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Eternity's Unhidden Shore:  
Time in the Writings of Edwin Muir (1887-1959)

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We speak of this time and that time, and these times and those times: “How long ago since he said this?” “How long ago since he did this?” “How long ago since I saw that?” “This syllable is twice as long as that single short syllable.” These words we say and hear, and we are understood and we understand. They are quite commonplace and ordinary, and still the meaning of these very same things lies deeply hid and its discovery is still to come.<sup>1</sup>

The feeling for eternity is a hypocritical one, for eternity feeds on time. The fountain retains its identity only because of the continuous pressure of water. Eternity is the time that belongs to dreaming, and the dream refers back to waking life, from which it borrows all its structures. Of what nature, then, is that waking time in which eternity takes root?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, XI:22, *Confessions and Enchiridion*, Albert C. Outler tr. (London: SCM Press, 1955), p.260.

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Colin Smith tr. (New York: Humanities Press, 1962), p.423.

## Abstract

The thesis discusses the subject of time as dealt with in the writings of Edwin Muir, exploring the ways in which his poetry, novels, and critical writings articulate a range of perspectives regarding the nature of time and its relation to human experience. Following the adaptation of ideas through Muir's career, a trajectory is traced from his early writings in which time is seen as a destructive power antithetical to life through to the celebration of mortality in his late writings. Integral to this development was his persistent interrogation of the relationship between time and eternity.

Identifying the important role of Muir's autobiographical method, this thesis begins by exploring his desire to obtain an objective view of human life by establishing a critical distance in his writings between the subject being presented and the imagination that presents it. To this end, his creative writings often incorporate myths, biblical allegories, heraldic symbolism, and surreal abstractions to present archetypal or timeless events and situations. In doing so, Muir is seen drawing on an array of literary and philosophical influences, many of which relate to his adolescence and formative adulthood in Glasgow. His rural childhood in Orkney and his early contact with Presbyterian and Evangelical Christianity made a lasting impression on his imagination with the resultant preoccupation with Eden and the Fall being dominant features of his poetry. Often dealt with in an abstract way in his poetry, Eden is frequently associated with his childhood on Wyre in his autobiographical writings, with the Fall, in Muir's theorizing, forming the moment at which time becomes of relevance to humanity.

Critically under-appreciated as ephemera and juvenilia, Muir's earliest prose and poetry in *The New Age* magazine between 1913 and 1923 convey a strong sense of his desire to engage with the popular debates of the day regarding contemporary literary and social matters. For this reason, a significant amount of space has been given in this thesis to allow these writings to be re-evaluated; not just as portents of his later work, but also as important contributions to the vibrant journal and magazine culture of the period.

Offering substantive detail to sketch the relevant biographical context, the essays, critical monographs and volumes of poetry are discussed chronologically and with reference to each other to allow the development of Muir's ideas to be seen as an organic evolution rather than as a series of philosophical epiphanies. However, the significance of Muir's reconciliation to Christianity in 1939 is highlighted as the single most important creative breakthrough of his mature adulthood.

The extensive range of Muir's critiques of Scottish and European culture, and his essays on the relationship between literature and society more generally, underline his position as a modernist writer immersed in the affairs of his time. Through detailing Muir's creative and philosophical struggles with himself and modernity (which he felt he had fallen into through a time-accident) he is seen repeatedly reaffirming his commitment to exploring the nature of time and its meaning for human society.

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To my wife Jackie all I can say is simply thank you, thank you for everything.

## Abbreviations

<i>Auto</i>	<i>An Autobiography</i> (1954)
<i>CP</i>	<i>The Complete Poems</i> (1991)
<i>PT</i>	<i>Poor Tom</i> (1932)
<i>SF</i>	<i>The Story and The Fable</i> (1940)
<i>SL</i>	<i>Selected Letters of Edwin Muir</i> (1974)
<i>TM</i>	<i>The Marionette</i> (1927)
<i>TNA</i>	<i>The New Age Magazine</i>
<i>TTB</i>	<i>The Three Brothers</i> (1931)

## Introduction

### 'A Return to Time': Some Theoretical Contexts

Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration, the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present, the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire: the influence which is moved not, but moves.<sup>1</sup>

P.B. Shelley's famous claim that 'poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world' is far more than the suggestion that poets affect social policy; it signals the belief that poetry has the potential to convey anagogical realities that lie far beyond the mundane realms of authorial intention and literary reception. It is 'less their own spirit than the spirit of the age' which is voiced through such poetry, argues Shelley, the 'all-penetrating spirit' of modernity which breathes life into their 'impassioned conceptions respecting man and nature'.<sup>2</sup> Modernity, in this context, is the ever-present moment as lived, the co-ordinates of mankind's position in space and time; positioned, as we experience ourselves to be, between an ever-receding past and an always approaching future.

By Shelley's account, the poet holds a special position as an orator for the 'spirit of the age' revealing the opinions and preoccupations of the day from a privileged position, as it were, live from the scene. However, in suggesting that every age has its own specific character or 'spirit' that will be as different in nature from those which precede it and those which follow it, Shelley appears also to be assuming that our experience of time is unquestionably sequential and that our understanding of time, in itself, is beyond revision. As poetic and influential as Shelley's account of literary inspiration may be, it unintentionally underlines the complex relationship between our understanding of time as an abstract concept and the ways in which we represent and discuss our experience of time in literature. Shelley employs the paradoxical metaphor of the future casting 'gigantic shadows' back onto the present to allude to the classical Greek association of poetry with prophecy, and in doing so also demonstrates how the ways in which we discuss time do not comply with our rational conceptual understanding of it.

Shelley's archetypal poet is a prophet of the present, and in the opening essay from *Transition: Essays on Contemporary Literature* (1926), Edwin Muir interrogates this notion that poets are orators for their age, arguing that

about the spirit of the age it is almost impossible to make an incontestable assertion. We do not know its attributes, nor how it operates and to what end, nor why it is what it is [...] Yet subjectively, in our experience, we feel

<sup>1</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry (1821)', in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat eds. (London: W.W. Norton Co., 2002), p.535.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.535.

it in a quite a different way. We feel it as a thing pressing in upon us, a force against which we can never be prepared, for we do not know its strength, its attributes, or the means by which it operates.<sup>3</sup>

Despite Muir's rejection of a romantic view of the *Zeitgeist* as some transcendent 'force of immense resource' which casts out parts of itself experimentally to establish its true expression,<sup>4</sup> he upholds Shelley's assertion that the literary artist still fulfils a crucial role in expressing the particularities of his age. In Muir's account, however, this is neither a passive nor prophetic role, it is an artistic struggle and he argues that the writer

will not feel like a reed through which the spirit of the age blows; that theory of the Zeit Geist will be refuted for him by his ever-present struggle to impose form upon his material.<sup>5</sup>

When discussing this artistic struggle to find voice Muir was drawing directly from his own experience, writing 'The Zeit Geist' the same year that his first collected volume, *First Poems* (1925), appeared, some twelve years after his first poem was published in the *New Age* magazine. However, this struggle as Muir envisages it, is more than a personal one; it is the artist striking out against, and yet simultaneously, on behalf of, his age. Rather than being a 'mirror' of the present (or indeed the future) as Shelley suggests, Muir's literary artist is someone who provides a dialectic space in which new ideas become differentiated from their antecedents:

All great writers are of their time, though they sometimes think of themselves as outside and against it; and when they attain expression in art the age is interrogating itself, is being differentiated for the purpose of self-realisation.<sup>6</sup>

In his editorial preface to Muir's *The Present Age from 1914* (1939), Bonamy Dobrée asserts that the writer is simultaneously a 'unique individual' and 'the product of his time':

How ever much we regret it, we have to abandon Shelley's contention that 'poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world', though we need not altogether throw over the position: [...] literature is, rather, a growth from life itself, a part of life, not its harvest only. We can go further and say that it is so ravelled with life that it can be described also as the soil and the seed.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> 'The Zeit Geist', *Calendar of Modern Letters*, II (October, 1925), pp.112-118. Reprinted in *Transition: Essays on Contemporary Literature* (London: Hogarth, 1926), pp.3-4. Cf. Margery Palmer McCulloch, *Scottish and International Themes in the Work of Edwin Muir and Neil M. Gunn* [Thesis 6500] (Glasgow University, 1982), pp.3-4.

<sup>4</sup> Muir (1926), p.3.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>7</sup> *The Present Age from 1914* (London: The Cresset Press, 1939), p.17.

Recasting Shelley's proposition and embellishing it with an additional layer of post-Romantic metaphor, Dobrée's suggestion nevertheless echoes the principles of self-realizing development and organic growth that lie behind Muir's depiction of the creative struggle to 'attain expression'.

Being a writer whose early work does not fit comfortably into any modernist school of formal experimentalism, and yet who nevertheless remained committed to critiquing modernity and its prevalent literary fashions, Muir's own writings embody the differentiating paradigm he synthesizes in 'The Zeit Geist' (1925). Instead, his writings offer the opportunity to explore an attitude of modernism which has far more to do with speculative enquiry than formal innovation or linguistic experimentation, and provide a sustained exploration of what living in a specific time and place means in relation to our understanding of what time is and how it functions. As Peter Butter's analysis of Muir's poetry supports, Muir's interest in time was not motivated by a desire to imaginatively live in the past nor to see into future; it was inspired by his longing to uncover the source of the 'harmony and wholeness' for which 'he felt himself to be a spokesman':<sup>8</sup>

The poet is not a prophet in the sense of being able to foretell the future. He cannot say that there will or will not be an atomic war, nor that after such a war life will or will not be renewed; and Muir does not try to do so. He is a prophet only in the sense of having an unusually impassioned awareness of the forces working in the present.<sup>9</sup>

As readers then, what can we learn about an age's notion of itself from such artistic utterances as those which Muir offers? Or, to go a step further, what do literary representations and discussions of time from a given period tell us about the contemporary conceptions of time which inform them? One approach toward answering this question is provided by Mark Currie in *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (2007) in which he identifies the 'need for a theoretical account of time' which can be employed to discuss more fully 'temporal structures and representations of time' in literature.<sup>10</sup> With the novel as its primary focus, Currie's discussion forms a response to David Wood's suggestion in *The Deconstruction of Time* (1988) that a 'return to time as the focus and horizon of all our thoughts and experience' is a necessary stage in contemporary theory given the 'linguistic turn' which took place in twentieth-century philosophy. Initiating dialogue between the philosophy of time and studies of 'temporality

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<sup>8</sup> Willa Muir, *Belonging: A Memoir* (London: Hogarth, 1968), p.316.

<sup>9</sup> Peter H. Butter, *Edwin Muir* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1962), p.98.

<sup>10</sup> Mark Currie, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: EUP, 2007), pp.1 & 45.

of narrative’,<sup>11</sup> Currie explores the use of tense, narrative delivery and the reader’s experience of the representation of time, and uncovers the tacit ‘conventional narrative’ flow of time in the novel, ultimately suggesting the possibility of synthesizing a ‘metaphysics of time’ influenced by an understanding of our experience of narratives.<sup>12</sup>

In *About Time: Einstein’s Unfinished Revolution* (1995), Paul Davies explores various visual, metaphorical and conceptual forms which the representation of time can take, from classical Greek philosophy’s engagement with the competing ‘concepts of eternity and transience’<sup>13</sup> to post-Relativity science. Davies argues for further critical interrogation of the relationship between our experience of time as a ‘flowing’ succession of incidents, which, he argues, is ‘the result of cultural conditioning’,<sup>14</sup> and our assumption that time flows in accordance with the direction of the thermodynamic ‘arrow of time’.<sup>15</sup> Illustrating the discussion with adages from classical Greek and Latin literature alongside quotes from physicists, mathematicians and twentieth-century thinkers, Davies’s exploration moves near-seamlessly from Antonius’s suggestion that ‘all things from eternity are of like forms and come round in a circle’ to Albert Einstein’s conclusion that ‘the distinction between past, present and future is only an illusion’.<sup>16</sup> Citing Walter Ong’s ‘Evolution, Myth and Poetic Vision’ (1966),<sup>17</sup> Davies forges interdisciplinary connections to explore the recurring forms of linear and cyclic models of duration. Western art and literature, argues Davies, despite being ‘strongly influenced by the dominance of linear time, nevertheless betrays much hidden and occasionally overt cyclicity’,<sup>18</sup> an indicator of the epistemological distance that exists between theories of ‘physical time’ and our subjective experience of ‘psychological time’.<sup>19</sup> In ‘Evolution, Myth and Poetic Vision’,<sup>20</sup> however, Ong is less convinced by what he calls the twentieth-century poets’ ‘fascinating

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<sup>11</sup> Currie (2007), p.1. This ‘linguistic turn’ is illustrated in Quentin Skinner’s adaptation of ‘the history of ideas’ and historiographic methodologies: ‘we shall do well to concentrate on the concepts we employ to describe and appraise our moral and political world. This in turn means that we shall need to focus on the various terms—the entire normative vocabulary—in which such concepts are habitually expressed. The special characteristic of the terms I am singling out is thus that (to invoke J. L. Austins jargon) they have a standard application to perform one of two contrasting ranges of speech-acts [...] there cannot be a history of unit ideas as such, but only a history of the various uses to which they have been put by different agents at different times’. Quentin Skinner, ‘Rhetoric and Conceptual Change’ in *Redescriptions: Yearbook of Political Thought and Conceptual History*, by Karl Palonen ed., Vol.3 (University of Jyväskylä, 1999), pp.60-62. Cf. Paul A. Rahe, ‘Quentin Skinner’s “Third way”’ in *The Review of Politics*, Vol.62, No.2 (Spring 2000), pp.395-398.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.151.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Davies, *About Time: Einstein’s Unfinished Revolution* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1996), p.9.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p.22.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.15.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.28 & 70.

<sup>17</sup> *Comparative Literature Studies* 3 (University of Illinois Press, January 1966), pp.1-20.

<sup>18</sup> Davies (1996), p.29.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.283.

<sup>20</sup> Walter Ong, ‘Evolution, Myth and Poetic Vision’ (1966), in P.T. Landsberg ed., *The Enigma of Time* (Bristol: Adam Hilger, 1982), pp.213-231.

little dreams of recurrence',<sup>21</sup> and chooses to underline the 'influence of Darwin upon poetic and artistic imagination' rather than the more recent theories regarding 'cosmic' and 'organic'<sup>22</sup> time.

Given that Currie's 2007 monograph echoes similar concerns to Ong's 1966 essay, particularly regarding the urgent 'need for a theoretical account of time' in regard to literature, it is clear that much of the groundwork still remains to be done. Informed by Currie's exploration of narrative and temporal representation, as well as his analysis of Ricoeur's critique of the *Zeitroman*,<sup>23</sup> this thesis argues that the representation of time holds an essential position in Muir's writings. Currie describes Ricoeur's definition of the *Zeitroman*, exemplified by Proust's epic serial novel *In Search of Lost Time* (1913-22) and Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (1924), as literature in which time is not necessarily the primary subject or focus but yet forms the central driving concept. As is the case in Joyce's *Ulysses* and Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, the novel 'about time' forms a presentation of, as well as a meditation on, the subjectivity of time. This is no less true of Muir's writings 'about time', where narrative delivery, structure and linguistic considerations are equally important in constructing mimetic and meditative renderings of temporal experience.

Muir's writings have been routinely criticized for being stylistically anachronistic and lacking the hallmarks of formal or linguistic experiment which reputedly define modernist literature. Edwin Morgan goes as far as to suggest that Muir's poetry is often 'rather bland' and that it lacks the 'vigour' which he sees in the work of Hugh MacDiarmid.<sup>24</sup> While recognizing Muir's dexterity for blank verse and his ability to write 'very fluent and often quite moving poetry', Morgan still asserts that Muir's 'plainer virtues' reveal him to be a poet 'out of step with his time'.<sup>25</sup> As Christopher Wiseman notes, Morgan is echoing Alvarez's even more robust criticism of Muir's *Collected Poems* (1960) in which he states plainly that 'Muir was not a "modern" poet [...] spiritually and technically in fact, he belongs to the generation of poets which were killed off in the First World War'.<sup>26</sup> Criticism such as that of Alvarez and Morgan carries with it the tacit suggestion that the definition of what constitutes a modernist text, and equally, what does not, is beyond challenge or revision. As current research highlights, the field of modernist

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<sup>21</sup> Ong (1982), p.231.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p.213.

<sup>23</sup> Wolfgang Iser's use of the term *Zeitdichtung* provides an interesting parallel for this discussion. Douglas F. Bub's review of Wolfgang Iser's 'time-centred' study of the poetry of Goethe in *Modern Language Notes*, Vol.76, No.1 (January 1961), pp. 90-92.

<sup>24</sup> 'Edwin Morgan in Conversation', *The Dark Horse*, (Summer 1997), pp.34-43.

<sup>25</sup> Edwin Morgan, 'Edwin Muir,' *The Review*, No.5 (February 1963), reprinted in *Essays by Edwin Morgan* (Chatham: Carcanet, 1974), pp.186-193.

<sup>26</sup> See Christopher Wiseman, *Beyond the Labyrinth* (British Columbia: Sono Nis Press, 1978), p.12.

studies is continually extending its borders and revising its definitions in order to better engage with the complex dialectic that exists between the temporal context for the production of a piece of art and its relation to other contexts.

The pioneering work being conducted at The Modernist Journals Project<sup>27</sup> is increasingly revealing the vast range of styles, forms and perspectives that modernist writings can display. Such research is making the notion of being able to classify a text or writer from the opening decades of the twentieth century as either modernist or not seem something of a critical fallacy. Indeed, as Ann L. Ardis's article on the *MJP* and modernist aesthetics suggests, the *New Age* magazine, during the period in which Muir was associated with it (1913-1922), frequently expressed an antithetical stance toward modernist perspectives and practices while simultaneously celebrating modernist literary innovation. The notion of a general consensus (whether on political or aesthetic grounds) appears to be at odds with the competing forms of modernisms which Orage (and many other editors like him) sought to discuss in the pages of their journals. As Ardis rightly states, 'the *New Age* shouts its "quarrels" (as Orage himself describes them) with modernism',<sup>28</sup> and provides a perfect example as to why:

the new modernist studies' historical recontextualizations of modernism must include awareness of such competition—if, that is, we're not to be accused of preserving modernism 'in intellectual amber,' to borrow Michael North's phrasing, retrospectively accomplishing 'by critical consensus' modernism's 'insulation from the cultural world into which it was introduced'.<sup>29</sup>

The arguments made by Alvarez and Morgan regarding Muir's lack of modernist credentials can be seen falling foul of the fallacy of viewing modernist writings as having a recognizable appearance defined 'by critical consensus' rather than accepting the possibility that they encompass a range of competing aesthetic and political considerations.

The need for robust critical debate regarding both the concordant and disparate literary products of the modernist period can be seen reflected in Margery McCulloch's *Scottish Modernism and Its Contexts* (2009). Rather than viewing modernism as a singular cultural movement, something that happened to the human character 'in or about December 1910' as Virginia Woolf suggests,<sup>30</sup> the volume builds on the solid groundwork of McCulloch's *Modernism and Nationalism: Literature and Society in Scotland 1918-1939* (2004), and endeavours to 'assist in the ongoing international project of expanding

<sup>27</sup> The Modernist Journals Project, Brown University (Rhode Island) and The University of Tulsa. <<http://dl.lib.brown.edu/mjp/>>

<sup>28</sup> Ann L. Ardis, *Modernism and Cultural Conflict 1880-1922* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), pp.144-145.

<sup>29</sup> Ardis (2002), p.147.

<sup>30</sup> Virginia Woolf 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' (1924) in *A Woman's Essays: Selected Essays*, Vol.1, Rachel Bowlby ed. (London: Penguin, 1992).p.70.

perceptions of modernism'.<sup>31</sup> To this end, McCulloch's study provides further evidence of the fact that 'many modernisms' existed and that 'their distinguishing qualities could, and did, vary, depending on the conditions of time and place'.<sup>32</sup> The plurality of the term 'modernisms' is explicitly challenging to the idea of being able to establish a set of conventions by which to judge whether something is or is not modernist. Indeed, as McCulloch convincingly argues, in the Scottish context, Muir and MacDiarmid are still actively producing modernist poetry into the late 1950s, time and place providing the conditions of production rather than imposing limits.

McCulloch's study of Scottish modernism concludes by highlighting Muir and MacDiarmid's shared creative fascination with the nature of 'the changing modern world',<sup>33</sup> and perhaps if any single perspective can be identified to define Muir's modernism it is that concern. While Muir continually returned to the discussion of how societies and individual human lives change through time, he did not accept that our perception of time should be taken for granted. To this end, it is not that things change through time which troubles his imagination, as much as the discordant relationship that exists between our experience of change and our understanding of time.

Muir's take on modernism is to question our understanding of where we are in relation to what has passed and to uncover what is modern about his age, in short, what has changed and what remains constant. For Muir, change is inevitable, natural, and organic, yet our understanding of time seems to confine us to a maze of our own making, abstracting us from our organic life. Throughout his writings there is the recurring suggestion that we have lost our way; that the modern world, whose course we have misguided, now appears to be heading down a road which humanity seems ill-equipped to travel. While Muir's artistic worldview might not be as relentlessly pessimistic as Gerard Carruthers' 'The Complete Despair of Edwin Muir'<sup>34</sup> suggests, Muir does, nevertheless, remain consistently concerned about the dislocation which has led to modern society's loss of its natural relation to time, as exemplified by his distinction between the 'Natural Man' and the 'Political Man',<sup>35</sup> a condition brought on by the 'decay of humanistic man'<sup>36</sup> in modern society.

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<sup>31</sup> Margery Palmer McCulloch, *Modernism and Its Contexts* (Edinburgh: EUP, 2009), p.2.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p.2.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p.194.

<sup>34</sup> See Gerard Carruthers, *Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh: EUP, 2009), pp.14-16.

<sup>35</sup> 'The Natural Man and The Political Man', *New Writing and Daylight* (June 1942), pp.7-15.

<sup>36</sup> Letter to John Lehmann (12/08/1941). *SL*, p.132.

Echoing her earlier commentary on Muir's conceit of the 'single, disunited world'<sup>37</sup> as well as Muir's own phraseology relating to his unorthodox relationship with Christianity, McCulloch suggests that Muir's 'persistent critiques of the *Zeitgeist*' during the interwar years identify him as an 'illicit' modernist, a form of literary 'gatecrasher'.<sup>38</sup> For Kolocontroni, Taxidou and Goldman, Muir's position as a modernist needs no justification as their inclusion of passages from *We Moderns* (1918) in their survey of various 'Modernists on the Modern' in *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents* (1998) highlights. It is clear that the volume's editors consider Muir's writings of this period to have made a contribution to at least one of the many 'Modernist traditions'<sup>39</sup> being born during the opening two decades of the twentieth century. Again, they are keen to stress that modernism is 'not a movement. It is a term that masks conflict and upheaval and any number of contradictory positions'.<sup>40</sup> Rejecting 'an evolutionary model of literary history', the volume's editors emphasize the need for modernism to be considered as comprising 'numerous, diverse and contesting, theories and practices', none of which could be thought of as forming a guiding paradigm or ideological mainstream. The possibility of establishing a consensus regarding the nature of modernism as a movement, they argue, can be attributed to the 'homogenisation' of modernist practices by critics during the 1950s, a tendency which was bolstered by 'complicit academic endorsements'.<sup>41</sup> This analysis also provides some additional insight into Alvarez's and Morgan's rejection of Muir's more modest modernist credentials.

As the research of the *MJP*, the British and Scottish Modernist Studies networks, Kolocontroni et al., and McCulloch all suggest, as a fuller appreciation of the contextual settings for various 'modernisms' is developed, supposed 'gatecrashers' like Muir will gain more critical attention and their writings will help redefine the critical boundaries. This project of critical realignment currently taking place within modernist studies also poses a challenge to the over-arching canonical view that literary texts form a successive history that can be divided into periods, which can then be characterized and categorized sequentially. Contemporary torchbearers of modernist studies such as Kolocontroni, Goldman, Taxidou and McCulloch argue for a broader discussion of the 'national, gender, social and intellectual contexts'<sup>42</sup> of modernist literature, yet it remains the case that a

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<sup>37</sup> Margery McCulloch, *Edwin Muir: Poet, Critic and Novelist* (Edinburgh: EUP, 1993), pp.35-49. See also Margery McCulloch 'The Single Disunited World: Edwin Muir and Prague', *Scotland and the Slavs: Selected Papers from the Glasgow-90 East-West Forum* (Nottingham: Astra Press, 1993), pp.131-140.

<sup>38</sup> McCulloch (2009), p.170.

<sup>39</sup> Vassiliki Kolocontroni, Jane Goldman, and Olga Taxidou eds., *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents* (Edinburgh: EUP, 1998), p.xix. For the extracts from *We Moderns* see pp.354-57.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xvii.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xvii.

<sup>42</sup> McCulloch (2009), p.170.

writer like Muir can be accepted into the modernist canon, almost despite himself, while his literary contemporary and honorary Orcadian, Eric Linklater, is excluded for being too picaresque and satirical, and for not ‘consciously challenging in order to build something new’.<sup>43</sup> As the centre continues to shift perhaps the merits of Linklater’s sceptical eye on modern life may also come to be lauded alongside the writings of Muir, Gunn and MacDiarmid. If the study of modernism as a field is to remain free from homogenization and critical stasis, such revisions and additions must continue.

The issue of canon exclusivity aside, an inter-disciplinary approach to literary studies offers many additional ways to explore texts which would otherwise be miscategorised or treated disparagingly through lack of contextual consideration. In addition to the work currently being conducted in modernist studies, two very different examples from Anglo-American and European literary studies signpost how such approaches can be developed in very different ways. In *The Enigma of Time* (1982), edited by P.T. Landsberg, Walter Ong’s essay on ‘Evolution, Myth and Poetic Vision’ follows a detailed exposition by Paul Davies on ‘Black Hole Thermodynamic and Time Asymmetry’,<sup>44</sup> displaying the explicit editorial rationale to stimulate dialogue across disciplines. ‘Time, as treated in poetry or art, is a mysterious concept’ and ‘philosophical treatments fare no better’ warns Landsberg, yet exchanging ‘the technicalities of physics for those of the arts’,<sup>45</sup> can allow a fuller appreciation of the ubiquitous problems which time poses for those who wish to describe it, irrespective of their specialism. As Landsberg concludes, our understanding of time is limited by our inability to gain access to a vantage point outside the frame of reference.

It is within this spirit of provocative readership and dialogue that this thesis seeks to examine Muir’s time-focused writings. As Currie’s exploration of the novel highlights, the discussion of the representation of temporal structures in literature has never been more ‘timely’,<sup>46</sup> and given the current research being conducted in the field of modernist studies, with the resultant interest in re-contextualizing Muir’s work, a temporally-focussed study of Muir’s writings seems equally timely.

### **‘Anatomy of Space Time’: Structural Overview**

This thesis explores the ways in which the treatment of time in Muir’s writings (with a particular focus on his poetry) articulates a range of perspectives and observations regarding the nature of time and its relation to human experience. This discussion primarily

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<sup>43</sup> McCulloch (2009), p.7.

<sup>44</sup> P.C W. Davies, ‘Black Hole Thermodynamic and Time Asymmetry’ first published in *Monthly Notice of The Royal Astronomical Society* (RAS, 1976), pp.179-190. Republished in Landsberg (1982), pp.178-189.

<sup>45</sup> Landsberg (1982), p.1.

<sup>46</sup> Currie (2007), p.1.

concerns itself with the ways in which Muir explores notions of time (based on linear or cyclic conceptual models) and how they relate to his belief in eternity. However, in Muir's writing we frequently find that time is not merely a yardstick against which the duration of human dramas can be measured; time often becomes the site of the drama in itself, forming a realm in which our understanding of human life is seen as contingent upon our complex experiences of time. By Muir's understanding, cyclical and linear ways of envisaging time are intricately intertwined concepts which reflect the twin aspects of human society. While the experience of time has a particular significance to the individual, it nevertheless remains a universal constant. As he defined it himself: "the cycle of birth and growth, death and birth again," can neither be called merely particular, nor simply universal. It is both, because it is human life'.<sup>47</sup> As Neil Gunn suggests in a letter to Peter Butter discussing Muir's worldview, 'time and acceptance are not in the nature of philosophic abstractions but realities experienced in Muir's inner being'.<sup>48</sup>

Yet through symbolic and archetypal abstraction Muir mediates his experience into utterances which convey both the particular and the universal, attempting to say something of human history as lived rather than to merely provide a footnote commentary on 'humanity in its historical development'.<sup>49</sup> What Muir is arguing for is the need to envisage humanity in relation to organic time as well as political history, and although never partisan, Muir did not shy away from writing about political issues. This thesis, therefore, discusses how Muir deals with concepts of both organic and historicized time within a range of dynamic political contexts, while also being mindful that his belief in eternity remained a constant throughout his life.

Considering the merit of viewing literature as a medium of collective utterance as well as the mediated product of an individual imagination will help to foreground the explicitly metaphysical and visionary nature of Muir's work, a quality often commented on by critics who wish to place emphasis on the spiritual elements of his work. Through his writing Muir expresses a heightened awareness of the significance of our individual and collective experience of time. Time can often be discussed in spatial terms, with the past viewed as a place which we must revisit, as individuals and collectively, in our memories, dreams, or vicariously through literature, in order to reach an acceptance of our present with a view to helping us deal better with the future. Muir's three novels form the most protracted examples of Muir's own attempt at this, with personal circumstances and family relationships often thinly veiled to the extent that his Rabelaisian cousin Sutherland (who

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<sup>47</sup> *The Structure of the Novel* (London: Hogarth, 1928). All citations give here are from *The Structure of the Novel* (London: Hogarth, 1954), p.89.

<sup>48</sup> See *SL*, p.10.

<sup>49</sup> Letter to Stephen Spender (04/09/35). *SL*, p.85.

George Mackay Brown suggests forms ‘a kind of island Falstaff’ in Muir’s *An Autobiography*) becomes a named character in *The Three Brothers* (1931). Although in a more fragmentary way, much of Muir’s poetry similarly reworks experiences which he proposes contribute to his understanding of himself and his relation to the world around him. In ‘The Journey Back’, from *The Labyrinth* (1949),<sup>50</sup> this is explicitly related through the persona’s call to ‘Seek the beginnings, learn from whence you came,/And know the various earth of which you are made’ (9-10). As well as being a personal ‘journey back’, this poem also forms an attempt to make contact with a living past, that is, to uncover a past that remains untouched by time. This backward glance is not an anthropological survey of one’s own life nor of global human society, but a return to a longed-for time when life was neither simpler nor less diverse but more unified, where he may find the ‘Image of man from whom all have diverged’ (71).

Any discussion of the representation of time will inevitably raise issues regarding the subjectivity of our experience of space, indeed, the relationship between time and space, in conceptual terms at least, can be considered as contingent. This thesis will not, however, attempt to interrogate Albert Einstein’s proposition that ‘the world in which we live is a four-dimensional space-time continuum’,<sup>51</sup> being a seamless manifold of inter-related dimensions of extension and duration.<sup>52</sup> Instead, the concept of space-time is introduced in its most general form to provide a way of signalling the simultaneity of our experience of time and space, an issue of particular relevance to *Chorus of the Newly Dead* (1926) and *Variations on a Time Theme* (1934). Muir uses the abstract notion of unified spacetime to create a sense of estrangement to potent effect in the opening passages of *Variations*, leading the reader into ‘the dead centre of the boundless plain’ (II:1) which we are told is ‘our station, our inheritance’ (II:55). The persona refuses to suggest any specific temporal or spatial setting for the poem and provides no details as to how they (the persona is himself one of the many captives of the poem’s reality) arrived at where they have found themselves. This estranged realm is beyond the singularities of time and space, being a never ceasing ‘twilight’ (I:34) in which the inhabitants are ‘fateless,/Yet ruled fate’ (I:41-42). On a less abstract level, Muir is also commenting on his own perception of the challenges facing Europe during the mid 1930s: ‘Where did the road branch?’ (I:8), ‘Was it truth/That lured us here, or falsehood?’ (I:21-22), ‘Where is our land’ (VI: 55) he asks. Through surreal abstraction Muir is seeking to find meaning within what he sees as the existential wilderness of contemporary Europe and to better comprehend the ‘anatomy of

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<sup>50</sup> *CP*, pp.161-167.

<sup>51</sup> Albert Einstein, *Relativity: The Special and The General Theory—A Popular Exposition*, Robert W. Lawson tr. (London: Methuen, 1920), p.55.

<sup>52</sup> See Wolfgang Rindler, *Relativity: Special, General and Cosmological* (Oxford: OUP, 2006), pp.20-24.

Space Time' (V:5) which defines the limits of human experience with time forming 'Eternity's unhidden shore' (VIII:38).

This double layering of meaning (the abstractly universal and the personally specific) is a recurrent facet of Muir's writing and particularly his poetry in which he frequently depicts contemporary Scotland and Europe as 'fallen' states. 'Fallen' in this context is both an allusion to mankind's postlapsarian position as well as the less abstract sense that modern technologized society has lost its moral footing. Examples of this are found in 'The Good Town'<sup>53</sup> in which Prague has been undone by its ill-fated place in history, and in 'The Town Betrayed'<sup>54</sup> where St Andrews is described as a town 'eaten out by time' (1). Both Prague and St Andrews are depicted as fallen cities, overcome by forces which, while human in origin, are inhuman in their ends. The evil which befalls the two cities is an abstract, timeless, archetypal force as well as the product of current social and political realities. The image of a fallen society, however, is most recurrently applied to Scotland, and nowhere more continuously sustained than in *Scottish Journey* (1935), and although Scotland remained a 'difficult land' for Muir, as his 1955 poem discusses,<sup>55</sup> it continued to be his spiritual home, with the Orcadian archipelago forming his personal 'true' North.<sup>56</sup>

Muir drew a great deal of inspiration from his rural island childhood, as his autobiographical writings detail, and as has been discussed at length in George Marshall's *In a Distant Isle: The Orkney Background of Edwin Muir* (1987). Muir opens *The Story and the Fable* (1940) by revisiting his childhood to begin his search for the underlying fable which he suggests forms the macrocosm of our individual human stories, and in doing so, he also provides an inviting way to directly engage with his views of time and human history. For this reason Chapter One of this thesis opens with a discussion of Muir's autobiographical method and its significance in relation to his creative outlook, particularly his views on the subjectivity of history and the existential significance of time. The second and third chapters explore how Muir's first encounters with the world of ideas impacted on his intellectual and creative development, suggesting how these influences provide the context for his lifelong preoccupation with time. Chapter Three, dealing with Muir's Glasgow years, concludes Part One which deals with Muir's early life and literary influences.

Part Two examines the early writings (1913-28) with Chapter Four commenting on Muir's first publications in the *New Age* magazine, his friendship with A.R. Orage, and the impact of his intense study of Nietzsche's writings. Chapter Five looks at the discussion of

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<sup>53</sup> *The Labyrinth* (1949). *CP*, pp.173-76.

<sup>54</sup> *Journeys and Places* (1937). *CP*, pp.82-83.

<sup>55</sup> 'The Difficult Land', *One Foot in Eden* (1956), *CP*, pp.219-220.

<sup>56</sup> Willa Muir (1968), p.114. See McCulloch (1993), p.xi.

temporal and spatial matters in *Latitudes* (1924) and *Transition: Essays on Contemporary Literature* (1926) and demonstrates the impact of these ideas on *First Poems* (1925) and *Chorus of The Newly Dead* (1926).

Part Three explores the most broadly productive decade of Muir's writing career (1929-39) with Chapter Six focusing its attention on Muir's three novels, *The Marionette* (1927), *The Three Brothers* (1931) and *Poor Tom* (1932). In *The Structure of the Novel* (1928) Muir devotes a chapter to the discussion of 'time and space' in the novel, arguing that while 'we see things in terms of Time, Space, and Causality [...] the imagination desires to see the whole unity, or an image of it'.<sup>57</sup> Muir's proposition is that, while our reflections on experience necessarily encourage us to draw distinctions between the temporal and the spatial, our imagination seeks to assimilate those distinctions into a unified perception. Chapter Seven, then, considers how Muir deals with the issues of temporal dislocation and displacement in his prose and poetry during the 1920s. The importance of having a sympathetic appreciation of your place in the continuity of time and human society forms a key theme in his three novels, with each showing their central characters struggling with the complexities of existing within what he defines as 'two distinct modes of seeing life: Time, personally, and in Space, socially'.<sup>58</sup> These anxieties regarding dislocation and discontinuity have both a highly personal and a political resonance within Muir's writings during this period, and *John Knox: Portrait of a Calvinist* (1929), *Scottish Journey* (1935), and *Scott and Scotland* (1938) are dealt with in Chapter 7 to illustrate Muir's proposition that Scotland, 'a country becoming lost to history',<sup>59</sup> had been dislocated from the inheritance of its past by the Scottish Reformation. Chapter 7 then turns to Muir's poetry to focus on *Variations on a Time Theme* (1934) and *Journeys and Places* (1937), exploring how these themes of temporal dislocation and spatial displacement are depicted in verse during the latter half of the 1930s.

The fourth part of this thesis examines Muir's writings from 1939 until his death in 1959, the two decades considered to be the period of his most critically valued poetry. The essays collected in *The Present Age from 1914* (1939) provide interesting points of comparison with the poetry Muir wrote during this period and the volume charts the development of English Literature through what he defines as 'a period of disintegration' in which the old 'pattern of society and civilisation' was revealed to be an unending 'process of realisation'.<sup>60</sup> Muir's own creative 'process of realisation' is reflected in his collections *The Narrow Place* (1943) and *The Voyage* (1946) which forms the focus of

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<sup>57</sup> Muir (1928), p.113.

<sup>58</sup> Muir (1928), p.98.

<sup>59</sup> *Scottish Journey* (Surrey: Heinemann/Gollancz, 1935), p.4.

<sup>60</sup> Muir (1939), p.183.

Chapter Eight. These two collections bear witness to Muir's reconciliation to Christianity and they are explored in relation to the distinction he draws between timelessness and time, between the belief in eternity and the acceptance of 'the time sense', as discussed with regard to the writings of Friedrich Hölderlin and Franz Kafka in *Essays on Literature and Society* (1949).<sup>61</sup>

Chapter 9 suggests how Muir came to an acceptance of the truth of his own story in later life and, as is borne out by his poetry, it was also an acceptance of mortality, a view of life in which time is seen as a contingent force of nature rather than simply the antithesis of eternity. The technique of using counterpointing images and ideas in his late poetry offers more evidence of the equilibrium he is able to achieve. There is, as Butter proposes, 'a greater sense of wholeness, of tensions having been resolved',<sup>62</sup> but Muir never offers a definitive statement or a synthesis of perspectives. Behind even his clearest articulations of acceptance and affirmation there remains an atmosphere of ambiguity and tentative uncertainty. Muir's later poetry profoundly reflects his striving toward an acceptance of what it means to be, as he believed himself to be, in possession of an immortal soul and yet confined to a mortal existence within an all too human body. Yet where acceptance is achieved, as in 'Adam's Dream', 'The Son' or 'The Christmas',<sup>63</sup> there remains a sense of the temporary nature of his imaginative repose, as if all could be undone in the next poem, as if the Fall were an ever-approaching moment that must be endured endlessly.

Muir's acceptance of the temporal conditions of human life is not an unquestioning nor an unconditional one. As his sustained engagement with biblical subject matter and use of Classical narratives highlight, it is an appreciation of time from a relative, rather than an absolute, position. The sympathy and focus remains with Man, not God. As 'If I Could Know'<sup>64</sup> suggests, although 'Man, earth and heaven' may be 'co-patterned so or so' (5) like an unyielding blueprint of creation, nevertheless, the 'journey and the place' (20) remain ours alone, 'a beginning and an end' (21) which is entirely personal regardless of its recurrent nature. The perspective Muir achieves is not a retreat into the literary tropes of orthodox religion; it is a recognition and revitalization of the archetypes and myths which have fuelled his imagination throughout his creative life. The paradise he occasionally regains in his late poems is the sense of harmony and connection he first knew in the summer pastures depicted in 'Childhood' and 'the quiet fields' (19) of 'Grass'.<sup>65</sup> He came

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<sup>61</sup> 'In an age obsessed by the time sense, or, as it is called, the historical sense, he [Kafka] has resurrected and made available for contemporary use the timeless story, the archetypal story, in which is the source of all stories'. *Essays on Literature and Society* (London: Hogarth, 1949), p.124.

<sup>62</sup> Butter (1962), p.105.

<sup>63</sup> *One Foot in Eden* (1956), *CP*, pp.195-97, 208-09 & 207 respectively.

<sup>64</sup> *One Foot in Eden* (1956), *CP*, p.232.

<sup>65</sup> *First Poems* (1925), *CP*, p.18.

to appreciate that his own story formed part of the fable, that for good and ill, his journey was the only one he could have taken.

This quadripartite structure follows Muir's creative and critical output chronologically allowing the ideas discussed to be seen in their various stages of adaptation and development. This is not to suggest, however, that Muir finally achieves a synthesis between the divergent influences and his own perspectives which are seen in dialogue throughout his writings, but instead, serves to illustrate how his writings repeatedly return to the discussion of time throughout his writing career.

### **'Works of Labouring Time': Some Critical Responses**

To be a modern in the true sense [...] is to be a forerunner; there is in this age, an age of preparation, no other test of the modern. To believe that there are still potentialities in man; to have faith that the 'elevation of the type Man' is possible yes that the time is ripe to prepare for it; and to write and live in and by that thought: this is to be modern.<sup>66</sup>

This is how Muir defines what it is to be a modern writer in an entry from 'We Moderns' from 21 June 1917. Muir's definition implies a form of temporal baptism, a complete immersion in the quotidian particularities and ethereal 'nowness' of the moment, to find, as he identifies in the writings of Donne, Sterne and Proust, the 'intelligible and the spiritual in minute manifestations of the physical'.<sup>67</sup> However, recognising that the modern writer must also be 'a forerunner', as every age is an 'age of preparation', Muir's critique suggests that the writer must also recognise mankind's essentially evolutionary nature, a mutability which is the cause of our failings as well as the source of our creative potential.

'We Moderns' ran for twenty one issues between 12 October 1916 and 13 September 1917. Published as a collected volume under his *New Age* pseudonym, Edward Moore, *We Moderns: Enigmas and Guesses* (1918) attracted the attention of the publisher, journalist and Nietzschean commentator, Alfred A. Knopf who publishing the American edition in New York in 1920. Henry L. Mencken wrote the introduction to the 1920 edition which provides an insightful example of an early critical response to Muir's prose. Mencken was also an exponent of Nietzsche's work, with his *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche* being published in 1907, the same year as Orage's *Nietzsche in Outline and Aphorism*, Orage's *Friedrich Nietzsche: The Dionysian Spirit of the Age* (1906) having been published the previous year. Mencken, like Orage, clearly saw merit in Muir's energetic application of Nietzsche, suggesting that his aphorisms announced the 'emancipation of the

<sup>66</sup> 'Genealogy the Moderns' *TNA*, Vol 21, No. 8, (21/06/1917), p.183. First reproduced in *We Moderns: Enigmas and Guesses* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1918). All citations given here are from *We Moderns* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1920). Muir (1920), p.133.

<sup>67</sup> 'Laurence Sterne', in Muir (1949), p.53.

modern spirit from its rotting heritage of ingenuous fears and exploded certainties'.<sup>68</sup> To the contemporary reader, however, the volume tends to fall short of Mencken's enthusiastic praise. Instead, the ideas and perspectives offered in *We Moderns* are arguably best understood within the context of the *New Age* magazine itself and the wider literary scene at the time of their publication, a discussion of which will take place in Chapter 2.

Mencken's introduction to *We Moderns* (1920) forms the first sustained discussion of Muir's critical prose, but critics such as Christopher Murray Grieve (Hugh MacDiarmid),<sup>69</sup> Patrick J. Gannon,<sup>70</sup> L.F. Powell,<sup>71</sup> Abbott Martin,<sup>72</sup> William S. Knickerbocker<sup>73</sup> and Maurice Lindsay<sup>74</sup> were among the many who keenly engaged with Muir's views on literature and society through their reviews and essays. However, it was not until Peter Butter's *Edwin Muir* (1962) that a monograph appeared dedicated to the discussion of Muir and his work. Butter establishes a clear distinction between Muir's early and his later 'mature' poetry, identifying *The Narrow Place* (1943) as the boundary line, a collection that Butter claims 'shows an advance on what had gone before both in skill and in range'.<sup>75</sup> Following Muir collection by collection, Butter argues that, comparing Muir's verse with that of W.B. Yeats, there is in 'the mature work of Muir a greater sense of wholeness, of tensions having been resolved'.<sup>76</sup> The unity and resolution that Butter is alluding to here is Muir's reconciliation with faith in St Andrews in 1940, what Butter calls the 'big find' of Muir's 'spiritual pilgrimage, the answer to the question he had been trying to work out in his poetry of the relation between time and eternity'.<sup>77</sup> The significance of Christianity with regard to Muir's later writings is an omnipresent facet of Butter's thorough critique of his work and one which is invited by Muir's own testimony at various moments in *An Autobiography* (1954). It is also a perspective which needs to be accepted with a degree of caution. In his reading of the Muir corpus, Butter often equates Muir's statements about spirituality directly with Christianity, a tendency which Willa Muir similarly identifies in

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<sup>68</sup> Muir (1920), p.8.

<sup>69</sup> 'Edwin Muir', in C.M. Grieve, *Contemporary Scottish Studies* (London: Leonard Parsons: 1926), pp.108-120. See also 'A Reply to Edwin Muir' in *The Thistle Rises*, Alan Bold ed. (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984), pp.188-94.

<sup>70</sup> Patrick J. Gannon comments on Muir's *John Knox: Portrait of a Calvinist* (1920) in 'Martin Luther and John Knox', *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, Vol.19, No.74 (June 1930), pp.309-320.

<sup>71</sup> L.F. Powell [untitled review] in *The Review of English Studies*, Vol.6, No.24 (October 1930), pp.493-494.

<sup>72</sup> Abbott Martin, 'Signifying Nothing', *The Sewanee Review*, Vol.38, No.1 (January 1930), pp.115-116.

<sup>73</sup> William S. Knickerbocker, 'Border and Bar: Revised Interpretations of Sir Walter Scott', *The Sewanee Review*, Vol.48, No.4 (October-December 1940), pp.519-532.

<sup>74</sup> Lindsay views Muir as a central figure of the Scottish 'literary renaissance'. Maurice Lindsay, 'The Scottish Songs of Francis George Scott', *Music & Letters*, Vol.26, No.1 (January 1945), pp.1-11.

<sup>75</sup> Butter (1962), p.67.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p.105.

<sup>77</sup> Butter (1962), p.18.

T.S. Eliot's approach to her late husband's work as she describes in a letter to Kathleen Raine.<sup>78</sup>

The issue of Butter's overtly Christian interpretation of Muir's poetry in no way detracts from the significant value of Butter's monograph, and its close readings and biographical insights establish the necessary proximity between Muir's life writings and his critical and creative work which remains a sound methodological starting point from which to approach Muir's literary output as a whole. Butter's *Edwin Muir: Man and Poet* (1966) expands on the insights of his first book, with additional discussion of Muir's prose writings and his biography, including the significance of his Orcadian childhood. The brevity of this volume also allows Butter to address the issue of Muir's interest in the ideas of Nietzsche, although he is unequivocal in his condemnation of the influence Nietzsche's writings had on Muir, arguing that Nietzsche presents an 'appealing philosophy to those who have lost faith'.<sup>79</sup> 'If one does not believe in grace one must believe in oneself if one is not to despair'<sup>80</sup> claims Butter, suggesting that Muir's reading of Nietzsche was as Muir claimed many years later, merely 'a compensation',<sup>81</sup> a symptom of 'his need to maintain himself against disintegration in his unhappy circumstances'.<sup>82</sup> In Butter's analysis, *We Moderns* is an attempt to articulate 'a state of acceptance which he has not really attained' arguing that it was not until his reconciliation to Christianity many years later that a true sense of acceptance is attained.<sup>83</sup> This movement toward affirmation and acceptance in Muir's later work is certainly evident but the search for metaphysical meaning has its origins in Muir's childhood and was not the result of a mid-life conversion. His believe in eternity and the immortality of the human soul predates his studentship of Nietzsche and it remained unfaltering throughout his life. It was the inspiration for his creative and philosophical attempts to understand the modern world and his relation with it. Aside from the numerous stories and symbols, Christianity offered Muir a way of interrogating the relationship between time and eternity; he appears to have been more interested in the paradigm of Christ as a living human being than a deity. Muir had always accepted the existence of eternity; it was time that he struggled to come to terms with.

*Edwin Muir: Man and Poet* argues the case that Muir should be seen as a visionary poet who, despite often expressing a 'humble reticence about his inner religious life',<sup>84</sup> nevertheless found solace and peace at the end of his life through his faith in God. In this

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<sup>78</sup> Letter from Willa Muir to Kathleen Raine (07/04/1960). NLS MS.19073 109f.

<sup>79</sup> Peter Butter, *Edwin Muir: Man and Poet* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1966), p.57.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p.59.

<sup>81</sup> Butter (1966), p.56.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p.63.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p.65.

<sup>84</sup> Butter (1966), p.299.

Butter's perspective echoes, albeit less vehemently, that of Elizabeth Jennings's chapter on Muir in *Every Changing Shape: Mystical Experience and the Making of Poems* (1961), in which she positions Muir (along with T.S. Eliot and David Gascoyne) as a poet of the 'true mystical tradition'.<sup>85</sup> Jennings's study establishes points of contrast between Muir's use of dreams and allegories with Gerard Manley Hopkins's poetic technique<sup>86</sup> and compares Muir's employment of imagery and symbolism from the natural world with that of Teresa of Avila's *The Four Waters* (c.1565). While the conclusion that Muir should be recognised as a Christian mystical poet requires an inductive leap of faith, Jennings's textual analysis does lead her to propose that 'time itself' forms 'one of the great themes of Muir's work',<sup>87</sup> arguably the greatest. Like Butter's Christianizing readings after it, Jennings' study places greater emphasis on Muir's later poetry, effectively negating the significance of his lifelong holistic metaphysical vision and the influence of Nietzsche on his earlier verse. That he never practised any creed of Christianity as a mature adult, nor expressed anything, other than in the vaguest terms, about his belief in immortality and God, should act as a caution against readily interpreting Muir's use of Christian imagery and symbolism as an indication of devout Christian faith. His artistic vision, as Jennings concludes, 'can often be most powerful when simplicity is at its centre',<sup>88</sup> but not to recognise that representation of simplicity as artifice is to lose sight of the power of the imagination which creates it.

As well as forming a captivating literary journey in itself, Willa Muir's *Belonging: A Memoir* (1968) provides a fascinating companion to Muir's *An Autobiography* as she devotes a great deal of the text to discussing the circumstances and biographical details which form the background to much of Muir's writing. Starting the delivery of her life narrative at the point at which she first met Muir and closing at his death, Willa Muir's account of their life together is a deeply moving expression of the devotion they shared, but it also displays the insights and beliefs of a singularly creative writer whose imagination and intellectual capacity were more than a match for that of her husband. At moments, wry wit and satire puncture the serene surface of her eulogizing and reveal a real sense of the complex dynamic which resided behind their personal and working partnership.

More recently, Willa Muir's writings have begun to attain the level of critical appreciation they merit, and it is unfortunate that Muir's autobiography does not mirror the generosity of criticism with regard to his wife's work that *Belonging* provides his. The

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<sup>85</sup> Elizabeth Jennings, *Every Changing Shape: Mystical Experience and The Making of Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1996), p.190.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p.98.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p.149.

<sup>88</sup> Jennings (1961), p.162.

major reason for this is that, unlike Muir's *An Autobiography*, *Belonging* was not, as Aileen Christianson points out, an autobiography;<sup>89</sup> it is the memoir of a relationship, a biographical and literary memorial to a beloved husband. This deeply personal aspect of *Belonging* serves to underline the significance of Willa Muir's unique insights into Muir's artistic methods and his creative worldview. As there is no need for the pretence of objectivity which forms a rhetorical feature of so many literary biographies, *Belonging* provides a far less self-consciously stylized portrait, and a far more emotionally integrated one than the blurry psychological outline which Muir's autobiography offers.

