

No Other World: The Poetry of Don MacLennan

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Abstract

This is a study of the poetry of Don MacLennan in four chapters. Chapter One explores the poetry's deep involvement with the immediate world, and with the being that encounters it. Chapter Two examines the corpus's mistrust of abstract thought, and its suggestions for alternative ways of interpreting (or at least approaching an interpretation of) our existential situation. Chapter Three deals with MacLennan's writing on the subject of death, while the final chapter looks at the response of the poetry to the fact of death: put simply, this is to learn to love the situation we are in, and to record our thoughts for future generations, thus reaching beyond death to share with others the necessarily unique experience of our one and only life.

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Introduction

Dear Don,

You are fond of writing letters. You devote an entire collection to them, *Letters*, in which you send missives to friends both real and imagined, and then there is *A Letter to William Blake*. In the first you use letters to bring people closer to you. You even write a letter to yourself, which serves much the same purpose. In the second you relive Blake's ephemeral involvement with his world, thereby bringing his poetic philosophy to life in terms of your experience of it. Letters, you realise, are important: their aim is communication; they provide a medium for sharing ideas and feelings, for expressing appreciation for the gifts of others, and for making your feelings known to them; perhaps equally importantly, for making them known to yourself. These, then, are the reasons for this letter to you.

Long Ear,

I feel that your poetry has taught me many so many things. It is strange to say that poetry teaches us something, because, as you claim, poetry is not really thought: it is not clear enough, and our bodies are a constant distraction. But this is the position that defines us: we cannot escape our bodies, and while we may well be "inspired contraptions" ("To the Ancients", *Letters* 46), we are still tragically limited by our state of being. Your poetry carries the wisdom of the flesh, and a little more besides. If read carefully, it suggests a certain way of being in this unfathomable world. It is a way that celebrates the body and its appetites, while never discounting the possibility of a less creaturely appreciation of our surroundings. It shows how, despite the limitations of our state of being, life is still a miracle. And life is worthy of the highest celebration, because in the end it is all that we can be sure of. As you

claim:

... being alive
and conscious
is all this one and only world
can offer me.

(“Being Alive”, *The Road to Kromdraai* 56-57)

Descartes famously claimed, in his *Meditations*, “cogito ergo sum” (Descartes, 68). It is a conclusion with which I cannot but largely agree, unlike most other claims to understanding that human beings have made. I feel that it is close to a truth about us, and a very comforting truth at that.¹ But it lacks vitality, and this is because it does not acknowledge the world’s participation in our being, its role in the creation of ‘self’. For this reason I struggle with it, because I cannot imagine thought existing in a vacuum. To what would it refer? Bishop Berkley, another brilliant thinker, was apparently treated with some disdain by Samuel Johnson. Upon being questioned as to his thoughts on the bishop’s solipsistic interpretation of our state of existence, Johnson kicked a stone lying in his path and truculently proclaimed: “I refute him thus!” (see Parks, 63). His ‘argument’ is crude, but his intention is clear. Berkley’s project denies the materiality of the world and seeks meaning in the world of ideas. Johnson’s response is to insist upon the reality of things, upon their obstinate enduring presence and the effect of this upon us, regardless of how we would prefer things to be.

Your poetry is firmly in this vein, never allowing the world’s insistent presence to be bracketed out. In this way it is reflective of our state of existence, which is defined by the world and its objects. No matter what I have thought about the world, I have always found myself influenced by the environment or state that I am or have been in. The profoundest conclusion can be tempered by a knock at the door, or a mosquito landing on the ear of the person who shares it with us. It can be

1

That we exist, and that our existence appears to be our own: “I think”.

Handwritten note:
The idea of a self
is not a fixed
thing.

heightened by overlooking

... the Bosphorus
 drinking blood red tea
 from narrow-waisted glasses
 and deeply breathing in
 the evening air.

Handwritten notes:
 Can I do
 2000 2000 2000
 2000 2000 2000
 2000 2000 2000
 2000 2000 2000
 2000 2000 2000

("Politics", *The Road to Kromdraai* 20)

Words come alive when shaped by careful hands into poetry. Poetry becomes meaningful when it refines a feeling that we have received from the world that surrounds us. And when we love the world, it begins to reveal itself to us. You quote, in a later poem, from Wallace Stevens: "sounds passing through a momentary rightness". It is a difficult description to evaluate formally, but one that defines the instinctual affinity I have for your poetry. One of the first poems I read of yours was "Reduction" (*Solstice* 20):

Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* ends
 where it begins, warning:
 of that of which we cannot speak
 we should be silent.

Handwritten notes:
 Wittgenstein
 Tractatus

What else is there to speak about
 but the unspeakable?
 In spite of warnings
 to define our terms
 nobody can define what matters.
 Why art aspires
 to the condition of music
 we cannot say.

Try to explain
 the Mozart aria that drifts
 into the spring garden;
 why love transforms biology;
 why literature's an elixir;
 or how inertness
 miraculously contrives
 to be warm flesh.
 Reality and words
 part company there.

I had read the *Tractatus*, and while I could not begin to pierce the validity of its arguments regarding our epistemic position, I could not help but feel that Wittgenstein was being a bit of a killjoy,² and in the process giving scant deference to most of the things that I valued about my existence. It also failed, for me, to appreciate the miraculous nature of being, simply that there is a world, and that it somehow appeared from a state of nothingness. And not only is there a world where there should not be one, but a world that is filled with significance for us. At times we catch glimpses of things beyond our comprehension, things, yet, whose existence we have a hard time denying. Perhaps here would be another good place to refer to those "sounds/ passing through a momentary rightness", or those "most serious moments" you describe as:

... quicker than reflections
 on a windowpane, or sunlight
 on the wave that troubled Cristopher Columbus
 at the edge of the known world

→ 3, 10, 11, 12, 13
 a. Invention
 b. "most serious moments"

("The most serious moments of my life", *Under Compassberg* 15)

2 Because I have always found metaphysical questions deeply interesting and meaningful.

Wittgenstein's 'warnings' also seemed fairly obvious. They called to mind beloved Socrates, the man who proudly recognised the inescapability of his ignorance, while simultaneously realising that his awareness of it made him wise. But Socrates had no time to waste dwelling upon and revelling in this realisation.³ There was too much world to speculate about, too many bottles of wine to drink with friends, and too many conversations to be had regarding the nature of love, about our mysterious universe and our place in it, and about how to live a noble life.

And "Reduction", with its celebration of the mystery of being, hit me so hard I wanted to hold it to Wittgenstein's face and say: "Look! Do you not see the value of these things? Do you not experience their presence? Does this not fascinate you?" The poem hit me mostly on an instinctual level. It was only later that I realised the circularity you suggest in Wittgenstein's thought: that it "begins where it ends", that it is so caught up in itself that it leaves the world behind. Back then I knew that I had found a poet who had the rare ability both to acknowledge his limitations and yet to continue to reach for the things that were just out of his grasp.

You have treated poetry as exploration, and as a personal history, of your experience of being alive. You do this for two reasons. The first, the one that you are generally noted for, either approvingly or disapprovingly, is to discover what it is about your life that makes it significant, that makes it unique and, I suppose, what makes it there in the first place. Your poetry has been your way of finding "that story that lives [you] into being" ("Poem 30", *Rock Paintings at Salem* 24). The second, which is largely unsaid, is to provide a set of beacons to help others to enrich their lives. You do this by recording the most significant parts of your experience, and then trying to map them out against the experiences of those who have written before. As Sydney Clouts claimed, "Poetry is death cast out" (Clouts 85), a line which you have helped to immortalise through your wide sphere of acquaintance. Another thing that is synonymous with you is your purchase on life and your belief that death is final, and that there is nothing to rescue us from this brutal fact. You are the definitive atheist, so you do not assume Clouts's sentiment lightly, for you know

that death cannot be “cast out” for us. The honesty and courage implicit in your unflinching recognition of this tragic impasse are exemplary. And there is surely comfort in the fact that we can leave behind something of our experience, and this, while being of no significance to us personally,⁴ can be of great benefit to others. Even though

They will discover
 they too have not found
 their vision of eternity
 on the flower strewn ground,
 that the poet is but a sower
 whose self is scattered
 by invisible hands

(“Manifesto”, *Reckonings* 40)

- they will at least know that there are others who have experienced a similar feeling.

Your visions of the world reveal the bitterness of experience, but also its beauty. And it is your spirit that I adhere most to, because you strive to make good of the tragedy which you reveal. You manage, also, never to lose your sense of humour: even as your piercing eye unnerves us by laying bare our innermost anxieties, your wry tongue reminds us not to take ourselves too seriously.

You remind me, in a world that we both grudgingly admit to being largely inscrutable, to love the state of my existence, to try and attend to every moment of it. Most importantly, you have taught me to take living seriously, simply by making me mindful that it is all that I have. You encourage those who read your poems to strive constantly for something higher, purer, more intense, while at the same time reminding them that they cannot leave the world behind. You live in your poems, wagging a tobacco-stained finger, and reminding us that

There are so many ways

4

As we will not exist.

of being alive, to know
'The brain is wider
than the sky',
or that 'Eternity is in love
with the productions of time'.

...

that

...poetry is
more necessary than bread
to the human race.

...

and to

Trust them who
Have smelled the sacred,
Know it will survive...

("Being Alive", The Road to Kromdraai 56-57)

You live in me in ways that I cannot begin to thank you for.

A Note on Chronology and "Development"

Something I will not address directly in this study is the "development" of MacLennan's poetry. Firstly, quite a bit has been said about this by the handful of critics who have considered MacLennan's poetry, the most salient observations coming from Gareth Cornwell and Basil du Toit. Cornwell marks a change in the poetry in *Collecting Darkness*, the volume in which he feels that MacLennan "finds his voice" (Cornwell, 2). He describes the achieved poetic persona as "in love with language but eschewing verbal frippery, confessional, self-deprecating but also forgiving, endlessly questioning, skeptical or elegaic even in celebration, terse, gnomic, sometimes amused and amusing" (Cornwell, 2). Basil du Toit makes a similar point, when he talks of the "greater serenity" of MacLennan's later work, describing him as a "Picasso, able to make art from handle bars and bits of Persian rug" (du Toit, 7). He also accuses the earlier poems of being "cluttered" by their "width of reference", which is a fair criticism to make. The refined focus of the poetry that comes after *Reckonings* allows MacLennan to attain greater clarity in his poems, something which he constantly strives for. MacLennan describes it well:

All I've ever wanted to make
a few clean statements
on love and death
things you cannot fake.

(Letter in a Bottle, *Letters* 50)

I agree with both these critics, though I do find exceptions in the collection *Reckonings*, such as "Sarcophagus" (39) and "Grahamstown II" (41). These anguished

lyrics are arguably two of MacLennan's finest poems, thanks to their economy of diction and their density, their focus and their simplicity.

I will therefore treat the body of MacLennan's poetry as a coherent whole in this study (i.e. *Reckonings* and the volumes that follow). While I shall at times refer to certain refinements in the thought, I feel that MacLennan's central concerns remain largely the same throughout: the need to direct attention to the immediate and to distrust abstract thought (including the notion of god and the promise of an afterlife); to confront the presence of death, and offer love and poetry as forms of resistance. My primary aim is thus to identify the salient aspects of a poetic project that to my mind has remained whole and consistent for over 25 years.

I would like in conclusion to say something about the most recent work that MacLennan has published. This consists of the collections *The Necessary Salt*, *The Owl of Minerva* and *Through a Glass Darkly*. In these later works it is almost as though we hear MacLennan speaking from beyond the grave. They are his attempt to leave his life experiences behind, to sum up what he has learned in his brief, attentive existence: truly to give himself away. The epitaph to *The Necessary Salt* (from Odysseus Elytis, a fond influence on MacLennan) forms his mandate in these later works:

Inscribe yourself someplace any way you can
and later erase yourself again with generosity .

[2]

He describes to us what Elytis means in "To enter Paradise" (*The Necessary Salt* [21]), and tells us "it's time to speak and tell about/ the wonder and the bliss of being alive" ("Socrates", *The Necessary Salt* [36]). He speaks of love, and appreciation of those around us, and remembers his first impressions of the world, his family and his life. Yet he never loses his regret that he must die, and in "The Owl of Minerva" he points to

... the chalky evidence

that something was alive
that thought its tiny consciousness
would last forever.

(“The Owl of Minerva”, *The Owl of Minerva* [71])

Death remains a strong presence in these later works, the reality of its inevitable triumph wryly conceded. There is also a lingering sense of regret that emerges in poems such as “Sea Change” (*The Necessary Salt* [46]), and “Night” (*Through a Glass Darkly* [50]), but it is regret that derives solely from the consciousness of moments that are slipping away. Poems such as “Memory” (*Through a Glass Darkly* [23]), and “Si rite remetior astra” (ibid. [60]) connote, by contrast, a deep appreciation for the life he has led, and for the way in which he has led it.

Chapter One: What Shapes Our Lives

Other world? There is no other world; here or nowhere is the whole fact.

– Emerson (epigraph to *The Road to Kromdraai* 7)

Maclennan's poetry has a strong engagement with the immediate world, and this is the first feature of it that I will explore in this study. He lays bare feelings of being, of entrapment, and ultimately of reconciliation with and within a world of objects or, perhaps more precisely, phenomena. Basil du Toit calls Maclennan a "poet of his immediate locality" (du Toit, 7) and it is the insistent evidence of the senses that forms the cornerstone of his poetic project.

The epigraph to this chapter is also that of *The Road to Kromdraai*. It is a stern admonition, and one that captures the essence of Maclennan's belief about our situation. We must not look beyond that which this world has to offer; thoughts of another world, of other possible modes of being, render a disservice to the uniqueness of this life: "here or nowhere is the whole fact."

So the poetry is firmly grounded in the world and its objects. Maclennan speaks from his experience of the world, and any line of thinking that ventures beyond this is strongly condemned. Our environment, in his view, plays a pivotal role in the formation of knowledge and the formation of the self. It is "the world that taught/(him) how to speak" ("Axioms", *The Road to Kromdraai* 62), and it is the world that Maclennan reveres for the gift of life, and nothing else.

With this in mind I would like to begin this study by examining how we are led by the poetry into the world of phenomena, and how it effects a recreation and enhancement, through language, of our environment. The poetry suggests that by summoning the world's objects a little closer through writing or reading poetry, we see them slightly differently, perhaps more clearly. We are in the world as limited

beings, able to pronounce authoritatively only on what we can perceive, and so the refinement of perception within this restricted situation is of enormous value. And summoning our world a little closer in this manner allows for us to involve ourselves in it more, to love it more, and to feel each passing breath with the intensity that it deserves.

The world is never an entirely comfortable place for MacLennan's speakers to live in: they appear isolated from the true nature of their environment due to their position in it,⁵ and they are constantly aware that this isolation is endemic to their situation, an inescapable, at times debilitating, fact of existence. The first poem I will examine, "In the Beginning" (*Collecting Darkness* 41), succinctly captures how this sense of alienation from the world is embedded in the very act of experiencing it.

I walk round a corner
and find the sea
exactly where
I would expect it to be –
cold, unconsoled as ever.

I have been
here before.

The poem speaks of our entrapment as intentional beings in an environment that will not respond to our wish to find out the truth about it. Its tone is resigned, as the speaker silently acknowledges the defeat of his intellect by the unrevealing, unconsoling world. The alienation he feels from the scene he encounters is emphasised by the fact that he confronts the sea alone. He observes that the sea is "cold, unconsoled as ever", a transferred epithet mirroring his isolation from the world and the lack of "consolation" that has come from his musing on it.

5 MacLennan views us as creatures limited to the sense data we receive, limited by the way our brains process our world, and limited, most importantly, by the subjectivity of our perspective.

The rhyming second and fourth lines, and the careful phonetic substructure that underlies the poem, mimic the sounds of waves crashing repeatedly onto a beach. The structure thus establishes a sense of repetition, and this suggests that the speaker's patterns of thought have led repeatedly to the same bleak conclusion – an implication confirmed by the final two lines: "I have been/ here before". We are doomed, it seems, to terminal isolation from the universe that harbours our being.

In the poem "Sarcophagus" (*Reckonings* 39) we find the speaker:

Lying in the bath
 at dusk –
 outside
 a restless
 mulberry tree
 its black leaves
 moved
 by incoherent
 messages
 of warm wind.

The bath is where we clean off the dirt of our day's involvement with the world, and so it is symbolically a good place from which to write a poem: a place where the refined use of language cleans up or clarifies our perception. The image of the day drawing to a close is symbolic of a life that is approaching its end, but also evokes the shadowy forms that obscure our vision at dusk. The speaker's eye falls upon a "restless mulberry tree" outside of the bathroom window, and the personification imbues the scene with a sense of obscure but urgent life:

black leaves
 moved
 by incoherent
 messages

of warm wind.

These lines temper the mood of the poem, because they suggest that the speaker is excluded from an understanding of what is really at work. The speaker recognizes that there are “messages” in the movement of the wind, but that these are indecipherable to him. The words of the landscape remain “incoherent”: the speaker is terminally distant from the scene that his eye translates, and so there is a sense of absolute apartness, of isolation, from the world.

There is once again a strong feeling of entrapment: the scene described is “outside”, while the speaker is stuck in his bath. Even though he is facing the world naked, or without any guises, he still finds himself distant from it. The bath’s function is elucidated by the poem’s title: it is a “sarcophagus” or tomb. The association is not contingent; this is not a tomb merely because the speaker is approaching his death. Rather, it is the tomb of human embodiment and the condition of exile from the truth of the world’s objects that it brings. The associations of the noun “sarcophagus”, a somewhat ostentatious coffin that aims to preserve its inhabitant in the world after his or her death, support the poem’s underlying sense that the speaker is dying, and that death will not bring transcendence. The stony, impenetrable materiality of the sarcophagus also reinforces the feeling that the speaker is enclosed within a sphere of human meanings and significance, cut off from the world that he wants access to, that of the universe and its language.

In the poem “Winter” (*Collecting Darkness* 18) a sense of entrapment is described by the inescapable cold that makes “iron roofs...crack/ like rifleshots”.

The cold is
 inescapable
 these nights:
 iron roofs crack
 like rifleshots,
 contracting
 as though

about to crumple,
and you wonder
whether day
will ever come.

In the first sun
our dogs loll
against the back wall,
brains or nervous
systems muttering
their thanks.

The cold is invasive and forceful, a feeling developed by the roofs appearing “about to crumple” in its grip. The chilly scene leads the speaker anxiously to wonder “whether day/ will ever come”. The feeling of entrapment is strong; the sense of hope that emerges from his “wonder[ing]” appears frail in the light of the rest of the poem, which reinforces the idea that certainty is distant, and that the light of the sun, with all its associations, will not dispel the cold reality of this fact.

The dogs, in contrast to the detached human speaker, waste no time in their eagerness to catch “the first sun”. As they “loll/ against the back wall” it is their “brains or nervous/ systems” that utter their thanks, and we get the sense that their search for comfort is more immediate and certainly more attainable. They have found what they require in the mere presence of sunlight on a wall, and their appreciation, even though it is not articulate (“muttering their thanks”), mocks the speaker’s position. In contrast, he remains paralyzed by his frail hope and persuasive anxieties. The dogs are described in a way that emphasises that they are simply their bodies, and nothing else. That they have found what they are looking for in something that is linked to basic survival (the rays of the sun), signposts the first solution the poetry offers for being in an unfathomable world: the need to seek comfort (or consolation) in the immediate, phenomenal world. And it is therefore our senses, not our minds, that will be our guides.

The poem "Astronomy" (*Collecting Darkness* 51) situates the speaker in more celestial realms, as we follow him with his "disgruntled dog/ and Zeiss binoculars" in pursuit of Haley's comet.

With a disgruntled dog
and Zeiss binocular
I drove north
on the Cradock road
looking for Halley's comet,
for a blur in the night sky
or a trail of threads
glistening with celestial dew.

I imagined the icy fury of that thing
returning in great sweeps, indifferent
to its own recurrence.
But the dog, with instincts still intact,
brushed through black plasma
and baptised the pagan grass.

The focus here is on the disparity that accrues between the speaker's imagination, which "conjure[s] the icy fury of that thing", and his actual situation, sitting in his car on the side of the road with a disaffected dog and a pair of binoculars. That the comet is "indifferent/ to its own recurrence" suggests that the speaker is not, and together with his awe at its "great sweeps", suggests that he is feeling vulnerable and inadequate in the face of the universe in all its power and mystery.

While the speaker imagines, with wonderment, the idea of the comet and all that it symbolises about our place in the cosmos, the dog keeps its "instincts intact" and heads out through the "black plasma" of the night to baptise "the pagan grass". The tone is self-deprecatory, and as we shall see in other poems, it is also gently mocking of our mode of experiencing the world. While the speaker is bemused by

the majesty of the event he imagines (even though this event fails to materialize adequately to his senses: “looking...for a blur in the night sky/ or a trail of threads/ glistening with celestial dew”), the dog simply follows its nature. The references to spirituality, to “plasma” and to baptism, are mocked by the dog’s actions, and once again the dog does not need much to satisfy itself. As with the dogs in the previous poem, its route to happiness is simple, and bound to the immediate world, and once again the speaker’s observation is tinged with envy.

The treatment of the animals in both poems seems to favour the idea that we should not get beyond ourselves as creatures. In the manner of a Socratic mandate, this suggests that our natural state is not wisdom, or understanding, but intractable ignorance.

The sense that the universe is uncertain and unforthcoming is also treated in the poem “Lunar Eclipse” (*Reckonings* 39).

Just below the surface
 was a fear the moon would
 not come on again,
 rot in the dark like
 a discarded pumpkin.

And the stars.
 I leaned against the house
 in the cold night wind
 staring through binoculars
 at orange blubber.

In the dark I was afraid
 of treading on a puffadder.

There are two ways of interpreting this poem. The first would focus on the sense of being distant from certainty, the fear that the moon “would not come again”.

In this interpretation the moon would represent the light of certainty, with the speaker voicing his fear that he will not achieve this state. The second is a phenomenological, or existential reading. The speaker, standing before the eternal night, becomes deeply aware of his mortality,⁶ and the gradual wear of time on the universe itself. The buried assumption is, of course, that the moon will come again; it is locked in a continuous cycle around the earth, and is therefore bound to. It would “rot ... discarded”, though, because its existence, in a phenomenal sense, is dependent on the speaker being alive to observe it. The speaker seems to realise that the moon will continue in much the same way after his death, and his sense of mortality is enhanced by the words “rot” and “discarded”, with their connotations of decay and abandonment. The poem both celebrates and undermines the role of the individual: it shows the observer to be central to the event, but at the same time a contingent and ephemeral presence (compared to the life of the moon, our own is but the blink of an eye).

