

MACEWEN'S MUSE

Margaret Atwood

Now you comprehend your first and final lover in the dark receding planets of his eyes, and this is the hour when you know moreover that the god you have loved always will descend and lie with you in paradise.

— MacEwen, "The Hour of the Singer" (unpublished, 1969).

IN READING Gwendolyn MacEwen's poetry it is a temptation to become preoccupied with the original and brilliant verbal surfaces she creates, at the expense of the depths beneath them. But it is occasionally instructive to give at least passing attention to what poets themselves say about their work, and MacEwen has been insisting for some time that it is "the thing beyond the poem",¹ the "raw material"² of literature, that above all concerns her. There is, of course, more than one thing beyond the poems, but there is one figure whose existence is hinted at throughout her work and who acts as a key to much of it. This is the Muse, often invoked and described but never named; and in MacEwen's poetry the Muse, the inspirer of language and the formative power in Nature, is male. Ignore him or misintepret him and her "muse" poems may be mistaken for "religious"³ ones or reduced to veiled sexuality. Acknowledge him, and he will perform one of the functions MacEwen ascribes to him: the creation of order out of chaos.

The twentieth-century authority on the poetic Muse is, of course, Robert Graves. In his *White Goddess*,⁴ he asserts that the Muse is always female, and if it isn't it should be. Poets who have the bad luck to be women should write either as priestesses of the Goddess, singing her praises or uttering her oracles, or as the Goddess herself. That some female poets have recalcitrantly invoked a Muse of the opposite sex would be viewed by Graves as new-woman perversity; but then, he labours under the same difficulty as does Freud when he tries to discuss female psychology and Jung when he deals with the *animus* archetype: he's a man. There are several male Muses about, even in Canadian poetry;⁵

often when the reader comes across an unnamed "you," he would be better employed searching for the Muse than for someone with a birth certificate and a known address. But no-one has invoked the male Muse with such frequency and devotion as has Gwendolyn MacEwen.

MacEwen is a poet whose interests and central images have been present from the time of her early publications, though her ability to elaborate them, clarify them, transform them and approach them from different angles has developed over the years. Thus her first small pamphlet, *Selah* (1961), contains two images which are later viewed more specifically as incarnations of the Muse: the God-figure and the winged man. The God of the first poem is spoken of as having "fathered" the hills and as being "the guardian/ of the substance of light,"⁶ but he is remote; he encloses the individual human life but remains unknown by it ("we . . . do not even . . . hint You"). This distant God reappears in MacEwen's later work as the "almost anonymous" God of "The Two Themes of the Dance"⁷ and the electrical First Cause of "Tesla".⁸ Although he is the ultimate source of all power, including the power of language (as early as "Selah" he is spoken of as one who "writes," and "sound and light" flow from his "tongue" in "Tesla"), he cannot be conversed with. This may explain the rareness of his appearances: MacEwen much prefers a Muse who may be addressed or who may provide the other voice in a dialogue.

The image of the winged man does not begin as an incarnation of the Muse. In "Icarus" (*Selah*), the parallel developed is that between Daedalus and Icarus, and the Muse, addressed as "you," and the poet, with the wings — instruments of flight — being quite explicitly the poet's pen, and the flight of Icarus, ending in destruction, being the writing of a poem which is later burnt. Here the Muse stands in the relation of quasi-father to the poet,⁹ as is usually the case when MacEwen employs the words "legacy," "heritage," and "inherit."¹⁰ But having once used the Icarus image, MacEwen takes it through a whole series of transformations. Always the man-bird is a creature halfway between human being and supernatural power. When he is ascending, he is a human being aspiring towards godhead;¹¹ when he is descending, he is the divine Muse in the act of becoming incarnate.

