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"To Have a Body / Is a Cruel Joke": *The T.E. Lawrence Poems* and Gwendolyn MacEwen's Shameful Subversion of Cultural Singularity

Carl Watts

The moderate amount of scholarship on Gwendolyn MacEwen's *The T.E. Lawrence Poems* (1982) has focused largely on issues of cultural appropriation and poetic voice. Considering that T.E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph* (1926), which furnishes much of MacEwen's collection's subject matter, recently entered the American public domain, now is a fitting time to consider the public ownership of Lawrence's text, its controversial subject matter's resonance today with questions of cultural singularity or ownership, and, concomitantly, MacEwen's engagement with subject matter that is relevant and transgressive in the present. For this reason, I think that MacEwen's unique engagement with these issues can give us a more productive conception of what has been referred to in criticism on her work as a uniquely, yet often ill-defined, spiritual or expansive worldview.[1] *The T.E. Lawrence Poems* also — in depicting the ruptures caused by colonialism, the wartime clash of empires, and the effects of the latter on colonized peoples who, for all their singularities, nevertheless share a common set of experiences — offers a productive reimagining of possibilities for a shared and relational (as opposed to singularly defined) cultural heritage.

A three-part series of poems that inhabits Lawrence's voice, *The T.E. Lawrence Poems* by turns details specific events and characters from *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* and engages in more abstract ruminations on warfare, the desert, the cosmos, water, and the slippery nature of the self, culture, and the idea of the imposter. I want to suggest in this essay that the poems in the book use the dialogic, speculative, or, as I term it, transsubjective characteristics of lyric (as articulated by Jonathan Culler in *Theory of the Lyric* [229]). They displace narrative time with the present-oriented, repeating event of lyric, in the process reiterating, reordering,

and reimagining the events, perspectives, and personas of Lawrence's life and writing. *The T.E. Lawrence Poems* also evokes what Gillian White has described as "lyric shame" (3). As I elaborate below, White's work on lyric shame reveals new connections between MacEwen's interests in temporal, spatial, and cultural alterity and the boldness, or simultaneous shame and shamelessness, of the expressing self. That is, shame — in bodily, cultural (as in her and Lawrence's fascination with passing or being accepted as or mistaken for a member of a racial or ethnic group to whom one does not belong), and lyrical forms — is embraced and used to challenge liberal-individualist understandings of cultures as singular, strictly defined, and claimable. White's work is relevant here in that it attributes much denigration of the lyric self to the influence of language-centred or avant-garde conceptions of non-expressive verse. One of my wider-ranging contentions in this essay is that binary ideas of expressive versus non-expressive poetries are analogous to twenty-first-century, liberal-individualist conceptions of cultures as singular, possessive, and unknowable in that they both regard the self as singular, impermeable, and unknowable to others — and by extension, possessable by an individual (and in the case of narrow conceptions of confessional poetry, uninteresting or unbearable). MacEwen instead offers the possibility of relationality rather than singularity or a relationality that rejects ideas of both the individual as dominant and the expressive lyric voice as unadorned and outdated, with either the related individual or the lyric seeking to downplay or limit the potential of historical and poetic subjects to engage with alterity and the manifold provisionality of knowing.

Seven Pillars of Wisdom, a long narrative detailing a succession of military campaigns, has remained at least peripherally relevant to present-day scholarship.[2] Detailing Lawrence's experiences as a colonel in the British Army who fought alongside and helped to organize Bedouin forces during the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire (1916-18), the text also delves into descriptions of the harsh environments of the Arabian peninsula, Lawrence's relationships with Arab commanders, his ambiguous sexuality, his navigation of class privilege and hardship, and his formulations of patterns among cultures and evolving senses of self and purpose. All of this can be read productively through the contemporary lenses of identity, racial passing, empire and colonialism, sexuality, class, and white supremacy. Differently but perhaps equally fraught in terms of their preconditions or assumptions are critical engagements with MacEwen's oeuvre, which have long struggled to articulate the nature of

what is frequently described as her spirituality, mysticism, or transcendence.[3] MacEwen's interest in these concepts is evident in much of the subject matter of her expansive oeuvre, including especially *King of Egypt, King of Dreams* (1971), set in ancient Egypt; *The Honey Drum: Seven Tales from Arab Lands* (1985), a children's book that draws from folk stories of the region; and *Noman's Land* (1985), which engages with conflicts in the modern Middle East.

The T.E. Lawrence Poems also engages with the Arab world, of course, as well as with the recurring archetypes and historical patterns that so fascinated both Lawrence and MacEwen. It is especially notable, however, because of its use of a universal shame associated with the lyric voice (and, as I articulate below, the *shamelessness* that issues from its persistent utterance) to refract these concepts. "The Absolute Room," from the book's first section, begins thus:

> We came to a place which was the center of ourselves
> in the desert between Aleppo and Hama;
> We came to this Roman place where a hundred scents
> were built somehow right into the walls. (21)

The Middle Eastern setting is palpable — located historically via the names of cities, located in historical time via the reference to the Romans — yet a storehouse of these eras and experiences that is universal to the extent that it is abstracted into the essence of those encountering it ("the center of ourselves"). By the end of the poem, this transgression of place, historical period, culture, and subjectivity is grounded in bodily images that hint at intimacy even as they ultimately withdraw into individual or even abstract acts of perceiving. "I knew then that you possessed nothing of me, and I / possessed nothing of you, Dahoum," the penultimate stanza begins; the next stanza concludes thus:

> 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. (21)

These final passages corporealize the trans-subjectivity evident throughout the book, dissolving the image into cliché ("the windows to my soul"), bodily death, and a universalizing sentiment that again borders on cliché ("the quiet, powerful sky beyond"), all the supposed shameful-

ness and, concomitantly, shamelessness of lyric overcoming any urge to dwell on the specific cultures and peoples that have shaped the site on which the encounter takes place.

