Dedication

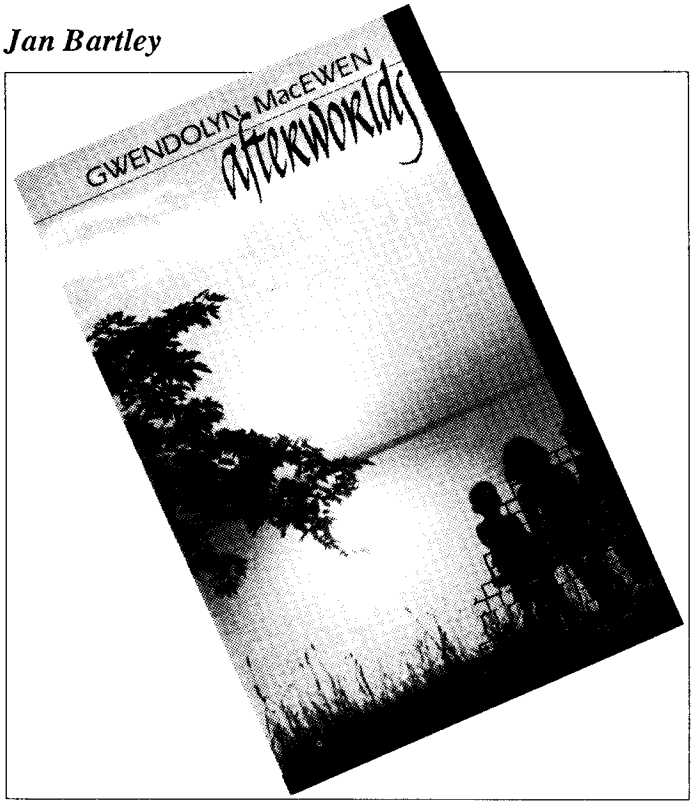
Gwendolyn MacEwen

(1941-1987)

AFTERWORLDS

Gwendolyn MacEwen. Toronto:
McClelland and Stewart, 1987.

Jan Bartley



The knowledge that *Wheatfield with Crows* is the last canvas painted by Vincent Van Gogh alters the way it is seen.[1] Its rich golden tones seem to darken, its energy seems to swirl inwards from the edges of the canvas to its centre, then through the centre to beyond the canvas, into "the carousel of space," "the beautiful darkness," afterworlds. Is it possible to read Gwendolyn MacEwen's *Afterworlds* without the knowledge that this is her last gift to us, her last open secret? Probably not, not yet. Irresistibly, meanings shift; the bold exotic vision, the outrageous images — sometimes seductively vague, sometimes sharp and knife-edged — become at once more transparent, more profound. Consider, for example, how the photograph included in *Afterworlds* becomes one of its poems:[2] taken by MacEwen's father, it shows mostly sky streaked by clouds, sunlight spilling over water, a clearly defined horizon, and, in the foreground the silhouette of a tree, the silhouettes of four children sitting on a bench looking out over the water. "Gwendolyn MacEwen," we are told, "is the child seated on the far right." She is the small, vulnerable shadow on the far right, and the very angle of her head makes one wonder what she sees in the twilight. "The eye *creates* the horizon," says MacEwen, "the ear *invents* the wind." We are free and obliged to invest her words with meaning, and to allow those meanings fluidity. MacEwen would approve of this wondering, this re-reading and re-seeing. Her poetry has always been a balancing act between convictions and questions, pulling us to "where the passage lies / Between conjecture and reality."