In the first "Icarus" poem, in which Icarus becomes a "combustion of brief feathers," the idea of burning is connected with the winged man, and it reappears almost every time the figure itself does. For the god-man the first is divine; for the man-god it is either destructive or regenerative, the fire that precedes a phoenix-like rebirth. The man who flies but dies is readily available

for sexual metaphor, as witness "Black and White" and "The Phoenix."¹² In the first poem the Muse is descending, becoming incarnate; in the second he is an individual man becoming Muse ("beyond you, the image rising from the shoulders / is greater than you . . ."). In *A Breakfast For Barbarians* the flaming birdman makes an ironic appearance as a "motorcycle Icarus," "without wings, but burning anyway," a profane version of the divine Muse who "cannot distinguish between sex and nicotine."¹³ Instead of the Muse's descent into the flesh or even Icarus' descent into the sea, the poet imagines a splashdown into Niagara Falls. But the flying Muse is back again full-fledged in *The Shadow Maker*. In the book's first poem, "The Red Bird You Wait For,"¹⁴ he appears, now more bird than man, as poetic inspiration itself, the Muse in its Holy Ghost form which rises phoenix-like from its own ashes only to descend once more "uninvited:"

Its shape is a cast-off velvet cape,
Its eyes are the eyes of your most forbidden lover
And its claws, I tell you its claws are gloved in fire.

That the image of the descending Muse caught in mid-flight is far from exhausted for MacEwen is made evident in the recent unpublished poem, "The Hour of the Singer."

HAVING BECOME INCARNATE, the Muse may both disguise and reveal himself in many forms. There are a number of poems in *The Rising Fire* and *A Breakfast For Barbarians* which praise men in action: the athletes, the escape artist, the surgeon who is "an Indian, and beautiful, and holy,"¹⁵ the several magicians, are all men but more than men, possessed at the sacramental instant by a power greater than their own, the power of their craft, skill or performance.¹⁶ In these poems the poet places herself at a distance; she watches the act but does not participate directly. Instead she transforms the act into a metaphor for the poetic process; in "The Magician," for instance, the magician's "fingers' genius / wave out what my poems have said."¹⁷ This kind of male figure is thus both Muse or inspirer and one who is himself inspired. Though these figures are partial masks assumed temporarily by the Muse, they are never total revelations.¹⁸

All of the above figures are taken from "real" life: some of the poems in which they appear are dedicated to actual people, others (such as "The Ath-

letes," set in an explicitly Canadian park) are located in a world which may be identified, more or less, with the objective external one. But there are two other forms of the Muse which belong to his own proper realm, that of the imagination. These are the king and the singer-dancer, the Muse at his most static as sacramental object and at his most dynamic as sacramental creator-actor. Song and dance, princes and kings are used as images in the early pamphlets, and "The Two Themes of the Dance" and "The Absolute Dance"¹⁹ are tentative explorations of the relationships among dance, poetry and the divinity of the Muse; but not until *A Breakfast For Barbarians* are Muse, dance and kingship synthesized.

The poems most important in this respect²⁰ are "Black Alchemy," "Finally Left in the Landscape," "Subliminal," and "The Aristocracies." "Black Alchemy" and "Finally Left in the Landscape" complement each other. In the first, the emergence of the elemental Muse from formless water and his taking shape as "the prince of laughter" "cancels the cosmos:" the world disintegrates, turns fluid, to be recreated by his word which is a dance:

... in his dance
 worlds expire like tides, in his flaming
 dance the nameless cosmos
 must await its naming.²¹

But in "Finally Left in the Landscape," it is the Muse, not the world, which has disappeared. Here the poet invokes the "dancer" who is also a "deity." He is both present and absent: the poet seeks him, but finds only possible fragments of him. Her task is to gather him together (*vide* Isis and Osiris), to seek him as a whole, and her poetry is part of the attempt to recreate him; though her "lines can only / plagiarize his dance,"²² since, though absent, he remains the originator of both language and world.

"Subliminal" and "The Aristocracies" deal with the relationship between Muse and poet, and with their mutual involvement in time. In "Subliminal," the poet, having achieved a state of mind in which "there is no time . . . but co-presents, a static recurrence,"²³ is able to hold the Muse still for an instant in order to contemplate him: ". . . in that substratum I hold, / unfold you at random." He is seen as both dynamic and static: ". . . you do not move / but are always moving." But such a state cannot persist: both must re-enter the world of time, in which movement forward is the only possibility:

I rise to see you planted
 in an earth outside me,
 moving through time
 through the terms of it,
 moving through time again
 along its shattered latitudes.

