TO SEEK A SINGLE SYMMETRY

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GWENDOLYN MACEWEN has stated that in her writing she hopes to construct a myth. At its simplest, myth can be defined as an attempt to make concrete and particular a cosmic view. Mythopoeic writers are those who "suffering the lack of an acceptable or widely believed body of mythic material to give order to their imaginative restatements of experience, set about consciously to make a mythic frame for their works."[1] In her four major collections of poetry, *The Rising Fire, A Breakfast for Barbarians, The Shadow-Maker* and *Armies of the Moon*, MacEwen works toward creating such a frame. Its basic shape is indicated in the poem "Tiamut" (*The Rising Fire*): in a divided but holy universe all things strain toward reunion.

> 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 —
>
> Woman, she winced at the coming of Marduk;
> his hands laid her out 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 . . .

> We, caught on a split organ of chaos,
> on the right half of a bisected goddess
> wonder why moon pulls sea on a silver string,
> why earth will not leave the gold bondage of the sun,
> why all parts marry, all things couple in confusion
> why atoms are wrenched apart in this
> adolescent time.

In an era of lean, spare lines, *The Rising Fire* (1963) impresses a reader with its verbal richness. Words pour out with abandon as if they have magical power and a right to exist without reference to an objective reality:

> 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 knuckles under for war
> when the bone intersects as the tangents in the district of the sun
> centipedes and infidels, snakes and the absence of doves?
>
> ("The Breakfast")

Nor does MacEwen use structure to control the outpourings. As the above example illustrates, her verse form can be as arbitrary as her meaning. Neither rhyme nor punctuation helps contain the flow, though the latter appears more often than the former. Instead, each poem gives the impression of an undisciplined creation that gushes out in emotive language.

Though its surfeit of words, its looseness of thought and its arbitrary forms display little feeling for integration, *The Rising Fire*'s thematic material tends toward synthesis. At times it surfaces as a desire to recapture a simple, more perfect state. In "Evidence of Monday," a young boy, new to the world of experience, remembers the innocence of a "brief green world." Exiled to work-a-day reality, he longs to return to "eden under the tugging years,/ eden at the end of days." Though "The Breakfast" is less well-realized, it echoes the urge to capture the world, create a self-contained space. ". . . eat only apples/ to improvise an eden. . . . by eating the world you may enclose it./ seek simplicities; the fingerprints of the sun only/ and the moon duplicating you in your body,/ the cosmos fits your measures; has no ending." The poem cannot sustain close analysis, yet it is in part an attempt to integrate experience into a meaningful whole that "fits" man and that man can fit into.

One recurring image that exemplifies MacEwen's tendency toward synthesis amid disintegration is her use of the circle, a figure that encloses. The shape appears in such diverse guises as a ferris wheel, a conical hat, the sun, the moon, the earth, an orbiting path, an egg, a man's eye and even the movement of neutrons and protons around an atom. In a three-poem sequence about space exploration she parallels the "sweet fanatic pace" of the smallest bit of molecular

matter with the movement of planets; compares the circling of an astronaut's spaceship with the "sweet/ concentric circles" of the mind's logic:

> but look to limits for a minute
> as the introverted eye looks inward
> we find the inward Eye looking out
> and finally, the astronaut swims
> through yellow yolks of total suns
> toward the ultimate inquiry
>
> ("Nikolayev and Popovich")

The outward journey that orbits the globe becomes a pattern for the journey inward to enclose, integrate, find meaning.

The inquiry, the search for meaning, rarely meets with success. The astronaut, reaching the limits of the universe, discovers not walls, "but mirrors/ reflecting the question mark/ of his own face back. . . . " Similarly, a ride on the ferris wheel means to move at "the/ point of absolute inquiry/ and stop nowhere on the mind's circumference." Though integration may never be attained, the attempt counts. "I ask you to revise your codes of holiness . . . I/ ask you to join me on/ the ferris wheel." ("The Ferris Wheel".)