Christopher Wiseman's *Beyond the Labyrinth: A Study of Edwin Muir's Poetry* (1978) provides an in-depth analysis of the symbolism inherent in Muir's writings, and aside from challenging the assertion that Muir did not achieve an 'indisputable technical mastery',<sup>90</sup> until *The Narrow Place* (1943), provides a series of equally insightful critiques and adept close readings as Elizabeth Huberman's *The Poetry of Edwin Muir: the Field of Good and Ill* (1971). Wiseman, however, places less critical weight on the opposition which Huberman's title potentially overplays. Elgin W. Mellow's *Edwin Muir* (1979) devotes a significant amount of space to the discussion of Muir's critical prose as well as his early poetry. Mellow also underlines the broader significance of Muir's public literary development, arguing that taken in their entirety his 'writings provide an instructive case history of the twentieth-century professional writer'.<sup>91</sup> As Mellow explains, 'Muir literally educated himself in public; and thus his reviews and other journalistic writings record his intellectual growth'.<sup>92</sup> By Mellow's analysis 'Muir ended his career as a traditional, Christian Platonist, but he began as an avant-garde, iconoclastic Nietzschean'.<sup>93</sup> What may seem like a reductive generalization is more than aptly qualified by his in-depth knowledge of the range of Muir's literary corpus, with his *Bibliography of the Writings of Edwin Muir* (1964 and 1970) providing the most extensive source of bibliographical data on Muir's vast body of prose writings.

Like many critics Mellow recognises the influence of Christianity on Muir's artistic world-view, but he does not underplay the influence which Muir's Nietzschean apprenticeship continued to exert on his imagination in later life.<sup>94</sup> Neither Mellow nor Wiseman's critical studies are acknowledged by Roger Knight in his *Edwin Muir: An*

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<sup>89</sup> Aileen Christianson, *Moving in Circles: Willa Muir's Writings* (Edinburgh: Word Power Books, 2007), p.177.

<sup>90</sup> Christopher Wiseman, *Beyond the Labyrinth: A Study of Edwin Muir's Poetry* (British Columbia: Sono Nis Press: 1978), p.54. See Elizabeth Huberman, *The Poetry of Edwin Muir: the Field of Good and Ill* (New York: OUP, 1971), p.105.

<sup>91</sup> Elgin W. Mellow, *Edwin Muir* (Boston: Twayne, 1979), p.7.

<sup>92</sup> Mellow (1979), p.7.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p.17.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p.17.

*Introduction to His Work* (1980). Instead, Knight suggests that Muir's use of Edenic imagery and symbolism is the result of his 'slowly gathered confidence in the truth of the story', a truth, that Knight argues, was not 'adopted' but 'discovered'.<sup>95</sup> Echoing Butter's assertion that Muir's first great triumph as a poet was to overcome the 'absurdity of his choice'<sup>96</sup> to study the philosophy of Nietzsche, Knight reinforces Elizabeth Jennings's perspective that the religious poetry of Donne, Herbert and Traherne form Muir's natural traditional context, 'a tradition of supplication, self-abasement and submission'.<sup>97</sup> Although highlighting numerous occasions when Muir seems reluctant to use any orthodox Christian language or imagery in his verse, Knight nevertheless presents Muir's development as poet as something of a pilgrim's progress, his original vision of spiritual harmony being rediscovered through his tumultuous journey through life.

Seeking to probe further into Muir's much discussed agrarian upbringing, George Marshall's *In a Distant Isle: The Orkney Background of Edwin Muir* (1987) challenges the literal interpretation of Muir's Lapsarian symbolism which has the potential to render the Orkney Islands of Muir's childhood as a form of nineteenth-century Eden:

Those commentators who, like Elizabeth Huberman, think of Muir as having 'a childhood in a static communal society' have reached mistaken conclusions about the nature of Orkney society in the 1880s.<sup>98</sup>

Yet, while Marshall spends time discussing a few of the myths relating to the lives of the communities in which Muir grew-up, the primary focus is on the dynamic relationship between lived experience, memory, and the processes of imaginative presentation. In this, Marshall rises to the challenge of interrogating the validity of terms such as 'sincerity', 'honesty' and 'integrity' in relation to Muir's creative output, and demonstrates how readers must strive not to be, as Sheila Hearn warned, caught in the 'totally self-reflexive system' which Muir (albeit unwittingly) establishes 'for the study of his work—a closed, exclusive world' in which, Hearn argues, 'all his critics have been imprisoned'.<sup>99</sup>

One reading which appears to have avoided the trap which Hearn describes is Margery McCulloch's *Edwin Muir: Poet, Critic and Novelist* (1993), which explores, as its title suggests, the threefold aspect of Muir's literary output. Seeking rightly to present Muir as a modernist, McCulloch identifies Muir's role in articulating 'an awareness of the historical and cultural crisis relating to innovation and change in the sciences and in

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<sup>95</sup> Rodger Knight, *Edwin Muir: An Introduction to His Work* (London: Longman, 1980), p.191.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p.23.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p.196.

<sup>98</sup> George Marshall, *In A Distant Isle: The Orkney Background of Edwin Muir* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1987), p.86.

<sup>99</sup> Marshall (1987), p.2.

philosophical thought',<sup>100</sup> a key aspect of his work which can be too readily overlooked if modernist writing is equated with stylistic achievement or linguistic experimentation alone. Charting the development of Muir's writing, beginning with what McCulloch refers to as Muir's 'apprentice collections' through to the last of his mature poetry, McCulloch's study gives equal weight to the discussion of the contemporary European and domestic literary scenes to reveal the diverse cultural currents operating in Muir's writings.

Building on Butter's extensive studies of Muir's work, the crucial innovation in McCulloch's methodology is her successful attempt to present 'Muir's poetry, criticism and novel-writing all as part of his ongoing discourse about the meaning of human life'.<sup>101</sup> As McCulloch concludes, to the end of his life

Muir perused the three mysteries he identified in *An Autobiography*: 'where we came from, where we are going, and...how we should live with one another'. This discourse was conducted in poetry, in criticism and in fiction, both philosophically and in terms of our everyday world.<sup>102</sup>

While recognising the spiritual and metaphysical aspects of Muir's writings, it is his role as a poet and commentator of the 'mundane world' which McCulloch's study celebrates, the 'sublunary Muir' whose work is engaged more deeply with the question of 'how we should live with one another' than any other.<sup>103</sup> In this, McCulloch's reading of Muir's writings provides an alternative critical frame of reference to the visionary Christian interpretation employed by Butter, Huberman and Knight, seeking to illustrate more fully Muir's engagement with European literature and thought, as well as his association with the Scottish Literary Renaissance of the early Twentieth Century. In McCulloch's analysis Muir's 'creative resistance to the artistic mores of the time and his insistence on the essential relationship between literature and society'<sup>104</sup> highlight the need to appreciate Muir's position as a conservative modernist, as keen to forward traditional humanistic values as to embrace new political, social and artistic modes of expression.

In accord with Butter and Wiseman, McCulloch also suggests that there is a perceptible development toward a 'stylistic maturity'<sup>105</sup> in Muir's later poetry and therefore directs more attention toward the later and, by implication, greater, poetry than the collections prior to *The Narrow Place* (1943) in which she suggests (quoting Neil M. Gunn's comments) Muir 'caught a flame—from the fire that is burning Europe'.<sup>106</sup> For

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<sup>100</sup> McCulloch (1993), p.x.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xv.

<sup>102</sup> McCulloch (1993), p.118.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xvi.

<sup>104</sup> McCulloch (1993), p.118.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xv.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p.35.

McCulloch this 'new direction' is expressed first in the poem 'To J.F.H. (1897-1934)', dedicated to Muir's friend John Holms. However, McCulloch also recognises the importance of the early poetry, particularly its autobiographical aspects, and gives due credit to Peter Butter's *Edwin Muir: Collected Poems* (1991), for making readily available many of Muir's poems which have been edited from successive selected editions.

The most recent publication of Muir's poetry is Faber's *Edwin Muir: Selected Poems* (2008), opening with an introduction by the literary columnist and poet Mick Imlah. The introduction provides an engaging, biography-driven exploration of Muir's poetry, and although substantively more interrogating than T.S. Eliot's brief preface to *Edwin Muir: Selected Poems* (1965), it is ultimately far less appreciative.<sup>107</sup> Discounting most of the poems prior to 1939 as 'places in which the creative process is not really working', Imlah blames 'the long reach of his Presbyterian upbringing' for what he defines as Muir's otherworldly, 'anti-social' poetry, being verse 'not designed to delight or move the reader'.<sup>108</sup> Recognising the reputation of 'The Horses', Muir's most anthologized poem, Imlah suggests that its popularity rests in its appeal to the 'adolescent or early student mind', which explains why the poem is so often 'trotted out in schools'.<sup>109</sup> In addition, he finds 'certain familiar weaknesses' with the poem including the 'guileless plagiarism' of images and cadences from Eliot's verse.<sup>110</sup> To appreciate the 'special virtues of the best' of Muir's poetry Imlah suggests that we must attempt to engage with Muir's abstract use of heraldic and symbolic imagery (even though they predominantly achieve what he calls 'static resolutions') no matter how disconcerting the process may be for the 'modern reader'.<sup>111</sup> Rather than an expositional overture, Imlah's introduction constitutes an apology to the reader.

In contrast to Imlah's 'stringent' editorial stance, applauded in Jay Parini's otherwise considered review,<sup>112</sup> Eliot recognized both 'the power of Muir's early work' as well as the 'remarkable' qualities of the later poetry, and comments on the 'uniformly high quality'<sup>113</sup> of the poetry included in *Collected Poems 1921-58* (1960) from which his selection was drawn. The 2008 edition follows Eliot's lead in rejecting all but eight poems (the 1965 edition included 10) from Muir's first four volumes favouring the latter four collections which were published in his lifetime. With the welcome inclusion of six uncollected poems

<sup>107</sup> The jacket notes erroneously state that Muir was born on Wyre rather than at Ayre in Deerness. Imlah correctly gives Muir's birthplace but inaccurately calls Wyre a 'neighbouring island'. Edwin Muir, *Selected Poems*, Mick Imlah ed. (London: Faber, 2008), p.ix.

<sup>108</sup> Muir (2008), p.xviii.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xiv.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.xvi & xxiii.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xxi.

<sup>112</sup> Jay Parini, 'One foot in Eden', *The Guardian* (31/05/2008). <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/may/31/poetry>> (accessed 12/06/2011).

<sup>113</sup> Edwin Muir, *Selected Poems*, T.S. Eliot ed. (London: Faber, 1965), pp.9-11.

(one less than the 1965 edition and with 'The Last War' being represented only by its fifth and final stanza), it is a pity that the opportunity to reintroduce a number of representative extracts from *Chorus of the Newly Dead* (1926) was not taken, particularly as it has not been represented in any previous Faber edition. Fortunately Peter Butter's *The Complete Poems of Edwin Muir* (1991) has ensured the preservation of this important and often overlooked poem. Butter's scholarly edition is a volume which stands testimony to Muir's engagement with the profundity of time as well as providing examples of his sustained interest in the role of archetypes, an interest which persisted far beyond the point at which he consciously shed the philosophical creed of his youth.<sup>114</sup> The extensively researched notes and poem by poem commentary ensures that Butter's edition of Muir's *Complete Poems* remains the source text for any reader who wishes to enjoy the full diversity and rewarding complexities of Muir's poetry.

As this precursory review of critical literature highlights, studies of Muir's writing have tended to prioritize his poetry over his criticism and novels, and the poetry from the mid-1940s in particular. Critics have often identified the importance of the autobiographical and psychological aspects in Muir's writings, many demonstrating how the natural world he encountered as a child and his rejection of the determinism of Calvinism feature in his narratives and verse. Discussion of Muir's use of biblical and Classical subject matter, particularly imagery associated with Eden, the Fall, and the legends of Troy, is also a reoccurring and important component of any thorough study of Muir's poetry. Mellown and McCulloch also identify the significance of Muir's substantive body of literary and social criticism with regard to elucidating some of the more abstract or complex aspects of his creative writings, while Butter's comprehensive research and editorial inclusiveness have ensured that *Collected Poems* (1991) provides a solid scholarly edition of Muir's poetry.

As Butter comments, Muir had an 'impassioned awareness of the forces working in the present',<sup>115</sup> and this thesis approaches his work as that of a poet who expresses a heightened sense of the need to engage with, and contextualize, the present. However, Shelley's model of the prophetic poet, through which 'the spirit of the age'<sup>116</sup> is articulated, also has a relevance to Muir as a poet of the 'mundane world',<sup>117</sup> and his own 'impassioned conceptions respecting man and nature'<sup>118</sup> are very much the product of his

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<sup>114</sup> *Chorus of the Newly Dead* (1926) was an important early expression of Muir's attempt to 'to come to terms with Death by looking for a transcendental meaning in Life'. Willa Muir (1968), p.103. Muir prepared manuscripts for an edited version of *Chorus* several times up to 1955. See *CP*, pp.316-17.

<sup>115</sup> Butter (1962), p.98.

<sup>116</sup> Shelley (1821), p.535.

<sup>117</sup> McCulloch (1993), p.xvi.

<sup>118</sup> Shelley (1821), p.535.

own time. As Marshall's *In a Distant Isle* (1987) warns, when Muir projects images of a pastoral island upbringing he is doing so in manner more in keeping with Wordsworth's re-imagining of childhood in *The Prelude* (1850) than biographic reality. What he is looking for is the underlying symbolic meaning of past events, a meaning that is not dependent upon any specific temporal context. 'All great writers are of their time'<sup>119</sup> claimed Muir, and this was equally true of himself, and through voicing his creative and philosophical struggles with himself and his age, he remained throughout his life committed to the exploration and discussion of the nature of time and its relation to human experience.

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<sup>119</sup> Muir (1926), p.5.

## Chapter One:

### 'My Childhood all a Myth': Muir's Autobiographical Method

#### Critical Distance

Appended to *The Story and the Fable* (1940) is a series of notebook entries entitled 'Extracts from a Diary, 1937-39'. In these short entries Muir sketches his views on time, history, and memory while reflecting on the process of writing his autobiography. Highlighting the influence of Proust's epic serial novel, *In Search of Lost Time* (1913-27) on his own writing, Muir is keen to suggest that far from being the final word on the relationship between life as lived and memory as experienced, Proust's monumental achievement in *Time Regained* (1927) is in breathing modern life into the age-old problem of representation and reality: 'to resuscitate the Eternal Man was a heroic attempt [...] yet I cannot help feeling that that resuscitation was only a beginning'.<sup>1</sup>

To go a step further and begin attempting to answer the questions of 'where we came from, where we are going, and since we are not alone, but members of a countless family, how we should live with one another',<sup>2</sup> Muir developed an autobiographical style of writing which necessitated establishing a degree of distance between his prior experiences and the creative process. This style is not restricted to *The Story and The Fable* and *An Autobiography* and can be seen employed at various points through his poetry, in the novels as well as in his critical writings. An example of this is provided in his discussion of his difficulties in writing *John Knox: Portrait of a Calvinist* (1929) where he complains that 'though dead for three centuries and a half, he was still too close for me to see him clearly'.<sup>3</sup> This is clearly a comment on what Muir saw as the most starkly negative effects of Knox's influence on contemporary Scottish society, Knox being the type of 'man who, when his object required it, was always ready to contradict himself, and used any means which suited him',<sup>4</sup> the type of political man whom Muir felt he had met 'over and over' through his life.<sup>5</sup> This awareness of the need to gain distance from his subject matter is an important component of Muir's approach to writing, and as this chapter explores, he achieves this through a range of mechanisms, including the ideas he interpreted from his reading of Nietzsche, his use of mythology and legends and also through imaginatively reviewing the past through symbolism and allegory. Aware of the subjectivity of his remembered past, through these rhetorical ploys Muir seeks a degree of objectivity by

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<sup>1</sup> *SF*, p.261.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.64.

<sup>3</sup> *Auto*, p.231.

<sup>4</sup> Muir (1929), p.300.

<sup>5</sup> *Auto*, p.231.

identifying the archetypal aspects of a given situation then representing them in a manner which frees them from their dependency upon a specific time and place.

In *Ulysses* (1922), Leopold Bloom's Dublin odyssey serves as a metaphor for the archetypal daily routines of city dwellers, but Muir recognised that Bloom also represented 'a type, a succession of types through history, and multiplication of types in space; one person in himself and persons in time'.<sup>6</sup> Describing the novel as the 'complete course, a set banquet, of the modern consciousness',<sup>7</sup> Muir argues that as Joyce was 'a writer whose sufferings were so great and conscious [that he] needed a more elaborate technique than most writers do, as much to put a distance between himself and his sufferings as to express them'.<sup>8</sup> In his analysis of Joyce, Muir could equally be talking about himself. Albeit through very different means, it is nevertheless through a process of distancing that Muir achieves his own form of creative freedom, allowing him to explore the past in search of the underlying archetypes he believed recurrent in human history. Through his own series of oblique devices Muir develops a quasi-autobiographical approach which rejects literary realism and the illusion of unmediated testimony, and seeks, not to reproduce the universal aspects of human experience, but rather to represent them, so that both author and reader can interrogate them anew.

A significant feature of Muir's earliest critical thinking was his disdain for literary realism, an attitude displayed in the article entitled 'Modern Realism' in his 'We Moderns' column for 16 November 1916. Here, Muir attacks modern realism, particularly in the novel and drama, which he criticizes for seeking to reproduce 'life as lived' rather than offering an interpretation of it. 'Representation has become reproduction', by attempting to 'make the representation as "thorough" as possible, the Moderns, in their attempt to simplify art, to understand it [...] have succeeded in destroying it'.<sup>9</sup> By way of contrast, he points to the symbolic and interpretative aspects of Classical Greek drama:

the Greeks did not aim at the reproduction but the interpretation of life [...] a symbolising of the deepest questions and enigmas of life—a thing infinitely more noble, deep and subtle than realistic art.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike the psychological and symbolic layers of meaning which Virginia Woolf and Joyce explore in the lives of their fictional city dwellers, the realism of the type which Muir is referring to (that found in the works of Arnold Bennett and John Galsworthy) is that which focuses on the ordinary life only then to depict it in an ordinary way. For Muir,

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<sup>6</sup> Muir (1926), p.30.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.24.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp.22-23.

<sup>9</sup> 'We Moderns', *TNA*, Vol.20, No.3 (16/11/1916), p.65.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.66.

realism that attempts to present ‘life as lived’ is merely a presentation of the unexamined life, a life devoid of meaning.

By 1937, when Muir began compiling material for *The Story and The Fable*, the quest to find suitable symbols and imagery to describe his own perplexing experiences of time led him to reconsider Proust’s figure of temporal transcendence, the Eternal Man:

In *Le Temps Retrouvé* Proust describes how he set out to resuscitate in himself ‘the Eternal Man.’ The Eternal Man is what has possessed me during most of the time that I have been writing my autobiography, and has possessed me too in most of my poetry.<sup>11</sup>

For Muir, Proust’s proposition of the Eternal Man serves only to foreground the complexity of the relationship that exists between the individual and the collective. As he states, ‘there remains the problem of the communion between the Eternal Man in Proust and the Eternal Man in other people, and also their communion with the Eternal itself’.<sup>12</sup> The challenge as Muir sees it is to ‘discover what I am, and to establish what my relation should be to other people’.<sup>13</sup>

This idea of relational selfhood is further explored in a letter to the novelist and modernist socialite Sydney Schiff<sup>14</sup> (17 May 1938) in which Muir reports that he is ‘taking notes for something like a description of myself’ that will eventually form ‘an attempt to find out what a human being is in this extraordinary age which depersonalises everything’.<sup>15</sup> ‘The problem’, as Muir defines it, ‘is to discover what you are, and then what your relation is to other people’.<sup>16</sup> In ‘Yesterday’s Mirror: Afterthoughts to an Autobiography’ (1940),<sup>17</sup> Muir sets out his central aim when he began his autobiographic journey into the past: ‘I tried to make clear the pattern of my life as a human being existing in space and moving through time, environed by mystery’.<sup>18</sup> Expressing the traditional humanist position that it is only through revisiting the past that the present can be understood, he argues that ‘our knowledge of life [is] significant only if we read into the pattern of our past the universal pattern of human existence’.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *SF*, p.261.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.261.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.242.

<sup>14</sup> Schiff [Stephen Hudson] was the host of the ‘great modernist dinner party’ at the Majestic Hotel in Paris in 1922. Richard Davenport-Hines, *A Night at The Majestic* (London: Faber, 2006), pp.5-37. See George D Painter, *Marcel Proust, A Biography*, Vol.2 (New York: Random House, 1959), pp.340-42.

<sup>15</sup> NLS MS.19671 ff.229-231. *SL*, pp.99-101.

<sup>16</sup> Butter (1974), p.101.

<sup>17</sup> ‘Yesterday’s Mirror: Afterthoughts to an Autobiography’, *Scots Magazine*, Vol. XXXIII No.6 (September 1940), pp.404-410. Most of this essay was incorporated into *An Autobiography* (1954) but the first three pages are reproduced in full in *An Autobiography* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2000), pp.278-281.

<sup>18</sup> Muir (2000), p.278.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.279.

In his preface to *The Story and the Fable* Muir explains why the account of his life halts at 1922, some 18 years before his autobiography's composition. The events of his life after 1922, he explains succinctly, are 'too close'; 'I could not write with any degree of clarity of later occurrences'.<sup>20</sup> Muir's justification seems to suggest that the further events are in the past, the greater his ability will be to perceive them, as if time itself aided memory and comprehension. To a large degree, this apparently paradoxical syllogism is precisely what Muir is suggesting; it is not merely the events themselves that he wishes to describe but their context, their largest possible context, the sort of scale which is impossible to see while up close. What Muir is justifying in his preface is the need for a temporal critical distance to overcome the superficial 'pathos of distance',<sup>21</sup> which he elsewhere suggests Ezra Pound achieves in *The Cantos* (1925-37),<sup>22</sup> by revealing the coexistence of 'the legendary, the historical and the contemporary'.<sup>23</sup>

Writing his autobiography during his early fifties, Muir is exploring his life up to the point at which he felt he was intellectually and spiritually reborn at the age of 35. Describing how the process of self-exploration was carrying him 'in so many directions, inward and outward, backwards and forwards; into dreams on one hand, and social observation on the other',<sup>24</sup> he also explores the possibility of imaginatively travelling through time in ways other than the standard linear progression. While representing the past as a historicised 'single line' when viewed from the present, in his imagination he returns to 'the present by countless lines',<sup>25</sup> that is, returning via the manifold series of experiences which constitute his understanding of the present. In doing so, Muir is self-contextualizing his understanding of the present, distinguishing between what Samuel Alexander defines as 'mental space-time' and 'physical space-time'.<sup>26</sup> Alexander's ideas relating to time and psychology are returned to in Chapter Four but it is worth stressing at this point that Muir's writings suggest that he shared, albeit on a less scientific level, Alexander's understanding that the distinction between our experiences of space and time

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<sup>20</sup> *SF*, p.3.

<sup>21</sup> Muir is reworking Nietzsche's hypothesis of the development of unsympathetic judgment, a 'mysterious pathos' achieved by a 'widening of distance within the soul itself'. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche* Vol.12, Thomas Common tr. and Oscar Levy ed. (Edinburgh: Foulis, 1911), p.223. This is the 18 volume series which Muir read in its entirety between 1911 and 1912. See *SF*, pp.149-52.

<sup>22</sup> 'Poetry', *The Present Age from 1914* (London: Cresset Press, 1939), pp.71-72.

<sup>23</sup> Muir (1939), pp.71-72.

<sup>24</sup> NLS MS.19671 f.230. Letter to Sydney Schiff (17/05/1938), *SL*, p.100.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.100.

<sup>26</sup> Samuel Alexander, *Space, Time and Deity*, Vol.1 (London: Macmillan, 1920), p.180.

are categorical rather than paradigmatic.<sup>27</sup> As Muir speculates in *The Structure of the Novel* (1928), ‘we see things in terms of Time, Space, and Causality [...] yet the imagination desires to see the whole unity, or an image of it’.<sup>28</sup>

It is this image of unity—a symbolic representation of the experiences of sensation, impression and reflection, rather than the literary stylistics of modernist realism—which Muir seeks. Terms of reference such as ‘time’ and ‘space’ have validity only in so far as they forward this end; that these two terms are interrogated so many times in Muir’s poetry (a poetic technique of which Imlah is less than appreciative),<sup>29</sup> underlines their importance to his imaginative undertaking. As the aporia between time and space cannot be resolved (other than being transposed in terms even more technical and perplexing) they never become redundant as poetic expressions. That the terms time and space are so frequently used in common speech provides them with an extra level of rhetorical complexity which Muir utilizes in his poetry: rather than being components of a metalanguage restricted to specialist users, they are expressions which are universally employed, denoting a vast range of assumed distinctions regarding the interrelated concepts they signify. As Currie suggests, literature always reveals something of our conceptions of time, no matter how subtly they may be expressed.<sup>30</sup>

Muir’s autobiographical writings remain the texts to which most readers turn to elucidate the more intricate facets of his poetry and Imlah is no exception. Muir’s previous editor at Faber was T.S. Eliot who came to appreciate the virtues of Muir’s poetry relatively late in his own writing career. Despite having spent a great deal of time concentrating his ‘attention on experiment in metric and language’, Eliot recognised that Muir ‘was first and foremost deeply concerned with what he had to say’.<sup>31</sup> Arguing that Eliot’s inverse *ad hominem* reading of Muir as a poet of indisputable ‘integrity’ is being surpassed by less charitable readings of his poetry, Imlah cites Patrick Crotty and Seamus Heaney as two ‘normally generous readers [who] have begun to protest’ against Muir’s ‘unexciting’, ‘low wattage’ poetry.<sup>32</sup> Heaney’s comment regarding Muir’s ‘visionary, yet

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<sup>27</sup> Alexander argues that ‘Space and Time, are in reality one: that they are the same reality considered under different attributes’. Alexander (1920), p.180. See also Hermann Minkowski, ‘Space and Time’ in Hendrik A. Lorentz, Albert Einstein, Hermann Minkowski, and Hermann Weyl, *The Principle of Relativity: A Collection of Original Memoirs on the Special and General Theory of Relativity* (New York: Dover, 1952), pp.75-91.

<sup>28</sup> Muir (1954), p.113.

<sup>29</sup> Imlah views Muir’s ‘preoccupation with repetition’ as a poetic ‘tic’ or ‘ailment’: ‘If Muir did not stutter in person, he habitually stutters in his poems, up to the last and best of them’. Muir (2008), p.xvi.

<sup>30</sup> Currie (2007), p.151.

<sup>31</sup> T.S. Eliot, ‘Preface’. Muir (1965), p.10.

<sup>32</sup> Muir (2008), p.xiv.

low wattage'<sup>33</sup> poetry is from 'The Impact of Translation' (1986) in which he voices his frustration that Muir, as a witness of the post-war European 'historical moment', did not bring more of its traumatic realities to bear in his work. Heaney's frustration is understandable if he is suggesting that the biographic content of Muir's poetry should constitute a historical testimony or act as mirror in which to view the past. Committed to the search for the underlying and recurrent pattern of human existence, Muir produces an archetypal poem like 'The Combat' (from *The Labyrinth*, 1949) to express the 'historical moment' rather than choosing to write a less abstract and more journalistic depiction of totalitarian inhumanity.

In 'The Combat' the 'killing beast' (48) and its undying enemy appear to necessitate each other. There can be no absolute defeat or victory on a field where freedom and oppression perpetually clash. The 'historical moment' is merely one round of such an 'unequal battle' (47); both are champions of their unnamed causes. It is the perverse unity of their struggle to which Muir is drawing the reader's attention. Concepts like freedom and oppression should not be too hastily applied as neither beast is free from the contest of the other. Muir's vision in this poem punctures the surface political allegory as neither beast has an absolute historical correlative: it is the utterly futile nature of the conflict which matters. The 'despair' (50) of the impotent murderer in the closing line signals the dawning of the realisation that victory in an eternal contest is hard won yet holds no more triumph than defeat. If, as Muir suggests, the passive beast 'be taken as humanity' and the attacking beast to be 'all the enormous forces, particularly nowadays, ranged against humanity',<sup>34</sup> then, ultimately 'The Combat' forms a depiction of humanity struggling with itself.

The discussion of visionary poets in 'Yesterday's Mirror' provides what reads as an exposition of this idea, suggesting that Muir had found the central conceit of the poem eight years before he found the appropriate imagery to convey it:

The world the mystical poet sees is a world in which both good and evil have their place legitimately: in which the king on his throne and the rebel raising his standard in the market place, the tyrant and the slave, the assassin and the victim, each plays a part in a supertemporal drama which at every moment, in its totality, issues in glory and meaning and fulfilment.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'The Impact of Translation', was published first in *Yale Review* (1987) and reproduced in *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T.S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings* (London: Faber, 1988), p.41

<sup>34</sup> MT845.3.2 Tape 2 (Harvard University, Lamont Library). See *CP*, p.343.

<sup>35</sup> 'Yesterday's Mirror: Afterthoughts to an Autobiography' (1940), p.407.

The Communists' seizure of power in Prague in 1948 is transfigured in 'The Combat' into a dream-inspired epic conflict between archetypal forces. *An Autobiography* provides the exterior reality from which this poem is formed:<sup>36</sup>

The stories about the Nazis when I first came to Prague, and those I heard now about the Communists, called up a vast image of impersonal power, the fearful shape of our new modern inhumanity [...Yet] I did not feel that this ancient humanity could ever be destroyed by the new order.<sup>37</sup>

By refusing to bolster the poem with specific details that would link it to the exterior circumstances, Muir is free to go in search of causes rather than discussing effects. In the autobiography's account he is still operating on the symbolic level, looking for images to convey his ideas. Rather than providing a precise account of events, he is attempting to see where those events fit in the greater scheme of things, juxtaposing the 'new modern inhumanity' against the 'ancient humanity' to suggest that the site of the current ideological conflict is also a place which exists beyond the stratification of European History.

Heaney returns to the discussion of Muir as a European visionary poet in 'The Place of Edwin Muir' (2005),<sup>38</sup> drawing direct comparisons with the poetry of Wilfred Owen, suggesting how they both developed a poetic rhetoric in response to their traumatic environments. A response, which in Muir's case may be at times 'somnolent and elegiac' yet is nevertheless 'politically purposeful'.<sup>39</sup> Heaney rightly underlines the significance of Muir's 'period of Nietzschean hardness' which to a large degree was a rejection of Christianity (and not merely the tenets of Presbyterianism) and a response to his susceptibility to the 'passive suffering' he encountered around him.<sup>40</sup> His understanding of suffering was both personal and philosophical. He witnessed the death of his father, his two eldest brothers and mother within five years of moving to Glasgow from Kirkwall. Later he came to realize what wholesale suffering meant in larger humanitarian and political terms. His interest in socialism, after his mother's death in 1906, provided additional insight into the pan-European context of that suffering.<sup>41</sup> What had seemed like inexplicable, arbitrary, and personal tragedies, now, in the light of socialism, had a broader meaning. In the writings of Nietzsche Muir found the required philosophical approaches to

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<sup>36</sup> *Auto*, pp.258-73.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.271-72.

<sup>38</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'The Alexander Stone Lecture in Bibliography' as delivered at the University of Glasgow in November 1988, an edited version of which is reproduced in 'The Place of Edwin Muir', *Alba Literaria: A New History of Scottish Literature*, Marco Fazzini ed. (Venice: Amos, 2005), p.517

<sup>39</sup> Heaney (2005), p.516.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p.517.

<sup>41</sup> *SF*, p.133.

temporarily gain some emotional distance from his own traumas. The faith in the future that Muir sought however, was more than any self-administered ‘pseudo-philosophy’ could provide, as he later realized.<sup>42</sup> The ‘integrity’ that Eliot identifies in Muir’s poetry is the culmination of this multi-faceted understanding and his various attempts at ‘overcoming’ himself and his circumstances. That Muir did eventually manage to turn the traumas of the Glasgow years into poetry and prose is not proof that he ever reached any point of absolute resolution; indeed, it is more the case that he came to terms with his own humanity through failing to reach a universal synthesis of ideas.

Muir’s autobiographic method, then, which he employed in his poetry, prose and to some degree his critical writings (particularly where Scotland or Scottish cultural matters are being discussed), required distancing himself from his subjective experience of events as far as possible, through allegory, symbolism and analogy, and by choosing not to write about them until a significant period of time had elapsed. Philosophically his interpretation of Nietzsche’s rejection of sympathy assisted this, as did his political beliefs (which broadly fit under the banner of socialism) which helped him formulate an appreciation of the existence of larger economic, social and ideological superstructures. Yet even in his earliest writings, Muir used Christianity as a resource to achieve precisely the same ends, and Heaney is not alone in attributing a visionary quality to Muir’s work. Jennings’s *Every Changing Shape: Mystical Experience and the Making of Poems* (1961) and Huberman’s *The Poetry of Edwin Muir* (1971) provide two of the most explicit examples of this. Christianity, then, offered Muir another way of approaching his subject obliquely, as did Greek and Roman mythology. With the potent rhetorical language and symbolism of Classical and biblical literature offering the opportunity to estrange the circumstances he is depicting even further back in time, it is little wonder that these two literary traditions provide the core resources of his poetic idiom. Indeed, the two traditions have a crucial point of confluence, as Auerbach concludes, in the ‘tragedy of Christ’ in which there is a unification of ‘everyday reality and highest and most sublime tragedy’.<sup>43</sup> It is this tragic Christ which appears in both ‘Thought and Image’ and ‘The Son’,<sup>44</sup> however, Muir tends to keep his biblical and Classical points of reference contained within different poems, and aside from the allusions to Eden, the biblical material is more prevalent in the latter collections of verse than the earlier ones.

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<sup>42</sup> *SF*, p.164.

<sup>43</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968), pp.311 & 555.

<sup>44</sup> *CP*, pp.131-132 & 208.

The importance of these two traditions to Muir is that they carry a range of pre-existing conventions and mythologies which can be reworked and adapted to suit his needs. Supplemented by the attitudes of his ever-evolving political, philosophical, and spiritual beliefs, he endows what could potentially be outmoded rhetoric with a heightened sense of immediacy and modernity. In doing so, he creates a sense of the ever-presence of the past as well as demonstrating the transience of the present. The affinity this suggests between Muir's poetry and Joyce's *Ulysses* is further confirmation of Muir's modernity.

### Philosophies and Mythologies

Muir's ideas relating to temporal matters have their basis in the three main currents of thought which inform Muir's early development as a writer: Christianity, the writings of Nietzsche and socialism, each having their own way of viewing human history, whether it be eschatological, evolutionary or revolutionary. Part of Muir's method is to draw freely upon these differing models, which is another reason why 'time' and 'space' have such a multiplicity of meanings in his writings. Muir's Nietzschean phase, as Heaney rightly argues, was crucial in Muir's development as a poet, just as Owen's period of 'vindictive outrage' was necessary for his progress from disempowering bewilderment to a position of writerly 'self-conquest'.<sup>45</sup>

Heaney can appear like something of a lone dissenter in identifying the positive necessity of this stage in Muir's writing career. By contrast, Imlah dismisses Muir's studentship of Nietzsche as merely one of the 'isms' which he tried and discarded in his youth.<sup>46</sup> Butter recognises the potency of Nietzsche's influence on Muir but views this as having a detrimental effect on his development, stylistically as well as intellectually.<sup>47</sup> Following Butter's lead in attempting to minimize the importance of Muir's lifelong dialogue with Nietzschean ideas (focusing on the 'myth of the Superman'<sup>48</sup> and overlooking entirely the influence of Nietzsche's use of antithesis and dualities), James Aitchison argues that Muir, despite his early Nietzschean 'hysteria', ultimately achieves a truly unified vision in the later poem 'One Foot in Eden'. Aitchison explicates the poem along prophetic lines, describing how Muir's 'beatific vision' acts as a transfiguring force causing the poet himself to become a radiant 'source of grace'.<sup>49</sup> This is clearly overstating the significance of Muir's creative endeavour although Aitchison is right in

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<sup>45</sup> Heaney (2005), p.517.

<sup>46</sup> Muir (2008), p.xii.

<sup>47</sup> Butter (1962), pp.65. Butter is also the first to demonstrate the continued influence of the Nietzschean 'paradox of permanence and change' which remained one of his central concerns. Butter (1962), p.54.

<sup>48</sup> James Aitchison, *The Golden Harvester: The Vision of Edwin Muir* (Aberdeen: AUP, 1988), p.9.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p.192.

identifying Muir's desire to find an underlying metaphysical unity within the poem. This search began by attempting to understand the relationship between the temporal and the spatial, with *The Story and the Fable* serving to chart the progress which Muir makes in his undertaking to grasp what it is to be 'a human being existing in space and moving through time'.<sup>50</sup>

The numerous depictions of geographic and archetypal journeys in Muir's poetry and prose highlight his epistemological insight into the relation of time and space: a journey being an event which, even in common speech, we can discuss as being equally spatial as temporal. The probing enquiry of a child who asks, 'are we nearly there yet?' on what is perceived to be an overly lengthy journey reveals the self-evident simultaneity of the temporal and the spatial. The child's question is as much about extension as it is about duration simply because it is impossible to separate the two within the context of the situation. Whether it be calculating vast distances in 'light years', observing the earth's revolution around the sun or detecting the frequency of caesium atoms travelling a metre inside an atomic clock, our understanding of what time means is bound up in this relationship between duration and extension. Having served a Nietzschean apprenticeship Muir was attuned to such complexities and, either consciously or not, formulated a conceit to exploit the existential significance of this space-time duality. Through the oxymoronic conceit of the 'stationary journey', Muir turns a thought experiment into an existential conceit which he uses to present the confusion of being in the wrong time and place:

Yet if I could reverse my course,  
Through the ever-deepening yesterday,  
Retrace the path that led me here,  
Could I find a different way? (5-8)<sup>51</sup>

In 'The Stationary Journey', the opening poem of *Journeys and Places* (1937), the persona describes his 'earthly station' (1), held in stasis as the 'revolutions of the year' (2) pass without offering any hope of bringing change. Muir had begun the process of imaginatively retracing the path through 'the ever-deepening yesterday' fifteen years previously, although, as he wrote to Stephen Spender (6 October 1937) in response to his review of *Journeys and Places* in the *London Mercury* (May-Oct 1937),<sup>52</sup> he felt that he was now more consciously able to 'move outside'<sup>53</sup> of himself than he had been previously, allowing him to gain an objective view of his past. In this letter he also details his rejection of the reductive 'historical machinery' of Communism, arguing that its

<sup>50</sup> Muir (2000), p.278.

<sup>51</sup> 'The Stationary Journey', *Bookman* LXIX (June 1929), 355-356. *Journeys and Places* (1937). *CP*, p.65.

<sup>52</sup> *London Mercury* XXXVI (May-October 1937), 578-80.

<sup>53</sup> Letter to Stephen Spender (06/10/1937). *SL*, p.97.

‘Marxian apparatus’ acts like ‘a terrible dead weight on the hope of Socialism’. It is clear from these comments that Muir is looking back over far wider territory than his own narrow cross-section of history.

While Joyce’s semi-autobiographical Stephen Dedalus complains in *Ulysses* (1922) that history is a nightmare from which he is trying to awake, by 1922 Muir felt that he had almost ‘climbed out’ of the horrors of his past, having spent years ‘sleep walking’<sup>54</sup> through his life after arriving in Glasgow at the age of 14. Noting the parallel with his previous superficial adoption of Christianity as a boy after hearing an evangelical sermon in Kirkwall, he suggests that his ‘conversion’ to socialism around 1908 was an ‘emotional transmutation’ which allowed only a ‘temporary discharge’<sup>55</sup> from the traumatic years that preceded it. However, as he admits, he did gain a lot more from his time in the Clarion Scouts than regular draughts of fresh air and a renewed passion for reading. He regained faith in a future in which society would be transfigured, a process which he realized would also involve his own transformation:

I realized for the first time how I should live with other men and women, and what I should look for in them, and as after my conversion in Kirkwall, I seemed again invulnerable, so that no jealousy among those who were working along with me for Socialism, weakness or vice, could disgust me or affect the stationary affection I felt for all of them.<sup>56</sup>

Here, even in a moment of visionary transfiguration, when he felt that he had once again entered ‘the fable’, becoming part of ‘some legendry drama which, as it has recurred a countless number of times’,<sup>57</sup> the term ‘stationary’ appears with an ambivalence which implies both a sense of security but also inevitability. From the second poem in the series which forms *Variations on a Time Theme* (1934), this is the first time Muir applies the ‘stationary journey’ conceit explicitly:

Time has such curious stretches, we are told  
And generation after generation  
May travel them, sad stationary journey,  
Of what device, what meaning? (I:11-14)<sup>58</sup>

An earlier form of it appears as the ‘stationary country’ (354) in *Chorus of the Newly Dead* (1926) being an estranged, eternally recurring realm in which ‘Achilles drives and Hector runs’ (355) and where ‘Time’s deer is slain’ (322) and ‘The hunter and the hunted rise again’ (323). The first usage of this trope, however, is in the opening poem of his first

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<sup>54</sup> *SF*, pp.130 & 234.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p.133.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p.134.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p.134.

<sup>58</sup> ‘The Interregnum’, *The Spectator* CXLIX (09/12/1932), p.827. ‘II’, *Variations. CP*, p.52.

collection. In 'Childhood', from *First Poems* (1925), the persona depicts the slow passage of a ship travelling so slowly on the 'evening sound' (15) that 'time seemed finished ere the ship had passed' (16). The ship is not actually static but is moving so slowly that time appears to be prolonged by its passage. Through this metaphor childhood is shown fixed within a moment and within a place that still exists outside the world of progress, the world in which the ship moves. Despite the foreboding shadows which are lengthening on the hills and the stirring imagination of the child wondering about 'new shores' (9), the poem closes with his mother calling him from the security of the family home. Since the poem was written around the spring of 1923, nearly 17 years after his mother's death and some 30 years after the Muir family were forced to leave their farm on Wyre, the poet's journey back to this place of childhood security seems all the more poignant precisely because of the distance in time he has to travel to reach it. Through the process of imaginatively revisiting the past, from a significant temporal distance, Muir's understanding of the causal relations between the present and the past remains in a state of constant augmentation, every return to 'the present'<sup>59</sup> revealing more about the past he felt he had lost.

Keen to avoid what he perceived as the shallow representation of 'life as it is lived', Muir sought to present an interpretation of his life as he understood it. He achieves this through employing self-reflexive, psychological exploration rather than attempting to recreate moments now inaccessibly past. Rejecting the possibility of 'catching'<sup>60</sup> aspects of real life and encapsulating them in art, Muir argues that the way to represent life is through the language of symbolism. Muir's affinity with Classical Greek literature is expressed repeatedly through his use of their mythologies in the corpus of his poetry, the frequency of the allusions and references increasing alongside the Christian ones volume by volume, from the gentle evocations of pastoral and idyllic verse in *First Poems* toward their climactic unity in the first part of *One Foot in Eden*. As Margery McCulloch notes, despite the fact that the ratio between biblical and Greek myths is of 2:1, the general impression of Part I of the collection is that the Greek myths are more numerous than they turn out to be. This is due to the balancing nature of these poems which focus more on human agency, action and responsibility, whereas the poems which concern themselves with Christian material tend to be more passive and speculative, particularly the postlapsarian relationship between man and God, exemplified by 'Adam's Dream' and 'Outside Eden'.

The use of Christian imagery and symbolism associated with the myth of Eden is a key example of how, occasionally, Muir's repeated employment of a set of rhetorical conventions has the potential to distract from, as much it contributes to, the story he is

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<sup>59</sup> Letter to Sydney Schiff (17/05/1938). *SL*, p.100.

<sup>60</sup> 'We Moderns', *TNA*, Vol.20, No.3-(16/11/1916), p.66.

delivering. His descriptions of rural life, his evocations of innocence and childish wonder, seem completely apposite to describe the earliest memories of his family's island farm on Wyre, yet his continual return to the notion of humanity's Fall, fixating on Original Sin, has the potential to undermine the universal nature of his recollections, almost abstracting them into a personal mythology. They are not, however, the product of Muir's own mythologizing, they are tropes of the Christianity he inherited from his family, his community and his country. That such beliefs seem so commonplace in Muir's story is an indicator of his early awareness of the more metaphysical and eschatological aspects of Christian faith, aspects which clearly inspired as much fear as awe in his young imagination.

Christianity, socialism and Nietzsche's writings form the main three intellectual and spiritual touchstones of Muir's creative idiom, but his appreciation of the important role which time plays in relation to memory and self-knowledge must be considered as central to his artistic worldview. As distinct as these three currents of thought may be what ultimately unifies them is that they all offer a way of viewing the past, the present and, no matter how tentatively, suggest what the future may hold. Muir's primary preoccupation in his autobiographical writings, however, is the task of formulating an understanding of the past, and essential to this, on both a personal and collective level, is an understanding of how memory shapes and reshapes our comprehension of prior events. In other words, the role the imagination plays in our understanding of the remembered past.

### **The Imagination and the Remembrance of Things Past**

The first definitive memory Muir recounts in *The Story and the Fable* is of the frightening experience of being baptised, the event taking on biblical proportions in his retelling: 'I felt the cold water on my face and began to cry [...] as if the baptismal water had been a deluge'. 'Most of my childhood is drowned as deep as the rest of that baptismal day',<sup>61</sup> he continues, underlining just how memorable that event was. When this experience is read alongside his account of the overpowering sense of guilt he felt at the thought that he may have touched a bag of poisonous sheep dip against his father's instruction,<sup>62</sup> we can see how Muir's earliest experiences are informed by a way of viewing the world in which the commonplace exists alongside the supernatural. A further example is found in his description of the 'Book of Black Arts' which he recalls from his father's stories, which in Muir's imagination, becomes a metamorphosed version of the family bible.<sup>63</sup> In his remembered childhood Orkney was a place where 'there was no great distinction between

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<sup>61</sup> *SF*, p.17.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p.36-37.

<sup>63</sup> *SF*, p.12.

the ordinary and the fabulous',<sup>64</sup> his parents 'were fixed allegorical figures in a timeless landscape',<sup>65</sup> while the natural world both fascinated and frightened him, capable of inducing both a 'stationary terror' and a sense of 'delight'.<sup>66</sup> All this is evidence of what McCulloch identifies as Muir's 'awareness of the essential relationship between the everyday and the unseen',<sup>67</sup> and such recollections also highlight his commitment to penetrating surface experience to reveal the psychological layer, which, although intrinsically personal, is of universal significance.

In concluding *The Story and the Fable* Muir suggests that it was through the process of living 'life over again', which began in Dresden in March 1922, that he came to know himself:

I realized that I had been stubbornly staring away from myself. As if I had no more choice than Time, I had walked with my face immovably set forward, as incapable as Time of turning my head and seeing what was behind me.<sup>68</sup>

Quoting a few of lines of Robert Henryson's *The Testament of Cresseid* by way of illustration (the moment that Troylus partially recognizes Cresseid despite her altered appearance),<sup>69</sup> Muir describes how, by turning and 'looking *against* the direction in which Time was hurrying' him, he experienced what Proust describes as 'a moment liberated from the order of time', in which felt himself 'freed from the order of time'.<sup>70</sup> What links Muir's intertextual points of reference here is the psychological focus on the relationship between memory, recognition and time, important considerations in Muir's autobiographical technique.

The two lines of the *Testament of Cresseid* which Muir cites are from a section of the poem which sees Henryson, following the Aristotelian model, draw a distinction between 'ane idole of ane thing' as fixed in memory and the same object as it 'appeiris in forme' at a later moment, suggesting how 'within the mynd' they become 'figurait' into a recognizable form without the active volition of the perceiver.<sup>71</sup> The discussion of memory, time and perception are framed along similar Aristotelian lines in *Time Regained* in the narrator's many nocturnal musings on the complexities of memory. Hypothesizing

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p.12.

<sup>65</sup> *SF*, p.25.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p.22.

<sup>67</sup> McCulloch (1993), p..xiii.

<sup>68</sup> *SF*, p.234.

<sup>69</sup> 'And with ane blenk it come into his thocht/That he sumtime hir face befor had sene' (499-500). *SF*, p.234. See Robert Henryson, *Testament of Cresseid* in *The Poems of Robert Henryson*, Robert L. Kindrick ed. (Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997).

<sup>70</sup> *SF*, p.235. Muir suggests that these lines, in addition to the one that precedes them, 'Than upon scho kest baith hir Ene', summarize the tragedy of the situation. See 'Robert Henryson' in Muir (1949), 7-19, p.17.

<sup>71</sup> *Testament of Cresseid* (507-511).

that a 'returning memory can throw no bridge, form no connecting link between itself and the present minute' until it is free from its historicized order and relived for a second time, the narrator speculates that memories are in fact impressions relived rather than experiences remembered, capable of inducing a 'sensation of renewal' as well as release.<sup>72</sup> For Muir this 'sensation of renewal' was akin to what he began experiencing during the spring of 1922: 'I did not feel so much that I was rediscovering the world of life as that I was discovering it for the first time [...] this was my turning point'.<sup>73</sup> Willa Muir echoes the significance of Muir's existential awakening during their time in Prague, describing how he was 'looking back over his life with new eyes', attempting to surprise 'his unconscious unawares' by 'going against the flow of time'.<sup>74</sup>

Because of its significance, this turning-point forms the natural caesura at which to divide the discussion of the biographical and literary background to Muir's writing. This chapter restricts itself to a discussion of Muir's representation of his life up to March 1922, the point at which *The Story and the Fable* closes, to suggest a few of the events and influences which helped inspire his lifelong fascination with the subject of time. This will provide the context for Chapters Two and Three which will explore Muir's earliest poems, his critical contributions to the *New Age*, and offer a deconstruction of his 'Edward Moore' persona. This process will highlight a few of the specific historical and cultural perspectives which he gained during his formative years as a self-styled Nietzschean neophyte and suggest how their influence extends beyond the point at which Muir no longer sought consolation in Nietzsche's philosophy. The remainder of Muir's own story, which forms the second part of *An Autobiography*, will be discussed alongside his other writings in subsequent chapters to illustrate the adaptation and development of his writing and ideas in general.

*The Story and the Fable* is worthy of significant attention as it constitutes the most revealing and imaginative instalment of Muir's life story, or to be more precise, his story as he tries to remember it. As well as establishing the blueprint which *An Autobiography* follows, the first instalment of Muir's story provides a real sense of the 'uniquely autobiographical tension'<sup>75</sup> which John F. Whitmire identifies in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Les Mots* (1964), namely the tension between the 'freedom of consciousness and the weight of circumstances'. Sartre categorizes childhood as the most critical stage of intellectual development which 'we never wholly surpass', arguing that 'we study the early childhood

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<sup>72</sup> Marcel Proust, *Time Regained in Remembrance of Things Past*, Vol.3, C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Frederick A. Blossom trs. (London: Chatto and Windus, 1981), p.903.

<sup>73</sup> *SF*, p.235.

<sup>74</sup> Willa Muir (1968), p.69.

<sup>75</sup> John F. Whitmire, 'The Double Writing of Les Mots: Sartre's Words as Performative Philosophy' in *Sartre Studies International*, Vol.12, No.2, (Winter 2006), 61-82, p.72.

as a way of living general conditions without clearly understanding or reflecting on them'.<sup>76</sup> To reflect upon, and to reach an understanding of, the resonant significance of his childhood, not merely in the past or the present but also in the future, is precisely what Muir achieves in the opening chapters of *The Story and the Fable*. In doing so he demonstrates what Whitmire concludes was Sartre's challenge to those of us who take up the gauntlet of 'know thyself': to 'twist around in our skin enough, re-totalize our story in such a way that we do not simply re-externalize all that we interiorized in our childhood, but give to the world something new'.<sup>77</sup> Muir achieves this through, what Elgin W. Mellow, paraphrasing Richard Austen Butler succinctly describes as, the marriage of 'poetic subjectivity' and 'ruthless objectivity'.<sup>78</sup> Mellow also rightly recognizes that through the 'direct examination of his personal yet archetypal experience'<sup>79</sup> during the composition of *The Story and the Fable*, Muir also uncovered the source out of which much of the material which finds its way into his later poetry began to surface.

*The Story and the Fable* can be seen as the point of confluence between Muir's early and mature poetry and within it he recounts the most significant events and influences which he believed affected his development as a writer. Aileen Christianson highlights the different approaches to life-writing that Edwin and Willa adopted, arguing that Edwin 'wrote the kind of autobiography which foregrounds intellectual and artistic developments' rather than 'any exploration of his emotional life'.<sup>80</sup> This analysis is unquestionably sound and it is exactly why *The Story and the Fable* is particularly useful as a record of Muir's early literary referential context, as well as providing extratextual points of reference. With regard to Christianson's observation, it is also worth noting that, although Muir's prose style does not lend itself to lengthy emotive discourse relating to how he felt about specific events, he certainly leaves the reader in no doubt about the emotional and psychological effect of the upheavals he experienced at various stages in his life. The difference between Willa and Edwin Muir's style of autobiographical writing is, on balance, more an example of the distinction between showing and telling than any deliberate attempt to construct a gendered 'life-history'.<sup>81</sup>

Christianson's suggestion that Muir focused more on 'symbolism and allegory rather than the details of his life',<sup>82</sup> is certainly consistent with his quasi-autobiographical approach and his desire to resist mimetic realism. His autobiography is an attempt to reach

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<sup>76</sup> Whitmire (2006), p.69. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, Hazel Barnes tr. (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1963), p.143.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p.75.