As the “cold night wind” affects the speaker, these deeper fears are offset by a more immediate one: the fear of “treading on a puffadder” in the darkness. A contrast between existential (or epistemological) anxieties, and the immediate fears linked to survival emerges, and it is the more direct threat to the speaker’s existence that trumps the more abstract one. The moon, being distant, has a subjacent significance, while the snake, a real and present danger, is foregrounded. Our goal, from a naturalistic perspective,⁷ is to live for as long as we are able, to remain as healthy as we can in the process, and to live thus without the hope of anything more to come. The snake’s proximity, then, is what is distinctly unsettling, and the fears associated with the moon thus become relatively remote and symbolic, rather than actual.

If we read this poem in terms of the search for knowledge, then the “moon” and the “snake” both become important symbols. The moon, in this reading, would be the light of abstract knowledge, which includes the awareness of our own

6 In this sense, the moon will one day “not come again” to his senses.

7 This is, after all, MacLennan’s dominant interpretation of the world.

mortality, and its distance from the speaker is synonymous with the cold distance of abstract ideas. The snake, on the other hand, represents knowledge that is linked to survival, to a more instinctual and corporeal way of being. The warning is clear, and is reinforced often in MacLennan's corpus: it is the world in its immediacy that we need to deal with, not the hopes or threats of our imagination of something beyond it.

"Unposted Letters to Gerald" (*Letters* 19) challenges notions of certainty, as images gain clarity and take on different perspectives for the speaker.

I

Dawn is a weak transfusion;
streetlights burn with fever
in the scarlet air.

On the hill the hospital
unblurs into white angles
losing its mystery.

Last night in the stifling ward
words whistled over ignorance,
and as we talked,
dreaming something onwards,
The wind outside
stirred up a violet sky.

II

Birds sing in the rumpled shadows,
sing first on waking up.
What instruction they have had
shows their fluency.
It takes me days to find my voice.

The town is soft, vulnerable.
 What we said wasn't enough.
 The streetlights burn
 with strange intensity
 before they are switched off.

A sense of helplessness develops as the dawn is not a powerful, burning spectacle, but rather mirrors the speaker's situation: he is feeling "weak". Its light also dispels any mystery surrounding the hospital, revealing its "white angles" and lending another, more threatening, aspect to the scene. The streetlights suddenly seem to be not only vibrantly incandescent, but also heraldic of the hospital that lies in wait for the speaker.

The weak image described by the first stanza seems to contrast with what has happened the night before, as described in the second stanza. The speaker remembers how "the wind outside/ stirred up a violet sky", an image of sublime beauty. A similar force is ascribed to a conversation held in the hospital, one whose words "whistled over ignorance". But the seeming power of this conversation has been dispelled by the arrival of morning.

The second section of the poem continues in a similar manner to the first. We are led to imagine the birds singing "in the ruffled shadows". They prompt a quick aside from the speaker, who bemoans "their fluency" when it takes him "days to find his voice". Again we are reminded that nature is sure of its place in the world, with its participation in the secret rhythms of the universe unhindered by any form of doubt.⁸ The speaker, conversely, is paralyzed by his sensitive humanity, and the demands that constitute the will, which distance him from a sure and comfortable participation in the world. There is also a sense that the speaker wants his poetry to issue forth as naturally as the songs of birds, represented by the "voice" which he struggles to find.

Presumably at a later stage in the day, the town appears:

8 One is reminded of Gerald Manley Hopkins' description of the way phenomena appear to him: "What I do is me, for that I came".

Soft, vulnerable.
 What we said wasn't enough.
 The streetlights burn
 with strange intensity
 before they are switched off.

We are left, then, at the end of the poem with the feeling that something that was intended to happen or supposed to have happened between the speaker and the poem's addressee never did. There is a glimpse of something in the "strange intensity" of the streetlights, but this is quickly discarded as they are "switched off" to mark the start of another day. We feel that the world goes on, time has gone by, and there is still no closure or redemption available to the speaker.

The lines leave some room for speculation, for instance, that the addressee has died. There is also the sense that the final word that could have remedied the situation the speaker now finds himself in is impossible. There is no finality to our acts of speaking, or to our act of living. There is only one certain conclusion, that we are doomed to die, just as the streetlights are switched off; there is nevertheless something triumphant in our ability to "burn/ with strange intensity" in the face of this certainty.

The poem "On Polyphemous Street" (*Collecting Darkness* 36) is one of MacLennan's early attempts at defining who he is against the uncertainty of the world he is living in. It begins with a list of foodstuffs, associated both with the sacrament (du Toit, 33) and with Greece, where the poem is set:

Today I bought
 hot bread, cheese,
 grapes, black figs,
 red Amalia.

What am I?

English speaking, certainly,
 an uncertain family man
 travelling alone:
 teacher,
 pilgrim,
 ignoramus.

At least this one fact –
 I am a
 digestive tract.

The diction is simple, rooted in every day speech, yet the sensory evocation of the opening lines is rich. We get strong cadences from the “hot bread”, which resonates with the soft texture of the “cheese”, a juicy sense from the “grapes” and “figs” and, finally, “Amalia” evokes a sense of exotic luxury. The poem’s reference to time, “today” and to the sustenance needs of the body show these to be defining aspects of the speaker’s search for identity as it is subsequently described (his approach here mirrors a sentiment⁹ from a later poem, “To Enter Paradise” [*The Necessary Salt* [21]]).

The first point of identification that the speaker makes is that he is “English speaking”: the world is filtered to him through this language and subjected to its interpretive restrictions. This immediately isolates him from the setting, as he is in a part of the world where English is not the main language. The use of the word “certainly” makes it seem as if the speaker’s sense of isolation from that which he encounters is directly linked to his inability to speak the language of the place, something he has noticed strongly about his position. There is a sense, bestowed by the Greek reference in the title of the poem, that he would like to be involved in the language and history of the area.¹⁰ But this is slightly ironic, because

9 From *Odysseus Elytis*.

10 In a metaphorical sense that he would like to have a “language” with which to explore the phenomenal world adequately.

"Polyphemous", the cyclops that Odysseus deceives in *The Odyssey*, has only one eye with which to view the world. This leads him into trouble in the epic, and Odysseus and his comrades are able to escape from him easily by blinding his only eye. Because the speaker can only see the world he encounters through a language foreign to it, it is almost as if he is one eyed: there is no other mode of interpretation, and having one eye means having poor depth perception.

The idea that he is a "family man", by contrast, is "uncertain", because he finds that he is "travelling alone". He would, perhaps, like to think of himself as a "family man", one who is concerned with others and their needs. But the search for identity is not, in the view of this poem, linked to other people.¹¹ It is something that the individual can do only by himself, and he travels alone because only he experiences his life's journey at first hand. He feels he is a "teacher", but this becomes slightly ironic, given the uncertain and limited nature of his enquiry. He is also a pilgrim, an identity supported by the biblical connotations of the foodstuffs with which the poem begins (Du Toit, 33). Again this is ironic: pilgrims generally know where they are going and what they hope to find there, while the speaker remains "uncertain" of what he will discover about himself. The pilgrimage to the essence of selfhood is an obscure, and probably futile, exercise, and so finally the speaker suggests he may be an "ignoramus", dumb to that which he perceives, limited in his capacity to search for meaning. This image offsets that of both "teacher" and "pilgrim", and serves as a reminder that the speaker in the poem is a long way from finding out who he is.

None of the answers emerges quite to his satisfaction, and so the poem ends with the single claim he feels he can make with certainty:

At least
this one fact -
I am a
digestive tract.

11 In later poems other people come to play a strong role in the search for identity, because it is largely through them that our characters are defined.

This wryly reductive remark suggests that the only thing we can know about our being is that we are defined by our bodies. The diction evokes a naturalistic, scientifically driven conception of who we are, as represented by the words “fact” and “digestive tract”, which at once show both the ugliness and the inseparability of ourselves and our bodies. We are our bodies, the lines say, and the decisive concluding rhyme confirms this.

But the poem has already tempered this naturalistic understanding a little. By using his imaginative faculties the speaker has opened other paths for exploration which, while deriving from the body, indicate that we can imaginatively elevate ourselves a little above it. The point is that questions concerning the more intricate details of the speaker’s identity remain confusing and vague, even seemingly contradictory (“teacher”, “ignoramus”), while the poem’s moment of certainty resides in the speaker’s realisation of the centrality of his body, and its influence on his mode of being. Thus the revelation at the end emerges not simply naturalistically, but phenomenologically. We are our being, with its limitations and imaginations, and in so far as we can be certain of anything, beyond the obvious existence of something, this is it. The prominence of the list of food and drink at the beginning suggests their fundamental importance: it is survival that we need to concern ourselves with primarily, and a more definitive synopsis of our state of being must derive from this “fact”. The speaker’s seemingly irreducible identification of himself with his “digestive tract” at the end exists as a warning not to get ahead of ourselves in our thoughts on the world or in our search for definition. That the title of the poem does not anticipate its conclusion, however, quietly suggests the power of our imagination and our ability to employ metaphors that may just assist us to come to a fuller understanding of our situation.

Maclennan’s landscapes are riddled with metaphor and symbolism,¹² yet

12 His frequent use of transferred epithets show how closely he feels his identity is linked to his environment. They are also reminiscent of Lawrence Durrell’s theory of the “Heraldic Universe”, which holds that our environment has a symbolic as well as an actual significance for us (Begnal, 105-109). It is a part of who we are, and we impose our ideas of

beneath these symbols there is an underlying uncertainty regarding the truth of that which his mind translates. The poem "What Shapes Our Lives?" (*Solstice 14*) begins with a spectral image:

Early today I could not see the town:
 smothered in a cold sea fog,
 dead quiet and faintly green,
 the place itself had disappeared.

By ten o'clock the sun
 began to burn it off
 showing all warm
 and brilliant underneath.

All day the light has been
 so pure and clean that it obscures
 geometries the imagination put there.
 Lingering inside the house
 are crumpled clothes,
 and the old fear that our bodies
 not our minds
 really shape our lives:
 it leaves me struggling
 with stones for words.

It is the phenomenal world (the fog) that controls the speaker's interpretation of the scene, and the arrival of the sun brings a vitality that was lacking before. Suddenly, the town begins to show itself "all warm and brilliant underneath". The

selfhood onto it, in the form of symbols of significance to ourselves. In this way the world that we see is full of the "heraldry", or symbolic history, of our lives, and while we somewhat unconsciously shape this symbolism, it also shapes us in every moment of our being.

sun also brings clarity, and thus is symbolic of the light of the mind, which illuminates the world that we perceive. It is sensation, refined in thought, the poem suggests, that leads us to an understanding of our position in the world, with sensation playing the primary role.¹³

The mind's power, despite its contingency in respect of sensation, is described as blindingly strong by the lines that follow.¹⁴ The sun's illumination of the scene reveals it in light "so pure and clean it obscures/ geometries imagination puts there". It is as if the application of rational thought to the speaker's impressions of the situation has indicated that his initial take on it was slightly inaccurate: his mind has clarified what he feels. Yet in each manifestation the town reveals a different side of itself to him, and this shows that its identity is never fixed. Even in the light of rationality, the imagination's geometries are "obscured", but not dispelled. This means that they are still there, but that the mind, due to the nature of its focussing, can no longer see them accurately. It shows that the world we experience remains both a product of sensation and a product of our minds.

That the same scene appears so markedly different under different conditions suggests that our perspectival acquaintance with the world is essentially limiting. It is impossible to apprehend the scene as it is: all that we can do is to observe how it appears to us at each moment of existence, from our singular perspective and via our inherent modes of perception. Thus the speaker is left with an ironic

fear that our bodies
not our minds,
really shape our lives.

13 This is a characteristic of MacLennan's thinking about the world, and in other poems becomes the main reason why he mistrusts thinking that is too abstractly metaphysical, as the next chapter will discuss.

14 MacLennan claims, in another poem, that it is important to know that "the brain is wider than the sky", or that the mind has the ability to search realms that are outside of, and grander than, the immediate. This refers to the power of the imagination as an interpretative tool.

It is ironic, because what shapes his position is not only his body, but fear, and fear derives from the mind. The fear, also, does not seem entirely justified. Is there anything to fear about our bodies being in control of our position in our world? In the previous poem, the fact that the body was in charge seemed to be almost a celebration.

There is, in MacLennan's thinking, a cause to celebrate the body. This, however, is because the body is all that we have. Because we are bound to our bodies, when they are destroyed that which we hold as our "self" is destroyed too. Our bodies are also limited, and this implies that our minds, which are shaped and controlled by our bodies, are limited too. Thus an escape from our mortal situation and a deep understanding of our world are seemingly impossible, and this is the cause of the "fear" the speaker records.

The natural world, in contrast to us, fits comfortably into its state of existence in MacLennan's poems. Earlier we encountered the carefree lives of dogs, and the ease with which birds lived in their world. We also saw the speaker's anxiety about the state of his existence providing a contrast to their existential sureness. We have seen both the limiting and liberating nature of the mind, and the inextricable link it has with our interpretation of the world. The poems have also bound our sense of identity firmly to our bodies, which in turn are firmly bound to the world that we experience. Finally, the poems have been marked by unease about our ability to impose ourselves upon the world, and a distaste for the alienated position that is imposed by the human condition.

In the poem "Pilgrimage" (*Reckonings* 32), a journey written into the landscape raises the idea that human industry is in opposition to the world's natural order. The poem follows the speaker on a drive through the "diseased Transvaal", and evokes the patterns enacted on it by human progress.¹⁵

15 This poem can be, and is surely meant to be, interpreted as a reaction to Apartheid. This study will not, however, pursue trajectories of political analysis, in deference to the basic stance of the poet under discussion.

I

At Magersfontein
the wind was cold
as steel among the
ironstone boulders.
Ghosts floundered everywhere
in the paralysing wind,
combing the rubbish-
heaps of history,
reduced to sucking bones
at roadside picnic spots.

II

At Christiana after dawn
we bought fresh milk,
at Bloemhof just discerned
the outline of a dam
like Chinese silk
on the invisible river.
Mealie stalks
rattled in the wind,
antheaps like fossil sheep
grazed on silence.

III

Here in the
diseased Transvaal
paths curve under over
by a tree that's gone,
a house once solitary
as the morning star

now crowded by suburbia.
 Dawn is a ghosthaze
 merging umber
 into dirty blue
 over the dynamite factory.

In the garden frost
 dissolves gently
 out of the June grass.
 I lie in bed
 under the eiderdown
 and hear the traffic roar
 from here to town.
 Beside my bed
 a cup, a dish.
 Jets enter overhead
 like silver fish.
 Blind
 I have come to follow
 old tracks
 in someone else's mind.

The speaker again appears to feel isolated from the world. The diction of the opening lines establishes this feeling, and words such as "wind", "cold", "steel" and "ironstone" convey a sense that he feels unwelcomed by, and uncomfortable in, the world that he is travelling through. The occasion appears to be a visit to an ancient site, and the image for what greets him is unfavourable: "ghosts floundering everywhere". He can find little of substance in what he observes of history, and the "spectres" of human progress and industry that appear later in the poem reinforce the sense that human narratives are distant from the actual world. Any sense of grace that may be associated with the richness of our past is dampened by the diction

that follows: "the rubbish-/ heaps of history", which suggests that we will find nothing of value in the sociocentric mode we traditionally employ to explore the world.

The second section of the poem resumes the journey in "Christiana", and the "discovery" of a dam at "Bloemhof", which lies "like Chinese silk". The speaker's imagination begins to trace symbolic forms on the landscape, which also suddenly comes to life under his gaze:

Mealie stalks
rattle in the wind
antheaps like fossil sheep
grazed on in silence.

The likeness of the "antheaps" to "fossil sheep" imparts a sense of the agelessness of the landscape. The lines also show the intimate link between the world and its creatures, calling to mind the practice of farming, both "[m]ealie[s] and "sheep", an ancient activity close to the earth. The tone of the passage is appreciative of a close involvement with the world's objects, approving of the cultivation of that which is necessary to our survival.

When the journey takes the speaker into an urban setting he bemoans the fact that this once remote place has been overtaken by "suburbia". It is described as "diseased" also, the marks of human progress having contaminated the landscape. And there is an auditory pun on the word too (dis-ease), which indicates a sense of this environment being uneasy with itself. The image of a "house once solitary/ as the morning star/ now crowded by suburbia" suggests that what we were once able to define our position in the world by has been obscured. The values that our species once had have been overrun by our excessive involvement in "development" and a single-minded idea of progress. The journey concludes in a "ghosthaze" dawn over the violent image of a "dynamite factory", and this completes the sense that we have ruined our inheritance of the world and that what we have created thus far has left

our understanding of our environment obscure and insubstantial.¹⁶

We then return with the speaker to his home, seemingly a place of comfort and security, as well as a space imbued with personal significance. This seems to be insisted upon by the speaker's referring to his "bed" and personal items. Yet even in his personal space he hears "the traffic roar", and the violent suggestion of the verb indicates an attack on the natural order of things, with cars being likened to predators. The scene the speaker describes in his room is simple: "beside my bed/ a cup/ a dish", and shows his immediate concerns to be linked to his body's needs, to comfort and sustenance. This is in contrast to the image of the cars, and the jets that "enter" into the sky "overhead", another invasion of nature – and an inversion of its order, as the planes appear like "silver fish". These images trespass not only on nature, but also on the speaker's personal space. That which he sees renders him "[b]lind", the word forming its own line to emphasise the debilitating effect of human 'progress' on the speaker's ability to see the world clearly. Fittingly, then, the poem ends with the lines: "I have come to follow/ old tracks/ in someone else's mind."

The sense that is created by the speaker in the poem is that the world seems impervious to his will. There is a strong deterministic feel to these lines: the speaker admits that he can do nothing but follow paths that others have laid out, and there is no sense of the freedom that is usually associated with the road.

There is a deeper sense to these lines too, that the tracks are not simply roads that mark the actual landscape, but represent the burden placed upon the psyche by the history and traditions that we are born into. The title of the poem, "Pilgrimage", thus mocks its content. The speaker has not described a journey to a holy place, but a journey that has struggled through the reality of the profane world we have created, and he has found in the end that it is unescapeable. The tracks that have been laid out for us are ones that we are bound to follow, and their influence filters through into our personal experience of the world. What hope is there, then, in light of this sentiment, for poetry to succeed in an unfettered recreation of the world?

16

The "ghosthaze" presumably refers to the smoke created by the work going on inside the factory.

Maclennan's response is to listen, in the manner of the Romantic poets, to what the landscape and its creatures are saying to him, hoping through this focus to begin to open the doors of perception that are our cultural heritage.

There has been a strong sense in the poems that this study has examined so far of the significance of the individual's personal space in the world as the foundation for a deeper understanding of it. Grahamstown, Maclennan's chosen city of residence, features prominently in his poems. The hospital in "Unposted Letters to Gerald" is Settler's Hospital, and the bath with a window onto a mulberry tree in "Sarcophagus" is the bath in his home. "Grahamstown II" (*Reckonings* 41) is perhaps the most resonant¹⁷ of the poems that have the town in their title:

City of bells
and birds:
hornbills squeaking
in the loquat tree
their voices too absurd
for such intrinsic dignity;
a rainbird and his bottle
bubbling down the scale.
City of gentle mediocrity,
your birds and bells
obliterated me.

Here Grahamstown is dubbed the "city of bells/ and birds",¹⁸ and these

17 And dumbfounding.

18 Grahamstown's traditional monicker as the "city of saints and scholars" is echoed by this description, and interpreting the poem in this way leads to an appropriate, and amusing, set of conclusions. In this reading, the "bells" are the "saints", while the "scholars" are regarded by the poet as "birds". The word "birds" is of course slang for attractive females, and when the speaker bemoans the "squeaking" hornbills, it is as if he is lamenting the presence of minds that offset the bodies that have an "intrinsic dignity", girls who look

images feature strongly in the rest of the poem. The score of the speaker's vision is set by the sounds of the "hornbills squeaking/ in the loquat tree" and the "rainbird" "bubbling down the scale", the music of non-human nature. Hornbills are graceful birds, rather otherworldly, and the speaker notes that "their voices [are] too absurd/ for such intrinsic dignity". The sound they make may appear awkward to the speaker, yet their dignity is intrinsic, implying that their existence is justified¹⁹ by virtue of their participation in their form. These cheery singers lead to Grahamstown's being dubbed a "[c]ity of gentle mediocrity".

Yet the poem's concluding line is a stark contrast to the benign nature of this epithet, its poignancy concentrated in a single word: "obliterated". There is surely more to this than the sense of a life wasted in an obscure provincial town. The "birds" and "bells" have left the speaker with no separate sense of his own identity: he has nothing "intrinsic" about him, no point of certainty about his existence. The "[c]ity of gentle mediocrity" has become a part of the speaker's ontological identity. He has also been bound to the "absurdity" of the place, and the subtle reference to the "city of scholars" reminds us of MacLennan's role as a university Professor of English. The unchallenging nature of the academic environment, and the deference to decorum and tradition that it at times demands, its "gentle mediocrity", has also destroyed something of his capacity to celebrate his environment with a song of his own. Thus it has had a debilitating effect on his poetry, and we feel that suddenly it is the speaker's voice that emerges as "too absurd" for the intrinsic dignity of his being. There is a sense that the voice of the speaker, as it is relayed in his poetry, will never match up to the "dignity" of that what lies invisibly behind the reality of his situation in the world.

A common element in MacLennan's poetry is the list, which uses a file of physical objects bound to a conceptual premise, as in the poem "On Polyphemous Street" discussed above. The poem "In a Pot on the Window Sill" (*Solstice* 8) lists a set of olfactory objects to support the central idea that "[s]mell spoke before speech".

good but are not too bright.

In a pot on the window sill
a hyacinth was coming into bloom,
its blue scent drugging
my small room.

Smell spoke before speech.
I lived somewhere before
the world of words was made:
my urine, sandals, cap,
iron railings in the park,
buses, river water,
ozone on the beach,
soap, gun oil, fireworks,
clean sheets, cut grass,
museums and cigars,
my father's pipe,
my mother's skin.

The "hyacinth ... coming into bloom" is the trigger for a reverie which leads the speaker through an inquiry into the origins of his being. The objects seem to spill out, yet are arranged in a careful sequence; each one complements the former, either continuing a theme or melding an old theme with a new one. The list begins with the speaker's "urine, sandals" and "cap", which are all personal things that carry his own smell. We can interpret smell as a defining mark of his existence, as well as of things that are part of his environment. Next come smells that are reminiscent of the modern world, both industrial: "iron railings", "buses", "soap, gun oil, fireworks" and, later, more personal: "clean sheets, cut grass". Then there are smells which suggest the world of previous generations - "museums and cigars" - from which the modern world originated. But importantly, the list is regressive, and we finally arrive at the origin of all sense, the speaker's earliest infant impressions: "my father's

pipe/ my mother's skin". This resonates with the earlier lines:

smell spoke before speech
 I lived somewhere before
 the world of words was made

Through this process of sensory recollection the speaker has arrived at his origin: a path has been reforged. The act has been creative, and by recalling these smells the speaker has rediscovered the world through a different "language", the language of the sense of smell. Objects that have featured in the speaker's world have become the repositories of his being, and thus by looking outward, into the world so to speak, he has come to rediscover himself.

