraught with anxiety over issues of legitimate birth, and class, and the sisters are ultimately monstrous, as was his mother and perhaps many women, waiting to devour him. Lawrence, already the "Prince of Nothing," has nothing to lose -- he cannot lose a crown that he does not really own -- yet he still fears loss in the image of being devoured.

Because MacEwen has Lawrence describe much of his childhood in retrospect, we are reading his memories, not a narrative set in the past. And memories can be read as part of the dreamwork, for the particular ways in which they are constructed by the unconscious. Lawrence's memories of his childhood play are recounted in "It Was Only A Game" (11), in which the game of the assault on a citadel becomes a miniature version of Lawrence's later megalomaniacal dreams of becoming "the saviour of a whole race." Mack writes,

Before he was nine, he had become the leader of the brothers in inventing games for them to play. These were usually war games and were marked by both humor and imagination. A favorite was the assault upon a tower, which had to be entered in order to rescue it from enemies ('fourscore of men') within.⁴⁴

MacEwen complicates the game by making Lawrence and his brothers and friends sometimes play the role of the "good guys," but at other times of the "bad guys." By switching moral allegiances, Lawrence realizes that moral definitions are complex: "Maybe it wasn't such a simple game." The figure of the tower under assault had already been used by Lawrence to describe his feelings about his mother, where he identified himself with the tower being assaulted by her. He would identify with the tower in later poems as well. Just as Lawrence had insisted on the aliveness of the statue in "My Father," here too he insists on the reality of the representations: "Those hostages of high cities, prisoners of citadels / were real, and the castles containing them / were real, because we deemed them so." Lawrence appears to jump the gap easily between reality and play, yet his insistence overdetermines this reality; he "doth protest too much." He imagines a material reward for being a saviour in these games: "gold rings" and a medieval feast, complete

⁴⁴ Mack 19.

with a decapitated boar's head and oranges, each penetrated with another foodstuff. The feast is at once exotic, barbaric, and aristocratic, representing a longing for lost idealized times and places and for society's acknowledgement of Lawrence and his particular qualities. As in the *pronk* still lifes, here also the foodstuffs indicate castration anxiety, and by extension, an anxiety about the stereotypical male role; in Lawrence's situation, that role includes being a warrior. The anxiety is more successfully veiled here than in the *pronks*, however, and Lawrence spends his conscious energy imagining himself as victorious. But this play is relegated to summer and is succeeded by "long sullen winters." It is then that Lawrence allows this game to grow into a desire of "having / Millions of people expressing themselves through [him]," of "rescuing / A whole people from tyranny." Lawrence describes these desires as "dreams" that were "tender" but also "obscene," perhaps because of the glut of pride they reveal, but also perhaps unconsciously because of the castration anxiety coded in them. The poem ends on a sinister note, with Lawrence's real enemy scaling the walls of the garden even as he, oblivious, indulges in his dreams of being a saviour. The adult Lawrence who is speaking the poem is haunted by the knowledge that he was naive about the identity of an enemy

that he now understands. The presence of this enemy lurks behind the poem, the hidden danger, an aspect of Lawrence himself that he would discover during the campaign in Arabia.

Another detail MacEwen takes from Mack's biography of Lawrence is Lawrence's curious sleeping arrangements as a boy:

In his home he had a coffin-shaped box almost six feet long, two feet high and two feet wide. His mother complained, 'That boy of mine's sleeping there every night now.' Overhead were brass rubbings -- 'the room was hideous with them,' another friend recalled -- one of which depicted a corpse being eaten by worms. Every night when he went to bed 'he'd think of this chap dying, eaten by worms.'⁴⁵

MacEwen's poem "In Bed" (12) makes this fixation on the corpse eaten by worms a sublimation of Lawrence's awakening sexual feelings, the location where he fixed his attention when "sometimes, in satin midnights, / [his] flesh crawled / With unspeakable desires" Lawrence, trying to be perfect but aware that he is "one step short" of perfection, counteracts the pleasures of the body with an awareness of the body's mortality. No matter how close to becoming an inviolable tower, the body is always susceptible to the penetration of worms after death. Lawrence seems also to be

⁴⁵ Mack 24.

nurturing a disgust with the merely physical body, with the materiality of the body. Preferring to live in the "Utopia or The Wood Beyond the World" of his imagination, he nevertheless remains in the present because of his "Mission," yet whether past, present, or future, he always idealizes his place and time, except for the future decay after death.

In her copy of the book, MacEwen pencilled in on the "Contents" page, next to the entry for "Words From the Preacher at Oxford" (13), "found poem." The words of this poem are entirely taken from Lawrence's writing.⁴⁶ To make these words into a poem for the collection is yet another example of MacEwen's foregrounding of Lawrence's complex and conflicted attitudes toward sexuality. Readers are aware of the irony of the preacher's words, as he insinuates his own lack of experience yet still expostulates on matters of sex. A further irony is that, rather than the snickering or ridicule that we might expect as a response from a young man of the time to these words, Lawrence seems to agree with the preacher's message. It resonates with his own views on the low value of sexuality and of the body generally, as opposed to the life of the mind and of idealized heroic actions.

⁴⁶ T. E. Lawrence, *The Mint*, Part 2 (London: Jonathan Cape, 1973) 109. Qtd. in Wilson 44.

Here there is no direct evidence of fetishicity, but intertextually with the other poems, this poem adds to the large number of comments and protests about sex that overdetermines Lawrence's antisexual attitudes. And such overdetermination points, of course, to an underlying anxiety about the issue. The number of protests act as a cover-up of the conflicted subject.

The only Englishwoman to appear in the poems other than Lawrence's mother and half-sisters is Janet Laurie, whom Lawrence loved platonically when he was a young man. Again his feelings of inadequacy are highlighted by MacEwen: in the poem "Janet" (14), the final stanza relates Lawrence's response when Janet asked him to "give her away" when she eventually married another man: "I said no, I would look like an ass; I was too damn short / to walk down the aisle with her." In the first stanza, Lawrence remembers that he had asked Janet to marry him, so had obviously contemplated walking down not only a church aisle, but his life-path with her. It is peculiarly like Lawrence to use self-deprecating humour to cover, even from himself, his pain and embarrassment.

Lawrence's many conflicts about sexuality, values, ideals, which haunt these poems about his early life, are discussed by him more explicitly, if symbolically, in

"Animal Spirits" (15). Here he speaks of conflicting desires that haunt him in secret -- "I can't tell / anyone when they move in me" -- in the form of "spirits" that make him feel "unclean": "it is the end / Of cleanliness; it is the great crime." And he associates desire with fear: "Is it true, then, that one fears all that one loves?" Fear, aggression and desire are again juxtaposed in the line "I can only kill them by becoming them." By becoming that which he fears, he will destroy them by destroying the boundaries between self and other. His bitter conflict about this points to his anxiety about these boundaries, about how self and other are constituted at all, about the instability of such definitions. Only in the second stanza do these spirits become those of animals: "their hooves and paws / smell of honey and trodden flowers." Honey symbolizes their seductive qualities, the trodden flowers the interdiction of desire, the destruction of that which he loves. In the third stanza, Lawrence moves from feeling haunted by the animal spirits, metaphors for sexual desire, to actually being the animals: "I am looking out from the camels' eyes, out / from the eyes of the horses." He has succeeded in becoming them, but not, apparently, in destroying them. And the inner conflict remains: "It is vile to love them; I will not love them." Then he succeeds in taming his mind, in suppressing all

desire, in self-control: "My brain is sudden and silent as a wildcat." The brain is not an animal anymore, but still resembles one, a "wild" animal. Lawrence is known to have trained himself consciously in stoicism, in negating the flesh in order to inure himself to physical pain and stress. This training eventually allowed him to make his famous walking tour of Crusader castles in Syria while a graduate student at Oxford, and later, of course, to withstand the harsh conditions of the Arabian desert during the war. As a young man, to become thus inured is a counterpoint desire to the sexual, and so the wild animal spirits of the poem have a double meaning. In the end the wildcat stands for this hardness, the wisdom and stamina to be able to survive in harsh conditions of nature, and the poem ends with the young Lawrence's prayer for such transformation: "Lord / Teach me to be lean, and wise. Nothing matters, / nothing *matters*." Here his sublimated sexual desire intersects with the spiritual economy: desire becomes prayer. It also intersects with the material economy of the natural world's sometimes-harsh conditions. But it is by multiple negations -- "Nothing matters, / nothing *matters*" -- that Lawrence negotiates the territory of these intersections. This final insistence has a double meaning too, of course: first, the denial of value to the material and sexual planes, but also

and "I would destroy it to save her." In this question he juxtaposes a symbol or icon of the highest achievement of western art, the cathedral, with an image of the most insignificant human he can imagine, a girl-child, but his humanism prompts him to chose the girl anyway, even though she might seem on the surface to be valueless, or of less value than the cathedral. This is a deliberate attempt to problematize the way that we assign value to human life and to aesthetic products. Lawrence perhaps unconsciously employs the logic of the marketplace when he tries to measure the two, when he tries to find some equivalence between them, some term by which to compare them. But art and human life resist such equivalencies and to make his decision, Lawrence resorts, somewhat resignedly, to the discourse of humanism and to the logic of idealism and chivalry that had molded his youth. He imagines the girl as an animal, but here the animal again is negative, as in the opening of "Animal Spirits." He would even try to save the life of a bird that "dashed itself against [his] sidecar" but the fusion here of MacEwen's own voice with Lawrence's increases his sense of anguish that he must make these choices: "Why did it have to / Kill itself against me, for God's sake, why me?"

"Furthermore" (17) is another poem listed as a "found

poem" in MacEwen's copy of the book, and she has underlined most of the words in her copy to indicate that they are taken from Lawrence's writing. In the poem, Lawrence lists his likes and dislikes, and thus in a sense it is one of the most personal of the poems. But Lawrence is simultaneously satirizing the notion that anyone can know anyone else at all, especially from such a list of likes and dislikes, and there is profound irony in the final line (which contains some of the few words that are not directly transcribed from Lawrence's writing): "Now you know me." The tone of Lawrence's voice is central here. He treads the spaces between subjectivity and objectivity, never really inhabiting either position. There is satire, almost sarcasm, but also wistfulness in the tone, as if he wished that it really were possible to reveal himself to another person; MacEwen has captured here a profound sense of his self-containment and loneliness. She portrays Lawrence as a self which inhabits borderland spaces, who wished that all of the fragments listed really did add up to a sense of really existing, a self who wonders how one goes about getting to know other selves: should they trade such information about each other? To occupy positions that are contradictory, and simultaneously to attempt to conceal and to reveal the contradiction, is fetishistic. Lawrence displays his

qualities in this poem as if they were interchangeable or reducible to a common exchange value. There is something uncannily *pronk*-like about the display. The tone is one of self-deprecating irony, but also of sadness and wry humour; it suggests that the speaker knows that he is not revealing anything really secret about his inner self, and it reflects back to the reader notions of subjectivity and questions about how we penetrate another person to know him. The qualities listed by Lawrence -- "My favorite character in history is nobody, / My favorite place is London" -- are a reflective shell that reveals his desire to preserve a sense of authentic self as secret and intact. Readers will automatically wonder how they would fill in these categories for themselves, how they would define themselves in similar terms; thus like the shiny or glossy surfaces of the objects depicted in *pronk* still lifes, which reflect the viewer's penetrating gaze and thereby resist becoming known and owned, the list of Lawrence's favourite things reflect back to the reader at least as much as they reveal of Lawrence, while they actually help to preserve Lawrence's privacy. They fetishistically both conceal and reveal Lawrence-as-subject.

The last few poems of "Part 1: *The Dreamers of the Day: For Dahoum*" concern Lawrence's experiences as an

archeologist in Syria, before the war. He worked on a dig at Carcemish, where he met a young man who inspired him to his later feats during the war, "Dahoum." Mack believes that Dahoum is the "S. A." to whom *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* is dedicated and who became the major -- though again platonic -- love-interest of Lawrence's life. Mack writes:

Wooley⁴⁷ wrote that Dahoum was 'beautifully built and remarkably handsome' and that the village was scandalized by the intimacy of the friendship, especially when Lawrence had Dahoum pose for a naked figure he carved in the soft local limestone and set upon the edge of the house roof. But Wooley denied firmly that there was any sexual relationship between Dahoum and Lawrence, and stresses Lawrence's puritanical nature.⁴⁸

Of course we will never know the exact nature of the relationship between Lawrence and Dahoum. Mack writes further:

The strength and importance of certain of Lawrence's friendships with other men ('comparable in intensity to sexual love, for which he made them a substitute,' his brother Arnold wrote) became apparent during this period [Carcemish].⁴⁹

MacEwen hints at the ambiguity of the relationship when she

⁴⁷ Leonard Wooley worked with Lawrence on the Carcemish dig and later served Britain in Cairo during the war.

⁴⁸ Mack 97.

