

EDWIN MUIR : THE WAR YEARS

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INTRODUCTION

There are few poets of those who live into their seventies whose work improves steadily without any falling off in the later years. Edwin Muir is one of the few.

His first poems were written in 1922, at the comparatively late age of thirty-five. His life and thought to this time had already gone through several major changes, the memory and scars of which were to affect him all his life. Yet the perpetual movement of the years between his marriage in 1919 and his relatively long stay in St. Andrews from 1935 till 1942 read like an incredible spy thriller with a rather woe-begone hero dragged through the cultural rag-bag of Europe by a dominating and fiercely intellectual female accomplice. Samuel Smiles might also have made much of Muir's social ascent from clerk to literary gentleman. By comparison with this early career, the war years were very unadventurous, and saw if anything, a regression in Edwin Muir's life-style, from itinerant man-of-letters to wartime ration-book stamper.

The poetry falls into three phases; the early poetry of the restless years in London and on the Continent, the poetry of the war years when the wanderings of the poet and his family were restricted for a number of reasons, and the post-war poetry when the nomadic existence began again. The final period produced fine poetry manifesting a new confidence of statement and form. In the early period there are several effective and pleasing poems, but the unknown critic cited by Mrs. Muir who described the verse as "stilted allegorical nudes walking through a grey landscape" undoubtedly had a point.¹ The difference between the early poetry

¹Willis Muir, *Belonging* (London, 1968), p. 176. Future references will be made simply to *Belonging*, followed by the page number.

and the later, between the cramped and obscure effect of

A child in Adam's field I dreamed away
My one eternity and hourless day,
Ere from my wrist Time's bird had learned to fly,
Or I had robbed the Tree of which I die,²

written in 1934, and the ease and clarity of the first stanza of "The Window" (1946), which states roughly the same thing

Within the great wall's perfect round
Bird, beast and child serenely grew
In endless change on changeless ground
That in a single pattern bound
The old perfection and the new,

indicates that the war years were peculiarly important in developing the poet's skill in the shaping of his concepts.³

By "peculiarly important" I do not mean to suggest a parallel with those poets such as Stephen Spender and C. Day Lewis who leaned more heavily upon the experience of wartime as a source of inspiration. Muir, perhaps from his previous familiarity with the oppressive state of pre-war Europe, was less obviously affected by the actual war than some of his younger contemporaries who assimilated the war to their own propagandist aims. Muir regretted, at least on paper, in a letter to his friend, Spender, that he could not write in this way.⁴ I suspect that his horror of all versions of rigidly

²Edwin Muir, "Variations on a Time Theme," III, Collected Poems (2nd ed.; London, 1963), p. 42. Future references will be made simply to Collected Poems, followed by the page number.

³The dates of poems are taken from R. B. Hollander, Jr., A textual and bibliographical study of the Poems of Edwin Muir, (Columbia University Ph.D. thesis, 1962).

⁴Cited in P. H. Butter, Edwin Muir: Man and Poet, (Edinburgh, 1966), p. 143. Future references will be made to Butter II, to distinguish from his earlier Edwin Muir, referred to as Butter I.

applied codes of belief directed his treatment of the experience of war away from political solutions into his own distinctive channels. This period of world turmoil is interesting in the development of Muir's work, for the peculiar reason that the war years seem to have had a paradoxically stabilising effect which formed the foundation for the achievements of his major phase.

There has been, in the last few years, an increasing recognition of the value of Muir's later poems, together with thematic studies and some perceptive criticism of individual poems. This present study sets out to examine the writings of the war years in relation to the later poems, placing particular emphasis on evidence of Muir's growing assurance in his own ability and in his concept of himself as a poet. The early poetry and prose will be referred to where they are considered to be important for an understanding of the later work.

Fortunately, Muir himself has given us an account of the progression of his life, thought and attitudes, in his autobiography. His decision to write his life at this time surely indicates that he saw the pre-war years as a cohesive unit in his life. He worked on this from 1938 to 1939, and it was published as The Story and the Fable in 1940.⁵ In an article describing his reactions to having completed his autobiography, he makes, what is for him, at this stage of his literary life, a startlingly bold claim: "Art is the sum of the moments in which men have glanced into that yesterday which can never change; and when we read, or look at a picture, or listen to music, we are released from the moment to contemplate that mirror in which all the forms of life lie outspread."⁶ I take this unusual confidence as a sign of Muir's

⁵ In 1954 Muir published An Autobiography. This was a revised version of The Story and the Fable with the addition of seven new chapters.

⁶ Edwin Muir, "Yesterday's Mirror: Afterthoughts to an Autobiography", Scots Magazine (New Series) XXXIII (1940), pp. 404 - 10.

having successfully come to terms with his distressing memories of the past, just as he had already done twenty odd years earlier under psychoanalysis. Both of these re-assessments of his past resulted in new phases of creativity. His praise of the arts had never been stilted, but this must be the first occasion when he specifically identifies himself with claims such as he makes here. He wrote more poetry during the war years than in any other comparable period of time, though strangely enough, his letters often state that he is not writing very much. It would seem that with the voluntary recreation and ordering of his past, he made some kind of literary break-through; the decision to call himself a poet. The apprenticeship was over, the journeyman years could begin.

The coming of war and the consequent anti-German feeling in the English-speaking world possibly precipitated Muir's new literary emphasis, as it certainly terminated the joint work of translating which had largely supported his wife and himself since their marriage. His prose work during the war consisted of critical and social studies together with regular literary reviews, at the rate of about one a week, mostly in The Listener. A small proportion of these periodical reviews has been published in Muir's collections of essays. The work of collecting such material for a complete edition would be immense, but valuable in view of the constant delight caused by random scrutiny --- one is gratified, for example, to find that Muir was one of the earliest critics to recognise the promise of the early and difficult works of the Australian novelist, Patrick White, who is only now coming to be recognised as an outstanding literary figure.

Another important body of source material would seem to be contained in Muir's extensive personal correspondence. Apart from occasional snippets in An Autobiography, in Willa Muir's memoir, Belonging, and in studies by those critics

lucky enough to obtain such material, the letters have remained unpublished. Mrs. Muir's recent death may, perhaps, make possible the publication of Professor Butter's long anticipated collection of the letters. Muir himself, naturally enough, does not appear to have kept copies. It would seem likely that in his letters he would be more straight-forward in stating his opinions and attitudes. Such part of his correspondence as has been published indicates that the rest is likely to contain useful comments on his poetry. Muir himself, and Professor Butter, refer to the existence of diaries, at least covering certain periods of the poet's life. Thus the present, and indeed all studies of Muir's work, must, for the moment, hesitate in the shadow of the large body of material still to be made generally available.

The main part of this essay is the study of the wartime poetry. This is preceded by two shorter chapters; one on Muir's life, the other on his non-poetic works. The emphasis is on the years of the Second World War. I attempt to isolate recurring concepts in Muir's writing, to show how he was concerned with similar themes in his prose and poetry, and to examine the modification and development of these preoccupations during the war years. In the conclusion I outline briefly how he applied the greater confidence, derived from the war years, to the final, sure flowering of his mature talent.

The repeated themes of Muir's work can be arranged under several headings, though these inevitably overlap. Time, mortality, history form one group. Under this large heading, war, treachery and the poet's environment may also be considered. This includes his work on contemporary Europe and his attitude to Scotland, Eden and the Fall, that Christian myth which parallels Muir's own childhood experience, and the Troy myth, are both aspects of the preoccupation with time, but they also suggest a counter-movement, in their affirmation of a faith in the ultimate

renewal of order. Linked with this is the poet's quiet celebration of continuity, of repeated pattern in nature and in human experience. Similarly, human love and the ritualisation of the most simple and basic aspects of ordinary life are themes associated with the ideal of Eden. This raises the question of Muir's tentative approach to Christianity during this period. Finally, his concept of the poet as a part of the celebration of life clearly becomes an important theme. I try to demonstrate that this accompanies the poet's efforts to come to terms with himself, in an era when he was constantly reminded of the frailty of life and order; a time when he must have been haunted by his pre-war European experiences and by memories of his friends who died, either physically or spiritually, during the period of the First World War.

CHAPTER ONE

Life (1887 - 1959)

My childhood all a myth
Enacted in a distant isle;
Time with his hourglass and his scythe
Stood dreaming on the dial.

Throughout his adult life Edwin Muir retained an extraordinarily clear memory of his childhood in the tiny island of Wyre in the Orkney Islands, off the north coast of Scotland. His memory is rich in detail, but the peculiar aspect of these recollections lies in the remembrance of the emotions associated with particular events and the strangely objective recall of the nature of his child-self's vision of the world. "We cannot tell how much our minds are influenced for life by the fact that we see the world first at a range of two or three feet . . . my height from the ground determined my response."² At the period which concerns us, when he was writing his biography, Muir recalls these impressions and frequently develops the recollection into a general principle, almost with the air of having surprised himself. "That world was a perfectly solid world, for the days did not undermine it but merely rounded it, or rather repeated it, as if there were only one day endlessly rising and setting. Our first childhood is the only time in our lives when we exist within immortality, and perhaps all our ideas of immortality are influenced by it."³ The passing from memories of his own childhood emotions to the universal condition, from "my" to "our",

¹"The Myth", Collected Poems, p. 144.

²Edwin Muir, An Autobiography (London, 1954), pp. 21 - 2.
Future references will be made simply to An Autobiography.

³Ibid., p. 25.

lending thus the poet's eye to the general reader is an example of Muir's belief in the wholeness and universality of life at its simplest and best, in the almost imperceptible sanctity of oft-repeated human experience.

Muir's belief in the wholeness of vision of the child, and in the adult's subsequent loss of this vision is reinforced by his unusual capacity for recalling dreams and visionary experiences. That these dreams came from the area Jung called the collective unconscious, and that they bore a relationship to Muir's childhood perception, implies that his particular recollections of his early years are capable of symbolic interpretations which sound responding echoes in every reader's conscious or unconscious experience. Typical of this retention of the child's vision into adult life is the following:

I have often fancied, too, that in a child's mind there is at moments a divination of a hidden tragedy taking place around him, that tragedy being the life which he will not live for some years still, though it is there, invisible to him, already. And a child has also a picture of human existence peculiar to himself, which he probably never remembers after he has lost it: the original vision of the world. I think of this picture or vision as that of a state in which the earth, the houses on the earth, and the life of every human being are related to the sky overarching them; as if the sky fitted the earth and the earth the sky.⁴

Muir never really lost this ability to see the objects of earth, sky and sea as fitting into each other. It is a perception which gives much of his natural description an unreal yet awesome effect. Trees, for example, often seem rooted in the sky as much as in the solid earth.

It seems almost inevitable that the myth of Eden was to become one of Muir's dominating themes:

Certain dreams convince me that a child has this vision, in which there is a completer harmony of all things with each other than he will ever know again. There comes a moment

⁴Ibid., p. 33.

(the moment at which childhood passes into boyhood or girlhood) when this image is broken and contradiction enters life. It is a phase of emotional and mental strain, and it brings with it a sense of guilt.⁵

The simple farming life of his family was closely bound to the natural cycle. The old style of farming always remained for Muir something praiseworthy, made legendary by association with Adam, and by its ancient rhythm and pattern:

And a child could not grow up in a better place than a farm; for at the heart of human civilization is the byre, the barn, and the midden. When my father led out the bull to serve a cow brought by one of our neighbours it was a ritual act of the tradition in which we had lived for thousands of years, possessing the obviousness of a long dream from which there is no awaking.⁶

Legend and the legend-making faculty was a natural part of life in Orkney at this time:

The Orkney I was born into was a place where there was no great distinction between the ordinary and the fabulous; the lives of living men turned into legend. A man I knew once sailed out in a boat to look for a mermaid, and claimed afterwards that he had talked with her. Fantastic feats of strength were commonly reported.⁷

Of his first acquaintance with imaginative literature he writes:

It seemed to me that I was watching the appearance of a new race in my familiar countryside: a race of goddesses, beautiful women, and great warriors, all under the low Northern sky, for even the Greek stories unfolded for me in a landscape very like Orkney.⁸

Muir retained this legend-making faculty throughout his life, so that the most simple descriptions of life take on mythic proportions, sometimes giving an insubstantial vagueness to the more obscure poems. Mrs. Muir describes the effect which this attitude had on their daily lives, even at a much later period:

Behind our more or less civilized frontages Edwin and I had a large area of primitive feeling, a greater proportion of simplicity than is usual in Britain, a simplicity which more sophisticated people call naïveté. We had inherited it

⁵Ibid., p. 33.

⁷Ibid., p. 14.

⁶Ibid., p. 36.

⁸Ibid., p. 77.

from islanders who practised co-operative not competitive ways of living, and so in each of us that simplicity was keyed to general goodwill.⁹

In a humorous reference to her husband's limited childhood experience she also pin-points one quality of his early life which made legendary material, such as the Eden myth, particularly real to the child's experience. "I then discovered [in 1919 when Muir was thirty-two] that except for The Tree in the middle of Kirkwall trees were just trees to Edwin; not having known them in childhood."¹⁰ In that process of recognition which is a part of growing up, a child is likely to associate the sole tree he knows with every tree in myth and literature, every fictional castle or keep with the only pile of ancient rubble near his home, and, by a similar process, all heroic and legendary material which can be adapted to his child's limited experience becomes real: the more limited or indefinite the immediate environment, the more real the imaginative appropriation of external material. Mrs. Muir states further, distinguishing between the ways of the remote islanders and those of the more sophisticated and self-conscious lowlanders of her home town of Montrose:

As a child in Orkney, which was then not very far from the Middle Ages, Edwin had lived in an atmosphere saturated with legend, myth, ballads and Bible stories. There was some kind of accepted story to account for everything . . . as a child I too lived among legends, fairy stories and Bible stories, but only the Bible stories were accepted in the ambience of Montrose; the others were a private indulgence.¹¹

Muir's childhood dream suffered an early intimation of evil and guilt, later vaguely remembered, but his family's removal from the pastoral wholeness of the mediaeval life of Orkney to the massive slum of Glasgow at the turn of the century was a permanent shock to the poet's impressionable mind. This displacement was quickly followed by the deaths of his father, mother and

⁹Belonging, pp. 22-23.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 40.