Yet, *Afterworlds*, even reread in the knowledge of our loss, is not a mournful book. It is tough-minded, sometimes tender, courageous and often humorous. Like other poetry collections, most notably *The Armies of the Moon*, its six sections — divided into preworlds (Ancient Slang and Anarchy) and afterworlds (After-Images, After-Thoughts and Avatars) balanced by the middle section (Apocalypse) — suggest a linear pattern, a rational mode of linking ideas and images. However, MacEwen has always been a superb craftswoman of the curve, mistrusting the simplicity of straightlines. In *Afterworlds*, once again, the straightline curves into a circle; the past and future intersect in the intensity of a single "breathing" moment; the images of one poem are echoed in another; the last poem mirrors the first, the simple notion of progression is complicated by the more marvellous notion of multi-faceted interrelationship. We are left with, and gain: "Words, these words / Careening into the beautiful darkness." In *Afterworlds*, words do not stand still. In "Let Me Make

Gwendolyn MacEwen

this Perfectly Clear," MacEwen warns us of their elusiveness:

All I have ever cared about
And all you should ever care about
Is what happens when you lift your eyes from this page.

Do not think for one minute it is the Poem that matters.
It is not the Poem that matters.
You can shove the Poem.
What matters is what is out there in the large dark
And in the long light,
Breathing.

What is out there in the large dark? The next poem, "But," tells us:

Out there in the night between two trees is the Poem saying:
Do not hate me
Because I peeled the veil from your eyes and tore your world
To shreds, and brought

The darkness down upon your head.

Circles. Words, especially MacEwen's words, can create a glittering appearance of reality, invested with form and meaning. Or they can destroy that illusion, suggesting instead the profound silence of a question mark.

What is important in *Afterworlds* is that the poet and reader exist together and are united in a dialogue of relative meaning. Remember:

The eye ***creates*** *the horizon,*
The ear ***invents*** *the wind,*
The hand reaching out from a parka sleeve
By touch demands that the touched thing
be.

In these lines from the long poem "Terror and Erebus," wherein the ghost of our past informs our present and wherein MacEwen becomes our poetic conscience, challenging us to reinterpret our past, we are again warned of the relative worth of words. The explorer Rasmussen, who searches for meaning in the doomed Franklin expedition to find the Northwest Passage, asks the Eskimo Qaqortingneq what happened to Franklin's papers, logs and reports, but receives this answer:

Papers, *oh yes!*
The little children found papers
In the great ship
But they did not understand papers.
They played with them
They ripped them up
They threw them into the wind
Like birds ...

This specific reply to a specific question becomes *the* answer to the poem's larger epistemological question: how can we know our past, how can we know anything? Rasmussen says, "Nobody needs to read." We need to see instead the "real journals" of people's lives, what lies beyond the words and beyond the pages. We need not just rationality, but passion and imagination. In the poem's last stanza, Rasmussen talks of the Northwest Passage and glimpses also the mythic passage still waiting to be explored:

Now the great passage is open,
The one you dreamed of , Franklin,
And great white ships plough through it
Over and over again,
Packed with cargo and carefree men.
It is as though no one had to prove it
Because the passage was always there.
Or ... is it that the way was ***invented,***
Franklin?
That you cracked the passage open
With the forces of your sheer certainty?
Or is it that you cannot know,
Can never know,
Where the passage lies
Between conjecture and reality ...?

MacEwen's poetry has always occupied this passage. She has always inhabited the two worlds of fantasy and reality and married them in her vision and her crazy, beautiful words. In the disturbing "Letters to Josef in Jerusalem," she can capture love and shame in a single moment:

In Beersheba your wicked black camera aims itself at an Arab woman and her child. She demands money for whatever part of their souls you intend to steal. She suckles her child, her magnificent dark breast exposed; it is as though the child is suckling the night. She turns away from the camera;

It is her face she wishes to hide.

In "Letter to an Old Lover" she can ask, *"Do you hear the wail of the water, / the roar of our love, the old nights / pouring in...?"* or in "A Stillness of Waiting," she can confess, "How I long to feel the dark voyage / of your hand along my spine," and make the tenderness and caring of two people tangible. Both worlds, humane and inhumane, co-exist.

In *Afterworlds,* MacEwen's words are mature, and startling, hurled at us with energy, wisdom, love and good humour. Read them again and again, but lift your eyes from the pages too, to see what MacEwen has always promised and warned us would be there.

[1] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Penguin Books Ltd., 1979), pp. 27-28.

[2] The photograph appears on p. 89 of this issue.