<sup>78</sup> Mellow (1979), p.80.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p.80.

<sup>80</sup> Christianson (2007), p.180.

<sup>81</sup> Christianson (2007), p.180.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p.180.

beneath the surface of individuation to find the source of humanity's common nature, to understand what it means to live a life amongst so many other entirely different, yet interdependent, lives. Ultimately Muir's own story was of less interest to him than the metanarrative of which it was a part, but it was the life he could write about with the most insight and therefore fit for purpose. As Christianson, picking up on Lumir Soukup's point, states, Muir's account of his married life is unquestionably an inferior factual record by comparison with that of Willa Muir's. As Soukup suggests,<sup>83</sup> the value of Muir's technique resides in its interpretative and speculative qualities and not in his ability to catch aspects of life as lived. Indeed, as already discussed, he sought to avoid that representational fallacy.

Following through on the idea that *The Story and the Fable* forms an articulation of Muir's 'intellectual and artistic developments', Chapter Two looks in more detail at Muir's reading of those he calls the 'uplifting Victorians' (including John Ruskin, Thomas Carlyle, Robert Browning)<sup>84</sup> and the Romantic poetry and prose (English and German) which fuelled his passion for 'thoughts' and 'thinkers'<sup>85</sup> prior to his adoption of Nietzsche as his philosophical lifeline. Soukup makes an important point regarding the value of the details which are absent from Muir's account of the first half of his life, such as his involvement with Gerda Krapp, a young German woman who accompanied the Muirs on a walking holiday in April 1923<sup>86</sup> or his sympathy for the plight of the German public after 1918 which are both suppressed from *An Autobiography* (1954). Such information must also be taken into consideration as what is absent from the autobiography is also an indicator of methodology and authorial intention. Fortunately Butter's detailed work on Muir's correspondence and notebooks, and Willa's *Belonging* help to restore some of the detail which is absent from Muir's own account. Naturally, Willa's account of her years with Edwin is of the utmost importance to any discussion of Muir's writing and the value of *Belonging* is reinforced by the fact that she was so concerned with accurately representing her husband's ideas and methods that she spent some time re-reading his early writings to renew her acquaintance with 'Edward Moore' before writing *Belonging*. In the notes she compiled regarding *We Moderns* she comments that it was the work of a man 'pulling himself up out of misery by his boot straps',<sup>87</sup> and despite having long since fallen from favour with critics (Muir himself was hypercritical about its merits), the volume

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<sup>83</sup> Lumir Soukup, 'Belonging', *Chapman 71* (1993), pp.29-33. See Christianson (2007), p.181.

<sup>84</sup> *SF*, p.112.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p.113.

<sup>86</sup> See Willa Muir (1968), p.78 & Christianson (2007), p.15. Gaskill suggests that while at Lake Garda in November 1923, Muir wrote to Gerda with the intention of returning to Germany to be with her but she reputedly declined his offer. See Howard Gaskill, 'Edwin Muir in Hellerau', *Scottish Literary Journal*, Vol.11 No.1 (May 1984), p.49.

<sup>87</sup> NLS 554-08 f.19.

exposed Muir to an appreciative American audience which in turn would provide the Muirs with the means to undertake their first foray into continental Europe.

Despite its failings, *We Moderns* must have retained a value for the Muirs which transcended its literary worth. The aphoristic and eclectic form of Muir's musings on literature and society in *We Moderns* certainly supports Willa's 1967 reassessment of it, demonstrating a mind grappling with the enormity and the multifaceted nature of contemporary life. Reluctant to systemize his questioning, Muir's progress from idea to idea appears to operate on the principle of free-association, and as Willa notes in relation to his discussions of political power, the ideas themselves always appear 'mightier than the sword or the pen'.<sup>88</sup>

As Soukup and Christianson concur, in-depth biographic detail is of secondary importance compared to Muir's perspectives on his experience. Muir's autobiographical paradigm would appear to be that only through thoroughly understanding the psychological and intellectual progress of a single life over a limited period of time can an appreciation of the potential of human development over epochs be realized. Precise and intricate biographical detail would act as a barrier to such an understanding, serving only to over-emphasize the significance of individual events rather than their collective meaning. However, sensitive and intricate description can achieve similar transcendental ends as those which Muir sought, as Hugh MacDiarmid demonstrates in his philosophically penetrating poem 'On a Raised Beach' (*Stony Limits and Other Poems*, 1934). MacDiarmid's poem, which Edwin Morgan suggests reveals 'the most deeply speculative aspect of the author',<sup>89</sup> operates on both a political and metaphysical level. The stones serve as a political metaphor for the individuated human society through being infinitely diverse yet unified through their diversity. The persona's sustained contemplation of the diversity of the Shetland stones then leads into speculations about the existence of a 'higher organism'<sup>90</sup> in which all matter is unified, the 'one perfect whole'<sup>91</sup> which forms the 'source of our knowledge of reality',<sup>92</sup> the realization of which may allow the exactitudes of being to give way to a transcendental meaning.

For Muir, this source resides in 'the fable' out of which every human story is composed, and although following the thread of an individual life enables an appreciation of the underlying pattern of this fable, if that thread is teased out of the fabric into its single

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<sup>88</sup> NLS 554-08 f.18.

<sup>89</sup> Edwin Morgan, *Hugh MacDiarmid* (Essex: Longman, 1976), p.23.

<sup>90</sup> Hugh MacDiarmid, 'The Kind of Poetry I Want' in *Selected Prose*, Alan Riach ed. (Manchester: Carcanet, 1992), p.241.

<sup>91</sup> Hugh MacDiarmid, 'The Kind of Poetry I Want' in *Lucky Poet: A Self-Study in Literature and Political Ideas* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1994), p.115.

<sup>92</sup> Alan Riach, *Hugh MacDiarmid's Epic Poetry* (Edinburgh: EUP, 1991), p.131.

strands, it is unravelled and the overall pattern is lost. Thus, in *The Story and The Fable*, Muir does not deliberate over the minutiae of individual events, seeking instead to offer an outline of his progress from the past into the present. He contextualizes his own journey through time in relation to the ‘universal frame overarching and embracing everything that gives proportion and meaning to the whole’.<sup>93</sup>

Reflecting Muir’s allegorical and symbolic approach to life-writing, Neil M. Gunn’s spiritual autobiography, *The Atom of Delight* (1956), strays beyond the genre expectations of literary autobiography to speculate about the ecstatic potential which resides in the mundane and the everyday. From a quasi-mystical position, what Alan Spence defines as ‘Highland Zen’,<sup>94</sup> Gunn argues that the transformative power to liberate the eternal self from its contemporary bondage resides in the acceptance of ‘an order of things outside our conception of time’.<sup>95</sup> For Gunn, this acceptance provides the freedom to comprehend the ‘ultimate wholeness or harmony’;<sup>96</sup> it offers a glimpse at reality as it presents itself to the imagination rather than as it is represented in our epistemology-driven, temporally fixated worldview:

The future remains open to this kind of freedom. Through freedom the adventure continues. The way goes into the future and the end of it cannot be known. One can only know it as far as one has gone.<sup>97</sup>

Like Muir, Gunn was sceptical about the validity of a totalizing historical view of human time and is keen to suggest the restricted nature of the metanarratives which result from a retrospective backward view. However, as the future is only imaginable through the re-contextualization of the past, any understanding of past events, no matter how problematic, is the only possible position from which to approach the future. In Muir’s personal mythology this equates to the idea that the macrocosmic fable is only imaginable through developing a sympathetic understanding of one’s own story. As George Mackay Brown discusses in relation to Muir’s historical novel *The Three Brothers* (1931), Muir ‘distrusted history itself’ with ‘all its cold documentation’ and instead chose to re-imagine humanity’s journey through time beyond the confines of ‘historical necessity’.<sup>98</sup> This is not to suggest that Muir imagines that we are able to truly escape the grasp of historical forces or indeed time itself. The litany of metaphors relating to captivity in *Variations on a Time Theme* (particularly the fifteen lines of section VII) demonstrates this perspective concisely through the poetic rendering of humanity’s Sisyphean struggle with time.

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<sup>93</sup> *SF*, p.245

<sup>94</sup> Alan Spence, ‘Afterword’, Neil Gunn, *The Atom of Delight* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1986), p.242.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p.245.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p.227.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p.227.

<sup>98</sup> Edwin Muir, *Selected Prose*, George Mackay Brown ed. (London: John Murray, 1987), p.6.

Muir was well aware that his obsession with time could cause his imaginative reconstructions of the past to be too frequently accompanied by a morbid sense of loss, as a letter to the art critic, poet and then a director of Routledge and Kegan, Herbert Read (dated 12 May 1940) reveals. Read was struck by the parallels between their life stories which he found while reading *The Story and the Fable*, and thanking Read for his kind remarks, Muir responded by explaining why he felt that time was literally against him:

I had a lot of difficulties in writing the book, especially in the Glasgow chapter, where all the calamities came upon the Muir family. I feel I probably have a sort of obsession about Time, and I wish I could look at it more objectively. Instead of seeing Time as the dimension of growth, I see everything passing away—the other pole, and I expect there is some perversity in my attitude, though on the other hand it is what stimulates my particular kind of imagination.<sup>99</sup>

On the immediately personal level Muir could articulate clearly what he felt time had undone, but when it came to the larger universal picture, Muir's questioning was not so readily satisfied, as he spells out in a letter to Alec Aitken:

I suppose what I mean when I say I have no philosophy is that I have no explanation, none whatever, of Time except as an unofficial part of eternity—no historical explanation for human life, for the problem of evil seems so insoluble to me: I can only accept it as a mystery, and what a mystery is I do not know.<sup>100</sup>

Unwilling to offer an answer to a question he is unsure he fully understands, this agnosticism regarding the nature of time is far from being Muir's definitive word on the subject, but it is significant that he arrives at this assessment after having just completed his first autobiography. Having spent a prolonged period contemplating the meaning of his own life, Muir reaffirms his rejection of any reductive 'historical explanation for human life'. While Muir and Gunn may differ vastly in the forms of faith they extol, what they share is the refusal to allow human life to be seen only in terms of ideological superstructures.<sup>101</sup> History may claim humanity's past as its subject, rendered into 'cold documentation', but what Muir demonstrates in *The Story and The Fable* is the ability of an individual to re-imagine his own story, engaging with the past as it is remembered and speculating on its meaning without the necessity of drawing any decisive conclusion.

<sup>99</sup> Letter to Herbert Read (12/05/1940). *SL*, pp.119-120.

<sup>100</sup> Letter to Alec Aitken (04/01/1940). *SL*, p.112.

<sup>101</sup> Muir was at this time exploring the possibilities of extending his essay on 'Bolshevism and Calvinism', *European Quarterly* (May 1934): 'I think both theories are extraordinarily alike here, alike, that is, in elevating the form of most human activity (which I suppose is struggle and anger) into the principle of human activity, and beyond that, into the principle .of good, at least of advancement. There is obviously a good deal of Darwinism behind the Marxian theory'. Letter to Herbert Read (26/01/1940). *SL*, pp.113-15. 'Bolshevism and Calvinism' is reproduced in *Edwin Muir: Uncollected Scottish Criticism*, Andrew Noble ed. (London: Vision, 1982), pp.123-131.

An important characteristic of this backward view is the extrapolation of the general from the specific. Seeking the universal via the personal, Muir's undertaking is to envisage the events of his own life within the context of human life and to affirm it, in the Nietzschean sense,<sup>102</sup> in the face of the contemporary forces which he describes dehumanizing the ancient societies of Europe. A witness to Czechoslovakia's 'rising out of chaos',<sup>103</sup> 'the general feeling of hope',<sup>104</sup> which Muir encountered in the streets of Prague in 1922 appears to be as much a projection of his own sense of liberation from the emotional chaos of his recent past as it is of the city itself. Like his depiction of a remote childhood paradise, which he came to realize had 'probably never existed',<sup>105</sup> the 'abundance of energy and hope',<sup>106</sup> which Muir perceived in Prague says as much about his own rejuvenation at this time as it does about the political and social realities of the city he is discussing. Focusing on its history, both ancient and modern, Muir's account attempts to identify the essential consciousness of Prague which transcends its tumultuous history, contrasting its characteristics with that of Glasgow and London. While he saw the renaissance he was experiencing in himself reflected in the citizens of Prague, the future for Czechoslovakia was already being shaped by larger totalitarian forces, which, albeit under a different banner, Muir would re-encounter on his return to Prague in 1945.

Prague is the site of monumental events in Muir's story both in 1922 and between 1945 and 1948, and in his poetry it is commemorated in 'The Good Town' (from *The Labyrinth* 1949). 'This was the good town' (1) the persona suggests, but now 'In our houses/Invaders speak in foreign tongues' (42-43). The cause of the town's ill treatment appears clear enough: 'It was not time that brought these things upon us,/But these two wars that trampled on us twice' (53-54). Yet penetrating further into the nature of the evil which is affecting the town's inhabitants, Muir's persona realizes, like Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902), that the true horror of their situation may reside in their own all too human nature: 'Could it have come from us? Was our peace peace?/Our goodness goodness?' (79-80). Ultimately though, the questions are unanswered and moral blame is held in the balance, sometimes enacted, but also 'seen': 'We have seen/Good men made evil wrangling with the evil,/Straight minds grown crooked fighting crooked minds' (101-03). Muir demonstrates, as he does in a more powerfully symbolic way in 'The Combat' (composed after the Communist *putsch* on 25 February 1948), that the

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<sup>102</sup> NLS MS1667 87-90ff. Letter to Sydney Schiff (01/02/1925). Partially reprinted in *SL*, p.45-46.

<sup>103</sup> *SF*, p.225.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p.225.

<sup>105</sup> Letter to Kathleen Raine (10/04/1956). *SL*, p.185.

<sup>106</sup> *SF*, p.226.

relationship between good and evil is more of a dialectic than a duel; neither side can ever truly win or lose as one is the inverse image of the other.

‘The Good Town’ asks when did the ‘Old time that promises and keeps his promise’ (10) end, that place in time in which ‘childhood, and youth and age’ (20) were fixed ‘Each in its place’ (21). This is a static realm where childhood does not end nor youth age. It is an imaginary place where the attributes of space and time can be separated from each other. Like the depictions of Wyre in ‘Childhood’, the good town of Prague is symbolic of something lost, both places forming reminders, for Muir, of a prelapsarian natural order. The conclusion of ‘The Good Town’, however, suggests the possibility of rebuilding a future from the ruins of the past:

[...] We must begin  
At the beginning, heave the grunting world  
Back in its place again, and clamp it there (98-100).

Writing seventeen years later, Muir admitted that his first impressions of Prague, published in *The Freeman* in 1922<sup>107</sup>—the American periodical whose payments of sixty dollars per article enabled the Muirs to continue their European travels—were of a ‘Prague which no longer exists’.<sup>108</sup> Certainly, in cultural and humanitarian terms this proved to be true, although Muir was unaware when writing his autobiography of the horrors which would follow the annexation of Czechoslovakia by Nazi Germany in 1939. Although he describes his reflections as a ‘sincere’ portrait of the city, he also recognized that he had ‘romantically touched up’<sup>109</sup> his version.

Prague continued to occupy a special place in Muir’s memory and imagination, with good reason; not only was it the city where he underwent the final stage of his psychological recovery but he would also return there as the Director of the British Institute (1945-48), where, after years of futile approaches to schools, colleges and universities in Britain,<sup>110</sup> he began lecturing on English Literature at Charles-Ferdinand University. Yet, as Muir stated in a BBC Scotland broadcast in 1952, ‘The Good Town’ ‘is not really about Prague or any other place, but about something that was happening to Europe [...] a symbolical picture of a vast change’.<sup>111</sup> ‘The Good Town’ is not only a

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<sup>107</sup> ‘Impressions of Prague’, *Freeman* V (10/05/1922), pp.204-205 & (09/08/1922), pp.510-512. ‘Impressions of a People’ *Freeman* VI (11/10/1922), pp.108-09. Reproduced in Edwin Muir, *Latitudes* (New York: Huebsch, 1924), pp.259-285.

<sup>108</sup> *SF*, p.229.

<sup>109</sup> *SF*, p.226.

<sup>110</sup> NLS MS 19670 ff.3-7 holds a series of open references from T.S. Eliot, Denis Saurat, Walter de la Mare, Stanley Cursiter, Bonamy Dobrée and the then Governor General for Canada, John Buchan.

<sup>111</sup> *CP*, p.344.

figurative depiction of the fall of Prague; it is also an exploration of the idea of the eternal Fall.

Muir's preoccupation with the notion of the Fall is not restricted to speculations regarding the resultant aftermath of our loss of innocence; he is equally interested in the continued existence of a place which remains unfallen, a propositional place which exists down the road we did not—or could not—take. This is a place that persists regardless of the events which follow it, a place that did not fall because our actions carry no consequences within it. This is the realm of pure imagination, where the past can be revisited, fallen cities restored, and time, like happiness, can be regained:

Time wakens a longing more poignant than all the longings caused by the division of lovers in space, for there is no road back into its country. Our bodies are not made for that journey; only the imagination can venture upon it; and setting out, the road, and the arrival: all is imagination. We long most for the places in time where we are happy.<sup>112</sup>

As Kathleen Raine suggests, Muir's autobiographic writings can be seen as the textual bridge between his worlds of 'thought and imagination'.<sup>113</sup> In support, McCulloch argues that they form an integral 'part of a philosophical continuum' which extends through all his writing with an 'unusual thematic coherence over varied genres and over the span of a lifetime'.<sup>114</sup> With the central concern of this 'philosophical continuum' being the infinitely perplexing subject of time, it is little wonder that Muir refused to draw his speculations to any resolving conclusion. What Muir does offer in *The Story and the Fable*, however, is a way of circumventing the pessimism of the suggestion that 'the true paradises are the paradises that we have lost'. Through his quasi-autobiographical method Muir arrives at a metaphysical understanding of human life, not as a 'life of routine and machinery, but as a fable extending far beyond our experience given to us by our senses and our practical reason'.<sup>115</sup> His childhood paradise, remembered and resurrected into 'lived time' (Proust's *temps vécu*), is ultimately of a lesser order than the socio-spiritual co-operative which he imagines humanity has the potential to reclaim, a state in which all will share 'a life of imagination and spirit'.<sup>116</sup> This is not, however, a Socialist fantasy of a future utopia: Muir well recognized that 'society has not yet solved its most elementary practical problems, and I do not think it will find it easy to solve them'.<sup>117</sup> Nevertheless,

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<sup>112</sup> *Auto*, p.224.

<sup>113</sup> Kathleen Raine, 'Review of *An Autobiography*', *New Statesman*, 48 (27/11/1954), p.711.

<sup>114</sup> McCulloch (1993), p.30.

<sup>115</sup> *SF*, p.236.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p.236.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p.236.

despite perceiving himself to be so at odds with time, his belief in humanity's endless potential to re-imagine itself forms a resounding expression of faith in the future.

Through gaining a critical distance on his subject, drawing upon the rhetoric, symbolism and the mythological aspects of his intellectual, spiritual and political beliefs, and integrating the inter-related functions of the imagination and memory, Muir developed a self-consciously writerly approach which is evident in his autobiographies, his poetry, and the novels alike. Through his search for archetypes, the most explicit and sustained examples of which are contained within *Chorus of The Newly Dead* (1926), Muir sought to gain some comprehension of the universal bond which he believed lay behind our individual existential experiences. There is a holistic approach inherent in Muir's thinking as he endeavours to sympathetically relate the world of experience to the world of the imagination. Just as the story forms part of the macrocosmic fable in Muir's creative vision, equally time must constitute some 'unofficial part of eternity'.<sup>118</sup> Like every individual life, time itself is ultimately a manifestation of something infinitely larger and more mysterious, and what Muir came to accept was that any knowledge we have of it is gifted to us from 'the Source of the mystery itself'.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Letter to Alec Aitken (04/01/1940). *SL*, p.112.

<sup>119</sup> *Auto*, p.281.

## Chapter Two

### A Child in Adam's Field': Orkney

#### Revisiting Orkney

In 1956 Muir returned to Orkney for the last time, compiling his impressions for the BBC broadcast 'Revisiting Orkney' which was to be aired in 1957.<sup>1</sup> Between 1901 and 1914 he had 'never missed a year without going back'<sup>2</sup> and enjoyed meeting up with a few of the people he knew as a child. Returning to the Orkney Islands in 1924 after a decade gap Muir recalls how swiftly modern innovations had become commonplace and how quickly time itself had seemed to pass: 'In my father's time Orkney was still living a life that had hardly changed for two hundred years. Now change had come, quite suddenly'.<sup>3</sup> Despite all that had altered by 1956 (the Muirs had been in the Orkneys during the summer of 1951, but here he is looking back to the Orkney he knew as a child),<sup>4</sup> including the new found relative prosperity of its farmers, Muir still felt that only in Orkney could he fully appreciate 'the unchangeable things in the world'.<sup>5</sup>

Orkney clearly remained Muir's point of contact with what he saw as the universal nature of things. As Willa notes, his 'secret compass'<sup>6</sup> always pointed north but it wasn't until they moved to Montrose in July 1924, having spent nearly three years living in Continental Europe, that she began to realize that his desire to return home wasn't a longing for Scotland but for Orkney. This longing was not just for the qualities of the natural environment or the characteristics of the Orcadian people that Muir details in 'Revisiting Orkney', but, as Willa identifies, Muir's orientation toward Orkney was linked with his need to commune with his childhood. Montrose may have allowed Willa a point of contact with her childhood but not Muir:

The great round sky, the whole wide links with their stretches of thyme and eyebright, the wild North Sea beating on sand dunes [...] were still as I remembered them; was it not a setting where the spirit had freedom to blow? I was not flatly disappointed, as Edwin was [...] I had forgotten that these childhood ways of mine were not his.<sup>7</sup>

For Muir, the 'great round sky' over Angus was not the Orkney sky, which he describes as married with the sea and the land in

<sup>1</sup> 'Revisiting Orkney' (1956). NLS MS 19662. Reproduced in *Scottish Literary Review*, NS Vol.1 No.1 (Glasgow: ASLS, 2009), pp.89-101. There are letters between Muir and the BBC regarding the proposed program but there is no evidence that it was broadcast.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.89.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.89.

<sup>4</sup> George Mackay Brown met the Muirs for the first time in the Stromness Hotel in the summer of 1951

<sup>5</sup> 'Revisiting Orkney' (1956), p.90.

<sup>6</sup> Willa Muir (1968), p.114. See McCulloch (1993), p.xi.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.114.

a spectacle of the first things: land and sea and sky [...] You see men and women and children walking on the bare earth against the sky, and houses rising as if on an ultimate hill with nothing but space and light beyond them. And seen in this way, you feel that house and man and woman and child have some universal human meaning. It has something to do with the naked contour of the land and something to do with the light.<sup>8</sup>

In a telling moment of editing in the amended typeset manuscript of 'Revisiting Orkney', Muir crossed out what would have been the closing line of the above description which stated: 'I have never had the same feeling in any other place'.<sup>9</sup> The inclusion of this sentiment was unnecessary as it is evident that this is exactly how he felt about Orkney; it was both his childhood home as well as his archetypal image of home, a place that he would frequently re-visit, both in his travels and in his imagination. While he accepted that the Orkney he knew as a child no longer existed, the memories of that place and its way of life remained with him and continued to inspire him, as 'Revisiting Orkney' demonstrates.

Nearing the end of his life, with frequent bouts of ill-health, he still saw Orkney as a place of full of life and the source of an elemental vitality. It is also noteworthy that he suggests that reading is an integral activity of Orkney life, proposing that 'North Ronaldsay, the remotest island in Orkney has a higher percentage of readers than any other place in Britain'.<sup>10</sup> Muir is not merely citing the opinion of Ewan MacGillivray, the 'enterprising head of Kirkwall library'; he is drawing on his own experiences as a young reader in a rural community. Gaining a clearer outline of Muir's life as a reader in his formative years helps elucidate Kathleen Raine's claim that 'the world of ideas for him was not a doctrine but an experience',<sup>11</sup> a lifelong engagement with literature and the world of thought which began in childhood. The following two chapters explore Muir's early encounters with the 'world of ideas', and suggests how those ideas impacted on his development as a writer. Identifying these influences will, in turn, help to illustrate the context for his lifelong fascination with the subject of time and its significance for human society.

The first thirty-two years of Muir's life can be usefully divided into two geographically situated stages, and follow the southerly trajectory of passage from Orkney to Glasgow, before leaving for London in 1920. These two phases of Muir's literary progress provide the background circumstances to his development from a young reader on a comparatively remote Orcadian island into a professional writer at the heart of London's literary society. Exploring these two stages in turn, this chapter begins by discussing the

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<sup>8</sup> 'Revisiting Orkney' (1956), p.90.

<sup>9</sup> NLS MS 19662 46f.

<sup>10</sup> 'Revisiting Orkney' (1956), p.99.

<sup>11</sup> Kathleen Raine, 'Edwin Muir: An Appreciation', *Texas Quarterly* 4, No.3 (Autumn 1961), pp.233-45.

significance of Muir's rural childhood and establishing a few of the early influences which inspired his young imagination, and continued to do so for many years after he left Orkney. Turning next to Muir's working life in Glasgow and the Clyde coast in Chapter Three, the discussion focuses on Muir's revelatory discovery of the writings of Heinrich Heine and Friedrich Nietzsche and his interaction with Socialist politics. This proved a potent and multifarious mix of ideas and beliefs which helped formulate his attitudes toward literature and society, and, crucially, his appreciation of the vital relationship between the two.

It was also during the Glasgow years that Muir began his involvement with Alfred Orage and the *New Age* magazine which led to his entry into the London literary scene in the autumn of 1920. Muir's earliest and most critically undervalued writings can be found in his *New Age* epigrams, lyrical poems and cultural commentary, and will be introduced at this point, highlighting his reserved and conscientious engagement with modernist writings and thought. This will set the scene to discuss Edward Moore, his Nietzschean persona, in greater depth, in Chapter Four.

In arguing that 'the most important shaping force on Muir's literary production was his birth and upbringing in the Orkney Islands', Mellown<sup>12</sup> lends support to what T.S. Eliot defines as the essentially 'Orkadian' aspect of Muir's poetry, being 'neither English nor Scottish':

there is the sensibility of the remote islander, the boy from a simple primitive offshore community who then was plunged into the sordid horror of industrialism in Glasgow, who struggled to understand the modern world of the metropolis in London, and finally the realities of central Europe in Prague where he and his wife — to whom together we owe our knowledge of Kafka — saw the iron curtain fall and where they saw their friends gradually finding it safer to avoid their company.<sup>13</sup>

Eliot's juxtaposition of Muir's 'primitive' origins with the complex political realities of industrialized modernity may be somewhat reductive, yet it does touch upon the central tensions and dualities which Muir utilizes in his poetry and biographical writing. For Eliot, the tensions between the past and present, the rural and urban, the primitive and the urbane, the ancient and the modern, are all concentrated in 'The Horses', 'that terrifying poem of "the atomic age"'.<sup>14</sup> As Eliot suggests, 'The Horses' is a concentration of elements drawn from a lifetime of sustained poetic exploration and philosophical enquiry, an intellectual trajectory whose beginning is firmly rooted in Muir's formative experiences of the natural world and of a Christian creed in which mankind's bond with the land is seen as both a reward and a punishment.

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<sup>12</sup> Mellown (1979), p.15.

<sup>13</sup> Muir (1965), p.10.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p.10.

In *Edwin Muir: Man and Poet* (1965), Butter argues that Muir's

way of looking at things is consonant with the Christian belief in a divinely created, but fallen world. But he did not see things like this because of any belief. The seeing came first. Similarly immortality was to be to him a state of being, something experienced rather than just believed in; and here too childhood memories contributed.<sup>15</sup>

Muir's sense of his early experiences of existing in a 'timeless landscape' partially supports Butter's view. Childhood, Muir claims, 'is the only time in our lives when we exist within immortality and perhaps all our ideas of immortality are influenced by it'.<sup>16</sup> Yet Butter's enthusiasm for Muir's heightened childhood perception of religious experience must be tempered by Muir's own admission of just how impressionable his imagination was as a child and how heavily influenced he was by the beliefs and practices of his parents and the community he was born into. In addition, what Muir meant by immortality does not seem to fit comfortably with the orthodox perspectives he would have encountered in the United Presbyterian Church at Rousay, nor in the Revivalist Christianity which his mother endorsed. Muir discusses immortality not as a God-given property of the soul, but instead, as a place of innocence that children 'exist within' before they have learnt the meaning of mortality, that is, before time 'tugs us by the sleeve or claps his policeman's hand on our shoulder; it is in our nature to ignore him, but he will not be ignored'.<sup>17</sup>

Muir's definition of immortality, then, appears less related to a manifestation of the divine and more to do with the absence of knowledge regarding the ephemeral nature of human life. In essence, it is an expression of childish innocence not cognizance of the supernatural. What Muir proposes is that children lack the understanding 'that time moves and that all things change'; 'we think and feel and believe immortally in our first few years, simply because Time does not exist for us'.<sup>18</sup> However, this state did not last long, and he quickly began to appreciate that the world around him as a child was part of a continuity, a living history in which the mythical and the fantastic co-existed with the commonplace.

In *The Story and The Fable* Muir recounts his father's stories of witchcraft and faeries alongside his mother's far-reaching family history, her family being descendents of a ninth-century Irish priest, Cormack, who built a chapel in Deerness (Muir was named after his maternal grandfather, Edwin Cormack). In the Orkney Muir experienced as a

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<sup>15</sup> Butter (1966), p.8.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.26.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p.26.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.26.

child ‘the ordinary and the fabulous’<sup>19</sup> seemed intertwined: the tales of witches, ghost ships and shipwrecks co-existed without contradiction alongside the hagiographies of St Magnus and Cormack, or the family’s Sunday scripture readings and Psalm recitations. Even the land itself, betraying its history through its Norse-inflected place names, is littered with the ruins of ancient chapels, crumbling castles and Neolithic sites, all with their own histories, legends and associated folk lore.

One such place was the Castle, a high, stone-strewn knoll on Wyre near to the family’s farm house and the setting of the poem ‘Childhood’ from *First Poems* (1925). ‘My very first memory was of a little green hillock close to our house, which we called the Castle [...] The name survived for many centuries after the Wyre people had forgotten what it stood for’.<sup>20</sup> These ruins mark the site of the Norse chieftain Kolbein Hróga’s stronghold (as detailed in the *Orkneyinga* and *Haakon Saga*), but the place became associated with the legendary Orcadian giant ‘Cubbe Roo’. From this high vantage point Muir could see the limits of his own childhood island haven: ‘My younger sister and I would sit there for hours in the summer evenings, looking across the sound at the dark, hilly island of Rousay’.<sup>21</sup>

Despite the everyday fusion of the fantastic and the mundane, and the dynamic experience of growing up on a working farm which he recounts in *The Story and The Fable*, Muir likens the first stage of his childhood to the experience of being encapsulated in ‘a vast, boundless calm’,<sup>22</sup> what he later came to understand as life’s ‘stationary pattern, changing, yet always staying the same’. The image of time, sitting like a bird ‘on the wrist of each day with its wings folded’,<sup>23</sup> which accompanies Muir’s discussion of immortality is a reworking of the opening image from the third poem in the *Variations on a Time Theme* (1934) series where the persona (Muir reimagining his childhood) likens himself to ‘a child in Adam’s field’ (1)<sup>24</sup> dreaming away ‘My one eternity and hourless day’ (2). Depicting a tranquil scene which existed ‘Ere from my wrist Time’s bird had learned to fly,/Or I had robbed the Tree of which I die’ (3), Muir renders his experience of innocent timelessness through a series of metaphors drawn from the allegory of the Fall. This poem demonstrates Muir’s ability to articulate personal experience through the language of biblical symbolism; a specific childhood moment is thus presented in the Christian tropes which most inspired him as a child. This has an estranging effect which allows the poem to develop further into the realm of the symbolic and the abstract, yet, in the poem’s closing

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<sup>19</sup> *SF*, p.12.

<sup>20</sup> ‘Revisiting Orkney’ (1956), p.97.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p.13.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p.26.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.26.

<sup>24</sup> *Variations on a Time Theme* (1934), *CP*, p.52.

image of the persona pledging to ‘search this rubble for the promised land’ (43), the reader is presented with a vision of human society that is both timeless and specifically contemporary.

Butter’s *Edwin Muir* (1966) provides an in-depth biographical study of Muir’s childhood, focusing particularly on a few key incidents which highlight how the religion of his parents and rural life resulted in a

childhood in which he could see his vision of Eden, but also perhaps contributed, though blamelessly, to his difficulties and inner divisions in the Glasgow years, and to his lateness in finding his true vocation as a poet.<sup>25</sup>

This summation is no doubt accurate with regard to the difficulties Muir had adjusting to urban life, and while he certainly developed his own vision of Eden, it was nevertheless informed heavily by the faith into which he was born and the natural environment he came to know. As such, his vision of an earthly paradise is an inherited one, yet he repeatedly demonstrates his literary agility in adapting and re-appropriating the symbolism and imagery associated with the creation story to an array of ends. As Butter rightly identifies, the Christianity Muir encountered as a child no doubt contributed to this ‘sense of unity, of timelessness, of splendour’<sup>26</sup> which he depicts with regard to his early stages of life in his autobiography and in his poetry which draws on childhood experience. However, these depictions merely mark the starting point of his imaginative attempts to understand and contextualize the past, a process which is also heavily informed by his life as a reader. Reading was an activity which seems to have been as important a part of his Orcadian childhood at the close of the nineteenth century as he suggests it was for the inhabitants of North Ronaldsay in 1956.

While the Bible is clearly the textual source of his Edenic and postlapsarian symbolism, there were many other influences which excited Muir’s young imagination and stimulated his adult desire to find answers to the ‘three mysteries’ which dominate his lifelong quest for understanding, ‘where we came from, where we are going, and [...] how we should live with one another’.<sup>27</sup> As Alexander Scott discusses, the ‘image of man-in-time is central to the fundamental concerns of Muir’s poetry throughout his whole career’,<sup>28</sup> and this is no less true of his writings more generally. Thus, his literary depictions of childhood are not intended to be merely presentations of his own past; he is seeking to form a representative image of our collective past. With this in mind, it is worth briefly rehearsing the timeline of the first two decades of Muir’s life to provide some

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<sup>25</sup> Butter (1966), p.3.

<sup>26</sup> Butter (1962), p.4.

<sup>27</sup> See McCulloch (1993), p.118.

<sup>28</sup> Alexander Scott, ‘Edwin Muir: From Myth to Man’, *Akros* Vol.16 No.47 (August, 1981), p.31.

context to his creative evocations of innocence and childhood, to appreciate fully the stark contrast between his early schooling and his working life in Glasgow.

### **‘A Child in Adam’s Field’**

Born on 15 May 1887 at Folly (‘Foley’) Farm, Ayre, in the parish of Deerness on the western peninsula of Orcadian Mainland, Muir was the youngest child of six born to James and Elizabeth Muir (née Cormack). In 1889 the Muirs moved to Bu, the largest farm of seven on the island of Wyre, which sits south-east of the larger island of Rousay, a few miles off the north-west Orkney Mainland. James Muir’s elder sister Margaret, and William Sutherland (James Muir’s nephew) were also part of the household.<sup>29</sup> Due to what Muir describes as the excessive exactions of their landlord, James Muir was forced to move his family to a smaller farm, Helzigetha (‘Helye’), also on Wyre, but they spent less than a year there before moving to ‘the Garth’ (like Bu, a substantial hundred-acre farm), four miles outside Kirkwall, in 1895. In 1900 the Muir family (only Clara and Edwin are still at home at this point) moved briefly to Kirkwall before resettling in Glasgow in the winter of 1901. The Muirs lived in a series of flats in the Crosshill area (now part of Govanhill) on the south side of the city where Jimmie had been living since leaving Orkney a few years earlier. His father, whom Muir depicts as being particularly ill-suited to urban life, died of a heart attack in September 1902, while Willie, who had been forced to give up his job in Edinburgh, lost his fight with tuberculosis the following October. The family was further bereaved by Johnnie’s death in November 1905, the result of a brain tumour brought on by a fall from a tramcar some months earlier, and his mother’s death in February of 1906. ‘The family now looked as if it had been swept by a gale’, as Muir recalls, for in the five years that the family had lived in Glasgow ‘time seemed to give no return, nothing but loss [...] I climbed out of these years like a man struggling out of a quagmire’.<sup>30</sup>

It was not to Christianity that Muir turned to restore his faith in the future during the traumatic aftermath of this period; it was to the politics of Socialism and the philosophy of Nietzsche. However, there is a strong association in Muir’s autobiography between reading and recuperation which can be traced to childhood, and particularly to his parents’ Christianity. His frequent bouts of ill-health as a child provided prolonged periods of time in which to read and some of his earliest reading materials were the products of his

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<sup>29</sup> The National Census Record for Wyre (1891) lists the occupants at ‘Bu’ as James Muir (aged 58, farmer), Elizabeth Muir (48, wife), James Muir (15, son), William C. Muir (13, son), John Muir (11, son), Lizzie S. Muir (9, daughter), Clara Muir (7, daughter) Edwin Muir (3, Son), Margaret Muir (59, sister), and William Sutherland (34, nephew).

<sup>30</sup> *SF*, p.122.

mother's interest in Revivalist Christianity, including papers and books which bestowed 'self-help' and the moral imperative to 'get-on' in life.<sup>31</sup> One such example was *The Christian Herald* which carried regular debates on Millenarian ideas, which, he states, 'sank deep into my mind',<sup>32</sup> forming the background to some of the visionary poetry which came from his psychoanalysis in 1919, what Maurice Nichol described as 'themes from his racial consciousness'.<sup>33</sup> If one believes that time is finite, as argued in the eschatological speculations in *The Christian Herald* (Muir recalls the paper offering a calculation for the duration of time itself), then the need to 'get-on' takes on a particularly urgent importance.

In addition to Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, which fuelled his fearful fascination with horses,<sup>34</sup> his early reading also included *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *The Scots Worthies*, the former terrifying him while the latter no doubt provided various examples of the kind of unquestioning veneration for Scotland's Protestant forefathers that he sought to address in *John Knox: Portrait of a Calvinist* (1929). As he details in a letter to Sydney Schiff soon after its publication, his biography of Knox was

written for the purpose of making a breach in the enormous reverence in which Knox has been and is still held in Scotland, a reverence which I had to fight with too in my early days (so I really feel quite strong about it).<sup>35</sup>

His father had a copy of *The Scots Worthies* bound for Muir after he had taken an interest in it aged nine.<sup>36</sup> As John Howie's 'Author's Preface' (1870) suggests, its Protestant hagiographies were intended to provide examples for both 'caution and imitation [...] important lessons for our conduct in life, both faith and manners'.<sup>37</sup> However, it was the 'exciting stories of heroism and endurance' which held Muir's attention rather than the 'badly written, biased, and untruthful' biographies of the reformers and Covenanters.<sup>38</sup> Whatever influence this book may have exercised over him in his youth must surely be secondary to his subsequent disgust for the 'ardent zeal'<sup>39</sup> of the Scottish Reformers he expressed in adulthood.

Responding to John Buchan's comments regarding *John Knox*, Muir expressed his gratitude by stating that 'I am very grateful, in particular, for your saying that I leave Knox a great figure, for as much as we dislike Knox that seems to be the end of the matter'.<sup>40</sup> This

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<sup>31</sup> *SF*, p.29.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p.30.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p.64.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p.23.

<sup>35</sup> Letter to Sydney Schiff (08/07/29). *SL*, p.66.

<sup>36</sup> *SF*, p.84.

<sup>37</sup> John Howie, *The Scots Worthies* (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier, 1870), p.xviii.

<sup>38</sup> *SF*, p.30.

<sup>39</sup> Howie (1870), p.xvi.

<sup>40</sup> Letter to John Buchan (28/06/29). *SL*, p.65.

recognition of Knox's powerful influence and anxiety regarding its impact had been first acknowledged by Muir in 'A Note on the Scottish Ballads' (1923),<sup>41</sup> where Knox is depicted casting an image of the Madonna into the sea, calling it 'only a bit of painted wuid'.<sup>42</sup> Lamenting the supposed loss of Scottish culture, Muir speculates about

what a tragedy it was that its great conception of life as a thing of sin and enjoyment, of life and death, of time and eternity, realized in pure imagination, was turned by Knox and the Reformation into a theology and intellectual principles!<sup>43</sup>

Muir returned to this subject in *Scott and Scotland: The Predicament of the Scottish Writer* (1936), to argue that

towards the end of the pre-Reformation Age there must have existed in Scotland a high culture of the feelings as well as of the mind: a concord which was destroyed by the rigours of Calvinism.<sup>44</sup>

The significance that Muir attached to Knox and Calvinism, and his ensuing theories regarding Scottish history and contemporary culture, have drawn much critical attention since 1936 and merit the further discussion which Chapter Seven devotes to them. For the moment, however, it is worth stating simply that Muir's early experience of Presbyterianism and his readings of Knox and the other 'worthies' no doubt contributed to the views he developed regarding Scottish society and the role of religion.

In *The Story and The Fable*, Muir's father is depicted as a man in possession of a 'spontaneous piety' while his mother is endowed with 'a deep respect for religion'.<sup>45</sup> Muir describes the family's Sunday evening hymns and gives accounts of his mother retelling the story of Christ's life from a children's book.<sup>46</sup> Such descriptions suggest a deeply religious, church-adhering household. As Marshall argues however, in reality Muir's 'Orkney background, it seems, was not a religious one',<sup>47</sup> or at least, not as traditionally religious as Muir's account of his childhood implies. Indeed, his parents may well have been more independently minded in their attitudes and beliefs than Muir's description makes clear.

Citing the United Presbyterian Church congregational records for Holm, Rousay and Kirkwall for 1876, 1877 and 1895 respectively, Marshall draws significance from the fact that James Muir, unlike many of his peers, never became an elder of the church despite the length of his membership and his position in the community. In addition, Muir's mother does

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<sup>41</sup> *The Freeman*, VI (17/01/1923), pp.441-444. Reproduced in Muir (1924), pp.12-30.

<sup>42</sup> Muir (1924), p.16.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p.28.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p.61.

<sup>45</sup> *SF*, p.29.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p.29.

<sup>47</sup> Marshall (1987), p.103.

not appear alongside her husband and sister-in-law on any of the congregational lists of transfers for the parishes of Rousay, Wyre or Kirkwall.<sup>48</sup> It is clear that she was not a member of the United Presbyterian Church, a position that is perhaps alluded to in the distinction Muir draws between his father who, despite being a ‘very religious man’ attended church ‘irregular[ly], but reverently’,<sup>49</sup> and his mother’s preference for the evangelical Methodism of Dwight Lyman Moody and Ira D. Sankey.<sup>50</sup> Muir himself had an encounter with a revivalist preacher in Kirkwall the year before the family left for Glasgow, one of a series of touring evangelists who visited Orkney during his childhood. His sister Clara was converted by a different preacher three years earlier.<sup>51</sup> He later rejected this experience as a false conversion and although its effect did not appear to last long it does suggest how his family’s beliefs had an impact on him during that time.<sup>52</sup>

Despite the piety with which Muir credits his parents, the family appears to have attended church rather infrequently. It is easy to imagine how regular church attendance at Rousay while the Muirs were on Wyre would have posed frequent challenges, but once the family were living on the outskirts of Kirkwall it is more difficult to imagine that it was purely issues of ‘time and space’<sup>53</sup> alone that kept them from Sunday worship. As Marshall concludes, it appears that the Muirs had rather less to do with the church than was normal in Orkney for the time. What influence religion had in the development of Muir’s young imagination, then, appears to be the product of the influence of his parents’ less than orthodox approach to organized Christianity and his own childhood love of books, legends and myths. The unorthodox nature of Muir’s adult religious beliefs is made explicit in a letter to Sydney Schiff on 16 January 1939:

As you know, I have believed for many years in the immortality of the soul; all my poetry springs from that in one form or another; and belief of that kind means belief in God, though my God is not that of the churches: and I can reconcile myself to no church.<sup>54</sup>

This sentiment is further underlined in a letter to William Soutar on 3 February 1940:

the difficulty with me is that I have the faith, but that I cannot belong to any one Christian community [...] the theological dogmas do not help me; I can't digest them for my good; they're an obstacle to me (perhaps they shouldn't be,

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<sup>48</sup> Marshall (1987), p.104.

<sup>49</sup> *SF*, p.27.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p.29.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.98-100.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p.76.

<sup>53</sup> See Marshall (1987), p.104.

<sup>54</sup> Letter to Sydney Schiff (16/01/39). *SL*, p.108.

but they are); and so I'm a sort of illicit Christian, a gate-crasher, hoping in my own way to slip in.<sup>55</sup>

These two personal statements of faith summarize the impact of Muir's childhood experience of religion on his imagination as they highlight the two key theological notions which Muir sought to preserve for his own spiritual worldview, namely belief in the personal and communal symbolism of the Fall and the immortality of the soul. It is also highly fitting that he appears unable to resist using Christian allusion while discussing his rejection of 'theological dogma'.

Alongside his exposure to religious ideas and texts at home, Muir was also inspired by the literature he encountered at school, which included a history book which contained, among others, the biographies of Thomas More, Philip Sydney and John Eliot.<sup>56</sup> Matthew Arnold's *Tristram and Iseult* (1852) and John Keats's *Eve of St Agnes* (1820) were the two poems which seemed to have spoken most to Muir during his school years. Around the age of nine, Muir suggests, he 'began to bolt printed matter as if it were some precious nourishing substance',<sup>57</sup> and by the age of twelve decided that he wanted to become a writer. Despite his anxiety regarding what his parents thought of 'profane literature', he began haphazardly reading whatever he could get hold of. Turning initially to the poetry of Matthew Arnold, whose depictions of the natural world only occasionally found accord with his own experience, Muir records being deeply moved by William Morris's *The Earthly Paradise* (1870) which he discovered in an edited selection in a Kirkwall bookshop around 1899.<sup>58</sup> The legends and myths which Muir encountered in Morris's poetry had a transformative effect on the way he imaginatively viewed the world around him:

I read it over and over again [...] and it seemed to me I was watching the appearance of a new race in my familiar countryside: a race of naked goddesses and 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.<sup>59</sup>

The essential premise of Morris' epic, the search for an earthly paradise, clearly finds a parallel in Muir's lifelong creative preoccupation with Eden, and this conceit also offered Muir a bridge between the worlds of Christian and 'profane' literature. *The Earthly Paradise* also presented a vast array of myths, legends and literary allusions for Muir to pursue, and he began devotedly following up every allusion or reference to 'great writers'

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<sup>55</sup> Letter to William Soutar (03/02/40). *SL*, pp.115-116.

<sup>56</sup> *SF*, p.87.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p.83.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.88-89.

<sup>59</sup> *SF*, p.89.

that he encountered in the press or in his school books. After the family moved to ‘Garth’ then Kirkwall proper in 1900, his frequent visits to the public library afforded Muir the opportunity to broaden his reading further, albeit he felt afterwards that he wasted a great deal of time reading histories and critical studies which he was ‘quite incapable of understanding’, including one concerning David Hume, much to his father’s exasperation.<sup>60</sup> It is interesting to note though that the story which he suggests remained one the most vivid from those early years of reading, and which he chooses to recount at length in *The Story and The Fable*, is not literary in nature, but mythical. The story is a creation legend concerning the Orkney and Shetland isles in which a man-eating dragon is slain by a noble prince. Muir recalls that the story appeared in *The Orkney Herald* and suggests that it may well be the source of many of his subsequent dreams about dragons. Given that it is a creation narrative, involves the archetypal fight between good and evil, and is heraldic in its imagery, it is not difficult to imagine why this story fascinated him. That it is also situated locally would no doubt have added an extra level of interest.

In summary, then, a brief review of Muir’s early childhood and reading reveals the foundations from which he began his life-long relationship with the world of ideas and literature. The symbolic potency of the Eden narrative clearly had a huge impact on him, as did creation narratives more generally, and they certainly provided him with one way to answer his question regarding ‘where we came from’.<sup>61</sup> His involvement with evangelical and Presbyterian Christianity ultimately led to his rejection of both creeds, and although he claims to have retained a lifelong belief in the immortality of the soul and the existence of a deity, he never identified himself with any church as an adult. The Bible, however, as a cultural and literary source, remained an important influence and the freedom with which he was able to draw upon it to suit his own artistic vision is better understood within the context of the non-conformist attitude that his parents held regarding organised religion. Like the myths and legends he first encountered in Morris’s *The Earthly Paradise* (particularly those associated with the fall of Troy and the birth of Rome), biblical narratives presented Muir with an imaginative long view of history, offering the possibility of contextualizing human history within time writ large.

The representations of nature and society he encountered in the poetry of Morris, Arnold, Shakespeare and in Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* (1882), may have been in stark contrast with his self-idealized rural childhood, yet he discovered that, through the act of reading, the world around him could be imaginatively transformed and re-interpreted. His fascination with horses also clearly stems from this period, and may owe as much to

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<sup>60</sup> *SF*, p.90.

<sup>61</sup> See McCulloch (1993), p.118.

experience of them on the farm as to his fear of Swift's race of Houyhnhnms. Growing up on a farm led to his appreciation of the natural relation between the mire and the byre, as Butter argues, for Muir 'the horses on the farm, the insects, the grass, even the inanimate things seemed to have a life of their own—mysterious, sometimes terrifying, but bound to the life of men'.<sup>62</sup> This appreciation also led to his first disquieting thoughts about the asymmetry of man's relationship with animals, and particularly their slaughter and processing.<sup>63</sup>

There is a sense of unity about Muir's descriptions of his early childhood, man and nature seem bound together within a continuity of time. This sense of unity was shattered when Muir turned his attention to describing urban life in Glasgow, the beginning of which can be traced to his recollections of the year the family lived in Kirkwall after they had to give up their last farm. It is this forced disconnection from the land that Muir felt was the deciding moment in his family's history. This break represented a time-shift from a realm governed by organic, seasonal continuity into a world ruled by impersonal mechanised time. This binary opposition, though essentially rhetorical, is a juxtaposition which allowed Muir to make sense of his own experience, to provide it with a meaningful historical context. In the myth of man's expulsion from the Garden of Eden, Muir found an archetypal history which held relevance for his own. The important distinction being, of course, that he did not consider his family to have 'fallen' from Orkney by their own actions; rather, they had been pushed out by a force beyond their understanding or control. In keeping with the biblical parable, it was the division of labour which Muir attributes as the cause: 'it was as if a fermentation had set up in our family which no power could stop [...] it was as if something quite impersonal were scattering us all to the quarters of the compass'.<sup>64</sup> After the family gave up farming, the transit from Kirkwall to Glasgow seemed like an inevitable journey to Muir: 'no power on earth could have kept us from taking that road'.<sup>65</sup>

It was the leap of faith that so many people from rural communities across Scotland undertake in their thousands every year, such is the gravitational pull that the cities exert on the unemployed of Scotland. For everyone who makes it, it is always a journey into uncertainty. It was easy for Muir to look back and see this event as wholly negative, but had the family never left Orkney it is hard to imagine how Muir, without his literary and political education in Glasgow and London, would have found his way into the European modernist canon. Accepting Muir's allegorical account for what it is—an attempt to form a

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<sup>62</sup> Butter (1962), p.3.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. *SF*, pp.97 & 162-164.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p.92.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p.93.

universally symbolic image of the past—the significance that he drew from his family’s metaphorical expulsion from Eden can be seen resonating throughout his writings. If there is a concluding point for this lifelong image of lost innocence, perhaps Muir realizes it with the consumption of the ‘moist fruit’ (14) that begins ‘the deadly path/That leads into the sultry labyrinth’ (10-11) and continues on through experience before arriving at ‘the true’ (22) in ‘I Have Been Taught’.<sup>66</sup> The act of consuming the fruit that leads from childhood into adulthood is accepted, without repentance or regret; an act of naive defiance becoming the final affirmation of experience.

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<sup>66</sup> *CP*, p.274.