In "Poem 28", from *Under Compassberg*, watercress growing in the sewage works induces in the speaker a feeling of awe, and this in turn evokes other memories and reflections. His thoughts eventually bring him closer to an understanding of how to reconcile literary wisdom with his personal, heraldic, life-world:

Sacred watercress grew
 profusely in the sewage works.
 I was awed by this display
 of immortality.
 But the healing herb I sought,
 hypericum, with yellow flowers
 and pungent leaves
 would not take root here.

I have been cured by smells.
 In the mountains once
 we used to find small habitats
 of agosthoma wedged between the rocks,

clusters of small white flowers
whose scent spread on the wind
filling whole valleys to overflowing.

Smell housed the inexpressible
experience that was my life
before I banished it with words.
Smells have remained
messengers of happiness,
memories of being here
if not yet quite arrived.

I gather the scent of agosthoma
to knit a garment for eternity.

The watercress in the poem may be a reference to the epic *Gilgamesh*, where the eponymous protagonist, devastated by the death of his friend, Enkidu, sets out to find the sacred watercress that confers immortality on the person who eats it. And it is, in a sense, immortality that the speaker in the poem seeks.

Watercress is a fresh, clean tasting herb, and contrasts with the profane sewage. It is also a plant with little smell, and so though we get the sense that in its abundance it conceals the sewage, we realise that this is a mere cosmetic masking - the smell would still filter through. It appears as if the artefacts - the verbal conjurations - that have been accrued by the speaker's involvement with literature fulfil a function similar to that of the watercress in this poem: they merely cover the profane nature of the world, they cannot dispel it. Those who seek true healing, like the speaker, are likely to be disappointed:

... the healing herb I sought,
hypericum, with yellow flowers
and pungent leaves

would not take root here.

Read allegorically, the speaker's quest to find the "holy watercress" is a search for truth. What is plain is that the strain of immortality that truth provides is not to be found in our endeavours, with the sewage representing the profane aspect of our existence,²⁰ and the watercress that which we traditionally hold as holy or sacred. The healing that the speaker seeks must come from "pungent" herbs, which reflects the idea put forth by the previous poem that our prelinguistic senses are our surest guides.

And the speaker remembers that he has "been cured by smells", that immediate observations of his environment have been a healing salve to his wounded being. A small clump of "agosthoma wedged between the rocks" fills entire valleys to "overflowing" with its abundance of scent, in direct contrast to the profuse yet weak-smelling watercress. *Agosthoma Pillans* is a yellow flowering plant that grows in the Great Karoo near Graaf Reinet, and does indeed have a powerful, and extremely pleasant, perfume.²¹ And so there are two important differences between it and watercress. The first is that it is an Eastern Cape plant, and so linked to the poet-speaker's immediate locality, while watercress originates from the Middle East and Europe, and so represents the traditions, often carried in books, that have filtered through from distant cultures. The second is that watercress has a literary link because of its prominence in *Gilgamesh*, while agosthoma has a personal one. And it is the personal significance of agosthoma which ultimately elevates it to a higher plane of import.

Smell continues to dominate the poem: it "housed the inexpressible/ experience that was my life/before I banished it with words", the speaker declares. The word "housed" suggests a place of shelter, a place where things both personal and precious have been stored. This reinforces the notion introduced in the

20 After all, sewage is the end product of our presence on earth.

21 MacLennan describes it as one of his favourite plants.

preceding analysis²² that the world's objects define us. And it also raises the idea that language is essentially alienating, as it has "banished" the original world that the speaker experienced. Smells are primal and essential, and they "have remained messengers of happiness,/ memories of being here/ if not yet quite arrived".

The speaker's world is formed, and remains prefigured by, the senses. They recall happiness, memories of involvement in a kind of truth before it is marked and "banished" by our reliance on language. The replacement of the now seemingly overly literary and ultimately plain watercress with the fecund agosthoma reinforces the idea that the world is a place that we imbue with personal significance. And it is this manner of definition that emergest as the truest touchstone of our existence. There is a strong sense of being in the world,²³ even though the speaker does not have an understanding of it. Yet a resolute feeling emerges from the olfactory imagery in the closing lines, and the poem ends: "I gather the scent of agosthomas/ to knit a garment for eternity". Smell forms something of a sure point in a life that marked by uncertainty. Thus it is the messages from his senses, from his personal experience, that the speaker feels will best serve for the "knitting" of his "garment for eternity". And this knitting clearly refers to poetry, suggesting how poetry weaves together the fundamentals of experience to create something new and perdurable.

"The Road to Kromdraai" (*The Road to Kromdraai* 11) is a good example of how enriching and consoling sensory perceptions can be, when reconstituted by the imagination:

The road to Kromdraai
bends and writhes in dust.
Aloes smoulder in the sun.

Cresting the sounding board of hills
I greet the bright, cold day

22 And forming one of the central concerns of this chapter.

23 MacLennan might interject at this point: "Where else might one be?"

With Jacqueline du Pré.
 The road glides down
 in rich glissandos
 into the smell of water
 and black fields.

Teach me about this place
 where what is willed is possible;
 how to escape the paralysing
 melancholy of days.
 Let the act itself come fresh,
 without credentials,
 inexplicably :
 not change, but rediscovery.

The opening lines establish an almost fantastical setting, the road coming alive under the speaker's gaze as it "bends and writhes in dust". There is a hint of clarity that follows in the "bright" and "cold" light of a Karoo morning, and the landscape becomes the point of departure for a sincere enquiry into the creative process. The speaker implores of it:

Teach me about this place
 where what is willed is possible;
 how to escape the paralysing
 melancholy of days.

The speaker's wish is to find a space where the will can free itself from the hindrance of our limited and at times ineffectual ("paralysing") way of being, and become involved in unfettered creation, melding the world of phenomena to that of human endeavour in a way that is enriching. The poem optatively identifies the setting as a new space ("this place") in which we might be relieved of the baggage of traditional

modes of structuring of our perception, dominated as they are by language and its social history. And the text suggests that we can, to some degree, shake off this “paralysing/ melancholy of days” by writing poetry, and there is a certain sense of knowing confidence in the plea: “let the act itself come fresh”. Indeed, it appears as if the speaker does know how to shrug off the paralysis of habitude, as he appears to have done so in the poem’s opening lines. The landscape has come alive under his gaze, displaying its vitality in a way that seems clear and to some degree unfettered by traditional attempts at understanding. The final line, “not change, but rediscovery”, suggests that the path the speaker seeks is one he has already travelled, in a prelinguistic state; a state he once possessed, but has subsequently lost.

It is a plea for primacy and immediate involvement with the world that the speaker makes in the final line, and this characterises MacLennan’s search for truth, which begins and ends with the immediate. While the poem is vague as to the location of the knowledge that needs to be rediscovered, we can make use of two philosophical ideas to approximate an understanding of where this might be. The first is from Plato’s *Meno*, in which Socrates uses a slave boy to illustrate his theory of mimesis (Plato, *Protagoras and Meno*, 130-140). Very briefly, he lays out an argument that everything we come to absorb as knowledge is only accessible to us because we have already known it: that which we take as learning about the world is actually impossible, and what we are actually involved in is “rediscovery”. In other words, knowledge is already in the world and in us because we are in the world; all we need to do is to find it within us, or to be shown it by others (ibid.). Socrates shows this in his interaction with the slave boy, getting him to prove a Pythagorean theorem²⁴ despite his apparent ignorance of mathematics.

The second is an idea prominent in the thought of scholars such as Gaston Bachelard (*The Poetics of Space*) and Martin Heidegger (e.g. an essay entitled “Language” [*The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 1122-1134]), who suggest that there is a space where our act of living is “fresh”, and that this is in poetry. When we write a poem we forge a new space, with an ontology of its own, thus

24

That a diagonal drawn between two corners of a quadrangle will divide it into two equal areas.

revealing a different side to the phenomenal world (*Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 1126-1131). By exploring the world from this new space we enhance our perspective, summoning whatever is responsible for the scene our eye beholds that little bit closer. The image of the "sounding board/ of hills" in the poem speaks of the reality of the scene resonating beneficially with the speaker's attempt to understand the world through poetry.

In the poem "Abatwa" (*Collecting Darkness* 49), the Karoo's wide open spaces and apparent severity are evoked in the images of "the blue shell" of the sky and the "blinding" nature of the light.

The karoo light is blinding;
 the sky, a blue shell,
 constricts all understanding.
 It is the hour to face
 the shrinking of creative power,
 acknowledgement of
 death as everywhere
 and we ourselves contingent.

The rock shelters
 hide like pudenda
 in the bush
 above the dry riverbed.
 On the smooth labia
 lies an ochre woman
 with big buttocks,
 a penis almost as long
 as the owner himself,
 a light-brown warthog,
 and two eland
 whose fatty bulk

dwarfs everything.

The world is
bright and crude
in its original plenitude.

The scene that the poem describes is harsh and unforgiving, as are the speaker's thoughts. If we take light as a metaphor for knowledge, then the place he describes is saturated with it. The landscape has an abundance of things to know. Yet this abundance is "blinding", in much the same way that the light in Plato's cave allegory blinds the eye of the captive who stares out from the darkness. The landscape "constricts all understanding", which connotes, first, that the harsh nature of the environment, specifically the heat and dry atmosphere, is stopping the speaker's thoughts from developing clearly. Secondly, it seems that the landscape itself will not let the speaker (as a poet) interpret its true nature; also that this attempt to approach it has taxed his mind, and the more he tries the more he feels constricted, like the helpless prey of a python. Finally, there is a sense that the landscape is alive, the verb "constricting" suggesting activity driven by will, activity that has a direct and inescapable bearing on his being, creating a bondage that is growing ever tighter, squeezing out any thought of escape.

A sense of relief, however, slowly begins to develop in the poem. The speaker tacitly ceases his attempts to understand the scene, and starts simply to observe it. By doing so he begins to touch it more directly, and it comes alive under his gaze, mirroring his impressions in its objects. He delineates it with images of fertility: "rock shelters" that "hide like pudenda/ in the bush" flaunt themselves above the "dry riverbed", and on these "labia" the rocks take form as an "ochre woman/ with big buttocks". These images combine to create a sense of fecund vitality. They are also at one and the same time the product of the landscape itself and the speaker's mind: they are the "Abatwa", or little people, that the poem's title describes. The image of "a penis almost as long/ as the owner himself" has connotations of penetration. It suggests that in freeing his imagination the speaker is penetrating the

scene, which relieves the earlier feeling of constricted understanding. The penis could be owned by another figure that has emerged alongside the “ochre woman” of the speaker’s vision. Yet the sentence is vague as to who the owner is; it could also be that the woman has transformed into a man in the speaker’s imagination. This ability to take on aspects of both sexes suits the metamorphising nature of the process mentioned above. It also suggests that the imagination, enacted upon the landscape, seems to be able to fertilize itself.²⁵

The world begins to reveal itself more and more, and life begins to emerge from the sensually delineated rocks, an earthy “light-brown warthog/ and two eland/ whose fatty bulk/ dwarfs everything”. The image of the “fatty eland” suggests abundance, and its presence “dwarfs” the feelings of constriction the speaker felt earlier. The poem ends strongly with a rhyming, summative couplet:²⁶

The world is
bright and crude
in its original plenitude.

These lines suggest once again that there is no need to look beyond the world for the basis of something meaningful: it is in itself enough to become meaningful to us. The dominance of the poem’s fecund images indicates that the speaker’s earlier fears have been allayed. The terminally distant “understanding” which he sought in the opening lines has been replaced by an acceptance – an acceptance that the true nature

25 This interpretation is lengthy, so I thought it better placed as a footnote: The being that the speaker imagines is a man, and is a woman, depending on his interpretation of the scene. It is the same set of rocks, thus it is at the same time both the man and the woman, though the speaker himself is only able to see one aspect at a time due to his limited powers of perception. Thus being one and the same thing at the same time and place (the objective rock), yet defined separately by the observer (the subjective imagination), they are able to copulate and the male aspect is able to fertilize, or enrich, the female.

26 Broken purely to emphasise the line “The world is”, confidently stating the speaker’s opinion as to its ontological status.

of things will always be out of our grasp; but we know that things do exist, and though we necessarily obscure the world because of our limited perspective, its objects begin to reveal themselves when we colour aspects of them with our imaginations. The world has nothing higher to offer us than its presence, yet the feeling of “plenitude” described by the poem both justifies and beautifies a fact that is initially difficult to accept.

A similar sentiment is expressed in a different setting in “Lullaby” (*Solstice* 37), where the speaker tenderly addresses a loved one.

Sleep, my darling, do not try
to catch that anaesthetic moment when
you shuck off consciousness.
Think, rather, of a rich idea,
a swarm of words
that clouds the moon
and takes you from yourself –
something that unties
your knotted-up surmises.

Silence drowns the landscape.
Colours run like a school paintbox
left open in the rain.

The sleepy “s” sounds, in tandem with soft-sounding vowels, provide a slow and mildly hazy phonetic substructure to the poem, which mirrors the content. This sense is helped by the enjambment of the lines, which makes them appear to flow gently from the speaker’s mouth, as well they might in the situation that is the setting of the poem. The imagination takes precedence in his advice: it is the “rich idea” that “clouds”/ the moon”, or covers over our secondarily lit understanding.²⁷ It

tempers the cold nature of the word “anaesthetic”, which suggests the ultimate oblivion that will be experienced by our “shuck[ed] off consciousness”. There is a suggestion that we, bound as we are by these fears, our “knotted up surmises”, need to reconstitute the world, to allow the imagination to draw us into it, and to reflect our being. The imagination allows us to elevate our being: to feel our world more strongly, and to realise our part in it.

Maclennan’s poetry thus has a strongly Romantic aspect, both in its appreciation of the natural world and in its subtle suggestions about the role of the imagination. In the manner of other poets in this tradition, he also often yearns for a more simple mode of existence, one that is close to the world and its forms, not subject to the mental restrictions imposed by the self in society.²⁸ The poem “Karoo Town” (*The Poetry Lesson* [17-18]) brings us to a town “crushed beside/ a heap of sprawling dolerite”, like some wrecked body at the foot of its tormentor. The sense of the town’s existence as a testament to survival in a hard place is brought out by the “smell...of work/ building walls, houses”. It also appears welcoming and full of life, with its “light and warmth”. The people, bound to trying to stay alive, have worked themselves to a point of appreciation for the things that support the structure of life itself. It is a place where

you can just manage
time to watch things grow -
children, trees, the skill
of how things can be done.

There is a strong meditative aspect to this life, a slowness. There is a closeness also, to the earth, the taste of which is “in their mouths”, and to “forgotten rivers”, or

sun is thus the true source of knowledge, while the moon is an impression of this. The sun is the actual world, and its light speaks of its nature. We cannot apprehend this directly, and so our understanding of the true nature of the world is necessarily obscure.

28 The violence of some of his imagery (and the contrasting gentleness), and his furiously searching intellect give him an affinity to William Blake, in particular.

things which we used to be able to identify but no longer can. The connection is so strong that the inhabitants' speech resembles the "fuss of birds". They are people who have remained close to our original mode of being – survival and generation. The tone of the poem indicates that the speaker has a sense of admiration and even a twinge of envy for this mode of existence.

A similar attitude is clearly evident in the poem "Envy" (*Reading the Signs* 10):

Today a man knocked on the door
saying he could sharpen knives.
He lived near Gradwell's mill
and drought had ruined everything
on his small-holding.

With two files he drew from his pocket,
one coarse, one smooth, he set to work
on our blunt kitchen knives.
He sat on the front step
humming to himself,
grateful for coffee
and the ten rand note.

I wondered why
I could not be
as content as he.

Both poems express a preference for working and creating in a simplified space. The man who comes around "saying he could sharpen knives" initially, however, seems to demand pity. "Drought had ruined everything", his "everything" – a "small-holding" – being modest enough anyway.

The man's trade requires simple tools, and pulling "two files" from his pocket he sets to work. He also does not demand much for his efforts, and he is "grateful

for coffee/ and the ten rand note". These small rewards take on a magnitude greater than the one which we would normally associate with them, and this makes the last section of the poem all the more poignant: "I wondered why/ I could not be/ as content as he". The lines are isolated from the rest of the poem, emphasising their importance. Again we get the feeling that the speaker is gesturing towards a malaise generated by contemporary ways of being. Lacking contentment, the speaker's tone appears wistful, but the choice of diction is profound. The speaker does not imply that this life is for him: he "could not be" in such a state of contentment, even if they were to trade places with the knife sharpener. But there remains an implication that contentment is to be found in simple tasks that bind one to the immediate world. The speaker's path to this is the medium of poetry, which serves intimately to *involve* him in the nature of existence. But it is a fraught path, while the knife sharpener's trade is much more sure and immediately rewarding.

In the poem "Shelter" (*Reading the Signs* 17) the speaker visits a ruined tannery, where he encounters a past that resonates strongly with the present:

At Leliekloof he took me to a ruined house
 on a rise above the stream,
 its walls still obstinate, without a roof,
 open to the sun and stars.
 Small trees and shrubs now claimed it,
 and greedy brambles.
 Once tanners worked there,
 the soaking vats they made
 fed by channels from higher up the stream
 now only ankle deep and scuttling
 with small crabs, sour grass on its rims.

Something made me want to save it,
 stay there for long months,
 the farmer bringing coffee and tobacco,

roofing materials and tools.
 It felt as if I'd once lived there myself,
 cut the wooden lintels
 that calmed the grey stone blocks.

The farmer smiled at my naivety.
 'You are a hundred years too late,' he said.
 'We've all moved on since then.'
 And yet I wished to clear the detritus away
 touch stone and wood, and heal myself.

The "ruined house" has been "claimed" by nature: "small trees and "shrubs" fight it out with "greedy brambles" for dominance, and "small crabs" live in the shallow hollows of the disused "soaking vats". The scene is ruinous, full of life but certainly not conducive to human habitation or industry. Yet the speaker finds himself wanting "to save it", to make a home there: "stay there for long months/ the farmer bringing coffee and tobacco,/ roofing materials and tools".

The rich sensory images of coffee and tobacco evoke the leisurely industry of an older time, the smells and associations of a micro-industrial, individual mode of life. The farmer is nameless, and so becomes a type in the speaker's dream, supporting the universal nature of the point he is trying to make. Interestingly, the speaker feels as if he has stayed there before and has been involved in its creation:²⁹ "It felt as if I'd once lived there myself/ cut the wooden lintels/ that calmed the grey stone blocks".

The word "calmed" is interesting in this context, suggesting a stillness about the whole project, a sense of being relaxed, and of being close to something that is essentially soothing. The cry at the end of the poem is for a return, and once again it reveals the poet speaker's wish to rediscover a mode of creativity that is bound to essential things.

29

In the manner of previous poems, this one too suggests that recreating the world through the imagination allows us to partake in it.

The farmer smiles away the speaker's "naivety", claiming that he is "a hundred years too late" and that "we've all moved on since then", a tacit suggestion that the speaker should be moving on from this kind of thinking too. Yet within the space of the poem the sense of loss at having moved away from this form of existence is strongly foregrounded. The farmer's words imply that everything is easier now, but the speaker's longing suggests conversely that as a result we find ourselves a lot further from that which we used to rely upon more directly, the world in its natural state. This is represented by the primacy of "stone and wood", and the speaker's idea that he would like to "clear the detritus away", and in this ecological return eventually "heal" himself.

In MacLennan's poetry this return is not simply a yearning for a different physical mode of existence. It is also a yearning for simplification of both thought and perception, for re-entry into prelinguistic consciousness, so as to rediscover, or at least approximate, a first-hand encounter with the world of phenomena. While he may claim a degree of envy for those whose involvement with the world is more direct, he realizes that his way to do this is through his poetry. Poetry is a more tenuous involvement though, because a poem is a secondary interpretation of the world, forged in language which struggles to approach reality.

Some of the problems involved in trying to render the phenomenal world with true attentiveness are examined in "Underneath" (*Reading the Signs* 6):

In this Constable watercolour
 the sky barely covers the paper,
 a cobalt wash which implies
 that colour's an illusion,
 That reality is the rough white
 cartridge paper underneath.
 Just as beneath these words
 a blank sky questions their validity.

The speaker sees through the "Constable watercolour" that forms the subject of the

poem, noticing its components: the “cobalt wash” of the sky “barely covers the paper”, which suggests to the speaker that “colour’s an illusion”, an interpretation of the mind. The paint and the “rough white/ cartridge paper” over which it is stretched are the only reality, while the image is merely a trick played on the eye.

These observations lead the speaker to draw an analogy with his own attempt at creativity, or establishing a viable second order of concepts physically separate from immediate reality: “Just as beneath these words/ a blank sky questions their validity”. This obviously undermines the creative process: how valid can a poem be when it is a mere reconstruction, through language, of a world that we are already distant from in terms of our perspective? How can we overwrite the world with a narrative that is equally vital and meaningful, that is not false? As MacLennan ruefully reminds us in another poem, “words are nothing/ to the juice of oranges” (“The Only Truth”, *Reading the Signs* 20).

There is also a sense that the world never allows us dominance over it. In the poem “Ownership” (*Solstice* 24), the speaker questions the extent to which we are able to possess the world’s objects, in the sense of understanding them completely.

How could I own
 the sunlight on this grass,
 viridian brilliance,
 or the generosity of the winter sun
 thawing my bones at noon?
 It gives unstintingly
 as the love of women,
 of children full of growing
 into self-assurance, openness,
 or the harvest books
 are brimming with.

The personification of the “winter sun” leads the poem smoothly to comparison with the “love of women” and “children full of growing”, as the speaker pays his respects



to the world's role as our provider, of both love and of life itself. The impressions the world gives are the seeds of poetry, which grow into "the harvest books/ are brimming with". The noun "harvest" suggests plenty and plenitude; it also ties our texts to the world, because we harvest things from the earth that provides them.

To conclude this chapter, I shall examine the poem "Poems" (*The Road to Kromdraai* 44):

Poems are nets of thought
 put out to catch
 what can be sensed only
 in a corner of the mind.
 A poem never drains
 its ground of silence.
 Poems make you
 see and touch and smell:
 they bring the world closer
 so you can live in it again.