¹¹Ibid., pp. 45-46.

two brothers all within the few years which preceded his nineteenth birthday. A heavy awareness of time and mortality was added to his wretchedness. An unwarranted feeling of guilt, instinctively associated with his brothers' deaths, preoccupied him from this period on throughout most of his life. The depression and crudeness of the city, and the industrial system it depended upon, were unavoidable aspects of his bleak adolescent years. His career as a clerk seemed to follow an almost self-willed progression from bad to worse; the nadir being reached during his years in the office of a factory for the reducing of stinking bones to glue, situated in Greenock, a small town completely impregnated by this vile but lucrative smell. In his later life he was haunted by memories of the scenes of human violence and punitive retribution which he had seen in the Glasgow streets. In The Story and the Fable (1940) he condemns such violence as part of "the quality of Scottish Calvinism . . . the unanswerable, arbitrary logic of predestination."¹²

Muir gained some relief from the oppressiveness of his surroundings in the friendships he struck up at this time and in the intellectual stimulation he derived from and through these friendships. That he was drawn to the philosophies of Nietzsche seems reasonable enough, indeed hopeful in the circumstances. The rather incongruous mixture of Nietzsche, Socialism and Heine demonstrates that he was open to various conflicting ideas, as one might expect in any young man who was to a large extent self-educated. He taught himself about contemporary political and literary trends, and, just before the First World War, began to contribute epigrams, aphorisms and very short articles to the periodical, The New Age.¹³

Amongst the friends he made at this time who were to continue to influence him all his life were David Peat, John

¹²An Autobiography, p. 107.

¹³Some of these short contributions were in verse but Muir himself never thought of them as his first poems.

Holms and Hugh Kingsmill. David Peat was a psychological casualty of the Army, though his father was also responsible for his break-down. When Muir first knew him "he hovered on the borderline for many years."¹⁴ I suspect that Muir responded to his friend's borderline condition because of his own mental suffering resultant upon his post-Orkney experiences. They were still in touch with one another when Muir was in St. Andrews. Holms and Kingsmill belonged to the English officer class. They had both been prisoners in Germany during the First World War. One can hardly imagine two backgrounds less sympathetic to each other than that which produced Muir on the one hand and Holms and Kingsmill on the other. Willa Muir records her initial dislike of their arrogance, and her continuing animosity towards Holms in particular. It is all the more amazing that Muir should have cherished this friendship. Years after Holms's death he had a kind of waking dream in which he thought he saw Holms cycling through the streets of St. Andrews. Disturbed by this strange experience, he wrote a poem about it, "To J. F. H. (1897 - 1934)".

I would suggest that Muir's interest in these three men, all to some extent the victims of military brutality, is more than mere coincidence. Perhaps, having lived through his own violent confrontation of the depersonalised forces of industrial society with its associations, for him, with needless and frequent death, he reached out to these other young men who had experienced a more extreme version of the same forces destroying a former harmony and innocence.

By the end of 1918 Muir had met his future wife, Willa Anderson. The mutual love and understanding which existed between them from then until Muir's death was clearly a constructive force in all of their later work. They were married in 1919. Willa Muir adequately bolstered her husband's natural reticence. The confidence she lent to the partnership was largely

¹⁴An Autobiography, p. 142.

responsible for the upward turn in Muir's fortunes in the next few years.

For sixteen years after their marriage the Muirs travelled in Czechoslovakia, Austria, Germany, Italy and France, with spells in London and the south of England, and occasional visits to Willa Muir's home in Montrose. These were very busy years during which Edwin Muir established himself as a literary essayist and reviewer, and made his first serious attempts at writing poetry. They became jointly renowned for their translations, and must surely have been, for their day, extraordinarily well-read in contemporary European literature. They led a life as literary vagabonds which it is almost impossible for our generation to comprehend. We are all familiar with the bohemian pattern of the Gertrude Stein, Paris set, but the Muirs' life together was considerably less fashionable and less rigidly "free", to use a contradiction. They were a happily married couple intent on seeing rather than being seen. It was also the end of an era. It is, unfortunately, no longer possible for a couple to live easily and comfortably on the proceeds of an occasional periodical review.

An Autobiography celebrates every sign of a European social harmony of the old, basically mediaeval order that came closer to Muir's memories of Orkney life than did anything he had encountered in the industrial society of the years between.

The new-found confidence of these years was partially attributable to Muir's marriage and partially to the knowledge that he could support himself from his writing, but it was also due to the effects of the course of psychoanalysis he undertook shortly after his marriage. Muir is not very specific about the nature of the fears and depressions which had been tormenting him, but he does relate that the experience of psychoanalysis was painful but salutary:

I was shaken with disgust and dread of myself. At last, by painful stages, I reached a state which resembled conviction of sin, though formulated in different terms. I realized the elementary fact that every one, like myself, was troubled by sensual desires and thoughts, by unacknowledged failures and frustrations causing self-hatred and hatred of others, by dead memories of shame and grief which had been shovelled underground long since because they could not be borne. I saw that my lot was the human lot, that when I faced my own unvarnished likeness I was one among all men and women, all of whom had the same desires and thoughts, the same failures and frustrations, the same unacknowledged hatred of themselves and others, the same hidden shames and griefs, and that if they confronted these things they could win a certain liberation from them. It was really a conviction of sin, but even more a realization of Original Sin.¹⁵

The course of psychoanalysis also revealed to Muir his extraordinary powers of recalling dreams or waking trances. He discovered that he was capable of going through a visionary experience at the same time as his brain objectively registered for recall the details of the vision. His analyst, Maurice Nicoll, advised him against developing this capacity any further --- apparently Muir could switch on and off this dream source, more or less at will. He took Nicoll's advice though he later doubted the wisdom of this decision. It is interesting, in discussing the relationship of Muir's childhood memories to these waking dreams, to consider the much later works of Timothy Leary and Aldous Huxley, as summarised here by Tom Wolfe in The Electric Kool-aid Acid Test:

In ordinary perception, the senses send an overwhelming flood of information to the brain, which the brain then filters down to a trickle it can manage for the purpose of survival in a highly competitive world. Man has become so rational, so utilitarian, that the trickle becomes most pale and thin. It is efficient, for mere survival, but it screens out the most wondrous part of man's potential experience without his even knowing it. We're shut off from our own world. Primitive man once experienced the rich and sparkling flood of the senses fully. Children experience it for a few months until "normal" training, conditioning, close the doors on this other world, usually for good.¹⁶

¹⁵ An Autobiography, p. 158.

¹⁶ Tom Wolfe, The Electric Kool-aid Acid Test (New York, 1968), p.40.

Obviously, since one does have to live in this world, such experiences can be disturbing as well as stimulating, and it must be a matter of conjecture whether or not a man as sensitive as Muir could have maintained his sanity had he remained in such close touch with this world of visionary experience. At any rate he took notes based on this dream material and later used it in some of his poetry. One of the sequences which most obviously lends itself to symbolical interpretation is clearly a myth of the creation. Thus very close to the threshold between subconscious and conscious Muir was in touch with a hoard of archetypal experience. The narrow separation between the physical or real world and the subconscious or "unreal" phenomena in the poet's mind goes a long way to explaining the nature, and some of the problems, of his poetry. It also accounts for his fine, and at times almost unbearable, sensitivity to mood and environment.

The darkening condition of pre-war Europe and the feeling of guilt which the Muirs experienced as their few pounds and dollars increased in value while the German mark depreciated, finally made life on the Continent unbearable, and brought their short-lived period of gaiety to an end. After brief visits to Italy and France, they came back to England, where their son and only child, Gavin, was born. A motor accident to the child and his resultant nervousness in the noise of traffic-bound London, took them north to the calm of Orkney. Rather than cut themselves off completely from the literary markets of the south, they then decided to settle for a time in the relatively quiet Scottish university town of St. Andrews.

St. Andrews was not a happy choice for the Muirs, yet having made the decision, they stayed there from 1935 till 1942, largely for their son's schooling and because of the difficulty of changing school, house or job in wartime. Thus at a time when they needed the solace and companionship of quick-witted, cultured and open-minded friends, such as had surrounded them on the

Continent and in London, they found themselves in a place of pig-headed prejudice and ignorance. In comparison with the graciousness and excitement they had found in the equally ancient university town of Prague, St. Andrews proved a sad disappointment, summed up by Muir's words, "we could find no one to talk to."¹⁷

Muir was described in university circles as "a man who wrote for the papers," with all the Scottish reductive vituperation against the seemingly frivolous that this implies.¹⁸ The pervading dullness, altogether different from the wretchedness of Glasgow, had, nevertheless, the same effect on Muir's mind:

I was more unhappy in St. Andrews than I had been since the time of my obscure fears and the course of psychoanalysis that dispelled them . . . I began to keep a diary, as a sort of judgement on myself, and I find in it entries such as this: 'After a certain age all of us, good and bad, are guilt-stricken because of powers within us which have never been realized; because, in other words, we are not what we should be.'¹⁹

Ultimately this guilt about his underdeveloped powers was constructive. It produced The Story and the Fable, and the self-awareness which accompanied this re-examination of his life led to a more effective poetry.

The war itself produced a certain amount of artificial social cohesion in St. Andrews, and Muir enjoyed the comic-opera of the Home Guard drill. The demand for translations diminished to such an extent that, despite Muir's increased output of reviews, critical articles and books, they suffered financial hardships, the strain of which, and the burden of over-work, caused a series of critical illnesses in both Muir and his wife.

At the low ebb of this troubled time he was tentatively drawn towards Christianity. Thus, for example, when his wife was very ill, he surprised himself one night, by suddenly, without conscious thought, repeating the Lord's Prayer, something he had

¹⁷ An Autobiography, p. 243.

¹⁸ Belonging, p. 190

¹⁹ An Autobiography, p. 244

not thought about since he was very young. He took a renewed interest in the Bible, which helped to bolster his failing spirits. Added to the general strain of these years was the pressure of knowing more intimately than most of the people around them, the impersonal horrors with which their European friends, such as Hermann Broch, had to live. As always, Muir was more concerned with the emotional and cultural damage of violence than with political ideas. The poetry he wrote, when directly concerned with war, was characteristically quiet, even understated, rather than explosive, tending to themes of treachery, human displacement and loss rather than slaughter.

It was soon after the outbreak of war that misunderstanding developed between Muir and C. M. Grieve (Hugh MacDiarmid) over the former's attitude to the revival of Scots for poetic purposes. The pettiness of Grieve and other members of the Renaissance movement at this time must have merely confirmed Muir's distaste for the parochialism of the Scottish mentality. Grieve's reaction to Muir's remarks forced Muir into an extreme position which he probably privately resented as much as he regretted the breach in former friendship. Muir became preoccupied with his poetic identity. His letters of this time, particularly those to Stephen Spender quoted in Professor Butter's study, reveal a mind very much obsessed by the function of art and poetry within a fragmented society. It is an indication of the distressed nature of his thoughts that he records in 1940 that he has written very little, and that "mostly in Scots."²⁰ He had publicly rejected Scots as a tenable literary language, yet he states that what he wrote at this period was in Scots. However, he never published any Scots poetry dating from this time.

The end of his first clearly-remembered period of depression and unwarranted guilt^{feelings} came with his psychoanalysis in London and led into the brief happy and productive years on the Continent. The self-examination involved in the writing of his autobiography, The Story and the Fable, and the depression of the early years of

²⁰ Butter II, p. 197.

the war, were followed by the brief, happy years after the unexpected removal to Edinburgh. He was appointed to the British Council in 1942, doing work for which he was exceptionally well-qualified and which brought him a great deal of personal satisfaction. His task was to organise lectures and entertainments for soldiers and refugees from various countries in the International Houses which the British Council had established in the capital. This was also the time when Muir became much better known through his broadcasts for the B. B. C.. For a brief period something of Edinburgh's old potential was realised. After the paucity of cultural stimulus and friendly intellectual exchange of St. Andrews, the poet developed within the richer texture of Edinburgh's cosmopolitan life. Despite, or perhaps because of, the war, the arts took their due place in the life of the capital. Something like the organic mediaeval culture, the loss of which Muir repeatedly lamented in his writings about Scotland, thrived temporarily, and the poet took his natural place in the very heart of this growth.

The years from 1942 till the end of the war were sufficiently productive to restore Muir's confidence in himself, and to negate the fears and guilts he had suffered concerning the denial of his powers. He says of this period:

I was too busy to have time for the agonized introspections of St. Andrews, and I felt again, as I had done in Hampstead, that it was good to be amongst people and to make friends. . . . The terrible memories which the refugees brought with them became more distant and bearable as they fell into the mould of a story, often repeated.²¹

The resurgence of faith in his poetic identity which came with the utilization of his abilities shows itself in the sure handling of his mature poetry.