## Chapter Three

### 'A Child, a Youth, a Man': Glasgow and the Clyde Coast

In these wildernesses of dirt, ugliness and obscenity, our industrial towns, there are usually art galleries, where the daintiest and most beautiful things, the flowers of Greek statuary, for instance, bloom among the grime like a band of gods imprisoned in a slum [...] like something delicate and lovely sprawling in the gutter, or an angel with a dirty face.<sup>1</sup>

This passage, entitled 'Art in Industry', appeared alongside fifteen other 'Odd Notes' in Muir's debut as a columnist in the *New Age* on 12 October 1916 (the title of the bi-weekly column became 'We Moderns' in the next issue). Writing as Edward Moore, Muir is talking about his own twofold experience of Glasgow. Glasgow was where he first encountered mass poverty but it is also where he became politically and artistically engaged with modern life. It is no over-statement to suggest that it is precisely because of the traumatic experiences which he catalogues in his autobiography that he became involved with socialism and Nietzschean philosophy, which in turn provided the stimulus that led him to take up writing. As Muir himself argues, attacking the reductive and selective nature of the 'realist theory' he describes operating in many modernist novels, 'great art may arise out of hate, grief, even despair, but never out of boredom'.<sup>2</sup>

The years which Muir spent in Glasgow appear far from boring, indeed his own account of them reads like an overpowering assault on the emotions and senses. In one of the most often-cited passages from *The Story and The Fable*, a diary extract from the period 1937-39, Muir imaginatively describes the shock of the new on his arrival into modern urban life:

I was born before the Industrial Revolution, and am now about two hundred years old. But I have skipped a hundred and fifty of them. I was really born in 1737 and till I was fourteen no time-accidents happened to me. Then in 1751 I set out from Orkney to Glasgow. When I arrived I found that it was not 1751, but 1901, and that a hundred and fifty years had been burned up in my two days journey. But I myself was still in 1751, and remained there for a long time. All my life since I have been trying to overhaul that invisible leeway. No wonder I'm obsessed with time.<sup>3</sup>

The surreal quality of this description is entirely in keeping with its time-travelling subject matter, and the polarization which Muir establishes between Orkney and Glasgow at the beginning of the twentieth century would not fare well if approached in terms of social realism or historical materialism. The temporal disjunction that is being depicted is a

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<sup>1</sup> 'Odd Notes', *TNA*, Vol.19, No.24 (12/10/1916), p.569.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.569.

<sup>3</sup> *SF*, p.263.

highly personalized one; it is how Muir felt about the time-accident which took him to Glasgow when he came to write about it some thirty-six years later. However, Glasgow and the Clyde coast was where he was fortunate enough to enjoy near-continuous employment, became politically and culturally engaged with modern life, and where he met his wife. Regardless of the personal challenges he faced, or more accurately and problematically, because of the challenges he overcame, Glasgow is where his writing life began. As well as being the place where he passed from childhood into adulthood, it was also the site of his metamorphosis from a reader into a writer.

As Mellown identifies, the eighty-odd book reviews that Muir wrote for the *Nation* magazine between August 1924 and May 1928 formed the basis of the more in-depth critical essays which followed them.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, it is worth exploring the key influences and events which inspired the writings he produced during the period from 1916 to 1919 as they establish the approaches and perspectives which dominate his literary output during the 1920s and beyond. Muir's literary development was a particularly public one from the outset, as Mellown notes,<sup>5</sup> and his first poetic and critical offerings in the *New Age* show a young writer thinking his way through his subject as he writes. He later regretted the fact that he exposed so much of his youthful ire during this period, yet it was the frankness of his approach and the explicitness of his points of reference which earned him favour among readers and editors alike, including Alfred R. Orage and Alfred A. Knopf. Often marginalized as juvenilia, Muir's earliest writings are best approached by first suggesting some of the context of their composition and also the influences which informed them.

Muir began his working life in Glasgow with a series of low-waged office jobs, first in a city centre law office in 1902,<sup>6</sup> then at an engineering firm in Renfrew. This post was followed by a junior post in a Glasgow publisher's but he lost this job due to ill-health (he suffered from a glandular complaint which resulted in a septic boil having to be removed from his neck). This condition also required a prolonged period of out-patient treatment at the Victoria Infirmary, which in turn provided more time to pursue his autodidactic education in literature. In an attempt to aid his health by escaping from the city into the countryside, he found work as a trainee chauffeur at Kirkmichael House in Ayrshire in 1905. The work allowed Muir sufficient spare time to continue his renewed passion for poetry, familiarizing himself with the works of Milton, Wordsworth, Swinburne, Rossetti and Morris, which he describes as an antidote to his 'religious moonings' which followed the deaths of his father from a heart attack in September of 1902 and his elder brother

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<sup>4</sup> Mellown (1979), pp.24-25.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.25.

<sup>6</sup> *SF*, p.106.

Willie, who Muir had been helping nurse, and who died shortly after from tuberculosis.<sup>7</sup> Muir's inability to keep the Kirkmichael House's cars up to the standards required resulted in him losing this position after only a few months and Muir returned to office work as a junior clerk in a beer bottling factory in Glasgow where he remained until 1912. Muir's brother Johnnie's death in 1906 (after a protracted period of suffering caused by a brain tumour) was swiftly followed by his mother's in February 1907, at which point Muir and the surviving siblings (Clara, Elizabeth and Jimmie) went their separate ways.

His job in the factory office of the bottling plant provided Muir with a level of income and free time that he had not previously experienced, and although the daily journey through the squalor of the Gorbals troubled him, he found the office to be a 'cheerful place'<sup>8</sup> and through working alongside the young men from the more impoverished areas of the city he began to gain a more sympathetic understanding of what urban poverty really meant in human terms. Looking back over the time he associates with travelling through the slums, he condemns the 'complacency' in the rags-to-riches stories of self-made men:

the knowledge that such years existed for me, and that they still exist for millions of people, is more than enough; and that a few men have escaped from them to become Members of Parliament or business magnates or trade-union leaders is at best a romantic story with a happy ending, while to the overwhelming majority the story ends as it began.<sup>9</sup>

This perspective is clearly at odds with the self-seeking 'get on' in life philosophy he encountered in *The Christian Herald* as child. It was not long after beginning work in the bottling plant office that Muir discovered socialism through the polemical tutelage of Bob, the head clerk, on whose recommendation Muir read Robert Blatchford's *Britain for The British* (1902). Establishing the Manchester Fabian Society in 1890, Blatchford spearheaded the Clarion Movement which spawned countless cycling and walking clubs, choirs and social groups throughout the United Kingdom. Blatchford was the editor and gravitational centre of the weekly *Clarion* newspaper since its first publication on 12 December 1891. *The Clarion*, like *The Scout* which came from it, was the articulation of a larger socialist movement which, as Martin Wright's analysis supports, had at its core a humanist antithesis to revolutionary class war:

We may see the Clarion Scout movement as a working out of the revolutionary energy engendered by the vision of socialism as presented in the Utopias of Morris's *News From Nowhere* or Blatchford's *Merrie*

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<sup>7</sup> *SF*, pp.110-117.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.123.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.130.

*England*. Fred Brocklehurst's statement of 1895 [*Clarion*, 23 March] that 'they are thirsting for new worlds to conquer' brings out the nature of this energy well. Rather than the bomb, the tool of revolution was argument and conversion.<sup>10</sup>

In 'What the Scouts are For', published in the first edition of the monthly paper *The Scout—A Journal for Socialist Workers* (1 March 1895), Blatchford identifies that the work of the *Clarion* Scouts must be both 'educational' and 'active' to forward 'the teaching of Socialistic principles' and bring about 'the destruction of anti-Socialist prejudices':

the most valuable work a Socialist can attempt, at the present time, is the teaching of Socialism [...] We *Clarion* men have been so fully convinced on this point that we have, for nearly four years, confined our energies almost entirely to the work of propaganda.<sup>11</sup>

Bob may not have been the exemplary Scout who was always 'calm and polite' and who only ever engaged in 'good-humoured argument' as Blatchford advised,<sup>12</sup> but in terms of propagating the socialist message he fared far better, and was certainly instrumental in Muir's conversion to the cause.

The idea that the roots of a new society were being put down, a society based on the principles of co-operation and equality (ideas which clearly resonated with the co-operation he saw amongst the Orcadian farmers as a child), helped Muir reclaim a sense of faith in the future. The social progress he envisaged was far removed from 'bloody revolution', and he seemed to be reassured by the thought that he would be playing his part in an evolutionary process.<sup>13</sup> An important aspect of his faith in socialism, which Muir skilfully absorbs into his wider metaphysical and spiritual beliefs as he outlines them in his autobiography, was that it contained a way of interpreting both the past and the present, as well as projecting far into the future. Believing that it would take 'two or three hundred years' for the 'free and equal'<sup>14</sup> society to evolve, his new-found belief in the future enabled him to re-imagine the present. He recalls how the lives of the ordinary men and women around him became transformed into a human continuity reaching toward the just society that was yet to come. Likening his adoption of socialism at the age of twenty one to his religious conversion in Kirkwall when he was fourteen, Muir saw, in retrospect, that this second conversion offered him a way of dealing with the tragedies of his recent past. There is no doubt that his involvement with the *Clarion* rambling and debating groups

<sup>10</sup> Martin Wright, 'Robert Blatchford, the *Clarion* Movement, and the Crucial Years of British Socialism, 1891-1900', *Prose Studies*, Vol.13, No.1 (May 1990), pp.74-99.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Blatchford, 'What the Scouts Are For', *The Scout—A Journal for Socialist Workers*, Vol.1, No.1 (01/03/1895), p.2.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>13</sup> *SF*, p.132.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.131 & 134.

presented Muir with a way to deal with his traumatic past. However, the humanitarian collectivism and his interest in notions of time and history which he developed under the influence of various socialist ideologies would remain with him for the rest of his life.

Muir joined the Glasgow Clarion Scouts sometime in late 1907 or early 1908, attending their regular Sunday night speakers' series, and he seems to have received great comfort from the positive and transformative political visions which his exposure to socialism afforded him. Augmenting his autodidactic education in literature and politics, he began reading the works of George Bernard Shaw, Henrik Ibsen, Walt Whitman, and Edward Carpenter, the latter having delivered a memorable lecture at the Glasgow Pavilion Theatre which Muir recalls attending.<sup>15</sup> After being introduced to socialism, Muir suggests that he 'read nothing but books pointing toward the future';<sup>16</sup> an understandable undertaking for someone who feels no desire to dwell upon the past. Butter suggests that Muir's socialism 'led him to place heaven in the future—in some distant future', but he recognizes too that there was also a genuine sympathetic concern for the here and now in Muir's new-found politics.<sup>17</sup> However, by introducing the religious overtone, Butter is lending support to Muir's own teleological presentation of this period as outlined by the intellectual and spiritual trajectory that he presents for himself in *The Story and The Fable*. As Sheila Lodge perceptively reveals, through his autobiographies Muir 'triumphed in determining which aspects of the totality of his work are to be seen as constituting his oeuvre and as bearing the development of his ideology', and conversely, those which he considered should not.<sup>18</sup> Despite Muir's more than implicit suggestion that his engagement with socialism formed another false conversion, the effect this period would have on his development as a writer is unquestionably significant and cannot be retrospectively underwritten by the 'transcendentalist faith' he was so keen to plot in his autobiographies.<sup>19</sup> Rejecting what he describes in a letter to Sydney Schiff as the Marxist 'machine of Materialist Determination', Muir was, to some extent, an 'anti-Marx socialist'<sup>20</sup> who aligned himself more with the 'quest for the new life' which the writings of Carpenter and Blatchford look toward<sup>21</sup> rather than any desire to be in the vanguard of the 'proletarian revolution' as proposed by Marx and Engels.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *SF*, p.136.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.137.

<sup>17</sup> Butter (1966), p.36.

<sup>18</sup> Sheila Lodge, 'The politics of Edwin Muir's autobiographies', *Prose Studies*, Vol.8 No.2 (1985), p.98.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.100.

<sup>20</sup> Letter to Sydney Schiff (16/01/39). *SL*, pp.107-108. See also letters to Stephen Spender (06/10/37) and William Soutar (03/02/40). *SL*, pp.107-108 & 115-16.

<sup>21</sup> Wright (1990), p.74.

<sup>22</sup> Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Bookmarks, 2003), p.12.

The spirit of optimism and action expressed in Blatchford's *Merrie England* (1893) and weekly column in the *Clarion* not only enabled Muir to imagine a hitherto unimaginable future, but it also helped him to re-imagine his present. The best demonstration of this is provided in his description of attending his first May Day March in Glasgow where he recalls how, being part of the mass crowd, he felt that the distinctions between class and creed had 'fallen away' as if 'all substance had been transmuted'.<sup>23</sup> Muir came to see that for many people involved with the various strains of the socialist movement 'moral theories were not necessarily mere words, but could be taken quite seriously and a real attempt be made to put them into practice'.<sup>24</sup>

The faith in the future which he gained from his involvement with the Clarion Scouts, and his reading of Blatchford, Carpenter and Shaw, was bolstered further by his discovery of Havelock Ellis's edition of *The Prose Writings of Heinrich Heine* (1887) which he came across while recovering from a bout of whooping-cough during the summer of 1908.<sup>25</sup> The doctor who had previously treated Muir for a stomach complaint instructed him to take an extended holiday to recuperate, so he spent a month during that summer on his uncle Willie's farm at Skail, near the site of the late-Neolithic settlement at Skara Brae (though only a fraction of it was excavated at that time) in the parish of Sandwick on the west coast of the Orkney Mainland. William and Sophie Cormack were the younger siblings of Muir's mother and the time spent with them on the farm provided him with a taste of 'homely life' which had long been absent.<sup>26</sup> This family environment, with its familiar landscape and climate, was one Muir would return to frequently during the years he lived in Glasgow after this initial visit. 'It was my one happy fortnight in the year', Muir recalls, 'when all my ailments and cares left me'.<sup>27</sup>

With a renewed sense of family and security (albeit temporary), Muir's hopes were furthered by the 'lyrical faith in the future' which he found in Heine's prose.<sup>28</sup> Citing extracts directly from Ellis's revised versions of C.G. Leland's translation of *Reisebilder* (1826-1831) and S.L. Fleishman's translation of Heine's *Confessions* (1853-1854),<sup>29</sup> Muir suggests that he responded to Heine's 'youthful errors, and ignored his mature knowledge' and developed, as a consequence, the 'habit of speaking about everything ironically',<sup>30</sup> an ironic posture that would be a significant characteristic of his 'Edward Moore' persona.

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<sup>23</sup> *SF*, p.135. See *PT*, p.93.

<sup>24</sup> Muir (1935), p.148.

<sup>25</sup> *SF*, p.137.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p.140.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p.141.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p.137.

<sup>29</sup> Heinrich Heine, *The Prose Writings of Heinrich Heine*, Havelock Ellis ed. (London: Walter Scott, 1887), pp.11, 23 & 303-305. Cf. *SF*, pp.137-139.

<sup>30</sup> *SF*, p.142.

'My belief in the future' he suggests 'now showed itself to be inhuman', a state he equates with his youthful inability to understand his own feelings and anxieties.<sup>31</sup> Heine's 'ironical paganism', Muir recalls, was like 'some substance I needed for my health', 'I could not bear to give it up, fearing that if I lost it I might subside into my old quagmire'.<sup>32</sup> On returning to work in Glasgow, Muir was reinvigorated to the cause of the future and became a member of the Independent Labour Party and continued his involvement with the Glasgow Clarions, however he became increasingly more interested in the literary and philosophical discussions taking place within the group rather than their leisure activities. Muir now considered himself to be a member of an intellectual socialist caste,<sup>33</sup> and his search for new material to fuel his imagination took him to the writings of Henri Bergson, Havelock Ellis, Joseph Conrad, James Joyce and D.H. Lawrence. At this time Muir also began reading *The New Age* magazine which had recently come under the sole editorship of Alfred Richard Orage. As Orage and the *New Age* play such important roles in Muir's development as a critic and poet, as well as in the lives of a generation of other prominent writers and thinkers, it is worth rehearsing a little of the background of this highly influential modernist magazine and its uniquely eclectic editor.

Orage and Holbrook Jackson acquired the *New Age* in 1907, then under the editorship of Joseph Clayton. The magazine had been heavily in debt, and owed a large sum to its printer when they took it on. Orage and Jackson financed the takeover with money fronted by Lewis Wallace, a merchant banker and theosophist, and George Bernard Shaw, who, like Orage and Jackson, was also a Fabian Society member. It had been Jackson who first introduced Orage to Nietzsche's work in 1900, and together they established the Leeds Arts Club in 1903, with the group serving as a breeding ground for the unique mixture of artistic and political considerations, new science and philosophy which the *New Age* would celebrate. However, following a year of poor sales and numerous differences of opinion regarding editorial policy, Jackson left the *New Age* in 1908 to pursue an independent career in journalism. Orage became sole editor and continued to transform the magazine into a dynamic 'views-paper', which quickly gained a loyal following of readers, and committed writers, who were keen to articulate their own particular take on what it meant to be modern.

Although its original subtitle was 'An Independent Socialist Review of Politics, Literature, and Art' it was far from a mere extension of the Fabian Arts Group that Orage and Jackson had helped found in January 1907. By issue 27 (31 Oct 1907) 'Independent' and 'Socialist' were dropped from the subheading with Jackson's name disappearing by

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<sup>31</sup> *SF*, p.143.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p.138.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p.146.

issue 36 (4 Jan 1908). 'A Socialist Review', however, reappears in the title banner in the first issue of 1921 (6 Jan) but this was removed again by 27 October (1921). Tellingly, the words 'religion and science' were also added to the subtitle banner at this time, signalling the change of direction in Orage's own interests. Regardless of any tinkering with subtitles, the *New Age* remained generally socialist in its politics if not always explicitly by name. Under Orage's sole editorship, the magazine grew in popularity (its circulation quadrupling under his tenure) and the range of content grew to include articles on guild socialism, theosophy, psychology, philosophy, economics, literature, the arts, music, parliamentary reports, social commentary, as well as various forms of literary parody and pastiche. The diversity of its contents was the result of Orage's enthusiasm for the new, the innovative and, importantly, the divergent and dissenting.

As Robert Scholes, director of the *Modernist Journals Project* at Brown University, Rhode Island, describes in his 'General Introduction to the *New Age* 1907-1922',<sup>34</sup> Orage had a fantastic ability to identify and foster new talent. This resulted in a wide array of young, emerging, and established writers becoming regular contributors to the magazine, most of them going without payment. Contributors included Ezra Pound, George Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells, G.K. Chesterton, Hilarie Belloc, Oscar Levy, Katherine Mansfield, Havelock Ellis, Edith Sitwell, Siegfried Sassoon and Denis Saurat<sup>35</sup> to name but a few of the many whose contributions helped to ensure that the magazine remained an eclectic forum for the presentation and reevaluation of ideas. As Scholes enthuses, reading the *New Age* today it is still possible to get a sense of

the stir, the buzz, the intellectual energy of an exciting period in our cultural history [...] To read it now is, in a certain way, to envy those original readers, for we live in a time when the phrase intellectual journalism sounds like an oxymoron. For the readers of *The New Age*, however, that phrase was simply a description of what they expected and received—every week.

Orage's personal interest in comparative religion, theosophy and the esoteric meant that alongside the regular debates regarding literature and politics, numerous contributions appeared from the exponents of more alternative philosophies and faiths. P.D. Ouspensky and G.I. Gurdjieff are the most noteworthy of these *New Age* mystics, although Aleister Crowley's verse on the Pentagram and a short piece warning against false knowledge<sup>36</sup> goes some way to demonstrate just how far into the obscure Orage was prepared to let the magazine drift in its search for new truths. In *Belonging* Willa Muir also highlights the

<sup>34</sup> <[http://www.modjourn.org/render.php?id=mjp.2005.00.001&view=mjp\\_object](http://www.modjourn.org/render.php?id=mjp.2005.00.001&view=mjp_object)> (accessed 22/02/2010).

<sup>35</sup> C.M. Grieve, James Young, Patrick Geddes, and John Davidson (the Jungian therapist who conducted the second phase of Muir's unfinished psychoanalysis) were also occasional contributors.

<sup>36</sup> Aleister Crowley, 'A Pentagram', *TNA*, Vol.2, No.21 (21/03/1908), p.410. See also 'The Wonderful Teaching', *TNA*, Vol.15, No.12 (23/07/1914), p.283.

input of the Bosnian polyglot and Utopian theorist Dimitri Mitrinovic, who she suggests ‘helped sink the *New Age* by weight of the columns he contributed’.<sup>37</sup>

In 1922, Orage gave up the London literary scene to study under Gurdjieff at his Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man at Fontainebleau outside Paris, selling the *New Age* to Arthur Brenton in October that year. Katherine Mansfield also joined Gurdjieff’s institute at this time and remained there until her death in 1923. Orage published a selection of conversations he had shared with Mansfield during their time at the institute. Published in *The Century Magazine* in November 1924, they discuss the nihilism and cynicism which they saw being represented in contemporary literature. As Mansfield states:

Now, most writers are merely passive; in fact, they aim only at representing life [...] with the consequence that their readers for the most part become even more passive, even more spectatorial and we have a world of Peeping Toms with fewer and fewer Lady Godivas to ride by. What I am trying to say is that a new attitude to life on the part of writers would first see life different and then make it different.<sup>38</sup>

This literary climate of negative passivity was something Orage always challenged through the *New Age*, his editorial policy seeking to engage with the new considerations of modernity while continuing to preserve more conservative and humanistic values. As Orage and Jackson proposed in ‘The Future of the *New Age*’, the introductory article announcing their co-editorship on 2 May 1907:

Far from confining the pages of the Review to dogmatic statements of a too hastily formulated Socialism, [we] maintain the right of intelligence to challenge and revise any existing formulation. [...] *The New Age* will devote itself to the serious endeavour to co-operate with the purposes of life, and to enlist in that noble service the help of serious students of the new contemplative and imaginative order.<sup>39</sup>

As their bold mission statement suggests, the *New Age* sought to ‘challenge and revise’ existing ideas while also providing a dynamic space for the development of new ones. The progressive agenda being proposed here is clearly motivated by political and philosophical concerns, with their suggestion that the ‘universal will of life is the creation of a race of supremely and progressively intelligent beings’, providing a distinctly Nietzschean tone. As well as debating socialism and philosophy, Orage used the magazine to explore aspects

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<sup>37</sup> Willa Muir (1968), p.40.

<sup>38</sup> A.R. Orage, ‘Talks with Katherine Mansfield at Fontainebleau’, *The Century Magazine*, Vol.109 (November 1924). < [http://www.gurdjieff-bibliography.com/Current/KM\\_07\\_2006\\_02\\_ORAGE\\_Talks\\_with\\_KM.pdf](http://www.gurdjieff-bibliography.com/Current/KM_07_2006_02_ORAGE_Talks_with_KM.pdf) > (accessed 23/06/2011).

<sup>39</sup> A.R. Orage and Holybrook Jackson, ‘The Future of the *New Age*’, *TNA*, Vol.1 No.1 (02/05/1907), p.8.

of his more abstract interests. Orage had been a seeker of mystical knowledge for some time. As Muir notes, Orage

was convinced that there was a secret knowledge behind the knowledge given to the famous prophets and philosophers, and for the spiritual power it would bring with it he was prepared to sacrifice everything.<sup>40</sup>

It was this search for knowledge which inspired Orage to give up the *New Age* in 1922, spending the following ten years travelling between Europe and America continuing Gurdjieff's work.

Orage returned to London and the world of publishing in 1932 and brought out the first edition of *The New English Weekly* in April of that year. The following month, *Time* magazine, celebrating Orage's return to the publishing world, suggested that the 'British consensus is that Editor Orage has started a snowball rolling up Civilization's hill'.<sup>41</sup> This hill proved to be steeper than expected and he was unable to generate the same momentum at the *New English Weekly* as he had achieved at the *New Age* but nevertheless he continued to run the journal until his death in November 1934. T.S. Eliot rated Orage as one of the finest literary critics in London, while Muir described Orage as being in possession of an 'incorruptible adherence to reason [...] He was more like one of those noble public figures of the ancient world whom he admired so much than a man of our own time'.<sup>42</sup> Yet, Orage was very much a man of his time, and through the *New Age* he inspired a generation of readers and writers to look beyond the fashionable literary cliques and contemporary haze, in search of insights wherever they lay.

For many of its readers the magazine formed the first point of contact with literary culture, as Wallace Martin notes in *The New Age Under Orage* (1967), 'many young readers [...] like Edwin Muir, having been forced to work for a living after a few years of schooling, obtained their education in contemporary politics and literature from *The New Age*'.<sup>43</sup> As Muir recalls, the magazine provided him with a 'picture of contemporary politics and literature, a thing I badly needed, and with a few vigorous blows shortened a process which would otherwise have taken a long time'.<sup>44</sup> While in retrospect he considered that the tone of the paper could, at times, be 'crushingly superior and exclusive' (he excludes 'Orage's own political and literary notes' from this criticism),<sup>45</sup> the magazine

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<sup>40</sup> *SF*, p.206

<sup>41</sup> 'The Press: New English Weekly', *Time Magazine* (16/05/1932). <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,847005,00.html#ixzz0gPYIwTxJ>> (accessed 23/02/2010).

<sup>42</sup> Obituary letter for A.R. Orage, *New English Weekly*, Vol.6 (05/11/1934), p.119.

<sup>43</sup> Wallace Martin, *The New Age Under Orage* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1967), p.7.

<sup>44</sup> *SF*, p.146.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p.145.

nevertheless formed his point of entry into literary culture, first as a reader then, with Orage's patronage and support, as a promising new writer.

Muir had been reading the *New Age* for about three years when he found that his 'faith in the future' was waning and wrote to Orage in an attempt to seek solace. Orage responded with a compassionate reply describing his own struggles as a young man and advised Muir to devote himself to the study of a great thinker, as he himself had done with Plato. Orage had tentatively advised him to study the *Mahabharata*, the epic Hindu text which he was currently studying himself, but Muir, in need of 'a more dramatic stimulus'<sup>46</sup> chose Nietzsche, whose ideas he had already come into contact with through the *New Age*. Another feature of Nietzsche's writings which attracted Muir's attention was that so many his speculations and assertions reject the historicized past in order to focus on the imaginative potential of future. In this, Nietzsche's philosophy seemed perfectly suited to Muir's needs; the challenge lay in integrating those ideas with those he had developed as a socialist. It was a task that ultimately proved too difficult, but the ensuing intellectual maelstrom prompted Muir to generate enough *New Age* column inches from which to compile *We Moderns* (1918), a publication which gained Muir the patronage of the publisher Alfred A Knopf whose American edition, published in 1920, helped establish Muir as a writer of international acclaim.

Nietzsche's writings had a profound impact on Muir, and while in retrospect, he was dismayed by the effect Nietzsche had on both his fragile psychology and his own literary style (which has as much to do with the stylistics of the translations he encountered as the actual philosophy), his study of Nietzsche's work must be one of the most significant contributing factors in his early development as a writer. Muir was working as a clerk in the office of the bottling plant when he began his encyclopaedic reading of Nietzsche's philosophy in search of an intellectual panacea. It took him over a year to read his way through all eighteen volumes of *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche* (1909-13) whose publication Oscar Levy oversaw as general editor. The first comprehensive translations of Nietzsche's work in English, the series brought the full scale of Nietzsche's philosophical achievements (and some of his all-too-human failings) to the attention of an English-reading audience for the first time. Although Levy was a passionate Nietzschean, he was a relatively recent exponent of Nietzsche's ideas by comparison to Orage who, in 1906, hailed him as the 'greatest European event since Goethe', suggesting that, in English, only William Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-93) could be compared to the vision on offer in works such as in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-85) and *Beyond*

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<sup>46</sup> *SF*, p.139.

*Good and Evil* (1886).<sup>47</sup> Orage saw in Nietzsche's proposition that we must strive to place ourselves beyond good and evil, to enable 'the will to create for the future, unhindered by the dead hand of the past', a progressive philosophical creed for a new Europe in a new century.<sup>48</sup> Such a notion must have been irresistible to Muir whose recent past was shrouded in death and whose hopes seemed to reside only in a distant future. Such ideas also had a great deal of appeal for C.M. Grieve (Hugh MacDiarmid) who, like Muir, received an education via the *New Age*, with some of his earliest writings published during Orage's editorship. As Scott Lyall notes, 'like many modernists, such as the youthful Edwin Muir's pseudonym Edward Moore in *We Moderns* (1918), MacDiarmid found inspiration for his elect persona in the work of Nietzsche'.<sup>49</sup> Distinguishing Muir's *New Age* persona and his more progressive writings after 1918, Lyall discusses how the influence of Nietzsche had a longer-lived and more significant impact on Grieve.<sup>50</sup> In contrast to Grieve, Muir abandoned his 'elitist' persona early in his writing career, yet, as Lyall identifies, he nevertheless retained an appreciation of Nietzsche's role in bringing 'a new atmosphere into European thought'.<sup>51</sup>

'As a poet, solver of riddles and redeemer of chance, I taught them to work at the future and to redeem all that *hath been* by creating',<sup>52</sup> claims Nietzsche. As a philosopher poet, an iconoclastic transformer of the past and as a creator of a powerful image of a transfigured future, Nietzsche's ideas found fertile soil in the ground that Muir had already prepared through his interests in socialism and Heine. The extent of this influence is made apparent in Chapter Four which discusses Muir's 'Edward Moore' persona and his *New Age* writings in greater depth, but it is worth stating here that what Muir gained from his study of Nietzsche was what he had similarly sought in Clarion socialism and Heine, namely, a way of distancing himself from the past while transfiguring his present in light of a hypothetical future. Joyce's sentiment in *Ulysses* (1922), ventriloquized through Stephen Dedalus, was that history was a nightmare from which he was trying to awake. Similarly, Muir was trying to awaken from his own nightmarish past, using whatever

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<sup>47</sup> A.R. Orage, *Friedrich Nietzsche: The Dionysian Spirit of The Age* (London and Edinburgh: T.N. Foulis, 1906), pp.11-12.

<sup>48</sup> Orage (1906), p.63.

<sup>49</sup> Scott Lyall, *Hugh MacDiarmid's Poetry and Politics of Place* (Edinburgh: EUP, 2006), p.157.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.158-165.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p.158. See Muir (1924), p.86. For more on the influence of Nietzsche on Grieve see Walter Perrie, 'Nietzsche and A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle', in *Out of Conflict: Essays on Literature and Ideas* (Dunfermline: Borderline Press, 1982), pp.3-27.

<sup>52</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, Alexander Tille tr. (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1899), p.272. See A.R. Orage, *Nietzsche in Outline and Aphorism*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (London: T.N. Foulis, 1911), p.144.

fragments of Nietzsche's philosophy he could shore against his socialism in order to gain a desperate foothold on his 'dying dream of the future'.<sup>53</sup>

After five years of secure employment in the bottling plant, a new owner began laying off members of staff, and fearing that he would be the next to lose his job, Muir left this post in August 1912 after obtaining a clerk's position at the animal charcoal factory (with company links to the sugar industry) in Port Greenock, initially taking lodgings in Greenock (referred to ironically in his autobiography as 'Fairport') then in nearby Gourock (which he calls 'Faldside'). He remained in this job for two years. Although based in the office, the bone rendering process proved to be a troubling sensuous experience for Muir, as attested by the lengthy account he provides in *The Story and the Fable*.<sup>54</sup> The protracted descriptions of decaying flesh, teeming maggots and waves of feasting seagulls, owe much to the influence of Heine's more macabre strain of imagery; they also suggest something of the psychological frailty which Muir was experiencing at the time.

After a series of uncomfortable temporary lodgings, Muir took a room in Gourock in the spring of 1913, and through the local press, was instrumental in establishing a parliamentary-style debating society where he met David Peat, a local journalist and fellow socialist, whose generosity of spirit and loyal friendship helped Muir through some of his most troubled days during the time spent in Greenock. It was around this time that Muir also met Bob Scouller, a union activist and, like Muir, a keen follower of the *New Age*. Muir became treasurer of the branch of the National Union of Clerks which Muir established with Bob Scouller and his brother Edward,<sup>55</sup> Bob going on to become the Secretary of the Scottish Area Council of the N.U.C. between 1915 and 1919. Muir and Bob worked closely together at times as their co-signed article detailing recommended reading on the subject of the National Guilds, appearing in the *New Age* on 16 Aug 1917, demonstrates.<sup>56</sup>

During the winter of 1913 Muir went through 'another Heine phase',<sup>57</sup> but this time it was his poetry that he turned to. Despite Muir's complaints that the 'sickly, graveyard strain in Heine's poetry'<sup>58</sup> did little to ease his morose state of mind at the time, he recalls how poems like the 'Night lay upon my eyelids' ('Nacht lag auf meinen Augen') and 'The

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<sup>53</sup> *SF*, p.150.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.154-55 & 162-166.

<sup>55</sup> Edward Scouller supported Muir's application to teach at Newbattle. Letter to Edward Scouller (19/05/50). *SL*, p.156-156. Edward Scouller also wrote articles and reviews for magazines and journals, including the *Library Review* and *Scottish Field*.

<sup>56</sup> Edward Moore and R.E. Scouller, 'Press Cuttings', in *TNA*, Vol.21, No.16 (16/08/1917), p.356.

<sup>57</sup> *SF*, p.171.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p.171.

night is wet and stormy' ('Die Nacht ist feucht und strummisch')<sup>59</sup> evoked a sense of 'distance and isolation' which formed the impetus for his first poetic endeavours. As well as providing the model for Muir's earliest poetry, Heine is also the source of two-thirds of Muir's great philosophical tripartite question, 'where we came from, where we are going, and [...] how we should live with one another',<sup>60</sup> the latter deriving from his socialism. The volume of Heine that Muir was reading during the winter of 1913 was Kate Freiligrath Kroeker's edited selection, which incorporates the work of numerous translators including James ['B.V.'] Thomson and George MacDonald. Muir quotes various extracts from poems in this volume, suggesting that he had memorized many of them at the time. However, Muir makes no mention of the poem 'Questions' ('Fragen') from Heine's *The North Sea* in which the poet, addressing the sea, asks:

Oh, solve me the Riddle of Life  
That harrowing, world-old riddle  
[...]  
What signifies Man?  
Whence does he come? And whither goes he?  
[...]  
The stars they glitter coldly indifferent,—  
And a fool waits for an answer (5-18).

Although a common enough metaphysical quandary, it is worth noting that this 'riddle' bears a strong similarity to that which Muir set out to answer when he began writing *The Story and The Fable* in 1937, and the central metaphor of time as a journey (whose origin and destination remain obscured) reoccurs throughout his poetic corpus.

Heine's influence on Muir can be clearly read in the early *New Age* poems and achieves a range of effects to varying levels of success. The overall tone of Muir's first published poem, 'Salutation',<sup>61</sup> justifies McCulloch's criticism regarding the 'synthetic witty cruelty'<sup>62</sup> she detects in 'A Question to My Love'.<sup>63</sup> The poem's four quatrains of end-rhymed couplets form a general address to the 'poets of today' (1), in which he lambasts their lack of sincerity, their feigned 'laughter', and their 'feigned regret' (16). A similar polemical tone can be seen in 'A Present-Day Author to the Critics' and 'To Present-Day Critics', 'The Same',<sup>64</sup> in which the writer and critic John Masefield and the romantic novelist Hall Cain are the primary targets of Muir's youthful ire. Another blast of

<sup>59</sup> *SF*, pp.172-73. Heinrich Heine, *Poems Selected from Heinrich Heine*, Kate Freiligrath Kroeker ed. (London: Walter Scott, 1887), pp.81-82 & 89-89.

<sup>60</sup> See McCulloch (1993), p.118.

<sup>61</sup> *TNA*, Vol.14, No.1 (06/11/1913), pp.25-26.

<sup>62</sup> McCulloch (1993), p.6.

<sup>63</sup> *TNA*, Vol.14, No.7 (18/12/1913), p.197.

<sup>64</sup> 'A Present-Day Author to the Critics', 'To Present-Day Critics', 'The Same', in *TNA*, Vol.15, No.9 (02/07/1914), p.208.

this critical wit is felt in ‘The War Poets’,<sup>65</sup> where he deplores insincerity and berates those who ‘feign the bully’s rage, [and] the coward’s hate’ (20):

For Watson’s blust’ring, academic brag,  
And Bridge’s[sic] impotent, official strain,  
Phillpotts’ flaunting of a brutish flag,  
And Begbie’s facile tones that fall like rain,

Do but insult the people’s puissant faith,  
Their courage sad and resolution clear;  
For in these blaring rhymes of blood and death,  
One-half is bluster and one-half is fear. (9-16)

The second strain of Muir’s *New Age* poetry was his political verse, which focuses on the condemnation of the spiritual and economic impoverishment of the working classes. These poems include the descriptions of the industrial hells of ‘Ancoats’ and ‘Shadwell’ (60) in ‘Address to Wage-Slaves’,<sup>66</sup> a clarion call to break the chains of class servitude in ‘A Chronicle of Woe’,<sup>67</sup> and criticism of the ‘Rulers of England’ (2) who care nothing for the welfare of the ‘wage-slaves’ (5) in ‘To The City Class’.<sup>68</sup> The message of these poems is uncomplicated and their language is without ambiguity or nuance, and they demonstrate little more than Muir’s frustrations with the present social and economic status of the working classes as well as his hopes for the future. Regardless of any aesthetic literary worth, these poems stand as testament to Muir’s public involvement with a grassroots movement which radically altered the social and political landscape of Britain. Muir’s socialism may not have actively nurtured his poetic abilities but it contributed immensely to his sense of humanity and social morality, qualities that become more apparent as his poetic output increased.

The third strain of Muir’s poetic experimentation at this time is more reminiscent of Heine’s poetry in its somnolent subject matter and its Romantic imagery, as can be seen in ‘Sleep’s Betrayals’,<sup>69</sup> ‘Utopia’,<sup>70</sup> ‘The Forsaken Princess’,<sup>71</sup> and ‘Metamorphosis’.<sup>72</sup> While these poems draw on either the conventions of the dream-vision (strongly reminiscent of Heine’s ‘Dream Pictures’)<sup>73</sup> or aspects of the Romantic chivalric tradition, as is the case in ‘The Forsaken Princess’, there is also a transformative aspect to the narrative elements of the poems which foreshadow Muir’s poetry from 1922 onward. The four metrical couplets

<sup>65</sup> *TNA*, Vol.15, No.23 (08/10/1914), p.553.

<sup>66</sup> *TNA*, Vol.14, No.7 (18/12/1913), pp.216-17.

<sup>67</sup> *TNA*, Vol.14, No.6 (11/12/1913), p.185.

<sup>68</sup> *TNA*, Vol.15, No.25 (22/10/1914), p.601.

<sup>69</sup> *TNA*, Vol.15, No.1 (07/05/1914), p.20.

<sup>70</sup> *TNA*, Vol.14, No.24 (16/04/1914), p.742.

<sup>71</sup> *TNA*, Vol.16, No.17 (25/02/1915), p.463.

<sup>72</sup> *TNA*, Vol.16, No.1 (11/05/1914), p.6.

<sup>73</sup> See Heine (1887), pp.5-14.

that form 'Metamorphosis' are markedly more accomplished in their use of symbolism, and the poem's meaning is rather more playfully revealed, than in the explicit juxtaposition of the pagan and the Christian imagery of 'Sleep's Betrayals', or the deliberately contrite neatness of the concluding lines of 'Utopia'. The death of the Classical Gods, the crucifixion of Christ, and the subsequent ascent of man, is the central depiction at the heart of 'Metamorphosis', and sees Muir temper the influence of both Nietzsche and Heine to achieve a poem which reflects an evolutionary, rather than revolutionary, transformation:

Once gleamed this earth in splendour clear and bright,  
 Bathed in a glittering sea of burnished light,  
 And o'er the dewy hills, with lightsome tread,  
 Danced a young god with vine leaves on his head;  
 When from the east a twilight dank and grey  
 Crept, and in fear the young god fled away,  
 And, o'er the gloom-environ'd earth forlorn,  
 Reeled a man mortal 'neath his crown of thorn. (1-8)

Of all his *New Age* poems under the guise of 'Edward Moore', 'Metamorphosis' offers the clearest insight into the latent potential of Muir's imagination; compressing thousands of years of human history into just eight lines of verse, Muir suggests how the old gods have been chased away by the encroaching shadows of time's passage, and presents a mortal Christ, more human than god, a man who knows pain and will face death just like the rest of us. The contrast of the laurel of vine leaves and the crown of thorns is a strong symbolic juxtaposition, laden with connotations and significance, yet these two images are allowed to speak for themselves without further explanation. This is a brief indication of the form of the richly symbolic verse that Muir would develop further, but it also serves as a reminder that although these poems have often been referred to as juvenilia by critics, if they are mentioned at all, they are in fact the work of a mature imagination. What the early *New Age* poems demonstrate is a lack of literary expertise, not literary experience; a good deal of thought has gone into their creation, and the process allowed Muir to practice his craft while also contributing to public debate.

The critical polemics and the political poetry became gradually more measured and found their way naturally into his various *New Age* columns and his numerous journal contributions, with *Latitudes* (1924) offering a sense of the breadth of interest and depth of sympathy which Muir developed for a diverse range of literary and social subjects. The powerful imaginative mode we can see initiated in 'Sleep's Betrayals', and even more so in 'Metamorphosis', became Muir's signature style, and owes as much to Muir's engagement with Heine's Romantic longing for the past as Nietzsche's desires for the future.

After two years at the charcoal factory in Greenock, Muir took a job as a costings clerk in the office of a Renfrew shipbuilding firm in 1914, a post he found through the assistance of a friend who had become concerned about his welfare. Muir remained in this post until he left Glasgow for London to set up home with Willa in the autumn of 1919. In a fit of despondency and through a degree of social pressure Muir attempted to enlist for the army in the winter of 1914 at the age of twenty-seven<sup>74</sup> but was refused on medical grounds, and so spent the war working in Renfrew and furthering his involvement with trade unionism, the National Guilds movement and developing his new literary persona. Over the next five years he continued to submit the occasional poem and various epigrams to the *New Age*, with Orage offering Muir a regular column which began on the 12 October 1916 and ran biweekly for 21 issues until the 13 September 1917. 'We Moderns' was the first of six columns that Muir wrote for the *New Age* between 1916 and 1923, and its appearance marked the beginning of Muir's public life as a writer, but it by no means formed the point of crystallization for his critical or creative outlook. 'Edward Moore' was the mask that allowed Edwin Muir to slip his way into the London literary scene, and although it was a guise that he would soon discard, it was the necessary Bloomian 'swerve' that allowed him to overcome his 'anxiety of influence' with regard to Heine and Nietzsche. Although lauded by T.S. Eliot and George Bruce for his 'integrity'<sup>75</sup> it is important to recognize how consciously Muir nurtured this quality in his writing. Through immersing himself in the writings of his literary mentors during the Glasgow years Muir laid the foundation for his own emergence from beneath their influence announced with the publication of the poem 'Re-Birth' in the *New Age* on 8 June 1922.

The early poems provide a real flavour of the raw intellectual energy which the *New Age* stimulated and they have a merit which exceeds their literary value. The ephemeral nature and pastiche style of his earliest verse, and the aphorisms of his Nietzschean-inflected prose, are important components of Muir's literary apprenticeship and demonstrate his unmediated engagement with contemporary modes of thought. In doing so, they also typify the spirit of immediacy and contention which made the *New Age* such a vibrant talking-shop of modernist ideas.

As George Mackay Brown noted of Muir's reading during the Glasgow years, 'the value of other men's ideas, in his case, was that they unblocked his own mind',<sup>76</sup> With so much of Muir's poetry from 1922 onward being deeply symbolic and the product of waking-visions and dreams, it is clear how important the relationship between the

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<sup>74</sup> *SF*, p.175.

<sup>75</sup> See T.S. Eliot, 'Preface', Muir (1965), p.10 and George Bruce's 'The Integrity of Edwin Muir' in C.J.M. MacLachlan and D.S. Robb eds., *Edwin Muir: Centenary Assessments* (Aberdeen: ASLS, 1990), pp.1-18.

<sup>76</sup> Muir (1987), p.1.

psychological, the symbolic and the poetic remained throughout his life, his interest in psychological symbolism having its roots in his reading of Heine. As well as the fascination with dreams, and the flashes of sarcasm and mocking irony which manifest themselves in his Edward Moore persona, Muir also appears to have been spurred on by his reading of Heine to engage with the philosophical quandaries of ‘where we came from’ and ‘where we are going’ which he sets out in *The Story and the Fable*.<sup>77</sup>

As traumatic as Muir’s progress into mature adulthood was, it provided the influences and experiences from which he drew inspiration for the rest of his life. The rebirth which Muir describes as his turning ‘against time’ during the spring and summer of 1922 has its origins in his discovery of Nietzsche’s rehistoricizing philosophy. Indeed, Muir’s rejection of his Nietzschean self was an act of transcendent will which overcame the central philosophical challenge laid down by Nietzsche’s doctrine of ‘always becoming’ in that it was the triumph of the self over the self.<sup>78</sup> In a similar fashion to Muir’s previous rejections of Christianity, his putting aside of ‘Edward Moore’ allowed him to appropriate another variant lens through which to view human history. What he retained from his early engagement with religion, politics, and philosophy, was the understanding that the concept of time has a history of its own, and that each of the doctrines he was influenced by during the earliest stage of his development as a writer provided him with different prisms through which to deconstruct history.

Given how negatively Muir described the years that followed his family’s arrival in Glasgow, it is worth underlining how those years contributed positively to shaping his critical and creative vision. Glasgow is the setting of *Poor Tom*, Muir’s third novel, and many of the experiences he recalls in *The Story and The Fable* relating to his time living in Glasgow’s South Side are filtered through the consciousness of its characters. The novel’s redemptive ending suggests something of how, despite his teenage years in Glasgow in which he felt like a ‘Displaced Person’, Muir did acquire a degree of affection for ‘that plain, warm hearted city’ where his life as a writer began.<sup>79</sup> Of the three questions Muir asks repeatedly in his poetry and social criticism about time and humanity—what is our past, what is our future and how should we live in the present—the first two seem to be, at least in part, in response to Heine’s poetry, and the third is informed by both his understanding of Christianity and his involvement with socialism. In addition, what he gained from his study of Nietzsche was a way of asking those questions in such a manner as to distance the questioner from the question, attempting to step outside the frame of

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<sup>77</sup> *SF*, p.64.

<sup>78</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Thomas Common tr. (Herefordshire: Wordsworth, 1997), p.6.

<sup>79</sup> *Auto*, p.280.

reference to see human history from an objective critical distance. Such a view, of course, is only possible within the realm of thought experiment, and from the late 1930s Muir became increasingly focused on the search for a harmonious fusion of ideas rather than any singular hypothesis, but his longing to reach an understanding about the nature of time and our relation to it remained untempered. As Alexander Scott has identified, the image of 'man-in-time' remained central to Muir throughout his career, and it is a career which began in Glasgow as a reader and contributor to Orage's *New Age*.

## Chapter Four

### Edward Moore and London (1913-1921)

#### Edward Moore: A Nietzschean Neophyte

When I first began to write what I produced was a sort of pinchbeck Nietzschean prose peppered with exclamation marks. I should have been astonished at the perversity with which, against my natural inclinations, my judgements, and my everyday experience, I clung to a philosophy so little suited to a clerk in a beer-bottling factory, if I did not realize that it was a compensation without which I should have found it hard to live at all.<sup>1</sup>

Muir was without doubt about the problems he had faced both on and beyond the page during the first decade of his writing career. Yet these writings provide fascinating evidence of his first steps into poetry, literary criticism and social commentary, and while his initial contributions may have mostly been literary pastiche and critical polemics, from the beginning it is clear that he also wanted to contribute positively to the various literary and social debates he was following weekly in the *New Age*.

Muir's first published prose piece takes the form of a short dialogue on the subject of 'The Epigram' and appeared in the *New Age* on 29 May 1913. The piece is included under the regular 'Pastiche' section and effectively forms a justification for his subsequent adoption of an epigrammatic prose style. Through his Socratic debaters, John and Tom, Muir provides a series of arguments for and against the use of the epigram. Berated as it 'denotes a lack of mastery', the epigram is also celebrated for being effective when used to convey true 'conviction'.<sup>2</sup> As John rightly announces, it was 'an epigrammatic age'<sup>3</sup> and while ironically applauding writers like Hilaire Belloc and G.B. Shaw for their triumphs of style over substance, it was a literary mode clearly suited to Muir's needs, having the potential to be pithy and profound or ironic and derisive, as the need required. Working full-time in the Renfrew shipbuilding office and spending a great deal of time travelling on trams and buses, Muir used whatever scraps of free time he could to read and compile his thoughts. 'Whenever I hit upon a paradox which lay conveniently near the surface I took it for the final truth', Muir comments, but he also recognised that his aphorisms were also the product of a genuine 'inward excitement',<sup>4</sup> the type of enthusiasm which Orage actively encouraged in his contributors.

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<sup>1</sup> *SF*, p.151.

<sup>2</sup> 'The Epigram', *TNA*, Vol.13, No.5 (29/05/1913), p.124.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p.124.

<sup>4</sup> *SF*, p.180.

'The Epigram' typifies both Muir's achievements and limitations in the first phase of his development as a writer. While the self-reflexivity of a dialogue using epigrams to both berate and celebrate the epigrammatic form itself shows a rhetorical playfulness, its haughty tone and contrived nature somewhat undermine its jocular nature. It is this mixture of ironic posturing, burgeoning talent and genuine engagement which characterizes Muir's style at this time. The series of eighteen satirical epigrams which ran over 4 issues between 23 March and 20 April 1916 provide further examples of this, with the exchange between Muir and the Irish writer and actor James Stephens demonstrating how this could unfortunately descend to metaphorical mudslinging. The first volley of Muir's being:

'To W.B. Yeats'

Remember, when you rave of mist and bog,  
Bog is a name for slush, and mist for fog.

'To James Stephens'

Stephens, from foolish rivalry desist!  
Your bog's inferior, second-hand your mist.<sup>5</sup>

To which Stephens replied:

'Moore Epigrams'

Moore: that bog you will not find  
Among my books—they must be in your mind.

Moore: you snap at Yeats without avail;  
To what fool master will you wag a tail?<sup>6</sup>

With Muir having the final word:

'Still More Epigrams'

Stephens, our tails will wag like anything,  
When Celtic epigrams have found a sting.

Stephens, the bog, at least, I do retract;  
Your spleen has made yours mud, to be exact.<sup>7</sup>

Muir's *New Age* epigrams were clearly composed swiftly<sup>8</sup> and at times appear a little forced, and yet they also convey a real sense of fervour to engage with contemporary

<sup>5</sup> 'Epigrams', *TNA*, Vol.18, No.23 (06/04/1916), p.545. Muir is alluding to the lines 'Down for me whose fire is clogged,/Clamped in sullen earthy mould,/Battened down and fogged and bogged/Where the clay is seven-fold?' from Stephens's poem 'The Nodding Star' (II:9-12), *Songs From The Clay* (London: Macmillan, 1915), p.68.

<sup>6</sup> James Stephens, 'Moore's Epigrams', *TNA*, Vol.18, No.24 (13/04/1916), p.562.

<sup>7</sup> 'Epigrams', *TNA*, Vol.18, No.25 (20/04/1916), p.595.

<sup>8</sup> 'While apparently labouring over the accounts, he would be polishing an aphorism written on a slip of paper inserted in his ledger'. Letter from Willa Muir (24/11/1959). Martin (1967), pp.277-278.

literary and social matters. They show a young writer attempting to find his own voice amid the overpowering influence of both his contemporaries and his literary mentors. It is also significant that Muir instinctively chose a verse form to convey his ideas and opinions, and while his poetry after 1921 is clearly of a very different order from these epigrams, his more lyrical poems like ‘Metamorphosis’ and ‘Sleep’s Betrayals’, with their marriage of classical and Christian imagery, or the sense of longing in ‘Utopia’ and the world-weariness of ‘The Forsaken Princess’,<sup>9</sup> all gesture toward the attitudes and themes of the poetry he would later achieve.

Despite its title, Butter’s “‘Edward Moore’ and Edwin Muir” (1981), offers no discussion of Muir’s writings prior to 1918, quietly ignoring *We Moderns* (1918). Although suggesting that ‘unhappily, under the influence of Nietzsche’ Muir surrendered to the ‘obsession of the epigram’ in *Edwin Muir: Man and Poet* (1966),<sup>10</sup> Butter accepts that ‘*We Moderns* is our most direct means of making contact with Muir as he was in his twenties’.<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche’s outspoken atheism underpins much of Butter’s negative criticism of Muir’s interest in his philosophy. However, Butter is right to suggest that Muir was ‘aspiring after a state of acceptance which he has not really attained’, and that his style throughout *We Moderns* demonstrates his attempt to ‘persuade himself into it’.<sup>12</sup> This consciously-willed attempt to accept a Nietzschean worldview led Muir to create his Edward Moore persona. More than merely a manifestation of a psychological ‘compensation’, this persona was Muir’s way of overcoming himself, allowing him to focus and direct his creative energy in directions which he felt otherwise unable to do.