The poem epitomises MacLennan's feelings about the job of poetry: to remake our world for us, as the poem concludes: "so [we] can live in it again". The association of "poems" with "nets" suggests that poems are a means of bringing "the world closer", as a fisherman would haul up a catch from beneath the surface of the water. The use of the "net" as an image is interesting, and there are several aspects relating to its function that suit the association the poem describes. Nets are thrown into water, which is an unfamiliar element to us, and often we cannot see what resides below the surface. Nets, moreover, do not bring us exactly what we seek, but return with whatever objects have come within their compass.³⁰ Their design means that the

catch returns without water, a variety of objects for the fisherman to sort through, gathering together those that matter and throwing the rest back. There is also the chance that the net will return with something surprising and unexpected, and of course the chance that the net will return empty, or without what it was thrown for. The relation to poetry is clear: a poem is a method of calling the world, of summoning its unknown aspects to the surface, to reveal something that was hidden. It is an exercise that never returns precisely what was sought at the beginning, but that has a compass of its own which we reveal as we try to record it. Thus poems, like nets, are useful tools. The final section of the poem brings this out succinctly:

Poems make you
 see and touch and smell:
 they bring the world closer
 so you can live in it again.

Throughout this chapter the idea that the writer of poetry has the job of reconstituting the world through its primary features has been explored. While the poem admits that poetry rests on a “ground of silence”, a world that is unforthcoming, it never “drains” it, which indicates the abundance of the hidden world. The world is never ours to possess or know, due to the limitations of our being. But the hope that we can bring phenomena a little closer suggests that poetry is using language in a way that enables us to deal with the fundamental aspects of existence a little better. In a poem we fashion the world differently, recreating it, tempting it to reveal more of itself. In this space we “bring the world closer”, and interestingly begin to sense it more: “see and touch and smell”. By reconstituting the world through language, poetry enables the speaker to “live in it again”: his existence is justified through renewal; he is empowered to *live* rather than merely exist. In this way the job of the poet is made clear, and the anxieties adumbrated earlier in the chapter are allayed. Poems are important, the poem suggests, and the

mind”.

idea that they make us “live” in our world stretches this sense to a necessity.

Chapter Two: Growing Out of Lengthening Shade

What kind of physician is this
who recommends health, and knows
neither the nature of the illness
nor the name of the remedy?

- Etienne Gibson (*Under Compassberg* 3)

The aim of this chapter is to examine the corpus’s attitude towards traditional knowledge and modes of learning, in particular the heritage of Western philosophy, of which the poetry tends to be critical because philosophical notions often seem inadequate when applied to the actual business of living. While MacLennan adopts a respectful, sometimes affable, attitude towards the thought of the great philosophers, he tends to undermine the basis of many philosophical ideas. This is done

specifically with regard to their relevance to the speaker's life-world, and it is the life-world that is of primary importance. While ideas gleaned from philosophers often provide the seed for the thought within each poem, the speaker typically questions methods of thinking which posit ideas that are outside of our immediate context, the phenomenal world. He also questions those whose prescribed approach restricts an engagement with the life-world, or whose sense is obscured by a careless use of language.

MacLennan's speakers tend to foreground the role of intuition, feeling and perception, and allow these to serve as the foundations for further thought. Furthermore, the poetry suggests the necessity of a close engagement with the life-world, and of humility and awe at the mysteriousness of it. This emerges as a limiting but ultimately liberating position to hold.³¹ MacLennan constructs his own path to wisdom in this way. It is a path devoted to the attempt to understand the nature of being, the nature of the universe, and the nature of the relationship between consciousness and the universe – in full awareness that such understanding can only ever be limited. In this way it is often reminiscent of the Platonic dialogues, and the poetry acknowledges this link through frequent, and favourable, references to Plato's ideas. The strongest connection is, quite simply, Socrates' famous realisation that his awareness of his ignorance was his single claim to certainty, and the buried warning in the parable that we, as thinkers, should be careful about our claims to understanding. There are a number of poems that use ideas garnered from the dialogues, including several which draw on the Cave Allegory.³² That the corpus adopts an attitude of wonder at the mysterious universe, and a willingness to explore the mysteries of life, despite the limits imposed upon us by our situation,³³ extends its purchase on the spirit exemplified by ancient Greek thinkers and writers in general. Thus the poetry implicitly recommends a return to classical Greek attitudes towards thinking about and exploring the world.

31 In line with the maxim: "the truth will set you free".

32 Which is really Socrates' realisation writ large.

33 Which in MacLennan's case certainly extends to being in full awareness of our limits, as creatures intractably involved in the life-world.

The first poem that I will examine in this chapter is “The Candles of My Mind” (*The Poetry Lesson* [15]).

The candles of my mind
 have been blown out.
 I’ve tried, but can’t repeat
 Philosophy’s well-made arguments
 thus am condemned to rational defeat.

But even if I were blind
 I could enter by feel
 the meaning of mankind.
 Fingers that clutch the world
 not knowing what they touch,
 like hands in church, steepled
 in prayer for light and grace,
 are convinced of meaning
 in this mysterious place.

The poem encapsulates MacLennan’s attitude towards claims of certainty, and implies the importance of feeling or intuition as touchstones for reflective thought. It describes a “defeat” in the opening five lines, and so initially suggests a failure on the speaker’s behalf. The “candles of [his] mind” stand for truths, and so the poem implies that the ideas that the speaker once held as true have subsequently proved incoherent or inadequate. Conceptual proofs are particular to philosophy, and the poet confesses he is unable to “repeat/ philosophy’s well-made arguments”. He implies that philosophical arguments may be carefully formed, but are nonetheless *constructed*, which puts them at a distance from the world experienced at first hand and lends the phrase a hint of irony. The speaker describes the effort of trying but not being able to “repeat” these arguments, implying that he has engaged closely with them, yet still cannot assimilate – take to heart – the thought informing them.

The fault apparently resides in the “well-made” philosophical arguments’ failure to address the speaker’s lived experience. This sense is buoyed by the forthright and argumentative tone of the second stanza, with its emotive language and forceful enjambement. It is also echoed by ideas encountered elsewhere in the poetry, regarding the intractable problems of language and the dangers of thinking that is too far removed from the immediacy of the phenomenal world.

In the second stanza, the speaker responds to his inability to “repeat” the philosophical arguments described in the first by describing what he *is* able to do. He begins by banishing altogether the metaphorical light of Spinoza’s “candles” and imagining himself “blind”. He then suggests that even in this state he could still “enter by feel the meaning of mankind”, or come to an intuitive understanding of our position in the universe and our state of being. Though the “fingers that clutch the world” do not know exactly “what they touch”, they are nevertheless touching something that allows for touch, even if rational knowledge of it is ultimately unattainable. Through the analogy of “hands in church, steeped/ in prayer for light and grace”, the speaker’s attitude is characterized by worshipful yearning and belief. His desire is to pierce the façade of the phenomenal world and reveal truth itself; his faith derives from his conviction that there is “meaning” buried in existence. The word “meaning” has a double sense: the first connotes a telos, as in the meaning of religion, and the second, something that simply makes sense. The stanza further suggests that our approach to knowledge dooms us to require translation of what the life-world conveys to us as a sensation. The lines “if I were blind/ I could enter by feel/ the meaning ...” suggest that the speaker is reading the world as though it were a form of Braille. But they also emphasize the importance of intuition. While knowledge is not synonymous with intuition, the suggestion is that intuition is a precondition for holding that something is knowledge, and is therefore the very basis of knowledge. If your gut tells you that something is wrong, you set about finding out why.

The necessity of using intuition as the foundation for understanding is succinctly captured in the poem “The most serious moments of my life” (*Under Compassberg* no. 18).

The most serious moments of my life
 are quicker than reflections
 on a windowpane, or sunlight
 on the wave that troubled Christopher Columbus
 at the edge of the known world:
 "There! A few miles more and we
 have passed over into eternity!"

The images of "sunlight" and "reflections" evoke brief glimpses of something whose cause is beyond the images themselves. They are also linked to thought that is inclined towards wisdom: the idea of light in "sunlight" is associated with knowledge or the truth, while the word "reflections" draws attention to our inability to apprehend reality, an image of which is 'reflected' to us by our senses. The speaker's confession that the most serious moments of his life are "quicker than reflections on a windowpane" suggests that these deeply meaningful moments are flashes of intuitive awareness of something that he is unable to articulate. To borrow a phrase from elsewhere in the collection, they are experiences that touch only "a corner of the mind" ("Poems", *The Road to Kromdraai* 44).

The name of Christopher Columbus invokes the idea of exploration "at the edge of the known world", thus linking the pursuit of 'felt' knowledge with the spirit of discovery. The poem is vibrant with possibility, with the conviction that by pushing a "little more" we will somehow contrive to "[pass] over into eternity!". This possibility is enabled by an approach that favours intuition as a foundation, the word "eternity" suggesting, in the context, arrival at some truth about our state of being. The word "There!" supports this sense, because it is directly indicative of something that exists and that is perceivable. The word's position at the start of the line, its upper case "T" and the exclamation mark, serve both to isolate and emphasise it, adding further weight to the importance of this mode of attention and imparting a sense of what might be called a 'eureka' moment, a flash of certainty that arises unbidden. It is of course true that Columbus did not pass into "eternity", but

merely into a part of the world previously unknown to Europeans. The word is nevertheless justified in this context by the importance of the glimpse of truth vouchsafed. The "eureka moment" induces, however momentarily, a feeling of attaining immortality, of reaching through to "eternity".

In sum, the speaker's apprehension of truth (allowing the possibility of such an apprehension) necessarily emerges from the initial breakthrough of a fleeting intuition or feeling. And despite the fact that such feelings are the most difficult of all to describe, the speaker insists that they mark the "most serious" moments in his life.

Despite the irony evident in "The candles of my mind", MacLennan's poetry has an intimate connection with the thought of the savants, and this often leads to a disputacious approach to their teachings. In "Reduction" (*Solstice* 20) the tone, while respectful in its dealings with what is a compelling argument, is clearly and strongly argumentative in its turn. The poem once again suggests that feeling is more fundamental than reasoning in approaching an understanding of, or at least a deeper appreciation of, the life-world:

Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* ends
where it begins, warning:
of that of which we cannot speak
we should be silent.

What else is there to speak about
but the unspeakable?
In spite of warnings
to define our terms
nobody can define what matters.
Why art aspires
to the condition of music
we cannot say.

Try to explain
 the Mozart aria that drifts
 into the spring garden;
 why love transforms biology;
 why literature's an elixir;
 or how inertness
 miraculously contrives
 to be warm flesh.
 Reality and words
 part company there.

The warning in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus* is fairly explicit. His pronouncements follow from Kant's idea of noumena, the 'things in themselves' that the limitations of perspective will not allow us to access. We can never see things in the world as they truly are, because we are limited by our modes of perception and our position in the world. It is a notion that Schopenhauer refined when he claimed that the noumenal necessarily exists as a single, unapproachable entity, indistinguishable because distinction is the product of human perception (Schopenhauer, 101-107). Wittgenstein takes these ideas a step further and outlines, in the *Tractatus*, precisely "that of which we cannot speak" - among which metaphysical pronouncements are the most thoroughly condemned. Wittgenstein argues that all we can talk about is the world as it appears to us; in other words, we can only make claims about things in the realm of the natural sciences, and any thought that is not conceivable in the form of a "picture" of itself as it appears to us, is nonsensical (Wittgenstein, 2.063 - 3.01).

Yet the rhetorical question that follows these opening lines expresses a firm belief: "What else is there to speak about/ but the unspeakable?" All that matters enough for us to talk about, the speaker declares, is precisely what Wittgenstein warned us against. The retort is not philosophically directed³⁴ but motivated by a

34

In the sense of confronting an analytical view of our epistemological potential.

desire to explore the more mysterious aspects of the world. The warning “to define our terms” is an analytic one: we must know what we are speaking about in order to speak about it appropriately, accurately. But, the poem suggests, the things that matter most to our lives – the sound of music, the transcendent power of love, the allure of literature and the sheer miracle of there being any life at all – are those that are at one and the same time the most difficult to define and the most fascinating to talk about. It is important that none of the categories mentioned fits Wittgenstein’s “picture” model; yet surely few would deny their importance to our lived experience?

The reference to “art aspir[ing] to the condition of music” is derived from Schopenhauer,³⁵ who discusses (in *The World as Will and Representation*, 258-265) the idea that, because of its independence from the phenomenal world, music is as close, in terms of art or, more broadly, creation, as we can get to a sense of the noumenal. Music is beyond ideas, and because there is nothing that exists in the world that it is modelled on, it has no phenomenal referent. It exists, in a sense, beyond the universe of language and stuff, and so is very much a target of Wittgenstein’s warning to us not to speak of anything outside the realm of the natural sciences. The “spring garden” evokes life and beauty, while the notion that the aria is “drifting in” to it suggests a harmony between the indescribable beauty of music and the invisible mechanisms of nature. Moreover, music is something created by human beings, which implies that our endeavours, however limited, still have import in an ultimately unfathomable world. The “inert” matter that “miraculously” manages to become “warm flesh” imparts a sense of the inconceivable, and resonates with the awe that often possesses MacLennan’s speakers when they attempt to penetrate the hidden workings of the universe.

The impact of the last two lines is powerful. There are indeed facts of existence, the speaker contends, though finding words to fit them is impossible: they exist as glimpses of something that evades articulation. Yet, even though it is negated, the word “company” in the final line points to the possibility of a link

35 Though it is formulated by Walter Pater (1887) as: “All art constantly aspires to the condition of music”.

between words and things. While the *Tractatus* warns us that “the limits of my language mean the limits of my world” (Wittgenstein, 5.6), the poem declares that “reality” exists – albeit in a way that language cannot hope fully to access – and our awareness of this existence compels us to use words to try to register and interpret it.

The kind of speaking to which this and many other poems by MacLennan allude seeks to unlock the mystery of being. It is imbued with a keen sense of possibility, yet remains aware of its limits. It is also aware of the limits of its medium, language, and of the necessity of being grounded in the immediate, but nevertheless defiantly insists that the world’s mysteries can be touched, if not possessed. It is interesting that Wittgenstein states later in the *Tractatus*: “It is not the way that the world is which is mystical, it is that there is a world at all” (6.44), for it captures the gist of the speaker’s sentiments in this poem.

Despite the sense of possibility registered in the poems above, MacLennan’s speakers eschew claims to knowledge and constantly draw attention to the limits of their understanding, their terminal ignorance. As a consequence the poetry is scathing towards thinking which makes claims to certainty, or that does not have a solid grounding in the world that we experience. In “Bonaventura’s piety required” (*Under Compassberg*, Poem 3), the speaker distances himself from Saint Bonaventura’s conviction of transcendence:

Bonaventura’s piety required
 a world like an infinitely thin
 translucent film
 that would allow
 the all-pervasive power of god
 to shine through.

All I have are skeletal
 transparent leaves of the mulberry tree
 purified by the mid-winter sun.

The world perceived by Bonaventura was “required” by his faith: its status was

apriori, existing in thought before or independently of its creaturely instantiation. The speaker does not know this world, as pure as “translucent film” stretched over the face of God; his is a more modest vision of “transparent leaves ... purified”, not by God, but by the “mid-winter sun”. The image of the mulberry tree leaves recalls the poem “Sarcophagus”, (*Reckonings* 39), where the leaves hinted at an obscure force behind or within the apparent. The difference is that the image is entirely natural: the leaves are what they are, and what is witnessed stands for nothing other than itself. The speaker’s intractable involvement in the world may well include a hint of regret at his inability to see anything beyond the actual, framed by the reminder of mortality in the image of the “skeletal leaves”. But this is surely negated by the secular beauty of the sun’s ‘purification’ of the leaves. And the final image of the “mid-winter sun” suggests several things that are pertinent to the poem’s message. These include clarity,³⁶ the mortal nature of life and the appreciation of a comfort which, however weak and distant, is still bestowed by the warmth of the sun. Thus while the speaker’s vision of the world is apparently marked by deprivation, it is ultimately reassuring in its acceptance of the givenness of its referents and its own insurmountable limitations. Unlike Bonaventura’s metaphysics, it has not lost its mooring in the world that we experience, and the speaker refuses to look for solace in something he cannot touch or comprehend, or at least relate back to the life-world.

In “Bach’s preludes are easier” (*Under Compassberg*, Poem 25), the speaker uses imagery drawn from musical fugues to describe the unique struggle inherent in the individual’s search for self.

Bach’s preludes are easier
to listen to than his fugues
because his fugues struggle
to play against themselves
and make light of
the strict formality

36 The relative mildness of sunlight in winter generally provides objects with very clear outlines.

of their construction.

Does the struggle with myself
make light?

The double implication of the phrase "make light" in the poem is interesting. It means both not to take things too seriously, and to produce clarity or understanding. The speaker's reference to his "struggle with [him]self" indicates how, like the complexly contrapuntal fugue, he is obliged to rebel against structured or socially given senses of his identity in order to live it fully and authentically. But he wonders whether the struggle is productive: after all, preludes make for easier listening than fugues.

In terms of the analogy that informs the poem, "formality" evokes the constricting mandates of traditional modes of learning – the rules of logic and reason – which lend a formal structure to the pursuit of ideas. Given the tone in the preceding lines, the final question is both sincere and wryly rhetorical. But the point is that the struggle for knowledge must "make light" of – resist, not take too seriously – "formality", or it will never succeed in "making light", producing understanding.

There are strong warnings in the corpus about the role of language in our lives. MacLennan suggests that it clouds both thought and perception, and ultimately fails to render our world in any way approaching adequacy. While language is our main means of articulating our thoughts and feelings, we are limited beings, and as a consequence our language is also limited. "Plato's Cave" (*The Necessary Salt* [2]), a poem from a later work, examines just such limitations with regard to the mechanism of the poet's art, and suggests the powerlessness of words fully to illuminate the opaque depths of the unconscious mind:

Language throws a shadow

on my thought.
 Deep inside
 the cavern of my mind
 speech's antecedents
 stumble still
 like prehistoric monsters
 cumbersome and dark.

Outside the light is blinding
 and the air smells of hot metal.

The reference in the title is to Plato's famous Allegory of the Cave (*The Republic*, book seven), which is alluded to in several other poems. Here, the speaker accuses language of throwing "a shadow/ on [his] thought". The "shadow" refers to the shadows that, in the allegory, the inmates of the cave see on the wall facing them. These shadows constitute reality for the inmates, though the shadows are in fact caused by people holding shapes in front of fires behind the prisoners (*The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*: 64-65). Thus what they see is something apparent, not actual. The "shadow" cast by language makes thought unclear, spreads darkness, substitutes a shadow for the real.

The speaker evokes the vastness and darkness of the unconscious mind in the image of a "cavern" where the things that prefigure our speaking self lurk "like prehistoric monsters". The image is a threatening one, and its threat is aimed directly at the speaking being, the being that imagines itself in control of a world because it believes that it names the things in that world. Language remains our chief point of contact with the world, our only means of translation and articulation: if its shadow is as "dark" as the poem describes, there is little hope of us achieving a clear understanding of the world. And this, by extension, necessarily threatens the value of poetry also.

The "outside" that the poem refers to is that which lies beyond the limits of

our understanding,³⁷ and there is no way for the eye to pierce this “blinding” “light”. The air’s “smell[ing] of hot metal” evokes a sense of power and of creation, positing an invisible, though active, forge. That the eyes, representing our powers of perception, are blinded, while the smell of “hot metal” is manifest, suggests that ultimate reality or truth is only approached via feeling, and this does not equate to understanding. The “blinding” light further suggests that the truth is not ours to comprehend, as we do not have the faculties to do so.

Maclennan highlights a problem inherent in the myth of certainty in the poem “Axioms” (*The Road to Kromdraai* 62), and the buried conclusion is again a warning not to reach beyond the immediate. There is a strongly implied difference between the work done by a poem and the work done by axiomatic reasoning.

A poem tests itself
 against the world,
 the world that taught us
 how to speak,
 to wrest reality from doubt.
 We test our axioms
 with meta-axioms
 that circle round
 and round them
 like full moons.

The speaker indicates that language is derived directly from the phenomenal world: “the world that taught us/ how to speak”. There is a strong sense, as there is in “Plato’s Cave”, that language has a set of referents, even if these are necessarily shadowy. The poem opens with the idea that a “poem tests itself/ against the world”, or finds its vindication in reality. And indeed, as we saw in Chapter One, Maclennan does constantly test his poems against the world, grounding them firmly

37

Again the poem suggests that this is the “noumenal”, or ultimate reality.

in the immediate. Thus the speaking that we derive from the world is important or valid to the extent that it remains in touch with the world and projects no further. And language is valuable because it helps us "to wrest reality from doubt", to articulate and mediate the things that our bodies, through our senses, encounter.

Our "axioms", by contrast, are tested "with meta-axioms", or axioms that come after our initial axioms. Their 'meta', or sense of being beyond, means they are not grounded in reality but in the axioms that precede them, and so this undermines their validity.³⁸ And this is perhaps true of many of our accepted axioms, which do not test themselves against the immediate, but are resolved through abstract reasoning. The speaker supports this contention with the succinct image of "full moons" circling around one another. Moons, by definition, rely on the gravity of planets to sustain their orbit, and so the image of moons sustaining one another (since they are all axioms) suggests that they are ungrounded, without a foundation. The word "circle", moreover, calls to mind circular reasoning, and that the axioms are going "round/ and round" implies that they are lost in their own set of orbits, distanced from something that should be sustaining them. While moons can shine brightly with reflected light, they are not a source of light (though to an idle glance they may appear to be). Again, the implicit warning is that we should not reach beyond ourselves and yield to the seductions of abstract thought. If we do, we become ungrounded and lost, moons doomed to circle other moons, worshippers of false gods. There is also a buried suggestion that language is valuable so long as it relates, however poorly, to the world we experience. And poetry is foregrounded as a space in which to test ideas, because the abstractions of thought need to be tested "against the world".

Despite all these caveats, MacLennan often pays homage to the discipline of philosophy. He has an intimate relationship with it, and the two poems that I will examine next impart a sense of this through their diction, imagery and tone. Their speakers self-consciously embrace the philosopher's quest for truth. In the title line of "When I went north to study Truth" (*The Poetry Lesson* [3]) this quest is portrayed

as a mock epic journey:

When I went north to study Truth,
 the steam train carried me,
 an ignorant god of twenty-three,
 through half-remembered landscapes.
 Sun gleamed on the granite city,
 touched erotically
 new-smelling books
 that ached to be consumed.

But study made it difficult to
 decide on whether making love
 to a willing girl or wrestling with
 the imponderables of Kant was not
 the self-same enterprise.
 In the end, the truth became
 so simple it was
 something of a surprise.

The tone of the opening stanza is somewhat whimsical. A hero sets out an adventure: though he is “ignorant”, at age “twenty-three” he has the sense of being a god, with all the world and all of time before him. He seeks to dispel his ignorance through the study of “Truth”, something that in early life we often treat as a discipline, a notion which further study usually subverts.³⁹ That “Truth” is capitalised suggests its importance at that stage to the speaker, and indicates the retrospective irony with which it is endowed by the poem’s conclusions. The allure of the sun “gleam[ing] on the granite city” suggests the radiant presence of the “Truth” that the speaker seeks.

39 What truth about the world can we wholeheartedly acknowledge, without conceding the fact that it is true only from our perspective, or is obscured by language?