⁴⁹ Mack 93.

has Lawrence mention that Dahoum had "a dark and secret love" that only animals could achieve.⁵⁰ Thus MacEwen accepts the probable sexual nature of the attraction between the two men, a secret that Lawrence seemed unwilling to admit even to himself. The conflict in the previous poems between an idealized, pure love and the "animal spirits" has led up to this relationship. Dahoum becomes a figure for many of Lawrence's conflicts: he is an object of desire that is doubly interdicted, because the desire is sexual and because it is homoerotic; he is called "Darkness."⁵¹ The desire in the poem is metaphorized as a desire to be haunted by ghosts of Dahoum's ancestors, ghosts who would reveal "wonderful Hittite secrets" of the past. This is an understandable desire for an archeologist on a dig in Syria, perhaps, but also a sublimated desire for lost exotic places distant in time, the displaced desire for the phallic mother. Moreover, MacEwen's version of Lawrence seems to attribute a kind of magic to Dahoum's name: there is an association of the name with dark waters, and with Dahoum's method of death, "drown[ing] in the dark waters of [his] own

⁵⁰ MacEwen, "The Water-Bearer," *The T. E. Lawrence Poems* 18.

⁵¹ Mack writes: "Dahoum is a form of *tehoum*, which means 'the darkness that was on the face of the waters before creation'" (96).

lungs" (he died later of pneumonia). Lawrence and Dahoum have "forgotten" this sympathetic magical dimension of Dahoum's name. Here MacEwen returns briefly to her interest in sacred alphabets and paradisaic naming. Dahoum's name embodies secrets and magical forces that have been known but are now hidden. His name is fetishistic, in that it is very nearly a reified thing, embodying widely different kinds of values: linguistic, magical/sacred. The poem is haunted by a sublimated and displaced longing for the past, and for the phallic mother, and thus by the anxiety about sexual and other differences which she represents. This anxiety, this fear of difference, is also expressed in Lawrence's homoerotic desire and simultaneous fear and suppression of that desire. The poem represents the intersections of linguistic, material, sacred/magical, and sexual economies, haunted by a lack or loss: Lawrence speaks in the past tense because Dahoum has already died, and because he remembers their time together as occurring "before the horror," both an echo of Conrad's Kurtz and a reference to the war, and perhaps to Lawrence's particularly dehumanizing experiences during the Arab Revolt.

The strange and significant fact that Lawrence had Dahoum pose naked for a statue that he carved out of limestone and then placed on the roof of his house in

Carcemish, an episode that offended the local sensibilities, is taken up by MacEwen in "Naked People" (19), which follows Lawrence's supposed train of thought about naked people. MacEwen begins the poem with another direct quotation from Lawrence:

Do you really like naked women? I asked my sculptor
friend.

They express so little.

I've never thought twice or even
Once of a naked woman.

Lawrence then remembers an incident in which Kurdish women tried to strip him naked, teasingly, in which they "felt [him] up all over"; the poem moves from that sexual image to the memory of Dahoum's posing. The movement of Lawrence's thought is clearly toward the sexual -- from naked women, to being touched himself, to Dahoum -- but Lawrence refuses this homoerotic attraction: "your nakedness only made you / more secret and inviolable than before." It is perhaps this very secrecy and inviolability that attracts Lawrence to Dahoum, although it is also probable that Lawrence constructs that secretness and inviolability himself. The poem moves finally to the association of nakedness with death, Dahoum's death: "Then you fell still, naked and chill and wondering." Lawrence's only real sexual passion, never expressed as such, ends in death. The sexual economy here is

inseparable from absence and loss, aspects that fetishicity has already highlighted in the previous poems.

"The Desert" (20) is less about a particular geographical location or a kind of ecosystem on the earth than it is about how such a location has affected the conception of divinity constructed by its inhabitants. The poem thematizes a contrast in aesthetic values and their intersection with linguistic values: "English makes Him an ugly monosyllable [a quotation from Lawrence which MacEwen underlined in her copy of the book], but Allah breathes / a fiery music from His tongue." Different sacred economies are implicitly contrasted as well, as the prophets are seen to have gone into the desert to "interpret" God, who needs help from his prophets because he is alone, as opposed to Christian beliefs which see God as omnipotent and self-sufficient. The gaps between these different value systems are underscored further by Lawrence's location between the void and material plenitude, the "Nothingness, this Everything." Here Lawrence's response to this desert and all that it means is figured in the trope of his head imploding "into pure light," which is repeated twice, at the beginning and again at the end of the poem. This is an image MacEwen used in a much earlier work, "The Eye," from *The Shadow-Maker* (4): "I implode / into the shrinking centre of your

sight," but in this earlier poem the implosion into the lover and into the self is later followed by an equally powerful explosion back into life and the material world. Lawrence's implosion is presumably a figure for a mystical experience he had in the desert, and is not followed in the poem by a movement outward, although Lawrence's subsequent career during the Arab Revolt could be construed as such an outward movement. Whether this implosion could be a figure for what can happen to the over-fixated consciousness, or a disintegration, a fracturing which could be either positive or negative, are questions MacEwen leaves unanswered.

A further meditation on the meaning of nothingness, of the void, appears in "The Absolute Room" (21). Here Lawrence and Dahoum are taken as visitors to an ancient building of Roman origin, in which still-perceptible scents were built right into the walls. The "sweetest room of all" is the one where all scents cancelled each other out, making nothing. Lawrence turns this into a love poem for Dahoum, in which he exclaims, "I knew then that you possessed nothing of me, and I / possessed nothing of you." Fullness and emptiness, presence and loss are confused and/or conflated here. A material economy built around such a paradox would be subversive indeed: "We were wealthy and stuffed with a wondrous nothing / that filled the room and everything

around." The appetite, so important a theme in earlier poetry, here is satisfied with the nothingness which fills it. The materiality of the sexual body and of Lawrence's eyes is also, simultaneously, nothing, using the same logic:

You looked into my eyes, the windows to my soul,
 and said that because they were blue
You could see right through them, holes in my skull,
 to the quiet, powerful sky beyond.

Lawrence, because of his blue eyes, sign of his racial difference, is both present and absent, nothing, a void to be looked through, to his companion. Every important image in these poems seems to contain its opposite, to embody conflicting discursive values and patterns, to resonate back and forth between different discursive meanings and positions, and to indicate from such resonance the void between the terms, the territory of the fetish and of the gap. This is, moreover, the first explicit appearance in these poems of racial difference as a determinant of value.

"Excavating in Egypt" (22) suggests castration anxiety in the image of the cold night as a sword that "lays its side along your ribs; / there the flat steel sings / And you shiver under it, waiting for the dawn." The sword is threatening: it touches the body and makes it shiver. By day the archeologists on the dig play with "trinkets" they have dug up: "odd jewels / and sad little things that could have

been / gods, or toys." "Gods, or toys" of course juxtaposes once again sacred and material economies. Moreover, at night, in the cold, these odd little material objects, associated with a time and place far distant "before the pharaohs," seem to come alive, to embody a mysterious and fearsome power, just as the original primitive fetish objects, as constructed by European Enlightenment discourse, were believed to function: as embodiments of the subject's power to endow material things with life-energy and of his or her tendency to forget such power after the material object has seemed to come alive, instead worshipping it as a deity or magic object. Lawrence, thus, is seen as participating in primitive sacred economies here, which intersect with the sexual economy as castration anxiety. There is also the sense of haunting by the dead, for the excavators had wrapped themselves "in the funeral-cloths of the dead." The uncanny territory between life and death, when it is not clear whether a material thing is alive or dead, is the ground for the dominant fear in Lawrence's voice here.

Once the possibility of fetishism is introduced by the trinkets that could have been gods or toys, and that take on an uncanny power after dark, it seems easier to perceive all manner of material objects as fetishes. In "The Story of a

Stone" (23), for example, the stone is a material object, a stone, but simultaneously, it is alive, for it "will always tell you nothing about itself." In telling, it is alive, but paradoxically in telling nothing, perhaps it is not alive, but just a stone. It traverses the territory between life and death, an uncanny stone that resembles, in its telling nothing about itself, the actions of Lawrence's father, who never looked any man in the eye, and thus, in MacEwen's representation of Lawrence himself, who is like his father in this respect. So the stone is an image or symbol of Lawrence. It is alive: it invents itself, makes history, pursues itself, as does Lawrence. Yet as just a stone, it leaves Lawrence in silence, contemplating the stars, contemplating emptiness. Because it is not alive, it is a figure for emptiness and loss. Lawrence wonders what lives inside the stone, and answers, "*Miracles, strange light.*" The stone is thus implicated somehow in the sacred and magic economies even as it is both a non-living material object and a living being. The stone is a fetish, embodying conflicting kinds of values, and Lawrence is fixated on it. It displaces his uneasiness about existing as a speaking subject, and his uneasiness about death. The stone "contemplating itself in a state / of perfect bliss" represents the only hint of transcendence in the collection

of poems, but its uncanny associations for Lawrence clearly locate it as an image in the discourse of disavowal, not the dialectic leading to genuine transcendence. The stone relates to the water of the first poem, and to Lawrence's uneasiness about the night-time power of the trinkets.

In "Thunder-Song" (24), two musicians play during a storm, and it is as if they control the storm with their music. Although the word "magic" is never used here, the magical power of the musicians is nevertheless suggested. The poem treads in the spaces between reality and illusion, life and death. When the stones come alive in the lightning, when the stone lions laugh at the men, it is utterly real and articulate, and not what we would expect, thus suggesting that what had passed as ordinary reality was not real. The god "striding along an inscription towards the door" reiterates MacEwen's interest in sacred alphabets. This stunning line is underlined in her copy of the book, indicating that she took the line from Lawrence's own writings. This god is the god that will come to the poet at the moment of death, or at least this is how the poet imagines death will happen to him; however, it is not this god, but King Husayn's son, the Emir Feisal, whose memory haunts Lawrence's death, and thus the promise of transcendence hinted at in this poem is not fulfilled. The

poet still hangs on to the possibility that he is immortal somehow, for he says, "if ever I die" The lightning makes the experience of the storm uncanny. It quickens to life an inanimate material object, becoming a symbol of the similar creative impulse that allows human beings to create their gods. Thus it resonates with reminders of ethnographic fetish discourses. The stone, too, is uncanny in its unstable status as a living thing and in its embodiment of different kinds of value as it juxtaposes material and sacred economies. Fetishistic fixation and repetition also appear in the poem in the image of the sacred inscription, which significantly is not read or translated for us by the poet, so that it remains a secret, veiling esoteric knowledge. The mention of the geographic location, Babylon, articulates the poet's desire for exotic locations and lost civilizations, a desire for the return to the phallic mother. For this archaeologist, the desert is both life and death. It is life in the sense that this is the place where he spends his life, does his work. The ordinary desert is his reality, hot, yellow/gray/brown. The desert also represents death because the speaker is on a dig, finding evidence of lost cultures, cultures that have died out. The enemy of the desert is the rain, because it brings something new and different to the desert. Everyone

is used to the heat and colour. The rain is the enemy, "armies" marching on the scientists. The rain is related to the colour blue, and blue brings death in the poet's imagination: he imagines that the god "comes quietly in blue light" when he dies. The ordinary world dies out in this uncanny rain. It is possible that Lawrence is subconsciously willing his own death, or at least coding a sense of self-loathing in the images of this poem, feelings which probably resonated with the self-destructive side of MacEwen's psyche, a side of MacEwen recognized by those of her friends who knew of her struggles with alcoholism.

In any case, there is at this point a death of sorts: a death of the poet's life and lifestyle at Carcemish, a death of the most happy time of his life. The tone of "A Farewell to Carcemish" (25) is MacEwen's voice, not Lawrence's. The line "Time contains me as once your eyes contained me, utterly" is a line that could have been uttered by one of MacEwen's personae to a lover in a poem, but here Lawrence speaks to Dahoum (or perhaps the carving of Dahoum), whom he had to leave behind when the war started and he began to work out of Cairo for the British forces. The poem suggests Lawrence's profound emotional attachment to the place and to the life of an archaeologist, as well as to Dahoum, a life that he would give up because of the war and never return

to. The sideways motion in "I exit sideways, slide / From your eyes" echoes other sideways exits in MacEwen's poems, and seems to signify in her work a secret or invisible action or feeling. The desert, which we have seen come alive, is now sightless. The word "Maktub" ("it is written") performs the inevitable, a sacred word with power, an exotic utterance in an exotic language, representing once again MacEwen's fascination with exotic alphabets and languages, a symptom of the poet's longing for the phallic mother and uneasiness about being a speaking subject. The final line paraphrases one of Lawrence's finest lines: "He is only dangerous who dreams by day" inverts Lawrence's "The dreamers of the day are dangerous men. . . ." ⁵²

The second part of *The T. E. Lawrence Poems* is entitled "Solar Wind: The War." It focuses on three crucial formative events recounted by Lawrence in *Seven Pillars*: Lawrence's rape by Turkish officials at Deraa; the death of his water-bearer from Carcemish, Dahoum; and the massacre at Tafas. Each of these incidents was difficult, even traumatic for Lawrence, and MacEwen's rendering of them illuminates some of Lawrence's most characteristic features. With Dahoum's

⁵² Gwendolyn MacEwen, Interview, *Poetry Canada Review* 4.3 (1983): 8. The quotation from Lawrence is taken from *Seven Pillars* 1.

death during the war, but from natural causes, Lawrence's very reason for fighting in the Arab cause also died. His rape meant the loss of the physical integrity that he had so carefully preserved throughout his life and that had been crucial to his self-definition and sense of self-respect. The massacre at Tafas obsessively fixates and repeats the loss of integrity of the rape, using the supposed revenge motive for the massacre fetishistically to conceal Lawrence's loss of honour, but simultaneously confirming Lawrence's weakness and barbarity. The other poems in this section provide a context of disavowal and loss in multiple registers throughout the entire war effort.