‘We Moderns’ began its fortnightly twenty-one-issue run, initially entitled ‘Odd Notes’, on the 12 October 1916. Over the course of its eleven-month run Muir, through his Edward Moore persona, presented a series of short observations on contemporary literary and social issues. These articles included the changing relationship between the modern writer and the modern reader,<sup>13</sup> his thoughts on realism and modernism,<sup>14</sup> and his diagnosis of the general ‘spiritual poverty of modern life’.<sup>15</sup> The influence of Nietzsche is displayed in every issue and his philosophical writings form the touchstone for many of the matters which Muir raises.

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Metamorphosis’, *TNA*, Vol.16, No.1 (11/05/1914), p.6. ‘Sleep’s Betrayals’, *TNA*, Vol.15, No.1 (07/05/1914), p.20. ‘Utopia’, *TNA*, Vol.14, No.24 (16/04/1914), p.742. ‘The Forsaken Princess’, *TNA*, Vol.16, No.17 (25/02/1915), p.463.

<sup>10</sup> Butter (1966), p.44.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.59.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.65.

<sup>13</sup> ‘We Moderns’, *TNA*, Vol.20, No.3 (16/11/1916), pp.63-65.

<sup>14</sup> ‘Odd Notes’, *TNA*, Vol.19, No.24 (12/10/1916), pp.569-570.

<sup>15</sup> ‘We Moderns’, *TNA*, Vol.21, No.9 (13/09/1917), pp.428-430.

The final ‘We Moderns’ appeared on 13 September 1917 and it concluded by quoting Nietzsche’s endeavour ‘To try to see in all things necessity as beauty’,<sup>16</sup> echoing the ‘New Year’s resolution’ which opens Book Four of *The Joyful Wisdom* (1891):

I still live, I still think; I must still live, for I must still think. *Sum, ergo cogito: cogito, ergo sum.* [...] the pledge and the sweetening of all my future life! I want more and more to perceive the necessary characters in things as the beautiful: I shall thus be one of those who beautify things. *Amor fati*: let that henceforth be my love!<sup>17</sup>

This positivism is at the core of Nietzsche’s anti-nihilistic philosophy, and Muir uses this allusion to reinforce Goethe’s life-affirming call ‘to abjure half measures and to live resolutely in the Whole, the Full, the Beautiful’.<sup>18</sup> The quote Muir attributes to Goethe is taken from Daniel Halvéy’s *The Life of Friedrich Nietzsche* (1911),<sup>19</sup> and its central conceit is also found in his persona’s call ‘From half-measures strive to wean us’ (33) in Goethe’s ‘General Confession’ (1803).<sup>20</sup>

For the duration of its run ‘We Moderns’ acted as Muir’s vehicle through which he articulated his frustrations at everything from the literary conservatism of G.K. Chesterton,<sup>21</sup> the reactionary counter-asceticism of Arnold Bennett,<sup>22</sup> the ‘smirking style’ of H.G. Wells,<sup>23</sup> and the ineffectual ‘love’ in the writings of Thomas Hardy, John Galsworthy and George Bernard Shaw.<sup>24</sup> As well as literary matters, he offered numerous entries on the subjects of modernity and modernism more generally,<sup>25</sup> Christianity and morality<sup>26</sup> (especially Original Sin),<sup>27</sup> the tone of the latter of these discussions being best summed up by his shortest aphorism on the subject: ‘The belief in Original Sin—that was itself Man’s original sin’.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.430.

<sup>17</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Joyful Wisdom*, Book IV, in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, Vol.10, Thomas Common tr. and Oscar Levy ed. (Edinburgh: T.N. Foulis, 1910), p.213.

<sup>18</sup> ‘We Moderns’, *TNA*, Vol.21 No.20 (13/09/1917), p.430.

<sup>19</sup> As Halvéy recounts, ‘Nietzsche never forgot the energetic maxim, nor the man [Giuseppe Mazzini] who had transmitted it to him’. Daniel Halvéy, *The Life of Friedrich Nietzsche*, T.M. Kettle tr. (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1911), p.111.

<sup>20</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, ‘General Confession’ (1803), in *The Poems of Goethe*, Edgar Alfred Bowring tr. (New York: John B. Alden, 1883), pp.89-90.

<sup>21</sup> ‘We Moderns’, *TNA*, Vol.20. No.3 (16/11/1916), pp.65. See also *TNA*, Vol.20. No.7 (14/12/1916), pp.161.

<sup>22</sup> See ‘We Moderns’, *TNA*, Vol.20, No.14 (01/02/1917), p.327.

<sup>23</sup> ‘Odd Notes’, *TNA*, Vol.19, No.24 (12/10/1916), p.569.

<sup>24</sup> See ‘We Moderns’, *TNA*, Vol.20, No.21 (22/03/1917), pp.496-498

<sup>25</sup> ‘We Moderns’, *TNA*, Vol.20, No.14 (01/02/1917), p.327.

<sup>26</sup> See ‘We Moderns’, *TNA*, Vol.20, No.23 (05/04/1917), pp.545-546 and *TNA*, Vol.21 No.6 (07/06/1917), pp.138-139.

<sup>27</sup> *TNA*, Vol.20, No.12 (18/01/1917), p.280.

<sup>28</sup> *TNA*, Vol.20, No.14 (22/02/1917), pp.401-402.

As the two concluding quotes from the final column suggest, Muir also used ‘We Moderns’ to celebrate those writers he considered to be forwarding the cause for the emancipation of the human spirit, the only path by which, he suggests, ‘Man is freed from his labyrinth’.<sup>29</sup> These writers, for Muir, were pre-eminently Goethe, Ibsen, Heine, and of course, Nietzsche. Despite the fact that he saw that ‘the sentiment of transiency’ was the predominant ‘spirit of the age’, Muir nevertheless proclaimed that ‘it is the first task of the true modern to destroy the domination of the present’,<sup>30</sup> to ‘believe that there are still potentialities in man; to have faith that the “elevation of the type Man” is possible, yes, that the time is ripe to prepare for it’.<sup>31</sup> Muir’s ‘true modern’ is a precursor, a ‘forerunner’ of a future that, by its very nature, can be nothing other than temporary. The ‘true modern’, then, longs for a creative freedom that must be re-attained by every generation so that they can avoid becoming enslaved by the freedom their predecessor longed for. It may be an over-simplification to suggest of Muir what he posits of Nietzsche—that he ‘loved Man, but not men’—but nevertheless, ‘We Moderns’ reveals a young idealist revolting against what he sees as the spiritual and aesthetic constraints of a society in which economic realities define human potentiality, and a literary culture in which the contemporary taste for realism has reduced the role of the artist to that of a mere depicter of life rather than an interpreter of it. The only way forward, as Muir saw it, lay in having faith in the future:

If we but break away from Realism, if we make Art symbolic, if we bring about a marriage between Art and Religion, Art will rise again. That this is possible, we who have faith in the Future must believe.<sup>32</sup>

Mencken’s introduction to the American edition of *We Moderns* (1920), summarizes what he sees as the core values of Muir’s speculations and assertions, and identifies their contribution to a particularly modern, and yet, simultaneously ancient debate:

The thing he argues for, despite all his fury against the debasement of art to mob uses, is not an art that shall be transcendental, but an art that shall relate to life primarily and unashamedly, an art that shall accept and celebrate life [...] It seems to me that, in more than one way, they help illuminate the central aesthetic question — the problem as to the nature and function of artistic representation.<sup>33</sup>

The debate regarding the relationship between the ‘nature and function of artistic representation’ was one which Orage was particularly interested in, and Muir’s interest in

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<sup>29</sup> *TNA*, Vol.21, No.12 (19/07/1917), p.270.

<sup>30</sup> *TNA*, Vol.21, No.10 (05/07/1917), p.232.

<sup>31</sup> *TNA*, Vol.21, No.8 (21/06/1917), p.183.

<sup>32</sup> *TNA*, Vol.20, No.20 (14/03/1917), p.471.

<sup>33</sup> Muir (1920), pp.18-20.

it did not end with the conclusion of 'We Moderns' in September 1917. Edward Moore continued to act as Muir's alter-ego in the *New Age* through the eight-article series of 'Recreations in Criticism'<sup>34</sup> in which he began modifying the epigrammatically exclamatory style 'We Moderns' established. This evolution continued through a further four columns—'New Values', 'Recent Verse', 'Our Generation', and 'Causerie de Jeudi'<sup>35</sup>—totalling 196 articles between October 1916 and March 1924. 'Re-Birth' was Muir's first poem to be published under his own name, appearing in the *New Age* on 8 June 1922,<sup>36</sup> but this moment formed more of a symbolic than an actual watershed as Edward Moore had in reality been fading into the background for some time as Muir gradually emerged from behind his Nietzschean mask.

Edward Moore served him well, and as with his justification of the epigram from his first *New Age* publication, Muir's discussion of the psychological dimension of a writer's adoption of a literary pose offers a potential insight into his own motivations behind constructing a literary persona:

A pose is simply an ideal: in itself it may be a thing insincere, but it has arisen out of sincerity. Yet, it is clear there is no escape for the writer; he cannot lie—at any rate, about himself.<sup>37</sup>

Edward Moore was Muir's attempt at projecting an ideal; not as much a deception as a device to enable self-discovery and self-realisation. Through projecting an idealised version of what he believed (at its point of conception) he had the potential to become, Muir sought to create a literary self through which he might discover himself more fully. This idealisation, which arose initially 'out of sincerity', appears 'insincere' in retrospect precisely because of its success; through first creating his Moore persona then overcoming it Muir discovered himself more fully as a writer, and arguably, psychologically and emotionally as well.

The psychological significance of Muir's overcoming of Edward Moore is reflected in a dream he had in which, as a member of the watching crowd, he saw Nietzsche being crucified. Looking down on the crowd, Nietzsche appeared 'as if he had usurped the cross [...] like a man who had violently seized the position which belonged to some one [sic] else'.<sup>38</sup> Muir attributes the cause of this dream to his Jungian therapy, and through the

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<sup>34</sup> 'Recreations in Criticism', *TNA*, Vol.23, No.26 (24/10/1918) to *TNA*, Vol.31 No.25 (19/10/1922).

<sup>35</sup> 'New Values', 5 issues (18/09/1919 to 27/10/1921); 'Recent Verse', 29 issues (16/05/1920 to 27/03/1924); 'Our Generation', 96 issues (04/11/1920 to 21/09/1922); 'Causerie de Jeudi', 21 issues (09/11/1922 to 16/08/1923).

<sup>36</sup> 'Re-Birth', *TNA*, Vol.31, No.6 (08/06/1922), p.72.

<sup>37</sup> 'Recreations in Criticism', *TNA*, Vol.23 No.26 (24/10/1918), p.411.

<sup>38</sup> *SF*, p.152.

visualized ritual death (without any suggestion of resurrection) Muir was also symbolically crucifying his own Nietzschean self-projection. After this experience he recalls that

My whole world of ideas changed; the Superman, after attending me so faithfully, took himself off without a word [...] My unconscious mind, having unloaded itself, seemed to have become transparent so that myths and legends entered without resistance and passed into my dreams and day dreams.<sup>39</sup>

This new found imaginative freedom echoes Muir's wider political appreciation that 'the concept of Freedom cannot be separated from that of Power'.<sup>40</sup> Through gaining the power to subconsciously cast off his projected self, Muir discovered a creative freedom that had previously been inaccessible to him.

Rejecting his idealized philosopher-poet and his projected self, the dream of the crucified Nietzsche symbolically enacted the journey from the ideal to the real; from the eternally recurring world archetypes back into the corporeal world of time. Yet, through symbolically killing-off his literary *auctor* in his 'dream-work' Muir appears (either consciously or subconsciously)<sup>41</sup> to be attempting to transcend his past rather than striving for an acceptance of it; a process that begins tentatively in *First Poems* (1925) but is not achieved to any major degree until *The Narrow Place* (1943).

A further imaginative breakthrough in this process was prompted by his discovery of the poetry of Friedrich Hölderlin whose work he encountered at Hellerau during the spring of 1923. In Hölderlin Muir discovered a poet who was capable of employing dream-like symbolism and temporal suspension to powerful effect, techniques that he would go on to experiment with himself. Likening him to Wordsworth and Nietzsche, Muir applauds him as 'a mystic of the earth, of nature, and of man'; a poet whose imaginative vision was essentially timeless and archetypal yet was grounded firmly in this world.<sup>42</sup> Muir returns to this point in his two 1949 essays on Hölderlin, highlighting how his poetry creates 'the recurring effect of passing at one step from one world of time and change to that of timelessness and back again',<sup>43</sup> arguing that 'the past exists in the present' in his poetry

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p.152. Cf. Aitchison (1988), p.11.

<sup>40</sup> 'We Moderns', *TNA*, Vol.21, No.8 (21/06/1917), p.182. As Muir argues, 'If art and literature are to flourish again, artists, writers, nay the whole community must regain the sense of power. Therefore economic emancipation first!'. 'We Moderns', *TNA*, Vol.20, No.3 (16/11/1916), p.64.

<sup>41</sup> See Sigmund Freud, *On Dreams*, James Strachey tr. (London: Hogarth, 1952), p.46. Cf. C.G. Jung, 'Sigmund Freud: On Dreams' (1901), in *The Symbolic Life: Miscellaneous Writings*, R.F.C. Hull tr. (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1977), p.362.

<sup>42</sup> 'Friedrich Hölderlin', *The Scottish Nation*, No.12 (11/09/1923), pp.6-7 & 15. Reproduced in *The Truth of The Imagination: A Collection of Reviews and Essays by Edwin Muir*, Peter Butter ed., (Aberdeen: AUP, 1988), p.172.

<sup>43</sup> 'Friedrich Hölderlin', *Essays on Literature and Society* (London: Hogarth, 1949), p.85. This essay is a re-reading of *Patmos* and although there are similarities to the 1923 essay its brevity and depth far exceed it, particularly with regard to the hagiographic and theological elements of the poem.

precisely because ‘time and timelessness are inextricably bound up’.<sup>44</sup> Hölderlin’s created world<sup>45</sup> also offered Muir a poetic model which recognised a truth he gained from Nietzsche and Nicoll that ‘there is no hard and fast barrier between time and eternity’.<sup>46</sup> Hölderlin’s ‘equivocal treatment of time’, he argues, ‘brings the present and the past together, evoking a possibility of a new mode of perception, it suggests the future’.<sup>47</sup> Muir’s reading of Hölderlin helped to stimulate the development of a more sympathetic understanding of the relationship between the world of ideas and everyday experience, what J.B. Pick identified as early as 1948 as Muir’s appreciation of ‘unity of the physical and the intellectual’,<sup>48</sup> an understanding that enhanced his perceptiveness as a critic and his sensitivity as a poet.

Discussing the romantic idealism of Hölderlin’s lyrical poetry and its relation to Hebraic prophetic verse and Jungian ‘dream material’, Muir goes on to identify Hölderlin’s ‘historical sense’<sup>49</sup> in his study of *Patmos* (1802), an appreciation which he proposes aligns the poet’s mystical trans-historical vision with that of Wordsworth:

Like Wordsworth, he was concerned with Man, not with men of his own age or any particular civilization or age. But while Wordsworth found God in nature, Hölderlin found Him in history, in time. To divine the workings of God in history is what we call prophecy. The prophet in the narrower sense foresees these workings in the future: Hölderlin saw them in the past as well, in the universal story of mankind.<sup>50</sup>

Although this was written more than 25 years after his first encounter with Hölderlin’s poetry, Muir clearly retained an appreciation for the time-centred facets of his verse that spoke to him so resonantly a quarter of century earlier.

As Mellown highlights in his preface to *Edwin Muir* (1979), Muir’s development as writer was an unusually public affair and as a result his writings offer an ‘instructive case history of the twentieth-century professional writer’: ‘Muir literally educated himself in public; and thus his reviews and other journalistic writings record his intellectual growth’.<sup>51</sup> The roots of this ‘intellectual growth’ are left fully exposed in observations and aphorisms

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<sup>44</sup> ‘Friedrich Hölderlin’, in Muir (1949), p.87.

<sup>45</sup> ‘It is rather a radiant chaos, containing fragments of a world which has been some time or will be some time’. Ibid., p.86.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p.86.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p.86.

<sup>48</sup> J.B. Pick, ‘The Poetry of Edwin Muir’, in *Scottish Periodical Review*, Vol.1, No.2 (Summer 1948), 89-93, p.92

<sup>49</sup> T.S. Eliot, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent (1920)’, *T.S. Eliot, Selected Essays* (Faber: London, 1934), p.34. For an account of the formation of Eliot’s ‘historical sense’ see P.G. Ellis, ‘The Development of T.S. Eliot’s Historical Sense’, *The Review of English Studies*, Vol.23, No.91 (1972), pp.291-301. Cf. Chris Humphrey and W.M. Ormrod eds., *Time in the Medieval World* (Oxford: York Medieval Press, 2001), p.3.

<sup>50</sup> ‘Hölderlin’ in Muir (1949), p.91.

<sup>51</sup> Mellown (1979), p.7.

which form ‘We Moderns’, which, as the collected volume’s 1918 subtitle suggests, is not so much a series of analytically derived propositions as a collection of ‘enigmas and guesses’. Read within their proper context, Muir’s speculations and assertions can be seen expressing a wide variety of ideas and concerns which resonate with those being discussed elsewhere within the *New Age*. Mencken sees Muir’s energetic application of Nietzsche announcing the ‘emancipation of the modern spirit from its rotting heritage of ingenuous fears and exploded certainties’.<sup>52</sup> Orage is equally unreserved in his analysis of Muir’s ‘tour de force’ Nietzschean imitation, which he claims, ‘amounts to originality almost equal to Nietzsche’s own’.<sup>53</sup> In Orage’s analysis, the author of ‘We Moderns’ is an iconoclastic romantic who envisages the world as a plastic, ever-evolving state of Becoming:

it is of the very essence of romanticism to wish for another kind of world than this which is [...] Acceptance of the doctrine of Becoming is as inevitable to the romantic as rejection of the doctrine of Being.<sup>54</sup>

‘Nothing is true for all time’, Orage contests, ‘for the future is only fixed if we allow it to be fixed’; insisting that ‘our will can create it in our own imagination’.<sup>55</sup> Orage concludes his praise of Muir’s ‘We Moderns’ series with the promise that ‘if the series were in a little book I should carry it about with me until one of us was exhausted’.<sup>56</sup> Orage and Muir’s readers did not have long to wait until his ‘note book’<sup>57</sup> was published, *We Moderns: Enigmas and Guesses* (1918) appearing less than nine months later.

The commitment to contemporary artistic and social concerns that Orage appreciated so sympathetically in Muir’s writings was heavily informed by German and English Romanticism,<sup>58</sup> yet their focus was fixed firmly on the future. This approach was very much in keeping with Orage’s editorial policy to foster the divergent and the deliberately contentious. Muir’s ‘Edward Moore’ writings clearly reflect this strategy, but also they reveal the breadth and depth of his genuine engagement with contemporary literary and cultural matters. They are too numerous and significant to his overall development as a writer to be written off as journalistic ephemera or literary juvenilia. As well as explicitly

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<sup>52</sup> Muir (1920), p.8.

<sup>53</sup> ‘Readers and Writers’, *TNA*, Vol.21, No.21 (20/09/1917), p.447.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p.447.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p.449.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p.449.

<sup>57</sup> Despite the apparent individual nature of these short articles and aphorisms, Muir’s editor clearly saw a continuity of thought and expression within them. *Ibid.*, p.447.

<sup>58</sup> Ritchie Robertson suggests that Muir’s development of a personal poetic metalanguage finds its parallel in German Neoromantic poetry, arguing that through developing a critical approach which seeks to decode Muir’s recurring images, his poetic ‘*Chiffren*’ (ciphers), a rewarding appreciation to his creative ‘thoughtscape’ can be gained. Ritchie Robertson, ‘Edwin Muir as European Poet’ in MacLachlan and Robb (1990), p.105.

reflecting the boisterous intellectual climate of the day, they also identify the centrality of the discussion of time to Muir's critical and creative approach, a fascination with which, as his appreciation of Hölderlin signposts, remained with him for the rest of his career.

### London (1919-20)

Muir was working in the office of the Renfrew shipyard when in September 1918 he met Wilhelmina Anderson at a mutual friend's flat in Glasgow. Mrs Stobo was the mother of one of Willa's university friends.<sup>59</sup> Willa left Glasgow the next day to take up a lecturing post in Gipsy Hill Teacher Training College in Streatham, South-East London, and over the next three months the pair exchanged letters and agreed to meet up in Glasgow in December. This meeting in turn led to them arranging to see each other at a dance in Glasgow the following Easter then visiting St. Andrews together a few days later where they decided to get married, as Willa recalls comically, because 'if we had any children I shouldn't like them to be bastards'.<sup>60</sup> They were married on 7 June 1919 at St Pancras Registry Office, and after a short honeymoon at Sheringham in Norfolk, they parted briefly while Muir returned to Glasgow to give in his notice, which after some hesitation and supportive encouragement from Willa, he eventually did. After Glasgow, they stayed initially with Willa's mother (Betty Anderson) in Montrose before moving to London to set up home at 13 Guildford Street, Camden Town, in the September of 1919. Willa's friend, Barbra Low, rented the upper half of the house while Willa and Muir took the two downstairs rooms.<sup>61</sup> Muir offers only the briefest details about their courtship and marriage in his autobiography, but he leaves little doubt about the impact Willa had on his life: 'My marriage was the most fortunate event in my life'.<sup>62</sup>

After two weeks in London Muir took a job as clerk in an engraver's and Willa found a temporary teaching post, before becoming headmistress at Day Continuation School in January 1920. Muir had been in frequent contact with Orage since arriving in London, and within a few months he was invited to be his editorial assistant at the *New Age*. Although poorly paid, the post took up only three days a week and Muir secured additional work at *The Scotsman* as a drama critic and also through providing occasional reviews for *Athenaeum*, then under the editorship of John Middleton Murray.<sup>63</sup>

The psychological instabilities and their associated physical maladies that had affected Muir in Glasgow became particularly troublesome during the first few months in

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<sup>59</sup> Christianson (2007), p.12.

<sup>60</sup> Willa Muir (1968), p.25.

<sup>61</sup> Willa Muir (1968), pp.29-34.

<sup>62</sup> *SF*, p.183.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p.186.

London. By the arrangement of Orage, and bolstered by Willa's encouragement, Muir undertook a course of psychoanalysis with the Harley Street neurologist and psychotherapist Maurice Nicoll in the winter of 1919. Nicoll, Kelso-born and three years Muir's senior, had attended university at Cambridge and worked under Jung in Zurich. Along with Orage, he became a follower of the mystic George Ivanovich Gurdjieff in 1922, continuing his studies at Gurdjieff's institute at Fontainebleau before returning to London in 1923 to become an exponent of P.D. Ouspensky's interpretation of the 'Fourth Way'.<sup>64</sup> Despite the unorthodox nature of Nicoll's esoteric Christianity, he remained a Christian Platonist with a deep interest in the nature of time,<sup>65</sup> a perspective which must have struck a cord with Muir. Muir and Nicoll (like Orage) were devoted to the search for revelatory and transcendent truth; Nicoll found his in Gurdjieff and Ouspensky, while Nicoll provided Muir with access to his own 'dream-work' which in turn offered him further justification for his belief in the existence of eternity and the immortality of the soul, a belief that his study of Nietzsche had made it increasingly hard to sustain.

Willa, whose own quasi-metaphysical spirituality resided in the notion of 'belonging to the universe', suggested to Muir that his therapy had allowed him access to the 'collective unconscious',<sup>66</sup> but Muir, rejecting both his analyst's interpretations and his wife's, chose to view his vivid dreams and trances as evidence of the existence of eternity, a realm he believed held the 'pattern of man's evolution and ultimate destiny'.<sup>67</sup> One vision in particular made a lasting impact on him, and forms the basis of the poem 'Ballad of the Soul',<sup>68</sup> in which he saw a host of mythological creatures, defeating the largest of them in combat, before undertaking a winged flight in unison with Willa, then finally alighting on the shoulder of a giant Jehovah to share a kiss. During the analysis of this vision, Nicoll had highlighted the sexual imagery involved (womb-like interiors, swords, armour, wounds, snakes), and suggested that they seemed be linked to a myth of creation.<sup>69</sup> Nicoll disagreed with Muir's conclusion that 'it seemed to point to immortality', suggesting to him that it 'would flatter your vanity nicely [...] to think that a revelation has been specially arranged for you'.<sup>70</sup> Rejecting Nicoll's analysis, Muir continued to interpret the

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<sup>64</sup> Nicoll describes the 'Fourth Way' as a form of 'Esoteric Christianity'. See Maurice Nicoll, *Psychological Commentaries on the Teaching of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky*, Vol.3 (Boston: Shambhala, 1996), p.1162.

<sup>65</sup> 'Our true future is our own growth in now, not in the tomorrow of passing time. Something must be brought into every moment, the cumulative effect of which is to create *now*. *Now* is not given. While living our ordinary life we must always be doing something else—internally'. Maurice Nicoll, *Living Time and the Integration of the Life* (London: Vincent Stuart, 1952), p.5.

<sup>66</sup> Willa Muir (1968), p.44.

<sup>67</sup> *SF*, p.197.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.189-93.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p.193.

<sup>70</sup> *SF*, p.194.

vision in this way. Accepting that it ‘would have to be put down to naïve spiritual vanity if it was really invented by me and did not “come” to me’, he posits the ‘racial unconscious’ as its source and not his own desire to find transcendent meaning.<sup>71</sup> Rejecting Nicoll’s analysis, Muir argues that

his theory that the dream was a myth of creation does not satisfy me [...] A discernible pattern certainly runs through the dream, but if it is anything it is a pattern of man’s evolution and ultimate destiny, not of the creation: the whole dream is concerned with our beginning and our end.<sup>72</sup>

Willa Muir provides additional insight into Muir’s desire to interpret this pattern as one in which human existence is confined by time in contrast with the freedom offered by eternity to the soul:

Edwin wanted to go much farther away, both in time and space [...] Not being steeped in Nietzsche, as Edwin was, I did not think that human life needed the transcendental justification he was looking for in his visions [...] although he was beginning to distrust Nietzsche’s Super-man, he was still looking for some great story, some cosmic pattern that would assign a place to every experience in life, relating it to an inclusive whole and justifying it.<sup>73</sup>

As Willa suggests, this search for transcendental meaning was something which continued ‘until he thought he had found it’ in later life.<sup>74</sup> Aitchison, by contrast, supports Muir’s analogical and revelatory interpretation of his vision, and argues that a Jungian rather than a Freudian interpretation of the ‘Ballad of the Soul’ allows the relationship ‘between the individual and the archetype, between man and mankind’ to be revealed.<sup>75</sup> Despite accepting the poem as an unmediated record of Muir’s experience in his discussion, Aitchison is accurate in his analysis that the poem foreshadows the ‘search for reconciliation’ which becomes such a major component of Muir’s later poetry.<sup>76</sup>

Acting on Orage’s suggestion Nicoll, the author of *Dream Psychology* (1917), had invited Muir to meet with him to see if he could help him. Offering his services free of charge he began a series of sessions with Muir that proved to be more therapeutic and inspirational than Muir could have imagined. Muir’s accounts of the resultant visions and dreams make clear how much these sessions informed his belief in the psychological and creative significance of mythology and symbolism. Despite his rejection of some elements

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p.196.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p.197.

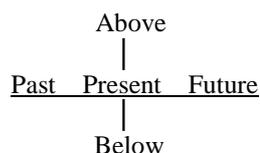
<sup>73</sup> Willa Muir (1968), pp.46-47.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p.47.

<sup>75</sup> Aitchison (1988), pp.16-17.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p.18.

Nicoll's analysis, Nicoll's Jungian approach nevertheless had a degree of influence on Muir. Muir did not, however, simply replace the ideas of Nietzsche with that of Jung. Instead, the experiences he underwent during his psychoanalysis gave a new lease of life to his understanding of the collective unconscious, individuation, dream symbolism, and archetypes, and they became assimilated into his critical and creative approach. Butter also identifies a degree of similarity between Muir's conception of time to that proposed by Nicoll in *Living Time* (1952), in which Nicoll represents his theory of time by way of the following diagram and explanation:



The present only becomes *now* in its full meaning if a man is conscious [...] If he is asleep in Time, being hurried on from past to future, identified with everything, there is no *now* in his life. There is not even the present moment. On the contrary, everything is running, everything is changing, everything is turning into something else; and even the moment so looked-forward to, so eagerly anticipated, when it comes is already in the past. It is only this feeling of the existence and meaning of the direction represented by the vertical line that gives a man a sense of *now*. This feeling is sometimes called the *feeling of Eternity* [. . .] Eternity and Time meet in Man, at the point called *now*.<sup>77</sup>

For Nicoll, eternity is not merely time with infinite duration; it is a higher order of reality, something which can be experienced within the 'now' yet nevertheless is entirely separate from it. This clearly has resonance with Muir's notion of eternity existing beyond time, as he describes in his 1940 autobiography:

immortality is not an idea or belief, but a state of being in which man keeps alive himself in his perception of that boundless union and freedom, which he can faintly apprehend in Time, though its consummation lies beyond Time.<sup>78</sup>

That Muir shared Nicoll's belief in immortality does not in itself constitute evidence of Muir's repudiation of Nietzsche's 'eternal recurrence', a concept which Butter argues is invalid as Nietzsche advances 'no convincing reason for believing the theory of Recurrence to be true',<sup>79</sup> suggesting that 'if one does not believe in grace one must believe in oneself if one is not to despair'.<sup>80</sup> Butter's proposal that Nietzsche's notion represents

<sup>77</sup> See Butter (1966), pp.180-81.

<sup>78</sup> *SF*, pp.202-203.

<sup>79</sup> Butter (1966), p.58.

<sup>80</sup> Butter (1966), p.59.

‘an eternal recurrence of personality’<sup>81</sup> echoes that of Jung’s perspective that ‘eternal recurrence’ and ‘the Superman’ form ‘compensations for the abandoned ideas of God and of the quest for the source of the self.’<sup>82</sup> In this way, Butter is reducing Nietzsche’s challenging ‘to live as if’<sup>83</sup> thought experiment into a belief system designed around the elevation of the personality. By contrast, Walter Kaufmann asserts that Nietzsche’s philosophy forms ‘the last best bridge between positivism and existentialism’, contending that his primary concern was not with the promotion of the self as much as with the liberation of the individual, ‘the individual who is not satisfied with accepted formulas [...] he challenges the reader not so much to agree or disagree as to grow’.<sup>84</sup> Whether the ‘eternal recurrence’ can be proved to be true or not is insignificant in comparison with the positive effect that willing it to be true holds for the individual.

As Frederick Copleston remarks, while Schopenhauer based a philosophy on the concept of the ‘will to life’, Nietzsche based his on the idea of the ‘will to power’, in which the theory of the ‘eternal recurrence’ was essentially ‘a test of strength, of Nietzsche’s power to say “yes” to life instead of the Schopenhauerian “no” [...] the triumph in Nietzsche himself of the yea-saying attitude of life’.<sup>85</sup> Copleston goes on to reject any suggestion that this positivist approach leads to a ‘self’ accentuating philosophy, arguing instead that Nietzsche’s ‘relativistic and pragmatist view of truth’ was more ‘social rather than personal, in the sense that those theories were said to be true which are biologically useful for a given species’.<sup>86</sup>

Although Nietzsche considered his vision of revolutionary human history to be anti-Darwinian,<sup>87</sup> it is easy to see why the ideas of the ‘superman’ and ‘eternal recurrence’ lend themselves to Darwinian interpretation,<sup>88</sup> and Nietzsche’s theories pose no less a challenge to creationist monotheism as those of ‘natural selection’. However, they do not support

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<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p.55.

<sup>82</sup> See Kathleen Marie Higgins ‘Review of C.G. Jung, *Nietzsche’s Zarathustra: Notes on the Seminar Given in 1934-1939*’ in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol.59, No.3 (Autumn 1991), pp.609-612. It is also worth recognising Jung’s appreciation of Nietzsche’s philosophy and the positive influence he had upon Jung’s thinking. See C.G. Jung, ‘Is There a Freudian Type of Poetry? (1932)’ in Jung (1977), p.766.

<sup>83</sup> Karl Löwith, ‘Nietzsche’s Doctrine of Eternal Recurrence’ in *Journal of History of Ideas*, Vol.6, No.3, (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1945), p.276.

<sup>84</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, Walter Kaufmann tr. (London: Viking, 1982), pp.15-19.

<sup>85</sup> Frederick S.J. Copleston, *The History of Philosophy*, Vol.7 (New York: Doubleday, 1963), p.169

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p.169.

<sup>87</sup> As Kaufmann details, Nietzsche offered his views on Darwinian evolution in two summative notes entitled ‘Anti-Darwin’ from 1888. Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974), p.328.

<sup>88</sup> James Birx explores how through the concepts of the ‘superman’ and the ‘eternal return, Nietzsche substituted Darwin’s principle of ‘adaptive fitness’ with that of ‘creative power’, with nature forming an expression of the adaptive ‘will to power’. James Birx, ‘Nietzsche, Darwin and Evolution’ presented at the Hawaii International Conference on Arts and Humanities (January, 2003). <<http://www.hichumanities.org/AHproceedings/James%20Birx.pdf>> (accessed 21/04/2010).

Butter's implicit suggestion that Nicoll's theories of time and eternity, which clearly influenced Muir, offered him an antidote to Nietzsche's atheism. Muir in 1940 (after his religious experience of 1939) equated the 'return eternal' with his own desire to believe in the 'deathlessness of [his] personality'.<sup>89</sup> This suggests a rather literal interpretation of the theory and is one that does not take into account the specific nature of time in Nietzsche's theory. A differing interpretation would be that Nietzsche's cyclical model presents a highly depersonalized model of time; a closed-loop of universally recurring entities, an eternal totality in which the participants and events would have to be archetypes by necessity of their cyclically recurring nature. This is the challenge to the imagination that Muir appears to reject: he seems to have found the depersonalized order of time offered by Nietzsche, akin to those presented by Calvinism and Marxism, too much to reconcile with his belief in the immortality of the soul. Ultimately, the idea of 'eternal recurrence' did not offer the freedom necessary to allow Muir to re-imagine himself once he had cast aside his self-styled Nietzschean persona.

Nietzsche claims that an understanding of 'eternal recurrence' is 'the heaviest burden' one could live with<sup>90</sup> and within it resides the key 'ethical imperative',<sup>91</sup> to borrow Karl Löwith's term, not to live a life that could be endured endlessly, but instead, to desire that your life be repeated eternally. By Nietzsche's account, truly overcoming this challenge will allow the individual to experience the 'moontide'; the transcendent 'eternal instant' in which 'Midday and Eternity' become realized.<sup>92</sup> Nietzsche's 'eternal instant', then, has a metaphysical and quasi-mystical character which is more akin to Nicoll's transcendental 'now' than Butter concedes. For both Nicoll and Nietzsche the 'truth' about time can be apprehended only through the disempowering process of accepting one's place within it. For Nicoll, this leads to a religious revelation; for Nietzsche, it forms the necessary phase in our Dionysian liberation from the tyranny of history, fated as we are to 'overcome' ourselves eternally.<sup>93</sup> Muir could no more accept Nietzsche's *amor fati*<sup>94</sup> than he could reconcile himself to the Calvinist notion of predestination, nor that human history could be explained by its socio-economic asymmetry,<sup>95</sup> and through the qualified

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<sup>89</sup> *SF*, p.202.

<sup>90</sup> Nietzsche, *The Joyful Wisdom*, Thomas Common in Nietzsche, Vol.10 (1910), p.270.

<sup>91</sup> Löwith (1945), p.276.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p.277.

<sup>93</sup> Nietzsche, Vol.10 (1910), p.336.

<sup>94</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale trs (New York: Vintage, 1968), p.537. 'My formula for human greatness is *amor fati*: that one wants to have nothing different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity.' Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*, Walter Kaufmann ed. (New York: Vintage, 1967), p.258.

<sup>95</sup> 'The theory that the soul is immortal was not invented as a pretext for keeping the rich from being made uncomfortable, or to provide texts to quote against the class-conscious workers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century'. *SF*, p.203.

separation of time and eternity, illustrated by Nicoll's model, Muir found another way of holding onto his belief in the immortality of the soul. It was not the 'recurrence of personality', as Butter defines it, which Muir feared, it was its loss.

With specific regard to the influence of the theory 'eternal recurrence', Muir, like Nietzsche, encountered this concept first in the writings of Heinrich Heine. As Walter Kaufmann notes, Nietzsche's own interpretation of this ancient concept finds a contemporary source in Heine's *Letzte Gedichte und Gedanken* (1869), a text listed among Nietzsche's library.<sup>96</sup> Similarly, during his reading of Havelock Ellis's selection of Heine's prose during the summer of 1908, Muir must have come across Heine's statement that 'everything in this world is liable to turn up again' and also the volume's closing biblical allusion to Ecclesiastes, citing the famous conceit that 'there is no new thing under the sun'.<sup>97</sup> Given that Nietzsche and Heine repeatedly present ideas relating to the 'eternal return' or 'eternal recurrence' in their writings, it is unsurprising that Muir was so affected by this idea, the longevity of its influence being demonstrated by his poetic repudiation of it in the poem 'The Eternal Recurrence' in 1940. It is also significant that this poem was written after Muir reconciled himself once again to Christianity, although it has its precursors in Muir's 'A Note on Friedrich Nietzsche' (1923).<sup>98</sup> The continued influence of Ellis's selection of Heine's prose is also demonstrated by Muir's paraphrased quotation from it in the opening notes for 'Ballad of the Nightingale' from *First Poems* (1925), where he cites the tale of the possessed nightingale from Heine's *German Philosophy and Religion* (1834).<sup>99</sup>

It is this interaction between the Jungian and Freudian ideas which Muir encountered first in Glasgow as a reader of the *New Age* and then through his analysis with Nicoll, combined with his immersion in the writings of Heine and Nietzsche which informs Muir's belief in the psychological significance of archetypes and his passionate commitment to exploring the relationship between our notions of eternity, time, and history, and their impact on our sense of freedom. If Nicoll's Jungian-inflected brand of Christian mysticism offered Muir a route out of the contradictions and complexities of Nietzsche's philosophy, he did not take it, and although Muir ended his psychoanalysis shortly after he was passed to Nicoll's colleague, James Young, having metaphorically crucified Nietzsche during the course of his therapy, Nietzsche's influence persisted to inform his artistic thoughts for a considerable time.

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<sup>96</sup> Kaufmann (1974), pp.318-319.

<sup>97</sup> Heine (1887), pp.41 & 327. 'The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun'. See also Eccl. 1:9-11, 3:15 & 6:10.

<sup>98</sup> *Freeman*, VII (14/03/1923), pp.18-21 and Muir (1924), pp.80-93.

<sup>99</sup> *CP*, p.26. Cf. Heine (1887), pp.150-51.

By 1918, stylistically and thematically, Muir was developing a more balanced mode in his critical prose, moving away from the deliberately provocative aphorisms of ‘We Moderns’ and gravitating toward a more probing form of discursive and speculative criticism. Muir began writing the eight-part series ‘Recreations in Criticism’ for the *New Age* whilst still living in Glasgow, the first appearing 24 October 1918. The change of style from ‘We Moderns’ is perceptible, as is the relative absence of exclamation marks, and shows a writer keener to illustrate his arguments more fully, with his tendency to strive for a witty conceit to paraphrase a position, though occasionally present, becoming less intrusive to the flow of the discussion. The same month that the Muirs set up home in Guildford Street, Muir contributed the first of five essay-articles entitled ‘New Values’ to the *New Age*.<sup>100</sup> Like ‘Recreations in Criticism’, they continued the conscious break with Muir’s previous rhetorical posturing, as Willa recalls: ‘Edwin’s reaction from Nietzsche [...] was bringing a new sobriety into his style [...] he was beginning to repudiate Edward Moore’.<sup>101</sup> Nietzsche may not be deferred to as the final arbiter quite as often as in ‘We Moderns’ but his ideas persist. However, Muir’s enlivened interest in psychology can be seen occupying territory once reserved for Nietzsche’s theories. Nevertheless, Nietzsche is still held up alongside Dostoevsky as one of the greatest psychological writers of his time.<sup>102</sup> As Mellown underlines, Muir’s interest in psychology was no doubt bolstered greatly through his contact with Nicoll, enabling him to quickly become ‘one of the foremost psychological critics of literature in the 1920s’.<sup>103</sup> This important aspect of Muir’s early writings was noted first by H.L. Mencken in his introduction to the New York publication of *We Moderns: Enigmas and Guesses* (1920), arguing that, unlike Nietzsche whose ‘whole aesthetic was hampered by the backwardness of psychology in his time’, Muir has Freud behind him.<sup>104</sup>

This heightened awareness of the need for an appreciation of psychological aspects of texts and their authors had already begun before Muir undertook his therapy with Nicoll and Young, as his first article of the ‘New Values’ series demonstrates. It opens with a discussion of the distinction between action and expression, highlighting how, in very loose terms, psychology and psychoanalysis help our understanding of personal and creative freedom:

Man reveals his essential nature not in action, but in expression. In the beginning and in the end there is the Word, that which tells what man is—that is, what he *would be*. Action is the outline drawn by his limitations.<sup>105</sup>

<sup>100</sup> ‘New Values’, *TNA*, Vol.25, No.21 (18/09/1919), pp.345-346.

<sup>101</sup> Willa Muir (1968), p.48.

<sup>102</sup> ‘Recreations in Criticism’, *TNA*, Vol.24, No.15 (13/02/1919)], pp.243-244.

<sup>103</sup> Mellown (1979), p.18.

<sup>104</sup> Muir (1920), p.20.

<sup>105</sup> ‘New Values’, *TNA*, Vol.25, No.21 (18/09/1919), p.345.

Although ‘the literature and the art of psychology have still to come to birth’, Muir cautions, that should not lead us to ‘react too obviously against modernity’ in search of tomorrow’s truth nor reject too readily the advancements in learning of the past.<sup>106</sup> Here, Muir can be seen once again striving to contextualize the present within a linear timeframe, attempting to attain the long view of his subject: ‘The science of the Middle Ages was theology; that of the Renaissance, anatomy; our science is psychology’.<sup>107</sup> Dostoevsky and Stendhal are explored as writers whose characters either act upon their introspection or are paralyzed by it. Illustrating his point through exploration of literary characterization, Muir is, on one hand, talking about ‘aesthetic and ethical education’ through fiction generally, while on the other, he is expressing his own desire for greater self-knowledge. ‘Introspection can be equally a source of great strength and of great weakness’,<sup>108</sup> Muir proposes, and as he subsequently discovered through his psychoanalysis, it can also be a source of great inspiration.

Given the descriptions of his dream-visions and their examination with Nicoll during his therapy, it would be expected that Muir’s approach to the discussion of psychology with regard to criticism would have altered to some degree. However, ‘A Plea for Psychology in Literary Criticism’ (1921)<sup>109</sup> bears less psychological terminology and adaptation to his thinking than might be expected given his recent reading on the subject (an indication of which is given in some of his *Athenaeum* reviews)<sup>110</sup> and his own experiences. Instead the article builds on the argument for a general psycho-literary approach as set out in the first of his ‘New Values’ articles from September 1919. Although Muir may have been reluctant to accept some of Nicoll’s professional opinions, he appears to have embraced his beliefs more warmly. In Nicoll he found someone, like himself, who believed in the immortality of the soul but unlike himself Nicoll had managed to incorporate that belief into a unified theoretical overview of time and mortality. In this respect, Nicoll’s influence can be seen in the *Athenaeum* article’s call for a ‘living criticism’ informed by psychology, to bring current critical practice in line with the advancements made in fiction: ‘Criticism apparently expected everything to express

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p.345.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p.345.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p.345.

<sup>109</sup> ‘A Plea for Psychology in Literary Criticism’ (1921), *Athenaeum* (28/01/1921), pp.90-91 and Muir (1924), pp.94-102.

<sup>110</sup> See Muir’s reviews of William S Walsh’s *Psychology of Dreams* (1920), *Athenaeum*, No.4721 (22/10/1920), p.553. Gustave Geley, *From the Unconscious to the Conscious* (1920), *Athenaeum* No.47531 (24/ 12/1920), p.867. John Howley, *Open Vision, Psychology and Mystical Experience* (1920), *Athenaeum*, No.4732 (07/01/1921), pp.17-18. Mary Arnold-Forster, *Studies in Dreams* (1920), *Athenaeum*, No. 4733 (14/01/1921), p.44.

life—except criticism [...] the function of criticism is to treat, in their expression in literature, the mind and the soul'.<sup>111</sup>

Psychology, Muir proposes, with its primary concern for the mind, has also rediscovered the soul along with the 'humours and the passions', and the psychological novel (again he cites Stendhal and Dostoyevsky) is an articulation of that re-discovery.<sup>112</sup> The article does not discuss in any theoretical detail exactly how psychology should be used to analyze texts, nor does it distinguish between the differing approaches of the schools of Freud and Jung. Muir is talking about psychology in the broadest sense, taking his lead from the psychological novel rather than science. Criticism, argues Muir, 'should reject the vulgar and irrelevant personal detail, and find its inspiration in the interaction and collision of minds, in the cold and passionate ardour of the activities of the spirit'.<sup>113</sup> Undaunted by Nicoll's warning that he should be wary of searching for revelations within psychological insights, Muir insists that psychological criticism has the potential to uncover the underlying truth of aesthetic experience, proclaiming that this new critical method will 'tell us whether the beauty in any case is true or false'.<sup>114</sup>

Mellown's proposition that Muir began his writing career 'as an avant-garde, iconoclastic Nietzschean' and concluded it as a 'Christian Platonist'<sup>115</sup> potentially understates the Platonic element in Muir's writings from the outset, which he maintained despite his knowledge of Nietzsche's views on idealism and moral absolutism. Yet, Muir's aphoristic witticism that concludes 'Beyond the Absolute' (1921), that 'life itself is "eternal" denial of Truth, "eternal" destruction of all that wisdom has contrived',<sup>116</sup> does constitute a Nietzschean rejection of absolute truth, proposing instead a 'Dionysian wisdom' which, he argues in 'Against the Wise' (1921), 'our age is ripe' for.<sup>117</sup> This new wisdom, he argues, has been revealed through writings concerned with the unconscious and psychoanalysis, writings that have demonstrated 'how much wiser we are than we think', offering us the opportunity to experience a 'wisdom' that 'is not deceived by eternal truths, good and evil, and all the meanness, the glory and the pride of the intellect'.<sup>118</sup> The development of a psycho-literal method, then, offered Muir the opportunity to bridge the gap between Nietzschean relativism and Platonic idealism, and although as his writing developed he became increasingly interested in idealism and archetypes, he never lost sight

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<sup>111</sup> Muir (1924), p.95.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p.95.

<sup>113</sup> Muir (1924), p.95.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p.101.

<sup>115</sup> Mellown (1979), p.17.

<sup>116</sup> *Freeman*, IV (21/12/1921), pp.345-346 and Muir (1924), p.249.

<sup>117</sup> *Freeman*, IV (16/11/1921), pp.226-227 and Muir (1924), p.220.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p.220.

of the value that a position of moral relativism could offer, as his recurrent discussions of the relationship of good and evil illustrate.

What the early *Athenaeum* and *Freeman* articles show is Muir working through his ideas relating to truth and consciousness, informed by the perspective that the ‘collective unconscious’ offers a means by which to attain transcendent truth, as well the Nietzschean appreciation that ‘wisdom is mixed in all things’, the ‘unconscious wisdom’ of our age being the final judge of truth.<sup>119</sup> As ‘A Note on Friedrich Nietzsche’ (1923)<sup>120</sup> makes clear, despite his growing dissatisfaction with the nuances of his philosophy, Muir continued to hold Nietzsche’s collective achievements as a thinker in high regard, even though by this time he is more interested in Nietzsche as a tragic hero than as liberator of the intellect. In this respect, the tragic and epic character which ‘A Note on Friedrich Nietzsche’ outlines foreshadows the approach which Muir undertakes in *John Knox* (1929); his desire to attain a sympathetic understanding of the differing psychological struggles of both men residing in his appreciation of their cultural and intellectual legacies.

Alongside his engagement with psychological approaches to criticism, Muir’s *New Age* articles continued to focus heavily on what he sees as the problems with modernist realism and the realist novel in particular. Although Muir writes outspokenly in defence of ‘Modern Truths’, arguing that we should ‘support new truths against old dogmas, simply because they are new, and being new are a mark of life, of health and of unconscious wisdom’.<sup>121</sup> This does not mean that Muir considered modern society or art to be any more advanced than earlier periods. ‘I do not think there is anything admirable in being up to date, apart from the fact it is necessary’,<sup>122</sup> Muir writes in the concluding diary extract appending *The Story and the Fable*, and it is clear that he shared with Orage an appreciation that the period in which they were living and writing was not exclusively the most important to their own time. There seems to have been a conscious effort on both their parts to assimilate the past into the present, to be modern, and to understand what it meant to be modern by attempting to understand how the present relates to the past. In literary terms, this involved a critical assessment of prevalent literary styles as well as a re-evaluation of those which had fallen from fashion. This is a key element in understanding just how relevant Muir’s early writings are in relation to the form of modernism which Orage embraced at the *New Age*, and it is probably best illustrated by an example of their shared concerns regarding the limitations of realism and the nature of representational art. As Robert Scholes summarizes in his ‘General Introduction to *The New Age* 1907-1922’:

<sup>119</sup> ‘Against the Wise’ in Muir (1924), p.218.

<sup>120</sup> *Freeman*, VII, (14/03/1923), pp.18-21 and Muir (1924), pp.80-93.

<sup>121</sup> ‘In Defense of New Truth’ (1921), *Freeman*, IV (19/10/1921), pp.130-131 and Muir (1924), p.213.

<sup>122</sup> *SF*, p.264.

‘the modernism of *The New Age* was not built upon a rejection of romanticism but on a re-examination of it [...] nor was it built on a rejection of realism, but on a reconsideration of it’.<sup>123</sup>

This reconsideration of realism was part of the larger discussion taking place within the magazine regarding the nature of artistic representation. Distinguishing between literature which forms a dynamic presentation of ideas and that which merely represents them, Orage demonstrates that this distinction can equally be applied to the journals in which such literature is discussed. In an entry from his long-running ‘Readers and Writers’ series dated 17 March 1921, Orage provides a brief survey of the current journals and magazines available concluding that *The New Statesman*, *The Spectator*, *The Saturday Review*, *Outlook* and *The Nation*, all form varying examples of the ‘representative’ journal, reflecting and ‘representing’ the tastes of their respective readers. *The New Witness*, edited by Belloc and Chesterton, by contrast, is placed alongside the *New Age*, being of the presentative form, albeit the narrowness of the contributions to the *New Witness* mean ‘it may still be said to be a personal journal’ and one which could not exist without its current editors.<sup>124</sup> In *The New Age Under Orage* (1967), Wallace Martin elaborates further on Orage’s proposition that the ‘representative’ periodical is ‘devoted solely to a representation of the interests of the public’, being simply the chronicles ‘of taste, fashion, and public opinion’.<sup>125</sup> Therefore, ‘Presentative’ periodicals must, to some extent, create the audience to which they appeal. As Martin identifies:

Orage deliberately attempted to make *The New Age* a presentative periodical which would mediate between specialized fields of knowledge and public understanding, and encourage a vital relationship between literary experimentation and the literary tradition..<sup>126</sup>

It is this forward-looking yet historically-referential approach which the best of Muir’s *New Age* writings reflect. An example of this perspective can be seen in his attack on modern realism in ‘We Moderns’ 16 Nov 1916 in which he lambasts modern realists for seeking to reproduce ‘life as lived’ instead of attempting to offer an interpretation of life. ‘In their attempt to simplify art, to understand it’, the realists have only served to deface its

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<sup>123</sup> Robert Scholes, ‘General Introduction to *The New Age* 1907-1922’. <[http://dl.lib.brown.edu/mjp/render.php?id=mjp.2005.00.001&view=mjp\\_object](http://dl.lib.brown.edu/mjp/render.php?id=mjp.2005.00.001&view=mjp_object)> (accessed 04/05/2010).

<sup>124</sup> ‘Readers and Writers’, *TNA*, Vol.28, No.20 (17/03/1921), pp.235-236.

<sup>125</sup> Martin (1967), pp.2-3. Cf. John Loe Strachey, *The Adventure of Living: a Subjective Autobiography* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1922), p.324.