In addition to the figure of the enclosing circle, MacEwen utilizes dance as a symbol of synthesis. Frequently the poet seems to gasp at the diversity of a world where "all/ must be taken into account/ sooner or later." Dance can become a primitive, ritualistic ceremony that keeps the unknown, feared complexities at bay. " . . . dance before it is possible to walk,/ dance crookedly into the difficult night." ("Poem for G.W.") More often, however, dance takes on the symbolic function Yeats assigned it, the role of an image so pure that thought and the form used to express it fuse into one. "The Athletes" in the park perform a classical ballet with their "syntax of perfect limbs". So welded are spirit and matter in their play that "the big forums/ of the skull collapse and/ the soul blows through its horn of bone." In "The Two Themes of The Dance", Adam must dance inward to find the identity he longs to express. God, on the other hand, can dance outward, express pure image, since his perfect state allows an integrity of intention and action man lacks. In "The Absolute Dance", MacEwen says explicitly that "something sustains us/ between the crib and crypt . . . the dance which is the synthesis." Each man struggles to discover this synthesis on his own. Old dancers are knocked aside for "they have no answers." By being willing to try each of us can "move towards the total power of the dance/ to seek a single symmetry, an hour of totality." ("The Absolute Dance".)

Both the encircling astronaut and the energetic dancer highlight the sense of desperate movement this poetry conveys, its "sweet fanatic pace". Fleeting moments of stillness, then, might imply the attainment of the integration sought.

In "Black and White", a poem strongly reminiscent of "Leda and the Swan", such a still point of perfection occurs. The winged muse plummets down toward a supine body, onto "knees which crashed the sheets" and "oh/ dark outrageous anchoring and the beauty of it." The single, ultimate meaning is momentarily caught in the still point Art effects when it unites the ideal and the real, mates eternity with time.

Despite a lack of cohesion in individual poems, *Rising Fire* shows MacEwen working toward the cosmic view she wishes to create. In a divided world straining toward reunion, her circle and dance imagery point up a drive toward synthesis. Though the movement is usually thwarted, the poet at least suggests that in the realm of art an instant of such perfection is possible.

In the prose introduction to her 1966 volume, *A Breakfast for Barbarians*, the normally reticent author offers some comments on her attitudes *vis-a-vis* the world and writing. "My prime concern has always been with the raw material from which literature is derived," she says, "not with literature as an end in itself." As her title implies, she writes with a sense of hunger and appetite "even though it be satisfied with such diverse first courses as kings, dancers, sperm whales, astronauts, escape artists or fruits from algebraic gardens." The horrors of modern civilization have cut man off from himself, leaving him exiled, alienated. To this state of affairs MacEwen says: "No — rather enclose, absorb, have done. The intake.... 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.... It is the intake, the refusal to starve./ And we must not forget the grace." This brief statement echoes "Tiamut." The world is holy but not whole, in need of being rescued from its fragmented, chaotic state. The poet acts as saviour by constructing a frame, a world-view that absorbs diversities, giving them significance within an over-all pattern.

One of the greatest differences between *Breakfast for Barbarians* and MacEwen's earlier poetry is the new discipline imposed on the language. As Davey remarks, "Gone is the inflated poetic language of the first two books which presented MacEwen as a variation on the ecstatic dryad, and in its place impressively realistic speech which presents her as a most attractive flesh and blood woman."[2] Part of the change springs from a realization that words should point to the real; the poet walks in fear of abstractions. "For you I would subtract my images/ for the nude truth beneath them." ("Poem".) Thus, in "It Rains, You See," the boys shy away from the pathos of mathematics, preferring to work with concrete objects such as chewed pencils and fingers. There also

appears a delightful coupling of the formal phrase with the colloquial that imparts to the work, however exotic the subject might be, a sense of immediacy:

> *now there are no bonds except the flesh*; listen —
> there was this boy, Manzini, stubborn with
> gut stood with black tights and a turquoise
> leaf across his sex
>
> ("Manzini: Escape Artist")

As in earlier works, verse form in *Breakfast for Barbarians* seems to spring from a spontaneous creation; poetry is discovery as well as communication. Perhaps because thought patterns are more clear, line divisions become more organic, make more sense. Occasionally, MacEwen lapses into pure prose ("Ultimately, Said The Saint, We Are All Of Us Devouring Each Other") or, conversely, sets herself the task of working within a confined, artificial form ("Modrakhina" and "The Cyclist In Aphelion"). She is at her best when line length, rhythm and punctuation are unobtrusive, conversational:

> 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
>
> ("Poems in Braille")

"There is a great unspeakable wheel which keeps/ Us slender as myths, and green with sleep." ("Green With Sleep".) In *Breakfast for Barbarians* the enclosing circle, be it orbit, arc or microcosm, continues to grope toward the synthesis it symbolizes. In "The Kindled Children" the lens, the sun and the children's eyes all suggest this figure. More important, the one kindling the fire creates at the same time, through the integrity of his thought and action, his own miniature universe:

> When you hook a whole afternoon into a small lens
> and change it into fire for the kindled children,
> when you move about, having little need
> of wider fires, whole burning worlds, or anything
> beyond the intact moments of your deeds.