As soon as the war was over, Muir's request to the British Council that he be sent to Europe was granted, and he was full of

²¹ An Autobiography, p. 250.

happy anticipation when he was posted to Prague, that city of which he and his wife had such happy memories going back over more than twenty years. In some respects he was not disappointed. He took immense pleasure in the classes he taught at the Charles University. English books having been destroyed during the Nazi regime, he found he had to teach English Literature almost entirely from his memory of the texts --- an astonishing accomplishment by any standards, given an ironic twist when we recall that Muir had not even been allowed to teach school-children in his own country, because the only credentials he had, said that he had left school at fourteen. He inspired friendly admiration and informal enthusiasm in his students, but it soon became clear to him that all he could do was provide a centre of enlightenment in what was an occupied country. Russia asserted her power and the peace in Czechoslovakia meant little more than a change of uniforms on the ubiquitous guards. Lecturing in a subject which so often celebrates liberty and truth, while the occupying guards of a foreign power stood posted in his lecture theatre must have seemed grimly ironic, seemingly meaningless yet desperately important at the same time. When he was finally forbidden to have any contact with his students, apart from lecturing to them, he felt that he was doing no good in Prague and asked to be moved elsewhere.

The distress one would have expected in the poet's reaction to the conditions of post-war Communist Europe took a very quiet form. Looking back from this response to his attitude to the war itself, we find a possible explanation for the absence in his poetry of specific references to the war. The war was, for Muir, only one manifestation of the impersonal forces of oppression. These dark forces had touched his own life as a youth, and he had been aware of their more generally destructive effect in the Glasgow slums, in the racial hatreds of pre-war Austria, and, albeit in a much milder form, in the prejudices of St. Andrews

which he associated with the repressions of Calvinism. Now after a dreadful war, the worst horrors of which only became known with its conclusion, he found the repression of freedom and truth continued under yet another system. There can be no doubt that Muir found the work in Prague heart-breaking and his return to the frightened city a great disappointment, yet by now he had grown accustomed to the sullen and endless union of good and evil. The extent of the brutality and inhumanity of the war, did not lead to Muir's having any blind faith in the compensatory joy of the peace when it came. His reaction to Prague was that of one weary with a familiar pattern. These feelings are expressed in the poem "The Return of the Greeks", which tells of the disappointment of the Greek soldiers returning from Troy. The poem was published in May, 1954, a few months before Muir set out for Prague. During the next few years the poem must have seemed quite prophetic:

 never a change!
The past and present bound
In one oblivious round
Past thinking trite and strange.

I do not mean to give the impression that Muir had become cynical. As ever, he took heart from the stories of human fortitude in the face of oppression. He obviously suffered for the condition of his Czech friends, and from the strain of such necessary compromise as his official position and his responsibility for his students demanded. Willa Muir records how, on returning to England, her husband became wearily withdrawn, formal and indifferent. He remained calm on the surface, but he had obviously been weakened by his experiences in Prague. It is distressing enough to expect good to be mixed with evil: it must be almost unbearable to be proved right once again. A clue to his condition can be found in the incident when he met E. M. Forster for the first time. In normal circumstances one would have expected these two rather shy, rather old-fashioned men-of-letters to have had a great deal in common to talk about. In fact, Forster had to get up and go.

away, there being no response from Muir at all. The removed, unhappy mood of the poet at this time is summed up in the poem "The Interceptor".

After six months in England, Edwin Muir was appointed Director of the British Institute in Rome. Italy restored the necessary balance to his spirits and he fell in love with the exuberance and warmth of Italian life:

The people we knew had the air of stepping out completely into life, and their speech, even at its idlest, had something of the accent of Dante, who spoke more directly from the heart than any other poet but one. I was reminded of the figures in the paintings of Piero della Francesca and Michelangelo, not so much by the faces of our friends, as by their expression and carriage, which seemed an image of full humanity. The humanity was perfectly natural, but I knew that naturalness does not come easily to the awkward human race, and that this was an achievement of life. ²²

In this setting he came to a new appreciation of the Christian religion, an appreciation based on the images he saw everywhere of the miracle of the Incarnation:

An angel and a young girl, their bodies inclined towards each other, their knees bent as if they were overcome by love, 'tutto tremante,' gazed upon each other like Dante's pair; and that representation of a human love so intense that it could not reach farther seemed the perfect earthly symbol of the love that passes understanding. A religion that dared to show forth such a mystery for everyone to see would have shocked the congregations of the north, would have seemed a sort of blasphemy, perhaps even an indecency. But here it was publicly shown, as Christ showed himself on the earth.

That these images should appear everywhere, reminding everyone of the Incarnation, seemed to me natural and right. ²³

This new perspective on religion remained with Muir. It had been a personal revelation to him, and he did not feel the necessity to make it the basis of any religious allegiance, for example to the Roman Catholic Church. He was moved by having found in Italy a harmony of physical and spiritual life which came close to the

²² An Autobiography, p. 275.

²³ Ibid., p. 278.

mediaeval, organic culture he saw as being conducive to a fully meaningful relationship between life and art.

In 1950 the British Council drastically reduced its programme, and the Institute in Rome was closed. The experience of lecturing which Muir had enjoyed was put to good use when he returned to Scotland, as Warden of Newbattle Abbey College, a liberal and non-vocational college for mature students, for whom Muir had an understandable sympathy. They were just the type of young, working-class person he had been, only they were being given a chance which he had never had. The next five years were brightened by the teaching of these stimulating and creative students, but darkened by the financial and political wrangling of the Governors of the College. Muir was in his late sixties when he resigned from Newbattle. He spent nine months in the United States, then he and his wife settled near Cambridge University, where they remained for the rest of Muir's life. He died in January, 1959.

CHAPTER TWO

Prose Works

Edwin Muir published reviews and articles in British and American periodicals from 1914 till his death. Some of these have been published in collected form; We Moderns (1918, under the pseudonym Edward Moore), Latitudes (1924), Transition (1926), and Essays in Literature and Society (1949). In 1928 he published his first extensive literary study The Structure of the Novel. The following year saw the publication of John Knox -- Portrait of a Calvinist. He gave the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at the University of Harvard in the session 1955 to 1956. These were published as The Estate of Poetry in 1962, three years after his death.

There are three novels, The Marionette (1927), The Three Brothers (1931), and Poor Tom (1932). Readers of An Autobiography will recognise the novels as fictional renderings of the same preoccupations which are handled more successfully in straight-forward biographical form.

Scottish Journey (1935) is the account of a motoring expedition through Scotland, ending up in Orkney. Signs of industrial decay and of human desolation and unemployment gave way, as he came back to his childhood home, to agricultural viability and even prosperity. However, the general gloom and emptiness of contemporary Scottish life at this time may have prompted the ideas of a basic disorder in the Scottish culture which later took shape in Scott and Scotland (1936) and which form a background to his examination of his own place in society in The Story and the Fable (1940).

The distinction between the two aspects of experience denoted by "The Story" and "The Fable" is central to an understanding of Muir's work. He writes:

In themselves our conscious lives may not be particularly interesting. But what we are not and can never be, our fable, seems to me inconceivably interesting . . . these [the few dimly perceived stages of "The Fable"] lie behind experience, not on its surface; they are not historical events.

¹An Autobiography, p. 49.

"The Story" is made up of these recognisable, historical events on the surface of life which can plainly be seen and recorded in time.

"The Fable" is that source of ancestral intimations of the extraordinary; intuitive, filled with a sense of mystery, which is ultimately supernatural or religious in feeling. Yeats clarifies the same dichotomy when he writes:

The arts which interest me, while seeming to separate from the world and us, a group of figures, images, symbols, enable us to pass for a moment into a deep of the mind that had hitherto been too subtle for our habitation.²

This sense of some subtle deep of the mind into which certain images or symbols lead is essentially Muir's "Fable".

The Present Age, from 1914 (1939) was part of the series Introductions to English Literature produced by the Cresset Press under the general editorship of Professor Bonamy Dobrée. Muir later asked Dobrée not to reprint the work and it was replaced by David Daiches' The Present Age, after 1920. Muir felt that he had written the volume in a hurry and that it was an inadequate survey. Muir's study is an interesting and perceptive enough history, in itself, but from the point of view of this essay its main interest lies in his comments upon his contemporaries and in the notions about the nature and function of poetry which these remarks reveal. One is again struck by the breadth of Muir's reading. He also demonstrates a quiet sense of humour; for example, "Mr. Empson's poetry is obscure, intelligent and intricate, and contains some beautiful lines and various kinds of ambiguities."³

Of the works collected in Essays in Literature and Society, those most cogent to my purpose are The Walter Scott Lecture given at the University of Edinburgh in 1944, which is a reworking of his previously published study Scott and Scotland, and the essay The Natural Man and the Political Man (1942),⁴ which forms an interesting

²W. B. Yeats, Essays and Introductions. (London, 1961), p. 225.

³Edwin Muir, The Present Age, from 1914. (New York, 1940) p. 218.

⁴First published in New Writing and Daylight (Summer, 1942) pp. 7-15. reprinted in Edwin Muir, Essays in Literature and Society (London, 2nd ed., 1965), pp. 150 - 164.

basis from which to study the lecture, The Politics of King Lear given at the University of Glasgow in 1946.

Rather than give a summary of each of the prose works in turn I prefer to take those of the war years as a whole and try to present the poet's frame of mind during this period. While conscious of the dangers of extrapolation and juxtaposition of scattered ideas, I feel that it is more meaningful to posit a unified synthesis of the poet's opinions, against which to study the poetry. The poet himself has expressed many of his basic concepts in the generalised statements, which he develops from the recounting of incidents in the autobiography.

Much of Muir's writing is concerned with the disintegration of the organic type of society of the kind he had known in Orkney as a child. He also perceives this type of society as forming the background to mediaeval literature. He is particularly concerned with Scottish literature and sees the poetry produced by the mediaeval period or environment (for as his own childhood shows it is not strictly a matter of date) as the high-point of the Scottish culture. The break-up of this society affects, not only the literary development of a nation but the self-respect of the whole people as seen most obviously in its craftsmen:

In the Middle Ages the judgment of a craftsman had a general bearing, for the craftsman had a recognised function in society; the over-ruling idea which governed the whole social structure, both religious and political, applied to him too; so that the conclusions which he came to in following his vocation were applicable to the other vocations and ranks of society, and not merely to a generality, 'an old bitch gone in the teeth', with which he was neither acquainted nor concerned. The craftsman now has no recognised function in society.⁵

The mediaeval society in Scotland produced the literary high points of Henryson and the Border Ballads. The Ballads, he says, constitute

almost the only Scottish dialect poetry extant in which the poet both thinks and feels in the dialect he uses. Scottish folk-song is pure feeling; but the Ballads express a view

⁵Edwin Muir, The Present Age, p. 67.

of life which is essentially philosophic, though completely devoid of reflection . . . [in them] the disposition to dramatic presentation existed . . . if the Reformers had not radically discouraged it.⁶

Muir's concept of a complete literary language being capable of expressing both thought and sentiment is the crux of his difference of opinion with C. M. Grieve (Hugh MacDiarmid):

If he [the modern Scottish writer] wishes to add to an indigenous Scottish literature, and roots himself deliberately in Scotland, he will find there, no matter how long he may search, neither an organic community to round off his conceptions . . . nor even a faith among the people themselves that a Scottish literature is possible or desirable, nor any opportunity, finally, of making a livelihood by his work.⁷

With the disappearance of the "organic community", there appeared the split between emotion and thought which has characterised Scottish literature ever since.

The concept of a national Scottish schizophrenia was not new. Muir, however, in stating its effects, toppled all Scotland's post-mediaeval literary giants:

the Scottish consciousness is divided. For, reduced to its simplest terms, this linguistic division means that Scotsmen feel in one language and think in another; that their emotions turn to the Scottish tongue . . . their minds to a standard English which for them is almost bare of association other than those of the classroom. If Henryson and Dunbar had written prose they would have written in the same language as they used for poetry, for their minds were still whole; but Burns never thought of doing so, nor did Scott, nor did Stevenson, nor has any Scottish writer since. In an organic literature poetry is always influencing prose, and prose poetry; and their interaction energizes them both. Scottish poetry exists in a vacuum; it neither acts on the rest of literature nor reacts to it; and consequently it has shrunk to the level of anonymous folk-song. Hugh MacDiarmid has recently tried to revive it . . . he has written some remarkable poetry; but he has left Scottish verse

⁶Edwin Muir, Scott and Scotland (London, 1936), pp. 89 - 90.

⁷Ibid., p. 15.

very much where it was before. For the major forms of poetry rise from a collision between emotion and intellect on a plane where both meet on equal terms.

This split between thought and emotion becomes a vicious circle: "Criticism, like poetry, requires a union of emotion and intellect, and where that union is broken criticism comes off as badly as poetry itself."⁹ Since Scots poetry has been reduced to sentiment, and "any emotion which cannot be tested and passed by the mind of the man who feels it is sentimental", there is little hope, if Muir's thesis is correct, for any future improvement in Scots dialect literature.¹⁰

I do not wish to enter the battle for and against Muir's treatment of the Scottish Renaissance movement. From the point of view of his own poetic development, the Scots language was clearly being dismissed (though letters he wrote about this time mention his having attempted some poems in Scots). I mean to stress that the process by which Scots became an untenable literary language for Muir was only one aspect of the large process of what his friend Hermann Broch called "the break-down of the medieval synthesis"¹¹. The loss of that environment which produced the Ballads, Muir maintains, leads to sentimentality on the one hand and to the impersonality and gracelessness of industrialism on the other. He blames the Reformation and the Industrial Revolution. Both are responsible for the destruction of tradition. "The normal development of a nation is a development founded solidly on its past. The development of Scotland during the last three centuries has been a development bought at the expense of shedding one bit of its past after another, until almost the only thing that remains now is a sentimental legend."¹² This is the 'Kailyard'

⁸ Ibid., pp. 21 - 2.