<sup>126</sup> Martin (1967), p.3.

universal value; while Classical literature sought ‘the interpretation of life’ through symbolising its ‘deepest questions and enigmas’,<sup>127</sup> the realists, he argues, have sought only to represent the ordinariness of ordinary life. Muir’s comments anticipate the criticism of ‘realism for realism’s sake’ which Virginia Woolf discusses in her essay ‘Modern Novels’ (1919)<sup>128</sup> and in more detail in ‘Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown’ (1923),<sup>129</sup> as well as Katherine Mansfield’s criticism of the passivity of writers who ‘aim only at representing life’.<sup>130</sup>

What Muir and Orage sought was not the rejection of realism or representational art *per se* but that such conventions justify their continued usage; that they should allow readers to see the world continually from new perspectives and, in doing so, discover new truths (however temporary they may be); in short, to develop a new vision of life for a new age. This is where Muir’s *New Age* writings show their true modernist credentials, demonstrating an emerging young writer attempting to re-imagine an image of human life worth celebrating in literature and art, and challenging readers to do likewise. His challenge to his readers is not to be mere spectators, as Mansfield feared so many writers and readers had become, but to see life differently and make it different. As Muir comments, at the *New Age* he was far from being a solitary voice in this endeavour:

in these first years after the War, in spite of the disillusionment elsewhere, in spite of *Ulysses*, *Chrome Yellow* and *H. S. Mauberley* and *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, the circle which surrounded Orage still lived in an atmosphere of vast hopes.<sup>131</sup>

Many of the ‘vast hopes’ being expressed in the *New Age*, as diverse as they were, articulated, if not an actual faith in the future, then certainly a desire that the future should be very different from the recent past, and that contemporary literature, art and society should reflect that ambition. While the human consciousness may not have changed quite so radically or swiftly as Virginia Woolf proposed in ‘Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown’, there were certainly many, like those whose work appeared regularly in the *New Age*, who sought to hasten its evolution.

Despite having corresponded with Orage regularly for over six years, when Muir became his assistant in the autumn of 1919 he found that his working relationship with him

<sup>127</sup> ‘We Moderns’, *TNA*, Vol.20. No.3 (16/11/1916), pp.63-64.

<sup>128</sup> Virginia Woolf, ‘Modern Novels’ in *The Times Literary Supplement* (10/04/1919). See ‘Virginia Woolf: Unrecorded Times Literary Supplement Reviews’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol.38, No.1 (Spring 1992), pp.279-283.

<sup>129</sup> ‘Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown’ (1923), *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, Andrew McNeillie ed. (New York: Harcourt, 1988), pp.384-389.

<sup>130</sup> A.R. Orage, ‘Talks with Katherine Mansfield at Fontainebleau’, *The Century Magazine*, Vol.109 (Nov 1924). < [http://www.gurdjieff-bibliography.com/Current/KM\\_07\\_2006\\_02\\_ORAGE\\_Talks\\_with\\_KM.pdf](http://www.gurdjieff-bibliography.com/Current/KM_07_2006_02_ORAGE_Talks_with_KM.pdf) > (accessed 25/06/2011).

<sup>131</sup> *SF*, p.208.

was initially a little strained. Muir attributes this to his own desire not to let his admiration for Orage lead him into becoming one of his many disciples.<sup>132</sup> Clearly aware of just how much Orage and the *New Age* had informed his intellectual and literary outlook up to that point, Muir conceded that this awkwardness toward him possibly led him to ignore too much of the personal and literary advice that he was offered during the term of their working relationship. Although Muir's involvement with guild socialism had Orage's political and editorial endorsement, he successfully resisted Orage's attempts to train him to take over his weekly political and social summary, 'Notes of the Week', and instead managed to further his interests in contemporary drama, novels and poetry, which he was now reviewing on a regular basis for the *New Age*, *Athenaeum* and *The Scotsman*. Mencken, having written the 1920 introduction for the American publication of *We Moderns*, brought Muir's work to the attention of Van Wyck Brooks, literary editor of the recently formed *Freeman* magazine who commissioned Muir to provide regular articles (one or two a month) at rate of sixty dollars an article. With the promise of this additional regular money and following the advice of Janko Lavrin, a fellow *New Age* contributor and member of Orage's entourage, the Muirs undertook their first journey of discovery to Continental Europe in August 1921.

Informed chiefly by the prophetic-poetic philosophy of Nietzsche, the remnants of his Protestant upbringing, and the literary application of psychological and psychoanalytical theory, Muir's occasional light verse and substantial body of critical prose and journalism between 1913 and 1921 highlight his intense interest in the nature of time and its relation to human consciousness, both in the large-scale metaphysical sense but also on the microcosmic level, in the minutiae—the years, the months, the seconds—of our experience. Muir clearly felt that Nietzsche's revolutionary eternity and a Christian eschatological world-history were incompatible beliefs; viewing both the 'eternal recurrence' and historicized time as theories of temporal confinement that prevent access to the timeless freedom he believed the imagination was capable of achieving. During this period the number of direct references Muir makes to the soul are fewer than in his later writings because of his rejection of religious faith, but this is not an indication that he ever suspended belief in its existence or its value in the conceptualization of human life. The creative freedom which Muir sees constrained by our inability to re-imagine time (realism being one of its symptoms) is more than an intellectual freedom or a willed creative urge; it is a spiritual and inspirational communion with eternity, allowing the individual to imaginatively step outside of historicized time into the realm of the imagination proper.

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid., p.204.

This is the realm governed by the ‘mystical’ imagination’, the creative power Muir saw operating in Edith Sitwell’s poetry, in which ‘the entities she describes exist in another world, they are ideal or magical forms’ yet always ‘correspond in some way to reality and illuminate it’.<sup>133</sup> Likening Sitwell’s method to that of Blake, Muir cites examples of her rendering of the natural world in which he suggests the reader is invited to ‘see it anew’, as in her description of ‘Adder flames shrieking slow’ and ‘like a gold-barred tiger, shade/Leaps in the darkness’, or in ‘like the lovely light gazelles/Walking by deep water wells/Shadow past her mirrors fleet’.<sup>134</sup> Through temporal estrangement and the juxtaposition of unexpected images, Sitwell demonstrates how it is possible to step outside everyday reality, and as the distinctions between ‘time, space, causality vanish’ we are left with a ‘sense of magical freedom’.<sup>135</sup>

Returning to the discussion of creative freedom in *The Structure of the Novel* (1928), Muir remained insistent that despite the fact we cannot help but view reality ‘in terms of Time, Space, and Causality’, ‘the imagination desires to see the whole unity’.<sup>136</sup> The challenge for the artist is to escape from these confines and construct an image which could be held up against reality, an image that not only has a contemporary value but which also says something about the past and the future. In the spring of 1922 Muir felt for the first time able to fully appreciate this creative liberation from time, a freedom he would spend the rest of his life arguing for in his prose and articulating through his poetry.

Yet, he did not use this new-found psychological and artistic freedom as a way of escaping from his troubling past. Instead, he found himself empowered to engage with it, something which up to that point he had been unable to do. ‘The past is a living past, and past and present coexist’, Muir maintains, and through the imagination the past opens to us ‘as part of our life, a vast extension of our present’.<sup>137</sup> This opening up of the past into the present is a process which Muir began in Dresden in 1922 as he tentatively started developing his own *Chiffren* of images, symbols and literary techniques, some of which chime with Sitwell’s fusion of Romanticism, symbolism and surrealism which he admired, with the visionary quality of her poetry no doubt reflecting his own creative aspirations.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> ‘Edith Sitwell’ in Muir (1926), p.153.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.152-153.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p.157.

<sup>136</sup> Muir (1928), p.113.

<sup>137</sup> *The Estate of Poetry* (London: Hogarth, 1962), p.91.

<sup>138</sup> ‘This peculiar kind of imagination, mystical and romantic, is Miss Sitwell’s highest gift [...] There is an order of poetry—Blake and Rimbaud have adorned it—whose function is to show us the world in this way; and it is this order that Miss Sitwell’s poetry essentially belongs’. ‘Edith Sitwell’ in Muir (1926), pp.152-159.

At the age of 35, with the stability of a supportive marriage, bolstered by the therapeutic and creative aftermath of his psychotherapy, and having gained sufficient distance from his Orcadian youth and his painful adolescence in Glasgow, Muir, having spent so long immersed in the work of the present and the hopes of the future, began reclaiming the past.

## Chapter 5 Transition and Individuation: Prose and Poetry (1921-1926)

### Places and People (1921-1928)

Leaving London behind them with only the relative security of promised income from articles and reviews for the *Freeman* and the *New Age*, the Muirs left for Prague (via Hamburg and Berlin) on 31 August 1921. Paul Selver, translator, critic, and fellow *New Age* contributor, equipped Muir with a series of letters of introduction to various Czech writers, including Karel Čapek who, along with his brother Josef, became their cultural guides to the city, showering them with tickets for the eclectic programme of performances at the Vinohrady Theatre.

The Muirs were very much what Christianson defines as unburdened intellectual travellers,<sup>1</sup> and after orientating themselves within their surrounds they undertook Czech lessons, a language that proved something of a challenge to both of them.<sup>2</sup> A more significant acquisition for Muir, however, was his newly found sense of time, one which was not regulated by tram timetables nor punctuated by tea-breaks and factory horns. The only protracted periods of free time Muir had experienced as an adult were during periods of convalescence so it is of little wonder that his first tour of Europe proved to be such a liberating experience. It was not a holiday in the strictest sense but with only the occasional essay or review to compose he had time to immerse himself in the culture and daily life of the towns and cities they encountered. It also provided him with the opportunity to begin his intellectual and artistic struggle to reclaim a past that he had spent so long distancing himself from. After only a few months in Prague he gained enough creative energy and personal courage to begin drawing inspiration from his past, with 'Re-birth', Muir's first published poem under his own name, appearing in the *New Age* on 8 June 1922.<sup>3</sup>

To Muir, Prague was a city that radiated 'energy and confidence'<sup>4</sup> and his 'Impressions of Prague', published in the *Freeman* in August 1922, describe how 'it is a tonic to go to Prague and in the midst of confusion and hope to see order, or at any rate modified disorder, rising out of chaos'.<sup>5</sup> Muir is clearly talking about himself as much as describing the newly constituted Czechoslovakian capital and its people, and while Bohemia's chaotic struggles with religious oppression and its fight for self-determination

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<sup>1</sup> Christianson (2007), p.14.

<sup>2</sup> Willa Muir (1968), p.64.

<sup>3</sup> 'Ballad of Rebirth'. *First Poems* (1925), *CP*, pp.20-21.

<sup>4</sup> *SF*, p.220.

<sup>5</sup> 'Impressions of Prague', *Freeman*, V (August 1922), pp.510-512.

forms the focus of his historicizing in this article, his chief interest is in the broader idea of transition, cultural and psychological, collectively and individually.

In March 1922 the Muirs visited Dresden and immediately decided to move there. Arriving in the spring, they remained there until June when Willa began teaching at A.S. Neill's Summerhill School at Hellerau. An old friend from her university days, Neill had recently established his progressive international school in two wings of the Eurhythmics school at Hellerau, and the environment and atmosphere there were clearly congenial to Muir, as Willa recalls: 'I think Edwin had never been so carefree in his life. The burden of earning a living had taken wings and flown off his shoulders'.<sup>6</sup> While the Muirs felt that the quality of their life was getting better with every month, for their German friends and colleagues quite the opposite was the case. The massive cost of post-war reparations resulting from the Treaty of Versailles was causing crippling inflation and the accelerating devaluation of the German currency was having a considerable effect on the people around them. Helping some of their friends out financially as best as they could, they felt that as foreigners trading on the favourable rates for US dollars and Sterling, Germany was quickly becoming a place of guilt.<sup>7</sup> When John Holms, Muir's friend, who had been a particular source of encouragement to him during his last year in Glasgow, invited the Muirs to share a summer house with him and his wife Dorothy in Forte dei Marmi on the Italian Ligurian coast, the Muirs were offered a legitimate opportunity to leave Germany and continue their travels.

Stopping at Lake Garda on the journey to Forte dei Marmi in May 1923 Muir admitted to Willa that one of Neill's students had expressed her love for him shortly before he left Dresden. Gerda Krapp, along with another Hellerau student, had accompanied the Muirs on a walking holiday the previous month to Bad Elster. Muir suggested to Willa that he thought that he should return to Germany to be with her. After a few days of emotional turmoil, the Muirs continued on their way south resolved not to take each other for granted again. Muir omits all reference to this incident from his autobiography but from Willa's account it was obviously a deeply worrying occurrence so early in their marriage, although it would appear they discussed it only once afterward, many years later at Newbattle when Muir was writing *An Autobiography*.<sup>8</sup>

After spending the summer with the Holmeses the Muirs moved to Salzburg in October 1923. Muir had visited the annual Salzburg festival of music in August with the

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<sup>6</sup> Willa Muir (1968), p.75.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.79.

<sup>8</sup> In *Belonging* Willa Muir claims that it was never discussed again but as Christianson details, there was clearly some discussion about Muir's decision not to mention the incident in *An Autobiography*. See Christianson (2007), p.15.

composer and leading figure of the Scottish Renaissance movement F.G. Scott, a friend since his Glasgow years and the dedicatee of *Transition* (1926).<sup>9</sup> Muir was enthralled by the town and the surrounding countryside which forms the setting of his first novel, *The Marionette* (1927). Moving to Vienna for Christmas, the Muirs remained there until the following Easter when they received news that *The Freeman* was suspending publication. By this point Neill had moved his international school from Hellerau to Sonntagberg and prompted by Willa's request, invited them to stay at the school. After a few months at Sonntagberg Muir was contacted by Ben Huebsch, the publisher of the American edition of *Latitudes* (1924), with a request to translate three plays by Gerhart Hauptmann at one hundred dollars a play.<sup>10</sup> This windfall provided them with enough money to return to England in the summer of 1924 after Neill's school was forced to leave Austria, relocating initially to Lyme Regis then later to Suffolk. After six unsettled months in Montrose the Muirs took up residence at Penn, near High Wycombe in Buckinghamshire close to their friends Sydney and Violet Schiff with whom they had stayed on their return to England the previous year.

During the summer of 1925 Muir completed *Chorus of the Newly Dead* (1926) which was immediately accepted for publication by Leonard Woolf, appearing the following year. They remained in Penn until they left for Montrose in the October of 1925. By late February 1926 Muir had completed writing *Transition: Essays on Contemporary Literature* (1926) and the couple left Scotland for the artists' Mecca of St Tropez where they completed their translation of Lion Feuchtwanger's *Jud Süß* (1925)<sup>11</sup> and Muir began working on *The Marionette* (1927). By September they had tired of the melodramas of the 'free thinking' circle at St Tropez and moved along the coast to the quieter town of Menton where Muir completed his novel and the pair translated Feuchtwanger's *The Ugly Duchess* (1923), published by Huebsch in November 1927. They returned to England in the May of 1927, taking a cottage in Dormansland, Surrey. Their only child, Gavin (named after both Gavin Douglas and Gavin Henderson),<sup>12</sup> was born in October. Muir completed the *The Structure of the Novel* (1928) the following spring and immediately began work on *John Knox* (1929). In addition, they both worked on further translations of Feuchtwanger and Hauptmann to guarantee regular income.<sup>13</sup> Securing an unfurnished property in

<sup>9</sup> 'At Salzburg' [festival review], *TNA*, Vol.33, No.4 (23/08/23), pp.231-32.

<sup>10</sup> *Indipohdi, The White Saviour, and A Winter Ballad* in Gerhart Hauptmann, *The Dramatic Works*, Vol.8 (New York: B.W. Heusch, 1924). See also Gerhart Hauptmann, *The Island of the Great Mother*, Willa Muir and Edwin Muir trs. (New York: B.W. Heusch, 1925).

<sup>11</sup> Lion Feuchtwanger, *Jew Süß*, Willa Muir and Edwin Muir trs. (London: Martin Secker, 1926).

<sup>12</sup> Willa Muir (1968), p.144.

<sup>13</sup> Lion Feuchtwanger, *Two Anglo-Saxon Plays: The Oil Islands and Warren Hastings*, Willa and Edwin Muir trs. (New York: B.W. Heusch, 1929). Gerhart Hauptmann, *Veland*, Edwin Muir tr. *The Dramatic Works*, Vol.9 (London: Martin Secker, 1929). *Veland* is the only translation that is accredited solely to Muir.

Crowborough, East Sussex during the summer of 1929 the Muirs were finally reunited with their furniture and possessions and set about forming a home which would allow them to settle for a few years after a decade of near perpetual travelling.

Given the amount of distance he had travelled and the level of displacement and re-organisation he witnessed others enduring at this time, in addition to his own traumatic adjustment to modern urban life as a youth, it is perhaps unsurprising that two of the main themes to emerge from Muir's writing during this period are that of transition and individuation. As his critical prose establishes many of the ideas and themes he carries forward into his poetry, it is worth discussing his essays first before turning to his creative writing to identify where and how these ideas resurface and are represented in more imaginative ways.

### ***Latitudes* (1924) and *Transition* (1926)**

The collection of essays which constitute *Latitudes* (1924) offers an overview of Muir's major achievements and interests as an essayist up to 1923. With the volume's earliest essay, 'A Note on Mr Conrad', dating back to September 1919<sup>14</sup> and the latest, 'Robert Burns' from May 1923,<sup>15</sup> the collection reveals Muir's steady emergence as a significant literary critic of the day, and one very much aware of the nature of his own critical methods and orientation. The deliberate arrangement of the essays in *Latitudes* also suggests something of the order of Muir's spheres of interest. Beginning with three essays on Scottish literature and its writers, 'Robert Burns', 'A Note on the Scottish Ballads'<sup>16</sup> and 'George Douglas',<sup>17</sup> he moves outward to discuss four nineteenth century European writers (Conrad, Dostoyevsky, Ibsen and Nietzsche) whose influence, he argues, informed much contemporary thought and writing. The collection then widens its range further, offering a series of essays on more general and abstract topics, including 'In Defense of New Truths',<sup>18</sup> 'Beyond the Absolute',<sup>19</sup> and 'On the Universe',<sup>20</sup> concluding with the reproduction of his tripartite 'Impressions of Prague' first published in the *Freeman* in 1922.

There is a discernible antithetical attitude adopted in many of the *Latitudes* essays, although it is more restrained than in many of *New Age* essays. There are also two which reveal something of the nature of Muir's unorthodox spirituality. 'Beyond the Absolute' and 'On the Universe' are markedly different in tone from the other essays, which are

<sup>14</sup> 'A Note on Mr Conrad', *The New Statesman*, Vol.13 (13/09/1919), pp.590-592.

<sup>15</sup> 'Robert Burns', *The Freeman*, Vol.7 (09/05/1923), pp.202-204.

<sup>16</sup> 'A Note on the Scottish Ballads', *The Freeman*, Vol.6 (17/01/1923), pp.441-444.

<sup>17</sup> 'George Douglas', *The Freeman*, Vol.7 (04/04/1923), pp.80-83.

<sup>18</sup> 'In Defense of New Truths', *The Freeman*, Vol.4 (27/10/1921), pp.130-131.

<sup>19</sup> 'Beyond the Absolute', *The Freeman*, Vol.4 (21/12/1921), pp.345-346.

<sup>20</sup> 'On the Universe', *The Freeman*, Vol.5 (28/06/1922), pp.368-369.

invariably 'Against' his chosen subject matter, and both discuss human 'life' as a manifestation of an 'eternal'<sup>21</sup> force. In arguing that 'we want a little chaos in our order'<sup>22</sup> and that 'the future is the absolute expression of chaos',<sup>23</sup> Muir is clearly echoing Nietzsche's belief in the creative value of chaos, but moreover he is initiating dialogue concerning the nature of rationalism and its relation to existential freedom, a debate which is rearticulated poetically in *Chorus of the Newly Dead* (1926) and *Variations on a Time Theme* (1934) and is returned to again in *The Labyrinth* (1949), reaching its resolution in *One Foot in Eden* (1956).

Given the thoroughly representative nature of *Latitudes*, it is both fitting and simultaneously regrettable that the volume closes with seventy two Nietzschean style aphorisms, previously published in the *Freeman* as 'Reflections and Conjectures'. Like the 'Earnest Trifles' that appeared in the *New Age* in January 1918, these aphorisms show Muir once again donning his Edward Moore mask. One of the shortest of these witticisms perhaps best illustrates the redundancy of his use of this literary form, with his suggestion that 'to guess is more difficult than to reason'<sup>24</sup> sounding a particularly unconvincing posture given the many well reasoned and insightful points that the volume's essays raise. This was the final outing for Muir's Nietzschean persona.

What is particularly interesting about the arrangement of *Latitudes* is the way that literary matters (Scottish and European) are dealt with first before the broader social, philosophical and aesthetic points are raised. This approach signals the direction which Muir takes in his third volume of criticism, *Transition: Essays on Contemporary Literature* (1926) in which he surveys the present literary currents in order to uncover something of the prevalent spirit of the age. In the opening essay, 'The Zeit Geist', Muir focuses his attention on formulating a definition of what it means to be modern, describing how a writer acts as an orator for his own imagination while also voicing the concerns of the age. Defining the *zeitgeist* as 'the mass of suggestion, desire and suffering of the time, which differentiates one literary period from another',<sup>25</sup> the essay goes on to describe the psychological effects of literary influence in terms which prefigure that of Bloom's near-pathological 'anxiety of influence'.<sup>26</sup> 'About the spirit of the age it is almost impossible to make an incontestable assertion' argues Muir, but yet subjectively he argues 'we feel it as a thing pressing in upon us, a force against which we can never be prepared'.<sup>27</sup> This idea of

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<sup>21</sup> Muir (1924), p.249.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p.250

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.257-258.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p.313.

<sup>25</sup> Muir (1924), p.12.

<sup>26</sup> Bloom (1997), pp.14, 19-45.

<sup>27</sup> Muir (1926), pp.3-4.

time as an overwhelming force is explored to a near tautological level in *Variations on a Time Theme* (1934), but here Muir also views time as the positive and dynamic driving force behind the artistic creative impulse:

it is he who wrestles with the age who finally justifies both it and himself; for if it oppresses the writer the spirit of the age has also something of incalculable value to give him, which only by it can be given. It not only presents him with a new resistance, unlike that presented by any other period; it gives him a new inspiration, once the resistance has been vitally pierced.<sup>28</sup>

The age is effectively a spirit which struggles to find expression through the creative individual while simultaneously being the force through which the individual must struggle to find creative expression. There is a deterministic element to this analysis which is very much in keeping with how Muir deals with time in his poetry; time seems to exist as an entity with its own will to life, an ever-present force that must be fought and yet can never be overcome. Time appears to need man as much as man needs time.

Next Muir sets out to provide a critical judgement of the main writers who appear to be consciously wrestling against their time, those who ‘seem to be influencing the development of literature’<sup>29</sup> the most. The task of the modern critic, Muir contends, must be to ‘deal with things of the present’; however, ever conscious of his temporal proximity to his subject, he argues that he cannot offer a ‘true judgment’ of any contemporary writer because such a ‘valuation can only come when this age itself is judged by a later generation’.<sup>30</sup> Instead Muir, running the risk of intentional fallacy, offers a series of interpretations based on writers’ intentions, suggesting what part the writer in question may be seen to play in the overall story of the age, or at least, suggesting what artistic tendencies the writer is expressing and how they reflect or contradict those of his contemporaries.

The preface and introductory essay establish the *zeitgeist* as Muir’s central interest in this volume. To simplify his logic and move beyond the Romantic notion of the spirit of the age as an ineffable force, Muir proposes that the current age can be considered as consisting of only two important forms of writer: the fashionable and the escapist, the former being characterized by writers like Aldous Huxley and the latter by James Joyce. The simplicity of this duality belies and to some degree misrepresents the subtle dynamic which Muir argues exist between the dominant strains of modernist writing, and his reliance on Nietzschean rhetoric serves partially to undermine the complexity of his theorizing.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p.7.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p.ix.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, pp.vii-viii.

Nevertheless, he astutely identifies some of the key modernists who have since become the very touchstones of literary modernism. Joyce is applauded for his presenting ‘our modern world in all its intellectual manifestations as well in as in its full banality’ in *Ulysses* (1922) and for recognizing the incredible significance that time plays in the symbolic rendering of the lived moment:

in that unit of time which begins with something recalling birth and ends in something recalling death: in a day. *Ulysses* is a complete course, a set banquet, of the modern consciousness. And being that no other unit could have served; the author could not have got into the record of a year what he has got into the record of a day.<sup>31</sup>

It is the complete sense of temporal unity which Joyce achieves in *Ulysses* which so impressed Muir, a unity whose simplicity allows it to have a universal resonance with a single day serving as an analogy for every day, all of human time. By Joyce’s design, Leopold Bloom’s ironic epic journey home through Dublin allows him to become a ‘type, and a succession of types through history, and a multiplication of types in space; one person in himself and many more persons in time and in the minds of men’.<sup>32</sup> Muir goes on to suggest that Joyce successfully uncovered, not just one, but a series of Jungian archetypes. The prostitutes (Dublin’s Sirens), he proposes ‘are rather like figures in folklore which mankind continually creates, or rather carries with it; creations and types in the dream in which sensual humanity lives, and which to humanity is the visible world’.<sup>33</sup> These archetypes form the bridge between the timeless, universal realm and the sensual, ever changing domain of the visible world. They are of the order of forms which Muir attempts to conjure up for himself in *Chorus of the Newly Dead*. Like Joyce, when Muir turned instead to characters from Classical literature he was rewarded more fruitfully, as can be seen in the ‘Ballad of Hector in Hades’ from *First Poems*, the Mystic’s monologue from *Chorus of the Newly Dead*, and in ‘The Return of Odysseus’ in *The Narrow Place*.

Although attuned to the significance of Joyce’s work, Muir did not initially comprehend the importance of Eliot’s poetry despite being highly receptive to his critical prose. As Margery McCulloch notes,<sup>34</sup> there are significant points of similarity between Muir’s search for humanist values in his interwar criticism and those developed by Eliot in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ (1919), as well the similarities between Eliot’s understanding of the ‘historical sense’<sup>35</sup> and his own. Yet Muir’s appreciation of Eliot as a

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<sup>31</sup> Muir (1926), p.24. Muir’s first appraisal of *Ulysses* appeared as ‘A Note on *Ulysses*’, *New Republic*, Vol.41 (10/12/1924), pp.4-6.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p.24.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p.33.

<sup>34</sup> McCulloch (1993), p.74. See also Muir (1926), p.133.

<sup>35</sup> T.S. Eliot, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ (1919), in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber, 1934), p.34

poet is far more reserved. Indeed, it took both poets many years for either of them to truly recognise the virtues and importance of the other's verse. However, despite his criticism of Eliot's 'very narrow' poetic furrow, the attitudes toward modern life he identifies in Eliot (along with Aldous Huxley) appear in many of his own poems from the period, namely the 'disdain for life, loneliness of soul, the sardonic gesture, the mysterious sorrow' of being.<sup>36</sup> 'They have been called the spirit of the age', Muir claims, 'and it is impossible to take them seriously'.<sup>37</sup>

By 1926 Muir had certainly managed to overcome the sardonic gesturing of Edward Moore, yet both the disdain for contemporary life and spiritual isolation feature repeatedly as issues in Muir's poetry during the 1920s and 1930s, albeit in Muir's case they are attitudes informed more by the poetry of Heine and Hölderlin than that of Tennyson or Pound. With regard to the 'mysterious sorrow', nowhere does Muir articulate this better than through the monologues he gives to his newly dead and the estranged inhabitants of the surreal timescape of *Variations on a Time Theme*.

In reality, what Muir is targeting with his criticism of Eliot is the mode of representation rather than what is actually being articulated, what he defines as Eliot's technique of deliberately creating a distance between 'art and reality', between 'literature and life'.<sup>38</sup> The mythological quality he finds in Joyce's *Ulysses* is absent from Eliot's poetry, and Muir's strong attraction to mythology, would mean that Joyce's stylistic innovations work toward ends that Muir appreciated, rather than Eliot's innovations which were of an order Muir did not value. That said, Muir recognized that *The Waste Land* (1922) had an undeniable contemporary resonance, 'as we read *The Waste Land* modern London, though not deliberately evoked, seems to rise up around us like a wall'.<sup>39</sup> The city of *The Waste Land* is in a state of constant transition and metamorphosis yet its changes are sterile. The city is suffocatingly real and yet 'Unreal' (207), it is as if the city were rising up against the inhabitants who try to live there, forming a barrier outside which nature, like the rain, waits but cannot enter. Rather than achieving individuation the Wastelanders can only act out ill-fitting roles; they have become pieces on a great urban chessboard, being moved without autonomy, responding without truly feeling.

It is a bleak social vision and one which Muir explores at length in *Variations on a Time Theme*, albeit he abstracts the landscape even further beyond identification, but issues relating to stasis and transition and the struggle for individuation are clearly present in *First Poems*, most noticeably in poems which long for an earlier time such as 'Childhood'

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<sup>36</sup> Muir (1926), p.141.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p.142.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p.137.

<sup>39</sup> Muir (1926), p.137.

and 'The Lost Land' or in the meditations on change itself like 'Anatomy' and 'October at Hellbrunn', and most morbidly in 'The Enchanted Prince'.

A century before Muir published his collection of essays on the *zeitgeist*, William Hazlitt compiled his essays on contemporary writing, *The Spirit of the Age or Contemporary Portraits* (1825), in which a similar desire to signify an age by its creative output is manifest. Among the prose 'portraits' are Lord Byron, Sir Walter Scott and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, from whom Hazlitt attempts to forge a contemporary canon which engages 'enough abroad into the universality'<sup>40</sup> of human experience to act as a representation of the age. The belief that they were experiencing a period of significant social and creative transition provides the impetus for both Muir and Hazlitt, and behind their discussions there exists a 'concept of the spirit of the age [...] as a tension between two polar opposites or as an imbalance'.<sup>41</sup> This binary view of cultural utterance is not a reductive formula which simplifies the complex relationship between literary art and society, but rather offers a methodology through which art can be seen as a proactive, as well as a reactive, process. One such model available for adaptation to Muir is Nietzsche's Apollonian and Dionysian duality,<sup>42</sup> yet despite the impact of Nietzschean concepts on Muir, he chooses to formulate his own duality using Lawrence and Joyce as his exemplars.

While Hazlitt is explicit about his critical engagement with the Horatian conceit of *ut pictura poesis*, Muir does not engage with the critical appraisal of visual art, but instead, uses his own verse to imaginatively illustrate the contemporary themes finding expression in the literary art of the day. For Muir, the experience of working and travelling through Central and Mediterranean Europe between 1919 and 1927 provided his first exposure to a diverse range of languages and cultures, all experienced within the ideologically-charged climate of the inter-war years. In contrast to what he perceived as the allegorical 'timeless landscape'<sup>43</sup> of his Orcadian childhood, concerns regarding the rapidly changing ways of life which he encountered during this time surface repeatedly in his verse and fiction, but they have their first collective voicing in *First Poems*. These experiences were also reflected in the existential *agôn* which he encountered in the work Franz Kafka and in the loss of social values depicted in Hermann Broch's novels. To explore these issues, Muir uses archetypal images, characters and settings in his poetry to juxtapose the cyclic nature

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<sup>40</sup> William Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age or Contemporary Portraits* (London: Henry Colburn, 1825), p.28.

<sup>41</sup> Roy Park, *Hazlitt and the Spirit of the Age: Abstraction and Critical Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p.207.

<sup>42</sup> The Apollonian/Dionysian (plastic/non-plastic art) binary employed in Muir's criticism further demonstrates the Nietzschean influence on his work. See Muir's comments on 'the sin of intellectualism' and the 'history of the Dionysian' in 'We Moderns', *TNA*, Vol.21, No.6(06/06/1917), pp.138-139.

<sup>43</sup> *SF*, p.25.

of human affairs, what he defines as the ‘story’, with the greater linear narrative of time, the macrocosmic ‘fable’.

### ***First Poems (1924) and Chorus of the Newly Dead (1926)***

‘Childhood’<sup>44</sup> sets the tone for the *First Poems*. It opens with a sense that time, its duration and its effects, is the main action of the poem. The solitary figure of a boy, retrospectively described by his older self, is placed high in the landscape above his family house and the sea that surrounds their island home. The opening depiction is one of fixity, the house is ‘securely bound’ (2) and the sea, the ‘changing sound’, is momentarily ‘still’ (3). Then the shadow of change looms over the landscape, the boy remembers the ‘unseen straits’ (8) that lie between the headlands, the fast flowing waters that lead to ‘new shores’ (9). Demonstrating the irresistible encroachment of change a ship appears moving slowly over the ‘sunken glass’ (15) of the sound, like a clock’s hand progressing steadily and surely across the face of the water, until ‘time seemed finished ere the ship passed by’ (16). The poem closes with the portentous shadows of evening, cast by the sleeping stones and upright grass, looming around him as he hears his mother calling him home. Simple and beautifully poignant, Muir makes a resounding statement about the twofold nature of the transience of human life, its beauty and its tragedy. The security of the family home seems so temporary and fragile against the forces of change outside it, the movement of time in the natural world and in the cycle of human affairs. Yet the home is the universal home, the refuge of childhood, a place of security against time, the place in which we remain children. This is the archetype of home that Muir spends so much time depicting in the *The Story and the Fable*, and the archetypal parents of ‘Childhood’ are held in a timeless union with the child despite the uncertain future that looms from every side. The central image of the poem is cast from the great universal template of idealized family life.

‘The Lost Land’<sup>45</sup> reads like an extended version of ‘Childhood’ and certainly the lamenting quality is similarly attained through the juxtaposition of stasis and movement. However, there is great deal more detail, as if Muir were trying to engage fully with every object of perception in turn rather than describing the overall sensation of them. Lines such as these:

towering cliffs hem in the thin-tongued strait,  
And far below like battling dragons wait  
The serpent-fangéd caves which gnash the sea (25-27)

demonstrate how Muir can carry a metaphor to near breaking point in search of the underlying epic drama which he perceives behind the visible surface. This poem also

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<sup>44</sup> ‘Childhood’, *Nation and Athenaeum*, Vol.34 (13/10/1923), p.54. *CP*, p.3.

<sup>45</sup> ‘The Lost Land’, *Scottish Nation*, Vol.2 (04/12/1923), p.15. *CP*, pp.3-4.

makes reference to 'the watching mound' (33), the viewpoint from which the persona is able to see how the world is quickly changing around him. This high ground is clearly inspired by the 'castle' on Wyre which he describes in his autobiographies and which also forms the setting of 'Childhood'. This is where he played as a child with his sister among the piles of old stones that were the ruins of the Norse chieftain Kolbein Hríga's settlement and where he spent many summer evenings 'looking across the sound at the dark, hilly island of Rousay'.<sup>46</sup> In contrast to the hazy dreamlike progression of images in 'Childhood', 'The Lost Land' has a phantasmagorical quality. If the former is informed by Wordsworth's vision of childhood, then the latter is certainly closer in its gothic tone to Heine's 'Dream Pictures'. McCulloch also identifies the influence of Goethe's 'Kennst du das Land?',<sup>47</sup> and there is certainly a sense of Romantic *Sehnsucht* in the poem's lamenting exclamations: 'Alas! I do not know/This place' (17-18), 'this is not my haven; oft before/I have stood here and wept for the other shore' (19-20).

These poems highlight how Muir's longing for the past can manifest itself in either an elegiac pensiveness or dramatic terror. 'Remembrance'<sup>48</sup> highlights this dramatic aspect, again drawing heavily on Heine and Hölderlin, with the sea once more acting as a signifier of distance and separation. The poem is best summarized by its third stanza which also introduces the postlapsarian theme that forms such an important feature of Muir's poetry of estrangement:

And all is changed, the shining fields, the host  
Of shapes who were myself years long ago.  
'Tis these who live! And I am but a ghost  
Exiled from their sole light and jealous glow. (9-12)

The persona is not just exiled from the past; he is exiled from the living, forced to travel alone the 'yawning distances o'er which we go/On our frail paths of sundering destiny' (27-28). The kind of living death Muir depicts, while highly resonant of his German literary sources, is also an echo from the Scottish ballads which at this time he was becoming increasingly interested in. The use of the wraith persona is a device he carries forward into *Chorus of the Newly Dead*, and the conceit of the exiled journey (with its connotations of both the expulsion from Eden and the judgement of Cain) is similarly reflected in 'Anatomy'<sup>49</sup> where the persona's 'feet walk to a hidden place/Where no path issues, my eyes range/Through immobility of space' (1-3). Death is likened to fruit ripening within the blood, 'a black and secret bud/Which breaks with every breath' (7-8).

<sup>46</sup> *SF*, p.13. See Edwin Muir, 'Revisiting Orkney' (1956), p.97.

<sup>47</sup> McCulloch (1993), p.5.

<sup>48</sup> 'Remembrance', *Nation and Athenaeum*, Vol.35 (06/09/1924), p.692. *CP*, p.5.

<sup>49</sup> *CP*, p.13.

This highly gothic and moribund poem ends with the metaphysical conceit of the heart beating ‘like Eternity in Time’ (12).

An otherwise less than remarkable poem, the closing line touches on a matter that Muir explores frequently in his poetry, namely the notion that eternity can be experienced from within time. This is the transcendental meaning that Willa Muir proposes he spent so much of life searching for;<sup>50</sup> the belief that it is possible to escape from the constraints of human time (corporeal existence) and experience a sense of the interconnectedness of time and space, a sense of eternity.

The capitalization of ‘Eternity’ and ‘Time’ throughout his poetry is a conscious device that Muir uses to indicate that he is dealing with these terms as philosophical concepts rather than their everyday usage. The same can be said of his use of ‘End and Beginning’ (20) in ‘Logos’<sup>51</sup>, one of Muir’s many metaphysical journeying poems. With a similarly dramatic and mythical scale as ‘The Lost Land’, the poem is a surreal dreamscape of relentless change. The ‘I’ of the poem is a disembodied voice, the logos of the title, who is endlessly travelling without defined purpose and is weary of the journey. The poem closes with the image of humanity rising from pregnant darkness into morning’s glow to be confronted with the ‘immense eternal pathway’ (40) of the ocean as it spreads before them. A creation myth, the poem is about the unindividuated mass of early human beings and their relation to the natural world from which they grew. It is a view of humanity at the moment that we took to the sea for the first, the moment when mankind breached the boundary of the land, the ‘end’ of one phase of our existence and ‘beginning’ of another.

In ‘Betrayal’,<sup>52</sup> ‘Beauty’ (23) is captured by time in the traps it has set for her. The traditional subject matter of the poem and its use of anachronistic phrases and words, such as ‘For still he sits’ (25) and ‘gaoler’ (15), demonstrate how Muir, despite his intense engagement with his subject, relies too heavily on the strength of the initial metaphor of captivity and as a result the sense of betrayal he is trying to create is lost beneath a metamorphic series of images. The poem has none of the sense of movement and tension that Sorley MacLean evokes in ‘Dogs and Wolves’ (1943),<sup>53</sup> which MacLean states was composed entirely in single night’s ‘troubled sleep’.<sup>54</sup> MacLean’s ‘mild mad dogs of poetry,/wolves in chase of beauty’ (19-20) are engaged in an eternal ‘hunt without halt, without respite’ (24) pursuing the ‘white deer’ (22) through a landscape that is both

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<sup>50</sup> Willa Muir (1968), pp.46-47.

<sup>51</sup> *CP*, p.14.

<sup>52</sup> *CP*, p.12.

<sup>53</sup> Sorley MacLean, ‘Còin is Madaidhean-allaidh’ [Dogs and Wolves], *Poems for Eimhir*, Christopher Whyte ed. (Glasgow: ASLS, 2002), p.84.

<sup>54</sup> Gifford et al. (2002), p.663.

recognisable and allegorical.<sup>55</sup> MacLean's poem is as much indebted to Petrarch's *Canzoniere* (in particular 'Life Runs Away')<sup>56</sup> and Shakespeare's 'Sonnet LX' (1609) as Muir's 'Betrayal' is, but instead of promoting the significance of art as a preserver of beauty, Muir focuses on the Ovidian element of this traditional conceit, that is without any sense of preservation. In 'Betrayal', nothing can outlast 'unpitying Time' (28), it is literally the last word.

Muir withdrew fifteen of the twenty four poems of *First Poems* (1925) from the second volume of *Collected Poems* (1960), yet that this poem survived his stringent self-editing is testimony to the significance of its subject matter and its importance to his poetic output as a whole. The same can be said of the inclusion of 'Autumn in Prague'<sup>57</sup> and 'October at Hellbrunn',<sup>58</sup> which are highly unusual by Muir's standard in that they are rooted within real geographical locations and allude to biographic details in a direct and less abstract manner. Both poems are meditations on stillness and read like the poet's attempt to capture moments by freezing them in time. In 'Autumn in Prague' the ground is frozen to preserve the 'ripe fruits' (1) fallen from their trees, and 'the great sea' is rendered as 'still' (21) as the 'blue air' that 'hangs' (20) above it. The whole 'earth, like a god,/far withdrawn/Lies asleep' (22-24). Such stillness in the natural world is impossible; what Muir is articulating is his desire to capture an eternal moment, to fall asleep as the world stills and to wake and find it unchanged.

'October at Hellbrunn' has a very similar somnolent tone but the focus here is on auditory stillness, the 'patient trees' (5) stand still 'Each in a single and divided sleep/While few sad leaves fall heedless with no sound' (7). The 'marble cherubs' (9) 'stand more still' (10) as the 'silent afternoon draws in' (13) and the silence is finally broken in the last line as 'a hidden fountain flings its sound' (16). Again, this poem shows Muir clinging to a moment, an experience of stillness and quiet, signified by images and objects drawn from world around him.

One of the most successful and powerful poems of *First Poems* explores Muir's childhood fascination with 'Horses'.<sup>59</sup> What this poem captures so vividly is the sense of awe and fear which the ethereal horses evoke. They appear like 'wild and strange' (3) creatures from another dimension, echoes of our 'childish' (5) past and portents of an 'apocalyptic' (22) future. The horses are endowed with 'magic' (4) and are 'glowing with mysterious fire' (19), yet they are also highly visceral and corporeal animals. The most

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<sup>55</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, p.664.

<sup>56</sup> Francesco Petrarch, 'Sonnet 272', *Canzoniere* (1374), in *Selections from the Canzoniere and Other Works*, Mark Musa tr. (Oxford: OUP, 1985), p.65.

<sup>57</sup> *CP*, p.16.

<sup>58</sup> 'At Hellbrunn – October', *Nation and Athenaeum*, Vol.34 (16/02/1924), p.701. *CP*, pp.9-10.

<sup>59</sup> *Nation and Athenaeum*, Vol.35 (31/05/1924), p.293. *CP*, pp.5-6. See *SF*, pp.22-23.

striking couplet demonstrates how the awesome power of the horses seems simultaneously organic and mechanical, and it also sees Muir return to one of his favourite metaphysical conceits, that of static movement:

Their hooves like pistons in an ancient mill  
Move up and down, yet seem as standing still (7-8)

As the horses dissolve into distance, the persona's vision of reality *sub specie aeternitatis* fades with them and he is left pining for his 'dread country crystalline' (26).

Muir revisits this supernatural equine subject matter in 'The Riders', section 'II' of *Variations on a Time Theme* (1934), of which he states that the horses, 'as I see them, are an image of human time, the invisible body of humanity on which we ride for a little while', the poem as a whole being 'an attempt to suggest those isolated moments of pure vision which have a feeling of timelessness (and are often called timeless)'.<sup>60</sup> The melancholic tone of both poems is of very different mood to the positivity of 'The Horses' in *One Foot in Eden* (1956), his final collection. Instead of a lament for the fleeting transience of human life or revelatory experience, 'The Horses' offers a vision of renewal against a post-apocalyptic landscape, enacting the moment when humanity re-discovers its innate relationship with the natural world through the ancient horses which gift their service to mankind.

Despite their differences of tone, in all three poems the horses represent an unindividuated collective; on one level they are humanity viewed from outside 'human time' but they are also a force of nature endowed with a supernatural form because of their seemingly timeless existence. In this sense they belong to the world of the archetype, but their corporeality, their awesome and fear-inducing physicality, places them in the less image-populated world of the Scottish ballads, where, as Muir argues the 'terrific simplicity and intensity' of experience has more importance than the images which result from conscious reflection.<sup>61</sup>

By contrast, 'The Enchanted Prince', 'An Ancient Song' and 'Where the Trees Grow Bare on The High Hills'<sup>62</sup> see Muir exploring themes far closer to the English ballads he discusses in 'A Note on the Scottish Ballads', as well as nodding in the direction of the more macabre aspects of Heine's gothic lyrics.<sup>63</sup> The six ballads which form something of an appendix to *First Poems* demonstrate Muir's most conscious attempt to capture something of the sense of movement, pace and lyrical energy of the ballad form. Yet despite his praise of the Scottish ballads for their ability to express 'what human beings

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<sup>60</sup> Murphy (1938), pp.168-169.

<sup>61</sup> 'A Note on the Scottish Ballads', Muir (1924), pp.18-19.

<sup>62</sup> *CP*, pp.8-9, 12, & 15 respectively.

<sup>63</sup> See Muir (1924), pp.19-21.

have felt from the beginning of time and must feel until time ends [...] and touch the very bounds of passion and of life',<sup>64</sup> it is only in 'The Ballad of the Flood' that he successfully manages to use the form in a truly imaginative way. Drawing on the biblical account of Noah's ark, the Hebraic patriarch, by Muir's depiction, is a justified Calvinist commending the unelected to the waters for their disobedience. Muir's Noah is a wrathful zealot and the full intensity of his inhumanity is captured in his passionate condemnation of the antediluvian world:

'To hell the haill warld gangs this day,  
But and my folk sae gude,  
Sail on, sail on till Ararat  
Lifts up aboon the flood.' (105-108)

Unusually for Muir, the poem is written in Scots, albeit a rather generic form of Lowlands Scots rather than his own Orcadian Insular variety. As McCulloch proposes,<sup>65</sup> it is unfortunate that Muir did not choose to include 'The Ballad of Black Douglas'<sup>66</sup> in *First Poems* or any subsequent collection as it is arguably the most successful of his Scots lyrical poems and captures 'the inevitability of the movement from beginning to end' which he describes in ballads such as 'Patrick Spens' and 'Clerk Saunders'.<sup>67</sup> The closing stanzas of Muir's retelling of the Black Douglas story restates the central chivalric theme of the narrative while drawing on a series of phrases and echoes from elsewhere in the poem:

Black Douglas went beyond the sea,  
His lance within his hand,  
But he never cam' wi' his gude men  
Into the Holy Land.  
He never saw Jerusalem's  
Green shaws and flowery braes,  
His king and he lie side by side  
In a far lanely place. (45-52)

Despite the effective elliptical progression of the story and the dramatic tension which the poem achieves, the use of Scots, as this example shows, appears in places inconsistent and unimaginative. This may well be a consequence of Muir's belief that contemporary Scots had become an inferior literary language by comparison to the Scots of the ballads. For Muir, modern Scots language lacked creative integrity; having been so long influenced by the literary dominance of English, he argues that the writers of pre-

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p.18.

<sup>65</sup> McCulloch (1993), p.3

<sup>66</sup> 'The Ballad of the Black Douglas', *Scottish Chapbook*, Vol.1 (July 1923), pp.344-345. *CP*, pp.280-282.

<sup>67</sup> Muir (1924), p.25.

Enlightenment Scots were the last to escape the elaborations and abstractions brought on by the age of reason. A language that reflected ‘a burning contemplation of things which take men beyond time [...] on supreme issues’, with the ballads being the chief vehicle through which this language expressed a unified vision in which ‘life and death have the greatness and simplicity of things comprehended in a tremendous spacious horizon’.<sup>68</sup>

His enthusiastic appreciation for the magnanimity of the ballads and the integrity of the language of their composition led Muir not only to reject the literary worth of modern Scots but to go one step further and express scepticism about the ability of modern Scottish writers to use English to great ends:

No writer can write great English who is not born an English writer and in England [...] it is improbable that Scotland will produce any writer of English of the first rank, or at least that she will do so until her tradition of English is as common, as unforced and unschooled as if it were her native tongue.<sup>69</sup>

This is a portent of *Scott and Scotland* (1936), in which Muir pursues a similar psychological line of argument as that proposed by G. Gregory Smith in his *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (1919). It is a pessimistic view of the position of the Scottish writer and must be recognised as an articulation of his own sense of estrangement from the language of the ballads and contemporary Lowland Scots. Muir’s heavily nostalgic view of the Scots ballads ignores the courtly poetry and high culture which existed alongside them. Muir chooses instead to focus on the idea that the Scottish ballads reflect a world akin to that depicted in Homer’s epic poetry, being essentially corporeal in nature yet driven by infinitely complex systems of human relations, and expressing ‘that great quality, that magnanimity about life, inadequately called philosophic’.<sup>70</sup>

‘A Note on the Scottish Ballads’, reveals something of the challenge that being neither a Scottish lowlander nor an English writer posed Muir when it came to seeking a tradition against which he could differentiate his own work. This problem became much less of an issue in his criticism and poetry after the late 1930s by which point, as Willa Muir suggests, he had ‘adopted English as his language and preferred to graft his poetry on to the great tree of English literature’.<sup>71</sup> Muir was unable to draw on the Orcadian and Norse traditions as George Mackay Brown did so productively and imaginatively through his career in the next generation. This must partly be due to the fact that Muir perceived himself to be an exile from Orkney; if mainland Scotland was his second country, he seemed reconciled to the fact that access to his first could only be gained through his

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<sup>68</sup> Muir (1924), pp.28-29.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p.15.

<sup>70</sup> Muir (1924), p.30.

<sup>71</sup> Willa Muir (1968), pp.115-16.

dreams and memories. This is perhaps why the dreamlike atmosphere and the symbolic elements of the ballads appealed so much to Muir, and as his own Scots poems suggest, the ballads provided him with an important model of how the ‘supreme issues’ of life and death, of time and mankind’s relation to it, could be approached obliquely yet meaningfully, and in a way that was effectively future-proof.

That Muir was working on a critical study of the Scottish ballads at the time of his death is a testimony to how long they continued to excite his imagination, and although he never undertook another ballad adaptation after those published in *First Poems*, the spirit of magnanimity and the ‘contemplation of things which take men beyond time’ which inspired them is manifest throughout his poetry. It is in this spirit that Muir committed himself to shaping *Chorus of the Newly Dead* (1926), his second volume of verse.

Although sections of the poem were published independently prior to its full composition, the various choruses and monologues of the poem are arranged into an interwoven pattern of monologues and responses. Stylistically Muir is taking his main cue from Classical Greek tragedy where the function of the chorus is to offer comment and summary. In addition, the personae of the poem are confined within death in a place highly resonant with the Classical underworld. Yet there is also a deeply deterministic tone which accentuates as the poem develops, with the closing prophesy of the day when the ‘saviours will arise’ (387) and ‘Time will cease’ (393) reinforcing the central Christian eschatological theme. The fusion of Christian and Classical references is most strikingly achieved in two stanzas from the Mystic’s monologue which also see Muir returning to his preoccupation with movement and stasis:

That stationary country where  
 Achilles drives and Hector runs,  
 Making a movement in the air  
 Forever, under all the suns!  
 And that ghastly eternity  
 Cut by the bridge where journeys Christ  
 On endless arcs pacing the sea,  
 Time turning with his solar tryst! (354-361)

There is no sense of anachronism about the proximity of Troy and the Sea of Galilee in this passage as distance and duration become compressed in order that time is seen as a continuous singularity. The cosmic vision of the ‘braided paths of Heaven and Hell’ (344), of the interconnectedness of being, has parallels with that delivered in William Blake’s ‘Auguries of Innocence’, a universal comprehension which offers the opportunity to ‘Hold infinity in the palm of your hand/And Eternity in an hour’ (1-2).<sup>72</sup> Indeed, Blake may well

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<sup>72</sup> William Blake, ‘Auguries of Innocence’, *The Portable Blake*, Alfred Kazin ed. (New York: Viking, 1974), p.150.

have been the model for Muir's Mystic, a further clue residing in the Mystic's reference to nature's 'lineaments' (334), a possible allusion to Blake's 'The Question Answer'd' in which the 'lineaments of gratified desire' (2, 4) are posited as the answer to the question of the origin of human desire.<sup>73</sup> In 'The Meaning of Romanticism'<sup>74</sup> Muir describes Blake and Hölderlin as 'mystics as well as romantics',<sup>75</sup> and argues that their branch of Romantic art points toward a 'transcendental life'; 'a pathos not of men living on the earth but of fallen spirits striving to climb back into a light which had been lost in a universal calamity'.<sup>76</sup>

There is no way back into the light for Muir's newly dead nor is there the promise of eternal sleep. Instead there is only the 'infinite play' (395) in which they must remain players forever, each confined to their allotted roles: Idiot, Beggar, Coward, Harlot, Poet, Hero, and Mystic. The archetypes seem trapped in limbo, exiled from both life and death, waiting eternally for the final judgement which has already been reached but yet will never be served. This conceit of exclusion enables Muir to pursue the greater existential themes of expulsion and isolation, and as the concluding lines of the Idiot's chorus reveal, the expulsion from Eden is an important pretext for these themes.