But “study” complicates things, revealing two competing paths toward the acquisition of wisdom: the first is the pursuit of formal knowledge, the second the gaining of experiential knowledge. The weighing of these two ‘ethics’ is a recurrent theme in MacLennan’s poetry. The contrast has already been introduced through the personified sun’s erotic touch on “new-smelling books”. The sun represents light in the sense of truth, while its “touch” stands for feeling or sensation. The image of “new-smelling books” echoes this distinction, with the repositories of wisdom being fondly recalled for their sensuous qualities.

It is “study” itself that makes the decision difficult, suggesting that the search for self is a pursuit grounded not only in thought, but also in experience. The “imponderables” of Kant are compared to the mysteries of desire and pleasure. That the pursuit of them is called the “self-same enterprise” suggests that they are both central to a study of life, and to learning how to live. The poem ends with the enigmatic observation that “[i]n the end, the truth became/ so simple it was/ something of a surprise.” The poem offers no direct account of what this “truth” is, but there are some suggestions buried in the diction. The first is that the word ‘truth’ is more humbly intonated than it was in the opening line, with the use of a lower case ‘t’: it is now revealed to be something less grand than initially imagined, perhaps something found in the ordinary and immediate. That it is also called “simple” suggests that it is of a different order from Kant’s “imponderables” that need to be “wrestled” with. We therefore gather that the immediacy of the phenomenal world, which is represented by the phrase “making love”, and the simplicity that characterises action (the “making” of “love”), present challenges and rewards of at least equal benefit to the speaker as the philosophy of Kant.

Something of a companion poem is to be found in a much later collection: “Philosophy” (*The Owl of Minerva* [56]).

I bought my first philosophy books
in the Athens of the North

because of their feel and smell
 and the thought of what they held
 locked up inside them
 like bees in a hive.
 I felt them stirring
 in the city's August days
 of lightness and unburdening.
 But the logic of the texts
 creeping page by page
 made me heavy and lethargic.
 For all the good it did me
 I may as well have eaten
 those closely argued pages.
 But then one scented afternoon
 Hume showed me I was nothing
 but a manifold illusion.
 I tasted honey then.

Again the opening lines of the poem establish a tone of wonder and expectation. The reference to "the Athens of the North" (Edinburgh) enhances the freshness of this first encounter with the wisdom of scholars, as Athens is considered to have been the birthplace (or at least the perfect expression) of the spirit of philosophical enquiry. The speaker's reasons for buying the books are both sensuous ("because of their feel and smell") and because of the sense of promise that they embody: "the thought of what they held/ locked up inside them/ like bees in a hive".

That this sense of promise is rendered in such a creaturely fashion is typical of the strongly sensuous imagery running through the poem. This resonates with the aspects of the life-world that proved, in the previous poem we examined, to be of equal temptation to the speaker as the allure of formal wisdom. The image of "bees in a hive" succinctly conveys hints of compacted energy, purpose, industry, precision and astounding complexity, and all of these nuances contribute to a romantic

impression of the promise of philosophy: the speaker's belief that the texts are passionately and carefully wrought, are full of exhilarating, provocative, and brilliantly complex ideas, and challenge us to unlock their secrets.

The early stages of the speaker's engagement with these books suggest that the wisdom "locked up" in them is about to become manifest. He feels "them stirring", as if awakening from slumber. The city's "August days/ of lightness and unburdening" enhance the speaker's feeling of a fresh and unencumbered pursuit. The specificity of "August" roots this pursuit in human time and in a world of changing seasons - late summer, with its robust warmth and sense of life. The root word 'light' in "lightness" is symbolic of clarity and understanding, though this is undermined by two other meanings of the adjective: to have no weight, and to have little intensity. Yet all of these associations are dispelled as the hunt for understanding is bogged down by the reality of the task. It is the "logic" of the texts that makes the speaker "heavy and lethargic", and both of these adjectives seem expressive of a physical feeling. They could also, naturally, be describing the speaker's thought, contradicting the promise of the earlier imagery and the sense of release conveyed by "lightness and unburdening". There is a further reference to the demands of the body, as the speaker jokes that eating "those closely argued pages" would have done him the same amount of "good". This of course implies that the study of philosophy has ultimately proved useless: the speaker has discovered no nourishment "locked up inside" the writings of the sages.

Yet his discovery of Hume is described in favourable terms, the phrase "scented afternoon" adding a flavour of the exotic, a whiff of mystery to pursue. Hume argues, in Book I, Part VI of his *A Treatise of Human Nature*, that when we look inside ourselves we do not encounter anything substantial or singular; there is no centre, he argues, to our being. Rather what we face are "successive perceptions" (Hume, 299-301), which we then draw connections between, rather like joining together dots to form a picture.⁴⁰

Thus the speaker is persuaded that in the final analysis we are nothing but a “manifold illusion”, a thing without substance, a trick of the mind. He greets this as a salutary revelation: Hume has finally led him to the truth about who he is. Thus the work of searching through the angry “hive” of philosophical discourse, has at last provided a reward, the nourishing, pleasant, “honey” of truth tasted in the final line of the poem. This image sits, at face value, somewhat incongruously with Hume’s conclusion.⁴¹ But it suggests a willingness to be involved with the truth, no matter how uncomfortable that might be. The “honey” produced by the “hive”, the solution given by Hume to the question of who or what we are, is in fact an anti-solution, the resonance of which echoes throughout the poetry in warnings against claims of certainty. There is also a sense that the liberation which was suggested and sought earlier in the poem has been achieved by the speaker’s discovery: his search for meaning is no longer weighed down by the “heavy and lethargic” feeling produced by “those closely argued pages” he initially encountered.

In Poem 7 in the *Under Compassberg* collection, the speaker’s feelings about the things that concern him culminate in a buried warning against sophistry:

I am troubled by cold,
 old age and death,
 and Babel’s remote
 and glittering stars.
 I do not have insatiable
 hunger for praise.
 I remain silent before
 the invisible world.

‘looking’ in Hume’s quest for personal identity – what is it that is able to observe these numerous insubstantial impressions? What is it that connects these dots?

41 Because Hume’s truth, in essence, describes a whole lot of nothing which is continually in flux: thus it is hardly a solid foundation.

The first three things that 'trouble' the speaker are threats to the survival of the body, creating a strong focus in the poem on life and the idea of being alive. But there is a further source of concern, "Babel's remote/ and glittering stars", a reference to language via the biblical myth of the tower of Babel. The "glittering stars" are the concepts behind words and the adjective gives a sense of animation to these points of light. However, they are also distant, "remote", and apparently out of reach. The things that trouble the speaker are of the kind mentioned repeatedly throughout the corpus: the inevitability of extinction and the failure of language to capture and convey the truth of existence. Nevertheless, and paradoxically, while words remain worryingly distant from that to which they refer, they are still reassuringly there, an embodiment of promise.

The speaker states quite simply that he does "not have insatiable/ hunger for praise", which implies that there are those who do. Praise for what? Perhaps for saying something that sounds intelligent but that has no real substance? The speaker notes that the world he confronts is "invisible": while there is nothing he can perceive of it, it is all the same there. This connotes a distance from actuality, and so, by extension, from certainty. Silence characterises his approach, and this is because language, as represented by "Babel's ... stars", is distant from the "invisible world", a world that resists interpretation of the rational kind. This again echoes Socrates' realisation that an awareness of one's ignorance is wisdom's estate.

A conception of the world dominated by scientific cognition is also targeted in the poem "Now We Know" (*Reading the Signs* 13), which is interesting in terms of the naturalist thinking that prevails in MacLennan's work.

Three old, broad-hipped black women
 sit straight-legged on the lawn
 outside the Science Festival
 stringing coloured beads as though
 they were re-threading the universe.
 Flags flutter in the brilliant day,

and streams of excited, laughing children
 clutching pamphlets and new ideas
 pour past these old mothers
 hardly seeing them
 because they think that now
 they have deciphered who we are.

The poem implies a residue of mystery about our state of being, a residue somehow embodied by the "[t]hree old, broad-hipped...women", who appear like the Eumenides of Greek myth. They seem to be stringing a kind of universal order with their beads. The word "re-threading" suggests, moreover, that there is more to their simple act of creation than is apparent at first glance. The glancing allusion to Greek mythology seems to point to the Greeks' love of mystery, and their spirit in general. It harkens back to a time when we approached the universe with amazement, rather than with the confidence of mastery. The distance of our understanding of the world from that earlier awe is suggested by the ironic title of the poem, "Now We Know", and emphasised by the mention of Grahamstown's annual Science Festival, a celebration of our scientific understanding of the world. There is a common tendency in current thinking to mistake science for metaphysics: implicit in MacLennan's poem is the reminder that science is a discipline that interprets the world as it appears to us, and has nothing to say about ultimate reality, from which we are terminally distant. The poem cautions against thinking that we can know with anything approaching certainty what kind of creatures we are, like the children who "think that now/ they have deciphered who we are". "[C]lutching pamphlets and new ideas", the children seem carefree and joyous, and they blithely ignore the old mothers. Read allegorically, this implies that the future, represented by the "children", is doomed to be characterised by thinking which ignores ancient wisdom, represented by the "mothers".

Just as there is a recurrent plea in the poems for a return to simplicity in daily life, so too is there a demand for a return to simplicity in our thinking. Simplicity, in this sense, means dealing with things in understandable pieces. It also implies a

primacy, an acknowledgement of our natural state of being, as intelligent creatures, but creatures – animals – none the less.

In the poem “Who We Are” (*Reading the Signs* 6) the human struggle for identity is given a timeless quality by a recollection of our ancestors:

Those who sat around
 their fires at night
 knew something hovered
 in the flickering shadows
 on the chamber walls.
 They know what’s hidden
 rules our lives,
 that we are instruments
 the shadows make their music on.

That these people 'knew' illustrates that they were in possession of a primitive, or rather primary, primal, wisdom. The reference is again to Plato and – through his allegory of the cave – the notion that what appears to be reality is the mere play of shadows on the wall. The word “instruments” suggests that, far from being in control of our lives, we are merely the means for realising intentions or purposes not our own. The “music” that is made on us by the shadows is informed by Schopenhauer’s idea that music is the one thing real, or noumenal, that we can approach as human beings. This is the only indication of what we might find lying beyond, the rest is just “shadows”, or an obscure representation of something else. The poem shows that this problem has plagued the human species since we started to think about the world at a higher than functional level, and that there was already then an understanding (they 'knew') of our position suggests the timelessness of our wisdom, however limited it may be.

Indeed, throughout the corpus, Maclennan constantly acknowledges the presence of something beyond the world of appearance. There must be a foundation to reality, he implies, or we would have nothing to experience. But at the same time,

this foundation is unreachable because of the limits imposed upon us by our state of being.

In poem 6 from the *Under Compassberg* collection, the speaker draws attention to the presence of this foundation, as captured in the image of “[e]xcessive brightness”:

Excessive brightness has driven me
into the dark,
a muffled bell chiming
in the night.

My primitive tongue
is trying to articulate
stone and water,
trees and stars,
naming god in images
that taste of gall and honey.

The first stanza of the poem again calls to mind the allegory of the cave: like the man who escapes the cave, the speaker finds that he, too, must retreat back “into the dark”. The “brightness” is the “fierce oracle” (to borrow a phrase from Lawrence Durrell in his introduction to *The Henry Miller Reader* [x]) of truth, unapproachable to limited beings. The speaker refers to himself as a “muffled bell”, suggesting that what he is trying to articulate has a musical quality, but that this is “muffled”, or muted. This is because of the incongruities that exist among language, thought, and perception: the very reasons that we cannot approach truth. His tongue is “primitive”, and this again suggests that the speaker is inarticulate, though the buried implication is that this is not his fault; rather it is the curse of all embodied creatures. And “primitive” also has connotations of a primacy, of a closeness with the primal elements of existence. “[S]tone and water,/ trees and stars” are all fundamental things constitutive of the phenomenal world. Stars may represent

represent glimmers of intuition, which – however distant – still manage to suggest something behind the phenomenal. Trees might be a metonymy for the mechanism of nature, which is to say, the mystery of life, that we cannot understand, but can get a feeling of through intuition and reflection. That the speaker is “trying to articulate” these elements suggests that he is not willing simply to accept the limits of embodiment, but is constantly seeking to voice them into being. In this way he will attempt to name “god”, though this ambition is tempered by the very word “naming”, which suggests simply attaching a label to something. As is generally argued in the poetry, naming things accurately is an exercise fraught with difficulty, perhaps one that is ultimately impossible. The “naming [of] god” is also mediated by the word “images”, which itself refers to mediation, as the poet is obliged to have recourse to substitution in order to name the unnamable.

The reference to “gall and honey” may recall Raleigh’s poem “The Nymph’s Reply”, in which the speaker makes reference to Marlowe’s shepherd speaker in “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love”. He claims that a “honey tongue” often conceals “a heart of gall”, and the nature of this response suits the tone of Maclennan’s poem, as Raleigh, adopting a cynical, though nonetheless accurate and realistic approach in his rebuttal of Marlowe’s poem, cuts to the heart of the naivety embedded in the romantic shepherd’s unrealistic promises. The paradoxical relation of “honey” and “gall”, sweet and bitter, indicates that the rewards awaiting the seeker after meaning⁴² are both comforting and painful. The word “taste” implies an inarticulate sensory involvement that underlies this search, and draws attention to the body, and the senses, which together mediate what we are able to apprehend.

So there remains in the poetry a residual notion of possibility, of hope associated with the articulation of that which we are able to “speak about” (“Reduction”, *Solstice* 20). And this is the result of a rigorous and careful approach, quite different, however, from the rigour and care required of traditional abstract, analytical thought, because it is continually conscious of the limits imposed on it. Thus it continues to remind us not to lose sight of ourselves and our relation to the

42 And ultimately ‘god’, which we can read as this foundation underlying reality, or truth.

cosmos. MacLennan is aware of this difference from traditional modes of thinking about the world. He explains it in a typically self-deprecatory, yet at the same time convincingly suggestive, way in the poem "To My Teachers" (*Letters* 49).

Beaten for writing with the wrong hand
 I took to writing backwards, right to left,
 as Leonardo and engraver Blake
 had done for other reasons.
 There's something different
 about growing backwards into the world:
 the elements uncondense and play
 the wrong way round
 though of their own accord.
 To arrive at consciousness is
 to grow out of lengthening shade
 and find that objects have no depth
 or density, are less
 recalcitrant, aloof, inert,
 find you are no longer living
 an inexplicable, primaeval hurt.

The speaker, by drawing attention to his writing with his "wrong hand", establishes the theme of an unconventional exploration of the world. This is extended by the naming of two thinkers who were renowned for their individuality and rebellion against traditional forms, Leonardo da Vinci and William Blake. The speaker was "[b]eaten for writing with the wrong hand", indicating that the independence that he displayed was not only frowned upon, but also punished by teachers who attempted to "beat" it out of him. Yet there is "something different", he claims, that accrues from "growing backwards into the world". This approach becomes a thing of pride, as it is through this symbolic (and later actual) reversal of the conventional attitude towards the world that healing occurs. The "elements", the things that are primary

in reality, are able, by being perceived in a different way, to “uncondense and play”. The word “uncondense” is particularly well chosen: it suggests the word “dense”, apposite to the incomprehensibility that MacLennan’s ascribes to the world. Yet it also suggests something organic about the process, as if the speaker were conducting a delicate chemistry project. The word “play” conveys that what the elements are doing is something that is natural, autonomous, and ultimately felicitous.

The speaker does not have any effect on what the elements are meant to be doing in this “uncondens[ing]”; they do what they do “of their own accord”. This implies a kind of intimacy with the universe: the speaker is not demanding or expecting anything in or from his interpretation of the world, merely observing what is happening from a different perspective. He uses the metaphor of a seedling to explain “arriv[ing] at consciousness”, which is to “grow out of lengthening shade”, and this again suits the organic tenor of the poem as a whole. The image is an interesting one, and gives a significant connotation to the word “consciousness”. The “shade” from which the seedling grows is “lengthening”, which suggests a growing darkness. I would suggest that this darkness is the darkness cast on the mind by traditional modes of learning, previously characterised as constricting and limiting. Light is essential for the growth of a sapling; so, in MacLennan’s view, is the pursuit of understanding central to living well. Here the image is of the sapling actively searching for the light, and the word “out” adds connotations of escaping, of becoming free. Thus the speaker describes his refusal blindly to adhere to convention as an experience that has liberated his mind, allowing it to search for genuine, life-enriching, wisdom.

The speaker refers to objects as having “no depth/ or density”, which implies that they simply are as they are, and that there is nothing more to them. This does not mean that they are shallow or inconsequential, but essential, and beyond that unknowable. We cannot measure their density or their depth, because these are illusions linked to our necessarily limited mode of perception. The sense of their being “less/ recalcitrant, aloof, inert” is reminiscent of ideas examined in the first chapter of this study, about the necessity of grounding our interpretation of existence in the immediate, thus directing our understanding to the world, instead of reaching

beyond it for meaning.

The reward for this approach to life resonates with the reward received by the inmate who escapes in the cave allegory. The speaker has realised that he is “no longer living/ an inexplicable, primaeval hurt”, much like the escapee in the allegory, who realises that his life up to the point of his escape has been fiction. In this instance, “arriv[ing] at consciousness” has brought him closer to the phenomenal world, to the extent that he no longer experiences that (quintessentially Romantic?) sense of alienation and exile.

To conclude this chapter, I wish to examine a poem that succinctly captures the root of MacLennan’s mistrust of traditional modes of exploring the world, “I cannot tell you of the universe” (*Solstice* 36).

I cannot tell you of the universe
 that talks to me
 like an inner spring –
 a sunrise that I helped achieve itself,
 a sea that darkens and darkens
 into Homer’s wine.

By paying careful attention to the personal pronouns in this subtle poem, one can gain a sense of what the speaker is attempting to convey. The speaker implies that the universe “talks to” him, but that this experience is untranslatable to someone else (“you”). This is because it comes from inside of him (“inner”). That is, he cannot translate his experience of the world into words that we will be able to understand, for it is something that we need to experience for ourselves.

The image of a “spring” suggests condensed and powerful energy. It is, of course, also like an “inner” fountainhead, suggesting that the universe is the source of the speaker’s nourishment. This is important, as has been argued in this chapter, because it points to the life-world as the place where the universe imparts this sense. The line “a sunrise that I helped achieve itself” suggests that it is the speaker’s perspective to which the sunrise appears: by being there to observe it, to mark its

beauty, he is integral to its state of existence. It is something that has happened to him and that he has intuitively understood. He cannot adequately describe it to or for another, as this would involve using words which are not the thing itself. The sea “darkens and darkens”, suggesting perhaps that it gets more mysterious as it becomes more opaque with the passage of time. The sea represents the life-world and, as has been suggested in previous poems, this is the source of any knowledge that may come to us. Though it gets darker, the poem implies that it becomes richer, the waters ultimately turning to “wine”, an image that has a rich and satisfying sensory appeal.

Finally, the reference to “Homer” is both a nod to the richness of Classical Greek culture and an allusion to the possibility of a synthesis between the world we experience and the texts that we read. Homer’s *Iliad*, which contains the famous image of the wine-dark sea, was considered a manual of moral instruction for the Greeks. It educated through the examples buried in its narrative, which accords with the idea of discovering the world by learning from the messages buried in experience. Homer is also considered the father of Western poetry, and so there is a further suggestion that poetry has a prominent place in an exploration of the life-world. The speaker can equate what he feels in the darkening of the sea to the image that Homer has given in his text, and this confirms poetry’s ability to evoke powerful and meaningful images⁴³ that capture succinctly our feelings and experience.

Chapter Three: The Senseless Exit

“Nothing is better than life”

– Voltaire (*The Road to Kromdraai* 56)

43 On which even Wittgenstein would say our thought is based.

The primary aim of this chapter is to explore MacLennan's attitude to death and dying. As MacLennan believes that death is the annihilation of being, the chapter will also examine his thoughts on the concept of god and the afterlife.

For MacLennan there is no redemption after death, no new life awaiting us: there is literally nothing, as consciousness is expunged with the death of the brain. In the previous chapters we have seen how the poetry allows some mystery to the universe. And while the universe is characteristically reluctant to reveal its true nature to us, there are at times tantalising glimpses of sublimity to be had.⁴⁴ Death, however, is no mystery: what it does to being is absolute and final. MacLennan confronts death with this awareness, and for a sensibility resonant with sensory vitality, this often induces a state of near terror. Nevertheless, death is a recurrent theme in the corpus, presented as something for the individual to stand up to with complete attention to its darkest possible outcome, the termination of consciousness. In a culture that is largely silent on the subject, MacLennan's poetry is therefore unusual, abounding as it does in meditations on death, his own in particular.⁴⁵ The terror that accompanies this would appear to have potentially paralysing consequences, yet what emerges in the poetry is a celebration of life. After all, it is life that forms the idea of death: as we have never experienced death, can we claim to know anything about it, apart from the way it presents itself, as the disappearance of the *life* that once animated a thing?

This chapter will also examine MacLennan's critical approach towards another form of traditional knowledge, religious faith, and in particular the 'carrot' of the afterlife, the promised reward that awaits the believer. MacLennan views the afterlife as a groundless fantasy that we have created to disguise the reality of death. Furthermore, he implies that holding a belief in another life to come is a disservice to life itself, as it distracts us from properly appreciating our brief existences. We are beings limited to drawing our knowledge only from what we are able to perceive.

44 For example: "Poems" (*The Road to Kromdraai* 44), "The Candles of My Mind" (*The Poetry Lesson* 15) and "The most serious moments of my life" (*Under Compassberg*, No 18).

45 After all, death is something that we experience alone.

Though we have, at times, intimations of rightness with the world, or of a deep sense of harmony in the universe, we are simply unable to penetrate beyond the world that our senses reveal to us. So all we can hope to talk about adequately is the world as it appears to us via our senses, a world where the dead appear dead, and where belief in an afterlife is a fantasy dreamed up by a consciousness that would lift itself into eternity, rather than face the alternative, being lifted from eternity.

Once this point has been accepted it becomes a constant source of pressure on the way that we live. The poetry suggests that, destined as we are to a very short life, we are obligated to try and live as fully as possible, and to search for enduring things that will, to some degree, redeem the tragedy of our mortality. There is a major problem with this task, which MacLennan acknowledges. This is that we have little hope of discovering the truth about the world that we perceive: we are beings limited by time and space, and so eternal things would appear to be beyond our cognition. There is a further problem that stems from this: would it be of any value to us if we were indeed able to glimpse the truth, when one day we must die, leaving behind everything we have accumulated? Death conquers all. The poetry offers a solution to this, and that is, naturally, to live as fully as possible, to celebrate the wonder of the fact of consciousness and being alive, and to offer to others that which we have garnered from our experience, in whatever way we can. In MacLennan's case the offering he leaves behind are his experiences and observations as recorded in his poetry.