"Apologies" (29) begins the second part of the collection, and much of it comes directly from Lawrence's Introduction to *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. In MacEwen's poem, we see again the Lawrence who imagines that freedom for the Arab peoples is a gift that he can bestow upon them, a gift "so fine it would outshine all other gifts in their eyes; / it would be *worthy*." MacEwen highlights Lawrence's preoccupation with the process of gift-giving, a subversive activity in the material economy unless the exchange is founded upon an earlier purchase in the marketplace. The poem shows Lawrence's motives to be doubly subversive: the circulation of goods through the giving of gifts that are

not commodities is subversive of commodity-based economies of exchange and, of course, there is the political subversion of fighting against an established, repressive political order. The gift Lawrence desires to bestow is not a material object but a condition of being, yet ironically the freedom that was to be such a wonderful gift was not really freedom at all, but in fact resulted in the Arab world entering into another political and economic reality that would limit them again in a different way (in the sense of the alienation theorized by Marx and Taussig⁵³) as they began to participate in capitalist development fueled by their oil resources. During the war, Lawrence's awareness that Britain's interest in the Arabian region had much to do with the area's strategic importance but also with its petroleum wealth contributed to his ambivalence about the British project in the area and his role in it and to his sense that his loyalty was divided.

MacEwen explores other dimensions of Lawrence's split psyche as well. In "Apologies," she portrays Lawrence in his role as the messianic political saviour of the Arabs and as the idealistic but undeclared lover of Dahoum:

⁵³ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* Vol. 1 (1867), trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage, 1977); Michael Taussig, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (Chapel Hill: U of South Carolina P, c. 1980).

But my mind's twin kingdoms waged an everlasting war;
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.

Giving the gift of freedom to Dahoum and his people would empty Lawrence, but capitalism does not value this kind of gift-giving. In capitalist material economies, emptiness is never an end in itself, but a condition for future consumption; however, Lawrence distrusts the implication of the material economy in the endeavor to bestow freedom: "The shabby money / That the desert offered us bought lies, bought victory." Lawrence's role in the Arab Revolt required him both to represent British interests and to act upon an intimate understanding of Arabic society and culture. In alternating so rapidly between these two subject positions that it must have seemed to him that he occupied both simultaneously, Lawrence never fully inhabited either space fully. MacEwen shows how he felt fully at home nowhere, which he experiences as "a dumb void" into which he falls. It is a void between sacred economies as well, one that "even a false god could not fill," possibly implying that a true god, should one exist, also could not fill it. This void or emptiness is all that is left when the contradictions which fissure all sacred economies are

perceived and these belief systems begin to fall apart. Lawrence wants to bring a new and better world into being out of the void created from the collapse of the old world, and his line "Out of this grand emptiness wonderful things must surely / come into being" echoes MacEwen's comment in the Introduction to *A Breakfast for Barbarians* that the emptiness of hunger will eventually lead to the creation of wonderful things. In both cases, an experience of emptiness precedes the appearance of the new world. At the end of the poem, the world is the army of which Lawrence is a part.

The several strands of fetish discourses seen in the previous poems in references to the sacred, aesthetic, material, political, and sexual economies layer the poems with anxieties about multiple kinds of difference. The effects of fetishicity are best seen in this layering and building of the poems in sequence, but occasionally one poem stands out as especially overdetermined by fetishicity. "Feisal" (31) is a prime example: here the traces of fetish discourses appear in the notion of disguise seen in the fake gold, which hides the fact that there is no money to pay the men; in the stones alive with deception, with promise, even as they simultaneously veil the lack of gold; and in the embodiment of a secret truth in the written texts that are carried by Feisal. Moreover, all of these are haunted by the

possibility of death, imaged in the "bundles of rotting letters." Secrets are linked to death and deception, to money and to freedom, all of which are terms in the uncanny discourses of fetishism. The final lines -- "And I would follow my lord Feisal from Wadi Safra / to the ends of the earth" -- are certainly spoken in a voice more like MacEwen's than Lawrence's,⁵⁴ and are thus an example of an instance when the Lawrence persona most obviously performs its fetishistic function of both concealing and also revealing a secret: the voice of the poem is actually dual and thus split along multiple axes of difference.

As a figure idealized by Lawrence, Feisal is another version of the phallic mother. He is the object of Lawrence's deepest desire, although probably not the sublimated homophilic desire Lawrence felt for Dahoum. For Lawrence, Feisal is "My lord Feisal, the man I had come to Arabia to seek," and Lawrence claims, "I would have sold my soul for him, joyfully And I would follow my lord Feisal from Wadi Safra / to the ends of the earth" (31).

⁵⁴ Here MacEwen gives Lawrence a sense of passion for Feisal as leader which she herself often felt for her muses, who have sometimes been referred to as "my lord." See, for example, "Dream One: The Man-Fish," from *The Shadow-Maker* (54), in which MacEwen says of a green-haired muse, "I would give up everything and follow him / Down to the dark, improbably sea" and "I would return, but first I follow my lord the Rey."

Feisal's very name encodes phallic power: it means "The sword flashing downward in the stroke" and signals the moment *before* severance, before castration. Thus castration is suggested but not yet realized in this powerful name. Feisal is associated, moreover, with the spiritual economy, seeming to be "like an ikon" who reveals nothing in his Byzantine face, thus signifying secrets, some of which are nevertheless revealed to Lawrence. Feisal rejects or is not caught up in the body: he does not flinch when having to watch the Turks torture his men. He is, literally, a "legitimate prince." His secrets include the lack of money or gold to pay his men on the campaign, which he conceals by carrying chests which he pretends are full of coins but which are really full of rocks. Later, in the last poem in the collection, the dying Lawrence imagines that it is Feisal's sword that severs him from life. Thus MacEwen creates in Feisal a literary figure who embodies the suggestion of castration and death, money and its lack, the sacred and the secret. The figure of Feisal in the poem suggests the "ghost of a lack" which hangs over the Arabian Revolt in the sexual, economic, political, spiritual, and aesthetic registers. Feisal becomes fetishized and represented using multiple fetish discourses much the same as Lawrence himself is also represented fetishistically

throughout the collection.

The poem "Auda" (33) once again juxtaposes conflicting material and sacred economies. This poem takes many turns; it begins with a comic character sketch of Lawrence's friend Auda abu Tayi and an appreciation of his leadership skills. Then, as Lawrence and Auda contemplate the stars one night in their camp, Auda asks, "*Why do Westerners want everything? / Behind our few stars we can see God / who is not behind your millions.*" Lawrence answers: "*We want the world's end, Auda.*"⁵⁵ MacEwen uses italics to highlight the words of this dialogue, which are slightly paraphrased from *Seven Pillars*,⁵⁶ because this passage offers a key insight into the nature of the cultural clash between Lawrence and the Arabs, and because she wants to emphasize Lawrence's passion as well as his fatalism. Lawrence seems wise with the cosmic perspective of Wagner's Wotan in the embedded text of this dialogue. Because of his belief that westerners tragically will their own destruction, one of Lawrence's challenges in life was to discover how it might be possible

⁵⁵ Lawrence had something concrete, beyond the war itself, on which to base this assertion. For Lawrence's parents' generation, one of the principle European mythopoeic artists was Richard Wagner, who created in *The Ring Cycle* a new myth of a regenerated world brought about through the necessary destruction of the present world.

⁵⁶ Lawrence, *Seven Pillars* 282.

to live a useful life in the face of such knowledge, and Auda is portrayed as another figure who suggests a possible answer. He values gift-giving as much as Lawrence does, loving the power of being able to give life to an enemy, to spare the enemy's death, just as Lawrence gives "freedom" to the Arabs. Moreover, Auda loves the power to engender life, a feeling that Lawrence neither comprehends nor sympathizes with. MacEwen retells Lawrence's account of an incident when he stumbled upon Auda and one of his wives engaged in sexual activity. Lawrence cannot understand the appeal of sex nor can he understand Auda's desire to conceive a son. Here Lawrence comes across as a ridiculous prig, not someone whose wisdom we should trust. Thus the profundity of the earlier embedded utterance, that secret gem of truth in the centre of the poem, is undercut, perhaps ignored. It is veiled by the frame of the poem. Lawrence fears sexuality here too, but seems to understand the irony of the cultural gaps between westerners, who want "everything," and Auda, who wants only a son. Yet Lawrence also describes the ways in which cultural differences are bridged, especially by humour. It is easy for Lawrence and his Arab companions to joke about the little things, but when it comes to desire, they do not really understand each other. Auda knows more than Lawrence. He knows a secret and Lawrence knows he

knows. Lawrence ends with an image of the coldness of the desert, which suggests the emotional isolation and loneliness that the subject fears in becoming a separate individual. Perhaps Lawrence's wish for the world's end, which he imagines as being a western trait, is the same as the wish for the phallic mother, the union with whom would end emotional isolation and loneliness, if only she were not so fearsome as is the thought of the world's destruction.

Lawrence continues his philosophic musings. In "What It's Like" (35), Lawrence asks what it is like to believe in everything, presumably set against the "nothing" and emptiness of the desert. He answers that it is like the Howeitats remedy for snakebite,⁵⁷ and he implies that such belief is naive. Significantly, the question is linked to death, whose uncanny presence haunts the entire volume, perhaps suggesting that ultimately, in the face of death, the opposition of emptiness and fullness is a false dichotomy.

MacEwen's original title for the volume was *The Virgin Warrior*,⁵⁸ and the poem of that name (36) is spoken with the self-deprecating humour of the warrior whose practical

⁵⁷ Again, these lines are slightly paraphrased from *Seven Pillars* 270.

⁵⁸ MacEwen Papers, Box 18.

understanding of the world, and of war, is conditioned almost entirely by the literature he has read: Aristophanes, read between marches in the original Greek and evoking, for the reader of the poem, the notion of satire and *Lysistrata's* plea for pacifism; *Morte d'Arthur*, the medieval romance that reminds the reader of Lawrence's youthful idealization of the code of chivalry;⁵⁹ and even Kipling, witness to the British Empire's last days of glory in colonized India. Ever the modern split subject, Lawrence is profoundly aware of the ironic contrasts and congruencies between his own position and the earlier ideologies represented by these texts.

"The Mirage" (37) adds to the fetishicity of the entire collection by thematizing the secret and the suggestion of a mystery associated with the physical elements of earth, air, water, and fire; it also restates MacEwen's earlier appetite theme: "I have come to explore and contain them all. / I am an eye." There is a haunting sense of emptiness in this juxtaposition of an inner and an outer vision, and the poem is developed through a series of negative references: no landmarks, "you are not here for nothing", no easy way, seas that are "invisible", secrets, "nothing is unknown", and the

⁵⁹ The historical Lawrence mentions, with no irony, reading this text in the hospital palace in Khartoum (*Seven Pillars* 111).

mention of a "thin and dangerous horizon" in the last line. The horizon is dangerous because it functions fetishistically, confirming but also simultaneously denying the possibility of limitless, empty space and, by implication, the possibility of any speaking subject's self-definition. Even the title of the poem is phrased as a negative: the mirage, a vision of something that is not there, links to themes of disguise and masquerade. The mirage is a figment of the viewer's desire: "I am an eye," but what the viewer sees may not be real. As if to underscore this meaning of the poem, the Lawrence persona so carefully constructed by MacEwen once again fetishistically reveals MacEwen's concealed voice, especially in the line "I am the living center of your sight," which echoes the opening lines of "The Eye" from *The Shadow-Maker*: "I implode / into the shrinking centre of your sight," a process which is as threatening as the horizon of Lawrence's poem: "I give way to the Terror / just beyond the door."⁶⁰

"The Meeting" (38) is a found poem, underlined in MacEwen's copy of the book, structured as a litany of exotic names, relying for its effect on the music of the unfamiliar sounds. In the context of MacEwen's interest in sacred alphabets and paradisaic naming, however, the litany takes on

⁶⁰ Gwendolyn MacEwen, "The Eye," *The Shadow-Maker* 4.

further significance beyond being merely a figure for the exotic. The poet is conjuring here. The names are magical, conjuring an image of the exotic desert, but an image no more substantial than the mirage which preceded it. The material world of the desert seems to pass in and out of existence as it intersects with dream worlds arising from spiritual, philosophical, and sexual desires. Like the invocational utterances in MacEwen's earlier alphabet poems, this exotic naming fetishistically signifies the desire for the phallic mother, a desire which the sacred language embodies in sound and written signs.