⁹ Ibid., p. 30.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 38.

¹¹ Cited in The Present Age, p. 28.

¹² Edwin Muir, Scottish Journey (London, 1935), pp. 46 - 7.

myth of a nation of ploughmen poets and bonnie lassies, a legend which is mere escapism from the reality of normal Scottish industrial life.

The industrial system depersonalises human relations, destroying social cohesion; for example, that which formerly existed between farmer and farm-labourer, and replaces the craftsman's concern for his work with the factory worker's indifference to the end-product he helps to fabricate. Muir seems to be equating this fragmentation of economic and social life with the Scots poet's incapacity to make, or inability to find, an adequate critique of his achievements. He does not express this relationship as crudely as I have done but it is the logical conclusion to be drawn from his linking of the twin evils of industrialism and sentimentality; that is to say, in most of contemporary Scottish life there is a short-circuiting between spontaneous expression or action and the means of judging the effects of such action. An example of his yoking together of the two aspects of Scottish life which he most regretted, is his discussion of the undying popularity of the song "Annie Laurie":

The enduring popularity of "Annie Laurie" is a sign that true folk sentiment in Scotland has for a long time been degenerating, so that a sham substitute is more pleasing to Scottish ears than the real thing [such as the Ballad "Clerk Saunders" which he quotes] . . . "Annie Laurie" was really the first great public milestone on Scotland's road to the Kailyard and the window in Thrums, and its popularity showed that that road was predestined. Two things mainly contributed to set Scotland, an eminently realistic country, on such a path: the breakdown of Calvinism, a process salutary in itself, but throwing off as a by-product an obliterating debris of sentimentality, and the rise of an industrial system so sordid and disfiguring that people were eager to escape from it by any road, however strange . . . The Kailyard school of literature was thus really a by-product of Scotland's economic history . . . To anyone living in Glasgow or Dundee even the Kailyard must have seemed heaven.¹³

The same split between action and thought, Muir suggests, also gives the Scottish character its peculiar dourness. "For the Scottish character has a thoroughness, or in other words an inability to know where to stop, which is rarely found in Englishmen, who

¹³Ibid., pp. 67-8.

make a virtue of compromise."¹⁴ The two seemingly contradictory characteristics, sentimentality and dourness, Muir suggests, are to be found in their most pronounced forms in the emotional short-sightedness of the middle-classes in Glasgow. His psychological interpretations of this group are not unlike the notions of the Glasgow psychologist, R. D. Laing. Muir recounts how, since he started to write Scottish Journey, he has been volunteered the most distressing accounts of life in the slums by these people, information passed on with a mixture of glee and horror:

The appetite of moderately well-off and quite well-off people for these infamous morsels is one which has no connection with the sentiment of pity, but is likely to check rather than induce it, creating disgust in its stead. Disgust is the coldest of human emotions, colder than hatred because more self-centred. If one hates the slums one may do something about them; but if one is filled with disgust of them there is nothing but to turn away.¹⁵

Muir explains the emotional short-comings of the Scottish people in sexual terms:

Nowhere that I have been is one so bathed and steeped and rolled about in floating sexual desire as in certain streets of Glasgow and Edinburgh. This desire fills the main thoroughfare and overflows into all the adjacent pockets and backwaters.¹⁶

The dichotomy between the outer and inner personality, and the confusion of motives which he found in the Glasgow mentality took a particularly grotesque form in the account of his insight as a young man, when, surveying the surrounding faces in the streets, or on the trams, he would realise that they were the faces not of humans but of animals. In his discussion of Shakespeare's animal imagery in King Lear he finds a parallel vision of the horrors resultant on the replacement of the old mediaeval order by the political:

That is a picture [Edgar's description of Edmund "A serving man, proud in heart and mind . . ."] of an animal with human faculties, made corrupt and legendary by the proudly curled hair. It is a picture, too, of the man of policy in the latest style, who regards the sacred order of society as his prey, and recognises only two realities: interest and force, the gods of the new age.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 26.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 116 - 117.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 18 - 19.

¹⁷ Edwin Muir, "The Politics of King Lear", Essays in Literature and Society (London, second ed., 1965), p. 49.

While the replacement of the mediaeval order is most obvious to Muir in the limitations of Scottish literature, the literature is a reflection of the whole national life, and the shortcomings and moral dangers inherent in Scotland are examples of the moral problems of all human development. He goes a long way to explaining the soullessness of modern man in his explication of the cruelty of Goneril and Regan:

The most repulsive thing about these words [for example "Go thrust him out at gates, and let him smell / His way to Dover"] apart from their cruelty, is their triteness. The two daughters ignore all the complexities of what to them is merely a situation, and solve it at once by an abominable truism. They are quite rational, but only on the lowest plain of reason, and they have that contempt for other ways of thinking which comes with the knowledge of their own efficiency. As they are rational, they have a good conscience, even a touch of self-righteousness; they sincerely believe their father is in the wrong and they are in the right, since they conceive they know the world as it is, and act in conformity with it, the source of all effective power.¹⁸

If Muir's picture of life since the Middle Ages has been bleak, at least his concept of human development leaves the future open to the possibility of hope:

For as man is a moral being, human development can be conceived only as a moral development; no evolutionary process can bring us brotherhood and justice, for they are not things merely to be ratified in a code (though a code is necessary) but principles to be given reality in all our private and public relations throughout society.¹⁹

Given the times of human bestiality which Muir was living through, it is not surprising that any hope is under-stated, implicit. All the evidence of contemporary life cried out of "the primacy of things", of moral regression rather than hopeful advance:

The new generation [as represented by Goneril and Regan] may be regarded as the embodiment of wickedness, a wickedness of that special kind which I have tried to indicate. But can it also be said that they represent a new concept of society? If we had not lived through the last twenty years, had not seen the rise of Fascism in Italy and Germany and Communism in Russia, and did not know the theory

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 40 -41.

¹⁹ Edwin Muir, "Natural Man and Political Man", Essays in Literature and Society, p. 162.

and practice by which they were upheld, we might be disposed to deny this. As it is we cannot. We know, too, that Shakespeare was acquainted with the Renaissance man, and that his plays abound in references to 'policy', which stood in his time for what the Germans dignify by the name of Realpolitik; ²⁰ that is, political action which ignores all moral considerations.

Eventual suppression of moral choice appears inevitable because the concept of a desirable life, and the personal striving to realise it, are regarded as foolish:

since they ignore the reality of things; such things as the power of the state, tanks, shells, concentration camps, and such things also as the natural man's appetites, vanities, angers, hopes, fears and hatreds, which can always be aroused, and which, with a little direction, can become irresistible. Consequently what has gradually been brought into prominence by the religion of development is the primacy of things, and it finds its fulfilment in the theory that men can be conditioned by things. Control things and you control mankind. In this conception the moral struggle which possessed the imagination of other ages, and was strong even a century ago, recedes into irrelevance, and becomes like one of these vestigial organs in the body which no longer performs any useful function, but exist merely to plague us: a sort of vermiform appendix.²¹

Despite Muir's heavy awareness of the destructive forces around him during this period, his criticism of poetry and his celebration of nature and the response to nature is affirmative. In Scottish Journey he regretted the passing of the old breed of shepherd such as Wordsworth had praised. Yet the landscape still exerts its salutary influence. Describing a Galloway landscape of seemingly eternal peace, he writes, "It is from such scenes as this that some Scotsmen I have met, shepherds and workers on remote farms, take the gravity and beauty of their character",²² and again, describing the North Highlands, "One could imagine oneself being so deeply influenced by this scenery, if one lived close to it for a long time, that one's most simple feelings about human life would be changed."²³ He notes also that, even at the very centre of

²⁰ Edwin Muir, "The Politics of King Lear", Op.cit., p. 42.

²¹ Edwin Muir, "Natural Man and Political Man", Op.cit., p. 154.

²² Edwin Muir, Scottish Journey, p. 82.

²³ Ibid., p. 215.

industrial society, selfless and non-competitive action is possible. He writes of Trades Union workers "pledged not to overreach one another, and that is the basis of disinterested communication between human things."²⁴ A spontaneous and unified mutual understanding was still possible, even in Scotland, though it was limited to "certain happy moments." Describing "ceilidhs" he attended in Edinburgh, he wrote:

They are free without the affectation of Bohemianism . . . their particular charm consists in perfect effortlessness, combined with perfect restraint . . . everything was so spontaneous, or appeared to be so, that the songs seemed a mere flowering of the general mood . . . at certain happy moments, in the first relief after a hardship passed, there are companies in Scotland which can strike this perfect balance between nature and art.²⁵

These few reminders of the positive side of human potential are enough to feed the poetic imagination, but Muir is very conscious of the evasive tactics a writer may use, in such times as his own, to avoid the difficult task of apprehending the world through his own peculiar vision. He may have been conscious of the ease with which an unsympathetic critic could label his own writings as "back to nature". He certainly jumps to Walter De la Mare's defence, stating that his world is "not a world of escape", to use the cliché which is more and more being applied to all literature that does not deal with the facts which are reported in the newspapers".²⁶ His own poetic imagination is not fired by the facts of the newspapers, but he is very conscious of the dangers of a sentimentalised presentation of a bucolic country scene. His remarks on Barrie make it clear that this is not his way. "He crept into his Kirriemuir heart and was safe there, no matter how loudly the world knocked at it. He began with great gifts and evaded them one by one".²⁷

²⁴ Ibid., p. 148.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 38.

²⁶ Edwin Muir, The Present Age, p. 100.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 129.

When the world knocks it, is obviously the poet's task to take it into his own vision and create some kind of resolution between the two orders. Muir is only too conscious of the facts of the newspapers but he regards propagandist poetry as a contradiction in terms. "To say that Shakespeare had no politics - if one takes the statement seriously - can only mean that he had no conception of what is good for society; and to assert that would bring an immediate denial from everyone."²⁸ Having a conception of human well-being does not necessarily mean that one's poetry should be full of the debris of the press.

Towards the end of Scottish Journey Muir describes two phenomena which, I suggest, bring us closer to an understanding of the special feeling of Muir's poetic imagination than any of the more immediate facts of his environment:

As I left Durness I saw a round hill rising out of the sea far away to the north-east, whose shape seemed somehow familiar to me. It was, I realised, the hill of Hoy in Orkney, which I had never seen before from this angle; and it seemed strange to me that for the people of Durness that mound must be a constant shape on the horizon, as well known to them as the inside of their houses; and I thought that all our lives are bounded by a similar horizon, which is at once familiar to us and beyond our knowledge, and that it is against this indistinct barrier that our imaginings pile themselves up, building for all of us a fabulous world. I tried to think of Hoy as an outline on the horizon which never came nearer; and because I knew the Orkneys, having lived in them during my childhood, I had a sense stranger than ever before of the double aspect of everything, and realised that if it had been possible for me to live in two places at once, in Durness, say, and my father's farm in Orkney, my life there would have seemed to one part of me merely a dream in the shadow of that round hill rising from the sea. This thought disturbed me, for it seemed to point to a sort of ultimate isolation of every human being, an isolation produced by the mere workings of time and space, which therefore no ideal state Utopia could ever reform away. I told myself that this was a figment of my imagination, but knew it was not as I looked at

²⁸ Edwin Muir, "The Politics of King Lear", Op.cit., p. 34

that hill which I seemed to know by two faculties at once, which I had so much wished to see, but had never expected to see like this. And I reflected that all the strange scenery which I had gazed at during my two-days' journey had just as little relation to it as it was known by the few people who lived among it, as that round hill in the sea to Orkney.²⁹

It seems to me that it is this quality of an almost startled freshness of vision or perspective, and his resultant reluctance to force ready-made blinkers on any man's response to his own vision, which give Muir's poetry its special ambience. A few pages further on he describes a similar sensation, in which he seemed to experience a double time sequence. This is obviously an extension of his realisation of the double aspect of landscape, the constant and the transitory ways of seeing one place. The surprise he experienced in this new perspective on the hill, which he had known so well that it had almost seemed a part of him, is not unlike the emotion he attributes to poetic greatness:

This quality [poetic greatness] is the power to make a natural, immediate and yet overwhelming statement which produces such conviction that we forget the voice that utters it. Statements of this kind always strike us as being newly forged, without a trace of poetic reminiscence, as being a concrete addition to the utterance of mankind.³⁰

It is from the kind of perception Muir himself displays that such utterance is likely to proceed.

The contemporary poet whose works he ultimately most admired was T. S. Eliot. On the surface this may seem strange. He does not appear to have been greatly influenced by Eliot, but his comments on the poet pin-point some of the attitudes to his craft which one could expect from familiarity with his other prose works:

Yeats's poetry and Pound's poetry, like so much of the poetry of the nineteenth century, began by dealing with a beautiful

²⁹ Edwin Muir, Scottish Journey, pp. 217-19.