Early criticism on MacEwen's work addresses the universalizing dynamic that enables this process, often describing it as the interaction between holistic or spiritual and contemporary or real-world political and cultural issues, but it also does so in a slippery and often somewhat subjective way. Ellen D. Warwick carries out a stylistic analysis of MacEwen's poetry, arguing that her "surfeit of words," "looseness of thought," and "arbitrary forms" reach toward a synthesis that "communicates above all the wish to bring pattern to the overwhelming diversity of contemporary society" (22). The people in such a society

> [s]truggl[e] under an ever-growing body of past history and fac[e] 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. (28)[4]

This large, somewhat hazy idea reappears in subsequent criticism. Jan Bartley's 1983 book-length study of MacEwen's work adds references to Jacob Boehme, early Christian Gnosticism, Carl Jung, and alchemy, with alchemy representing a "spiritual process, a quest for inner vision and totality," the latter becoming possible "when opposites are reconciled" (3). Frank Davey articulates the early MacEwen's use of quotidian phenomena to reveal "arcane knowledge" and its attempt to "'embody' divine truth in the way in which she evidently believes that the phenomena of this world contain, imply, or reveal it" (47-48). R.F. Gillian Harding-Russell, meanwhile, argues that MacEwen uses "pseudo-history" to classify her poems "in the category of the 'creative' as opposed to the 'borrowed' myth of history or legend" (204), the by now familiar trope of her synthesis resulting in "a dialectic which underlies the rich diversity of reality and human experience as seen from a post-modern perspective in a timeless, cosmic, and psychological setting" (215-16).

Tom Marshall, in a reflection published after MacEwen's untimely death, suggests that, in the "Kanadian" period that defines her later work, "all times and places are one" in a "mystical apprehension of the world as one organism always rearranging itself" (80-81). One finds a common thread: that of the specific melting into some kind of universal perception. T.E. Lawrence, with his location at the nexus of historical rupture — namely, the geopolitical and social upheavals of the First World War as well as the disruptive effects of a clash between empires (Ottoman and British) on Arab peoples — and his comparatively ahistorical acts of imposterism, might be regarded as the perfect vehicle for such an understanding of fluid cultures and selves.

Many of these studies draw from an interview with MacEwen published in *Rhymes and Reasons: Nine Canadian Poets Discuss Their Work* (1971), specifically her statement that she rejected discrete notions of a real world versus another that "consists of dream, fantasy and myth." She went on to state that her "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" ("Gwendolyn MacEwen" 65), using the phrase that would appear in the titles of her short-story collection, *Noman* (1971), and short-story cycle or novel, *Noman's Land*.[5] My purpose in summarizing such criticism at this length is to illustrate the consistency with which one finds an expansive, vaguely defined, yet increasingly (given the critical concerns of the present) valuable set of ideas that animates her work. Notable as well are her dual fascinations with undefined, dislocated, or free-floating individuals (the titular character of the *Noman* books, for example) and a relatively anchored, historically deep, and demographically varied region — the Middle East — nevertheless defined by a set of common experiences. Just as "The Absolute Room" places side-by-side references to Aleppo and the ability to see through one's eyes and head into "the quiet, powerful sky beyond," so too does *The T.E. Lawrence Poems* provide insight into what the above criticism construes as MacEwen's slippery, even nebulous, worldview. For these reasons, I think, the book is also an illuminating counterpoint to contemporary critical concerns with identity as a singular and impermeable concept, with cultural appropriation, and (relatedly) with the idea of cultures as something that can be clearly possessed or owned — and accordingly culture and identity as ostensibly fixed rather than fluid.

Early attempts at systematizing MacEwen's uniquely expansive poetics were subsequently made by scholars who took a more theoretically

oriented approach, including some that engaged with *The T.E. Lawrence Poems* in somewhat greater depth. I will engage further with ideas from this phase of scholarship in my own readings, even as I try to push past them by putting MacEwen's poems in conversation with Culler's theory and with White's concept of lyric shame. Mary Reid seems to have inaugurated this second phase of criticism by building upon Marshall's argument about MacEwen's global consciousness to articulate the author's "deep investment in imagining ethically and politically engaged ways of being" that are "grounded in everyday life" (37). Reid finds that MacEwen's understanding of history is central to this formulation, arguing that "MacEwen's understanding of history is neither linear nor teleological"; instead, MacEwen employs a Benjaminian conceptualization of time as totality, when "all moments and events are implicit in each other" (40). Reid elaborates on this collapsing of distinctions, applying them to a spatial level — between the local and the universal — in her reading of "Letter to Josef in Jerusalem," also from *Afterworlds* but similar to *The T.E. Lawrence Poems* in approach and subject matter. Exploring the role of imperialist and capitalist expansion in connecting "individual acts and the acts of nations," the poem suggests that subjects recognize "responsibility at the individual level so as to effect change in the ways we conceive of ourselves and act as citizens and agents in national and global contexts" (46). This strand resonates with what I am identifying as MacEwen's resistance to liberal individualism and its current dispensation in conversations about cultural ownership.