The first poem I shall examine is "The Sun" (*Collecting Darkness* 13), which, through its description of the sun's impending "death", captures MacLennan's view on the subject:

The sun is losing his authority.
 To whom can he say goodbye?
 This landscape of stones,
 taciturn, dry?

The agony of the sun

who knows he is dying,
and still longs for light.

I strain to hear
his parting words.
Nothing. No redress.
A black beetle crosses
the riverbed.
There is nothing to confess.

In the poem the subject is personified, so “faces” death as a human being would, with the attendant anxieties and impossible desires. It is alone in its struggle – “to whom can he say goodbye?” – as human beings are. It gets no response from its surroundings, represented by the “landscape of stones”, and the image may stand for living in a society that does not speak about or acknowledge death. The sun’s loss of “authority” reflects the human experience of growing old and discovering inadequacies in what once may have been accepted for knowledge. The sun has an implied awareness of what is in store for it – “who *knows* he is dying” – but continues to search for the means of sustaining life: “yet still longs for light”. This reflects the speaker’s need for clarity before death: he too “knows he is dying”, while the “light” that he “longs for” is either truth or grace. The sense of desperation conveyed by these lines reflects the anguish that never leaves MacLennan’s poetry regarding the inescapability of death and the frantic desire to garner all that he can before the event.

All this leads to “agony”, a feeling very distant from acceptance. The imagined “agony” of the subject links strongly with a human “agony” at dying in a world that does not respond to the being’s pain and suffering when it regards the finality of death. The images imply that there is not enough in the world to render one’s death acceptable. Death’s absoluteness offers no promise of redemption, as nothing of the self survives its strike.

By using the image of the sun the speaker intimates that death is at the heart

of everything that exists; it is not unique to human beings, or even sentient beings. The sun is the source of life, and so the fact that it is "dying" is poignant, and draws attention to the fact that everything has a point at which its existence will cease, even things that we encounter as being relatively eternal, such as the cosmic bodies that comprise the universe.

The speaker "strain[s] to hear/ his parting words", the verb connoting a desperate effort. If we see the sun as symbolic of the illumination of knowledge, then the dying sun signifies a death of meaning, and again this is reflective of the speaker's state of mind. There is "nothing" that the sun can offer him, "no redress" or redemption. "Redress" also has the sense of compensation for ills sustained, and so the speaker notes that the universe itself will not supply any solution to the sickening fact that we must one day lose everything. Thus there is nothing in either the universe's objects or in his thoughts that can save the speaker from the dire nature of his fate. The image of the "black beetle" is nightmarish, and calls to mind a scarab beetle, an Egyptian symbol of death. The beetle stands for life also, as it is the only living creature alluded to in the poem. Thus, the image suggests, life and death are inseparable companions. The "riverbed" is dry, which allows the beetle to cross it. But a river is a traditional symbol of life, and so the absence of water is symbolic of death, the absence of life. This further suggests that the concepts are inseparable. Finally, the step across into death's kingdom has been conceived in various mythologies as the crossing of a river. But for the speaker this river has symbolically dried up, suggesting that for him these mythologies do not "live", but are dry of meaning and contain nothing of substance - there is no river to cross, for death is simply the end.

The speaker finds that "[t]here is nothing to confess", or nothing that he can say that will disclose how he feels about death, or what he feels he knows about the subject. "Confess" can also mean to acknowledge one's belief in something; but there is nothing to acknowledge, the poem suggests, because there is nothing (higher) to believe in. As we have seen, in this poem the "authority" of the sun has replaced the authority of a deity. But the speaker's inability to hear the sun's parting words indicates that he has failed to find a solution to the problem of death - or

solace in the face of death – in the workings of the universe, because everything in it is also dying. The sense of loneliness evoked by the sun's futile struggle is poignant and universal. The idea of death's pervasiveness is at the heart of MacLennan's poetry, and forms the central theme in another poem from the same collection, "Holiday Resort" (*Collecting Darkness* 18).

The seaside farms are bawdy
with lucerne and barley,
black and squelchy mud.

What death has in mind
I do not know.
I have become stern,
appalled by what
is still to learn.

The title is ironic: it conveys an image of a happy place, where the expectation is pleasure and where the cares of life can be forgotten. But the opening lines undermine this expectation, with evocations of the pungent, damp smells of "lucerne" and "barley" and the image of "black and squelchy mud". There is no escaping the fact of mortality, the poem implies, for everything lives within the shadow of death.

The second stanza intimates that the speaker's mind has been preoccupied with thoughts of dying. He admits "what death has in mind/ I do not know", which suggests two things: the mystery that lies in and beyond death, and the fact that he does not know when and how he will die. This thought causes the speaker to become "stern", because "what/ is still to learn" is something that "appall[s]" him. Thus the poem suggests that the conclusion is, in all likelihood, deeply tragic. The verb "stern" suggests a stoicism, though it is in the face of something terrifying, the loss of all we have, an idea that always proves difficult for MacLennan to accept.

The poem "Possession and Loss" (*The Road to Kromdraai* 25) describes this

sense of losing everything, and also alludes to the "struggle" we face to accept this fact:

After last night's heavy rain
the street is covered
in a coat of cadmium flowers
shed by the trees.

For them it is no
struggle to let go.

That the fallen flowers are cadmium, bright yellow, a colour generally associated with happiness, adds a poignant irony to a poem whose tone is tragic. The speaker's concern is stated strongly in the final two lines. Isolated from the first stanza, each comprises five syllables and together they form a rhyming couplet that commands attention. For the natural world the process of living and dying is not a struggle but a mere fact of existence: "For them it is no/struggle to let go." The implication is that for the speaker it is a "struggle", that life is something he will fight to hold on to.

In "That Was Me" (*The Road to Kromdraai* 61), the moon is cast as an old "invalid", apparently tired and close to death, as its ascent "up the stairs" of the night sky is "painful".

The moon was an invalid
painfully climbing up the stairs.
It was a time
when night and inner darkness
so entangled that I didn't know
just who was talking.

Perhaps you heard the midnight jet

whistling in the moonlight,
 a silver fish against
 that indigo emptiness.
 That was me, that miracle,
 high above doubt and black despair
 in the clear, cold air.

The light that is reflected from the moon⁴⁶ is weak, conducing to its status as an "invalid", its power⁴⁷ not enough to dispel the "night and inner darkness" that have become "entangled". The "night" that the poem refers to is the darkness that the speaker faces in his failure to understand the external world, the silent and indifferent universe that will not respond to his existential anxiety. The "inner darkness" reflects a commensurate failure to find meaning in his state of being. The verb "entangled" suggests that the speaker cannot distinguish between his own anxieties and a world that appears to have no meaning to impart. The dearth of meaning we can attribute to the absence of god or any idea capable of conferring sense on an apparently senseless world.

The poem is a retrospective account of a feeling of dire uncertainty – "I didn't know/ just who was talking" – and the use of the past tense allows the second stanza to offer a favourable reflection. It also makes the poem appear as if it were written from beyond the grave: "that *was* me". This draws attention to the fact that one day the speaker will die, and that there is nothing that the future can offer to offset this certainty.

The "midnight jet" that appears in the second stanza is a powerful image: "whistling in the moonlight", it is fast and penetrating, sure of its direction. It is a "silver fish" gliding across the night sky, like a fish swimming in the nebulous oceans. Most importantly, it is something tangible in the "indigo emptiness", something that lights up against the darkness. It is a fitting image for the "miracle"

46 Symbolic of the promise of knowledge or guidance in a dark world.

47 Or the knowledge it symbolises.

of the speaker's existence in a nebulous world. The jet also flies high above "doubt and black despair", sure of its direction and distant from things that might bring it, or the speaker, down. And the elevation of consciousness that the jet symbolises is further emphasised by the "clear, cold air" of reason or understanding. The poem alludes to death, the cause of the "black despair" that the speaker implies has troubled him in the past. It also alludes to a higher consciousness, the mind elevating itself to a space where things appear miraculous, where direction and identity are clear, and where doubt is left behind. It suggests the potential in us to elevate ourselves above the problem of death. But the poem emphasises that this is temporary, a sense given by the past tense of the diction, as though the speaker in the poem were already dead.

The succinctly titled "Truth" (*Collecting Darkness* 19) begins with a confession:

I know I write
 too much about death
 out of fascination
 with component parts
 infected by the whole,
 departures and defections
 shaping one role
 for all the arts.

But truth is too complex for my needs:
 my world
 is coming to an end,
 and I am starving
 for affection.

The speaker explains his preoccupation with death as arising from a "fascination/ with component parts/ infected by the whole". In other words, his understanding of death can never be clear before he has died: all he can do in the meanwhile is observe

the signs or “component parts” that death leaves in its all-encompassing wake (“infected by the whole”). He further claims that it “shap[es] one role/ for all the arts”, lines that follow D.H. Lawrence’s idea of building one’s “ship of death” (Lawrence, 41), that the best we can do is to prepare ourselves as well as possible to face this inevitable outcome.

Truth is something distant and unapproachable, leading the speaker to describe it as “too complex for my needs”. He views his world as coming to an end, and there is nothing in “truth”, or knowledge, that can offer him what he “needs”, which is some remedy for or salvation from death. The personal pronoun “my”, repeated in the second stanza, emphasises the personal significance of the need to understand death: it is an experience that the individual must face by himself. All that the speaker can find to maintain his spirit in the shadow of this idea is the contact of another human being. The verb “starving” suggests the necessity of human contact for the maintenance of life. As Maclennan declares elsewhere, “hold on to the hand of your brother or sister/ for that is all you will ever have” (*The Necessary Salt* [43]).

“Last Touch” (*Reading the Signs* 11) is a psychological study of death which shows how vital human contact is to the individual, even if they are not aware of it.

He would avoid embracing you,
 shrug off affection
 as if it were contagious.
 Belligerent, he’d criticize
 the folly of mankind,
 shout at his wife,
 and yell ‘Shut up!’
 at raucous haddas
 flying overhead.
 But when he was dying
 he let me place
 the palm of my hand

on his pale cheek.
 He held it there
 for half-an-hour or more
 without a murmur.

The man described in the poem has led a caustic existence, marked by an impatience with physical and emotional intimacy. That he would “criticize/ the folly of mankind” and even berate the natural world indicates that he found life, in all its forms, uncomfortable and uncongenial, with the result that he seemed to want to keep experience itself at arm’s length.

The poem makes a poignant turn in line nine, as the scene moves to the now “dying” man’s death bed. The hand that the speaker “place[s]...on his pale cheek” is not asked for, but the antipathy to affection that has characterised the subject’s life up until these final moments has been forgotten. The dying man “let[s]” the speaker place his hand there, which suggests that the man has finally come to understand what it is in life that he has lacked, or truly needed: intimate contact with another human being. Holding the speaker’s hand on his cheek is a gesture of acceptance on the part of the doomed man. Moreover, he countenances his realisation in stoic silence, absorbing it “without a murmur”: this, especially in the light of the poem’s title – “*Last Touch*” – adds a keen poignancy to the image and the gesture.

So the poem indicates the necessity of human contact, as well as a reverence for the world, if we are to face our death adequately. But is there anything that we can really do to redeem ourselves in the light of the fact that we will one day cease to exist? Is it possible to offset the pain of leaving everything behind, all that we love, even though we may be unaware of it?

MacLennan does not allow for any thought that extends beyond our state of being, apart from registering a sense of wonder at our being here in the first place, where there should be nothing. We are a species in the natural world, consigned to rely solely on sense data to interpret our state of existence. There is no way we can look outside of our immediate context for meaning, and the only way we can escape our position is through our imaginations.

The poem "The Dead" (*Collecting Darkness* 20) begins with a mix of solemn and bawdy imagery, creating a humorous undertone to alleviate the poem's weighty theme.

They exit senseless,
 when entry was so easy,
 a simple pleasure of tumescence.
 They enter solid silence,
 not even the celestial spheres
 playing a major triad
 there to welcome them.
 And we cannot shout across
 the silence like we shout
 across a room. They're gone

The dead "exit senseless", and the adjective is ambiguous. The dead are not aware of what is going on; that they do not take their sensations from life with them, as these are deleted along with consciousness. But also, MacLennan's vision of death renders him unable to perceive a sense of order in the universe; thus there is no "sense" to our dying, it is a pointless, yet inevitable, fact of our state of being. Entry into life, by contrast, is described in jovial, albeit slightly deprecating, terms, as "a simple pleasure of tumescence". No miracles here, the speaker suggests, life is what it is.

The poem claims that those who die "enter solid silence", and the sibilance offsets the cheeky tones of the previous lines. The "silence" also inverts the Christian idea of a chorus of angels who await the dead with trumpets to welcome them into the afterlife. The speaker declares that "we cannot shout across/ the silence like we shout/ across a room", the lines reminding us of the standard religious assumption about death, in terms of which the spirit of a person continues to exist, but in another realm, where they can hear the prayers and words directed to them by those awaiting transcendence on earth. The "silence" mocks the idea of prayer, in the

form of imagined contact with those who are dead: they are not there to answer, thus no replies will ever be given. It also stands for the state of not being, described as "solid silence" earlier in the poem.

The web of myth that society has woven around death, involving the existence of god, the promise of an afterlife, and the divine nature of being, is also mocked by the poem. There is no room for god in MacLennan's conception of the world. The idea is not cogent and not necessary to explain the truth of our existence: if anything it hinders our search to find a reason for why we are here.

MacLennan thus often employs humour when dealing with the idea of the existence of god, indicating that he finds the idea quaint, a bit of a joke. Yet there is also a (tongue-in-cheek) sense that, should he be wrong in his belief, he didn't quite mean it. Poem 20 in the *Under Compassberg* collection features a scenario in which the poet encounters god:

I dreamed once
 that I stood in front of god
 staring at the patches on his knees.
 His hands, palm up,
 reached out to me.
 "Lift up your eyes," he said.
 Three times he gestured
 and three times I tried.
 But my eyes were heavy,
 weighted down with sleep.

I think he gave up trying,
 for I never saw his face at all.

Beneath its humour, the poem contains a serious message, that a cogent conception of god is simply not possible for such limited beings as ourselves. God is imagined as a very big human being with "patches on his knees". The image reminds

us of the holes in our conception of god, our shabby or makeshift image of him, an altogether threadbare idea in which to invest our hopes.

God makes a peaceful gesture to the speaker. His hands are "palm up", showing he intends no malice, and also perhaps indicating a desire to take the speaker to his bosom, a traditional metaphor for the realisation of god's presence. The tone of "Lift up your eyes" (which echoes Psalm 121) is gently imploring. The three repetitions are conventional in traditional narratives and feature throughout the Bible, from Samuel's summons by God to Peter's denials of Christ. Here, their presence is humorous, as is the speaker's response. He is unable to see the face of god because his eyes, "weighted down with sleep", are too heavy to raise. This is clearly a metaphor for the speaker's inability to apprehend the nature of god, reminding us of the difficulty we face when we try to imagine things that do not derive directly from the impressions that our senses deliver to us. There is too much in the world, the burden of the body and its needs is simply too great, for us to begin to apprehend the nature of the eternal. We have intimations, or dreams, as the speaker suggests, but these are always as full of "holes" as god's trousers are.

The last two lines of the poem acquire poignancy because of their separation from the rest of the poem. The suggestion is that god is the one who "gave up trying", which is an interesting inversion of the search that must have been the speaker's. The implication is that it is the universe that no longer seems to implore the speaker to search beyond it for meaning, to posit something higher as a reason for its existence. God is not necessary to explain its presence: it is as it is, and this is all that we can say about it. The last line of the poem concludes the speaker's suggestion that belief in a higher power is ungrounded ("I never saw his face"), cannot be grounded, because god is not evident to our senses.

In the poem "Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus" (*Solstice* 18), MacLennan's feelings on the afterlife are described through a narrative based on a letter written by Petrarch to his brother.

Petrarch, writing to his brother,
said life would be

a troublesome and dreary thing
 were there no promise
 of that other home awaiting us.
 Calamitous and weary,
 the fourteenth century
 found comfort there.
 Their flesh ran to excess,
 on all the seven deadly sins intent,
 for which the Black Death
 was, perhaps, a fitting punishment.

To me that other home is fantasy:
 it masks the appalling fact
 that meaning's left us in the lurch.
 There is no reason why we're here
 except to keep residual humanity intact,
 love women, cherish beauty,
 and before we die strive to redeem
 our paltriness and lack of energy.
 We're nothing but what we
 have riddled from the dirt,
 and pieced together
 into conscious artefact
 anaesthetising hurt.

In his letter Petrarch bemoans life as "a troublesome and dreary thing", a tedious and a taxing experience that he would sooner be rid of than endure. The only thing that holds out some "promise" for him is the thought of "that other home awaiting us", Heaven, the afterlife. The speaker accuses the "fourteenth century" of being "[c]alamitous and weary", clumsy in its conception of the world and tired of a life marked by drudgery. Its inhabitants sought a remedy in the idea of another world,

one that offset the pain of the world they lived in, and this is why they “found comfort there”.⁴⁸ The speaker imagines that this enabled them to see the infamous plague, the Black Death of 1348, as “a fitting punishment” for their sins.

In the second stanza the speaker states his view in direct terms: “that other home is a fantasy”. To him, it “masks”, or attempts to conceal, the lack of reason behind existence. “There’s no reason why we’re here”, he states blankly, “except to keep residual humanity intact”. “Residual humanity” encompasses our more compassionate habits, which are difficult to maintain against our natures, but redeem us as creatures with a purpose. The same applies to the remainder of the list that amounts to an existentialist credo: “love women, cherish beauty,/ and before we die try to redeem/ our paltriness and lack of energy”.

The last four lines of the poem are very strongly worded, and the tone grows graver and bleaker. The speaker claims that we have “nothing” to base our ideas on but that which we have “riddled from the dirt” – such scraps of knowledge as we have scratched together from our experience. And this itself is “riddled” – hard to decipher, fraught with difficulty – and in need of being “pieced together” before becoming a “conscious artefact” – something tangible to our minds, with a history, or place, in the world – it can deaden the pain of existence. Our only salvation, the speaker concludes, is through finding things in the world that we can forge into deliberate acts of meaning making, in order to lend some dignity to the intrinsic abjection of consciousness.

The poem “Hymn No. 548” (*Through a Glass Darkly* [17]) shakes off the idea of redemption by directing attention to the empty metaphors drawn upon by religion to explain away the problem of death:

At school we sang a hymn
which claimed the time was coming
when the whole earth would be filled

48 The sentiment is similar to that of Kavafi’s poem “The City”, and the implication, or lesson of the poem, is that life is something to be dealt with immediately, not in some imagined future form.

with the glory of God
 "as the waters cover the sea."

It filled me with strange fear:
 the tune was sombre, threatening,
 moving like a wounded monster
 and concluding with the certainty
 of death.

How could the waters cover the sea
 which was already water?
 How would it arise,
 this sinister end of things?

The image that is developed in lines three to five is one that makes little sense to the speaker's younger self: "How could the waters cover the sea/ which was already water?" he asks. The question, when examined a little more closely, succinctly captures MacLennan's views on the positing of god as a solution to life and, by extension, death. It is a concept that makes no sense, because what it claims to be is something that is either already there or something that is superfluous, because of course the waters of the sea do not 'cover' the sea, they *are* the sea, as the speaker indicates. The idea of divinity should not rest above, or more accurately beyond, our lived experience. If there is some sense of the sacred in existence it is to be found within existence itself: that is, it *is* existence, rather than something apart from existence.

The speaker finds that the hymn fills him "with strange fear", a feeling heightened by its "sombre" and "threatening" cadences. These two adjectives imply that the intention of the hymn is to conjure up an impression of the majesty of god. The effect that it has on the speaker is different, though. His fear derives from the fact that there is no meaning in its narrative. It is no more intelligible to him than the roaring of a "wounded monster". The phrase has connotations of anger, ugliness, obscure suffering and danger; importantly, a monster is something not of this world, a fantastical creation of the mind to explain what it does not understand. That the

wounded monster must die provides a single point of “certainty” in the narrative, and this is the idea “of death”, the phrase forming a line on its own. It is death which is the point at which all this fabrication ends, it is death that is “certain”, not the hereafter conjured by illogical fantasy. The question posed in the final two lines, therefore, emerges with two meanings. The first is more direct: the speaker demands to know what it is that will cause the catastrophic (and nonsensical) flooding of the world? The second is about the seeming certainty of the speaker’s own death: will death come like a wounded monster, he seems to be asking, “sinister”, unintelligible and terrifying? When will it strike, and what will be left after it has?

In poem 19 from *Under Compassberg*, it is the smell of “death” that has “lured” the congregation into church.

I suffocated in the church,
 the burning offertory candles
 rivalling the heat outside.
 The smell of death
 had lured us in
 like phorid flies.
 Improbable images of saints
 and patriarchs,
 starved or faintly smiling,
 invited piety.
 Each inch of space engorged
 with polished brass, copper and glass,
 and racks of metal imitations
 of ailing body parts
 hung there in thanks or hope.

No room for god in here.
 Behind carved barriers and screens
 richly robed and bearded priests

intoned god's words
harsh and monotonous.

Outside the dazzling white basilica
the sun hurt my eyes.
Hibiscus, bougainvillea and oleander
rioted in the well-tended garden.
I was so thirsty
I wanted to sit down and cry.

Normally religion, and the comfort of being under an umbrella of metaphysical and moral "certainty", is meant to allow one to breathe, in a metaphorical sense, as the spirit awakes to the promise of a new life in the presence of god. Yet the speaker in this poem feels "suffocated" by the "offertory candles"; this attempt at affirming the existence of a creator has left him feeling stifled and oppressed. The congregation has been "lured...in", suggesting that - like "phorid flies" about a piece of rotten fruit - they find something obscurely and indecently attractive about the spectacle of death.

The inside of the church seems overly ornate, even fantastical. There are "[i]mprobable images of saints", the space is "engorged/ with polished brass, copper and glass". An image of "ailing body parts", alluding to the mortality of the flesh, is given a bizarre edge by the fact that they are "metal imitations". This is a reference to religion's attempt to elevate the mortality of the flesh to the eternal life of the spirit, represented by the metal, but the word "imitations" denotes artifice. The speaker concludes the stanza by saying that they are "hung there in thanks or in hope". The word "hope" suggests the uncertainty (and, for the speaker, the futility) underlying the practice.

The second stanza opens with the blunt statement: "No room for god in here." The speaker sees only deception "[b]ehind carved barriers and screens", and well-heeled "priests", whose recital of "god's words" is "harsh," not gentle. Their "monotonous" delivery, moreover, suggests that these are words that are unfelt, that

do not stoke the passion supposedly afforded by belief.