From this veiled suggestion of desire for the phallic mother, MacEwen's Lawrence persona next considers what is, for him, another source of anxiety and fear, homosexuality. In "Daoud and Farraj" (39), the line "And the sun and moon looked down on them with favor" may be somewhat pompous, but it is part of the poem's attempt to naturalize the (presumably) homoerotic love of these two young men. It is ironic that Lawrence himself would never admit to, never mind indulge in, such a transgressive form of desire, yet here he strives to see it in others as being as natural as the landscape.⁶¹ But perhaps Lawrence can accept this

⁶¹ Years later, Lawrence explained his views on homosexuality in a letter to Charlotte Shaw: "I've seen lots of man-and-man loves: very lovely and fortunate some of them

behaviour in the two young servants because he does not really see them as human: "I loved them the way I loved fine horses" -- and we remember that Lawrence was critical of Ali, who caressed his horses.⁶² Moreover, Lawrence's association of these boys with horses relates to the images of wild animals for sexual desire seen in previous poems. One does not, according to Lawrence, have intimate physical contact with any creature, especially an animal or another man. These two men, figured throughout the poem as twins, as a unit, (although they are not brothers, he notes, because that would make their love incestuous and thus doubly transgressive) are a reflection of Lawrence's split psyche, a projection of his desire and revulsion. Here death is figured as a snake in the idyllic garden with its edenic associations, and the snake, death, creates impotence: "Snake death sucked the nectar from their loins." Death and impotence are, of course, what the fetishist most fears. The haunting presence of death in the poems continues in "Towards Akaba" (40), which emphasizes the death and emptiness in what should have been a great military victory.

were. I take it women can be the same. And if our minds so go, why not our bodies? There's only a wall between farm and farmyard" (Lawrence to Charlotte Shaw, Nov. 6, 1928. Qtd. in Mack 424).

⁶² MacEwen, "Ali," *Lawrence Poems* 30.

In "Nitroglycerine Tulips" (41), the aesthetic economy collides with the social and material economies of war. Lawrence feels guilty about seeing beauty in war and is terribly aware of the incongruity of seeing this beauty, and of trying to make the war aesthetically pleasing, straightening out the row of Turkish corpses. This incongruity is the territory of fetishism, the in-between ground between incompatible discourses that somehow have been juxtaposed and in which material objects must simultaneously embody conflicting kinds of value: aesthetic beauty is juxtaposed to the ugliness and horror of war; the garden (tulip) to the weapon (bomb); and seduction to death, as a way to escape the tension and insanity of these seemingly incontrovertible, inconceivable contradictions. The final image of the poem, of the corpses of the Turks as disintegrated into little bits of matter flying in the explosion, reduced to their most simple visible material form, suggests that the pressures of these contradictions is too much for the corpses to embody. This final image suggests a loss of control, an inability of even fetishistic strategies to always negotiate such treacherous conditions.

"Solar Wind" (42), the title poem for section II of the collection, describes something mysterious, out of the range of vision, or on the margins of vision. Images of staring

and not staring reduce the world to fetishistic scopophilia,
the fixation on viewing (or attempting to resist viewing)
the object of desire:

It comes upon you unawares --
 something racing out of the edge
Of your vision, as when you are staring at something
 and not staring -- looking through --

Speaking in the second person, as if to implicate the reader in the action of the poem much as the position of the instruments of cutting implicate the viewer as the agent in *pronk* still lifes, the speaker seems to desire to penetrate and thus claim the object of viewing by making it transparent through the sheer force of his gaze; but his gaze cannot dominate or possess the entire visual field, for there is always something on the periphery of his vision, "out on the edge," which surprises him and resists his grasp. Although the beauty of the images of the desert wind as a "herd of white horses" and as "the color of the sun" vividly portrays the landscape as aesthetically pleasing and therefore desirable in Lawrence's eyes, it is the ambivalence of his gaze which provides the key to his writings about the war. Lawrence speaks in this poem as a split subject, part Englishman, part Arab. The part of his psyche which identifies with the Bedouin appreciates most the beauty of the desert, but as an Englishman, his gaze is

an imperial gaze which sees the wind as "gold wind" representing the economic riches of the region which form the object of England's interest. It is also a more fetishistic gaze because Lawrence desires to both conceal and reveal his duplicitous role to the Arabs, and thus the desert haunts him with reminders "on the periphery / Of [his] sight" that he is there as an agent of economic imperialism. Representing the English desire which is interested not so much in the Arabs as a people as in the riches that can be derived from their lands, Lawrence becomes an inverted Midas-like figure, strangely inhuman: he has "eyes / which are nuggets of gold" presumably because gold is all they desire to see. These gold-nugget eyes see the wind as transformative, and as a symbol for the war itself, "[l]eaving everything gold, gold in its wake." The "gold wind" embodies simultaneously the disparate values of both the natural world, as a barely material force of nature, and the human material economy, as the universal exchange value, and is thus a symbol for the commodification of an originally natural substance, petroleum ("black gold"). As the wind transforms everything to gold, it eliminates all differences, creating sameness and commodity value as if the natural world were not valuable in itself. As nuggets of gold, the first things that Lawrence's eyes

see are rifle barrels, once again showing the close relation here between economic imperialism and violence. Further symbolizing the reduction of all differences to those of commodity value, even the perceived differences in time itself are then burned up, melted down through the power of the heat of the solar wind: "The past and the future are burning up; the present / melts down the middle." In the face of this vision of the domination of commodity-producing material economies, Lawrence turns to the spiritual. He claims that this vision has answered all his metaphysical questions: "all mysteries have been solved. . . all questions answered," but the poem does not give the solution explicitly. Moreover, the moment is unholy and Lawrence believes that he "must find a god to worship or [he] will die." Thus the juxtaposition of natural, commodity, and spiritual values, and the ambivalence represented in Lawrence's scopophilic gaze, make this poem a good example of fetishicity in poetic texts. This poem does not give the solutions found by Lawrence to "all mysteries" mentioned at the end of the poem, but the poem that follows it in the series is called "Solutions," as if to suggest that they will be revealed (but they are not).

The solutions described in "Solutions" (43) are not the solutions to the world's mysteries, but rather

Lawrence's very pragmatic resolutions of the disputes and legal conundrums among his men during the war. They come to him to mediate their disputes and, feeling very inadequate, he must nevertheless find a way to solve their problems. One solution is to cast a magic spell, although it seems Lawrence does not credit such belief in magic. He is, however, willing to use any and all means at his disposal, including his men's superstition, to cope with the disputes brought to him. His spell involves staring at them with his own medusa-like "evil eye." In an inversion of the scopophilic instinct, his gaze repeats and reflects back the gaze of the evil eye used as a weapon by one man toward another. The repetition and reflection of the evil eye's gaze and its simultaneous embodiment of an index of racial difference -- his eye is "horrible" because it is blue -- show that Lawrence's strategy is successful because it evokes in his men the fear underlying the fetishistic operation of racist discourse. The poem ends with a reference to the deception inherent in Lawrence's role in Arabia. He knows that "it was all a pack of lies," that there are "no real / solutions anywhere, for anything." His tone is resigned, despairing, and cynical.

Lawrence recovers his more usual tone of detached humour, however, if only for a few lines before he begins

more seriously to worry once again. Structured as a cataloguing of the silly beliefs of the religious men around him, as seen in the improbable and unnatural occurrences that they expect to accompany the end of the world, "On the Day of Resurrection" (44) could also be read as a tongue-in-cheek, symbolic representation of the sociopolitical implications of the creation of a modern Arab state. Lawrence says, "On the day of resurrection, all animals / and inanimate things / will be given the power of speech." Once again, we see the confusion of boundaries between animate entities and inanimate material that is the fetishistic territory of the original sense of the uncanny. Lawrence continues, "A monster will arise out of the earth," and its attributes -- grotesque in the classical sense, since it is made of parts of a number of animals -- suggest the original *fetisso*, which was thought to be made from the chance fixation of disparate elements into a unity. The poem ends by claiming that this monster will speak Arabic, a language that, to western ears, is exotic. On one level, the poem symbolically codes Lawrence's desire for, and fear of, the phallic mother. On another level, the Arab state is the object of his desire and fear, a freedom he has longed to bestow on the Arab people even as he is troubled that he may be playing a role in the creation of something monstrous.

The grotesque creature described by Lawrence in this poem could also be a symbol for the disparate Arab tribes, elsewhere figured as "the facets of a jewel" which no one can unite,⁶³ associated in a semblance of a European-style nation-state.

"Morning Horses" (45) once again aestheticizes the war, except for the line that says that in the daylight it was "an open wound that stank and oozed." It speaks in terms of profound ambivalence, trying to make the war palatable but always noting its sordidness. Night is associated here with voluptuousness, serenity, and eloquence, but it also has "ghost-flowers" which are "withering," the haunting of death. Speech and sight are foregrounded, as when Lawrence claims that their campaign was easy enough to do blindfolded, but it is "nasty business." They can do their work blindfolded, but one man actually becomes blind. He seems to be coming to Lawrence as the others did in "Solutions," but Lawrence can do nothing for him. MacEwen quotes the lines about being blindfolded and becoming blind from Lawrence's own writing.

The contradictions and ambivalences of the previous poems have built the tension in the collection to what was,

⁶³ Gwendolyn MacEwen, "The Peace Conference," *Lawrence Poems* 59.

for Lawrence, the most traumatic event of the war. "Deraa" (46) begins haltingly, with a false start:

I started to write something like:
*The citadels of my integrity were lost, or
quo vadis from here, Lawrence?*

How pathetic.

Its fractured discourse mirrors Lawrence's real-life difficulty in writing about this episode, the rape. Here the identification of his body with his castle and sexual inviolability are made explicit. His pain is communicated through the fractured discourse and strange tone, at first matter-of-fact, then somewhat defiant: "life is shameful; I am shameful. There." He naturalizes the rape, by making it no more worse than many other things that happen in life, but Lawrence is also defiant. He blurts out the truth and then discovers that it is not as bad to utter this truth as he had thought it would be. He reveals his deepest inner secret here or, rather, the rape reveals it to him: that he is not perfect, that he was not heroic in this incident, that he wished to die rather than to fight back. He claims that he knew he would come out of it "bleeding and broken and singing." His Turkish assaulters "split[] a bloody pathway through [his] soul." This splitting is double, a physical violation, but also a splitting of the psyche, and of the heroic ideal from the sordid reality. That Lawrence

imagines "singing" might refer to his obsessive writing and re-writing of this incident as a form of healing. For MacEwen, Lawrence is iconic and inspirational partly because he was a split subject, representing the possibilities for the heroic in the modern world, the hero broken and fragmented by trauma but nevertheless going on somehow with life.

"The Real Enemies" (48) recounts the death of Farraj and Daoud, Lawrence's young bodyguards written about earlier. Lawrence claims here that the real enemies are omnipotence, the infinite, and hope. These enemies are fetishes in the original sense, because they are "those beasts the soul invents / and then bows down before." They are not even "of this world." The phrase "For those who thought clearly, failure was the only goal" is underlined in MacEwen's copy of the book, indicating that it is Lawrence's own line. Inverting Europe's usual view of heroism, Lawrence here contemplates failure as honour, as the relinquishing of self, as freedom, and wonders how this relates to the freedom he had wished to bestow on the Arabs as a gift, when all he can give them now is failure, but a failure that they surely must have already come to understand as being inseparable from living in the desert. The sacred economy appears in the surrender of the self to God. The war was a

holy one declared upon God, and as God won, men became victors. Lawrence here inverts logical categories in trying to understand life and death. He is trying to convince himself, but the tone suggests that he does not actually succeed.

"Their Deaths" (49) is another poem on the deaths of Farraj and Daoud. In what must have been one of his most difficult actions in the war, Lawrence preserves Farraj's physical integrity by killing him after he has been shot, to protect him from the degradations of the Turks on his "perfect body." Lawrence could not save himself from a similar crime against the "citadel of his integrity," and now Farraj and Daoud inhabit his "black dream." His dismissal of them because of his war duties reminds him of an earlier, cooler, flippant dismissal (of Thomas, the journalist) when he said, "I have to go now; they're having a war." Now he knows the meaning of war, and it is nothing to be flippant about.

"Ghazala's Foal" (50) recounts a sentimental memory of the death of a camel's foal. The Bedouin men skinned the dead foal, and when the mother remembered it and, disoriented, would not go on, they let her sniff the skin. This poem explores the territory between life and death, and the uncanny power of an inanimate object, the skin, to make

the camel act.

The poems about death build in intensity in the collection. After the deaths of Farraj and Daoud (echoed in the death of the foal) and the rape, Dahoum's death is an even more intense cause of suffering for Lawrence. "The Death of Dahoum" (51) represents the most painful death of all, of Lawrence's most loved one. MacEwen's version of Lawrence's voice here is far more frank than the historical Lawrence about his feelings for the young man. Lawrence confesses in the poem that he could have drowned in Dahoum's eyes "forever." Water as an element, introduced in the first poem, now is seen in its destructive power, for it is "water" that filled Dahoum's lungs. Dahoum tells Lawrence in dreams that the gift of freedom, Lawrence's supposed motivation for even being in Arabia at all, was wasted. In the mournful tone of the poem, Lawrence is haunted by absences here: of Dahoum's ability to speak when he died -- and of Lawrence's knowledge of it, of Lawrence's presence at Dahoum's death, of the freedom they fought for.