Subsequent articles have taken more circumscribed critical approaches to this common thread in MacEwen's writing. Joel Deshaye has engaged directly with MacEwen's use in *The T.E. Lawrence Poems* of phrases copied directly from the writings of Lawrence,[6] noting that the popularity (or "notoriety") of the book allowed MacEwen to link her own modest literary celebrity with that of Lawrence. Deshaye also addresses the personal, racial, and national politics of the book with reference to the idea of racial passing, which includes within it "the grandstanding, impersonation, and ventriloquism that MacEwen enacts in her literary imitation of Lawrence" (532). Accordingly, MacEwen "passes as Lawrence to imagine herself as a man, to experiment with her identity, and to appropriate his celebrity"; rather than condemning Lawrence for his Orientalism, MacEwen adopts his voice to acknowledge the debt that his celebrity "owes to his imperial presence in the Middle East" (532) and to critique

the appropriation of Middle Eastern culture, myth, and religion that was central to her own work and persona.

Deshaye ultimately finds a blurring among MacEwen, her speaker, and Lawrence, suggesting that readers "could easily be persuaded that the historical Lawrence wrote *The T.E. Lawrence Poems*" (536). He also notes that

> MacEwen annotated and corrected a copy of her book, which is now stored in the archives at the University of Toronto, and she underlined phrases that she had copied directly from various texts by the historical Lawrence. There is underlining in 45 of the 60 poems. She describes four of them as "found poem[s]" that are composed mostly of the historical Lawrence's phrases. These inclusions are not remarked upon in the published book. One might say that she speaks Lawrence's voice invisibly or that she silently *incorporates* his voice into the book. His voice becomes his body. In that sense, she passes as Lawrence. (536)[7]

Although Deshaye suggests that this technique "counter-colonizes and even penetrates the male imperialist" (537), I think that attending to this phenomenon of racial passing is also useful because of the way in which it is bound up both with the idea of lyric trans-subjectivity that I will unpack below and with notions of shame. This reading is borne out by Brent Wood's contention that MacEwen's poetry emphasizes not "orthodoxy of belief and action" but also plurality, continuous evolution, and a "cross-cultural mythological imagination" ("No-Man's Land" 146). In *The T.E. Lawrence Poems*, Wood continues, MacEwen uses her subject's identification with alterity to examine her own relationship with myth and reflect on the polyphonic, "triple-layer" relationship that emerges as her readers are invited to do the same (148). Although compelling, Wood's formulation relies (as earlier criticism does) on an interconnective spirituality.[8] The contexts of colonial history and cultural identity suggest, however, that this interconnective or polyphonic element does not reduce ideas about cultural appropriation to the realm of textual borrowing so much as disperse them to such an extent that the figure (and her exploration of and dialogue with it) is wrested from fixed ideas about culture and belonging.[9] This trans-subjectivity challenges not only the definability of an individual participating in the project of British imperialism but also liberal-individualist ideas of cultures as singular and possessable.

One way in which trans-subjective lyric breaks down these constructions is in its expansive and multivalent approach to singular personas. At several points in *Theory of the Lyric*, Culler criticizes the New Critical idea of the lyric voice as narratological and functioning as a fictional character. He seeks explicitly to "resist the model of lyric as dramatic monologue" and focus instead on the "characteristic extravagance of lyric on the one hand and its intertextual echoes on the other," not to mention "all those elements of lyric — including rhyme, meter, refrain — not imitated from ordinary speech acts" (118-19). Culler attends to the features that imbue lyric poetry with a uniquely non-rational appeal and its related ability to entertain, arguing that critics often "conceal the seductive power of rhythm by undertaking for poems that attract us a complex interpretive process, to find something worthy of the hold it has on us — in which case what we conclude to be the meaning of the poem is designed to repress that other meaning" (168). This emphasis on the non-rationality of lyric's anomalous yet enduring appeal resonates with MacEwen's subtle yet frequently occurring and insistent consonance and assonance as well as her holistic or spiritual belief in a common store of human experience.

Another aspect of Culler's lyric evident throughout *The T.E. Lawrence Poems* is his description of a singular performance space. Culler argues that lyric's strengths do not revolve around describing or interpreting past events; one finds instead an "iterative and iterable performance of an event in the lyric present, in the special 'now,' of lyric articulation" that displaces narrative time and asserts instead a continuing present in which "a poetic event can repeatedly occur" (226). This narrative displacement contributes to "the evocation of poetic power" evident, for example, in the poetic pretension of the apostrophe, both embarrassing and productive of a "specular relationship" between the subject and the world that "has a highly optative character, expressing wishes, requests, demands that whatever is addressed do something for you or refrain from doing what it usually does" (229). Culler's version of lyric registers a radically distinct reorganization of relationships and possibilities — a way of apprehending and articulating alterity that differs drastically from that which inheres in prose and other narrative forms — that flies in the face of those conceptions of singular, possessable cultures that have structured understandings of identity that have become dominant following MacEwen's publication of *The T.E. Lawrence Poems* and that the book seems to rebut in advance.