The orbiting astronaut traces this same sort of enclosure: "his body has become a zodiac of bone/ its own myth, a personal cosmology." ("The Astronauts".) And the moment of poetic inspiration, which MacEwen portrayed as mating of ideal and real in "Black and White", here becomes a circular action compared to the path of a planet whirling around a sun.

More often, as the introduction indicates, the theme of eating becomes an analogue for the need to contain the universe.

> let us make an anthology of recipes,
> let us edit for breakfast
> our most unspeakable appetites —
> let us pool spoons, knives
> and all cutlery in a cosmic cuisine,
> let us answer hunger
> with boiled chimera
> and apocalyptic tea,
> an arcane salad of spiced bibles,
> tossed dictionaries —
> (O my barbarians
> we will consume our mysteries)
>
> ("A Breakfast for Barbarians")

By consuming we will regain and make one with ourselves that which has been divided, split, and hence lost. In a society damned as materialistic and overly consumer-oriented, the poet literally turns the tables. She suggests that consuming is sacred, a sign of a holy hunger that longs to digest everything, thus bringing together all into an integrated whole. Even man himself, she says only half-playfully, may be the object of a divine appetite that wants to subsume him into a larger existence:

> 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 . . .
> It seems that we the consumers are also consumed.
>
> ("Ultimately, said the Saint, We Are All of Us Devouring Each Other")

In *Breakfast for Barbarians* to devour signifies not a cannibalistic but rather a Eucharistic act wherein all creation unites in a feast of holy communion.

The impulse to consume may be sacred; still, it is doomed to leave the consumer always dissatisfied. No matter how much is taken in, more remains waiting for the intake. Simple, uncomplicated, "bright ancestral food" has disappeared from our complex cities. Now, "we eat and we eat and we know and we know/ that machines work faster than the machines of our mouths. ("Strange Breakfast".) Modern technology makes possible for man such a plethora of experiences to be integrated that one staggers back, daunted by the task. In this sense,

"we have too many myths." Having too many means we are left with none, since no single pattern emerges to give coherence to the confusing array of choices. So crowded is the altar with dishes that one cannot perceive the sacred food. As MacEwen puts it in "The Last Breakfast,"

> sometimes the food refuses to be sanctified
> and you stand over the table beating your chest
> and screaming impotent graces

What is the solution when "the food has become an anathema" and "the whole thing is decidedly insane"? One consumes anyway because in so doing can conjure up the image of "dark men running through the earth/ on their naked, splendid feet." The bared foot touching earth brings back into contact two parts of a Tiamut-sundered universe.

In *The Rising Fire* both the astronaut and the dancer moved toward a "single symmetry" but did not attain it. So also in *Breakfast for Barbarians* the intake proves insufficient. After incorporation comes transformation. "And all the diversities which get absorbed can later work their way out into fantastic things." ("Introduction".) MacEwen pictures transformation not as change imposed from outside, but an intrinsic movement coming from the inside out. A sculptor is surprised to find a shape emerging of its own accord: "I was working with clay and a face/ inherited my fingers; nor did I ask it/ to rise from the grey amorphous mass." ("The Face".) The poet becomes a queer "incredible animal" in her garden "working from the inside out". ("The Garden of Square Roots".) The escape artist finds "there are no bonds except the flesh" when he slides free "as a snake from/ his own sweet agonized skin". ("Manzini: Escape Artist".) The very universe is expanding outward, transforming itself in a cosmic sigh into nothingness. ("Thesis".)