"The Aristocracies" is placed at the end of *A Breakfast For Barbarians*, and pulls together a number of its motifs. The figure addressed is the Muse, incarnate as lover but also as a "natural" king; the tension in the poem is created as the poet's vision moves from the Muse as man to the Muse as a supernatural power ("The body of God and the body of you / dance through the same diagonal instant / of my vision . . ." ²⁴), a movement which both traps the human element in the man, turning him into a "crowned and captive dancer," and makes him eternal:

You must dance forever beneath this heavy crown
 in an aristocratic landscape, a bas-relief of living bone.
 And 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 Muse exists both inside and outside time, and like the letters on a page he is static yet in movement. Bodies as alphabets occur earlier in *A Breakfast For Barbarians*, and, again, word-thing metaphors date back to *Selah*; the importance of this body-letter lies in the fact that it is the first letter and the alphabet to which it belongs is unknown. The Muse is always *about* to be interpreted: he can never be completely deciphered.

Two attributes of MacEwen's Muse worth noting are his preference for a certain sort of landscape and the cyclical nature of his appearances. Before *The Shadow Maker*, the Muse's landscape tends to be identified with actual, reachable landscapes: those of the south and east rather than those of the north and west, exotic Palestinian, Arabian or Greek locales as opposed to bleak Canadian ones. The landscape of the Muse is also the landscape of the imagination, and there is often a sense of the grim "altogether Kanadian" reality of metal cities, snow, breakfasts of "unsacred bacon" ²⁵ and the mechanical clock-time present pulling against a different kind of reality, that of the ornate, hierarchical landscapes and the ancient stone city-scapes of the Middle East, or of the bell-time or blood-time ²⁶ of a more organic past. In *The Shadow Maker*, the poet is

clearer about the relationship between self and Muse. Here she takes "the roads that lead inward . . . the roads that lead downward,"²⁷ and although the south-eastern landscapes are still present,²⁸ the Muse's most authentic landscape is identified more positively with the inner landscape of dream and fantasy. "Song for a Stranger" has Muse and poet meeting in a mutual dream to "plot / the birth of a more accurate world" in a setting of "pavilions" and "pools."²⁹ In the two songs from the "Fifth Earth," the meeting takes place in a kind of science-fiction otherworld. Towards the end of *The Shadow Maker*, the Muse is seen more as a potential force than as an actual or incarnate being: the "chosen abyss" of the title poem³⁰ has replaced the "chosen landscape"³¹ of *A Breakfast for Barbarians*.

THE ENCOUNTER BETWEEN MUSE AND POET is an increasingly dominant theme in MacEwen's poetry. Through their meeting each actualizes the other, and together they are able to enter the Muse's landscape, he as a returning exile, she more often as an alien discoverer or explorer rather than a native. Together, also, they form the divine or cosmic couple which is a recurring image in the poetry. This couple may be either the original (and rather vegetable) Adam-Eve, the "man and woman naked and green with rain"³² of "Eden, Eden" (who reappear, for instance, in the pastoral, innocent, season-linked couple of "We Are Sitting on a High Green Hill"³³); or it may be an earth-sky couple like that in "Seeds and Stars."³⁴ It is interesting to juxtapose the early "couple" poem, "Tiamut,"³⁵ in which the female figure is "Chaos," "the earth . . . sans form"³⁶ and the male figure is the shaper, the divider, the former of Cosmos, with the later poem "The Name of the Place," in a sense its other half. In the later poem, the god and goddess responsible for the divided world momentarily glimpse a regained unity: "All things are plotting to make us whole / All things conspire to make us one."³⁷ There is a strong pull in MacEwen's poetry towards completion, synthesis: if the divine couple could ever permanently join, the universe which has emanated from their division would be drawn back into them and all things would indeed be truly one, a sky-earth, flesh-spirit, spirit-flesh landscape which would also be the homeless "adam"³⁸ returned from exile³⁹ and a dance containing its own "extremity."⁴⁰ Time and space would be abolished.