Going further back than *Theory of the Lyric*, one finds similar arguments in Helen Vendler's *Soul Says: On Recent Poetry*. Vendler — who explicitly decries the increasingly singular and exclusive conception of identity[10] — argues that lyric is inherently able to express not only a multiplicity of subject positions but also the fluidity that characterizes our manifold conceptions of selves. She characterizes the perennial reluctance to accept this multiplicity of lyric as an error; like Culler, she conceives of the dialogic voices of lyric not as fictional characters but as the products of "changing registers of diction, contrastive rhythms, and varieties of tone" (6). These lexical, thematic, and tonal "congeries of forces" transcend a subjectivity analogous to the narratively constructed character (or singular self or defined group) in part because "almost every word in lyric language has a long history," each word itself a "character" that is "heavy with motivation, desire, and import" (6). This conception of lyric — which (both Culler and Vendler would have it) includes individuals and groups, specificities and universals, and cultural concepts both distinct and recognizable as templates that might be in conversation with one another — seems in retrospect to pulse through *The T.E. Lawrence Poems*, with MacEwen's (by today's standards) almost flippant crossing of such boundaries bearing out Vendler's description of the mode.

Culler and Vendler are firmly on the side of lyric (as opposed to various constructions of avant-garde, experimental, or anti-lyric poetry).[11] But I want to explore a framework distinct from a conformist or quietist conception of lyric poetry. I want to suggest, in other words, not only that MacEwen employs precisely those qualities of lyric remarked by Culler and Vendler but also that *The T.E. Lawrence Poems* recalls the adversarial qualities of lyric as conceived of by Gillian White in *Lyric Shame: The "Lyric" Subject of Contemporary American Poetry*. Notably, White mentions Sina Queyras's "ambivalent call for a new lyric" as part of her contention that this kind of desire to move beyond mere lyric "depends on a host of assumptions about a coherent 'old lyric' that have been powerful in determining the discourses of contemporary poetry in North America" (4).[12] Seeking to examine the manifold iterations of this purported shamefulness of lyric among several twentieth-century American poets, White describes the supposedly "expressive lyric" as the "chief abjection of a powerful and increasingly canonical avant-garde antilyricism now forty years in the making" (4). Lyric, therefore, is not inherently limited or regressive but characterized as such by a hostile party wishing to set itself apart from poetries of the past.

White situates her argument in a genealogy relevant both to Culler's conception of the multivalent subjectivity of lyric and to MacEwen's unabashed engagements with the limitations of — and embarrassment associated with — individualistic conceptions of self and related notions of culture as singular and possessable by a singular speaker. White reads current academic bias against Elizabeth Bishop's supposedly "minor and conservative" (4) lyricism as a continuation of eighteenth-century views of Romantic lyric as inferior to epic, with recent ideas of lyric's shameful valence caricaturing the lyric of Romanticism as defined by "unmitigated individualistic subjectivism, self-absorption, leisured privilege, and ahistoricism" (5). I think that MacEwen taps into the same conception of lyric as conservative or self-indulgent largely because of "dynamics in modes of reading rather than in individual poems or authors' canons" (White 5). In her own way, MacEwen employs both the non-narrative, repetitive time of lyric and shame: in *The T.E. Lawrence Poems*, the shamelessness and boldness (another variant of what, according to Culler, is nearly described as a kind of poetic pretension [229]) of a racially passing individual who is at once imperialist and anti-imperialist and whose lyric utterances themselves, per White's formulation, play on our internalized acceptance of the shame of lyric. In doing so, MacEwen conveys the reiterability of experiences and cultures and the futility of regarding oneself, or one's culture, as singularly definable, knowable, or possessable. Her holistic or spiritual conceptions of being, sharing, and belonging, despite the hitherto relatively weak theorizations thereof, in *The T.E. Lawrence Poems* become grounded via her use of the shame of the trans-subjective lyric speaker. The expansive or trans-subjective conception of lyric seen in the above passage, with its self-conscious and productive shame, destabilizes liberal-individualist conceptions of a clearly defined self. By extension, such passages today function as a refreshing, if challenging, subversion of popular progressive conceptions of strictly demarcated cultural practices and cultural ownership that one nevertheless might theorize as an extension of this Western liberal-individualist complex.[13]

The book's first poem, "Water" (3), combines an acceptance of fraudulent identity with the elemental tropes that likely inspire the recurring descriptions of MacEwen's work as spiritual or transcendent. The speaker has "tasted water / From London to Miransah," in the process evoking histories of war, invasion, and the politics of gender and wealth. Water is marked by proper nouns — "In France it tasted / Of Crusaders' breastplates, swords, and tunnels of rings / On ladies' fingers" — but just

as quickly absorbs into itself any marked location, rendering the latter as interchangeable: "In the springs of Lebanon water had / No color, and was therefore all colors." The poem articulates the ubiquity of exchange and the shifting of location ("Water will never lie to you, even when it insinuates itself / Into someone else's territory") and persona ("Water has style"); it includes an articulation of MacEwen's holistic worldview while introducing the book's depictions of a coherent self, culture, or territory as limiting and associated with the shortcomings of individualism: "Water has no conscience and no shame; water / thrives on water, is self-quenching." Tropes of fluidity and the universal needs of life are foregrounded in a way that shamelessly embraces what might be regarded as the cliché of the poem's omnipresent element.