A reader is not sure where MacEwen's transformations lead: to the void mentioned above or to some bright new order? In "Safed: Israel," the poet mourns that "In all things/ we lack the final syntax, the total form./ The eye is not full on Safed." Art fails to achieve the total form, for Chagall paints the eye turned sideways and hence communicates only a limited half-vision. But

> Once
> the Eye turned full of Safed
> and wrestled for the light with
> that total and sarcastic dark,
> and won the jacob-angel fight.
>
> ("Safed: Israel")

The capitalized "Eye" suggests that mystical union with some Godhead, a coming together of the ideal and the real, captures a moment of integration that Art cannot. In "Subliminal," on the other hand, the instant of perfection occurs in

sexual union when two beings are transformed into one and time stops: "where there is not time/ no differentiation of identities/ ... Christ oh Christ no one lives long/ along that layer." ("Subliminal".) And finally, art does capture a second of supreme integration when it transforms both perceiver and perceived into one entity. Thus, the poet communicates the thing-in-itself: "with legs and arms I make alphabets/ like in those children's books/ where people bend into letters and signs." ("Poems in Braille".)

In the final poem of the volume, "The Aristocracies", MacEwen brings together all these avenues to perfection — sex, mysticism, art — and presents them in the figure of the dance. Cannot, she wonders, the body of her lover-muse and the body of God "dance through the same diagonal instant/ of my vision." If so, "I will altogether cease to speak/ as you do a brilliant arabesque within the bas-relief/ your body bent like the first letter of an unknown, flawless alphabet." The reader gives thanks that such happens only in the realm of MacEwen's desire. If coherence, order and perfection were achieved, the poet would no longer need to function as saviour. Silence would be the result.

Breakfast for Barbarians communicates above all the wish to bring pattern to the overwhelming diversity of contemporary society. Images of the circle, eating, transformation and the dance suggest that experience must be contained, ingested, changed and figured forth in a new perfected mode. Modern man struggles under an ever-growing body of past history and faces the possibility of new worlds and new time systems being discovered. All those realms have to be comprehended, then integrated, lest man find himself irrevocably alienated from the universe. In the Arcanum poems and those dealing with the Middle East, MacEwen tries to go backward in time and space; in those dealing with modern technology she reaches forward into the future. Both movements seem to spring from the same impulse, a need to gather up every jot and tittle so as to fit it into her mythic "brief green world". Only by taking the necessary step first, that of encircling and absorbing *all*, can the poet hope to transform reality into some significant whole.

BECAUSE IT URGES an emphatic "no" to nay-saying, *Breakfast for Barbarians* is an affirmative book. MacEwen's 1969 volume, *The Shadow-Maker*, delves into the negative aspects of man's experience. Though individual poems do not show the drive toward enclosure and synthesis to the degree that earlier works do, the collection itself is a self-conscious effort to mark off one particular area of life. Evil, the dark regions of existence, must also be incorporated into myth if the poet's vision is to be a whole one. The author subdivides these regions into "Holy Terrors", "The Unspeakable", "The Sleeper"

and "The Shadow-Maker". Unfortunately, the divisions remain artificially imposed, yielding little insight into either the poetry or the rationale behind such a partition. Indeed, the entire book comes perilously close to being poetry written to prescription. NEEDED: a volume on the tragic sense of life. "I have come to possess your darkness, only this," says the title poem. The statement sums up the purpose of *Shadow-Maker.*

MacEwen's usual involvement with language is blunted in this book. Rather than fearing abstractions, she revels in them and hence slips all too often into banality. "Love, move me, cast me furious through space;/ Love, bend me to your time — / Test and revise me, I fear your face!" ("Two Voices") comes dangerously close to the verse of ladies' magazines. Though she wishes to contain the darkness, the author complicates her task by refusing to make evil real, concrete, and hence believable. In "Westminster Abbey", by contrast, Irving Layton uses a cluster of tangible objects — chapels, monuments, tombs — to stand for a corrupt tradition that he despises. MacEwen, however, explores twilight regions by direct statement about emptiness, loss, the absence of good, but without linking such concepts to experiences that might arouse the appropriate emotions:

> And once fearful I no more wanted
> Sunflowers, conquests, kingdoms, stars,
> But that priceless loss of things —
> The unbearable dark and sweet lack of wanting
> The death in the mouth, the utterly empty eye,
> The easy wealth of nothing for it needs
> No tending and no holding
>
> ("The Pillars")

Because the language remains subjective, abstract, the shadowy realms are ultimately unreal. The "priceless loss of things" does not leap out from the writer's imagination to take on a full-bodied meaning in the reader's mind. The blandness of MacEwen's evil is typified in "The Taming of the Dragon," where the beast becomes both unbelievable and foolish with harmless claws, golden teeth and a wreath of flowers around his neck.