But the union of Muse and poet is limited by the flesh, and even when it takes place in dream or fantasy it is bound by the strictures of time and, in poetry,

by the length of the poem. Hence the emphasis on the cyclical nature of the Muse's appearances. Again, the wheel or cycle is an image used frequently by MacEwen. The revolving wheel is an organizing symbol in *Julian the Magician*, and in "The Ferris Wheel"⁴¹ it is made a "wheel of lyric" connected with the writing of poetry as well as with the movement of life around the "still middle, the / point of absolute inquiry." Wheel, circle and still centre occur as images again in "The Cyclist in Aphelion."⁴² But the moving wheel becomes the shape of time itself in three poet-Muse poems in *A Breakfast For Barbarians*: "She,"⁴³ which draws on Rider Haggard's tale of the reincarnations of a pair of lovers; "Green with Sleep,"⁴⁴ in which the "great unspeakable wheel," which is both diurnal time and the mythical time of recurrences, renews the lovers; and "Cartaphilus,"⁴⁵ in which the two lovers encounter each other repeatedly: "Whoever you love it is me beneath you / over and over. . . ." In *The Shadow Maker* the wheel image is connected not only with the poet's own circular movement,⁴⁶ but also with the circularity of time and the recurrences of the Muse. "First Song from the Fifth Earth" is even more positive than is "Cartaphilus" about the underlying identity of all the incarnations of the Muse: "I say all worlds, all times, all loves are one. . ."⁴⁷ "The Return," in addition to illustrating the theme of recurrence, is one of the clearest "Muse" poems MacEwen has written, and is worth quoting in its entirety:

I gave you many names and masks
 And longed for you in a hundred forms
 And I was warned the masks would fall
 And the forms would lose their fame
 And I would be left with an empty name

(For that was the way the world went,
 For that was the way it had to be,
 To grow, and in growing lose you utterly)

But grown, I inherit you, and you
 Renew your first and final form in me,
 And though some masks have fallen
 And many names have vanished back into my pen
 Your face bears the birth-marks I recognize in time,
 You stand before me now, unchanged

(For this is the way it has to be;
 To perceive you is an act of faith
 Though it is you who have inherited me)⁴⁸

Who has created whom? Is the male Muse as Marduk shaping the female chaos of the poet into an order or defining her by contrast (as in "The Shadow Maker"), or is the poet putting the Muse together out of words, as she sometimes suspects?⁴⁹ Is the Muse outside the poet, or is he inside, a fragment of the self? Does he exist outside time, or can he be apprehended only through time and through the senses? These are questions the poems ask; the answers to them are never final, since another turn of the wheel may invalidate all answers. The poet wrestles with the angel, but to win finally, to learn the true name of the angel, would be to stop the wheel, an event which she fears.⁵⁰ The last poem in *The Shadow Maker*, "The Wings," is a series of questions; in it the Muse, despite his many names, languages and landscapes, is again nameless. He has created, destroyed and restored innumerable worlds and several phases of the poet herself, and through the poet's invocation is about to begin the process again.

"I want to construct a myth," Gwendolyn MacEwen has written, and she has indeed constructed one. MacEwen is not a poet interested in turning her life into myth; rather, she is concerned with translating her myth into life, and into the poetry which is a part of it. The informing myth, developed gradually but with increasing clarity in her poetry, 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. Though the process is cyclical, he never reappears in exactly the same form. Each time he brings with him a different landscape and language, and consequently a different set of inspirations, though beneath these guises he keeps the same attributes. He is a dancer and a singer; his dance and his song are the Word made flesh, and both contain and create order and reality. The poet's function is to dedicate her life to the search for the Muse,⁵² 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. The Muse is both "good" and "evil," both gentle and violent, both creative and destructive; like language itself, he subsumes all opposites. Since he is infinite, the number of his incarnations is potentially infinite also. Though the final poem in *The Shadow Maker* may look like a last word, each of MacEwen's previous collections has an ending which is really a beginning: the "growing" of *The Rising Fire*, the "unknown" alphabet of *A Breakfast For Barbarians*. Here the final

word is "floods," chaos comes anew, a chaos which invites the creation of a fresh cosmos. There is little doubt that the Muse will rise again from his ashes in yet another form.⁵³