"The Parents" puts the abuses of colonialism in the context of the family and its original sins:

> I was the bed on which they lay; their shy and awkward crimes
> were once committed in my name.
> Their necessary dark did not deceive me, their furtive
> Victorian midnights did not deceive me.
> I was the place they sold their souls in, and now I pay
> For every breath I draw with the memory of their shame.
>
> Now it is I who must give birth to them, redeem them
> and restore them to a kind of grace,
> for I carry them around within me endlessly.
> Father and Mother, be born in me. (4)

Beginning with the grammatically singular speaker's immediate transformation into the almost universal trope of the parents' bed at once indicates MacEwen's conception of cultures as reiterable and disperses the bodily across generations in a way that marks her lyric as shameful in that it challenges liberal-bourgeois conceptions of individual agency and dignity. Her characteristically understated yet persistent assonance renders as natural or logical the connection between individual subjects and the collective identities that came into conflict as part of the long history of Western imperialism and colonization. The relationship between the often contrasted levels of individual subject and power dynamics among historically situated group identities is further blurred in subsequent references to the Victorian era, the Christian trope of selling one's soul, and the more abstract (yet perhaps still biblical) generational tropes of a

father and mother being "born in me." The enveloping intonation of the repeated "them" forges a link between differentiated generations and the inherently complex experience of being a singular entity that nevertheless is bound up both with family and with larger collective understandings of culture.

"It Was Only a Game" more clearly channels the voice of Lawrence, in this instance illustrating the trans-subjective nature of lyric to the historical injustices and racist sense of entitlement that characterize Britain's interventions in vast swaths of territorial and cultural space. The poem indicates the problematic nature of applying MacEwen's ideas about the fluid nature of identity not only to contexts including adults' universal experience in many ways of being a child but also to British and imperialist history and the Crusades. But her notion of the interchangeability of cultural and adversarial roles here gives way to a scene in which

> The wild clumsy summers of our play succumbed to Fall,
> And then to long sullen winters.
> I dreamed of having
> Millions of people expressing themselves through me,
> Of being the saviour of a whole race, of rescuing
> A whole people from tyranny. Those were the tender,
> obscene dreams of my childhood. (11)

The seasons here imply the repetition of history, generations, and changes in ownership as natural and, ultimately, transcending the boundary between life and death.[14] This is borne out formally, with MacEwen's frequent use of repetition, which might seem to be stylistically irregular or undisciplined. The result is that repetition and change over the course of generations are cast as natural, as in the scattered appearance in the opening stanza of those who are good and those who are evil:

> As children my brothers and friends and I used to play
> A very simple game. The good guys, knights in armour,
> would lay siege to a castle held by the
> bad guys who were holding some of our
> good guys.
> We of course had to free the
> good guys from them, the wicked ones.
> *Or* —
> We could be the bad ones and hold the
> fortress against the onslaught of the

good ones who were coming to get more
of their good ones from us. (11)

The repetition of *good guys*, *bad guys*, *good ones*, *bad ones* is almost unnoticeable if one follows the sense of the lines, but the recurring elements remind us of the arbitrariness of singular political affiliations in the face of shifting or fluid cultural and, ultimately, trans-subjective identity markers.

"Feisal" subsequently opens with imagery reduced to black and white, a motif that underscores the falsity of any binary between multitude and singularity:

He was standing in a doorway waiting for me, all white,
Framed in black, with the light
slanting down on him —
a heavenly weapon.
Of the ten thousand and thirty-seven words for *sword*
in Arabic, his name meant one:
The sword flashing downward in the stroke. (31)

This first stanza ends by moving beyond binary distinctions between individual and group via the transcultural practice of naming. The latter — inherently marking singularity as much as ethnolinguistic group — here seems to parody infinite singularities (the purported "ten thousand and thirty-seven words" denoting "*sword*") as well as the multiply signifying nature of the name in question ("*The sword flashing downward in the stroke*" capturing a movement, an act, an image, and perhaps the drawing of the Arabic numeral 1). The description or supposed translation itself might be considered individualist because of its dramatic nature, but it is also both infinitely repeatable and — in its function as a given name particular to a linguistic cultural tradition — part of one of the collective identities from which Lawrence, and in turn MacEwen, draw their subject matter.