Perhaps the poet's experiment with more conventional verse forms has contributed to the dilution of her language. In any event, she seems ill at ease in these more structured poems, hampered, forced into vague, thin phrases. The frequent use of end-rhyme becomes simplistic: "Death . . . breath; you . . . shoe; four . . . more; back . . . track." Punctuation is also used more often than before, and like the other devices, controls and hems in a writer whose style cannot seem to survive such bounds. In *Shadow-Maker*, poetry is no longer written as discovery. Instead MacEwen has adopted a poetry of calculation. Spontaneity

disappears; the poetry of effects takes over. The tacked-on, clever endings of "The Red Bird You Wait For", "Invocations", "Poem", "The Sacrifice" and others attest to this tendency.

Not every poem in *The Shadow-Maker* fails, however. Some of the better efforts reveal a pattern evident in *Breakfast for Barbarians*, the movement to encompass other times, other places. "I say all worlds, all times, all loves are one," claims the author and she travels to exotic places to explore the truth of that statement. Sometimes the trip is an actual one, as in her poems on the Middle East, sometimes an imaginary one through space to the future. Always the trip stands for the more fascinating inward journey to the hidden recesses of the human mind, a terrain MacEwen prefers.

"One Arab Flute", perhaps the most successful poem in the book, reports such an outward-inward journey in a vivid, memorable way. Certain pictures from it remain in a reader's mind, persisting with Kodachrome clarity: "a blue-eyed Arab/ with a wild profile, standing/ in front of blond stone"; "a small girl carries a loaf/ of bread that reaches to her knees"; "To reach Jerusalem you ride/ through ribs of dead jeeps/ and rusted wreaths of war"; and "The chalk-white/ salt of bleached houses, white-/ faced, wide-eyed towns." Here are no shadowy, misty evocations, but rather hard, bright, real images. Workers scratching dirt from an archeological dig become emblematic of modern alienated man searching for roots. They relate to the one in "The Last Breakfast" who eats in order to conjure up the sight of dark men running "on their naked, splendid feet". The "I" of the sequence, the tourist, is "the disinherited" from the New World who seeks links to an ancient past. The tourist's desire for the wholeness and continuity of tradition gains hope from observing the Arabs' tenacious survival in a hopeless situation:

> But I have seen
> trees that grow sideways
> in Esdraelon, fighting gravity;
> their bark is strong
> and corded with patience
> and their leaves rush upwards
> in incongruous dance.

In several other poems MacEwen goes further back in time than the Judeo-Arabic world. In "Dream One: The Man-Fish" and more successfully in "The Heel", she regresses through evolutionary eons to pre-history when man emerged from sea-life. She blesses those ancestors who "came from the waters/ scaleless and shrewd, and walked with unwebbed feet/ to create memory." Longing for a share in their fortitude, she asserts her kinship with those unknown creatures as she feels "the holy waters lapping just behind my heel." ("The Heel".)

Shadow-Maker does more than attempt to contain the "black fields of history",

however. Many of the poems travel forth, usually via a space ship, into the future. "First Song from the Fifth Earth", "Second Song from the Fifth Earth", "The Hollow", "Fire Gardens" and "Letter to a Future Generation" attempt to reach forward in time. Unfortunately, few of these are well-realized enough to be convincing. Most work on the level of simple assertion: "I *say* all worlds, all times, all loves are one." (*italics mine*)

The theme of the trip as an inward journey shows up most clearly in the haunting "Dark Pines Under Water". Here the terrain explored is explicitly the interior landscape. "This land like a mirror turns you inward. . . . Your memory is a row of sinking pines." The poet wants to examine not only the furthest reaches of time and space but the mysterious world of the sub-conscious. " . . . the dark pines of your mind dip deeper . . . There is something down there and you want it told."