Intermixed with Lawrence's personal losses of friends during the war -- the foal, the bodyguards, Dahoum -- and of his integrity are the more impersonal deaths, the atrocities of war: "Tafas" (52) tells of the massacre ordered by Lawrence when he witnessed the results of a Turkish attack

on a village, the third key event in Lawrence's experience of the Arab Revolt around which MacEwen organizes Part Two of the series. Lawrence's own men and he himself went crazy with bloodlust and this is probably the episode that makes Lawrence the most ashamed. He discovers his barbarity, his weakness in trying to live up to his noble ideals. He sees a woman who was raped with a bayonet by a Turk, and a child nearly beheaded but still alive after the Turks' attack. The images of a mother impaled in the womb and of the almost-beheaded girl encode castration anxiety as sexual difference and sexual violence as they highlight the incompatibilities in the discourses of sexuality and war. The image of the child haunts Lawrence for the rest of the war, until the victory at Damascus. In a gesture which questions the definitions of madness and sanity, he tries to normalize all this -- "The next day was Friday" -- fully aware of the incongruity in doing so. Images of animals, once signifying unbridled desire, here represent the calmness that contrasts to Lawrence's insanity, as he notes, "Then we blew in the heads of the animals." The ghosts of these animals and, through the chain of associations, the ghosts of the people slaughtered at Tafas seem to haunt Lawrence in the next poem, "Horses" (53), in which he lists the kinds of horses he has ridden, probably unaware that in so listing them, he

tends to reduce them, pronk-like, to the status of interchangeable commodities. Lawrence ends the poem with images of haunting, darkness, and midnight, when the ghosts speak to him.

"A Photograph from Carcemish" (54) is a love poem, an elegy for Dahoum, who also haunts Lawrence's dreams as the horses do. Even though Dahoum died of pneumonia, significantly Lawrence associates his death with sexuality and violence: "my darling, my brother, / the pistol asleep in your young groin." The poem then becomes a simple outpouring of pain and longing for the beloved.

Damascus was supposedly to be the site of Lawrence's and the Arabs' triumph, for a victory here signified that they would be victorious in the war that was nearing its end. But in the poem "Damascus," Lawrence merely seems to go through the motions, zombie-like, the dream that had been his inspiration now dead in him. Lawrence remembers,

. . . I noticed a sword
 lying unused in a garden, a still garden
 Behind a palm tree. And the worthless Turkish money
 was flying crazily through the air.

The fetishicity of the poem is evident in the juxtaposition of the edenic garden with its prominent tree (symbolic of the phallic mother), the sword which, although "unused," is nevertheless potentially threatening (symbolic of castration

anxiety), and the "worthless Turkish money," seemingly alive because it is "flying crazily through the air," yet inducing fear because its embodiment of material values has become unstable. There is also mention of food, but no appetite -- none of the symbols of sexual or economic potency are any more alive than Lawrence is. Several lines from Lawrence's own writing were borrowed by MacEwen for this poem,⁶⁴ adding to the fetishicity of the poem with hints of MacEwen's masquerade as Lawrence. Moreover, the poem is addressed to Dahoum's ghost and thus the memory of death, the "ghost of a lack," haunts the poem.

The final section of *The T. E. Lawrence Poems*, "Necessary Evils: Aftermath," concerns Lawrence's life after the war. At this time, Lawrence preferred to disappear from the public eye, changing his name and joining the Air Force in what was effectively a demotion in rank. Lawrence wrote about this period of his life in *The Mint*,⁶⁵ and MacEwen

⁶⁴ These lines are underlined in MacEwen's copy of the book, indicating that they are quotations from Lawrence: "The dream was dead in me before we reached Damascus"; "the air silk with locusts"; "Arabs smelled of dried sweat, / and the English had a hot aura of piss / And naptha"; "They're burning Damascus." MacEwen Papers, Box 18.

⁶⁵ T. E. Lawrence, *The Mint* (Ltd. ed., New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1936; Unexpurgated ed., London: Jonathan Cape, 1955; Rev. unexpurgated ed., Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1973, 1978). Lawrence intended to print this work

draws on this text, Mack's biography, and the letters published after Lawrence's death to reveal the contradictions and conflicts that continued to plague Lawrence even as he sought to conceal them (and himself!) from the world.

The final section opens with "The Peace Conference" (59). The line "After prostituting myself in the service of an alien race," underlined in MacEwen's copy of the volume, gives us, in Lawrence's own words, the powerful and disturbing metaphor of Lawrence's role in the war as a prostitute. The idea of prostitution brings together sexual and material economies in the commodification of the body and of sexual acts. Lawrence sees the Arabs here as an "alien race," completely other. They are at the margins, while Lawrence is at the still center of the political controversy resulting from the war's end. Now it is geographies rather than body parts that are sundered, as nations are carved up by the victors, as castration anxiety intersects with politics and geography. The psyche is implicated as vulnerable as well: "everyone was carving up / the kingdoms of each other's minds." In a variation on the theme of betrayal and loss, Lawrence's conscience speaks to

himself on a hand-press in a very limited edition, but his death prevented this. The first edition of fifty copies was printed posthumously.

him, claiming that he has not done well in freeing the Arabs, only to have them become enslaved or dominated by "ourselves," the British. What is lost is the original dream, Feisal's dream that now Lawrence has to share. In the imagery of victors playing chess with the world, Lawrence sees himself as a helpless pawn, a thing, not a person, and thus experiences the effects of the peace conference process as analogous to the reification of human subjectivity in commodity fetishism, which also relates the peace process to the Western world's interest in gaining control or at least access to Middle East and Arabian sources of petroleum for commodity production. Fetishism is also implicated in Lawrence's sense of his disguise during the Revolt, which hid the true power relations coming into play in the political and economic arenas opened by the war, but which also revealed them. They were never entirely secret for him. In reflecting on the currently vulnerable position of Arab society, Lawrence asserts, "no one can unite the facets of a jewel." He fears the imposition of an ideology of nationhood, an ideology developed in Europe for European needs, onto Arab society, and he fears the cultural and material imperialism that the imposition of a European ideology entails. When Lawrence imagines the Bedouin as "facets of a jewel," he associates them with non-productive

expenditure subversive of commodity values, as if imaginatively to keep Arab lands and society safe from capitalist exploitation; but the bitter, resigned tone of the poem reveals that Lawrence also intuits that the jewel is simultaneously the ultimate commodity and that non-productive expenditure is absolutely necessary to the functioning of the commodity marketplace. The Arabs and their world will not escape.

The theme of role-playing and disguise continues to be important in Lawrence's life even after the war, as he adopts yet another persona. In "Tall Tales" (60), Lawrence considers the nature of truth, truthfulness, and role-playing, comparing the war to theatre, the "theatre of war"; He compares his situation to that of a poet, who also plays with words and masters the Lie, the Grand Fiction: "Poets and men like me who fight for something / contained in words, but not words." Here Lawrence admits to veiling the truth when he confronts the irony of words that can "contain" truth, but not embody it, words that are not themselves the truth, in this meditation on the nature of truth and language, in which truth is seen to be provisional and slippery. One of the truths Lawrence veils in England is his name and role as "El Auren," "Lawrence of Arabia." In England after the war, Lawrence joined the Air Force to

hide, to keep his energies in check. "In the Ranks" (61) reveals that he assumed a secret identity, keeping his true name hidden and secret.⁶⁶ MacEwen's Lawrence is once again dreaming of death here, but a "death turned inside out," seen in the image of "crustaceans who wear their skeletons / on the outside." In this inversion of inner and outer, the most secret layers of the psyche are revealed. Even though Lawrence feels that his soul is "in prison," he says, "Outside, I was whatever England wanted me to be, / but in the ranks I was an eager servant / eating dirt until its taste was normal to me." Here MacEwen highlights the contradictions in Lawrence's feelings of self-worth. Debasing himself, a split subject, he believes that "outside" he was valuable because malleable, but the outside world does not really know him. Being in the ranks reinforces his sense of worthlessness. He further claims that as England's servant he is the lowest of humans: even in Arabia, a slave has more privileges than a servant, who must remain subservient. Lawrence also admits in this poem to enjoying receiving the whippings he had arranged using elaborate subterfuge, but MacEwen's version of this most

⁶⁶ Lawrence experimented with several names, including "E. Smith" and "John Hume Ross," but finally settled on "T. E. Shaw," some think in subconscious tribute to his friend George Bernard Shaw, who served as a father figure for Lawrence.

secret of Lawrence's activities emphasizes Lawrence's self-loathing as the probable cause, without relating these flagellations as Mack does, for example, to the whippings inflicted on Lawrence by his mother during his childhood.

In "The R. A. F." (62), Lawrence merges with MacEwen's other Icarus-muses, "scaling the heavens in a blaze of petrol." We also see that Lawrence's hideout in the R.A.F. is safe because there are no women there, no women associated with his study of "the Machine," "any Machine." The machine becomes the object of his sublimated desire. MacEwen shows that this goal is another version of Lawrence's desire to give a people the gift of freedom, only here it is all "mankind" who receive the gift, and the freedom is not political, but material, the freedom from gravity. The speaker's jaunty tone clearly hides pain: "I was sporting one of my new names," but the reason for needing a new name remains painful, if subtextual, here. Through her Lawrence persona in this poem, MacEwen adds a new name to her lexicon of lost or forbidden exotic places indicative of the desire for the phallic mother, sites that embody an exotic otherness: the "Ruba el Khali," the Empty Quarter of Arabia "where no man had ever gone," at least no European man. The Arabic name for the Empty Quarter is a homonym for "Kali," the Hindu goddess of destruction, who is

associated with the "Kali Yuga" or the current Dark Age, after whom MacEwen named the protagonist in *Noman's Land*; thus the reference to the Empty Quarter also suggests darkness and destruction. Nevertheless, Lawrence claims he was happy during this time: in another image of Icarus, he says, "My soul rushed upwards / if only for a time / on smoky, blackened wings."

In "Clouds Hill" (63), Lawrence refers to himself as "the Prince of Mecca," and contrasts ironically the Mideast with "home": "At least I think I am at home, but / even the house is travelling somewhere -- / through time, I think, and beyond." Lawrence asks, "What is exotic?" and claims that "[h]ome is more exotic than anywhere."⁶⁷ Lawrence realizes the irony that one can only see "home" as exotic if one is an outsider to it, as he believes he is: he inhabits the uncanny condition of *unheimlich*. Lawrence's claim that "[e]verything has designed itself" creates a sense of the uncanny, because everything would have to be alive in order to have designed itself. The planets, wind, and night know him, which implies that they watch or see him. He is awaiting something so important that it will never be, but if Lawrence knows what it is, he keeps it secret. It may

⁶⁷ This is also a claim made by MacEwen in mid-career about Canada, after writing her eden poems and her early novels about a European magician and Pharoah Akhenaton.

well be unspeakable or unknowable. He retraces his journey back to Mecca in his dreams, and again we also hear MacEwen savoring the exotic names:

*Damascus, Deraa, Amman, Jerusalem
Beersheba, Ma'an, Akaba, Wejh, Um Lej,
Yenbo, Rabegh
Jidda, Mecca.*

Lawrence gives us an update on important characters: Feisal is dead (death haunts these poems), and Bob and Mother are spreading the word of God in China, playing their part in the civilizing mission of the British Empire, but news from there is nil. Lawrence is deciphering his diary, written upside down, another image of inversion and of the secret text. Ironically he lives on chocolate while writing about war.

"The Void" (64) continues the fetishicity of the collection in the intersection of political and religious systems. It presents the contrast between the aging Lawrence and his foolish younger self, as he remembers flying the Hejaz flag from the pinnacle of All Souls, a schoolboy prank (but still, after the war, he committed it as an adult). In another instance of his overvaluation of bodily perfection, he finds his gold teeth almost obscene, which reminds the reader of his eyes as "nuggets of gold" in "Solar Wind." Lawrence is one of those who, as Pietz says, defines his

selfhood as inextricably linked to his body, and the reality of imperfection haunts him everywhere with a sense of lack or loss. For example, in this poem he likens himself to a pilgrim at the Kaaba, another exoticism, but he highlights the geometrical imperfection of the shrine: "none of its sides or angles equal" and draws attention to the problem of how a material thing (the shrine) can simultaneously embody contradictory kinds of value (aesthetic, spiritual). Then his dismissive comment, "for whatever that's worth," suggests the desire to bury the problem rather than confront it. The fetishicity of the poem continues: Lawrence sees his gold teeth as "obscene," which links the discourses of psychosexual and commodity economies. Lawrence is still haunted by Arabia, especially by the death of the camel foal. In a self-referential, self-deprecatory, ironic tone, he bemoans the absence of his previous comrades and dreams. This is a "sad, left-handed poem" with all the resonances of left-ness accreting from the previous poems.

"Boanerges" was the name Lawrence gave to his motorcycle, to all his motorcycles, or "devil-horses" as Auda would say. In the poem "Boanerges" (65), this name for Lawrence's fetishized motorcycles conjures the grotesque, the evil, and the dangerous: the third line links explicitly to death: "Someone warned me I'd break my neck on my present

one." Lawrence is MacEwen's "motorcycle Icarus"⁶⁸ here, knowing himself "to be streets ahead of everyone."