He did not know the place, the alien throng;  
The light was strange to him, bound in awe  
Of a once-broken long-forgotten law. (79-81)

This 'once-broken long-forgotten law' is God's original covenant with Adam and Eve but it is also the law of nature which allows sentient creatures to recognise, and to be recognised by, other members of its species. The Idiot cannot help but 'fear what others loved' (72) and his lack of empathy with his fellow humans renders him beyond their sympathy. Effectively punished by God through his visions, his unearthly revelations have meant that he has 'suffered more than human wrong' (78) for reading 'clouds like signs' (70): the Idiot is a visionary who lives in fear and ridicule because he cannot harness his visions into artistic or religious expression.

Both the Beggar and the Coward are outcasts, 'hounded' (138) from one place to the next; the Harlot is met only by barred doorways so must spend her hours 'on the brazen street' (195). The Poet is the real questioning figure of the poem and asks why we have such 'a stubborn love for passing things' (244) before lamenting the people and the places, the beauty and the loves he has known. The Hero is a dragon-slayer, a vengeful figure

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid, p.135.

<sup>74</sup> 'The Meaning of Romanticism', *The Freeman*, Vol.8 (26/12/1923), pp.368-370, continued in (9/01/1924), pp.416-418 and (16/01/1924), pp.443-444. In *Chapman*, Vol.9, No.6(Aberdeen, 1986), pp.1-10.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, p.4

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, p.2.

fuelled by chivalry and petty wrath. An early rendering of the central conceit of 'The Combat', the Hero's chorus captures concisely the cyclical nature of the eternal hunt:

The phantom quarry sped through Time and Space  
Is here; the hunt is ended in this place.  
We scent the trail of blood. Time's deer is slain.  
The hunter and the hunted rise again. (320-323)

Muir captures a sense of endless movement and unresolvable tension, more akin to the atmosphere of MacLean's 'Dogs and Wolves' than 'Betrayal' but Muir's poem achieves an anagogical, cosmic level beyond the reach of MacLean's allegory. The Mystic's chorus draws the poem to a close as the 'exiled dead' (395) are left to their 'unimaginable doom' (400) while across the quietening earth 'dreams walk where flesh has died' (386) and the last of evening's light casts 'long-shadowed towers' (388) as time slows to its end.

The poem is what Muir describes in a letter to Sydney Schiff as an attempt to 'get a certain pathos of distance in contemplating human life': 'The atmosphere I am aiming at is one of mystery and wonder at the life of the earth [...] an assumption of infinite and incalculable powers behind the visible drama'.<sup>77</sup> As is the case with so many of his writings which draw heavily on personal experience, Muir is attempting to distance himself from his subject so that he may deal with it objectively. Many of the sections of this poem were written during Muir's great emotional and creative re-awakening during the spring and summer of 1922, and the central themes of the poem, that of expulsion and isolation, can be read as the product of Muir's coming to terms with the traumas of the Glasgow years. The archetypal figures are, as Muir defines them, neither 'in Heaven or in Hell, but a dubious place where the bewilderment of the change has not been lost'.<sup>78</sup> It is important that they are conscious of the transition and separation which they have endured so that they may be seen attempting to understand and overcome their fate. Through the different voices Muir explores and elaborates on his experience of being exiled, of being moved by 'infinite and incalculable powers'. This is perhaps why he wanted the poem to 'end with a feeling of gratification';<sup>79</sup> because he wanted it to reflect his own attempt to come to terms with the 'bewilderment' he had endured.

Though profoundly abstract, the *Chorus of the Newly Dead* is also deeply personal, yet the use of archetypes, rather than a series of more mimetically drawn characters, reduces the reader's ability to sympathize with any of them directly and restricts our attempts to engage with the nuances of their individual psychologies. Although potentially counterproductive, this is a reflection of Muir's own ambition to comment on the universal

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<sup>77</sup> Letter to Sydney Schiff (07/05/1924). *SL*, p.37.

<sup>78</sup> *SL*, p.37.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p.37.

nature of incomprehensible change without differentiating between the individuals who experience it. Despite their apparent isolation, the newly dead are united, both in their bewilderment at their shared fate and by their ever-recurring natures.

*First Poems* and *Chorus of the Newly Dead* are significant collections in their entirety not just because they establish some of the central themes that dominate Muir's later and more critically appreciated work,<sup>80</sup> but because they skilfully and imaginatively serve to illustrate the anxieties which plagued his youth and young adulthood as well as demonstrating how he was able to creatively work through ideas that he was unable to explore further in prose, ideas that were born of personal experience yet hold a universal resonance. Although subject to bouts of heightened inspiration, such as experienced at Prague and Dresden, Muir was seldom overcome with poetic material. His approach from the outset was craftsman-like, continually editing, rewriting and putting aside fragments and pieces to be continued later. This is why there are so many echoed phrases, themes, and ideas throughout his work; his poetry forms a continuity of transitional positions, a series of differing perspectives from which to obtain a range of different yet complementary views. This is most explicitly developed in *Chorus of the Newly Dead*, but *First Poems* also offers a rich array of different viewpoints from which to appraise his chosen subjects. If there is one problem with this approach it is that of distance; in attempting to gain the highest ground, Muir sometimes appears to moving too far from his subject, particularly when that subject is himself. However, this abstract quasi-autobiographical style was also Muir's defence against over-sentimentality and self-reflexive subjectivity. Through figuratively taking a couple of steps back he was able to convey a great deal of biographical material into his poetry without over-burdening the reader with emotive rhetoric or a sense that the persona can always be readily identified as the poet.

What Muir captures in *Latitudes* and *Transition* is a sense of the dynamism of the period, of the uncertainty and the optimism. In these essays he suggests how the age can be seen individuating from that which went before it, and how the writings of Joyce, Huxley, Woolf, Eliot, and Lawrence all signpost new and untraveled ways branching from the roads that had been laid by Ibsen, Conrad, Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche. This backward-looking forward thinking is carried into *First Poems* and *Chorus of the Newly Dead* which see Muir exploring some deeply personal subjects (displacement, exclusion, separation, and isolation) albeit in a somewhat abstract way, and all against the background of his attempt to reconcile his existential understanding that human life is a state of perpetual temporal transition with his belief that eternity exists within time.

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<sup>80</sup> See McCulloch (1993), p.2.

The view that ‘Time is the realm of imperfection and Eternity that of perfection’<sup>81</sup> was an unconvincing formula to Muir. Yet he accepted the Platonic perspective that ‘something more real’ exists behind the visible world and attempted to marry this with the Romantic ‘transcendental vision’ of Blake, Heine and Hölderlin<sup>82</sup> whom he sees as exponents of ‘an immense hope for a new way of life [...] a state partly to be grasped in this world, but only to be realised in another’.<sup>83</sup> This double-vision can give Muir’s poetry an ethereal quality, a sense of separation and detachment which is sometimes at odds with the implied intimacy of the experience being conveyed. This quality is accentuated by his oblique technique which often results in the experience or situation being described serving as an analogy for a more universal or less easily defined experience. Yet despite these abstractions and difficulties, there is a consistency and determination about Muir’s commitment to the exploration of our understanding of time, a pursuit of knowledge which is continued through his three novels and forms the core chapter of *The Structure of the Novel*.

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<sup>81</sup> ‘The Meaning of Romanticism’ (1923), p.5.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p.7.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.6-7.

## Chapter 6

### The Three Novels and Other Writings (1927-32)

#### *The Structure of the Novel (1928)*

Following on from the discussion of contemporary fiction in *Transition*, *The Structure of the Novel* (1928) seeks to uncover what Muir defines as the ‘principles of the structure of the novel’ in order to ‘postulate a general principle’ regarding how novels come to be organised around the basic components of narrative and characterization.<sup>1</sup> Having already completed his first novel, *The Marionette* (1927), in writing *The Structure of the Novel* Muir was attempting to truly get inside the craft of fiction writing, to develop an overview of the prevalent distinctions in form, and to formulate a theory regarding the development of narratives. In this undertaking, Muir is once again navigating his way through his subject as he writes and although the arrangement of the chapters and the flow of the argument aspire to present a logical progression, in reality, the discussions are far less organized and their conclusions do not formulate one overarching ‘general principle’ so much as provide a series of general observations about the differing uses of characterization, plot and action, in an array of varying novels. If there is one predominant set of findings in Muir’s study then it would be his observations regarding what he views as the importance of understanding how the representation and manipulation of time and space function as structural devices within the novel. As Muir concludes:

seeing life in time, or seeing it in space, the writer can work out the relations, the dynamic values, of his plot satisfactorily and to an end, and transform his vague and contingent sense of life into a positive image, an imaginative judgement.<sup>2</sup>

The perspective that any artistic articulation should present a fully formed image of life is central to his approach in his study of the novel, and for Muir finding a way to offer comment on the dynamic relationship that exists between time and space forms an important component of that image-making process. At the heart of his enquiry is the chapter devoted to discussion of the differences in time and space in the dramatic novel and the character novel, exemplified by *Wuthering Heights* and *The Return of the Native*, and *Tom Jones* and *Vanity Fair* respectively. Muir’s main ‘generalization’ is that

the imaginative world of the dramatic novel is in Time, the imaginative world of the character novel in Space. [...] The values of the character novel are social, in other words; the values of the dramatic novel individual or universal,

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<sup>1</sup> Muir (1928), p.7.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.150.

as we choose to regard them. On the one hand we see characters living in a society, on the other figures moving from a beginning to an end. These two types of the novel are neither opposites, then, nor in any important sense complements of each other; they are rather two distinct modes of seeing life: in Time, personally, and in Space, socially.<sup>3</sup>

This is the key distinction between time as a personal realm of experience and space as a social one, as described in relation to the novel forms outlined, which Muir takes forward through the rest of his study. An understanding of the relationship between these two different ways of seeing life are crucial to what Muir views as the underlying ‘limitations of our vision of the world’, limitations against which the creative imagination must struggle. The imagination may strive ‘to see the whole unity, or an image of it’, yet, as no artistic utterance can contravene the limits of ‘Time, Space and Causality’, the resulting articulation is always restricted by the same laws that govern the reality outside the text.<sup>4</sup>

What Muir is proposing is a form of creative and existential confinement in which the imagination is limited by universal truths whose laws cannot be transgressed, even in fiction. Yet this is neither a defence of realist art nor literature as escapism; what Muir is proposing, as he does so often in *We Moderns*, is that art must not only relate to life but contribute to it; rather than merely representing the ‘the cycle of birth and growth, death and birth again’,<sup>5</sup> it must offer an ‘imaginative judgement’<sup>6</sup> about the nature of human life, a judgement that offers more than merely a reiteration of the effects of ‘time, space and causality’. It was the sort of judgements he found in *Ulysses* and in *Mrs Dalloway*, novels which Muir heralds as ‘devious returns to the pure imaginative convention’.<sup>7</sup> While Woolf’s novel forms ‘the most skilful spatial picture of life in contemporary fiction’,<sup>8</sup> Joyce’s dextrous manipulation of time is described as creating ‘a sort of space-time’<sup>9</sup> in which ‘time remains stationary through each scene until Mr Joyce is ready to go on to the next’.<sup>10</sup> Alongside *Ulysses*, Muir identifies Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* as another convention-defining contribution to the character novel, arguing that because Proust ‘never succeeded in separating his work from himself’ his novels are not only the results of his imagination but a commentary on the processes of the imagination as well.<sup>11</sup> ‘What we are

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<sup>3</sup> Muir (1928), pp.62-63.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.113.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.112.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.130.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.133.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.132.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p.128.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.129.

<sup>11</sup> Muir (1928), p.125.

shown, therefore, is not merely a number of novels, but the mind which conceives them [...and] its struggle with them'.<sup>12</sup>

Aside from their shared creative engagement with the exactitudes of time and memory, Muir like Proust, repeatedly makes use of autobiographical content in his novels, and while none of Muir's efforts would be considered 'a novel about a novelist writing a novel',<sup>13</sup> they nevertheless form evidence of his own struggle to find suitable forms to convey his ideas. As well as offering a survey of prevalent structural considerations of the novel from the perspective of a critic, *The Structure of the Novel* also constitutes an attempt to understand how the underlying principles of time, space and causality govern the arrangement of narratives. It is written from the viewpoint of a writer striving to fully comprehend the nature of those underlying principles while also endeavouring to discover something of the greater yet less tangible reality he believed lay beyond them.

### ***The Marionette* (1927)**

When Muir began writing his study of the novel he had been working as a literary reviewer for over eight years. As a literary critic for the *Nation* magazine this meant regularly reviewing multiple volumes for its monthly columns, and between August 1924 and October 1927 Muir provided over seventy reviews for the magazine not including the additional essays on individual topics and writers. By the autumn of 1927 when he began writing *The Structure of the Novel*, Muir was thoroughly immersed in the world of the novel and his poetic output at this time also reflects this, with only two new poems published between 1926 and 1928,<sup>14</sup> and with only a further four in the following four years. Five of the poems from this period, with the addition of 'The Field of the Potter', are included in *Six Poems* (1932), a very limited edition of hand printed volumes published by Samson Press.<sup>15</sup>

Muir suggests that *The Marionette* is 'less a novel than a sort of metaphysical or symbolical tragedy, and at the same time a perfectly straightforward tale',<sup>16</sup> and yet despite its highly inventive elements, like *The Three Brothers* (1931) and *Poor Tom* (1932) which followed it, aspects of the novel are heavily informed by biographic subject matter, particularly those episodes relating to childhood which form the opening and most vivid

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp125-126.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p.126.

<sup>14</sup> 'Trance', *Saturday Review*, CXLIV (23/07/1927), p.130. *Journeys and Places* (1937) as 'The Enchanted Knight', *CP*, p.81. 'Tristram Crazed', *Atlantic Monthly*, CXLI (May 1928), pp.627-628. Muir (1937) (minus one quatrain) as 'Tristram's Journey', *CP*, pp.70-72.

<sup>15</sup> See *CP*, p.321 and Mellow (1970), pp.23-24 & 75-79. Muir dedicated *J&P* to Flora Grierson and Joan Shelmerdine of the Samson Press, detailing his gratitude and his regret regarding the fire at the press which claimed so much of their stock (including most the of 90 copies of *Six Poems*). Muir (1937), p.vii.

<sup>16</sup> Letter to B.W. Huesbch (10/11/1926). *SL*, p.58.

chapters of *The Story and The Fable*. A sympathetic and engaging narrative concerning the troubled development of a teenage boy with learning difficulties and the strained relationship he shares with his grief-stricken widower father, *The Marionette* also forms a celebration of the sights and sounds of Salzburg as well as foregrounding its vibrant folk art tradition. Having accompanied F.G. Scott to the yearly music festival in August 1923, Muir was immediately captivated by Salzburg and the novel reworks Muir's own sense of wonder into both the appreciation of the natural world and crippling fear of the human society which Hans, the novel's fourteen-year-old protagonist, experiences. Depicting the confusion and isolation that Hans's intellectual and emotional impairments cause him, the novel demonstrates how he is trapped inside an endless childhood which effectively places him outside the collective experience of time and space which the novel's other characters share.

Unable to overcome his childish fixations and irrational fears, and plagued by an overactive imagination, Hans's disabilities define the limits of his experience, inhibiting his psychological growth and excluding him from full social integration. As the narrative develops his interior world becomes increasingly more fantastic, and fuelled by his father's well-meaning though disastrously ill-judged pedagogy, Hans struggles to maintain the puppet-show reality he constructs for himself. Ultimately a form of empathy is found between father and son at the novel's close, but only after they have managed to break through the self-constructed reality in which the other has been living. Because of the symbolic level that Muir establishes, there is a distinct otherworldliness about Hans's sensual interactions with the natural world, a sense of estrangement which is furthered through the descriptions of the puppet-world fantasies which Hans becomes immersed in. Yet the two tragic psychological dramas at the centre of the story (Hans's autistic-like condition and Martin's suppressed grief and guilt) ground the action of the story very much in this world. It is as straightforward a tale as any which invites various forms of symbolic interpretation and deals with such weighty themes can be.

In relation to the definitions formulated in *The Structure of the Novel*, *The Marionette* complies with that of the character novel in that it draws attention to the 'contrast between appearance and reality',<sup>17</sup> with the blurring of the distinction between the two being a major theme of the novel, introduced through the dolls, puppetry, and the transformative power of Hans's Faust costume. However, the novel's reliance upon psychological characterization and motivation to direct the plot, and its accelerating pace toward a final equilibrium sees it comply even more closely with Muir's description of the dramatic novel whose 'imaginative world' is concerned with the movement through time

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<sup>17</sup> Muir (1928), p.47.

rather than space, a literary form which he associates with the tradition of dramatic tragedy.<sup>18</sup> The opening tragedy which provides the context for the story is the death of Hans's mother during childbirth, an event which leaves Hans motherless and locks his father, Martin, into a cycle of grief and guilt. Coupled with the discovery of Hans's disability early in childhood, the result is that Martin's life is defined by a past he has yet to come to terms with. *The Marionette* also reflects the spatial-temporal relations of the dramatic novel in that its 'Space is more or less given, and the action is built up in Time', with the bulk of the action of the novel confined primarily to the family house and garden. Hans and Martin's walks through the town to the Kapuziner Berg and their visits to Salzburg's Marionette Theatre serve to further outline the significance of the home as a source of the drama.

As Hans's obsession with the marionettes of the puppet theatre intensifies, Martin erroneously believes his identification with the fantasy world of the puppets could offer a breakthrough for Hans:

The marionettes, he thought, might be a means of leading him back into the actual world. If he could show so much sense in ordering an imaginary life, why should he not show it in the real world as well?<sup>19</sup>

However, after the puppet theatre closes for the season and Martin has a Faust suit made for Hans, the boundary between reality and fantasy becomes increasingly less defined as Hans starts imagining that their home has a corresponding existence in the puppet world, and his attempts to live out his interior world in the space around him further undermine Martin's hope:

Looking at him from the mirror was another Hans, who seemed to be trying by signs to show him something. This other Hans must live in another house, in a distant place. Perhaps Martin knew where it was, but there were no roads which could take one there. Yet if he could reach it he knew that he himself would be this other Hans.<sup>20</sup>

As the action of the novel reaches its height, in a fit of anger and desperation Hans symbolically crucifies his favourite marionette Gretchen, and in doing so, discovers the unreality of the puppet world and, by consequence, the disquieting reality of his own existence, a reality he is no longer able to escape in his imagination. Hans's resulting breakdown and subsequent recovery leads Martin and Hans into a more positive and accepting relationship. This resolution is rather swift given the pace of the action that precedes it but it certainly signals effectively that Muir has said all that he wishes to say

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<sup>18</sup> Muir (1928), p.149.

<sup>19</sup> *TM*, ch.7.

<sup>20</sup> *TM*, ch.12.

about Hans's anagnorisis. As the psychological drama is brought to a close their social and spatial existence opens up again and the narration accelerates forward in time to a point where Hans has become 'less afraid of people than he used to be' and the closing vignette is of the pair 'tramping the less frequented roads near Salzburg [...] through long association father and son have come to resemble each other in their gestures and ways of speech'.<sup>21</sup> The stasis of their timeless world has ended: Martin has rediscovered his enthusiasm for life and has learned to accept Hans for who he is while Hans has reached a restricted form of individuated adulthood, tending the gardens in which he once played as a child.

### ***The Three Brothers (1931)***

From stasis and isolation brought on by grief and disability to the fervent tumult of living in an age of dynamic transition, *The Three Brothers* continues the theme of psycho-emotional family relations and explores generational discontinuity and sibling rivalry against the backdrop of North East Fife during the Scottish Reformation. The novel opens with David Blackadder (the youngest of the three brothers and the novel's central figure) hearing the news of the recent murder of Cardinal David Beaton. Murdered by a storming mob prior to the siege of St Andrews Castle in 1546, Beaton's demise is retold through the wrath persona in *The Tragedie of the Cardinall* (1547) by the sixteenth-century poet and dramatist David Lyndsay. In Lyndsay's poem, Beaton describes how his unbridled ambition for wealth and power led to his downfall: 'upwarde I did ascende' (47), 'Syne in the dust dounge down so dulefullie' (273).<sup>22</sup> It is not the reason for Beaton's death that interests the young David Blackadder, it is the fact that he could be killed while seemingly safe in his castle, and his father explains, even the strongest hold has its weakness: 'If you go round the corner of the castle what should you come to but another gate, a wee thing that ye would hardly notice, a wee, wicked-looking, wee gate'.<sup>23</sup> This story forms the backdrop of 'The Castle'<sup>24</sup> in which a 'wicked wicket gate' (19) forms the entrance through which the 'enemy' (3) gains access.

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<sup>21</sup> *TM*, ch.15. This scene forms something of an enactment of Wordsworth's conceit that 'The Child is father of the Man' (7) from 'My Heart Leaps Up When I Behold' (1802). Through his friendship with John Holms, Muir became interested in Wordsworth's 'theory of childhood'. See *SF*, pp.214-215.

<sup>22</sup> David Lyndsay, *The Tragedie of the Cardinall*, in *Selected Poems*, Janet Hadley-Williams ed. (Glasgow: ASLS, 2000), pp.112-127.

<sup>23</sup> *TTB*, bk.1, ch.1.

<sup>24</sup> *The Listener* XXXIV (04/01/1945), p.12. *The Voyage* (1946), *CP*, p.128.

Despite the historical setting of the novel, it does not readily fit with the definition of the historical novel offered in *The Structure of the Novel*, as McCulloch demonstrates.<sup>25</sup> Instead, Muir's tale of the intertwined lives of the Blackadder brothers contains significant elements of the period novel and the dramatic novel. The period novel, Muir contends, concerns itself wholly with 'a society at a particular stage of transition, and characters which are only true in so far as they are representative of that society'.<sup>26</sup> With their mother's Catholic faith representing the old Scottish societal order in decline, Archie, and his elder brother Sandy (until his deathbed repudiation) are orators for Knox's new creed. David's sympathies reside with the Anabaptists, whose ideas he comes into contact with through Ellen Livingstone and her father. Ellen's subsequent death at the hands of a former suitor is the result of Archie's covert relationship with her and establishes the theme of betrayal and injustice which overshadows the third of the novel's three 'books'. The ideology-charged atmosphere of the novel certainly depicts Scottish society during a particularly dynamic stage of transition as would be in keeping with the period novel. Yet, Muir's characters are intended to reflect something more universal about the nature of sibling relations, an intention which takes the narrative back into the realm of the dramatic novel with its focus on the interior and the psychological. The overall effect is that the novel has aspects of both the dramatic and the period novel form but its chief successes are certainly drawn from the former rather than the latter.

A similar desire to see how the psychological interior impacts on the social, on both the personal and the collective level, is evident in *John Knox: A Portrait of a Calvinist* (1929). Muir's warts-and-all portrait of Knox constitutes something of an inverse hagiography, and in addition to being a response to his childhood reading of Howie's *Scots Worthies*, it offers a critique of what he views as Knox's lasting legacy on Scottish culture, foreshadowing the extended and predominately bleak exploration of Scottish society and literature expounded in *Scott and Scotland* (1936). In a letter to John Buchan soon after its publication, Muir acknowledged his criticism of the volume's inadequate appendices and thanked him for being the first to recognize his intent to portray Knox as a history-defining figure: 'I am very grateful, in particular, for your saying that I leave Knox a great figure, for as much as we dislike Knox that seems to be the end of the matter'.<sup>27</sup> Writing to Sydney Schiff on the same subject the following month, Muir offers further insight into the significance which he attaches to Knox:

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<sup>25</sup> McCulloch (1993), p25.

<sup>26</sup> Muir (1928), p.117.

<sup>27</sup> Letter to Sydney Schiff (28/06/29). *SL*, pp.65-66.

The book should have a general interest, I think, but it was more written for the purpose of making a breach in the enormous reverence in which Knox has been and is still held in Scotland, a reverence which I had to fight with too in my early days (so I really feel quite strongly about it) and which has done and is doing a great deal of harm.<sup>28</sup>

The volume's summative appendix on 'Knox and Scotland' provides his central charge against Knox:

How could the country have avoided its fate of becoming for over a century an object-lesson in savage provincialism? [...] What Knox really did was to rob Scotland of all the benefits of the Renaissance. Scotland never enjoyed these as England did, and no doubt the lack of that immense advantage has had a permanent effect. It can be felt, I imagine, even at the present day.<sup>29</sup>

By Muir's reckoning, Knox is an awesome historical figure whose impact resonates through the collective consciousness of Scottish society, its transcendent influence extending through contemporary life and into Scotland's future. The hinterland of Muir's theorizing, however, remains an in-depth psychological portrait of the Scottish reformer which seeks to reveal the motivating factors 'that transformed a man so timid and apprehensive into a heroic figure', factors whose source he traces back to Calvin's 'City of God' in Geneva where he discovered the inner resolve 'that finally turned him into the marvellous instrument which changed the fate of Scotland' and forged his 'cruel and terrible' will, shaping him into 'perhaps the most heroic and astonishing spectacle in all Scottish history'.<sup>30</sup>

Comparing his cultural criticism with his novels, Butter proposes that 'Muir is able to reflect intelligently about the Scottish past, but not to recreate it', arguing that behind the historical theme of *The Three Brothers* he was more 'deeply involved' in 'the private one of the relationship of the Blackadder brothers'.<sup>31</sup> This relationship is the device through which Muir shows David's development through the stages of individuation and integration. There is doubtless an autobiographical aspect of this which relates to Muir's early adulthood, with the deaths of the mother and Sandy in the novel relating to the traumatic and premature deaths of his own father, mother and two older brothers. The themes of sibling rivalry, betrayal, and bereavement is returned to in Muir's last novel, *Poor Tom*, and both stories form explicit attempts to engage with the central question as to why, if God exists and we are in possession of an immortal soul, humans endure so much suffering through time. The provisional acceptance which David reaches after having

<sup>28</sup> Letter to Sydney Schiff (08/07/29). *SL*, pp.66-68.

<sup>29</sup> Muir (1929), p.309.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.301-302.

<sup>31</sup> Butter (1962), p.42.

watched both his mother and oldest brother die (and having been betrayed by Archie's sexual conquest of Ellen leading to her murder) is that humanity is incapable of reaching an understanding of the true nature of life and death because we cannot comprehend time from anything other than a human point of view. Meditating on the Calvinist justification for the existence of a wrathful God which Sandy and Archie employ in their quasi-theological debates, David reaches an understanding about humanity's inability to see time from anywhere except from within it:

How many myriads have died by plague, earthquake, famine and tempest since the first man and woman brought forth the first child to be a comfort to them and an heir to their guilt? And how many more millions—unless the chain of generation be broken—will die by fire, by the sword, by disease, by accident, by their own hands, to the farthest bounds of time? And thinking of this, suddenly I imagined that I was back at Falsyth, a little boy lying on the braes and looking out to the sea beyond St. Andrews. Then methought that to Him the full round of Time was nothing more than that round of the sea; and next that, as from the Lomond Hills to that small boundary, all is steadfast and familiar, so must Time be to Him, Who contemplates it from eternity; and that there in the self-same moment, nay, for ever, He has sight of Eden and Adam and Eve unfallen, and His own people in captivity in Egypt and Babylon, and Christ in the ox's stall, and Christ on the Cross, eternally suffering and eternally dying; and at the same moment all the generations which have risen and fallen since then, like waves rising and falling, yet not like waves but like mountain ranges, for they are stationary: everlasting forms on this island of Time, eternal images in the retina of His eye.<sup>32</sup>

David's vision of 'Eternity in Time' (12) is reminiscent of the expansive vista offered in 'Anatomy' and the static timescape of 'Autumn in Prague' from *First Poems*, with the depiction of the child looking wistfully out to sea echoing the opening image of 'Childhood' (1-4), an image which in turn finds its way into the opening chapter of *The Story and the Fable*.<sup>33</sup> After various crises of faith, David becomes reconciled to the belief that the answers he seeks lie beyond his immediate comprehension and this acceptance leads to a newfound comfort and a faith founded on awe rather than fear. In his vision, time is seen fulfilling its own end while eternity forms the totality of all time and space, an absolute unity which can only be appreciated from outside time, from a God's eye view:

I saw that all mankind, yes that the very world and the stars and the sun, hasten irrevocably towards their end, where all labour and suffering and joy are consummated. We see, I thought, but a glimpse here and there, an act of love or of treachery, and the generations advancing and waxing and failing; but to His eye, Who sees all, Adam innocent in Eden, and Christ crucified and arisen, and the last Judgment Day, and the lion and the lamb resting side by side, these are but grains of eternal dust, single grains in a whole which we cannot

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<sup>32</sup> *TTB*, bk.3, ch.5.

<sup>33</sup> See *SF*, p.13.

imagine, for it can only be revealed in the fullness of futurity. Yet to Him, I thought, all is already finished, and this present moment is not more visible to Him than the Judgment Day and the accomplishment of all things.<sup>34</sup>

This acceptance allows him to return to his father's farm to make peace with his past before turning his thoughts toward England, Europe and the future.

David's going forth may not have the resounding commitment to 'forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race' that Stephen Dedalus musters at the close of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916),<sup>35</sup> nor is there any sense of ironic distance. Yet, through David's synthesis of revelation and resignation, Muir illustrates just how deeply unsatisfying such a suspension of enquiry would be to someone who strives for genuine spiritual and metaphysical insight. After David's initial glimpse of eternity, his doubt returns and he remains troubled by the question

what comfort remains with us who travel unceasingly and end our pilgrimage in the ground, in some hidden nook of the earth where no agency shall ever reach us except Thy trump blown at the Last Day? And how many generations after us will travel the same road, what hosts upon hosts, and end as infinitely short of the mark?<sup>36</sup>

David's vision of eternity and the Last Judgment leave him with a deep sense of despair at the injustice of being created imperfect only then to be punished for being judged imperfect, and the sheer inhumanity of the suffering that so many generations must endure along the way. It is true that *Variations on a Time Theme* echoes these concerns through a series of powerful images and with a great deal more complexity, as the next chapter will detail. However, the simplicity and directness of David's questioning achieves a resonant pathos that Muir's more abstract imagery and analogies do not always attain. Just as the silhouette of the boy on the hillside looking out to sea is drawn directly from his childhood experience, David's anxieties and speculations can equally be seen as a manifestation of Muir's own search for transcendental meaning in the cycle of human life, the 'burning wheel of generation, which is ever self-consumed';<sup>37</sup> a search that is continued, again against a background of family dramas and traumas, in *Poor Tom* (1932), his most heavily biographical, and arguably most significant, third and final novel.

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<sup>34</sup> *TTB*, bk.3, ch.5.

<sup>35</sup> James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Penguin, 1996), p.288.

<sup>36</sup> *TTB*, bk.3, ch.5.

<sup>37</sup> *TTB*, bk.3, ch.5.

***Poor Tom (1932)***

Willa Muir comments that the sixteenth-century setting of *The Three Brothers* was another of Muir's creative attempts to gain 'distance' on his 'personal emotions', the result being a novel that was 'not quite convincing nor was there enough romantic glamour in it to draw public interest'.<sup>38</sup> The setting of *Poor Tom*, by contrast, forms a 'contemporary study of life in Glasgow' which draws heavily on his 'own family experiences'.<sup>39</sup> Muir, however, was keen to suggest that he managed to achieve a degree of distance between his depiction of Glaswegian family life in the novel and that of his own adolescence and young adulthood. In a letter to his sister Elizabeth, composed and enclosed with a copy of the novel at the time of its publication, Muir advises her not to

look for any living model (or dead one either) for any of the characters: that would be completely wrong, for they are all synthetic, made up of scraps taken from all sorts of nooks and corners, and mostly pure imagination, like the main situation. The book is unfortunately a very lugubrious one; but I had to get it out of my system; and I look upon it only as the first third of a whole, the second of which I look upon as noisily comic—if I can bring it off.<sup>40</sup>

The 'noisily comic' second instalment never appeared, and this is possibly because through *Poor Tom* he was able to get out of his system all that he wanted to commit to print about his formative years in Glasgow. At least, in fiction, as he returns to discuss Glasgow at some length in *Scottish Journey* (1935), defining it, for both better and worse, as the area which requires the most attention if one is to understand the predicaments of modern Scotland.<sup>41</sup> The synthetic nature of Muir's characters in *Poor Tom* cannot detract from the fact that the 'main situation' is just too similar to his own to be discounted as insignificant, with the depictions of sibling rivalry and disloyalty establishing the context for the premature death of the central character's brother near the end of the novel. While neither the characters of Mansie and Tom are drawn as direct likenesses of Muir and his elder brother Johnnie, the nature of Tom's death—a brain tumour brought on from a fall from a tramcar—is simply too close to the circumstances of Johnnie Muir's death to be discounted as insignificant, with the symbolic resonance of the 'fall' motif proving too much for Muir to resist. Tom's protracted illness also echoes Muir's description of helping to nurse his brother Willie, who died of tuberculosis four years before Johnnie. As Muir related to Lizzie and George, the novel is certainly 'lugubrious' in tone and subject matter, yet it is not without spiritual and philosophical insight, and it is certainly Muir's

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<sup>38</sup> Willa Muir (1968), p.151.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p.151.

<sup>40</sup> Letter to Lizzie and George Thorburn (29/09/1932). *SL*, p.78.

<sup>41</sup> *SJ*, p.102.

most successful attempt in prose to suggest the possibility of finding a transcendent meaning within the existential captivity of human mortality.

As Butter identifies, while Muir can be seen employing his characteristic technique of distancing himself from his subject matter in all three of his novels, in *Poor Tom* ‘he bravely moves closer’ to his own ‘story’ than in his two previous novels.<sup>42</sup> The ‘detachment he knew was needed in art’, as Butter notes, is brought in by developing a plot which diverges greatly from his own biography, and through a narrator who, despite having full access to Mansie’s psychological interior, nevertheless stands discreetly outside the narrative frame. Muir also restricts the reader’s sympathy with Mansie by rendering him as unattractive as he dares so that neither the drama nor the tragedy of the situation is dependent upon the reader’s empathy with him. Muir, as always, is in search of the universal and innate humanity of the situation which the Mason family find themselves enduring. The novel does not, therefore, engage with the *Bildungsroman* tradition directly, although it does serve as a vehicle through which Muir is able to fictionalize and explore many situations from his youth and young adulthood. As well the deteriorating health of Tom which forms the central scenario of the latter two thirds of the novel, the depictions of early childhood on an island farm (including an incident with a bag of sheep-dip and an encounter with an otherworldly horse),<sup>43</sup> Mansie’s flirtations with evangelical religion, his membership of the Clarion Scouts and absorption in socialist politics, even his reading habits, all appear to be drawn more or less directly from Muir’s own experience. The result is that through following Mansie’s struggle to come to terms with the isolation of bereavement and the bewildering complexities of contemporary urban life, the reader is being offered a fictionalized study of Muir’s own existential *nausea* during the first two decades of the twentieth century. However, rather than rendering the events of his own life for merely mimetic or empathetic effect, Muir represents intimate and painful scenarios from his Glasgow years in an attempt to contextualize and come to terms with what happened, and to uncover the essential meaning which he believed animates ordinary life.

This pursuit of metaphysical insight is highlighted in Muir’s occasional but highly significant moments of authorial intrusion where Mansie’s interior monologue seems to diverge so far from his rendered character that the reader feels that they are being invited to engage with the author’s speculations and anxieties far more directly than elsewhere in the novel. The most sustained and explicit incidence of this takes place over the course of chapter nineteen. It is prefaced by a quote from Nietzsche’s ‘The Dance-Song’ from *Thus*

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<sup>42</sup> Peter Butter, ‘Introduction’ to *Poor Tom* (1982), p.2.

<sup>43</sup> *PT*, ch.10 & 18.

*Spake Zarathustra* (1885): ‘Warum? Wofür? Wduroch? Wohin? Wo? Wie?’.<sup>44</sup> This chapter sees Muir, thinly veiled as the narrator tunneling through Mansie’s subconscious, delivering a meditation on the psychological impact of the transition from one temporally framed worldview to another, a process in which a Socialist understanding of material history (and the associated dream of a post-materialist future) overthrows a Christian vision of time and eternity. Employing a typically Nietzschean rhetorical turn Muir distinguishes between these two modes of understanding as the ‘difference between Why and How’, delivering his meditation using the time-travelling analogy which he returns to in the diary extract which is appended to *The Story and the Fable*:<sup>45</sup>

A man of our time who is converted from a Christian creed to one of the modern faiths takes without knowing it several centuries at one leap. He launches himself out of a world in which the church bells are still ringing, reminding him of the brevity of his life and the need for salvation, and in the twinkling of an eye he is standing in a landscape from which thousand-year-old lights and shadows have been wiped clean away, a shadowless landscape where every object is new, bright, pure and naked; and while he is contemplating it the medieval bells, still ringing, die away to a thin, antiquarian jangle in his ears [...] And although between the creed, say, of a Baptist, the most narrowly individualistic of all creeds, and that of a Socialist, which is communistic through and through, there lies the gulf between the religious and the secular, as well as several centuries of human thought, the convert behaves in the most natural manner as though he were merely stepping out of one room into another furnished more to his taste.

The difference between the world he has left and the one he enters now is perhaps simply the difference between Why and How. And perhaps he has had no choice. For if a man lives in a large modern city where existence is insecure, and change is rapid, and further change imperative; where chaos is a standing threat, and yet in the refluent ballet of becoming every optimistic idea seems on tip-toe to be realised; where at the very lowest one must put one’s best foot forward to keep up with the march of invention and innovation: the How challenges at every turn and one is irresistibly driven into its arms. Once there, however, one finds that the Why has become an importunate and niggardly claim, holding one back; and so without scruple, indeed with a sense of following the deepest dictates of conscience, one casts it off, and with it apparently all concern for the brevity of one’s life, the immortality of one’s soul, salvation, and God. Strange how easily all this can be done!<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Muir cites the original German but the Thomas Common translation which Muir read first in Levy’s edition reads ‘Why? Wherefore? Whereby? Whither? Where? How?’. The significance of this quote is that in *Zarathustra*’s ‘Dance-song’ he celebrates the ‘unfathomable’ ‘Wisdom’ of ‘Life’ directly before moving on to deliver his ‘Grave-song’, and this chapter forms Muir’s meditation on the ‘evolution’ from contemplating the ‘How’ to the ‘Why’ of existence: “‘How am I here? Why is this thing in this place and that thing in that? Why does one moment come before or after another Am I really here? Am I at all?’”. *PT*, p.188. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, in Nietzsche, Vol.11 (1914), pp.126-130.

<sup>45</sup> *SF*, p.263.

<sup>46</sup> *PT*, ch.19.

This passage deftly intertwines a sense of the enormous scale of the passage of time on the historical level with a sense of the artificially accelerated and disempowering pace of urban life. Here, Muir is looking back to the ideologically charged atmosphere of Glasgow, exploring the intellectual strides he himself must have taken (consciously and subconsciously) when he renounced his evangelical Baptist faith and became a Socialist. Muir, however, retained his belief in the ‘immortality of one’s soul’, a belief which Mansie somewhat reluctantly attempts to reject, nor was he ‘betrayed into a mad affirmation’ by ‘the vision of the Eternal Recurrence’ no matter how much the concept stimulated his imagination.<sup>47</sup> Yet Muir, like Mansie, was still longing for ‘a faith that shall transfigure life’, a faith to ‘halt eternity’ and ‘halt time’ and ‘so alleviate the intolerable pathos’ of modern life.<sup>48</sup> It was a faith that Mansie did not attain and it was one that Muir had come to recognize, in writing *Poor Tom* if not before, that he would not find preformed in either Christianity or socialism.

Muir uses free indirect narration to express thoughts and emotions which Mansie is only partially aware of. Although no less overt than his authorial intrusions, this device is somewhat less disruptive to the narrative flow as the narrator is discussing thoughts and impressions which are just beyond Mansie’s comprehension yet nevertheless are fed through his psychology. One of the most successful occurrences of this takes place shortly before Tom’s death while Mansie’s mind is flooded with nebulous series of fears and anxieties:

It was a vague sense of ill-ease that he felt, and it never hardened into a definite thought. But had he been able to read his mind he would have found, strangely enough, that what he longed for was not to bring his dreamt-of heaven nearer, so near that he would be able to see it outspread before him and cross its frontiers and be received finally within it, stepping out of a dying world into one new born, but rather to raise his heaven to some position high above itself, to lever it upwards with his eyebeams to a height where it would no longer be in Time; for so long as it was in Time, Time would sunder him from it. And with his sense of separation his old dread of chaos returned, for chaos is universal separation; and at the uttermost end of the blind longing to lift his heaven from the distant future place where it stood so implacably, there must have been the hope that if it could be raised high enough, uplifted to an inconceivable height, Time would once more become whole and perfect, and a meaning be given not only to present death, but to all the countless dead lying under their green mounds, so that the living and the dead and the unborn might no longer be separated by Time, but gathered together in Time by an everlasting compact beyond Time. All that he felt was an uneasy sense that even the perfect future state was not all that it should be; but when, brooding on Tom's certain death, he said as he often did now, “Well, there's no use in

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<sup>47</sup> *PT*, ch.19.

<sup>48</sup> *PT*, ch.19.

expecting a miracle to happen,” he was probably thinking, without knowing it, of a greater miracle. But he had no hope that it would happen.<sup>49</sup>

Tom’s death changes the dynamic of Mansie’s antithetical relationship with time, and as the novel closes he experiences a brief yet miraculous sensation of spiritual interconnectedness, one which will spur him on to reclaim the past he has wasted; a moment of integration with greater reality that his fantasies and fears regarding the future have been preventing him from attaining:

Mansie stood without moving, breathed in the scent of the lilies, and no longer felt any desire to go away; for though he knew that he was standing here in the parlour with his dead brother, something so strange had happened that it would have rooted him to a place where he desired far less to be: the walls had receded, the walls of the whole world had receded, and soundlessly a vast and perfect circle – not the provisional circle of life, which can never be fully described – had closed, and he stood within it. He did not know what it was that he divined and bowed down before: everlasting and perfect order, the eternal destiny of all men, the immortality of his own soul; he could not have given utterance to it, although it was so clear and certain; but he had a longing to fall on his knees. It was not death that he knelt before; he did not know indeed to what he was kneeling, or even whether he was kneeling; for his head might have been bowed by the weight of immortality, by the crushing thought of that eternal and perfect order in which he had a part [...] And at the thought of all the people who should gather to the house, as in the evening all the exiled workers are gathered to their homes and to themselves, he felt embedded in life, fold on fold; he longed to go at once and look at Jean, as if she herself were life, sitting there by the fire; he wanted to experience again, like someone learning a lesson, all that he had already experienced; for it seemed a debt due by him to life from which he had turned away, which he had walked round until his new road deemed the natural one, although it had led him to places where all life was frozen to rigidity, and the dead stood about in the mist like the statues in George Square. He was in haste to begin, and with a last glance at Tom's face, which he could only dimly discern now, for darkness was falling, he left the room and closed the door after him.<sup>50</sup>

Mansie’s longing to experience again ‘all that he had already experienced’ finds accord with the creative struggle ‘against the direction in which Time was hurrying’ which Muir deals with in his autobiography, a process of re-engagement with both the past as well as the present: ‘I did not feel so much that I was rediscovering the world of life as that I was discovering it for the first time’.<sup>51</sup> In ‘going against the flow of time’,<sup>52</sup> as Willa describes Muir’s imaginative process, Mansie’s internal narration underlines how closely *Poor Tom* comes to fulfilling Muir’s definition of the chronicle novel, in that its structure reflects the ‘cycle of birth and growth, death and birth again’, a cycle that Muir

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<sup>49</sup> *PT*, ch.24.

<sup>50</sup> *PT*, ch.27.

<sup>51</sup> *SF*, p.235.

<sup>52</sup> Willa Muir (1968), p.69.

insists ‘can neither be called merely particular, nor simply universal’ as it is both.<sup>53</sup> The chronicle, by Muir’s definition, is thus inevitably heavily biographic by nature, and despite his dextrous use of lived experience Muir’s characters, as Butter rightly identifies, are ‘mostly either spokesmen for the author or have but a shadowy existence’, and there are certainly moments in *Poor Tom*, like the two episodes discussed above, when Mansie is forced into the shadows so that the author can address the reader directly. As Butter notes, despite this, all three novels display a high degree of imaginative insight when

Muir is dealing with the inner lives of characters in some ways resembling himself, when he is working out through them his own problems and conflicts, and when he is describing, under a thin disguise, events which had moved him in actual life.<sup>54</sup>

Mansie, however, is not merely a dialogized version of the author as a young man; he is a representation of one of the countless generations of ordinary young men, a man enveloped in the dichotomy of a life of relative monotony interspersed with moments of intense tragic or revelatory profundity.

Mansie Mason’s story, akin to that of David Blackadder and Hans Scheffer in this crucial regard, is the story of the traumatic journey toward self-understanding. It is an enactment of the struggle to come to terms with the fact that you must exist within the time and place in which you are and the acceptance that your actions appear to have so little impact by comparison with the unseen forces which time orchestrates beyond your comprehension. Muir also ensures that all three characters attain only a provisional resolution, and, importantly, one that is not shored-up by an overarching faith or philosophical attitude. All three come to accept, albeit through very differing yet no less harrowing paths, that the uncertainty of their existence is one which they must live with. This is a recognition that allows them to engage more fully and consciously with their own lives as well as the world around them. Muir’s novels may be drawn heavily from life but they also have something significant to say about it.

### **Three Ways, One Journey**

As McCulloch proposes, there is a degree of validity in interpreting *The Three Brothers* as a manifestation of Muir’s ‘personal journey to understanding and integration’,<sup>55</sup> and as she demonstrates, the abundance of biographic detail which Muir transposes into the opening passages lends support to this argument. It could equally be argued that *The Marionette* also forms a stage on that journey despite its less heavily biographic content and its more

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<sup>53</sup> Muir (1928), p.98.

<sup>54</sup> Butter (1962), p.40.

<sup>55</sup> McCulloch (1993), p.25.

symbolic nature. Indeed, although there are many differences of setting, plot and characterization, there is a developmental process which Muir charts through his novels, one which illustrates, in broad psychological terms, the ritualized journey of the child into adulthood through the various stages of individuation toward mature integration. This is a process that involves not just a temporal progress but also an increased psycho-spatial awareness; a progression through which the individual becomes, not only increasingly cognizant of the effects of time, but also more socially aware and active in the societal space in which they exist.

The course of this psycho-spatial and psycho-temporal development<sup>56</sup> is plotted through the narrative paths of Muir's three central characters. Hans Scheffer is a solitary figure, a lone child who is isolated within his own highly imaginative world because of his disability. As a result he is heavily reliant upon others to help him reach the limited form of social integration which he achieves by the time he reaches adulthood.

David Blackadder is a twin, and a younger brother, and we follow his struggle toward individuation very much within the context of relationships he shares with his brothers. He is served disloyally by his twin who casually seduces his girlfriend resulting in pregnancy and her murder at the hands of a jealous ex-suitor. Yet by the novel's close, David becomes a much more active agent, and after taking on the responsibility of being the deathbed counsel to the dying Sandy, David strikes out on his own to claim a future he knows must reside beyond the static security of life on the family farm.

Muir subverts the motif of sibling betrayal in depicting Mansie Mason as the seducer of his younger brother's ex-girlfriend, an action which introduces the themes of guilt and responsibility absent from the psychological landscape of his previous central characters. Mansie's betrayal of Tom is the opening action of the novel and establishes the context for his antagonistic and guilt-ridden relationship with his brother, particularly during Tom's terminal illness. Unlike Hans and David, Mansie is the central catalyst of the novel's action, and although there is no direct causal link between Mansie's 'fall' with Helen<sup>57</sup> and Tom's fall from the tramcar, they nevertheless happen in succession and are clearly intended to be seen in relation to one another. It is not until Mansie's epiphanic episode at the novel's close that he is finally able to reject the feeling that he is in some way guilty for

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<sup>56</sup> As Paul H. Seton proposes, 'How one comes to terms with external reality and internal reality can be written in terms of time, and these terms will reflect that person's experience of himself, his being, and his sense of self and of self-continuity [...] A sense of one's own history is a gauge of this psychotemporal adaptation'. Paul H. Seton, 'The Psychotemporal Adaptation of Late Adolescence', in *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, Vol.22 (1974), pp.795-819. Samuel Alexander also underlines the fallacious, albeit functional, nature of our 'relational view' of 'physical' time and space, an understanding of which reveals a more comprehensive picture of how we come to construct psychological or 'mental space-time'. See Samuel Alexander, *Space Time and Deity: The Gifford Lectures at Glasgow University 1916-1918* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1920), Vol.1, pp.35-143.

<sup>57</sup> See *PT*, ch.3.

Tom's accident. Despite finding out from his friend Bob Ryrie that Helen had finished with Tom some months earlier and had no intention of seeing him again, and therefore he could not be held responsible for Tom's reaction to seeing them together, a nagging sense of guilt remained with Mansie. 'But a fellow would like to be sure',<sup>58</sup> he protests to Bob, and Mansie wrestles with his guilt up to the point that he finally comes to recognize that mortality ultimately renders such matters redundant.

Through Tom's death Mansie is reborn into his own life, and the cycle that began with the death of Hans's mother during childbirth, which continuing through David's life affirming commitment to the future after Sandy's death, is finally brought to a close. Death is placed firmly within the context of life, and it is this unsentimentally humane yet fittingly dramatic approach that allows Muir's novels to resonate with humanity rather than morbidity. Rather than a final and absolute state, mortality is presented as the last obstacle that time sets against humanity's progress toward eternity, an eternity whose existence Muir may not always proclaim, yet appears never to have doubted.

Aside from this psychological developmental cycle, the three novels also evoke important questions about the relationship of individual with collective reality more generally. Questions remain about what the notions of innocence, freedom, responsibility, and guilt, really signify in the realm of human interactions if we accept that our viewpoint is always too restricted (both temporally and spatially) to form any universally valid general principle of moral conduct. Again, there is a natural progress in the novels in this regard, through the progressively morally complex positions of Hans, David, and Mansie, with Mansie's betrayal, with its analogy of Cain's slaying of Abel, explicitly exploring the themes of responsibility and guilt that looks toward the probing self-questions of 'How did we come here' (4), 'Where did the road branch' (8), and 'Did we choose' (13) in *Variations on a Time Theme*, and portending those found in *Journeys and Places* (1937):

Yet if I could reverse my course  
 Through ever-deepening yesterday,  
 Retrace the path that led me here,  
 Could I find a different way? (5-8)<sup>59</sup>

What shape had I before the Fall?  
 What hills and rivers did I seek?  
 What were my thoughts then? And of what  
 Forgotten histories did I speak  
 To my companions? (1-5)<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> *PT*, ch.25.

<sup>59</sup> 'The Stationary Journey', *CP*, p.65.

<sup>60</sup> 'The Fall', *CP*, p.75.

As proposed in *The Structure of the Novel*, through ‘seeing life in time, or seeing it in space’ a writer can figure out the relation between the two and so transform a ‘vague and contingent sense of life into a positive image, an imaginative judgement’.<sup>61</sup> In Muir’s novels we see consistent attempts to do exactly that, and while there are without doubt fissures in his characterizations (mostly due to his over-reliance on rendering lived experience into fiction), yet, at significant moments in his narratives he does successfully express a sense of what it is like to feel both confined within a specific temporal setting while also experiencing a sense of being marginalized and excluded. Just as Muir repeatedly wrote about feeling out of step with time in his autobiographical writings, he shows his three central characters struggling and finally coming to terms with their place in their respective temporal settings. As he theorized in *The Structure of the Novel*, despite the fact that ‘we see things in terms of Time, Space, and Causality’, our imagination desires something more, it strives ‘to see the whole unity, or an image of it’.<sup>62</sup> Muir’s novels may not present the reader with a self-contained unity such as that found in *Ulysses* or *Mrs Dalloway*, yet there are certainly radiant moments when his vision of ‘eternity within time’ resonates through the minds of his protagonists and is effectively communicated to the reader.

The novel may not have been the most natural home for his creative vision, but it nevertheless gave Muir the opportunity to articulate some profoundly personal and yet intrinsically human experiences in a range of thought-provoking ways. This is particularly true of *Poor Tom*. Its penetrating psychological insights and its socio-economic critique of ordinary life in an industrial metropolis during a financial depression certainly demonstrate its relevance to the contemporary reader as well as underline the fact that this is a novel long overdue for critical reappraisal

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<sup>61</sup> Muir (1928), p.150.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p.113.