In earlier volumes MacEwen implies that sexual union, mystical experience and art can each bring about the integration necessary to an earth that is "the right half of a bisected goddess." Tiamut reappears in *Shadow-Maker*; "angel, look again — / it is only that these seas are blood,/ this continent the torso of/ a tougher god than we can name. . . . " ("First Song for the Fifth Earth".) Who shall reunite the sundered parts? The thesis around which this book seems to have been conceived is that art must integrate all, even the blacker sides of existence. In "Dream Two: The Beasts", the poet does bring about a momentary reconciliation of opposites. The warring tiger and dog are transformed and lie down together, one on her right side, the other on her left. A new order emerges, that of the peaceable kingdom. The moment of perfection lasts but an instant, however. Law, order, the forces of convention appear in the person of a policeman: " 'Nobody brings the beasts together,/ It's illegal,' he said" ("Dream Two: The Beasts".) For the first time in MacEwen's works, a sense of despair becomes prominent. Formerly the effort to contain a divided, various earth was admitted as hopeless, but the attempt to do so counted. It occasioned a bursting, bleary laugh rather than a sigh. Now the complexities of living elicit resignation tinged with a whiff of self-pity: "And beyond the freest reaches of our sight" lie realms we shall never comprehend, bound as we are by "the shores of pain." ("Dark Stars".) Neither art, nor sex, nor mysticism nor even love can bridge the painful spaces that keep man from wholeness. Unfortunately, since the pervading despair and occasional affirmation in this volume are asserted rather than proved, both attitudes become ultimately unreal, devoid of impact.

The Shadow-Maker, then, represents an effort to incorporate even the darker realms of human existence into its author's vision. In that sense, the book continues MacEwen's plan to create an all-embracing myth that demonstrates "all worlds, all times, all loves are one." In the pattern of the inward-outward journey she reaches back into history, forward into space and down into the

subconscious in an attempt to integrate all these possible regions of being. Too often, however, tightness of form and vagueness of language prove barriers to effective poetry. Much of the verse fails because the shadowy realms remain shadowy, unreal, not linked to a concrete reality existing outside the writer's mind. A reader is left puzzling whether MacEwen's vision or technique is most to blame. That is, is the problem that the poet cannot see evil as operative in the world or is it that she cannot communicate evil in anything but bloodless phrases? Whatever the reason, the world of holy terrors, nightmare and darkness remains, for the most part, unarticulated in this book.

ARMIES OF THE MOON, MacEwen's 1972 collection, may well represent a plateau in her development. The language in *Armies* modulates from formal to colloquial, depending on the requirements of the particular poem. Thus, one of the Arcana pieces begins: "now as I wear around my neck a necklace/ of a million suns, you come/ undead, unborn, thou Ghost of the morning!" ("Arcana in Seven".) The somewhat rhetorical, elevated tone fits the remote, stylized tale of love, death and incest in ancient Egypt. On the other hand, "Memoirs of a Mad Cook" starts with the slangy observation that "There's no point kidding myself any longer,/ I just can't get the knack of it." The everyday language suits the everyday problem of meeting other's needs which the poet poses in terms of preparing edible meals, an everyday chore.

Happily, MacEwen returns here to poetry as discovery. Though a reader can never know definitely how a writer creates, *Armies* projects less of the sense of calculation which characterized *Shadow-Maker*. Rhyme has disappeared once more; line length and stanza breaks are organically linked to thought rather than existing as a preconceived imposed structure. "Apollo Twelve" proves the poet can in fact work within a conventional form, but in general her more exciting verse avoids such predictable patterns. "Into whose future am I moving," asks "A Letter To Charos", and many of these poems give the impression of growing and developing to a climax previously unknown.

The epigraph to this volume indicates the turn MacEwen's myth-making has gradually taken. The Laurens van der Post lines say, in part, "It was then that I first realized that the war I was fighting was in me long before it was in the world without." Despite the astronaut and space ship imagery, this poetry does not communicate the feeling of frenetic movement evident in earlier books. The impulse to orbit, encircle, enclose, take in the universe has changed in favour of a more microcosmic approach. The traveller chooses the inward journey to encompass the self, a trip that began in *Rising Fire*.

Goodbye, goodbye
the planets have resigned
and left me all alone;
you have collapsed to a microcosm
where your brilliant secrets
no more masquerade as stars,
there are no more galaxies
there is no more moon....

("The Telescope Turned Inward")

The search for integration has become less cosmic, more personal. Instead of comprehending the universe, one must comprehend the self.