³⁰ Edwin Muir, The Present Age, p. 43.

world, or a beautified world. Eliot's did not, he saw through the beauty and the ugliness to the boredom and the horror; not so much, it must be admitted, to the glory, though there must be some perception of the glory before the boredom and the horror can be seen at all.³¹

The same perception of the glory, no matter how desperate the boredom and the horror which obscure it, can be seen in the corpus of opinions which I have tried to create from Muir's various prose works, and it is the perception which colours his poetry.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

CHAPTER THREE

The Poems 1938-1945

The poems of the years between 1938 and 1945 form a unit within the body of Muir's poetic works. The earlier poems as a corpus tend to be experimental, prosaic, at times obscure. They derive from the poet's experience but they often seem abstract rather than personal. This is not to deny the existence of several fine poems from the earlier volumes, for example "The Enchanted Knight". The poetry of the war years is personal in a more straight-forward way. This is the period in which his poetry takes on the feeling of apparent ease of expression which characterised his later technique. It is also the most productive period of his poetic career. The post-war poetry develops naturally out of this period of re-assessment. All of Muir's poetry is motivated by the desire to recreate his own experiences, and to understand these experiences in relation to all of life, that is, to set his own "Story" in the framework of some larger "Fable". The post-war poetry separates itself from the war poetry by its prevalent mood of calm, indicating that Muir had succeeded in this desire. Consequently his themes tend to deal less with himself and more with the possibilities open to the human race as a whole. More than one critic has explained the mood of these later poems in terms of this dovetailing of personal experience with cosmic forces. Michael Hamburger claims that they form "one of the closest approximations in poetry to Kafka's world of absolute fiction - so subjective in origin, so inexhaustible and universal in effect."¹ Kathleen Raine also compares Muir to Kafka when she states that "Muir at last wedded the archetypal to the real as only those poets can do for whom the real is the signature of the Mystery."² The poetry of the war years can therefore be seen as a turning point in the poet's development.

¹Michael Hamburger, "Edwin Muir", Encounter, 87 (1960), p. 51.

²Kathleen Raine, Defending Ancient Springs, (London, 1967), p. 5.

They were published in the collections The Narrow Place (1943) and The Voyage (1946). In mood the arrangement of the two volumes is similar, going from dark to light, from mixed emotions to affirmation. For this reason I feel justified in treating the poems in thematic order rather than chronologically. The date is given for each poem mentioned. This is the date of earliest publication since most of the poems first appeared in periodicals.³ However, the version of any poem quoted is the version to be found in Collected Poems, that is, Muir's final version. When he made changes in his earlier works, these changes were usually simple substitutions of one word for another to make the statement clearer or to eliminate any archaic, poetic diction, and he endeavoured, in these changes, to preserve the tone he had tried to create originally, even when he no longer upheld the particular view of the original statement.

In the poetry of these years Muir demonstrates a greater variety of technique than he had formerly. Most of his earlier poetry had been in octosyllabic quatrains which occasionally depended upon rather forced rhymes and stilted statements of themes. In these two volumes he is experimenting with new forms. The development is towards clarity and compression. At times this can lead to the use of rather recherche words such as "systole and diastole" and to short jerky lines which do not fit happily to the context. "Reading in Wartime", for example, has a sing-song, Audenesque rhythm which gives an unsuitable brittleness to the treatment of a serious theme.

One would look in vain for detailed descriptions of the events of the war in Muir's poetry. There are contemporary references, and there are poems which, were they not further identified, one might fairly attribute to a poet writing in the mood of wartime. But, on the whole, Muir treats the war as a recurrent aspect of time and human history. Thus there is a predominance of references to place rather than to time; the voyage, the grove, the narrow place, the human fold, implying Man's endless journey, in which the specific time and locations of battles, or heroic struggles, or mass betrayals,

³I am indebted for this information, to Robert Hollander's Columbia doctoral thesis, A Textual and Bibliographical Study of the Poems of Edwin Muir (1962).

are merely dots on the map to be joined up by the pattern of the voyage.

If poems such as "The Prize", "Then", and "The Grove" were the only wartime poems we had, they would suggest a poet deeply pessimistic about the human condition. But these darker poems are lightened somewhat when placed alongside more typical poems such as "The Ring" or "The Recurrence". The first two stanzas of "The Prize" (1941) are in question form asking where mankind came from to its contemporary fallen state and why we flew like the flight of an arrow "from eternity's immaculate bow" to this place or this point in time, seeking what prize? The answer, in the third stanza, describes the lost and aimless condition which is our prize, though, self-deluded, we cannot even recognize it as such:

We hurried here for some such thing and now
Wander the countless roads to seek our prize,
That far within the maze serenely lies,
While all around each trivial shape exclaims:
'Here is your jewel; this is your longed for day',
And we forget, lost in the countless names.

The speed of our hurrying towards the unknown prize is counteracted by the circuitous and indefinite wanderings of the maze, "time's great turning ring". We are doubly lost, cut off from the original serenity of the condition we left behind, and blind to the "trivial shape" of our new condition. We cannot even recognise "our longed for day", for we are "lost in the countless names". I take the last line to be a reiteration of Muir's scorn for all codes, systems, efforts to label actions, which in their efficiency ignore the seemingly trivial reality. The extermination of millions as a function of the high rhetoric of nationalism in Germany, is such a manifestation of forgetfulness through our too close attention to the names of things. Muir, of course, does not use this specific example, for he says "countless names". My one example already reduces the endless horror of his perspective. "The Grove" (1941) is an example of Muir's use of a shifting focus in the closing lines of a poem, a tendency which gives the reader the suspended sensation of being "enmeshed in a slow-motion nightmare".⁴

⁴M. L. Rosenthal, *The Modern Poets* (London, 1960), p. 137.

He seems to be regretting the fact that we have had no alternative but to take a "blind path" through a violent but colourful grove. The "banners", "scarlet cardinals", "curvetting knights" and "silk-tunicked eunuchs" give the far-away quality of pageantry, but the brutality described is that of contemporary Europe:

And oh the silence, the drugged thicket dozing
 Deep in its dream of fear,
 The ring closing
 And coming near,
 The well-bred self-sufficient animals
 With clean rank pelts and proud and fetid breath,
 Screaming their arrogant calls,
 Their moonstone eyes set straight at life and death.

Yet he regrets that there was no other road but this, for we have passed on into the seeming light. The colourful, but brutal world left behind had a certain contained and legendary quality. It was an oft-repeated pattern. Typically the language used to describe this prescribed and static order is heraldic. He has been describing

. . . sylvan wars in bronze within the shield,
 All quartered in the wide world's wood.

This was a "smothering grove where there was place for pities." Bestial as it was, the poet expresses nostalgia for the "stifling", limiting, quality of this path, this way, this alternative. Yet the full horror hits the reader at the end. He says that we have passed beyond the smothering restrictions of the grove "as in a dream of the will", and groped in wonder towards a greater "light" and a new vista of "splendour". If the persona of the poem uses terms of approval to celebrate the passing of the brutal order, then the new "light" we have come to wonder at is beyond imaginable horror as it is no longer limited, heraldic, made familiar by repetition. Thus the poet creates an impression of a limitless evil whose threshold mankind has reached and is now entering. Yet he does not describe the nature of this new horror, which makes it all the more effective. The casually thrown-in concluding sentence

. . . We know

There was no road except the smothering grove

is an ironic comment on the typical pessimist's trite acceptance of

such explanations. It implies that there was indeed an alternative. For the very point about the grove is that it was not a road, it was an enclosed, static place. "We" have made it into a road, a stage in our progression, and now proclaim that we had no other alternative. Thus the reader comes to realise at the end of the poem that the choice was our choice, but that there was a choice. This saves the poem from a fatalistic pessimism. Our turning familiar, limited evil into the newer version was not inevitable. But the fact remains that we chose and now evade the responsibility of the choice, by recourse to explanations of "to be: to be".

The rather obscure poem "Then" (1940) describes a pre-historic cave, sometime before the existence of Man. Indeed, it seems to describe some remote period before there was any form of recognisable life. Yet the cave is full of "angry shadows fighting on a wall", full of sighing and groaning, implying that, even as far back as this period, "blank as forgotten script", some primordial propensity to violence cast its shadow forward on to human history. This is surely one of Muir's most pessimistic poems. He treats inevitability in a more straight-forward manner in his poems about innocence passing into consciousness of time and evil. An example, shaped around memories of his own first childhood's vision of the ordered world breaking up, is "The Gate" (1943). The two children sitting against the wall are not inside a paradisaical state, but outside the adult world, protected by the "childish masks" their parents wear "over their tell-tale faces". The inevitable awareness came to the innocents as

. . . suddenly all seemed old
And dull and shrunken, shut within itself
In a sullen dream. We were outside, alone.
And then behind us the huge gate swung open,

upon the adult, fallen world. The particular, childhood incident he describes is complete in itself, but bears effectively the implication of archetypal pattern. The two children can be taken as Adam and Eve, and therefore, by extension, all of mankind. The relationship of Muir's concept of pattern to the question of inevitability can be studied in "The Recurrence" (1940) and in "The Ring" (1941). It was, at this period, already a long time since Muir had turned away from the Nietzschean concepts, such as historical necessity, that had so much influenced

him as a young man, but he is still preoccupied with the rejection of such ideas. In their place he puts his faith in what must have seemed almost meaningless during these years, that aspect of "The Fable" which indicates a faith in the essential grace and innocence; the dimly perceived memory of Eden, at the still centre of life:

All things return, Nietzsche said,
The ancient wheel revolves again,
Rise, take up your numbered fate;
The cradle and the bridal bed,
Life and the coffin wait.

Yet if historical events are so strictly manipulated, there would be no point in heroic effort, and

. . . the Actor on the Tree
Would loll at ease, miming pain,
And counterfeit mortality.

Nothing would be worth the effort, especially not such passion as Christ experienced on the cross, there would be no place for any "needful error",⁵ for in a predetermined and absolute Hell, just

One doubt of evil would bring down such a grace,⁶
Open such a gate, all Eden would enter in.

The delightful notion of Eden colonising Hell is as absurd, Muir suggests, as any other concept of absolute historical necessity, which diminishes the human potential for god-like or heroic action, and the legends or fables which grow out of such actions.

"The Ring" (1941) has a similar development to "The Gate", though it describes not children, but "a family, a people" -- possibly Scotland, but also the family of Man. Again there is the shattering of a former, dream-like unity,

Nature in wrath broke through the grassy ring
Where all our gathered treasures lay in sleep--
Many a rich and many a childish thing.

The "nature" here is not the bountiful earth he celebrates elsewhere, but a "nature red in tooth and claw", which "filled with hoofs and horns the quiet keep". It is the bestial nature already described in "The Grove" and discussed in the essay

⁵ "The Good Man in Hell" (1938).

⁶ Ibid.

"The Politics of King Lear". Contemporary man is the heir of this chaos, though he harbours memories of the legends of his ancient and fabled fathers. Things do come round again "as Nietzsche said", but not because of historical determinism.⁷ Rather it is because, out of the old dreams of our fathers, we recall,

. . . the long-forgotten word
That rounded again the ring where sleeping lay
Our treasures, still unruined and unmarred.

Characteristically Muir does not say what "the word" is. It must be something which gives the lie to mere determinism and unlimited brutality in Man, something which implies a faith in the human soul, a word like God or love or duty. That we, the mean heirs of such chaos, can still recall the dim memory of such words is enough to keep the treasure, the memory of Eden, "unruined and unmarred" at the centre of our being.

Where there is still the memory of fable, whether it be the original fabled harmony of Paradise, or the heraldic, time-halted legends of a limited evil, such as recreated in the mediaeval world of "The Grove", or found in the Ballads, there is the possibility of a recurrence of some good in human society. At times, however, Muir fears that the slight memory of such possibilities will be obliterated, leaving human beasts or mere nonentities of men to replace men of vision and of hope. In "The Escape" (1945) the worst dangers of such a condition is related to modern times:

. . . The enemy
These days was scarcely visible;
Only his work^{was} everywhere,
Ill work contrived so well

that it is impossible to distinguish, impossible to tell one's way, impossible to escape, since escape depends upon a visible order.

⁷"The Recurrence"(1940).

There the perpetual question ran,
 What is escape? and What is flight?
 Like dialogue in a dismal dream
 Where right is wrong and wrong is right.⁸

Where such moral boundaries are blurred, Man becomes complacent in the face of the most obvious danger, in fact, the more obvious, the more likely it is to be ignored. The best statement of this is in "The Refugees" (1939) which places the war, indeed any war, within the perspective of all situations of vulnerability. The opening, homely image effectively controls the mythical scope of the poem:

A crack ran through our hearthstone long ago,
 And from the fissure we watched gently grow
 The tame domesticated danger,
 Yet lived in comfort in our haunted rooms.

The crack is the breach in the innocent citadel of Eden which has left evermore an open wound in Man's society. We have become,

The always homeless,
 Nationless and nameless,
 To whose bare roof-trees never come
 Peace and the house martin to make a home.

The present fissure is the same Eden fable, so inevitably lived and relived, by which

We bear the lot of nations,
 Of times and races.

But we are not quite "as flies to wanton boys". The fault is not the primordial guilt of Adam, but our having become complacent and indifferent, ceasing to fear and hold in check our evil heritage. We could have put up a fight, that is to say,

This stroke was bound to fall,
 Though not to fall so.

Evil "rotted where it fell" because we failed to tend the garden, the hearth, becoming careless, unaware of the "gentle" spread of corruption as, through negligence, it spreads

. . . upon the kind and the unkind
 Without election.

⁸"The Escape" (1945).

If there is no counsel, no respect for inherent values, evil outgrows its "tame domesticated", known, and therefore prescribable, proportions and flourishes indiscriminately. Muir ends the poem with an unusually definite command or warning,

We must shape here a new philosophy.

"The Face" (1942) is a more personal treatment of the self-deluding escapist theme. He describes his face as an "untroubled oval",

That alters idly with the moonlike modes
And is unfathomably framed to please.