Lawrence's Boanerges is a wild motor-god, another image of the machine, like the airplane, that is his sublimated love-object. The imagery of the poem resonates with all of the images of horses (and camels) in the previous poems. In the age of the machine, it is fitting that Lawrence now has a mechanical horse, for the real horses are dead or vanished: the machine has come alive, as all commodities seem to do. There is sublimated sexual energy in the poem, in Lawrence's relation to riding on the motorcycle: "I ride this wild motor-horse until my guts explode / like seeds of dynamite, then / fizzle out into perfect nothing," repeats images from the war of dynamite and guts exploding. Just as in the war, perfection is emptiness. The poem ends with a couplet that shows Lawrence repeating, in an ambiguous tone, a child's prayer: "Now every night I pray the lord my soul to keep." Fetishistically and compulsively, he adds, "And make sure everything's alive before I go to sleep," a reminder of the origins of the fetish in the "primitive" belief in projecting life onto disparate objects.

⁶⁸ Gwendolyn MacEwen, "Poem Improvised Around a First Line," *A Breakfast for Barbarians* 16. Interestingly, this poem is oddly structured by a sense of loss: MacEwen notes, "The first line around which it was improvised has disappeared."

In "The Desirability of El Aurens" (66), Lawrence tries to resist the mythology that is growing around him (although we know that historically he did much to augment it as well). Historically, he felt profoundly ambivalent about the myth of Lawrence of Arabia. In this poem, MacEwen underscores his hatred for the role-playing, portraying him as seeing it for exactly what it is and trying to set the historical record straight by devaluing his past: "My past is a tin can tied to the tail of a dog / That rattles whenever he does." Disguise and impersonation are thematized again, as a "discharged mental patient / with the face of a wrinkled monkey" is reported to be impersonating Lawrence. As object of desire, he receives many love letters from women and men who claim to know him, but Lawrence discredits them by quoting the devil: "but my name is Legion." The man who had earlier seen himself as a Christ-figure is surely confusing spiritual values here or perhaps revealing that he has fallen, but he clings to his earliest views on physical intimacy: "they don't know that one live thing / can never touch another live thing, and / Intimacy is shameful unless it's perfect." When Lawrence refers to his heart as a "monstrous piece of machinery," he inverts his earlier overvaluation of the machine as plane and motorcycle, revealing his confusion and ambivalence. "Let his several

selves enthrall them!" he writes, while the real Lawrence sits comfortably in his cottage, "smiling and listening to Mozart" (his favourite music). Here MacEwen shows us Lawrence's masquerade as strategic, as a defense against the world's importunities. Having seen him as so profoundly split and fractured as a subject, however, the reader must assume that the persona who here seems in control of the fictions he has invented is at once both a figure for Lawrence's profoundest desire and merely another of his masquerades.

Coming after the previous poem, in which Lawrence claims to be really very happy to hide at Clouds Hill while his personas entertain the masses, "There Is No Place to Hide" (67) is doubly ironic. In contrast to the public figure described in the first stanza, who decries publicity and shyly backs into the limelight, Lawrence says here that really he is courtmartialing himself. The lines "I can neither reveal myself / nor hide. No matter what I do, I am naked" reveal him to be caught in the problematic of the fetish. "Everything shows through and yet no one can see me" suggests a body that is simultaneously present and absent. His invisibility is also exposure: it suggests absence and loss, but there is no body to veil the truth, either, as "everything shines through." The poem ends with an image of

a bird smashing against the window. Lawrence believes that it was admiring itself, a figure for narcissism, but then claims it was really mad. Clearly Lawrence is the narcissist here, seeing himself in the bird and projecting onto it his own fear of madness, but this is also an instance when the Lawrence persona functions fetishistically for MacEwen, concealing but also revealing her own fear of madness.⁶⁹

As the collection draws to a close, it comes nearly full-circle in a poem that adds more negative inflections to the images of water seen in the opening poem. In "Hot Baths" (68), Lawrence desires water to "boil the Hell" out of himself. Water is the world of pure idea in which Lawrence "wallows", as both mind and body "adore" this world, again confusing spiritual, intellectual, and material values. Lawrence utterly rejects the physical body here but discovers the origin of poetry in the void found "in the hollow diaphragm under the cage of ribs" -- where the heart would be, if one had a heart, or the stomach, if one had an appetite. This poem reveals some of the deepest fissures in Lawrence as a speaking subject constructed by the intersection of competing fetish discourses of the physical

⁶⁹ Based on her own research, including an interview with Aasta Levine, one of MacEwen's friends who also grew up with a mentally ill mother, Rosemary Sullivan believes that MacEwen probably always feared that she might herself become mentally ill. See Sullivan's biography, especially 303-04.

body and the material, aesthetic, and spiritual economies. Aligning himself with the devil, Lawrence is profoundly ambivalent about his self-worth and his spiritual beliefs. He has sought purification by opposite means, burning and boiling, "since the day [he] was born," but is "still not clean". His desire to avoid further pain by resorting to "the direct route to heaven," the sacred well of Zem-Zem at Mecca, shows once again the desire for and fear of the phallic mother in the fixation on distant or lost exotic places.

Lawrence finally achieves in death his desire for union with the phallic mother. In "Notes from the Dead Land" (69), Lawrence speaks as an already-dead subject, to Feisal, who is already dead also. Death comes to Lawrence, as he anticipated, by the machine, the black van that caused the accident, but also metaphorically via the animal, the "death camel." After he falls, he addresses the dark hearts of tall trees, but they do not answer: there is no longer any life reflected back at him, or discoursing with him. Lawrence thinks of the Arabic belief in angels recording good and bad deeds and of his fixation on perfection. His life was not perfect, nor his body, his loves, his goals, but his death here is perfect. He salutes both the angels, as the Arabs taught him. His last word is an Arabic word, "Maktub: it is

written," uttered as an incantation, as magic or spiritual syllables fusing writing and life, fitting last words for a poet.

The final poem in the collection, "Departures" (70), demonstrates the power of a poem shaped by the symbolic vocabulary of fetish discourses in its images of a sword in the garden, "Feisal's sword, flashing" (on the downstroke); "ghostly riders on blonde and dreaming camels"; the splitting open of the sky; and the foreign last word, "salaam," another exotic farewell. Moreover, the form of the poem suggests the separation of the body and spirit at death as the lines seem to split, the two halves falling away from each other, imitating the splitting open of the sky, until the final line, which is whole. The line structure, then, imitates the drifting that Lawrence says is happening to the images in his consciousness, and the final, whole line represents Lawrence's "perfect" death.

As a literary creation, Lawrence functioned as a fetish and a muse for MacEwen. MacEwen "became" Lawrence, speaking in his voice and often in his own words, but she was also inspired by him. MacEwen's interests and career mirrored Lawrence's in several important ways, although on a far less grand scale. In her disguise as Lawrence, she uses a symbolic vocabulary derived from multiple fetish discourses

to reveal the profound fear of and desire for the Other which underlies our relations as gendered beings with spiritual longings, artistic tastes, and material needs. In earlier poems, fetishicity became an important strategy for the exploration of themes of lost exotic or sacred worlds and the desire to recover them, and of the all-consuming appetite as a metaphor for a valuable openness to all experience. MacEwen's rewriting of Lawrence in *The T. E. Lawrence Poems*, however, is a far more complex creation, which fully employs fetishicity's tendency to problematize the incommensurability of discursive values which are paradoxically fixed in the same material site. The volume's overdetermination by fetish discourses imitates textually the spiritual, racial, geographical, material, legal, and sexual fissures and gaps experienced by Lawrence as it re-mythologizes with an uncanny energy this important historical figure.

Conclusion

The Divided City, The Speechless Sea

"The ghost of a lack hangs over the scene."

-- Hal Foster

Something happened to Gwendolyn MacEwen's poetry after she published *The T. E. Lawrence Poems*. The fetishicity apparent in so many of the earlier poems disappears in the only other collection of new poetry published after the *Lawrence Poems*, *Afterworlds*.¹ In this collection, MacEwen writes poems that make it clear that she accepts death: not only her own personal death, but also a more universal sense of death, including the possible death of our planet. The poet speaks paradoxically with extraordinary passion for the world, for life, for all of the beings here, and with detachment, as if from a distance, separated from her beloved created world by a "field of endless sunlight" (A 14).

The poet's muse for these poems is Shiva, the Hindu god of creation and destruction, and it is in both roles that he is called on by the poet to inspire her last poetry. The opening and closing poems of the collection share many of

¹ Gwendolyn MacEwen, *Afterworlds* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1987).

the same lines and images as they frame the collection. Shiva is invoked as "the lord of Life" and as "my lord Death" in the final poem, "The Tao of Physics" (123). In the universe where matter and energy are both illusions, and "where events have a tendency to occur," the poet defiantly claims,

I hurl
Breathless poems against my lord Death, send these
Words, these words
Careening into the beautiful darkness. (123)

The first poem, "The Grand Dance," repeats these lines, but the poet goes on to ask, "And where do all the words go?" (13). Clearly, she is wondering about the immortalizing power of poetry, not in the context of the assured Christian afterlife, but of the relativistic universe made up mostly of empty space and probabilities, "the present myriad inner worlds / Which whirl around in the carousal of space." She relies on a combination of folk wisdom and the speculations of theoretical physics for her answer:

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. (123)

If her words survive, they are merely gossip, and "lethal

gossip" at that; clearly this thought offers the poet little comfort. Yet this poem defines itself and the collection; these poems are MacEwen's "Afterthoughts," the words that survive after her death. In her earliest poetry, the muse had urged the poet, "dance you, dance / you / against the light against / the cold light" ² Now it is the muse, Shiva, god of life and death, who dances, and the poet understands that he is "a fierce illusion of flesh, of energy." The poet has accepted, on a very profound level, that in this empty, relativistic universe, all that matters is the illuminated, illusory moment: "The particles of light cast off from your hair / Illumine you for this moment only." This is not a universe that can be neatly summed up in dualistic categories, polar opposites, a dialectic leading to a synthesis, for Shiva embodies (for MacEwen) a mastery over a universe in which life and death were never separate. ³ Neither is this the poetry of disavowal. Disavowal's logic of simultaneously concealing and revealing a lack or a loss does not operate here; there is sometimes loss, in later poems in the collection, and there is much

² Gwendolyn MacEwen, "The Death Agony of a Butterfly" (RF 16).

³ In a later poem in the collection, "Manitou Poem" (71), MacEwen sees that same logic in the Native American "Great Lynx Misshipeshu."

revelation, but there are no longer any secrets that must be concealed in fetishistic language. There is no longer anything so painful that the poet cannot face it directly.

Most of the poems in the collection's first section, "Ancient Slang," meditate on death and the possibility of an afterlife. For example, in "The White Horse," the horse seems to symbolize freshness, innocence, purity, and new life, as it is juxtaposed to the pain of war in "all the broken countries / Of the universe where this horse has never been." The poet, speaking from across the "field of endless sunlight," is perhaps speaking from the afterlife, but the poem undercuts such easy dualities when the poet asks, "But hasn't the brilliant end come, you wonder, / And isn't the world still burning?" Another poem, "Late Song" (15), predicts what will happen "When it is all over." The poet might run out of poetry, "the long / exhausting music," and remembers when her interlocutor and perhaps lover and/or muse warned her "of the world's end." "Wild leaves fell," perhaps an allusion to the violent revolution longed for and predicted in Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," and midnight, a figure in this collection for the world's end, "crashed upon the city," both the human world and the poet's own body. Yet once again the poem subverts its own discourse of destruction, as the poet claims, "But it is never over;

nothing ends until we want it to." On the physical level, MacEwen's own death refutes this claim, of course,⁴ but it is also a metaphysical and social claim. MacEwen had also written, in T. E. Lawrence's voice, "we want the world's end, Auda,"⁵ and the reader is left wondering about the extent to which MacEwen perhaps desired the end.

MacEwen imagines that our world's end, an end that she does not conceive of in strictly Christian terms, will bring an end to language as well. In "The Music," her tone expresses the pain that a poet must feel at the thought of having to give up an attachment to language. The first lines of this poem could be a capsule summary of her career as a poet, as seen from an immense distance of detachment:

You were born in a city of thunder, thunder contained
by dark walls, thunder strapped within dark flowers,
 a place of bruised silences
Where you thought you could be excellent and immortal
Until tomorrow. (16)

Once again "thunder" is a figure for the poet's words, and the "city" for her body. The "trapped thunder" within "a place of bruised silences" could refer to the words that she

⁴ Sullivan cites evidence that MacEwen had not wanted her life to end but was trying to call for help when she died (Sullivan 383-84).

⁵ Gwendolyn MacEwen, "Auda" (TEL 33).

could not utter, but instead blotted out of her travel journals, words that perhaps revealed traumatic secrets, and to her subsequent difficulty in writing poetry. She imagines her death once again: "I will die here / With the cracked and bitter leaves, the foul unsung / Thunder." Continuing the allusion to Shelley, the "cracked and bitter leaves" could refer to the disappointment that radical change toward a more ideal, utopic world did not occur, and the "foul unsung Thunder" to the poetry that could not have been written before, unhealthily repressed. The chaotic energy figured in "all the leaves of the world / Were falling outwards and inwards" moves toward a radical change in language, though, as "the night sky became / a pack of cannibal stars." Perhaps the universe has consumed the pages on which all poetry has been written? A new beginning of some kind is signalled by the "crazy luminous blue of the sac / Of a newborn horse." But it is a new beginning for poetry, as the poet insists, "*I am speaking of the music.*" The limitations of the past are shaken off as "the walls / shook off their darkness" and the universe speaks in a new kind of poetry: "the flowers released their thunder." The poet predicts the future collapse of language, but paradoxically by using the present, past, and past-perfect verb tenses to suggest that it has already happened: this

gives her voice more authority as she reports that the separation between the signifier and signified, and between sign and referent, has disappeared: "Nothing remembers its name because / It has become its name." The poet must rely on the past tense because no future tense could accurately capture this new absence of language: words belong to the past. The new poetry is an art of existence itself: "Now the music proceeds to its own centre / and the city is no more."