Stepping outside the church, the speaker finds scant comfort in the natural world. The “sun” shines on indifferently, while exotic plants thrive in their own independent way. The speaker experiences a moment of excruciating need and alienation, a thirst both literal and symbolic. Like the faithful in the church, he too thirsts for certainty and understanding. But his search for meaning has been futile, and he wants to “sit down and cry” out his frustration, loneliness and lack.

A cognate poem set inside a church, “Mid-Winter Concert” (*The Road to Kromdraai* 35), develops a terrifying association. The sun has set and it is freezing cold in a “deconsecrated” church where the speaker is part of an audience listening to a sung Mass, “vapours of ancient sound/ that once wove filigree/ around the Saviour’s death”. The poem continues and concludes thus:

...

The listeners, mummified
in overcoats, gloves and scarves,
await transcendence
for which this world starves.

But as they sing
their fragments of the mass,
through a door they left ajar
I see in the bleak grey sacristy
where priests once robed
high on the wall a showerhead.

In the dying light a horror seizes me:
the showers of Dachau bloom again,
the apertures where
pale blue crystals
fell from the roof

on naked, wet shoulders.

"The listeners" are "mummified" in their "overcoats, gloves and scarves". The word "mummified" suggests a form of entombment where the body is preserved, though life is absent, and this renders the listeners strangely passive and inert – perhaps cut off from the world by being swaddled in comforting myths. This seems confirmed by the way in which "they await transcendence", not actively seeking it. But meanwhile, the speaker has seen something which takes his thoughts in another, shocking direction: the showerhead in the "bleak grey sacristy". What comes flooding into his mind is an image of the gas chambers at Dachau, the first Nazi concentration camp. The "naked shoulders" of the victims are deliberately contrasted with the wadded congregation, and the effect is to juxtapose the stark reality of death with the self-delusion of those participating in a ritual commemorating Christ's triumph over death. The association between the priests' disused shower and the Nazi death camps seems contingent and gratuitous, but the effect is to infect the religious observance with a hint of indecency: the Mass becomes somehow insulting to the memory of those who perished in such a cruel and abject way. Their "naked shoulders" are literally in touch with reality, the reality of the death camps and the mechanisms that led to their creation. In contrast, the cocooned believers unthinkingly allow their faith to separate them from reality, even the reality that they create (there may be an allusion here to the initial quiescence of the Vatican during the War).

Religion, then, in MacLennan's view, actively offsets the search for truth. Those who are involved in its teaching are often corrupt and use its principles to further their own aims. Through this, it has largely lost sight of its original aim, to lead people to the sacred, to "god". Religion itself is dismissed in the poetry as a route of escape from existential problems, and as a collection of groundless ideas and insubstantial responses, particularly with regard to the problem of death. There is no god to provide an explanation for our state of being, and life appears in the light of this to be "meaningless outside of itself" ("*As a Child*", *Through A Glass Darkly* [11]). The life-world, then, is the only place in which to search for meaning. While at times

Maclennan suggests that a sense of rightness with things in the universe can be attained, this is only ever a feeling, never knowledge, and the speakers always need to stop short of pronouncements outside of the experience of being, and condemn those that make them.

In later, more recent poems, Maclennan seems to evince a more accepting attitude towards death. The poem "One Day" (*Reading the Signs* 24), for instance, strikingly positions the speaker on the shore, at the very edge on end of life:

The shoreline is swept clean
 by restless tides,
 great swaths of yellow sand
 on which to conjure messages
 with my walking stick.
 But who is there to read
 these vanishing heiroglyphs?

One day you may return,
 remembering an old man
 gathering driftwood for a fire,
 lost in his memories
 and waiting for the spring tide
 to heal him of his flesh.

The "tides" that wash the "shoreline" clean are the tides of history, which is forgetful, or the tides of time, which governs and ultimately erases all. The great swathes of "yellow sand" seem like vistas of possible experience, lying in wait to be inscribed by the poet, either in terms of his life experiences, or of writing poetry, or of course both. The dual sense of this image is further developed by that of the "walking stick", which suggests an active involvement with things. The speaker asks "who is there to read/ these vanishing heiroglyphs?", so that his role can be fulfilled:

to give a part of himself away in his poetry, to live on in other minds, and thus to guide, or at least enrich, their experience of the world.⁴⁹

The “old man/ gathering driftwood for a fire” is presumably a figure for the speaker collecting experiences to turn them into something illuminating like a poem. He is “lost in his memories” at this stage, suggesting that he is trying to rehearse his experiences in words, but that the nature of his endeavour is forever unclear, leaving him “lost”. It is the “spring tide” that he waits for, conventionally the highest tide of the year, the final tide that will wash clean the slate of the speaker’s experience, and ultimately “heal him of his flesh”. It is a positive image of death, as if the body, consciousness, were a wound that only death might cure. And it shows an inclination on the part of the poet to go some way towards accepting death, unlike the attitude informing earlier poems which express mostly anger and regret. The sense that the flesh will be carried into the ocean alludes to the disappearance of individual consciousness, and suggests that there may after all be some mystery in death, another development from MacLennan’s earlier dealings with the concept.

In his abiding preoccupation with death, MacLennan has sought to work out the concept fully, in order to stand up to it at its most fearsome. The title of the poem “Letter in a Bottle” (*Letters* 50) is interesting. It describes a letter sent to an unknown receiver in an unknown place. It is also synonymous with a cry for help, often associated with either the marooned or the lonely. It is a metaphor for the speaker’s sense of abandonment in the universe, inscribed and placed in a bottle sent out on the ocean of death for whatever lurks beneath its impenetrably dark waters. It is also a memorable and moving testament to MacLennan’s entire project.

When death takes me
 I’ll be in no mood to recount
 the way I saw things
 or work out my account.
 All I’ve ever wanted to make -

a few clean statements
 on love and death,
 things you cannot fake.

Death's power is illustrated by the verb "takes": the speaker feels that when death does finally arrive it will be abrupt, allowing no chance for a fight. Nor will it conduce to leisurely summing up or stocktaking, with the speaker declaring that he will "be in no mood to...work out [his] account" when he dies. Given MacLennan's absolute view of death, his allusion to the vagaries of mood is purposefully mocking. The story of his life is that which he lives, and so with his death his story ends too.

The poem's focus shifts in the fifth line to something of a poetic manifesto. The first point the speaker has accepted is that there is nothing you can fake about death. It is real, it is something that will end us all, and there is nothing that can change this fact. His ideas on poetry are also reflected: what one does within a poem is to try and make language "clean", to use words to make phrases that are clear and honest. He identifies his primary concerns as "love" and "death", and they are indeed central in MacLennan's poetry. If death is central both because it is something we all have to face and because it means the end of everything that we value, love is just as central because it is what enables us fully to appreciate our existence. The last line of the poem, "things you cannot fake", is a telling tribute to the striking honesty that characterises all MacLennan's poetic enquiry. It is the truthfulness of poems, their utterly sincere pursuit of truth, that is their sole and entire justification.

The next and last chapter in this study will examine the roles of love and poetry in keeping death at bay. Separately and together, they help to fill the void created by the absence of god and the failure of conventional forms of thought to deliver consolation.

Chapter Four: To Enter Paradise

"Inscribe yourself someplace any way you can
 and later erase yourself again with generosity."

- Odysseus Elytus, epigraph to *The Necessary Salt* [2]

"Poetry is death cast out"

- Sydney Clouts (*Clouts*, 85)

This chapter will explore the recommendations MacLennan's poetry makes to help us face the problem of death. The poetry highlights two central mandates as remedies to our condition of being: the first is to love, both people and the situation we are in, and the second is to record the fragments of our experience for others to map their experience against, to help them make sense of the world. In MacLennan's view these commitments provide us with an opportunity to approximate an encounter with eternity in our short, earth-bound lives.

MacLennan's dual mandate is thus reminiscent of William Blake's observation that "Eternity is in love, with the productions of time" (Blake, 36). One may read this to mean that our portion of eternity resides in an appreciation of others and of our situation, and with that which we produce in our time, like poetry. Blake thus invokes an eternity immanent in the world that surrounds us, rather than one on a separate (higher) plane.

What MacLennan has to say about love is often delivered in a humorous way, with wry observations about the decaying body, the limits of the mind and the difficulty of feeling. Yet the humour conceals some of the most serious and profound moments in the poetry. As he confesses in "Letter in a Bottle", all he has "ever wanted to make" is "a few clean statements/ on love and death, / things you cannot fake" (*Letters* 50).

His life's struggle, as conveyed in the poetry, consists in a constant weighing of the world of abstract thought with the world of feeling. It is the world of feeling that ultimately proves more difficult to navigate, and yet is more exigent, because of its direct and ever-pressing impact on our being. Desire is absolutely central to our lives. It is mysterious, as is our position, but there is more to its mystery than a

deeper appreciation of the world and its phenomena. This is because an appreciation of our environment transforms us, making us strive ever higher. It elevates us above the drudgery of our everyday lives, and may afford as a glimpse of the "sacred", no matter how distant or obscure.

It is in the first instance love for people that the poetry extols. People deserve our affection and attention, seemingly to a greater extent than we realise when we are young. MacLennan's poetry - most of it the work of an aging man who is keenly aware that he is aging - evinces a growing recognition of this, demonstrating an ever-increasing intensity and breadth of feeling for friends, family, and human beings generally, no matter how obscure or remote their situation.

But loving people is but a part of being in love with our lives, with our presence in a frustratingly opaque yet overwhelmingly beautiful world. The poetry exhorts us to love each moment that we spend in this world, precious because finite. An important aspect of this love is to be charitably attentive to our senses, our guides through this world, and to what they reveal to us about it.

The place of poetry, in MacLennan's view, is to record the few moments that we have, and to immortalise them in words that make the experience and the feelings they engender more difficult to erase. Because others face the same struggles, poetry exists as a set of signs for future generations, to help them make sense of their world by comparing it with the experience of those who have passed through the world before them. Yet poetry also allows us to reach a little further into the world, to grab at its hidden, perhaps essential, aspects. Martin Heidegger argues, in an essay called "Language", that when we write a poem we firstly create a new ontological space from which to explore the world, and secondly we tempt the world's objects to show us their reality (Leitch, 1129-1132).⁵⁰ MacLennan's poetry seems to acknowledge that the medium has an essential mysteriousness that somehow allows us to summon objects into a truer light, and so for him poetry is a higher function of human being.

There is a sense, also, that poetry is in some ways a tool we can use to confront

50 By showing us different aspects of themselves, thus giving us a fuller picture of the ultimately unknowable, though certainly existing, thing.

and, in a sense, expel the presence of death. Sydney Clouts begins a poem with the line "Poetry is death cast out" (Clouts 85). In direct terms, the line suggests that a poem carries the poet a little further into time than his natural death would permit. By virtue of its being written down, it provides an enduring record of the poet's imagination and experience of the world. But the line also suggests that something of the poet survives death inside his poetry: his 'voice' remains in the lines he writes, as do his feelings and emotions. These survive the poet's physical death to affect and influence others. Maclennan once described this to me as "holding a banner for others to follow" (Author's interview with Maclennan), a banner emblazoned with the poet's more salient observations about life during his lifetime, available to others when he dies, so that they can pick up where he left off. Clouts's line implicitly pays tribute to the centrality of death, which is perhaps another reason why Maclennan approves it so. After all, Maclennan's poems are never ignorant of the subject, and the shadow it casts on his conception of the life-world is all-encompassing.

Thus the ability to experience and participate in love, and the aptitude and willingness to create, offer, in the view of the poetry, the best way to salvage something of value from our short, hazard-ridden lives.

I would like begin with the closing lines of "Letter from Bed" (*Letters* 41), describing a challenge that the poem's speaker sets for himself:

Now I must work at my reality.
Preparation for the night's
a difficult and daunting thing.

The lines express a firm resolve on the speaker's part to define his "reality" in the face of death's impenetrable stare, to recreate the essential elements of his existence.⁵¹ The word "reality" refers both to defining the speaker's sense of what reality means to him, and also to the "reality" that he will die.⁵² The "night" that he refers to is the

51 This is a reference to the job of poetry, and introduces the themes that will be covered in this chapter.

52 The second sense of the word is brought out by the idea that the speaker is making

darkness of death, and the nature of the preparation for this is “difficult and daunting”, because it is hard to convey just what is salient and meaningful about his “reality”, or life, when it is measured against such a totalising negation. The words employed in these lines call to mind preparation for a journey, and thus cast life as a quest – perhaps to find something meaningful before we die. MacLennan’s life, as reflected in his poetry, has been characterised by this struggle.

Poem 32 in *Notes from a Rhenish Mission* (22) looks at religion’s conception of the world, and its certainty that there is an afterlife:

They claim there is another place
 where hungry souls can go.
 And yet we know
 to love this place
 transforms it utterly.

The speaker suggests that in their yearning for “another place”, believers overlook the beauty of the world that they are in. The adjective “hungry” suggests that the “souls” feel they are lacking something in their lives, something they will only find in the life to come. But the literal sense of word persists as a reminder of the demands of the body, and the need for survival, and thus subtly undermines the more ethereal lable “souls”.⁵³

The speaker’s conclusion is that “we know” how to appreciate this world. The personal pronoun that he employs is both inclusive and impliedly universal: it is as if every one of us has something common to our experience, the capacity and the need to “love”. The speaker declares that “to love this place/ transforms it utterly”,

“preparation for the night”, which is death. It calls to mind D.H. Lawrence’s idea of building one’s “ship of death”, or making full use of our conscious moments to prepare ourselves for our death.

53 As MacLennan admits elsewhere, he struggles to understand what people mean when they refer to the “soul” (e.g. “what he means by the soul is still obscure”, “On Reading Plotinus”, *Solstice* 21).

meaning that by enjoying and appreciating the world that we are in we make both the earth and our existence upon it (the only state of existence we can be sure of) far more significant. The word “utterly” connotes a complete transformation. Thus the poem suggests that by loving our existence on this earth we radically transform our position within it, perhaps even our aptitude for dealing with it.

The title of the poem “What Was He Saying?” (*Reading the Signs 2*) takes the form of a question, an answer to which is hinted at at the poem’s end.

‘People must learn to love
before they die,’ said Freud.
But we’re too scared
to throw away our reticence
like old vegetables, or books
we no longer need to read.
People still ask,
‘So what’s he telling us?’

Sit there in your chair
in the winter sun.
You’ll think of something.

It is significant that Freud’s dictum should have been chosen as the source for a sentiment that has been expressed in various ways by so many others. His position as iconic psychoanalyst lends the poem the feeling of a remedy for the human condition. The speaker notes that most of us “are too scared/ to throw away our reticence”, our reluctance to love. It is an interesting comment to make, because it suggests that making a decision to love the world takes courage, and does not come easily to us. The implication appears to be that most of us are too concerned with the shallow immediacies of everyday existence to find the time to love the world, to open ourselves up to it. The poem draws a comparison between this reluctance to give up our habits and our reluctance to throw away “old vegetables, or books/ we no longer

need to read". Both sets of objects that the poem describes are of little use to our lives: "old vegetables" represent things that we imagine we might still take some sustenance from, though to eat them would either make us ill or simply be degrading. What is certain is that they will not contain the flavour they once had. They could stand for habits which we are reluctant to part with, or things that we accumulate without needing. The image of "books/ we no longer need to read" has a similar message: surely if we no longer need to read a book, there is little point in keeping it? Books inevitably stand for knowledge, or ways of thinking about the world. The phrase "no longer need to read" implies that (old and limiting) ideas are not necessary to an appreciation of our existence. They bog us down, and in all likelihood, stop us from exploring new avenues of knowledge, thus prejudicing the way we think about the world and the way that we orientate our lives towards it.

Finally, the speaker notes exasperatedly that "[p]eople still ask,/ So what's he telling us?" We fail to act, hiding behind old habits or customs, and because we do, we limit our engagement with the world. If we will not heed Freud's simple injunction, our involvement in our own lives is doomed to remain impoverished.

The last section of the poem is separated from the main body for emphasis' sake. The speaker does not provide a direct answer to the question of what Freud meant, because we cannot tell other people what to love in the world: they need to discover this from their own experience, in a way that will become meaningful to them in their own lives. The adjuration to "[s]it there in your chair/ in the winter sun" evokes a minimalist setting, pared down to essentials to maximise the clarity of the experience. To feel the gentle warmth of the sun in winter seems as good an initial lesson as any in learning to appreciate the simple fact of being alive. The poem's final line - "[y]ou'll think of something" - conveys the speaker's conviction that everyone can find something to love about their existence, in the process endorsing the sense of community or commonality⁵⁴ that the poem has suggested characterises the human condition. The word "something" conveys tangibility or creatureliness as well as non-specificity, meaning that for each of us that something

54 That we all share the same fundamental experience: being alive in an unfathomable world.

to love will take a different form; but that whatever one chooses to hold dear will become significant simply by virtue of being appreciated. The message is that love transforms our world, making it meaning-bearing. Because of this it becomes something of a necessity for MacLennan, as the title of the next poem I wish to examine suggests.

In "The Necessary Salt" (*The Necessary Salt* [5]) the speaker reflects:

I came into this world
 with nothing but a mother
 and a man who smoked a pipe,
 the scent of hawthorn blossom,
 Pears soap, the warmth
 of bodies holding mine,
 my sister singing in the dusk,
 and love, the necessary salt.

The lines convey the innocence and ignorance with which we enter the world, and how our lives and characters are formed by the environment in which we find ourselves. This immediately casts doubt on our capacity for knowledge beyond the phenomenal world, and puts the roots of our being in the realm of experience. The images the speaker employs are sensuous – the "scent of hawthorn blossom", Pears soap, the sound of his "sister singing in the dusk", "the warmth of bodies" – thus insisting that it is the immediate experience of our senses that is the signature of all we are.

The images all direct attention towards the poem's conclusion, which is that "love" is "the necessary salt". Salt is a universal metonymy for richness and flavour, and that it is "necessary" suggests that the recipe, in this case for life, would be insipid and unpalatable without love as an ingredient. Salt has been the cornerstone of many ancient economies: the Greeks used it as an alternative currency (to buy slaves, for example) and the Romans used it to pay their soldiers (Southern, 221). Thus it is also associated with value, and it is as if the speaker is implying that the

value of our lives is measured by our capacity to love. Simply put, without appreciation for our human lot, our lives are poorer: they lack an ingredient that reciprocally enriches our experience of the world. That this is “necessary” in the speaker’s eyes suggests just how integral love is to MacLennan’s conception of living well: it is no less than essential.

The poem “Love” (*Through a Glass Darkly* [27]), claims that love “is of this world only”, a statement that grounds it in the terrestrial and binds it to our lived experience:

Love is of this world only,
 Adam and Eve returning to the garden
 naked as the day they were reborn.

Love has no secrets,
 but for one:
 lovers lie naked
 in each other’s arms,
 not knowing how a hidden hand
 performs its chemistry on them.

The poem begins with the by now familiar gambit of directing our attention to the place where we find ourselves, instead of to another that we feel may lie in wait for us after death. This forms the foundation for the remainder of the poem, which suggests that through love we begin to approach eternity, or paradise, within the essentially limited sphere of our lives.⁵⁵ When we experience love,⁵⁶ the speaker suggests, we become like “Adam and Eve returning to the garden”, and the association with Eden implies that this is as close to paradise as we can hope to come in our once-off, earth-bound existence. The speaker describes love as a return to

55 Thus once again the poem reminds us strongly of Blake’s lines, quoted earlier.

56 Or participate in the act of making love.

innocence, as well as a kind of spiritual re-awakening: “naked as the day they were reborn”. The word “reborn” contains the resonance of a baptism, and suggests something about the transformatory power of love – that we are transformed or remade by the power of love, which reawakens our being so that we are enabled to greet the world anew. Our sense of the world becomes more refined, our understanding of it elevated, as we become more attentive to our surroundings. The stanza implies, overall, that when we begin to love the world the sacred (“the garden”) can begin to manifest itself in the immediate (“of this world only”).

The second stanza’s claim that “Love has no secrets” conveys a sense that when we truly experience love, we cannot but experience it honestly and openly. There is nothing deceptive about it – the experience of love is transformatory and real, unmediated and intimate. Thus “lovers lie naked/ in each other’s arms”, bereft of mask or guard or protection, sharing themselves openly and utterly.

The speaker then concedes that there is one secret that love has, and this is the reason behind its mysterious power over us. The speaker refers to this as the “hidden hand” that “performs its chemistry” on lovers. There is a guiding force that underlies desire, and which controls us in a hidden, powerful and mysterious way. The verb “performs” supports this sense, implying that the power that resides in love is like the magic of a conjuring trick, or the secret rites that accompany a ritual.⁵⁷ The final line appears to offer a more scientific observation that the “hidden hand” that guides us in love is “chemistry”, as our bodies respond to love’s stimulating influence with a release of chemicals. Yet this also implies that love is inherent in the nature of things, that it is a part of our chemistry, our essential make-up. Love is inextricably a part of us.

The poem “To the Ancients” (*Letters* 46) similarly evokes a sense of love’s inherence in our being.

I found myself in bed,
relaxed and warm,

57

It calls to mind initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries, for example.

next to a woman whose urges
 spring directly into being,
ex nihilo, like mine.
 After all, we are
 inspired contraptions
 that guarantee returns of favour
 and mutual satisfactions.
 Why else
 does the *Symposium*
 end in love?

The word "ancient" is associated with the wisdom of the past, with an arcane (to us), gnomic kind of wisdom. Thus the poem implies that love has been both an enduring and integral aspect of our collective experience. The poem's appreciative tone supports this sense, while its title gives it the flavour of a dedication or elegy.

The "relaxed and warm" speaker lies in bed with a woman "whose urges/ "spring . . . *ex nihilo*", from nothing. Love somehow urges itself into being, emerging from nothing, miraculous. The rhyme between lines 7 and 9 injects a certain playfulness into the language, which is nevertheless serious in its import. The word "inspired" suggests something sublimely engendered, while "contraptions" restores our bodies to the level of mechanical devices, machines. Together the words celebrate both the physical body and the invisible promptings that govern its behaviour. The reference to the sheer convenience of mutual orgasm – the "guarantee . . . of mutual satisfactions" – is also of course a nod towards the way in which love involves some kind of sharing at every level.

The poem ends with another philosophical reference: this time to Plato's *Symposium*, which is fitting, because of its subject matter, the nature of love.⁵⁸ That the poem describes love as the final teaching of Plato's finest dialogue, again implies that love is, in the end, of vital importance to an adequate appreciation of the world.

58 A symposium was an ancient Greek gathering for the discussion of philosophical issues, often with plenty of wine involved.

Socrates'⁵⁹ quest for the truth, an activity which in the eyes of Plato characterised his life, finds love to be the ultimate solution to, or at least a remedy for, his state of being.

Many of MacLennan's "love poems" appear to be addressed to or concerned with specific women. This makes his musings on the subject seem more personal, adding the impression that he has lived the experiences that he describes. In "She" (*Through a Glass Darkly* [31]), the speaker notes:

How hard we need to work
to keep the images of those we love
from being buried
in the drudgery of daily life.
She was shaped and saddened
by a history we knew nothing of,
yet she survived, as we both aged,
as words stay on the page
though night erases them.