He is concerned that beneath this smiling surface

The sun-and star-shaped killers gorge and play.

I imagine he is indicating both the brutal emotions within himself and the violence of the outside world which spreads freely beneath the seeming acquiescence of his untroubled face. The tone is humorous but he uses the animal imagery which he often employs to describe the end of our limited civilisation.

We might contrast the dangers of such idle complacency with Robert the Bruce's dilemma in "Robert The Bruce: To Douglas in Dying" (1940). Nearing death, Bruce reflects on his sacrilegious murder of the Red Comyn while the latter had been praying in church. If fate is all, then Bruce can never be released from this act, for Man's efforts to distinguish good from evil become meaningless, his own remorse becomes pointless since there can be no hope of forgiveness from any extraordinary source. Yet upon the little "but" in the following lines, hinges the possibility of avoiding the fate that his act has determined for him:

'But that Christ hung upon the Cross
Comyn would rot until time's end
And bury my sin in boundless dust,
For there is no amend

'In order; yet in order run
All things by unreturning ways.
If Christ live not, nothing is there
For sorrow or for praise.'

The "but" manifests an intuition if not exactly a faith in the possibility of freedom from historic necessity, from the endless inhuman system of action and reaction. This intuition of the

possibility of divine forgiveness for an apparently doomed man makes Bruce a heroic subject for the poet and he compliments him for refusing to give in to pessimistic determinism. Had he accepted his seeming fate complacently, he would have lacked the stature and perseverance to have

. . . outfaced three English kings
And kept a people's faith.

Like the persona in "The Face", Bruce was well aware of the disparity between his outer and inner realities, and aware that his mental turmoil was a form of the unchecked violence rampant in an uncivilised, faithless world. Bruce, however, is not even seemingly untroubled. One does not imagine a "moonlike" surface to his face. By struggling with the paradox of freedom and fatal determinism he becomes fabulous and a source of inspiration by which others may counteract the tendency to fatalism. The persona in "The Face" achieves no such resolution. If the persona is, as it seems to be, the poet himself, then it demonstrates his old fears of self-evasion, of not using his powers to their full extent. As we have seen, his letters during these years seem to be obsessed by this problem. "The Face" is one of the most negative forms of this theme and its general tone of gentle self-mockery does not accord with the violence of the last line.

To counteract the attraction of complacency and fatalism we need constant reminders of "The Fable" side of life, which is now almost obscured by the pressures of "The Story". The fabulous, because rooted in an ancient concept of harmony, enables us to avoid the moral ambiguity described in "The Escape", but reminders of the dim legends of our fathers become rarer as each generation becomes increasingly incapable of distinguishing good from evil. This is a human sickness which leads to fatalism, at a mundane level as expressed in the sentiment "You can't fight the system", which forgets that the system usually exists, ideologically, for one's good. At its worst this kind of thinking leads to the concept that life is cheap, because the living give up cheaply,

and to suicide. Muir does not express these views but they are implicit in his obsession with the problem of moral evasion. Nor is this merely a poet's whimsy. Paul Goodman recently expressed a similar view of mass indifference leading to suicide:

Thirty years ago the Jews in Germany believed that Hitler did not mean to exterminate them; "nobody", they said, "can be that stupid". So they drifted to the gas chambers, and went finally even without resistance. Now the nuclear powers continue stockpiling bombs and pouring new billions into missiles, anti-missile missiles, and armed platforms in orbit. . . [we] do not prevent it. Afterwards, survivors, if there are any, will ask "How did we let it happen?"

"The Trophy" (1941) gives an illustration of how this distortion can come about, destroying all political and social order till "king and rebel" become indistinguishable.

. . . co-princes of one mind,
Irreconcilables, their treaty signed.

Seemingly impossible antagonists can become so confused that it is impossible to separate the pursuer and the pursued, the killer and the victim since both seem fatally drawn to the same destructive end.

There is nothing to suggest that Edwin Muir ever contemplated suicide, but the stultification of his talents must have seemed like a kind of death-wish to him. Certainly he took such limitation of one's potential to be a conscious, self-willed choice stemming from the same moral ambiguity as suicide, treachery and the mass-murder of war. There are several poems about death in the two volumes we are discussing. "Sappho" (1946) is of special interest because it describes the suicide of another writer, but her suicide does not arise out of any suppression of the truth or moral evasiveness. It is obviously a poem of pity and praise. He is full of pity for

Pursuer and pursued
Tied each to each by such a sullen knot
No arrowy thought of immaterial god
Can slip between and ease the torment . . .

⁹Paul Goodman, The Moral Ambiguity of America (Toronto, 1966), p. 4.

Yet her anguish is of a heroic order leading her to such depths of destitution that her world seems like the nameless and indefinite chaos before Creation. In fact, by an act of will she recreates this intangibility

. . . as on the day

Before the first day broke, when all was nameless.

Having achieved this state she can batter herself to death, with apparent ease. Muir is not celebrating suicide, but he does recognise the intensity with which Sappho lived and died. By contrast, the pathetic subject of "Epitaph" (1946) shows the reader what it is that Muir found praiseworthy in Sappho. The dead man was one

Who living was a flickering soul so dim

He was never truly loved nor truly a lover,

whose "vastest dreams were less than six feet tall". Muir fears that this man may be "a poor image of us all". And he concludes

If now is Resurrection, then let stay

Only what's ours when this is put away.

The thought that this empty shell of a man may be an image of us all is counterbalanced by the last line's antithesis of "ours" and "this". The "ours" which he wants to stay would seem to indicate something more basic to mankind than the poor show of this dead man's life demonstrates, something of the same stature as Sappho's heroic passions. The subject of the poem, "this", is a mere shadow of what is naturally "ours", and Muir consigns him to oblivion without regret, indeed he seems to hope that this death would represent a massive removal of that impoverished side of Man's nature of which the subject is an image. Even in this portrait of what must be one of the sorriest pictures of Man in all the poet's works, there is muted the concept of an alternative, the state which is more naturally "ours", that is, in his own terms, the life represented by "The Fable".

In the short poem "The Swimmer's Death", (1942) the dead subject is again unnamed. He is merely someone drowned at sea, yet, by association with nature and ritual, his meaningless death becomes important and bearable. It shows the poet with a much more balanced

outlook on death.

He lay outstretched upon the sunny wave,
That turned and broke into eternity.
The light showed nothing but a glassy grave
Among the trackless tumuli of the sea.
Then over his buried brow and eyes and lips
From every side flocked in the homing ships.

The swimmer's death is seen both as part of eternity and as a part of the repeated daily pattern of ships running to harbour. The order of the words implies that the body becomes almost an essential part of this homely ritual, and the anonymous little tragedy is placed in a much larger context which makes the suffering, the nonentity of "a glassy grave", endurable, and enduring.

There are two poems about the deaths of friends of the poet; "To J. F. H. (1897 - 1934)" (1941) and "For Anna Scott-Moncrieff (1914 - 1943)" (1943). The later poem is the simpler and I shall discuss it first. It is important to note that in the sequence of the poems in The Voyage, it comes amongst a group of poems marked with a feeling of affirmation. The elegy for his friend fits into this general tone. It is a poem of quiet regret for the loss of his friend but it would seem that the poet had no trouble in accepting her death, indeed it is one of the poems in this volume in which the poet's technical accomplishment seems to have led him astray. The rhythm, the short lines, would be unsuitable in a more serious elegy and the imagery, of unsettling stars, for example, verges on the trite. Yet one cannot doubt that the poet was motivated by admiration and sorrow. It may be that he was attempting to recreate the characteristic gaiety of the woman summed up in her "the world is a pleasant place", and that this accounts for the rather incongruous jauntiness of this poem. In praising her he places her in the company of all

Who strive to make themselves whole,
Smashed to bits by the Fall.

She is not the passionate creature Sappho was, nor is she the empty shell of "Epitaph". Her striving to make herself whole, in spite of the apparently ineradicable Fall, seems to be the normal human way which Muir finds praiseworthy. That he treats the subject rather

lightly may make it a poor poem but it does indicate a mind totally in control of the concept of death.

This later sense of balance and acceptance of death is very different from the emotions aroused by his strange experience when he thought he had encountered his friend J. F. Holms, seven years after the latter's death. He wrote about this incident in a letter " . . . I saw a young soldier, so like my dead friend that he could easily have been mistaken for him, dashing by on a motor cycle and he too had been in uniform the first time I met him. I was in one of the curious moods which sometimes come with convalescence: at any rate I did not know for a moment where I was; the worlds of life and death seemed to fuse for an instant".¹⁰ This was in 1941 when Muir and his wife had been ill one after the other and his consciousness of the nearness of death is not surprising. He explains the incident by stating that he has been for a short time in an area of experience in which his friend Holms had always existed:

. . . A chance face flying past
Had started it all and made a hole in space,
The hole you looked through always. I knew at last
The sight you saw there, the terror and mystery
Of unrepeatable life. . .

He is expressing relief rather than envy. "At last" he knows what it is that has given his dead friend the quality which had fascinated him since their first acquaintance. Willa Muir's autobiography describes, with good reason, her own dislike of Holms. It is to be regretted that her impatience never allowed her to analyse the reasons for her husband's interest in him. I would suggest that the reason is associated with that major theme of Muir's poetry, his concept of Eden and the Fall from Eden. The pattern of his life had been a series of falls from peace, security and self-confidence into various kinds of limbo in which he felt cut off, intercepted, from the former source of security, or from the ability to face up to the horrid memories which crushed in upon him and prevented

¹⁰Letter to Professor Raymond Tschumi, quoted in Butter II, p. 201.

him from expressing his whole personality, and therefore, his complete artistic potential. I would suggest that this period of illness and convalescence together with the emotional and financial strain of this period and the poet's sensitivity to the war in Europe brought him very close to the same emotions he had experienced as a young man in Glasgow, and later as he forced himself to relive these earlier experiences, under psychoanalysis in London. His interest in Holms, despite the latter's arrogance and selfishness, seems to me to have been motivated by his sympathy for a man who, though worlds apart from him in social background, yet served him as a model for his own fears of the frustration and stultification of his poetic talents. Muir never seems to have doubted that Holms was a genius who never quite got round to committing his great talents to paper. He seems to suggest a reason for this, in that the peculiar poetic vision of Holms was one of terror. Since his life was empty of achievement and his vision was of terror, is it any wonder that Holms

... ran in dust the burning comet's race
 Athirst for the ease of ash -- the eating itch
 To be elsewhere, nowhere, . . .

or that death, which for someone of Muir's vision was "a span-wide, world-wide ditch" became for Holms a mere "low dike/ So easy to leap?" At those periods of his life where Muir had to face the worst horrors of contemporary life, the terrors of his own subconscious memories, or the nearness of his own or his beloved friends' deaths and the consciousness of his own, as yet, unsatisfied artistic potential, his faith in innocence and in the possibility of Man's returning to, or even retaining consciousness of Eden, or "The Fable" side of human nature, must have been sorely tried. In this poem he recognises that Holms had the courage, similar perhaps to that he attributes to Sappho, to face

. . . the terror of the trysting place,
 The crowning test, the treachery and the glory.

We may doubt that the vision here attributed to Holms would have been capable of perceiving very much of the glory, but that he faced up to

the tryst means that the glory must be possible, at least for others, such as Muir; for as Muir said of Eliot "there must be some perception of the glory before the boredom and the horror can be seen at all".¹¹ It is not surprising that a sensitive poet, who had already lived through the faceless terrors of pre-war Europe and could only too clearly visualise the more tangible horrors then being experienced by his Continental friends, should have experienced a trance-like limbo between life and death as the result of the quite ordinary sight of a young soldier who resembled his dead friend in appearance and uniform. The similarity between the soldier and his friend gave him a certain insight, and a centre around which to shape his thoughts about death, and about the terrible responsibility of facing up to the fact of "unrepeatable life". It seems plain that the emotions crystallised around this experience, were typical of the poet's state of mind during the early years of the war. Indeed, when he lacked such an incident as a nucleus for poetic expression, his thoughts were likely to be more terrible. Holms' vision contained both "terror and mystery". Muir is conscious of a more positive result of the consciousness of death, as he shows in "The Letter" (1937). It is possible that this poem refers specifically to the breach that had occurred in his former friendship with C. M. Grieve (Hugh MacDiarmid). At any rate it describes the breaking up of old friendships and the hates resultant on such actions:

Tried friendship must go down perforce
Before the outward eating rage
And murderous heart of middle age.

But death "levels all" and the certainty of death may prevent the living from the worst follies of hatred, if those who rage would look and see:

Fixed in the body's final station,
The features of immortality.

Death gives Man a stature which is more than mortal, and

. . . That more is our salvation.
Now let us seize it. Now we can,

the poet demands. Such knowledge was not enough to cool MacDiarmid's

¹¹ Edwin Muir, The Present Age, p. 76.

fury but that is rather irrelevant here. A development of the central concept of this poem is found in the sonnet "Comfort in Self-Despise" (1946). The argument of the poem is that, just as when he has indulged his spite against a friend, he is reminded of "the pure and touching good no taunt can kill", so when he detests himself he may delve so deep in self-abuse that he will stumble upon "that good I scarcely dreamt I had." Both of these poems, one from each of the two volumes discussed here, show the double-edged nature of hatred, spite and death. They are both witty and show a poet very much in control of his material.