I cannot help but think that MacEwen writes about her own death in "The Death of the Loch Ness Monster" (17). Here the poet is monstrous, her "noble, sordid soul in ruins." The monster, "this last of our mysteries," "died of loneliness." This poem thus provides a key to the darker side of MacEwen's psyche at this time in her career. Perhaps commenting on the public's seeming lack of interest in poetry, the speaker claims that the monster "had no tales to tell us, only that it lived there, . . . lost in its own coils, / waiting to be found." Moreover, the monster "denies the vision before his eyes," the vision which informs him that there are people nearby, thus augmenting his sense of loneliness. MacEwen's own doubts about her origins could be figured in the beast who was "born from some terrible ancient kiss, / lovechild of unspeakable histories," now

become "half blind," perhaps only half a visionary. This equation between MacEwen and the Loch Ness Monster might seem a little forced, until one reads the end of the poem: the monster's origin in Scotland, home of MacEwen's ancestors, is emphasized, and most interestingly, the monster's imagination is mythopoeic: "his mind's dark land, / where he dreamed up his luminous myths." The Loch Ness Monster, myth-maker and Scot, could very well be a figure for MacEwen, who even changed the spelling of her name to that of the ancient bards of Scotland in order to identify more fully with its bardic tradition. Read in this way, the poem expresses the poet's knowledge and perhaps her fear of her own limitations at the end of her life.

Moving beyond her own death, Macewen also seems to have accepted the inevitability of the end of the world, not a surprising theme for a writer working in the second half of the 1980s, but MacEwen's tone is nevertheless surprising. The poem's tone is deeply tragic, accepting the inevitable with courage and sadness, but also seeking solace in the image of Shiva as a symbol of the cyclical nature of the material world and thus of hope for a new beginning to arise out of this ending.

Cosmic cycles are invoked in "Thunderbirds" (24) and "Vacuum Genesis" (25). Both poems seem, at first reading, to

rely on dualistic categories to record a traditional transcendence desired by the poet: "fusions of light and dark, / [. . .] fusions of night and morning" ("Thunderbirds"), and "I only own to disown you" ("Vacuum Genesis"); yet what is memorable in these poems are the images of violent destruction: the "priests and lovers, / Some with limbs and spirits torn apart" ("Thunderbirds"); "The bird insane in the jaws of the cat" ("Vacuum Genesis"). The poet responds to the Blakean romantic vision: "life is not a fearful but a broken symmetry," but deconstructs the meaning of symmetry itself: "symmetry in time and space means Nothing / And time is the space your mind moves through" ("Vacuum Genesis"). These poems see life as implicit in death, and death as what has to happen in order to keep life going: "The bird insane in the jaws of the cat / The world, delirious with dawn." Perhaps the poet means that the poetry of death is necessary to keep poetry going as well. The poem ends with images of irrationality, even madness, which can be inflected both negatively (the bird is "insane" as it is torn apart in the jaws of the cat) and positively (the world is "delirious with dawn," an image of a new beginning, new life). But this poem, as well as "Polaris," reminds us that these dualistic categories, these bipolar opposites, mean "Nothing": we cannot depend on them

to guide us or to create an enduring meaning in our lives.

One of the most outstanding poems in *Afterworlds* is "Polaris: Or, Gulag Nightscapes" (20), a contemplation on the nature of reality, the self, and freedom. The word "Gulag" in the subtitle refers, of course, to the Soviet acronym for the administration of the forced-labour camps in which millions died in the early-to-middle decades of the twentieth century in the U.S.S.R., and adds the political dimension to the many other possible meanings of "freedom." As the poet views the northern starscape, the stars' rotation becomes a metaphor for the revolutions of governments and of the shiftiness of the individual mind: "everything is a lie," whether it be a social institution or the psyche, in the sense that "there is no guiding star," nothing solid to rely on. Governments are constructs, but so is the mind and so is the notion of freedom.

Such a view might seem at first to echo Lawrence's claim that he "patched up" problems among his troops, "[k]nowing it was all a pack of lies" ("Solutions", TEL 43) and his question, "What if the whole show was a lie, and it bloody well was -- would I still lie to you?" ("Tall Tales, TEL 60); yet the contrast in the tones of the two poems provides a good example of the difference between the fetishicity of the *Lawrence Poems* and MacEwen's new poetic

strategy. Lawrence is cynical, angry, and feeling betrayed in a world in which he has been lied to since he was a boy and in which he must continue to lie to others as an adult, whereas the "lie" in "Polaris" refers to a glimpse of the material and social worlds as illusion. Lawrence's situation had required disavowal as a survival strategy, but the poet's insight in "Polaris" involves no fear, uneasiness, or sense of dark secrets that must be concealed even when they are revealed.

The poet's meditation on freedom in "Polaris" parallels very closely the understanding of form and emptiness as expressed in the ancient Mahayana Buddhist text *The Heart Sutra*. The poet begins with "freedom as a word, / freedom in its bleakest, purest form," but quickly realizes that "freedom is a prison," much as the sutra claims that "form is emptiness, emptiness itself is form."⁶ When the poet claims toward the end of the poem that "this prison is actually your freedom, and / it is you, it is you, you / are

⁶ *Prajñāparamitasutra*. "The Heart Sutra in English." Nalanda Translation Committee. <<http://cres.anu.edu.au/~mccomas/heartsutra/english.html>> Nov. 18, 2000. Although there is no evidence available at this time to show that MacEwen was familiar with this text, her use of the Hindu god Shiva as her principle muse for this collection of poems suggests that she had an interest in Eastern systems of thought.

the only thing in this frozen night which is really moving," she has experienced an insight similar to that expressed in the sutra: "form is no other than emptiness, emptiness is no other than form." These phrases represent stages in the understanding of the relationship between the material world and emptiness, in which a complete understanding of the relationship sees the material world and all concepts as illusion. MacEwen's speaker also understands this:

If you consult the polestar for the truth
of your present position, you will learn that you have
no
position, position is illusion (consider this
endlessly still self, endlessly turning);

This understanding is not an experience of transcendence, but it is a glimpse of illumination, and this insight is perhaps what makes possible the poet's new ability to accept all change, including death, without the necessity to disavow that which is painful. Fetishistic language is no longer necessary because the poet's real understanding of everything as illusion subverts the psychic power of the dark and threatening secret that must never be revealed, and thus eliminates one-half of the fetishistic equation.

The central poem in *Afterworlds* is "Letter to Josef in Jerusalem" (58), a work in eight sections, each structured in alternating prose-poem paragraphs and single poetic

lines. It is largely because of what is said in this poem that I claim that MacEwen is thinking in the collection of her own death but also of the planet's death. References to death abound in the first section, in which the poet remembers sitting with her friend Josef in a graveyard in Jerusalem, in images of the cemetery, gravestones, the "dying radio" and "killing moonlight." Although the poet claims that she is "still sitting there" in memory, she seems detached: she seems to have moved on. There is no sense of nostalgia or longing expressed in this section, as was seen so frequently in evocations of exotic geographical locations in the eden poems, for example; rather, the poet seems to be saying goodbye to this memory of the cat's-eye view of a divided city.

The second section of "Letter to Josef in Jerusalem" begins with a memory of the attempted rape MacEwen suffered on the beach at Jaffa during her visit in 1962 to Israel. In her travel journal, the recording of this incident had evoked something possibly so threatening that she blotted it out completely; but here, MacEwen writes vividly of the details of the experience:

The beach was crowded with fish-skulls, and how violent the sun was! We kicked and thrashed and cursed, each in his own separate tongue. All I did was give him the time and all Hell broke loose; kids emerged from behind the walls trailing kites, and surrounded us, cheering.

My braids, my shorts, my naked Anglo-Saxon knees had
offended him . . . How easily one becomes the enemy.

It is now possible for the poet to remove the usual
obstacles to direct perception: she can face the rawness and
"throbbing" of existence, and the certainty that the end of
the world is near, without the necessity simultaneously to
conceal this knowledge, that is, to disavow it:

Josef, have you noticed that a thin film has settled
over everything? You peel it away and the world is a
raw nerve, throbbing and throbbing, even the stones are
throbbing. There is nothing but this throbbing, this
ancient pulse. If you see that boy on the beach at
Jaffa, tell him the time. It is two minutes to
midnight, though it feels like morning. The first
battle of this war has begun on the beach at Jaffa. All
battles begin on the beach at Jaffa. The sea is booming
out the real hour of the world:

It is countdown; it is the same time everywhere. (60)

The poet could be referring to many "battles," of course:
the tensions that would culminate in the Israeli war of
1967; a gender war arising from the boy's misogyny and
violence; a "holy war" of Islamic fundamentalists against
"the infidel"; a metaphoric war against the natural world,
in which ecosystems are damaged or destroyed in the name of
economic progress; and by association, any other war
resulting from the fear or ignoring of difference.

Intertextually, this war could also be the war thematized in
"The Breakfast," with its "twilight of purple fallout" (RF

39), a cataclysmic nuclear war. In that poem, mention of such a war seemed prophetic; here, the war "has already begun. . . ."

Section iv of "Letter to Josef in Jerusalem" makes more explicit that the war that is beginning is a figure for the world's end: the poem emphasizes death, loss, and madness: "Death has sucked your brains out; no one will enter heaven now" and announces, "It is just a few minutes to the end of the world." Section v continues the image by suggesting that humans will themselves be responsible for such an end: "And when it ends, when we finally break the Law --" (63). Of all sections of the poem, this one contains the most numerous images of violent environmental destruction: "The universe disowns us; through forests of mis- / siles / We come to the Dead, the speechless Sea"; "The parched sea drains"; "An unholy wound we carved in God, a gash in the cosmos where the final void oozed in"; "Unable to love the smallest things we let fall singing through our hands -- lucid animals and birds and flowers -- to cherish life after birth, we gave birth to this death." There is no comfort for the poet in traditional teachings: "The prophecies are gasps, the dry white sounds of death." In this most emotional of the poem's sections, the mournful tone becomes angry at times, but the anger does subside somewhat, as the

poet moves closer to acceptance:

Enraged by wounds we cannot heal, and blind with fear
which has become as true and usual as breath, we give
ourselves over to the lords of death. The Law is
broken; we enter

The kingdom. We come to the Dead, the speechless Sea.

Here the "lords of death" are not identical to Shiva, "my
lord Death" of the framing poems of the collection; rather,
they are the figures responsible for waging the war, the
world's political and economic leaders, and the "Law" is
presumably the natural law, the serious transgression of
which leads to the sterile wasteland, "parched,"

"dehydrated," and "dry," created by humanity: "We announced
the coming of a terrible kingdom and it came."

Representations of a universal end continue in section vi,
where the poet moves from images of desert to images of heat
and fire in an answer to Yeats:

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

Burn into one.

There is a turning point in this long poem in section
vii. Here the poet "dare[s] to believe Peace --" (65), and

in a sentence that includes references to both T. E. Lawrence and "a new satellite . . . launched at Cape Canaveral," the poet's imagination sweeps the expanse of the twentieth century and envisions its wars retreating "into the silence of space." It is the intense beauty of individual moments of existence that gives the poet the courage to hope for peace, and these moments are suggested in brilliant colours: ". . . passionate light shines on purple grapes, yellow beer, the green and violet slopes of Mount Miron. Giant insects with golden shells. . . ." (65). Nevertheless, the final section of the poem is more pessimistic, more resigned, as the poet claims, "History is wearing thin, Josef; soon there may be no more history." At least here the dire predictions of previous sections are moved into the subjunctive mood, introducing a tentativeness to the vision. Perhaps one of the most plaintive cries of the poet appears in this section as well: "*We are still young, and everything is a moment away from being destroyed*" (67). Although the tone shifts in "Letter to Josef in Jerusalem" from sadness to anger, and to reluctance to accept death, overall *Afterworlds* is more positive, as the poet discovers in an understanding of cosmic cycles theorized in Hindu, Maya, and Native American mythologies, a courage to accept of all that is and must be.

When Hal Foster first theorized the overdetermination of cultural products by fetish discourses, he confined his analysis to Dutch *pronk* still-life paintings from the seventeenth century -- although he did hint that a similar logic of fetishism might account for the "luminosity" he sensed in certain modernist sculptures. My study extends Foster's work to show that such overdetermination is not necessarily confined to the field of the visual arts, however; it can also appear in literary productions in which traces of multiple fetish discourses -- those derived from psychosexual, material, aesthetic, political, and spiritual economies -- are embodied simultaneously by the same verbal text. Moreover, this work identifies exactly what form such overdetermination could take in a literary text, that is, how the visual images and traces of fetish discourses in visual art "translate" in a literary text into a symbolic vocabulary of fetishisms that creates a structure of ambivalence. I have termed this phenomenon in literature, "fetishicity."