This multiple, mutable attention to the individual, the collective, and the transhistorical resonates with what I have described as trans-subjectivity in the lyric tradition, here being borne out with the book's consistent references to polities and cultural formations that, with a degree of elasticity, map on to contemporary geopolitical entities (Arabia and the Arab states, Byzantium and the Eastern Mediterranean, Turks and Turkey or the broadly Turkic world) while also challenging their existence as fixed or permanent:

My lord Feisal, the man I had come to Arabia to seek,
Had a calm Byzantine face which, like an ikon,
was designed to reveal nothing. Many times,
I learned later, he had watched his men
tortured by the Turks, and his black eyes
With their quiet fire did not flinch or turn away. (31)

"The Mirage" subverts the idea of *terra nullius*, asserting that land is defined not by its ostensible connection to culture but as the stable matter on which lives play out regardless of cultural affiliation. Although the context of colonialism (British, French, and Ottoman) makes this point somewhat jarring, MacEwen focuses on the harshness of this particular landscape to get this point across:

This is the desert, as I promised you.
There are no landmarks, only
Those you imagine, or those made by rocks
that fell from heaven.

Did you ever know where you were going?
Am I as invisible to you
As you always were to me, fellow traveller?
You are not here for nothing.

There are no easy ways of seeing, riding
the waves of invisible seas
In marvellous vessels which are always
arriving or departing.

I have come to uncover the famous secrets
of earth and water, air and fire.
I have come to explore and contain them all.
I am an eye.

I need tons of yellow space, and nothing
in the spectrum is unknown to me.
I am the living center of your sight; I draw for you
this thin and dangerous horizon. (37)

Land is demarcated here by a relatively unmarked perceiving subject; statements about the uncertainty of one's path, the encounters among

(again culturally unmarked here) subjects out of which human interactions are made in any location ("As you always were to me, fellow traveller?"), and the rendering of terrain as part of the narrative of one's personal journey ("There are no easy ways of seeing, riding / the waves of invisible seas") subvert the singularity of both the individual as culturally marked subject and the collective identities (race, nation, ethnicity, tribe) that organize modern conceptions of land as yoked to culture.

"Nitroglycerine Tulips" marks the point at which MacEwen's book moves outward from the above topographical focus and on to encompass the nature of warfare and conceptions of honourable participation in a cause. Such subject matter might appear to be prejudiced or xenophobic, but in fact the shift in subject matter transposes the tensions associated with interethnic conflict onto a more broadly humanist management of intergroup conflict. Its subject matter — like the declaration "I called myself Emir Dynamite, and became quite deft / at the whole business of organized / destruction" (41) — directly addresses the necessity of dismantling empire; more subversively from a present-day perspective, it also dismantles conceptions of possessable ethnonational or -cultural identities in favour of a collective use of resources in support of a larger anti-imperialism. With images of water, nature, and culture, the end of the poem features a corporeality that reinscribes notions of universality and a common, bodily humanity even as it undermines the categorization of the latter into distinct, definable cultural units:

> We planted things called tulip bombs to knock out
> Turkish trains, or curl up the tracks;
> the Turks were so stupid, it sometimes
> seemed to me too easy. How could they
> expect a *proper* war
> If they gave us no chance to honor them? (41)

The third line refers to an ethnic group or nation in disparaging terms; next the voice shifts from collective pronouns to the first person as well as the at once singular and collective dynamic inherent to the given name — in this case, something between a nickname and a call sign ("I called myself Emir Dynamite"). The poem's form locates its insertions of an individual self in the longer beginning and ending lines that enclose four indented lines in each stanza. The first-person pronoun is foregrounded in many of these lines and echoed in rhymes ("If they . . . I called myself . . . So I wedged . . . Another time I straightened

. . . And I wanted nothing more than to lie down with them, // And die, of course" [41]), in the process insistently reiterating the speaking self while dispersing it among the shameful stereotyping of a specific ethnic group (the "stupid" Turks).

The concept of individualism is then taken to an extreme, with the individual body cast as the carrier of contagion: "Once there were three hundred / of them, with their clothes stripped off, / And I wanted nothing more than to lie down with them" (41). Desire, or a bodily shamelessness, here derives not only from nudity and death but also from the act of imagining oneself among one's victims — here opponents named by a collective (Turkish) identity marker. Such passages anticipate and rebut the liberal-individualist and subsequently neoliberal understandings of culture, identity, possession, and, fundamentally, culture rendered as possessable or ownable. The Ottoman Turks are denigrated because they are agents of empire. Meanwhile, their racial classification in any modern or contemporary sense does not even occur to MacEwen's Lawrence, who, by extension, might be especially inclined to take up the cause of the Arabs given that they are engaged in an anti-imperialist uprising; hold multiple and shifting cultural, regional, and tribal affiliations; and seek to take on the appearance of their vanquished enemies.[15]

"Solar Wind" addresses these concerns in a way that eventually becomes self-reflexive, in the process underscoring the limiting or abject shame associated with notions of the individual agent. Reflecting MacEwen's preoccupation with universals, trans-subjectivity, and the culturally specific, the poem is somewhat more direct in its engagement with these transcendental matters. The opening stanza uses perception and peripheral vision to articulate how subjectivity seeps even into a sense — sight — that we often regard as giving us the most accurate sensory impression of an objectively existing world. From here, the poem returns to temporality in a maximal sense, conveyed in an elementally focused picture of perception in a temporally linear universe:

> The past and the future are burning up; the present
> melts down the middle, a river of wind,
> wind from the sun, gold wind, anything —
> And suddenly you know that all mysteries have been solved
> for you, all questions answered. (42)

The culmination of the list in "gold wind, anything" foregrounds MacEwen's spirituality and related image inventory as it is outlined

above, with the subsequent lines about solving "all mysteries" and "all questions" creating a too-easy, almost self-parodying effect. The poem's following (and concluding) stanza — "You must find a god to worship or you will die / In that unholy moment just before darkness and the sound / Of guns" — contrasts with the long-running sentences that comprise the poem's two middle stanzas, each of its short lines marked with a capital letter. The formal difference underscores the falseness of this sense of closure, and the iteration of the need to find "a god to worship" points to the arbitrariness of specific religious and cultural value systems by comparing them with a need for certainty.

The poem rejects these conceptions of culture in favour of a willingness to play with that lack of certainty and, relatedly, the falsity of the idea that cultures are singular and unknowable to each other as opposed to existing on a continuum of common experience. It evokes outer space and perception, in the process severing the connection between culture and land to such an extent that the Earth is removed as the middleman between people (defined as a more or less singular cultural collective that works hand in hand with the ostensibly individualist subjects of which such a group is composed) and the dispersion of individual people who, residing on the Earth, might experience such an extraterrestrial sensorium.

But MacEwen is not content to dwell only in this abstract yet universally palpable realm; instead, she engages directly with the notion of reiterable selves, conceiving of the speaking subject as enacting the repeating present event of the lyric. At the risk of drawing too pat a connection between Culler's ideas about the optative and MacEwen's poems, I suggest that the following passage, from "Deraa," could have furnished Culler with a prime example of lyric's repeating present event:

> Imagine, I could never bear to be touched by anybody;
> I considered myself a sort of flamboyant monk, awfully
> intact, yet colorful.
> Inviolable is the word.
> But everything is shameful, you know; to have a body
> is a cruel joke. It is shameful to be under
> an obligation to anything, even an animal;
> life is shameful; I am shameful. There. (46)

The passage illustrates the shame of the liberal-individualist conception of a singular self, with MacEwen's iteration of Lawrence choosing instead

to repress this understanding of subjecthood in favour of being anybody. Despite what might be regarded today as the insensitivities in doing so, viewing the poem in the transhistorical sense that influenced MacEwen's interests and autodidacticism (as have been outlined at length by Sullivan and by Deshaye [540]) suggests that its expansiveness challenges the liberal-individualist ideas of ownership at the centre of present-day ideas about culture and identity as discrete, singular, or even possessable. This concluding stanza's embrace of shame — "I am shameful. There" — subverts the unproductive shame of the individual subject, defined by a singular self and the culture to which that self belongs. The result is an expansive, bold shamelessness that puts lyric's trans-subjective characteristics and its nebulous, at times maligned, speaking voice in the service of dismantling ideas of fixed selves, cultures, and stories.

Many of the poems in the book's final section, "Necessary Evils: Aftermath," explicitly depict individual identities, cultures, and locations as all but interchangeable while acknowledging the fraught historical moment at which Lawrence's cultural transgression or imposterism took place. In "The Peace Conference," MacEwen's Lawrence states that, "After prostituting myself in the service of an alien race, / I was too mangled for politics; the world / swirled around me and I was its still center" (59). This theatrical presentation of ironized self-absolution continues in "Tall Tales," which addresses the inherently performative nature of war, conflict, and intergroup relations: "Consider / truth and untruth, consider why they call them / the *theatres* of war. All of us / played our roles to the hilt" (60). In addition to these lines' comparison of the dramas of history with drama proper, one finds increasingly explicit statements about the performativity of fixed culture. "In the Ranks" includes the line "Outside, I was whatever England wanted me to be" (61); "Clouds Hill" asks "What is exotic?" and immediately answers "Home is more exotic than anywhere" (63). The phrase is almost a mockery of conceptions of one's birthplace or native culture as somehow natural, familiar, or claimable as one's own.

The poems in "Necessary Evils" make theatrical the book's discussion of warfare and the geopolitical manipulation that comes with its conclusion. The topic of international (at root, European) conflicts and their reproduction in colonized parts of the world intervenes most explicitly in the controversies that might arise today from MacEwen's trans-subjective poetics — however fashionable they might have been in her own time.

"There Is No Place to Hide" features Lawrence standing on a stage and "apologizing for having a past, a soul, / a name (which one?)" (67). The sentiment enlarges the idea of shame to encompass any series of identity markers, here on display in the late-imperial, early postcolonial, modern-nationalist era in which Lawrence was forced to (fail to) find himself and that found full, garish expression in the liberal-individualist commitment to so-called national self-determination animating the Paris Peace Conference (1919). Located at the crossroads of so many ideologies and historical periods, MacEwen's work might seem to be either nihilistically iconoclastic or just deeply confused — trapped, perhaps, in its own mysticism. But, as I have tried to argue, it is her ability to see the associations among these formations — and the harm that can come from reifying them as the only way of conceiving of ourselves and of others — that makes *The T.E. Lawrence Poems* as valuable a diagnostic for our own critical and ideological assumptions as it is slippery, spiritual, and transgressively expansive.