The lines suggest the difficulty of sustaining an intimacy with those we love in the context of the "drudgery of daily life", which draws our attention away from the meaningful and towards the trivial. The implication is that it is our experience that wears us down, the sheer onslaught of surviving in time, and that its effect can be hidden, both from those who see us and from ourselves: the subject of the poem has a "history *we* knew nothing of". This can "shape and sadden" us, determining the way our lives go and casting a melancholy shadow on our existence. Yet through all of this, the speaker notes, "she survived", her nature resilient to processes such as the ageing of her body. The speaker then draws an interesting comparison with poetry, noting that the woman's essential immutability is "like words on a page". The correlation lends a sense of timelessness to both, elevating love (the force behind his

appreciation of the woman's person), and poetry above the moribund "daily life" the speaker has mentioned earlier. The "night" that erases words stands for time and time's ineluctable end, death; but the poem's last line is profoundly ambiguous. On the one hand, it indicates that night emerges as more powerful than the words, negating them by rendering them invisible. On the other hand, though the words cannot be read in the dark, they nevertheless survive, they "stay on the page", and MacLennan is reprising one of the most abiding themes of Shakespeare's sonnets⁶⁰ in order to evoke some sense of how human identity somehow triumphs over death. So the poem identifies two enduring elements about us, our ability to love and our ability to write, things that dignify our existence, and enable us to imagine the experience of timelessness. But it also draws ambiguous attention to the great inescapable shadow of death.

"To Enter Paradise" (*The Necessary Salt* [21]) elucidates the Greek poet Odysseus Elytis's dictum for the formation of identity - "First find out/ who you are: that is the beginning" - by means of an allegory with an instructive tone:

Elytis said, "First find out
 who you are:
 that is the beginning."
 Sweep out the room,
 wash the windows,
 hang the bedding in the sun,
 bring in flowers,
 fruit and vegetables,
 garlic, and a fish to roast
 over a bed of coals,
 a bottle of good wine,
 coffee, cigarettes.
 Then, as evening closes in

60 Cf. the end of Sonnet 18: "So long as men can breathe and eyes can see,/ So long lives this, and this gives life to thee."

Paradise will enter you.

To “sweep out the room” is presumably a metonymy for clearing our personal space, our lives, of things that are unnecessary and hinder us. He implores us to “wash the windows”, also, to clean from our minds any “dirt” that might cloud our perception, thus enabling us to see the world as it is, in perfect clarity.

The implication is that we need to clear out the space in which we find comfort, even refuge from the world. This is suggested by the injunction to “hang the bedding in the sun”, to bring those things that we identify with ourselves, the generally secret and most personal aspects of our lives, into the light of the sun. We must then surround ourselves with beauty, or be able to harvest the beauty of the world, perhaps in a poem: “bring in flowers”. We have to find what nourishes our being “fruit and vegetables,/ garlic, and a fish”, and to nurture and prepare these things to realise their full potential: “to roast/ over a bed of coals”. Finally, we must learn to appreciate the things that offer direct gratification to our being, to give in to the pleasures of the body, and to celebrate the fact that we are alive at all: “a bottle of good wine/ coffee, cigarettes”.

These images are all very carefully chosen, and although I have read them in a symbolic sort of way, the figure of speech in which they participate is of course metonymy: they stand for more than themselves without ceasing to be and mean themselves. The poem concludes that “as evening closes in”, or as death approaches, we will find our “Paradise”, though not in the traditional way. It is not we who will enter into paradise, as religion teaches, but “Paradise” that “will enter” us. This is all we can hope for in a world where thoughts of further salvation are unfounded: that MacLennan uses the upper case “P” for “Paradise” indicates that this is not some poor substitute, but the real thing, the authentic goal of all our longings and strivings. That the poem ends with the pronoun “you” reminds the reader that the poem is a direct instruction addressed to him or her. The poet is giving advice to his readers, to help them to live well and face death with equanimity: he is casting death out. The mood of confidence, even certainty, focused in the verb “will” in the poem’s last line, suggests that the speaker addresses us with a conviction born of experience.

It is probably worth noting that this tone is comparatively rare in MacLennan before his most recent work.

The poem "Socrates" (*The Necessary Salt* [36]) is lent an elegaic air by its title, the name of the historical persona the poem examines:

I think of Socrates,
 that doomed man,
 walking by a stream
 outside the walls of Athens.
 He listens to its mutterings
 and bees collecting pollen
 in the olive trees.
 His courage does not fail.
 The spring sun says to him
 it's time to speak and tell about
 the wonder and the bliss of being alive.

The speaker describes Socrates as a "doomed man", but the implication is that this is a universal condition, as no reason is given for the epithet. We can imagine, because of the general cadence of MacLennan's poetry, that he is "doomed", as we all are, by his mortality. Of course, the manner of Socrates' famous death has some resonance with MacLennan's philosophy. The Athenian people had decided, after much politically charged rhetoric from his detractors, to execute him on a charge of "corrupting the youth". But Socrates took his death into his own hands, drinking a vial full of hemlock which caused a slow, numbing death, beginning in his feet (Tredennick and Tarrant 39-123). The scene, as it is rendered by Plato, has a poetic resonance consonant with several aspects of MacLennan's life philosophy. There is the honesty and openness with which Socrates faces up to his persecutors. There is the charge of "corrupting the youth", something that MacLennan takes an active involvement in: his poems constantly exhort and instruct, while rarely toeing any established lines. Finally, there is Socrates' death itself, of the inevitability of which

he was fully cognisant, literally aware of its advance from the first sensation of numbness in his toes. This chimes with the poetry's constantly reiterated awareness of the presence of death, and of the need to live in such a way as to be able to confront death without fear. Socrates stood up to death, facing it heroically and nobly, even knowing and feeling, at every last passing moment, how inevitable and inescapable its strike was. Maclennan, in his poetry, achieves something very similar.

Socrates' physical position in the poem is interesting. He walks "by a stream/ outside the walls of Athens", which indicates that he is in some sense outside of, detached from, the world of getting and spending, represented by the bustling city of Athens. The poem also implies that he prefers the natural world to the built environment of human "civilisation". He listens intently to nature, the "mutterings" of the stream and the sound of "bees collecting pollen". This last image is interesting in that it suggests both industry and a refining of the natural world through a reassembly of its fundamentals, in this case the turning of pollen into honey. This can be read as a metaphor for the activity of writers, who need to transmute the world, to destroy and recreate it, in order to come closer to an understanding of it. In the eighth line the speaker notes that Socrates' "courage does not fail". The line seems at once to praise Socrates' attitude towards life and to remind us that this is not an easy thing to achieve and sustain in the face of mortality: there seems to be an implication that the speaker's courage has failed him on occasion, or at least come close to failing.

Of particular interest in this poem are the last three lines, which seem to enjoy the speaker's wholehearted endorsement. It is the "spring sun" that speaks to Socrates, "spring" being symbolic of life and the "sun" symbolic of knowledge or guidance. That it speaks directly to him indicates that through his wanderings outside of convention (the habits of the city), he has discovered an affinity with the workings of nature: it now addresses him and guides him. In the same way, Maclennan's attitude to death (and the approach to life that is its corollary - the mutual entailment is important) is guided by the world as it appears to us, not by abstract ideas that swaddle its bitter truth.

The message that “it’s time to speak and tell about/ the wonder and the bliss of being alive” is essentially MacLennan’s response to death, and absolutely central to *oeuvre*, especially the more recent work. Even though Socrates is “doomed”, he still has a clear mandate. His response to life is characterised by “wonder”, because we somehow exist inside of what can loosely be termed a miracle, and also by “bliss”, when we realize the preciousness of each moment in a procession that must one day come to an end. The somewhat tautologous “speak and tell” suggests that we must both “speak”, or discuss, our feelings about life, and that we must also “tell”, or share with others what we have seen, realised or experienced. This can be done through philosophical dialogue, as was the case for Socrates, or any other form of expression that recreates, and refines, the details of experience – perhaps most notably, poetry. The similarity of the speaker’s outlook to that attributed to Socrates is clear, and again the poem gives a nod to the Socratic spirit, which champions an exploration of our world with an understanding of our limits, a desire to push these limits, and, finally, a love of life itself, in all its wonder and all its tragedy. It is also another reminder of Sydney Clouts’s claim that “[p]oetry is death cast out”, that our written interpretations of the world stand as a testament to our experience and provide beacons for others to follow, as Socrates’ ideas shine on in Plato’s dialogues.

But poetry is a difficult medium to work with. Even Plato accused poets of being liars and refused them entry into his Republic. Poetry is representational, he would argue. In fact, it is a reflection of a representation. Few would be able to question this inherent limit to its ability to probe the world, or even to portray it accurately. Thus there is a justified insecurity that creeps into MacLennan’s feelings on the ability of words and poetry to convey the world accurately. In the poem “The Only Truth” (*Reading the Signs* 20), words are dismissed as “nothing/ to the juice of oranges”. Poetry is insignificant compared to the actual world of sensation and feeling that it attempts to describe. It is also not comparable to the “reassurance of warm stone”, the universe that surrounds us, and allows us to feel its presence. Lastly, and the poem ranks these aspects in order of their importance, it is as nothing to “holding you in my arms/ feeling you breathe”, the joy and reassurance of contact with love and life itself. Once again it is an affirmation of love that concludes the

poem, seeming to offer redemption from the insecurities of poetic endeavour, the “words” referred to earlier in the poem.

And poetry, despite MacLennan’s occasional anxiety, is by no means a useless exercise. The poet has an important role in society. In poem 30 from *Rock Paintings at Salem* (16), the speaker highlights what he feels a part of this role to be:

The work of poets is to feel back
 along the ancient lines
 and find at last the story
 that lives us into being.

The image of the “lines” is evocative of fishing, and suggests that what we discover will not be known to us until we have felt along the lines of history for it; but when we do find it, as with catching a fish, it comes as a tangible reward. Like patient fishermen, poets must “feel back/ along the ancient lines”, letting their senses guide them to the catch that may await them. The verb “feel” connotes an experiential, personal excursion along the lines of history, one that is based in instinct and gut feeling, while the word “lines” also asseverates a direct connection between the present and what has come before. And, as is always the case in MacLennan, “ancient” has the favourable connotation of time-honoured wisdom.

The reward that poets seek is to “find at last the story/ that lives us into being”. This is a provocative proposition: that a story we tell ourselves can make us become it. The poem is suggesting that the narrative we create of and around our lives is something that can lift us out of an inattentive existence, into a higher state of alertness and being. The lines identify a creative aspect to life that it is up to us to take control of. And, as we have noted before, a poem offers a medium through which to pass on these “stories”, a space in which one can deposit fragments of meaningful experience and memorialise ways of approaching life and our place in the universe.

In “No Voice Is Wholly Lost” (*The Necessary Salt* [32]), the speaker explains how poetry to some extent extends both the experience and existence of the being,

albeit in a derivative way:

Life gives us what we want
 although imperfectly:
 what goes comes back again,
 yielding is giving,
 giving taking,
 anywhere is somewhere.

You said you heard my voice
 when you read my poetry.

He begins by claiming that “[l]ife gives us what we want/ although imperfectly”. The world will provide for us, yet in a way that we may not at first realise that we want it to, or may not recognise as perfect. The paradoxes he describes (“yielding is giving,/ giving taking,/ anywhere is somewhere”) are apposite to the “imperfect” nature of life that he alludes to. By “yielding”, or giving in to what life provides us, we show it the attention that it deserves, and thus find ourselves “taking” from the riches that it offers us. The enigmatic “anywhere is somewhere” implies that even though our exact position in the universe is not known, we certainly still exist as a part of it.

In the last two lines of the poem, the speaker recalls the person to whom the poem is addressed saying that she (?) “heard [his] voice/ when [she] read [his] poetry”. The speaker seems to be cheered by this, by the notion that a poem carries a little of its author with it, not only the sentiments he expresses but also something of his essential being, something uniquely him or his. Of course, it is not just a notion, but a personal compliment: what the speaker finds rewarding is that it is his voice that will not be “wholly lost”, that has “come back” via an appreciative reader to affirm and console him.

Yet despite its importance in a world where meaning is difficult to attain and sustain, and where feeling or intuition is the only thing we can rely upon or hope to

convey, poetry is at times simply not enough. MacLennan's world remains frustratingly undisclosive. The poem "Letter from a Traveller" (*Letters* 39) ends with these lines:

...

That exit from the world
 that I intended to achieve
 has turned to ash.
 The world is hiding things
 from me and my left hand.
 There's still too much to smell,
 to touch, to understand.

The lines express the main concern of the poem, which is the speaker's inability truly to penetrate and understand the nature of the world. He claims, in tragic tones, that the "exit from the world" that he "intended to achieve" has "turned to ash". What this "exit" might be is vague, but the words seem to refer to transcendence, an escape from the sublunary world through poetry, as through a doorway leading to truth. The word "ash" is perhaps chosen for its biblical resonance, and reminds us that all that comes from the earth will return to the earth, as unformed as it began. It also connotes complete destruction: once an object in the world has turned to ash we can have no hope of reconstructing it. Thus the speaker's "exit" is simply no longer salvageable; in some despair, he observes that "the world is hiding things" from him, declining to reveal a path towards transcendence. Specifically, the world is resisting capture in writing, represented by that rebellious "left hand" of his. The intimate association between the speaker and his "left hand" suggests the importance for him of poetry as a mode of exploration, its near necessity as a guide and interpreter.

But his efforts are not ultimately in vain: the last two lines of the poem shift the focus to make this point. The world is described as an abundant place, indeed overwhelmingly abundant, as there is "too much" that the speaker still has to do. While its true nature may remain unfathomable, it still tempts him to try and

understand it – by enticing him to continue smelling, tasting, touching, feeling its rich textures and illimitable variety.

The poem “Poetry” (*Solstice* 9) relates the speaker’s first encounters with poetry, and portrays the unexpected ways in which it has enriched him.

In innocence I groomed myself,
 learned carefully by heart
 the rich lines of prodigals.
 Then poetry found me out,
 tapped at midnight on my window
 to see if I could shine like a rainbow
 or roar like a church organ.
 It was not what I’d expected
 of an enterprise
 everyone so admired:

I was reminded that
 I’m just an animal
 who cooks his food,
 makes promises, laughs,
 lies, and knows
 he is going to die.

When the speaker initially encounters poetry, he responds to its beauty by dutifully committing to memory favourite lines. No doubt the exercise is beneficial: by holding poetry thus inside himself he has begun to make it a part of his life. The word “prodigals” perhaps suggests that MacLennan’s early influences were poets whose use of words was lavish and profligate. There may be a glancing allusion, too, to the figure of the prodigal son from the Bible, identifying poets who came to poetry after an experience of being in the wilderness, or who experienced hardship in life before coming to terms with it through poetry. However, he remains “innocent” of the

potential and power of poetry.

But then poetry, personified, discovers the speaker ("found me out"), as if it had been seeking an instrument. It "see[s]" what the poet can do: the image of shining like a "rainbow" suggests creating great beauty, while roaring "like a church organ" is an evocation of powerful, noble and resonant expression, while also associating poetry with music. The speaker is surprised by this turn of events: "It was not what I'd expected/ of an enterprise/ everyone so admired". It seems that he is taken aback by the personal nature of poetry's interpellation, and by how much it expected of him. Poetry, it seems, brings difficult and demanding things, in addition to the sublime and uplifting things that originally attracted him to it. Poetry's "lesson" to the speaker is conveyed in the final stanza.

What poetry does to the speaker is "remind" him that he is "just an animal/ who cooks his food". The phrase is loaded, and reflects both the more base ("animal") aspects of our nature and the higher ("cooks"). The phrase "cooks his food" also symbolises the recreation of the world through poetry. The verb describes an activity characterised by taking fundamentals (the ingredients) and mixing them together in interesting combinations, with the aim of producing a refined result with a new form and an improved flavour. Thus by taking basic elements of our surroundings and weaving them into the fabric of words that is poetry, we improve their flavour, or importance, to ourselves. The speaker continues by referring to our moral capacities: ("makes promises"), our ability to find humour in our situation ("laughs"), our capacity for evil and deception ("lies"), and our awareness of mortality ("knows he is going to die"). These, in a nutshell, are the central concerns of MacLennan's poetry. What he has learned is that poetry is to be found in the intricacies of the human situation, in every last detail of our existence. Moreover, poetry has taught him to be humble about his place in the world.

"At a Poetry Reading" (*Through a Glass Darkly* [59]) insists on the humility of the poet in the face of the mystery of artistic creation. The speaker is one of a group of poets:

...

We sat in a corner of the gallery
 waiting our turn to read,
 wondering if what we had to say
 would entertain, amuse, depress,
 yet hoping that our record of a day
 when something used us like an instrument
 would have its say.

There is, it seems, after all, something sublime about poetry, because it uses poets like instruments to express its cosmic music – what Wallace Stevens, quoted earlier in poem, called “sounds passing through/ a momentary rightness”.

This “given” quality of poetry – its dependence on what has sometimes been called inspiration – means that is certainly special, and not within the reach of everyone. But it is by no means everything, as Poem 41 from *Excavations* ([27]) reminds us:

It is one thing
 to be able to say
 what poetry is,
 another to write it,
 and another to know
 how to live.

The speaker names three abilities, the repeated word “another” emphasising the difference between them. The order of these abilities connotes their importance, the most significant appearing at the end. The first is to “be able to say/ what poetry is”, to be able to identify how a poem works, and what it does, as in the academic study of poetry. To be able “to write it”, the speaker implies, is a lot more difficult: creativity appears to be of a higher order than knowledge. Finally, though, the speaker declares that yet more difficult and more important is to “know/ how to live”. The wisdom to understand how best to live life is the greatest achievement of

all.

To conclude this study, I would like to look briefly at the poem "I'm not sure poetry" (*The Poetry Lesson* [31]).

I'm not sure poetry
 is thought -
 it's too contaminated by the flesh. But
 if the words are clean
 they might just do -
 reveal the arc of light
 that touches earth
 and makes us sing.

In the end there is
 nowhere to live
 but in our days:
 the kingdom forged within us
 is enough for praise.

The speaker begins by expressing the doubt "that poetry/ is thought" because it is "too contaminated by the flesh", or too entangled with both feeling (emotional and physical) and the life-world from which it arises. "Thought" might also be read as a verb, indicating poetry is not the result of a purely mental exercise, but responds in part to the promptings of the body, or at least of the unconscious. Yet the speaker believes that words can still be "clean" enough - honest enough and, as it were, sufficiently transparent - to effect a revelation, to touch reality ("earth"). The "arc of light" that touches it is symbolic of illumination, or the apprehension of reality. The word "arc" has several shades of meaning, all of which apply to its function in the poem. An arc is a curved line or shape, not exactly linear, in much the same way that poetry's illumination of the world lacks the straightforward directionality of rational thought. The sense of an "arc" as a gentle, curved trajectory reinforces this notion.

There is also a reference to the rainbow, the biblical Covenant that is God's guarantee of his enduring presence, here denoting that fleeting sense of the sacred or transcendent that accompanies the recognition of truth. That the "arc of light" touching of the earth "makes us sing" invokes the mysterious beauty of music to describe how we can be uplifted and transfigured by aesthetic experience. In the brilliantly economical second stanza the speaker offers something like a summary of MacLennan's accumulated wisdom. Like poetry, which is after all a human product, we humans have nowhere to go but where we are. Somehow the speaker endows the verb "live" in the phrase "nowhere to live/ but in our days" with a sense of something far more active and dynamic than that of merely existing. Living in this way forges a "kingdom" of response within us so rich that the only proper response is "praise", perhaps through the secular worship of poetic creation. The word "forged" has strong connotations, insisting firstly that the "kingdom" we have inside of us has been created, as metal is "forged" into objects, and also that it is self-created, something that we make for ourselves. It also connotes the mystery and industry of a process which uses fire and heat to create something new. And this, "in the end" is enough for us to be thankful for. When we have become aware of this, we can truly begin to love our lives.

The crux of MacLennan's poetic project is to celebrate being inexplicably alive in a place that is reluctant to reveal its secrets, a place that demands only that we love it, and this only because it is all that we have. His entire poetic journey can be construed as an attempt to shake off some of the more traditional metaphysical baggage that continues to encumber our perceptions of life. At times this has led to terror in the poetry, and the earlier collections are characterised by anxiety and dread. Yet the journey has resulted in a good measure of discovery and understanding: while the later poems are still questioning, there is a growing sense of rightness with things, of a sensibility making itself comfortable with that sense of rightness. MacLennan has come to recognise that there is no golden path to truth, and there is little that is "higher" to reach for except the happiness that comes from appreciating what we have. And, in the manner of Socrates, he finds that this

exploring has mapped the contours of his ignorance, making him aware of the extent of it; yet it has also allowed him glimpses of the things that seem to underlie it, the things that are, so to speak, responsible for the contours. Socrates, after realising his ignorance, still appeared to search for something which would give him more of a sense about his mysterious surroundings. MacLennan says of Socrates' words that:

...when they are opened out
 And you get inside them,
 You find them full of ripened sense.

(“In the Peppergrove”, *The Road to Kromdraai* 21-23)

The same might be said of MacLennan's poetry. Socrates spoke of the amazing nature of life, and pushed the limits of his understanding. The cave allegory (though ostensibly conceived by Plato) illustrates how Socrates felt about the world. He observed it from a position removed from the more obvious ignorance of his peers, but the light that he encountered outside of the cave (because of the limitations that history and his body had placed upon him) remained largely impenetrable. Still, the allegory illustrates that although his awareness was not exact, it was nevertheless sufficiently profound to render his return to a world where people could not understand him, a painful defeat. This mirrors the nature of MacLennan's glimpsed apprehensions of reality, which are always rendered in terms that make them unspecific but definite, impenetrable but obviously apparent.

Then there was Socrates' esteem of love, which is described by Plato in his *Symposium*, arguably his finest text. Socrates loved the world that he was in, and was compelled to talk about it, to share the refined experience of it that he had enjoyed. In the same way, despite the shadow of death that lurks behind our every endeavour, MacLennan preaches that love is the thing that transforms our world, that endows it with meaning sufficient to “cast death out”. Love means sharing, and love characterises the way in which MacLennan shares his experiences through his poetry, which ceaselessly conveys honest, heartfelt feelings about his state of existence and its imagined affinity with that of others. His poetry is written both as a means of

understanding the world, and as a way of sharing with others the conversations he has had with the world, in the hope that somehow this will help to touch and transform their lives. This is perhaps the greatest gift that one can offer. Odysseus Elytis instructs (in the epigraph to *The Necessary Salt*): "Inscribe yourself someplace any way you can/ and later erase yourself with generosity". MacLennan has never strayed from this purpose in his poetry.

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