As far as I have been able to determine, this is the first study in English to identify the overdetermination by fetish discourses of a literary text, and it locates the poetry of Canadian writer Gwendolyn MacEwen as a definitive example of fetishicity in literature. A reading attentive to

the fetishicity of MacEwen's poetic texts opens up her work to entirely new dimensions of meaning, and I hope it will reinvigorate scholarly critical interest in her work by showing that her mythopoeia was itself fetishistic, and that it was balanced as a literary strategy by MacEwen's employment of a symbolic vocabulary of fetish discourses. Although most readings of MacEwen's poetry find it to be shaped by a dialectical logic, fetishicity shows that her work was structured by disavowal, not dialectic.

At the present time, Gwendolyn MacEwen occupies a peculiar place in the Canadian literary canon. She remains a writer whom ordinary readers and other writers admire, yet her work receives little, if any, critical attention. She is considered one of Canada's best poets of the twentieth century, yet much of her poetry remains out of print and thirteen years after her death there appears to be little interest among publishers in producing a definitive *Collected Works*. All of the scholarly work before 1990 on MacEwen's writing, for example, has focused on her mythopoeic method and the only critical article to be published since then attempts to place her in a line of Canadian mystical writers. While this work has provided an important foundation for the critical understanding of MacEwen's oeuvre, it seems that scholarship has since

stagnated with respect to MacEwen.⁷ No one has published a study of her work informed by poststructuralist theory, for example, yet MacEwen's poetry would richly reward such a critical approach.

Possibly one factor that has contributed to this lack of interest is that MacEwen's mythopoeia has been misunderstood (and possibly mythopoeia itself as a literary strategy has been misunderstood), and thus MacEwen's work has been dismissed as historically interesting and important but ultimately rather simplistic, her vision of the fusion of opposites naive, her exoticism merely eccentricity.⁸ But the traditional understanding of MacEwen's mythopoeia is only half of the story. Her mythopoeia itself is fetishistic, and the fetishicity in her work both augments and subverts MacEwen's stated goal of achieving a Boehme-

⁷ An important exception is the commentary on MacEwen's poetry contained in Rosemary Sullivan's biography of MacEwen, *Shadow Maker: The Life of Gwendolyn MacEwen* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1995).

⁸ An example is Margaret Atwood's story "Isis in Darkness" from *Wilderness Tips*, in which MacEwen appears, slightly fictionalized, as the character "Selina." Margaret Atwood, "Isis in Darkness," *Wilderness Tips* (Toronto: Seal Books, 1992) 49-76. Atwood, a close personal friend of MacEwen, serves up to readers a stereotype of MacEwen, satirizing audiences' expectations about artists and fascination with eccentricity and exoticism. At the same time, however, the characterization of Selina is complex enough to function, in Atwood's words, as a "thinly disguised tribute" to MacEwen (Sullivan 102).

inspired "golden breakfast," the alchemical marriage of the fusion of opposites. MacEwen's symbolic vocabulary of fetishism enriches her writing, providing a sophisticated and complex vision that is not quaint and historical, but relevant to and compelling for a subject living during this time of rapid globalization.

It is probably true that MacEwen did think of herself first and foremost as a mythopoeic writer, especially in the early part of her career, even though in her fiction she satirized this classification. Nevertheless, she is much more than a poet engaged in the creation or re-creation of myth. This study has attempted to provide the beginning of a new kind of reading of literary texts, one that is attentive, following poststructuralist theory, to the contradictions and gaps in a text, but one that offers something other than the text's mere deconstruction. It provides a new key to the enormous felt power behind Gwendolyn MacEwen's poetry. Even when MacEwen was striving to invoke through the word a kind of magic that would transform everyday twentieth-century urban reality, an invocation seen, for example, in her earliest "alphabet" poems, it was the uncanny energy with which her work was imbued, an energy deriving from fetishicity, that appealed to her audience and made her project more than merely

idealism or weird, eccentric behaviour. Audiences could respond to the poems because the texts resonated with an energy deriving from the multiple contradictions of everyday life in the registers of psychosexual, spiritual, aesthetic, and material economies. The magical utterances and the longings for lost edens were more than the musings of an idealistic 1960s flower child. These works convey the very foundations of the source of pain and suffering in human life. They point ultimately to the fissure that opens up at the moment of subject formation, fixated upon and obsessively repeated in displacements throughout personal and social experience as the source of anxiety about otherness, about all differences: gender, racial, ethnic, cultural, spiritual, and even those that open up between an author's "real" world and the mythic one she seeks to create through her writing.

Even when MacEwen seemed to be herself obsessively repeating her longings for a lost eden, she was developing as an artist and discovering the limitations and contradictions of this method of mythopoeisis. The "eden" poems culminate in "Tiamut," which represents not just one more attempt to rewrite a traditional myth, but the discovery of a tradition that accounts for the kind of experience of subjectivity felt in the late twentieth

century better than do biblical or classical myths from Greece and Rome. Tiamut becomes one of MacEwen's most powerful images of the phallic mother, the ultimate source and object of all fear and desire. Through the myth of Tiamut, MacEwen comes to understand that although the desire for the fusion of opposites into a harmonic unity seems to be "natural," such a unity is always already impossible. Chaos, confusion, and the undermining of all form by formlessness are always the result of any such attempt.

Developing a metaphoric appetite for all experience, seeking to transmute the experience of opposites rather than to unify them, is equally problematic. Such an impulse toward transcendence can have enlightened and neurotic aspects, as MacEwen discovers when her poems based on the metaphor of appetite move toward the discovery of eating disorders, of hunger and starvation, and of obsessive eating and purging. The fetishicity of these poems is closer to the surface, less hidden than in the "eden" poems, perhaps because these poems deal more directly with the material economy of commodities. Through these poems, the poet finally achieves a sobering realization similar to that of the Tiamut myth: transcendence is fraught with danger; violence is threatening everywhere.

Whereas critical acclaim has been most forthcoming for

MacEwen's Jungian-influenced poetry of archetypes, *The Shadow-Maker*, which won the Governor-General's Award and inspired a musical composition (as did "The Nine Arcana of the Kings" from *The Armies of the Moon*), this study has revalorized the earlier poetry and *The T. E. Lawrence Poems* by finding in them a greater texture and complexity than a myth-critical reading could account for. In the early poetry that seems to rely on an evocation of traditional myth, a reading for the fetishicity of the poems discovers fractures, contradictions, and gaps in the attempt to retrieve or recreate an idealized past golden age.

MacEwen's *The T. E. Lawrence Poems* demonstrates the possibilities of fetishicity as a literary strategy in the hands of a mature and skilful artist. In this series of poems, MacEwen is able to exploit fully the potential of fetish discourses to develop a symbolic vocabulary of fetishism which illuminates and energizes images of Lawrence as a man sundered from stability and certainty, and as existing between worlds, never fully at home in any culture, sexual identity, spiritual belief system, or material economy he inhabited. Explicit references to the sites of fetish formation, such as Lawrence's father as castrated and to his mother as castrating, or to the Arab oil reserves of interest to the British, are fixed and repeated symbolically

throughout the poems, for example in references to Feisal's name as "the sword flashing downward in the stroke" and to Lawrence's eyes as "gold nuggets," eyes which are both Midas- and Medusa-like in their translation and fixation of all objects of his gaze into gold as the ultimate measure of all material value. Fetishism -- as a "negotiation of divergent representations and dangerous realities"⁹ -- is the ideal strategy to create in poetry the figure of, in Lawrence's words, a "man who could see things through the veils at once of two customs, two educations, two environments."¹⁰

This study has shown that fetishicity can appear in a text in a number of ways. A text can thematize the fixation of various discordant values in a single site and the repetition of such fixation; it can also suggest fetishisms symbolically. Perhaps there is always an element of fetishism in the project of writing. There are always gaps, after all, that open between the "real" world of the writer and the world represented in the text.¹¹ And there must

⁹ Foster, "Art" 256.

¹⁰ T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1936) 32.

¹¹ Indeed, Sohn-Rethel has shown that the human thought process itself is fetishistic. Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities P, 1977).

always be an element of fetishism in positioning the literary text as a commodity in the marketplace. In addition, Linda Saladin has proposed that authors can also fetishize textual images of their own creation as a muse or dangerous Other; my study shows that women authors as well as men can create textual fetishes. Unlike the muse as *femme fatale* created by the male authors studied by Saladin, however, MacEwen repeatedly invoked the phallic mother as muse. This study has concentrated on a body of poems most significant for an understanding of the fetishicity of MacEwen's writing. Many other of her poems, however, especially some of the works in *The Shadow-Maker* and *Armies of the Moon*, are also informed by the logic of fetish discourses, and would likely reward a reading attentive to their fetishicity.

Fetishicity allowed MacEwen to "have it both ways": to invoke or create myth, but to also acknowledge the impossibilities of a sacred world; to play the role of bard in the ancient sense even though, as a woman, supposedly she could not have been a poet, according to the aesthetic beliefs of an influential part of her milieu; to be a powerful poet in her persona as T. E. Lawrence, even when she was experiencing profound loss of self-confidence as an artist.

There is something enormously seductive about the fetish, in whatever discourse it appears. It accounts for polarities and contradictions without assuming that any sort of harmonization or synthesis of opposites is possible or desirable. But there is a tendency for the critic to fetishize fetishicity, to become fixated on symbols derived from fetish discourses as a literary and critical strategy, and to make this strategy account for widely disparate elements in the work in order to fix heterogeneous elements in one material, textual location. For example, in reflecting on her work researching fetish discourse theory for her book *Feminizing the Fetish*, Emily Apter writes that the term "fetish" is slippery indeed and that there is a danger, in theorizing the fetish, of fetishizing the theory, until everywhere the critic looks, there she finds more evidence of fetish discourses.¹² Apter's cautionary words provide a context that reminds us that it is important to understand fetishicity as only one way to read a text, and as only one way for an author to write a text. For an author such as MacEwen, fetishicity might complement or be an element of other literary strategies such as mythopoeia,

¹² Emily Apter, *Fetishism*. *The Princeton Architectural Journal* Vol. 4, Ed. Sarah Whiting, Edward Mitchell, and Greg Lynn (New York: Princeton Architectural P, 1992). This is probably the kind of phenomenon meant by Derrida when he coined the term "metafetishism."

giving the work a deeper texture of meaning, giving the reader and writer another avenue for meaning-making. However, this study has had to be always aware that the single-minded purpose of finding a symbolic vocabulary of fetish discourses in a group of poems risks forcing those poems into a mold, possibly doing literary violence to the writer's work.

It is important, also, to consider this study as a preliminary one. It does not attempt to have the last interpretive word about MacEwen's work. It is also too soon to theorize the kinds of literary texts that demonstrate fetishicity. The preliminary study would suggest that such works might have in common a serious interest in exploring other cultures, particularly cultures which are radically different in their material, spiritual, and sexual economies, for fetish discourses are especially appropriate for representing the spaces that open up between widely disparate cultures. Possibly fetishicity is particularly effective for those texts which seek, like MacEwen's work, to suggest or create a new world, a new sense of the world's possibilities. It might prove valuable to read the most political and visionary work of the Romantic poets, such as Percy Shelley's *Laon and Cythna* and *Prometheus Unbound*, in light of fetish discourse theory. Postcolonial and

transcultural texts which investigate the interstices between cultures as the sites of subject formation and artistic production might be another fruitful area of investigation. This study has followed Foster in suggesting that the overdetermination of cultural products by fetishicity is not particular to seventeenth-century Dutch society nor to modernism, but can be used effectively as an aesthetic strategy in the postmodern period as well. It seems that on the threshold of the twenty-first century, we should expect more artistic production to employ a symbolic vocabulary of fetishism in order to embody and to communicate passionately the extraordinary losses experienced throughout the world's social, psychosexual, aesthetic, geophysical, ecospherical, and spiritual economies, as living and non-living resources alike are exploited to extinction while the economies based on capitalist commodity production and trade mysteriously seem to grow. Never has there been a time of more confusion of monetary, spiritual, cultural and aesthetic values. Fetish discourses, concerned primarily with the problem of the difference of values, will become an ever more useful literary strategy for those writers who wish to communicate their views on this confusion of values. We can expect that in the future, "the ghost of a lack" will increasingly haunt

cultural production, and that the experience of the uncanny, of *unheimlich*, the lack of the feeling of being at home anywhere, will become the logic that structures the new global society.

Gwendolyn MacEwen's belief in the "magic power of language" brought her naturally to the use of fetishistic strategies in her writing, producing poetry with an uncanny power to open up any world of experience to new perceptions. This "magic power," according to MacEwen, means that "things [can be] revealed and understood through language and only through language,"¹³ but it contradicts, on the most basic level, her desire for language to effect an experience of the ordinary world as "mythic," as direct, fresh, new, and essentially unmediated. MacEwen's conception of the poet's relationship to language, then, is riven by the contradiction between her overvaluation of the uttered or inscribed word of the bard as "magic," and the deeper desire hidden by this overvaluation, for an experience unmediated by language. Ironically, MacEwen achieved her goal of communicating the magic of language through the resulting fetishicity of her poetry, which expresses the most fundamental paradoxes of human existence.

¹³ Meyer and O'Riordan 103.

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