The quality of being startled by the obvious and familiar danger has already been discussed in connection with the poem "The Refugees." Just as "The Letter" and "Comfort in Self-Despise" show that one may be prevented, almost by accident, from the excessive hatred of one's self and one's friends, the longest poem in the two volumes, "The Voyage" (1945), shows how in the most harrowing and aimless situation one may be made conscious of a former lost innocence. It is based on a sailor's story told to Muir by Eric Linklater. The story exposes the doubts which rack a ship's company when, lost at sea, they fear that they are the sole survivors of some world-wide calamity, and that they are doomed to sail to and fro eternally. But their fears turn to a state of blessedness, removed from the dross of the familiar world, which becomes in their recollections "a legendary land". Eventually they realise that they are back on their true course and their old world slips back into place,

And it rose up, a sullen stain
Flawing the crystal firmament.
A wound! We felt the familiar pain
And knew the place to which we were sent.

Recognising the weary pain of normal life, they leave their enchanted and timeless state behind, but they have at least had the vision and can now see the familiar world in a different perspective. The poem reminds me of Muir's description, in Scottish Journey, of the effect on him of seeing the familiar landscape of the hill of Hoy in a new aspect. The experience of being outside of time came unsolicited to the sailors and arose out of their fears. Muir seems to believe

that, given a suitable opportunity, such as being lost, or having a startling experience of the familiar, one can be inspired to recollect the seemingly buried "Fable" aspect of life's voyage, despite the inevitable weight of consciousness of our contemporary "Story".

The contemporary "Story" of the war is implied in such poems as "To J. F. H. (1897 - 1934)" and "The Refugees". "The Lullaby" (1946) is the bitterly ironic title of a poem describing the dead soldiers of all armies "crooned to sleep" by the metallic cacophony of war. Contemporary war is paralleled by similar incidents in history, for example, in "The Return of the Greeks" (1945), in which the soldiers returning from Troy find things both "trite and strange". More specific references are included in "The Wayside Station" (1941) and "The River" (1943). The European situation adds a solid dimension to the familiar themes of time, the effects of time, and inevitability. "The Wayside Station" describes the poet's surroundings as he waits for his train. It is based on his daily morning wait to change trains at Leuchars Junction, during the period when he was working in Dundee. It is a fine example of his use of perspective. As the light of morning rises he describes objects further and further from his immediate situation till his eye spans a whole rural landscape and in the final sentence a little stream reverberates into a mighty river winding "through the day and time and war and history". In this last sentence what had been a simple descriptive poem takes on implications of the flow of time, and of a source of some unpolluted clarity muddled by association with time, war and history. It also seems to be the same river which reflects the scenery of a war-torn land in the next poem "The River". The line describing the river reflecting "the trained terrors, the well-practised partings" is reminiscent of the tense, distraught human conditions Muir had seen, and, unfortunately, was to see yet again, in Europe. That the scenes are reflected in the stream, a source of brightness and strength, provides a foil of innocence and natural purity for the treachery, terror and aimlessness of the people who live beside the river as

. . . The stream
 Runs on into the day of time and Europe,
 Past the familiar walls and friendly roads,
 Now thronged with dumb migrations, gods and altars
 That travel towards no destination.

The "disciplined soldiers" "conquer nothing" in the emptied lands.
 Like many of the poems of this period it ends in half-statement,
 half-question.

The stream flows on into what land, what place,
 Far past the other side of the burning world?

At least the stream seems to remain. "The Castle" (1945) describes
 an aspect of war, which though set here in some timeless castle,
 must have been repeated in every situation of war and vulnerability
 since time began. The enemy seemed to be no threat at all to the
 secure inhabitants of the keep. But there was one "little private
 gate/ A little wicked wicket gate". The poem concludes

We could do nothing, being sold;
 Our only enemy was gold,
 And we had no arms to fight it with.

In "Moses" (1945) there is a similar evil, the anarchy of the mass,
 incapable of contemplating with patience the dream, the vision
 of their mystic leader; a short-sightedness which has caused the
 wandering Jews to be cut off from Canaan, just as the seeming security
 of "The Castle" was destroyed, just as Adam and Eve were cut off
 from Eden, by similar human weakness. Yet if these pictures of various
 kinds of treachery or lack of faith give a grim view of humanity,
 we should remember that the poet has said that the opposite process
 is just as likely: the curse of the human flaw is no more eternal
 than the grace. "The Good Man in Hell" (1938) is an example of the
 possibility of faith in the eventual rightness of things overcoming
 the despair of seemingly endless damnation.

The poems which seem to typify the poet's attitude to
 the contemporary situation are "The Narrow Place" (1939) and "Scotland
 1941" (1941). Neither poem refers specifically to the war but both
 describe the processes which make war possible. "The Narrow Place"
 describes a generalised condition which is neither a place nor a time,

rather it is a state of being. It is "narrow", "meagre", "bleak". Its inhabitants, like the subject of "Epitaph", are empty of emotion for

They have lost all look of hate or love...

This is the state of emotional atrophy which creates the moral ambiguity Muir so rightly feared in his contemporaries. All they know is parsimony, the instinct to "keep but what they have". Land and people are in total harmony. The ground is "parsimonious" bearing only a few thin blades of grass and an apology for a tree, which, like the people, is "niggardly" and "envious". Yet with imagination the tree can flourish forth a "world of shade" and bountiful growth under which "we" may sleep. It is important that in the second last stanza, describing the blessings of the imagination, the poet speaks of "we", of communion, while all the rest of the poem, describing the impoverished reality outside of the "sleep" of the imagination, speaks of "you", of separateness. With the return to the use of "you" in the last stanza, the poet states that

It is your murdering eyes that make
The sterile hill, the standing lake,
And the leaf-breaking wind,

and he commands

Then shut your eyes and see,
Sleep on and do not wake
Till there is movement in the lake,
And the club-headed water-serpents break
In emerald lightnings through the slime,
Making a mark on Time.

There is compassion in the command to sleep on in the enchanted state of the imagination, the state that makes "we" of "you", for soon enough, he concludes, Time will make its presence felt, which is reality enough without the self-motivated reality which comes of cutting oneself off from the imagination, "The Fable", and closeness to one's fellows. The entwined water-serpents are a symbol of Time outside of Man's control. The blinkers he imposes on the imagination are however subject to his control. Obviously the two states described can be taken as the Fallen world and the possible return to Eden, but they also fit very closely to what Muir saw as the two possible attitudes to the war in contemporary

poetry; the pessimistic tendency to trust the facts of reality, the facts of the newspapers, for example, and the belief that another kind of Europe was still possible based on the imagination and love.

It is as well to remember that the war for Muir was only an extreme result of the same choking off of the imagination and the resultant moral confusion which he had condemned in almost all of his prose writings about the Scottish culture. "Scotland 1941" identifies Scotland with the race of Adam, and bitterly castigates the Calvinist ethic of Knox, Melville and Peden which has turned us into a race which takes "no pride but pride in pelf". The former wholeness of which "all may read the folio of our fable" atrophies in our own day and is replaced by

Mean heirlooms of each fainter generation,
mere shams created by those sham bards, Burns and Scott, whom Muir had already condemned in Scott and Scotland and Scottish Journey. He regrets the passing of a simple receptive state of mind such as was known to the Ballad society which "roofed in"

The green road winding up the ferny brae,
that road which, along with Christianity, leads into an acceptance of the supernatural as manifest, real; an equal part of a way of life which also includes an acceptance of suffering and death. His bitter attacks, here and elsewhere, on the post-Reformation Scottish mind is a reflection of his regret for the loss of the old comprehensiveness of life such as he had known in Orkney, where every aspect of life was explicable in terms of legend, and Christian and pagan myth were indistinguishable. It is the loss of such comprehensiveness which informed his desire and regret for a cosmic order. It is a process of loss which he saw accelerating in his own day and he must have realised that the old manifestations of this kind of life, about which he had rejoiced in pre-war Europe, were likely to be obliterated. Fortunately for him he was later to encounter proof of the tenacity of such attitudes in his religious experiences in Rome, but for the present he could only regret the spiritual and cultural poverty of the life which he knew best, that

of his own land. There is no attempt to link Scotland with the war, but his experiences of the ignorance and prejudice of what should have been a cultured town, St. Andrews, during these war years are undoubtedly inseparable from his castigation of the Reformers, and his linking of the order they and the "sham bards" destroyed with all that was then being destroyed in Europe has already been traced in the discussion of his prose works.

I have so far been discussing those poems which deal with the darker side of the poet's vision, time, evil, moral evasiveness, death, treachery and war. Even these poems, it can be seen, contain some hope for contemporary man, though at times this hope is only implied by contrast, suggestion, or the poet's faith in the repetitive rise and fall of human history. I should now like to examine some of the poems which manifest the poet's quiet affirmation of humanity, nature and civilization.

There are poems, such as "The Wayside Station", which begin with a celebration of nature and natural human activity and end, as we have seen, on a more anxious note. More typical of Muir's works, however, are poems like "The Little General" (1938) which set human activity within a framework of nature, and the traditions associated with nature and the natural cycle. The ancient annual shooting of birds is

. . . like the pious ritual of a faith,
Hunter and quarry in the boundless trap...

It is a

Perennial emblem painted on the shield...

The heraldic imagery reminds one of the limited state of evil in "The Grove" from which the poet had regretted our passing beyond into the present time of "The Narrow Place". Life takes on this heraldic aspect for Muir when it has the feeling of timelessness; each thing at one with every other thing, unique yet oft-repeated and therefore symbolic of a harmony and unity beyond itself.

"The Transmutation" (1945) is a fine poem which shows that such an attitude to nature was a source of strength to the poet at this time.

Since everything changes, its unique and brief existence also exists in memory beyond change. Realising this, we may relish the memory for,

There incorruptible the child plays still,
The lover waits beside the trysting tree,
The good hour spans its heaven, and the ill,
Rapt in their silent immortality,

As in commemoration of a day
That having been can never pass away.

Taking this view of life, everything falls into place and evil is acceptable because it is seen to be limited. The following poem in the volume, "Time Held in Time's Despite" (1945), posits a faith in some external power which "when all was lost", guaranteed that

Impersonally soul and soul embrace,
And incorruptibly are bodies bound.

This residue, the virgin territory of the incorruptible cohesiveness of life, is forever fresh and lends its fresh vision to the world and to life's journey. Whatever the external guarantees may be, the attitude of treating each aspect of life with awe and innocence is the same as that of "The Transmutation". A more traditional nature poem which states this awe of the unique thing set in a cosmic harmony with an almost oriental grace and simplicity is "The Bird" (1943). It is also one of several poems from this period which pulse with the poet's delight in nature. The last sentence describes the bird sweeping and singing through a sky, making him confident that

The wide-winged soul itself can ask no more
Than such a pure, resilient and endless floor
For its strong-pinioned plunging and soaring and upward and
upward springing.

The ascending rhythm of this poem must surely characterise a poet very much at one with the world. It is followed by the poem "The Guess" (1941) which seems to describe a dream which reminds the poet of

Man's natural innocence in Paradise. He concludes that
... a long forgotten guess
Had shown, past chaos, the natural shape we take.

"A Birthday" (1943) celebrates this new found confidence which arises from the receptiveness of all his senses, and as a result of this he gathers to his heart

Beast, insect, flower, earth, water, fire,
In absolute desire,
As fifty years ago.

This new mood takes him back then to his first childhood's vision of the world with its hunger for each new and unique experience. He has returned to this state because he can now discern life and its pattern "whole or almost whole". The last poem of The Voyage, "In Love for Long" (1946), continues with this new note of acceptance and joy. I call it new because I have been concentrating till now on the darker poems, but the poet says his feeling is one which he has long held:

I've been in love for long
With what I cannot tell.

The feeling is "intangible" but its effects are quite specific -- it is a return to a limited version of Eden, which return, limited or no, makes all of life and nature, of good and evil, bearable and harmonious. He does not give the feeling a religious name but the joy of the poem and the impossible natural friendships it creates remind me of the magical sweetness which poured forth from Christ in the Old English poem "The Panther"; indeed this group of poems is marked by the same enthusiasm and freshness as many early Christian poems, though Muir was, as always, guarded about defining his feelings about religion. This love, he feels, creates

A little paradise
Held in the world's vice.

It is a fleeting emotion, but as we have seen in discussing "The Transmutation", such moments, having been, cannot pass away, so that emblematically they remain

. . . like the happy doe
That keeps its perfect laws
Between the tiger's paws
And vindicates its cause.

Each recollection of such frozen moments in experience becomes a source of joy in itself. The poems take on this child-like simplicity,

with all the stylization and appeal of heraldic devices. Their effectiveness only goes to prove that Muir was right to reject the dreary cataloguing of newspaper headings as his type of poetry. By creating his own timeless emblems he conveys his individuality with an authority which cannot fail to be convincing. Nobody who reads the group of poems which occupies the last few pages of The Voyage, can fail to be moved to hope by them.

It is, perhaps, natural that, finding this new peace in these troubled times, and, surely, knowing that his poetry had achieved a greater simplicity of effect, Muir should have come to concern himself with the nature of being a poet. There are several poems which deal with this theme. One of the poet's functions is to retell old tales. "Twice-Done, Once-Done" (1946) states the poet's view concisely:

Nothing yet was ever done
Till it was done again

and,

Even a story to be true
Must repeat itself.