Not that MacEwan has abandoned her desire to create a myth, a world-view. Both the opening title poem and "Apollo Twelve" suggest the need to orbit the universe and thus contain it, force it into some comprehensive whole. As in earlier space poems the movement is ultimately thwarted. The earthmen die and "become one with the gorgeous anonymous moon," a fate that hints at a reunion of Tiamut's divided parts. The astronaut of "Apollo Twelve" does indeed become "the satellite of his own dream" and succeeds in orbiting "the white world of his youth". But the moment of completion is, again, fleeting, for, that accomplished, he "climbs/ Through vacuous doorways to the gasping dark beyond." What is most significant about these two "cosmic" poems however, is their placement in the volume. Coming on the first and last pages, they themselves enclose the more personal, intimate, often domestic lines of the rest of the collection. MacEwen thus suggests that while a world-view must be sought it remains a frame within which the implications of such a vision are worked out in individual daily existence.

Some of the most successful poetry in *Armies* begins in the world of the ordinary. The poet starts with simple experiences in the realm of the domestic and, without straining to do so, endows housewifely tasks with mythic meaning. In "Meditations of a Seamstress (1)", for instance, she retreats to wine and the sewing machine when the universe starts to fall apart. "I make strong strong seams for my dresses/ and my world." And, if the job isn't done by nightfall "everything will come apart again;/ continental shelves will slowly drift into the sea/ and earthquakes will tear wide open/ the worn-out patches of Asia." Here the *need* to create a world where "everything fits at last" comes close to being the myth itself. The world-view, the vision of completeness becomes precisely the picture of man searching for perfection. The domestic poems about eating and house-cleaning echo this notion of a personal search for wholeness. Again, the search will fail, but the process itself, rather than the goal sought, attains cosmic significance. In "Dining at the Savarin," the poet, as in *Breakfast for Barbarians*, eats to the bursting point in an attempt to capture the essence of all

things. "Forgive me this second/ unreal hunger," she pleads, "Lord of the infinite buffet." In "The Vacuum Cleaner Dream," the "best cleaning woman/ in the world" succeeds in consuming everything with her "extra-galactic vacuum beast." Such perfection, however, ultimately destroys the very life the poet hoped to capture. "And when I opened the bag/ to empty it I found: / a dictionary of dead tongues/ a bottle of wine/ lunar dust/ the rings of Saturn/ and the sleeping body of my love." In "The Aristocracies," the moment of perfection stunned the poet into silence, the need to speak vanished when integration occurred. Here too, the "dictionary of dead tongues" suggests that once everything is caught, taken in, synthesized, the need for poetry will be gone. Thus, both poetry and life exist not as completion, but as process.

At first glance "The Nine Arcana of the Kings", MacEwen's sequence based on obscure events in ancient Egypt, would seem to afford an opportunity for presenting a vision of completeness. That is, while the present and the future defy any attempt to encapsulate them, remaining stubbornly ongoing, open and processive, certainly one can see the past as a whole. The tale itself has elements of myth: heroic figures, a royal brother and sister, strive to throw off the tyranny of an oppressive parent-ruler. Their incestuous love survives death and two millennia of waiting until resurrection occurs. Even here, however, the poet refuses to freeze the past into lifeless completion. At the end of the poem-series, the prince only half-heartedly embraces his nubile sister-lover. Instead, he longs for the homosexual, self-destructive relationship with the old king. The reader guesses that the sequence is actually a cycle of recurring events, a representation of the ceaseless struggle between fecundity and sterility, freedom and domination, life and death. Even antiquity cannot be caught once and for all. The pattern it suggests is not synthesis, but one of change, evolution, struggle.

During the past decade Gwendolyn MacEwen has worked to create a myth, to make concrete and particular a cosmic view. She has used images of the circle and the dance, has dwelt on themes of consuming and the inward-outward journey to point up man's need for integration. She has indicated that mysticism, love and art can all, at least momentarily, heal a Tiamut-divided world, a "split organ of chaos." Ultimately, however, her vision remains open, unfinished. The process of searching for wholeness rather than its attainment becomes the myth.

NOTES

[1] C. Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, p. 335.

[2] F. Davey, "Gwendolyn MacEwen: The Secret of Alchemy," *Open Letter*, Second Series, No. 4 (Spring 1973), p. 19.