Notes

[1] See, for instance, Ellen D. Warwick's repeated references to MacEwen's "tendency toward synthesis" (22), Jan Bartley's discussion of her "quest for inner vision and totality" (3), and Mary Reid's argument for her work's "ethical and . . . political global consciousness grounded in everyday life" (37), in addition to the statements by Tom Marshall and Brent Wood cited below.

[2] Recent studies of the book include investigations into its erotic register (see Paris), its unique relationship with genre (see Brandabur and Athamneh), and its registering of the history of Arab nationalisms (see Ochsenwald).

[3] See, for example, Bartley, Davey, and Marshall.

[4] Thomas M.F. Gerry builds upon Warwick's emphasis on Boehme's having influenced MacEwen with his argument that MacEwen "modifies the legacy of Canadian mystical writers represented by this tradition's originators, [Henry] Alline and [David] Willson" (152), instead using "the language of mysticism with a feminist difference" (154). The latter point is especially relevant given MacEwen's inhabitation of a complex yet, of course, male historical figure in *The T.E. Lawrence Poems*.

[5] Marshall finds a similar sentiment in MacEwen's "The Letter," from *Afterworlds* (1987), distilling the ideas expressed in the poem into the terms "life-enhancing global consciousness" and "its passionate rightness" (82).

[6] MacEwen, in a copy of *The T.E. Lawrence Poems*, underlined parts taken directly from Lawrence's texts; this copy is held by the University of Toronto archives. See Deshaye (536).

[7] Rosemary Sullivan states that MacEwen was both drawn to Lawrence, reading *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* as a teenager, and, given her ability to observe phenomena with a "seeing [that] did not bring resolution" (342), specially positioned to engage with the alienation and unhappiness that the older Lawrence experienced. Sullivan details the bond that MacEwen

felt they shared, describing her inhabitation of his voice as the result of her having "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" (342).

[8] In a different article about MacEwen's work, Wood makes a unique argument that links her supposed "visionary" qualities ("From" 40) with her alcoholism, which he hypothesizes might have been exacerbated by hypoglycemia; he suggests that her experiences of intoxication would therefore have involved "exaggerated sensations of mental confusion or intense awareness of one's own feelings" (50). In a comparison that today would raise eyebrows and ire, he associates this aspect of her work with "psychedelic experimentalists, vision seekers of North American First Peoples, and shamans from the polytheistic cultures around the world" (40).

[9] Although Liza Potvin does not discuss *The T.E. Lawrence Poems*, she comments on a similar dynamic in MacEwen's work. Potvin makes the broad claim that MacEwen's feminism is articulated through spiritual views in which the personal and political are intertwined (18).

[10] Vendler argues that the lyric self is more fluid and expansive than what she regards as the "socially specified self" (3) commonly constructed from various group-identity coordinates.

[11] Lingering distinctions between lyric and experimental poetry are themselves based to some extent upon the denial of the fluid or trans-subjective characteristics of lyric as explored by Culler and Vendler. Such formulations include Reginald Shepherd's idea of a magpie post-avant that draws from both lyric and experimental traditions; Brian Reed's argument that the movement of poets such as Rae Armantrout from the supposedly experimental margins to the celebrated mainstream of the 2000s confirms this kind of "hybrid poetics" (123) but that the avant-garde lives on in work that critiques "language and literary form in the context of class struggle that aspires to bring readers to consciousness of their place in that conflict" (48); and Gregory Betts's similar acknowledgement that a Canadian cohort of such writers has been enshrined in the mainstream of Canadian literature, yet, despite their subsequent lack of a "rhetoric of antagonistic marginality," these writers are unified by their "commitment to experimentation, to new poetics, and to literary innovation" (25). Despite their nuances, these formulations continue to reify contemporary lyric (however hybrid) as a default, pedestrian poetic mode.

[12] Queyras's "Lyric Conceptualism, a Manifesto in Progress" outlines a conceptually informed poetics that "does not accept that content does not matter" yet "appreciates the way that content does not always matter."

[13] Perhaps the most prescient of the earlier, arguably underdeveloped, theorizations of this aspect of MacEwen's work is Davey's idea of the poet as character. "It is later poems like these," Davey writes, "which present myth as the poet's own literal experience, as something she has lived as vividly and as credibly as did Julian or Akhenaton, which form the essential part of her poetic work. In many of these poems the dramatic element is underlined by the poet's placing herself in the poem as a character among other characters, as in 'The Left Hand and Hiroshima'" (65).

[14] My phrasing here is indebted to Pheng Cheah's compelling articulation of the Fichtean and Hegelian idea of the living community of the nation as one that "interiorizes and overcomes the border between life and death" (127) or regenerates itself in spite of the birth and death of multiple generations.

[15] Chapter 54 of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* states that "To an Arab an essential part of the triumph of victory was to wear the clothes of an enemy: and next day we saw our force transformed (as to the upper half) into a Turkish force, each man in a soldier's tunic: for this was a battalion straight from home, very well found and dressed in new uniforms" (314-15).

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