In this scheme of things the poet's part would seem to be minimal, the stories almost telling themselves. The poet, however, to communicate effectively with his contemporaries, uses the story as a medium. Thus Muir, for example, can write many poems by means of the Eden myth or the Troy myth without being merely repetitive. For example, Penelope's predicament in "The Return of Odysseus" (1943) expresses obliquely but effectively the position of any artist creating and recreating his vision when there appears to be no hope of that vision remaining meaningful. Muir does not state the comparison but I am sure he was conscious of the parallel with the artist in war-time, indeed it is one of the best statements of his faith in art, and in the repetition of old, familiar things in the midst of chaos and meaninglessness. It is a sign of Muir's growing poetic ability that the simple story takes on, I think, without forcing the matter, this additional interpretation. Penelope reflects, as Muir himself and many contemporary artists must have done at this time,

'Here I do nothing
 Or less than nothing, making an emptiness .
 Amid disorder, weaving, unweaving the lie
 The day demands. Odysseus, this is duty,
 To do and undo, to keep a vacant gate
 Where order and right and hope and peace can enter.
 Oh will you ever return? Or are you dead,
 And this wrought emptiness my ultimate emptiness?'

For Odysseus one might substitute Peace, or something implying a time when art and poetry seem to have a creative effect on human action. And, of course, Penelope continued to weave her ancient legend and seeming emptiness while, unknown to her, Odysseus was on his way. Muir writes of his own face, the surface with which he countenanced the world,

I should have worn a terror-mask, should be
 A sight to frighten hope and faith away,
 Half charnel field, half battle and rutting ground.
 Instead I am a smiling summer sea.¹²

Like Penelope, he does not frighten hope and faith away and faces the world with seeming confidence. "The Rider Victory" (1944) describes a work of art, timelessly commemorating a time now past in the present of the poem. It was a time of war and it is perhaps hopeful that the poet pretends to be writing at a time when peace has been regained. It also serves as an emblem of victory and peace in any period of war; it is "legendary". Such legends are more meaningful, Muir writes in "Reading in Wartime" (1943), "than all the carnage". Artistic effort tells him that,

Though the world has bled
 For four and a half years,
 we are all united one with another, and that the thing which unites
 us is art, for we have all at some time,
 Searching an ancient book,
 Folk-tale or country song
 tried to fit the pieces of our chaos together
 And gather an image whole.

¹²"The Face" (1942).

It is a large and optimistic claim to make for art; it is an even more remarkable claim to make for Man's capability to be affected by art. In "All We" (1946) he describes the poet's peculiar sensitivity to nature in terms of the marriage of poet and earth. Poets cannot but take pleasure in the craftsmanship of Nature for they too know

. . . the delicacy
Of bringing shape to birth,
and also work "to fashion the transitory" into something timeless, oft-repeated and inspiring. "The Three Mirrors" (1946) sums up his attitudes to his job of poet. The first mirror into which he looked showed the world all askew, the second showed it all innocent and new turning into the world of the first mirror while still the memory of the former innocence is "locked" together with the Fallen order. The third mirror he knows shows an interpretation of life which is tranquil, legendary and wise. He does not claim to know this wisdom, but he knows that it exists and that there is a possibility that he may be able to frame his thoughts in this way.

There are two possible explanations, not mutually exclusive, for the growing confidence of the poetry; his religious experiences and the strength he derived from his marriage. We know from his autobiography that he surprised himself one evening in 1939 by starting to repeat the Lord's Prayer, without consciously desiring to do so. This was during a period when his wife was critically ill. We know too, that he re-discovered the beauty of the Bible and read it extensively. There are poems, as we have seen, such as "Robert The Bruce: To Douglas in Dying", which contain Christian references, but there are others, such as "Scotland 1941", which demonstrate his disgust with, at any rate, the Scottish form of institutionalised religion. His religion would seem to be no more exclusively or rigidly Christian than, say, Thomas the Rhymer's. As Kathleen Raine says, Muir was Christian "by convergence of symbol".¹³

¹³Kathleen Raine, Defending Ancient Springs (Oxford, 1967), p. 12.

While the world round about them testified to a loss of innocence, the relationship of the poet and his wife seems to have existed in an almost prelapsarian wholeness, resilient to the knocks and impingements of "The Story". This is one explanation for the development of the poetry in a direction other than might have been expected. Their mutual trust and support is clearly stated in the twin biographies but it is also borne out by the remarkable phenomenon of a poet writing his first love poems when he was well into his fifties, and as Mrs. Muir readily admits, written to a woman racked by illness and the strain of overwork. They are restrained, dedicated, joyful poems, placing the love at the centre of the poet's response to the world and to legend so that he sees all things "not beautiful or rare in every part" but, like his wife, "as they were meant to be".¹⁴ Things fall into place and he can accept them as they are. This must be close to the concept he thought of as the wisdom of seeing into the third mirror in "The Three Mirrors". However it is not always as easy for him to be sustained in this way. In "The Window" (1946) when the world's "giant flaw" passes before his sight and he sees both "earth and heaven in jeopardy", he turning, presumably to his wife, sees

The wrinkle writhe across your brow,
And felt time's cap clapped on my head.

But on the whole he can see "life roll by in thunder" while the "single song of two" remains for him "a wonder" which can raise him into "tranquil light".¹⁵

Muir has progressed towards a state in which he has returned to something like the timeless calms of

My childhood, all a myth
Enacted in a distant isle¹⁶

¹⁴

"The Confirmation" (1943).

¹⁵"Song" (Why should your face so please me) (1946).

¹⁶"The Myth" (1945).

in which his oneness with nature and the senses is complete:

I never felt so much
Since I have felt at all.¹⁷

Time is no longer a fearful predator, a closed circle, but a framework which foils and intensifies experience:

. . . that we who fall
Through time's long ruin should weave this phantom ground
And in its ghostly borders gather all,¹⁸

and by intensifying, makes memorable, fabulous, immortal, such "That having been can never pass away".¹⁹ "The Fable" is no longer for Muir, an occasional "glimmer of the autumn light",²⁰ it is all but tangible in life itself, that is, "it is not by dreaming of another world that he finds salvation, but by a profounder vision of what goes on in this one".²¹ The jailer is not time but sheer love of life,

A little paradise
Held in the world's vice,²²

an indefatigable resilience to evil, to the crushing certainty of the Fall and the repetition of the Fall. It is a conviction that, however brutal and terrifying the world, there is still the possibility of affirmation, of a force such as Muir had always known in his subconscious, but was now for the first time beginning to assimilate into his consciousness of the everyday, "The Story".

¹⁷"A Birthday"(1943).

¹⁸"Transmutation" (1945).

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰"Variations on a Time Theme II" (1934).

²¹Butter I, p. 76.

²²"In Love for Long" (1946).

CONCLUSION

In 1946 Stephen Spender wrote that the best poetry of the war years had been written "by older men and women whom the war effort almost passed over, if it did not entirely do so . . . T. S. Eliot, Edith Sitwell, Edwin Muir and Lawrence Binyon".¹ Spender was a close friend and correspondent of Muir's, yet I find his remark strangely jingoistic, deriving from an attitude which must ultimately be seen as Romantic when compared with the frame of mind which shaped Muir's wartime poetry. Spender seems to have been blinded by the lack of a busy, surface concern with war in the works of Muir and the other poets he mentions. Elizabeth Jennings rather over-states the case, but she points to the reason for Muir's seeming lack of involvement:

Muir was a visionary poet whose poems were both the source and the fulfilment of his vision, they did not crystallize a past experience but embodied it even while it was being experienced. There was no question of feverishly seeking for appropriate imagery. The poetic, but also the visionary experience came to him in terms of the image.

That is, for Muir, the image was not a device to clarify his concept but a starting point, what Eliot would call a catalyst. This, as much as his horror of systems and codes, isolates him from any kind of rhetoric or didacticism.

Yet it cannot be denied that, with the exception of those few poems discussed in the previous chapter, there is a surprising lack of specific references to the war in Muir's poetry of this time, and it would be ridiculous to claim that he saw the writing of poems dedicated to the return of peace as didactic. I have tried to demonstrate

¹Stephen Spender, Poetry Since 1939, (London, 1946), p. 10.

²Elizabeth Jennings, "Edwin Muir as Poet and Allegorist", London Magazine, VII, (1960), p. 43.

that the poetry of the war years forms a turning point in Muir's work. Yet was the improvement in his poetry a result of his reaction to the war, or simply another stage in his late development? It would be impossible and ill-advised to attempt a definite answer to this question, but there are several points which ought to be considered.

It would be extremely unlikely, given Muir's own personal history of security passing into chaos, together with his knowledge of European conditions and the evidence of his correspondence from such friends as Hermann Broch who were living in Nazi-occupied Europe, that a poet as sensitive to suffering as Muir should let the war simply pass over his head. If proof is needed of his involvement it is surely to be found in his desire to rush back to the devastation of the Continent immediately the war was over, to become actively engaged in trying to restore life to its former order. This is not the action of a man cut off from the effort of war, but it does point to a distinction, which Spender fails to make, between man and poet.

We know that Muir was preoccupied during these years with the reassessment of his own identity. He frequently seemed cut off from life by "feelings of bewilderment, of baffled loss, of mental trouble, of 'conclusion without fulfilment'".³ He later wrote about these feelings of bewilderment in the poem "The Interceptor", which describes such a cutting off device in terms of a failure of courage. We are reminded of the peculiarly receptive nature of Muir's awareness, and of the words his psychoanalyst Maurice Nicholl wrote, in a more general context: "no-one must expect to be in contact with the unconscious without being constantly humiliated".⁴ During the early war years, Muir was in the process of re-examining his own life. The completion of The Story and the Fable seems to have given him a new confidence, but the drudgery

³Belonging, p. 198.

⁴Maurice Nicholl, Dream Psychology (London, 1917), p. 187.

of his ordinary, day-to-day life must have been humiliation enough for any poet, without the additional burden of the pain, which Nicholl speaks of, in a man who was more or less constantly on the threshold of the unconscious, and who associated the inner pain with the violence and chaos of the outer world. If his wartime poetry lacks the brave rhetoric of his younger contemporaries it may be because, seeing things on a larger scale, he was conscious of "the sun-and star-shaped killers" gorging and playing beneath his own, and every, Fallen "smiling" face, whether it be the face of an easily-identified enemy or not.⁵ As I have tried to show, the brutality of the war was only an extreme form of the evil Muir everywhere saw co-mingled with good, in his own thoughts as much as anywhere else. The beginnings of his coming to terms with this knowledge is evident in poems of this period, such as "In Love for Long". The process continues in his later poems. For example, it was only a short time before his death that he finally came to terms with his long and tortured guilt feelings concerning the early deaths of his two brothers, in the poem "The Brothers."

Similarly in his later, post-war period he seems more ready to write poems obviously derived from the war, such poems as "The Interrogation", "The Good Town", "The Horses", "After a Hypothetical War", "The Last War", "Petrol Shortage" and "The Day Before The Last Day". Obviously, aspects of the war had had time to shape themselves to the poet's capacity for balancing good and evil. Muir wrote, in his notebook, describing his attitude to the revision of his autobiography:

The picture I am trying to present is of power growing more and more impersonal as it becomes more mechanically perfect, and of the greater part of mankind; its victims, who contrive, in the greater and greater stresses, to remain human. Omnipotent impersonality on the one side, fumbling and unequipped humanity on the other.⁶

⁵ "The Face".

⁶ cited in Butter II, p. 247.

Thirty years earlier he had written in Transition:

Nothing is wholly real until it finds an image
as well as a formula for itself. For the image is
the record that the conception has been steeped in
the conscious and then accepted by the deeper
potencies of the mind.⁷

The war became such an image in the later period, as found, for example, in the two famous poems "The Combat" and "The Horses". The former is not about any specific war but it has an immediacy which makes it applicable to any struggle between fierce brutality and unvanquishable persistence. It is based upon a dream, and possibly upon Muir's childhood memories, but it is difficult to imagine that it is not an image of the war "steeped" in "the deeper potencies of the mind", till it takes on an archetypal and heraldic simplicity. The struggle is endless, but even in that there is hope. "The Horses" also develops out of an image of war. Cosmic destruction is the starting point for a penetration by fabulous forces of innocence into the Fallen state. Such clearly perceived, clearly expressed, responses to war can best be described by Muir's own words:

As easy utterance of harmonious words,
Spontaneous syllables bodying forth a world.⁸

I have tried to demonstrate that the war did not pass over Muir's consciousness. He responded to it in his own way and made use of his response in his own time, in his own terms. During the war years his concept of himself as a poet, and of the poet's role in society, and in Scotland, took shape, as I have tried to show. That this happened during a time of war and the growing dangers of such impersonal forces as produce war, seems to me to be no accident, as is borne out by his review of Hölderlin, written during those dark months of 1938 when the inevitability of war became a certainty:

Time has its might; all things return to chaos and
are formed again; and during those periods of
deprivation the poet must maintain his faith in the
return of light.

⁷ Edwin Muir, Transition (London, 1926), pp. 195-96.

⁸ "The Labyrinth".

⁹ Edwin Muir, "Friedrich Holderlin", The Scotsman, December 5, 1938, p. 13.

That he maintained this faith throughout the war years with all the attendant personal troubles it indirectly brought on him, is justification enough for this study of the writings of those years. That his tenacity to this faith "in the return of light" ultimately reached beyond the immediate chaos to a greater confidence and maturity of achievement, possibly demonstrates that the poet's struggle to unite his own "Story" to his belief in "The Fable" during this period, is indeed a watershed in the poet's development. Long before the war, he wrote of Dostoievski that

his whole work is the demonstration of a sort of unconscious theology within us, a sort of religion working in the subconscious minds of men like an ineluctable process,¹⁰ and demanding an end, a solution, a poise, a harmony.

One might fittingly apply this to his own work during the war years.

¹⁰ Edwin Muir, Latitudes (London, 1924), p. 57.

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