FOOTNOTES

- 1 "The Double Horse," TRF, 18.
- 2 Introduction, BB.
- 3 A. Schroeder in *The Vancouver Province*, July 25, 1969.
- 4 With which MacEwen is familiar: see "Thou Jacob," BB, 27.
- 5 Where however the Muse, male or female, is more typically a place rather than a person. But see e.g. Jay Macpherson's Angel and some of the male figures in Dorothy Livesay's *Plainsongs*.
- 6 "Selah," *Selah*.
- 7 TRF, 41.
- 8 BB, 19.
- 9 cf. Graves, for whom the Muse is, among other things, a Mother.
- 10 cf. e.g. "The Return," SM, 81. Nor is it strange to find the "boy" as parallel for the poet: this is elsewhere the case in MacEwen's poetry; see e.g. "Dream Three: The Child," SM, 56.
- 11 cf. the astronauts of "The Cosmic Brothers" (TRF) and "The Astronauts" (BB); cf. also the poet as a child, attempting to fly with the help of the magic word SHAZAM, as humorously recounted in "Fragments of a Childhood" (*Alphabet*, No. 15, December 1968, 10).
- 12 TRF, 19, 57.
- 13 "Poem Improvised Around a First Line," BB, 16.
- 14 SM, 2.
- 15 "Appendectomy," BB, 42.
- 16 cf. also Julian in *Julian the Magician*.
- 17 BB, 36.
- 18 MacEwen's interest in Christ is connected with his role as divine priest-king-physician incarnate; he is not the original or archetypal Muse, but another of the Muse's earthly incarnations.
- 19 TRF, 41, 43.
- 20 Though see also "Thou Jacob," the "Arcanum" series, and the cosmic dance at the electron level in "Tesla."
- 21 BB, 40.
- 22 BB, 52.
- 23 BB, 31.
- 24 BB, 53.
- 25 "The Last Breakfast," BB, 35.
- 26 See for instance "The Drunken Clock," the last poem in the pamphlet of that name.
- 27 "The Wings," SM, 82.
- 28 As in, for instance, such poems as "One Arab Flute" and "the Fortress of Saladin."
- 29 SM, 53.
- 30 "The Shadow Maker," SM, 80.
- 31 "Finally Left in the Landscape," BB, 52.
- 32 *The Drunken Clock*.
- 33 SM, 58.
- 34 SM, 71.
- 35 TRF, 5.
- 36 cf. other woman-as-earth images: e.g. in the verse play *Terror and Erebus*, in "Poet vs. The Land" (*Selah*), and in "The Discovery" (SM, 31).
- 37 SM, 16.
- 38 "The Catalogues of Memory," TRF, 66.
- 39 cf. also "The Caravan," BB, 51.
- 40 "The Absolute Dance," TRF, 43.
- 41 TRF, 49.
- 42 BB, 7.
- 43 BB, 9.
- 44 BB, 28.
- 45 BB, 46.
- 46 See "Dream Three: The Child," SM, 56.
- 47 SM, 68.
- 48 SM, 81.
- 49 See e.g. "The Face," BB, 9.
- 50 See e.g. "Fragments of a Childhood," in which the pronouncing of the "Final Formula" would stop everything.
- 51 BB, Introduction.
- 52 cf. again Graves; though for MacEwen the Muse is less Nature than creating Word or Logos.
- 53 See, for instance, the recent poem "Credo" (*Quarry*, Vol. 19, No. 1, Fall 1969, 5), in which the poet says, "no one can tell me that / the Dancer in my blood is / dead. . . ."