## Chapter 7

### Poetry and Prose (1932-1937)

#### England and St Andrews

In the summer of 1929, having completed his biography of Knox, Muir persuaded Martin Secker to publish a translation of Franz Kafka's *The Castle* (1930). The volume appeared the following March along with the Muirs's translation of Emil Rheindhardt's *The Life of Eleonora Duse* (1930). What spoke to Muir in Kafka's writing was the resonantly abstract and nightmarish qualities of his prose, and he recalls how the 'stories continued themselves' in his dreams 'unfolding into slow serpentine nightmares, immovably reasonable [...] a succession of weird inventions'.<sup>1</sup> Writing to Schiff, Muir describes how moved he was by *The Castle*, which he suggests is 'a purely metaphysical and mystical dramatic novel' in which 'everything happens on a mysterious spiritual plane which was obviously the supreme reality of the author'.<sup>2</sup> Muir recognised that Kafka's writing appealed to the part of him which generated *The Marionette*, and its impact can certainly be seen in the 'mysterious spiritual plane' which the exiles of *Variations* inhabit, just as the 'serpentine nightmares' induced by 'the feeling that the world is so tightly crammed with solid, burgeoning objects'<sup>3</sup> are reflected within the endless array of 'Stairways and corridors and antechambers' (29) that form the metaphorical maze of 'The Labyrinth'.<sup>4</sup>

Following the completion of *The Three Brothers*, the Muirs began work on Hermann Broch's *The Sleepwalkers* (1932) trilogy, an undertaking which, as Willa describes, had a palpable psychological impact on both of them.<sup>5</sup> As she recalls, their last year in Crowborough was not a particularly optimistic period for either of them, personally or professionally, suggesting that this is reflected in the 'undertone of dejection, even misery' that is detectable in the poetry that Muir was writing at that time.<sup>6</sup> In April 1932 some of the poems composed at Dormansland were published as *Six Poems* (1932) by the Samson Press, a hand-crafted volume of only one hundred and ten copies,<sup>7</sup> many of which were lost in a fire at the press.<sup>8</sup> As well as demonstrating the pessimism that Willa identifies, they also reflect the influence of Broch's interest in the 'disintegration of values',<sup>9</sup> a central preoccupation of *The Sleepwalkers* trilogy, and it was clearly a theme that chimed with

<sup>1</sup> *SF*, p.67 and *Auto*, p.240.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to Sydney Schiff (08/07/1929). *SL*, pp.66-68.

<sup>3</sup> *SF*, p.67.

<sup>4</sup> *The Listener* 37 (20/03/1947), 432. Collected in *The Labyrinth* (1949). *CP*, pp.157-59.

<sup>5</sup> Willa Muir (1968), p.152.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.151

<sup>7</sup> Mellow (1964), p.24.

<sup>8</sup> See *Journeys and Places* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1937), p.vii.

<sup>9</sup> Willa Muir (1968), pp.151-52

Muir's own social and artistic perspectives at the time, as this chapter's discussion of *Scottish Journey* (1935) and *Scott and Scotland* (1936) seeks to illustrate.

This is particularly clear in the central conceit of 'The Stationary Journey',<sup>10</sup> the opening poem of *Six Poems*, in which time is depicted holding human society locked into 'an earthly station' (1), moving in an astronomical procession without end, forward in time yet without progress. With the resounding pessimism of 'Now/Nothing's to see but waste and rocks' (25-26), the persona rejects the 'fatal flaw' (31) of an endless cosmological eternity and instead turns his attention inward toward the 'mind's eternity' (41), imagining what it would be like to 'reverse' his 'course' (5) 'Through the ever-deepening yesterday' (6), against the direction of time's arrow<sup>11</sup> and see 'Time led in chains from post to post/Of the all-conquering Zodiac ring' (59-60). Here again Muir is trying to imagine himself going against the entropic flow of time, an 'occupation dear to him',<sup>12</sup> attempting to escape its all-embracing captivity. The conceit of temporal captivity is explored at length in *Variations*, however in 'The Stationary Journey' there is the suggestion that freedom may still be attainable, at least, in the imagination.

The Muirs were Scottish PEN delegates at Budapest in May 1932 and in Hungary they gained a fuller appreciation of the scale of the ideological shadows looming over Europe, with the various political intrigues of the delegates illustrating the resentment and the paranoia building on all sides. Just as they had witnessed the impact of the Treaty of Versailles on the German people, they soon came to realize that the Treaty of Trianon was having a similar effect on the Hungarians, contributing to a desperate climate of fear and distrust. As Willa remarks, travelling to meet Broch in Vienna after the congress, they believed that in Austria they would be escaping from the gathering political storm over the border, but, as she suggests, on discussing their fears with him he simply 'looked down on us compassionately as on a pair of children who had just been learning the facts of European Life'.<sup>13</sup>

The cynicism and dejection that Muir encountered in Broch's novels was reinforced by his experience of Budapest, yet his poetry at this time sought to do more than merely represent that outlook. As the jacket notes of *Variations* propose, what occupied Muir was the inquiry 'into the nature and result of the conflict' of the human spirit with time, the

<sup>10</sup> *Bookman* 69 (June 1929), pp.353-356. *Six Poems* (Warlingham: Samson Press, 1932) and (with minor textual alterations) in *Journeys and Places* (1937). *CP*, pp.65-66.

<sup>11</sup> As Davies and Hawking illustrate, the direction of time's arrow is aligned in accordance with the entropy principle that predicts that the available energy in any closed system changes from a more ordered state to a less ordered one. Davies (1995), pp.196-201 and Hawking (1998), pp.162-173. However, as Hawking points out, there is a fallacy inherent in this 'psychological arrow of time' as 'disorder increases with time because we measure time in the direction in which disorder increases'. Hawking (1998), pp.167-168.

<sup>12</sup> Willa Muir (1968), p.146.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.157.

'final enemy' who 'dissolves away the most heroic purpose and achievement'.<sup>14</sup> Where there is a rejection of the present in favour of the past, it is counter-balanced by the conviction that the future can still be saved from its apparent fate; that it is worth saving, no matter how desperate our situation has become or how far removed we are from our vision of the ideal human society.

From Crowborough they moved to Hampstead in October 1932. Muir continued reviewing fiction for *The Listener* and contributing essays and verse to *The Spectator* and *The Modern Scot*. *Poor Tom* (1932) was published just a few weeks before the move and leaving Crowborough Muir also left behind his novel writing aspirations, returning to poetry as his chief medium for creative expression. The atmosphere of Hampstead proved sympathetic to this poetic renewal as the area was something of a literary centre at the time, with Donald and Catherine Caswell, Flora Grierson and Joan Shelmerdine, Hugh Kingsmill, William Empson, C.M. Grieve, and the young surrealist poet David Gascoyne, all featuring among the array of visitors the Muirs entertained.<sup>15</sup>

Muir completed the remainder of the *Variations* poems (published in April 1934) in an atmosphere far removed from that achieved in the poetry. However, a few incidents rapidly changed the peace and security the Muirs had come to enjoy. The most significant of these was their son Gavin's road accident in July 1933 which resulted in him sustaining a broken leg and concussion. They immediately left for Orkney to allow Gavin to spend a month convalescing but on their return to London Willa experienced a rapid deterioration in her own health. Muir remained in London while Willa and Gavin returned to Orkney for a further three months during the summer of 1934.<sup>16</sup> Muir had been commissioned to write the third in a series of travel journals, following on from J.B. Prestley's *English Journey* (1934) and Philip Gibbs's *European Journey* (1935). He joined his family in Orkney having conducted his tour for *Scottish Journey* (1935). Grieving for his recently deceased friend, John Holms, and somewhat downhearted by the critical reception of *Variations*,<sup>17</sup> Muir was keen to live in a quieter, and importantly, less expensive place than London. Rural Scotland was the obvious choice and after ruling out Orkney on account of its long winters St Andrews was chosen. Willa had attended university there and Muir had a literary acquaintance in the town in the form of James Whyte, publisher of *The Modern Scot* and owner of the town's avant-garde bookshop. They set up home in St Andrews in

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<sup>14</sup> *Variations on a Time Theme* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1934).

<sup>15</sup> Willa Muir (1968), pp.159-166.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.171-172.

<sup>17</sup> Geoffrey Grigson retracted his early praise of *Variations* and Louis MacNeice described it as a series of 'stilted allegorical nudes walking through a grey landscape'. Willa Muir (1968), p.167.

August 1935 and remained there until Muir's appointment to the British Council in Edinburgh in 1942.

Before discussing the writings published during Muir's time in St Andrews, it is important to examine the position that Muir had arrived at with regard to his views on contemporary Scottish society. During the 1930s in particular, Muir appears to be something of a self-isolating figure,<sup>18</sup> both creatively and intellectually. On an emotional level, he seems to have had an innate capacity to retreat into himself and attain a high degree of emotional detachment from the immediate world around him when he required it. Given how quickly and how thoroughly Muir became discontented at St Andrews it is unsurprising that he expresses some of that negativity when he came to survey contemporary Scottish society in *Scottish Journey* and the position of the Scottish writer in *Scott and Scotland*. As he recalls, '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 was profoundly dissatisfied with myself'.<sup>19</sup> This clearly impacted on his poetry but it left a mark on his critical writings during this time that is particularly pronounced, and Muir's monographs on Scottish life and culture bear testimony to the negativity which was undermining his creative and personal life. However, more than just an extension of cultural pessimism, *Scottish Journey* and *Scott and Scotland* are also impassioned expressions of frustration at what he perceived to be Scotland's wasted potential, social and creative, and offer insightful comments about the formation of Scotland's historical and cultural landscape, although some of his conclusions, particularly those relating to the contemporary use of Scots as a medium for literature, would come to dwarf his more perceptive insights.

### ***Variations on a Time Theme (1934)***

It was Muir's dissatisfaction which led him to begin compiling the notes which would form the basis of *The Story and the Fable*, accepting as his premise the need to identify 'where we came from, where we are going, and [...] how we should live with one another'.<sup>20</sup> As well as forming the philosophical core of his autobiography, these three questions explicitly inform the approach Muir adopted with regard to his creative and critical writings during the 1930s, and in *Variations* he homes in on the themes of dislocation and displacement in an attempt to uncover some potential answers.

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<sup>18</sup> Pick (1948), p.90.

<sup>19</sup> *Auto*, p.244.

<sup>20</sup> *SF*, p.64.

*Variations* is dedicated to the memory of John Ferrar Holms who died suddenly in 1934 of heart failure during surgery. Muir describes Holms who was ten years his junior as ‘the most remarkable man I ever met’, and although he had seen him infrequently during the years before his death, Muir was in no doubt that his personality had a considerable impact on him.<sup>21</sup> This point is illustrated by the poem ‘To J.F.H.’, the opening poem of *The Narrow Place* (1943) inspired by the sight of a young soldier on a motorbike in a St Andrews street who bore a startling resemblance to Holms.<sup>22</sup> From the sober dedication the volume then follows with an equally sombre epigraph taken from the Book of Daniel (7:24-25), the text that Knox had chosen for his first address to the people of St Andrews in 1547 and one which Muir had long been intrigued by.<sup>23</sup> As Butter states concisely, the central theme of the series ‘is the paradoxical co-existence in us of the consciousness of mortality and immortality’<sup>24</sup> and the first poem introduces this theme with a description of a lingering existential illness and the slow recuperation back into self-consciousness. It is clear from the outset that what is being described is a social rather than an individual condition: ‘How did we come here to this broken wood?’ (4), ‘Where did the road branch?’ (8), ‘Can we build a house here’ (35), ‘Can we sing our songs here,/Pray lift a shrine to some god?’ (38-39).<sup>25</sup> Regardless of the cause of their past exile or the harrowing years of wandering, the focus is on the challenge of the present, the need to establish a functional society on the site they now occupy. Being the link ‘between the impotent dead/And the unborn’ (40-41), the exiles must reconstitute a civilization fit for the ‘Many [who] will follow’ (42). While the images of decay and degradation establish a degree of tonal similarity between Muir’s collection and *The Waste Land* (1922), the abstract landscape in which Muir’s exiles find themselves is free from the sense of impotency which blights Eliot’s wasteland. In *Variations* there is no doubt that life will continue, the challenge is to build a society fit for the next generation to inhabit, a task that seems complicated by a new-found desire for self-knowledge, the self-conscious knowledge that resulted from their exile and their fall from innocence. The explicitness of the central biblical allegory is another important difference between Muir’s exiles and Eliot’s, as is the relative economy of Muir’s literary references.

The initial verse passage begins with a sense of urgency and is set in the immediate present, poem ‘II’<sup>26</sup> continues this, opening ‘At the dead centre of the boundless plain’ (1), but quickly the persona’s thoughts move on to contemplate what lies further ahead in the

<sup>21</sup> *SF*, pp.216-217.

<sup>22</sup> See *CP*, p.329 and *SL*, pp.152-153.

<sup>23</sup> *CP*, p.318.

<sup>24</sup> Butter (1962), p.57.

<sup>25</sup> ‘Interregnum’, *The Spectator* CXLIX (09/12/1932), 827. *CP*, pp.51-52.

<sup>26</sup> ‘The Riders’, *The Listener* 10 (16/08/1933), 255. *CP*, pp.52-53.

future. 'Time has such curious stretches/And generation after generation/May travel them, sad stationary journey,/Of what device, what meaning?' (11-14). Considering the cycle of generational evolution, the image of a herd of eternal steeds is employed to illustrate the relationship between the single human and the mass of humanity through the ages: 'Yet we fill a saddle/At least. We sit where others have sat before us/And others will sit again' (27-29). The 'beasts are mortal, and we who fall so lightly/Fall so heavily, are, it is said, immortal' (48-49), yet this knowledge provides little protection 'against all change/And this monotony' (50-51). The persona concludes by suggesting that we must resign ourselves to the knowledge that as our ultimate destination is unknowable, on this plain of existence at least, we must accept that our journey through time is the only progress we can truly know, and therefore we must live 'As if it were all. This place all. This journey all' (56).

Offering an explanation of the 'The Riders' in Gwendolen Murphy's *The Modern Poet* (1938), Muir relates how the horses of the poem

are an image of human time, the invisible body of humanity on which we ride for a little while, which has come from places we did not know [...] and which is going places we shall not know [...] Yet the steed—mankind in its course through time—is mortal, and the rider is immortal.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to this insight, Murphy's questioning also led Muir to offer a further explanation of his poetry more generally: 'I have only realised during the last year that almost all my poems from the start have been about journeys and places: that is, about the two sides of the paradox (of mortality and immortality) one of which implies the other'.<sup>28</sup> The challenge of this paradox is taken up in 'III'<sup>29</sup> through the language of biblical allegory and sees the persona retreat momentarily into childhood memory, 'A child in Adam's field I dreamed away/My one eternity and hourless day' (1-2), before exploring the postlapsarian implications of living inside time while retaining a knowledge of the lost paradise that exists beyond it. Implicitly associating the judgement of Cain, Noah's flood, and the expulsion from Eden, the persona provides a biblical context for his own sentence, 'Set free, or outlawed, now I walk the sand/And search this rubble for the promised land' (42-43). The biblical allusions are less compressed through 'IV', 'V' and 'VI' yet the scale of the wasteland the persona is moving through remains of an epic proportion with the sense that eternity, 'the unknown and feared and longed for land' (65) of poem 'VI',<sup>30</sup> is driving the progress of the persona toward some form of breakthrough.

<sup>27</sup> Gwendolen Murphy, *The Modern Poet: An Anthology* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson Ltd, 1938), p.168.

<sup>28</sup> Murphy (1938), p.169.

<sup>29</sup> 'Autobiography', *The Spectator* CL (26/05/1933), 764. CP, pp.53-54.

<sup>30</sup> 'In the Wilderness', *The Modern Scot* IV (July 1933), 138-140. CP, pp.56-57.

From the use of spatial metaphors and biblical allusions, poem 'VII'<sup>31</sup> turns from the broader discussion of exile to that of time specifically, with thirteen of the poem's fifteen lines using time as a single word refrain. The last word however, goes to eternity: 'Imprisoned for ever; we're the mock of Time,/While lost and empty lies Eternity' (14-15). The opening two stanzas of 'VIII'<sup>32</sup> establish a literary frame of reference for the persona's own expression of the injustice of time's supremacy over human creative endeavour, and using the imagery of archery, cite 'Sebastian' (5) 'Socrates' (10), 'Plato' (20), and 'Shakespeare' (21) to demonstrate how, despite the desire for vicarious immortality, 'all art/End in a new yet long-foresuffered smart' (27-28). This sets the scene for the juxtaposition of time first as a sea, then as a flaming wheel, in the remaining two stanzas of iambic pentameter couplets. The intense compression of contrasting imagery of 'VIII' leads into a more restrained, self-interrogating mood in poem 'IX'<sup>33</sup> in which the speaker confronts his own personified 'Indifference' (10) in the hope that

If I could drive this demon out  
I'd put all Time's display to rout.  
It's wounds would turn flowers and nothing be  
But the first Garden. The one Tree  
Would stand for ever safe and fair  
And Adam's hand stop in the air. (22-27)

Providing an early version of the paradoxical conceit at the heart of 'The Combat', 'Pity' (44) is resurrected and depicted locked in ceaseless conflict with 'Indifference' (10). Drawing on heraldic imagery, the battle between the two is depicted in similar terms as that between *The Labyrinth* collection's combatants, as 'the slain rise and smile upon the slayer' (57).

The concluding poem, 'X',<sup>34</sup> sees Muir conflating heraldic and mythological symbolism with religious allegory to present a cyclical view of time, one in which the events within time are repeated endlessly so that it becomes meaningless to attempt to distinguish between that which lies in the past and that which resides in the future. More than simply a representation of a predestined universe, what is being offered is a view of time from outside the frame of reference, the briefest glimpse of what an omniscient view of time from an eternal vantage point might be like.

Critical responses to Muir's adventurous undertaking in the collection as a whole have tended to be less than sympathetic. Butter, recognising the central theme of 'the

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<sup>31</sup> *CP*, p.58.

<sup>32</sup> 'Threefold Time', *New Verse* 6 (December 1933), 3-4. *CP*, pp.58-59.

<sup>33</sup> 'The Dilemma', *The Spectator* CLI (22/12/1933), 932. *CP*, pp.60-61.

<sup>34</sup> 'Heraldry', *The Spectator* CLII (09/05/1934), 375. *CP*, pp.61-62.

paradoxical co-existence in us of the consciousness of mortality and immortality’, infers that Muir was over-reliant on ‘private myth’ making.<sup>35</sup> Muir describes the poem as an attempt to communicate a few ‘isolated moments of pure vision’.<sup>36</sup> For McCulloch, the collection is too weighted down by Nietzsche’s concept of eternal recurrence: “‘Time’ in these poems would appear to be both the restrictive, predestined fate of Calvinism and the very fact of mortality itself which seems to deny lasting significance to human lives’.<sup>37</sup>

McCulloch’s analysis accurately signals a few of Muir’s central influences but it does not discuss the importance of the quest which resides at the heart of *Variations*, the attempt to demonstrate mankind’s universal will to resist time’s rule through imaginative thought and creative endeavour. With this quest in mind, the litany of time’s brutality which forms poem ‘VIII’ can also be seen as a celebration of the depth and breadth of human emotional and intellectual capacity. Every nuanced expression of frustration forms an articulation of the inexhaustible refusal to accept that because we are mortal we must reconcile ourselves to death. The question posed in ‘XIII’, ‘Who shall outsoar the mountainous flame of Time?’ (62), is answered by its poser; it is the immortal soul that defeats time, but only after its corporeal host has been defeated by mortality. The crucifixion of the ‘great lion’ (24) that closes ‘X’ resonates with a sense of an immense loss and heralds the many ‘fabulous wars’ (12) that lie ahead but it also holds the unmistakable promise of resurrection, signalled by the sign of the cross which forms the poem’s title. As well as an exploration of the themes of communal displacement and temporal dislocation, the collection is also a personal expression of the desire to reach some form of unified, transpersonal state, to be ‘released from the presence of Time’<sup>38</sup> and reunite the physical world inside time with the spiritual realm beyond it.

### ***Journeys and Places* (1937)**

Writing to Gwendolen Murphy in 1938, Muir acknowledged the significance that the discussion of journeys and places held in his poetry, linking them to his interest in the relationship between mortality and immortality.<sup>39</sup> What Muir is underlining in his comments in *The Modern Poet* is the fact that there is often a great deal of interplay in his poetry between the spatial and the temporal, and that this interplay relates to what he calls ‘the two sides’ of the paradox, the relationship between the concepts of mortality and immortality. In *Journeys* the relationships between time and space, and mortality and

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<sup>35</sup> Butter (1962), pp.57-58.

<sup>36</sup> Murphy (1938), p.169.

<sup>37</sup> McCulloch (1993), p.11.

<sup>38</sup> Murphy (1938), p.170.

<sup>39</sup> Murphy (1938), p.169.

immortality, are approached from various viewpoints, and Muir's introduction outlines this intent as well as the collection's rationale and its bipartite thematic approach:

The Journeys and Places in this collection should be taken as having a rough-and-ready psychological connotation rather than a strict temporal or spatial one. The first deal more or less with movements in time, and the second with places; but I have also included in the latter division imaginary situations which by the licence of the fancy may perhaps pass as a place, that is as pauses in time.<sup>40</sup>

In addition to outlining the overall structure and his thematic approach, Muir's introductory note also reveals an important component about his representations of places both in this collection, as well as elsewhere in his poetry. In describing places (both real and imagined) as 'pauses in time', Muir is once again suggesting that spatial considerations have an essential temporal nature; that to describe an experience of a place is in essence to describe an experience of something fixed at a specific temporal point. In this sense, no place can ever be truly revisited (aside from in the imagination) as its co-ordinates in space-time can never be reproduced. Recognizing the ceaseless flux of time, Muir's poetic 'pauses in time' attempt to capture a snapshot impression of an interrelated series of sensations and emotions at a particular and unrepeatable moment. From this perspective, there becomes less of a need for a precise distinction between the real and the imagined; what is significant are the impressions that are induced, impressions that are dealt with as if held in spatial-temporal suspension, paused so that their meaning and relative significance can be explored.

Through his images of paused space-time, Muir is obtaining another opportunity to study 'pauses in time' in closer detail. In this regard, *Variations* deals with time 'as it flies'<sup>41</sup> whereas in *Journeys* he attempts to capture stretches of it and then manipulate it to better understand its inner workings. Through equating journeys as 'movements in time' and places as 'pauses in time' Muir's methodology allows him to manipulate time to the extent that he is able to offer temporal realities to a series of 'imaginary situations', imagined places where humanity is no longer 'the mock of Time' (14) as 'VII' in *Variations* proposes, places where Adam and Eve will remain eternally 'unfallen' (47) and are free to bask eternally in the 'imagination's one long day' (44).<sup>42</sup>

The first journey of the volume is, fittingly, a journey without movement. The paradoxical conceit at the heart of 'The Stationary Journey', and after which the poem is

<sup>40</sup> *Journeys and Places* (1937), p.viii.

<sup>41</sup> 'He who binds Himself to a joy/Does the winged life destroy;/But he who kisses the joy as it flies/Lives in eternity's sun rise'. William Blake, 'Eternity', *Verse and Fragments: First Series* (1793-1799), in *The Portable Blake*, Alfred Kazin ed. (New York: Viking, 1974), p.135.

<sup>42</sup> *The Bookman* LXIX (June 1929), 355-356, CP, pp.65-66.

named, appeared in an earlier form as ‘the stationary country’ (354) in *Chorus* but the notion of negative stasis is one that Muir repeatedly revisits in his poetry. The action (or inaction) of the poem is rooted firmly in the ‘persona’s earthly station’ (1) and refers to the inability of humanity to escape from time’s forward propulsion, a force that paradoxically does not result in any real movement. However, unlike the predominantly pessimistic tone of *Variations*, here the persona is quickly able to transcend this stasis in his imagination and reverses time’s arrow so that ‘Delilah’s shears/rejoin’ Samson’s ‘strong ringlets to his neck’ (55-56) and the ‘the dead world grows green’ (43) again.

‘The Mountains’<sup>43</sup> sees Muir reconstructing a Hölderlin-inspired gothic landscape akin to that in earlier poems like ‘The Lost Land’ and ‘Ballad of Rebirth’ from *First Poems*. However, alongside the rhetorical Romantic longing, the *Sebnsucht* that McCulloch rightly identifies,<sup>44</sup> there is also a more positive quest for change, a desire to find a point of vantage from which the persona will be able to comprehend physical reality more fully, ‘a peak whose height/Will show me every hill’ (25-26). As in the previous opening poem, the persona still muses about the possibility of turning back against time and retreating from the present, ‘If I could/I’d leap time’s bound or turn and hide/From time in my ancestral wood’ (14-16), yet there is also a hesitant positivity forming. While ‘The Hill’ and ‘The Road’ continue the themes of misdirection and longing, the attitude of tentative hope that emerges from ‘The Mountains’ becomes fully visible in the closing lines of ‘The Mythical Journey’:<sup>45</sup>

[...] Thence the dream rose upward,  
The living dream sprung from the dying vision,  
Overarching all. Beneath its branches  
He builds in faith and doubt his shaking house. (44-47)

The juxtaposition of the ‘living dream’ and ‘the dying vision’ and ‘faith and doubt’ creates a balance between uncertainty and possibility, a balance lacking in much of the pessimism of Muir’s poetry from the 1920s. This may not be indicative of a radical shift in the attitude of Muir’s poetic persona—the journey in this poem is after all one of his purely ‘imaginary situations’—but it does nevertheless demonstrate an attempt to offset the negativity regarding the present with a degree of stoicism and, at moments, hope for the future.

<sup>43</sup> ‘The Journey’, *The Spectator* CLV (19/07/1935), 93. *CP*, p.67.

<sup>44</sup> McCulloch (1993), pp.4-5.

<sup>45</sup> *The Spectator* CLVI (15/05/1936), 886. *CP*, pp.69-70.

'Tristram's Journey'<sup>46</sup> sees Muir retreat into the familiar territory of literary myth and chivalric legend, and demonstrates his affection for the cadences of the ballad form and its terse narrative style, his rendering of the myth serves as a perfect prelude to 'Hölderlin's Journey' which continues the themes of madness and exile but reintroduces them into a temporal and spatially referential context: 'He was not mad but lost in mind,/For time and space had fled away (2-4). Establishing an implicit comparison between the ill-fated relationship of Hölderlin and Susette Gontard (his married lover referred to as 'Diotima' in the poem)<sup>47</sup> and that of Tristan and Iseult, Muir successfully fashions a tragic mythology from a few fragments of Hölderlin's biography.

The second section of the collection devoted to places opens appropriately with 'The Fall',<sup>48</sup> Eden being by far the most frequently revisited place in Muir's poetic travels. Although the action is set within sight of paradise, the poem is actually a conflation of many of his poetic preoccupations. Through a series of unanswered questions the persona attempts to trace his origin and it quickly becomes evident that the persona is the trans-temporal collective soul of mankind searching for its long forgotten source:

What shape was I before the Fall?  
 What hills and rivers did I seek?  
 [...] Did our eyes  
 From our predestined watching-place  
 See Heaven and Earth one land, and range  
 Therein through all Time and Space? (1-8)

The heraldic and mythological images of the 'dragon' (21) and the 'Sphinx' (28) are employed to suggest an epic struggle against primordial forces, malevolent entities ultimately destined to bring about the fall of mankind and expulsion from paradise. Muir uses Eden as a context for this poem, as he does so often elsewhere, not to depict a single place at a fixed point in time (an earthly paradise before the Fall) but rather as a form of shorthand set to denote the journey into time, from the temporally amorphous realm before the Fall to the point at which time enters humanity's story.

In Muir's metaphysical mythology, there is no time before the Fall precisely because it forms the 'event horizon' for all human knowledge. The persona cannot know anything that took place 'before the Fall' precisely because that was the defining moment at which it became self-conscious. Regrettably this quasi-theological inquiry becomes too quickly lost beneath a stream of chivalric and mythological images that relate more to Muir's practice of incorporating dream material into his poetry than the questing creative process that can

<sup>46</sup> *The Atlantic Monthly* CXLI (May 1928), 627-628. *CP*, pp.70-71.

<sup>47</sup> See *Journeys and Places* (1937), pp.vii-viii.

<sup>48</sup> 'After the Fall', *The Modern Scot* I (Jan 1931), 10-11. *CP*, pp.75-76.

be seen driving the opening stanzas. Yet despite this, there is a momentum that propels the reader through the array of surreal images to the poem's close where the action pauses as the persona watches 'a shadowy figure fall/And not far off another beats/With his bare hands on Eden's wall' (54-56).

Proposing that *Journeys* has a distinctly 'uneven quality',<sup>49</sup> Butter nevertheless argues that the collection as a whole demonstrates that the range of Muir's vision was growing.<sup>50</sup> Muir was becoming more confident about his ability to articulate the originality of his creative vision, being less reliant on the rhetorical modes and literary attitudes of others. Among the poems that are less originally executed are 'Troy', 'A Trojan Slave', 'Judas', 'Merlin', and 'Mary Stuart', each in their own way contributing something to the general themes of the collection although the weight of allusions and the over-reliance on mythological imagery and well-trod narratives seem to deaden the creative momentum that 'The Fall' establishes. Similarly, 'The Enchanted Knight' is clearly a poem that came out of Muir's reading of Keats and Heine and seems somewhat out of place by comparison to the less morbid and more accomplished verse that follows it. With 'The Town Betrayed'<sup>51</sup> Muir is on fresher and firmer ground both in terms of his choice of subject matter and the use of literary form. Each of the poem's ten quatrains works toward the completion of the end-rhyme that links the second and fourth lines. This creates a sense of pace and tension, as well as delivering some of the tersest lines of the volume. The harsh judgement that opens the poem is given a particularly keen edge when we consider that Muir, on one level at least, is using the poem to allegorize contemporary St Andrews:

Our homes are eaten out by time,  
 Our lawns strewn with our listless sons,  
 Our harlot daughters lean and watch  
 The ships crammed down with shells and guns (1-4)

Looking back to the siege of St Andrews Castle during the spring of 1547, with the French galleys blockading in the harbour, Muir is drawing on the events of Knox's St Andrews and stripping them of their historical context to explore the underlying significance of a massed martial threat. The actual historical context, well known to Muir having explored it in his biography of Knox and in *The Three Brothers*, forms a potent backdrop for the exploration of the fear invoked by a faceless malevolent force. Again, Muir uses Classical Greek and chivalric mythology to help fulfil this function, but the allusions do not, as they do in the Trojan poems, slow the pace of the verse. Being so

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<sup>49</sup> Butter (1962), p.58.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p.65.

<sup>51</sup> *The London Mercury* XXXIV (Oct 1936). *CP*, pp.82-83.

skilfully woven into the cadences of the lines, the references help accelerate the poem to its climax, as the closing stanzas illustrate:

There our ancestral ghosts are gathered.  
Fierce Agamemnon's form I see,  
Watching as if his tents were time  
And Troy eternity.

We must take order, bar our gates,  
Fight off these phantoms. Inland now  
Achilles, Siegfried, Lancelot  
Have sworn to bring us low. (32-40)

Here, history is being compressed as an army of characters from differing periods appear massed and ready to storm the town, the town taking on a mythical reality, a reality that dislocates it from any specific temporal setting.

The brooding pensiveness of 'The Unfamiliar Place', 'The Place of Light and Darkness', and 'The Solitary Place', generate a twilight quality of psychological restlessness suited to the solipsistic self-interrogations of 'The Private Place' and 'The Unattained Place'<sup>52</sup> in which 'strength is weakness,/The body, a pride,/The soul, sickness' (59-61). There is a marked change of attitude in the four concluding 'places' and through them Muir is able effectively to express the key idea underpinning his creative vision for the volume, namely the quest to discover something of the relationship between time and eternity. Implicit to this endeavour is an appreciation of the important role that archetypes, myths and allegories play in presenting a symbolic interpretation of that relationship. 'The Threefold Place'<sup>53</sup> is the pivotal poem for this turn and it explores the notion of a multi-layered reality in which the past, the present, and the future, are simultaneously expressed. This is an idea returned to in prose form in *Scottish Journey* where Muir speculates about the possibility of a multi-perspective view of reality after catching sight of Hoy from an unusual angle at Durness on the Scottish mainland. The sight of the island, which seemed unnervingly strange to him, led him to lament the relative nature of visual perception which he felt pointed toward '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 or Utopia could ever reform away'.<sup>54</sup> In contrast to this articulation of epistemological relativism in *Scottish Journey*, 'The Threefold Place' offers an imaginative transtemporal view. The poem forms a microcosm of the three which follow it and the final stanza resonates with a clarity that conveys the multi-layered nature of the revelation:

<sup>52</sup> 'Poem', *Outlook*, Vol.1, No.4 (July 1936), pp.98-99. *CP*, pp.88-89.

<sup>53</sup> *Bookman* LXX (November 1929), p.233. *CP*, pp.89-90.

<sup>54</sup> *SJ*, p.218.

One field. I look again and there are three:  
 One where the heroes fell to rest,  
 One where birds make of iron limbs a tree,  
 Helms for a nest,  
 And one where grain stands up like armies drest. (14-18)

The heroes of the past are seen again upon the field of battle, the nesting birds with their promise of new life look toward the future and the grain is seen growing in a time-lapse version of real-time, the persona's three-fold vision forming a temporally transcendent present.

The poems which follow 'The Threefold Place' form representations of the past, the present, and the future in turn. Through them Muir charts the trajectory of mankind's journey from the moment time enters creation as a result of the Fall to humanity's liberation when we are finally reconciled with eternity. 'The Original Place'<sup>55</sup> uses two distinct voices to deliver contrasting views on humanity's 'ancient inheritance' (2), the punishment of Adam and Eve which resulted in humanity being given dominion over creation. This bond is presented as an ambiguous liberty which sees mankind bound to 'hope and fear/And the turning maze of chance' (6), enjoying an 'unquestioned rule' (16) over creation yet nevertheless ruled by a force which neither 'answers or yields' (49). In the absence of an answer from any higher authority, the creation of myths seems the only choice:

To weave our tale of Time  
 Rhyme is knit to rhyme  
 So close, it's like a proof  
 That nothing else can be  
 But this one tapestry (8-12).

Heraldic imagery closes the poem with a slain hero bleeding before his admirers with a tone of resignation akin to that achieved at the conclusion of Auden's 'The Shield of Achilles'<sup>56</sup> in which the artifice of mythology is overturned by the stark reality of mortality.

From the mythological imagery of the past, the focus moves on to the significance of archetypes in the present in 'The Sufficient Place'.<sup>57</sup> Constructing an image of a three-part family unit, Muir presents an archetypal home that recalls the sense of unity and security of 'Childhood' except here Muir does not just project an image of idyllic family life but deconstructs it as well in order to explore its symbolic importance. The opening chapter of

<sup>55</sup> 'The Stronghold', *The Modern Scot* V (Autumn 1934), p.159. *CP*, pp.90-91.

<sup>56</sup> W.H. Auden, 'The Shield of Achilles', *The Shield of Achilles* (London: Faber, 1955), pp.35-37.

<sup>57</sup> 'III', *The London Mercury* XXXIII (March 1936), pp.478-479. *CP*, p.91.

*The Story and The Fable* revisits these archetypes but here brevity ensures an exactness of phrasing that would be unachievable in prose:

Two figures, Man and Woman, simple and clear  
 As a child's first images. Their manners are  
 Such as were known before the earliest fashion (11-13)  
 [...]  
 This is the Pattern, these the Archetypes,  
 Sufficient, strong, and peaceful. All outside  
 From end to end of the world tumult. (19-21)

The 'sufficient place' of the poem's title is 'the room inside' (14) the inner space of the symbolic family home, where 'all's sufficient' (16), the house being a place that exists 'three times in time' (24), simultaneously in the past, the present, and the future. The archetypes of man, woman, child, and home, are presented as entities whose reality is not dependent upon their existence within time as they exist in an ever-present moment, free from diachronic adaptation and independently of any synchronic context. They are the original archetypes, everlasting and immutable. The description of the 'aeon's summer foliage' (6) upon the ancient boughs that surround the house ensures that the home is associated with ageless fertility and continuity. This poem can be related back, with regard to the discussion of archetypes at least, to the personae of *Chorus* and the eternal riders and steeds of *Variations*, yet here time is no longer seen as an irrepressible malevolent force, indeed time, by comparison to the eternal moment of this poem, is of no consequence at all.

While 'The Sufficient Place' forms one the most unambiguous of the volume's 'pauses in time', an eternal moment 'liberated from the order of time',<sup>58</sup> 'The Dreamt of Place'<sup>59</sup> looks far into the future to the moment when 'Time has caught time and holds it fast for ever' (17). 'This is the reconciliation/This is the day after Last Day' (14) announces the prophetic persona, but rather than jubilation, there is an air of uneasy expectation as 'Every height/On earth was thronged and all that lived stared upward' (11-12) waiting for a sign. The suggestion is that there is no certainty beyond time, nothing we can meaningfully call life, and the persona's closing question about the nature of what is 'Hid in this harmony' (20) goes unanswered as there is no answer that can be given. Eternity may be the liberation from time but what that freedom is this poem does not venture to answer. The paradoxes of time capturing time and the existence of a day after the last day reinforce the dream-logic of the scene; this is a place that exists in the mind of

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<sup>58</sup> *SF*, p.235.

<sup>59</sup> *CP*, p.92.

its dreamer and its reality is associated with, but does not form a representation of, exterior reality.

That said, although prophetic in tone and metaphysically speculative, this poem, like 'The Fall', is nevertheless a product of Muir's experience of St Andrews, its inspiration being the view of the North Sea from Muir's home on The Scores<sup>60</sup> (Knox's sermons may well have been in his thoughts also). Despite the use of the Christian setting of the Last Judgement, there is little suggestion that it holds anything other than a figurative reality, and being highly sensitive to its visual and poetic potency, Muir employs the central image of massed humanity without dealing with the subject of divine judgement. Having time captured by itself echoes the conceit of time being led in chains by the 'all conquering Zodiac' in the collection's opening poem, and neatly draws *Journeys* as a whole to a close with a nice rhetorical flourish, but there is no doubt that with so many questions left unanswered the quest into the nature of time and eternity will continue.

What is significantly different about the quest for understanding in the poems that form *Journeys* in contrast to those which precede it is that time is no longer seen simply as the enemy of humanity, the barrier between man and eternity. The final 'reconciliation' in *Journeys* is far too tentative and nebulous to be called an articulation of faith but it is evidence that Muir, despite, or perhaps because of, his deeply troubled years in St Andrews, was moving into intellectual territory where he would be able to find solace through being reconciled to a Christian faith, albeit one of his own adaptation.

### ***Scottish Journey (1935) and Scott and Scotland (1936)***

In *Variations* and *Journeys*, Muir was exploring themes of temporal dislocation and displacement to explore the relationship between time and eternity, using mythology, allegory and symbolism to approach his subject. In his critical prose from the period the same themes manifest themselves in a desire to thoroughly re-examine contemporary Scottish society, retracing the road into the present and charting possible directions into the future. Broch's interest in the 'disintegration of values' in Central European society was something that clearly chimed with Muir's view of contemporary Scotland,<sup>61</sup> and more than just depictions of the symptoms of moral decline, Muir sought to uncover the historical causes as well as the contemporary factors impacting on the nation and suggest how they may be overcome.

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<sup>60</sup> *CP*, p.368.

<sup>61</sup> Willa Muir (1968), pp.151-52.

George Mackay Brown, while recognizing the fact that ‘there has rarely been such a trenchant exposure of capitalism and industrialism’ in a Scottish context as that offered in *Scottish Journey*, considered that it is, nevertheless, ‘written in a kind of dream prose’:

the actuality of Scotland in the political depression of the mid-thirties is palpable; but one has the impression that the man driving the car [...] that this traveller through the Borders, Ayrshire, Glasgow, the Highlands, was seeing everything at a remove.<sup>62</sup>

Attempting to remove himself to a critical vantage point so he can gain an objective view has the effect that he appears to feel passionately about his subject yet does not always seem to be speaking about his own country or countrymen. As McCulloch notes, Muir can appear distinctly ‘equivocal’<sup>63</sup> with regard to his views on Scotland, both publicly and privately, and this is most keenly expressed in his views on Scottish nationalism, as his correspondence from the period illustrates. Writing to his sister Elizabeth and his brother-in-law in the spring of 1927, Muir writes of his appreciation for C.M. Grieve and offers his own views at the time on Scottish politics, giving an explanation for the detachment he often exhibits when dealing with Scottish culture:

Grieve is a strong nationalist, republican, socialist, and everything that is out and out. He thinks that if Scotland were a nation we would have Scottish literature, art, music, culture and everything that other nations seem to have and we haven't. I think that would probably be likely; but I feel rather detached, as I've often told Grieve, because after all I'm not Scotch, I'm an Orkney man, a good Scandinavian, and my true country is Norway, or Denmark, or Iceland, or some place like that.<sup>64</sup>

Although expressing a desire to see a ‘Scottish Republic’, Muir is deliberately placing himself outside the debate regarding the process to bring about its creation, putting forward an ambiguous ancestral heritage as the reason for his lack of political engagement. By 1933, Muir appears to have moved into even more uncertain territory:

I don't know how Scottish nationalism is to survive in the general revolution that seems to be sweeping over all civilization. It seems to be a counter-movement, but it may be simply another form of the general process. I'm all for it, in any case.<sup>65</sup>

Less than a year after moving to St Andrews, however, he adopts the opposite opinion: ‘the Nationalists have been trying to get hold of me, but quite without success, for there

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<sup>62</sup> Muir (1987), p.1.

<sup>63</sup> McCulloch (1993), p.87. McCulloch is expanding here on the argument set out in her essay ‘Edwin Muir on Scotland’, *Akros* Vol.16 No.47 (1981), pp.67-81.

<sup>64</sup> Letter to George Thorburn (14/05/1927). *SL*, p.64.

<sup>65</sup> Letter to George Thorburn (11/03/1933). *SL*, p.80.

seems to be only one side one can take now, and it's not the Nationalists'.<sup>66</sup> Muir did maintain an interest in politics at St Andrews but this interest was one more centred on debate rather than political activity or application. A letter to the poet Stephen Spender in the winter of 1936 underlines his insistence that mainland Scotland was his second home:

I was born in a different age, and on the top of that in a different world; for the Orkney Islands where I passed my childhood was at that time the same as they had been for two hundred years before; untouched still by Industrialism, and still bound to an old co-operative life which preceded that: the very idea of competition, for instance, was unknown. That really means that I was born over two hundred years ago, or perhaps more, so no wonder if my poetry is an acquired taste.<sup>67</sup>

Muir returns to the time-travelling motif in the final diary extract that appends *The Story and The Fable*,<sup>68</sup> but here he is using it to push the Orkney of his childhood into a place remote in both distance and time. This is no doubt an expression of how Muir felt about his childhood but it also serves as a useful maneuver to gain a double-distance on contemporary affairs. Being the product of another time and another place, Muir is suggesting that he is doubly estranged from contemporary Scottish society, 'a strange world' far removed from the one he thinks of as his own.

Adopting the position of a self-elected immigrant empowers Muir to write passionately against the social deterioration he witnessed on his tour of Scotland while also retaining a degree of critical detachment, a quality which lends *Scottish Journey* an additional level of journalistic authority. However, the overarching premise that contemporary Scotland is a fallen state dominates so strongly that it can too often obscure the more insightful perspectives he conveys. Regardless of the well-wrought nature of Muir's postlapsarian approach, there is a humanity that underpins his social critique. 'What Scotland is I am still unable to say', he confesses, 'it has a human north and south, east and west, as well as a geographical; but though they have been clamped within a small space for a long time, one feels they have never met'.<sup>69</sup> Here Muir introduces the theme of disunity that dominates all his theorizing about Scottish culture through his travels in this volume and *Scott and Scotland* which closely followed it. Scotland is 'a country becoming lost to history' he argues, with Edinburgh, 'a handsome, empty capital of the past', at its centre.<sup>70</sup> The opening chapter on Edinburgh illustrates the central conceptual challenge that Muir encountered in his writings on Scottish culture. As clearly stated and insightful as his

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<sup>66</sup> Letter to David Peat (19/08/36). *SL*, p.91.

<sup>67</sup> Letter to Stephen Spender (19/11/36). *SL*, pp.93-94.

<sup>68</sup> See *SF*, pp.263-264.

<sup>69</sup> Muir (1935), pp.2-3

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4.

comments regarding the plight of contemporary 1930s Scotland are, the strength of his positive associations with the distant past unquestionably restricts any positive attitude he is able to form regarding the future. Offering the poem ‘Scotland’s Winter’<sup>71</sup> by way of summative envoi, Muir concludes his ‘impressions of Edinburgh, or rather historical Scotland’ by proposing that Edinburgh’s (and through synecdoche, Scotland’s) ‘tawdry present’ falls far short of its ‘legendary past’.<sup>72</sup> The poem is an intensely bleak image of a frozen Scotland where all the living are trapped within close proximity to the dead (although unaware of their existence) waiting for Judgment Day. Returning to the existential motif of the stationary journey, the life for the owners of the ‘common heels’ (25) is rendered even more pathetic as they ‘are content/With their poor frozen life and shallow banishment’ (27-28).

Contemporary rural Scotland is seen to be in no better health than Edinburgh. Describing the Kailyard etiquette being played out in the border towns,<sup>73</sup> Muir argues how the mundane daily routines fall far short of the vibrancy and the celebration of life that lies behind the area’s historic ballads. The Reformation is signposted as the pivotal period which brought about the dislocation of Scottish culture from its historical past. This proposition is raised in Muir’s portrait of Knox which diagnosed the ‘savage provincialism’<sup>74</sup> which came about through the legacy of Calvinism. In *Scottish Journey*, this provincialism is juxtaposed against the continuity that the Scots ballads offer:

the ballads possess a quality which the rest of Scottish poetry after the Reformation lacks. They are like a wedge of solid life going back through all the vicissitudes of Scottish history, an unchanging pattern of the Scottish spirit as it was before Protestant theology.<sup>75</sup>

To overcome centuries of cultural erosion and begin reclaiming some of that inheritance ‘an enormous change must happen’, a change whose basis must be founded on answering ‘an economic, not a national question’.<sup>76</sup> ‘Nationalism without a social programme, and a radical one, will be quite impotent to deal with it’,<sup>77</sup> Muir argues, ‘a hundred years of Socialism would do more to restore Scotland to health and weld it into a real nation than a thousand—if that were conceivable—of Nationalist government such as

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., pp.38-39. *The Listener* XIII (06/02/1935), p.226. *One Foot in Eden* (1956), CP, p.214.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p.38.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p.42-44.

<sup>74</sup> Muir (1929), p.309.

<sup>75</sup> Muir (1935), p.46. In ‘A Note on The Scottish Ballads’ Muir proposed that ‘the ballads enshrine the very essence of the Scottish spirit, and that they could have only been written in the Scottish tongue’. Muir (1924), p.30.

<sup>76</sup> Muir (1935), p.250.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p.128.

that of the Scottish National Party of Scotland looks forward to'.<sup>78</sup> This was a point of view reinforced by the continuity which he thought Orkney represented, a place where 'unemployment is virtually unknown, drudgery equally uncommon, and the result an alive and contented community'.<sup>79</sup> A situation brought about by 'centuries of hardship' yet they have produced 'something which is natural and inevitable and at the same time humanly desirable'.<sup>80</sup> Yet returning to Orkney at the end of his tour also led Muir to speculate about a more fundamental obstacle to the success of any 'ideal state or Utopia', namely the psychological individualism which results in the 'ultimate isolation of every human being, an isolation produced by the mere workings of time and space', forces against which any project of 'reform' must ultimately accept defeat.<sup>81</sup>

There is an explicit fatalism in Muir's conclusion that extends into an all-encompassing determinism. However, in the tautological acceptance that 'nothing could have happened other than it happened, I saw that Scotland must have had the only history that it could have had',<sup>82</sup> there is also a reaction against the Scottish Nationalist movement. 'The National Party has nothing behind it but a desire and nothing before it but an ideal [...] Scotland needs a hundred years of Douglasism to sweat out of it the individualism which destroyed it'.<sup>83</sup> Muir's acquaintance with C.H. Douglas's theory of Social Credit dates back to his time at the *New Age*<sup>84</sup> and culminates in *Social Credit and The Labour Party: An Appeal!* (1935)<sup>85</sup> which was published three months after *Scottish Journey*. Douglas' ideas were very much to the fore of Muir's thinking at the time he was writing his socialist critique of Scotland. Through Douglas' social credit model Muir offers a way of circumventing the dangers of what he views as the nationalists' call for a return to 'traditional peasant values', drawing a parallel between the Scottish Nationalists and the 'Hitlerites in Germany'.<sup>86</sup> Although the full horror of fascism in Germany had yet to unfold, the analogy was clearly intended to be forceful.

As well as forming an intensely humane evaluation of the ravages of industrialism and the psychological effects of competitive individualism, *Scottish Journey* reveals

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., pp.233-234.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p.240.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p.242.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p.218. As Butter identifies, Muir expresses his simultaneous feeling of longing for, and detachment from, Orkney in 'The Mountains'. See *CP*, p.67 & 322.

<sup>82</sup> Muir (1935), p.225.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p.234.

<sup>84</sup> Douglas's *Economic Democracy* (1920) and *Social Credit* (1924) have their origin in his series of contributions to the *New Age*. See C. H. Douglas 'A Mechanical View of Economics', *TNA*, Vol 24, No.9 (02/01/1919), pp.136-137, 'The Control of Production', *TNA*, Vol 25, No.1 (1/5/1919), p.4 and his four-part series on 'Economic Democracy' which began in Vol.25, No.6 (05/06/1919), pp.97-99 and concluded in Vol.25, No.9 (26/06/1919), pp.146-148.

<sup>85</sup> Muir touched upon Douglas' theory of social credit in 'Bolshevism and Calvinism', *European Quarterly* I (May 1934), pp.3-11.

<sup>86</sup> Muir (1935), pp.241-242.

something of the nature of Muir's own struggle to imagine significant positive change without first achieving an overall sense of unity. The main problem with this approach is that Muir places too much emphasis on the correlation between the 'character of the people' (232) and the individual human psyche, his own desire for psychological harmony leading him to transpose that need onto the country as a whole. The way Muir draws on Scotland's history and literature implies that the real journey is that of Scotland itself, from its historic past, through its discordant present, and into its two projected futures (one Socialist one Nationalist). However, Muir appears to be taking every opportunity to revisit his own past in an attempt to contextualize the present, and given the pessimism of the findings, he seems particularly uncertain about the future.

The emphasis on psychological unity is taken forward into *Scott and Scotland* with an unequivocal vigour that says as much about the urgency of Muir's personal quest for understanding as it does about either his need to define Sir Walter Scott's position as a Scottish writer or his attempt to offer a remedy for Scotland's dislocated society. As George Mackay Brown rightly identifies, 'this book was, as always with him, a quest for the truth; he followed wherever the argument led him',<sup>87</sup> and as well as generating a text of considerable importance it led him into theoretical territory that would prove highly controversial. The thesis of his argument is stunningly succinct and its implication momentously significant: 'the pre-requisite of an autonomous literature is a homogenous language [...] For this homogenous language is the only means yet discovered for expressing the response of a whole people, emotional and intellectual, to a specific body of experience'.<sup>88</sup> Because Scotland has lacked a 'homogenous language' since the Reformation, 'the Scottish consciousness is divided [...] this linguistic division means that Scotsmen think in one language and feel in another'.<sup>89</sup>

Adapting Smith's theory of the Caledonian antiszygy<sup>90</sup> and rejecting MacDiarmid's poetic subversion of it,<sup>91</sup> Muir proposes that, for contemporary Scots, English represents the language of reason and education while 'the Scottish tongue' provides the language of 'their emotions'.<sup>92</sup> Citing David Lyndsay, Alexander Scott, and Alexander Montgomerie, as a few of the last writers who were still able to write in a 'whole language', an idiom capable of expressing every level of discourse,<sup>93</sup> Muir suggests that despite producing some 'remarkable poetry' MacDiarmid's attempt to 'galvanise' synthetic Scots has 'left

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<sup>87</sup> Muir (1987), pp.1-2.

<sup>88</sup> Muir (1936), pp.19-20.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p.21.

<sup>90</sup> G. Gregory Smith, *Scottish Literature: Character & Influence* (London: Macmillan, 1919), p.4.

<sup>91</sup> Muir (1936), pp.61-62.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p21.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p.18.

Scottish verse very much where it was before'.<sup>94</sup> The lack of a 'whole language' and an 'organic society'<sup>95</sup> results, in Muir's analysis, in 'the lack of a whole mind', a 'division in the Scottish consciousness'<sup>96</sup> whose consequences resonate through every strata of Scottish culture. Muir's diagnosis constitutes a linguistically triggered neurosis, the lack of a single literary language taken as an indication of the lack of psychological unity within the national psyche. With Scott as his paradigm, a writer he depicts trapped within the 'spatial' and 'temporal' 'Nothing' that is Scottish culture,<sup>97</sup> Muir sets out to show how Scottish writers since the Reformation have been conditioned by the 'Caledonian antiszygy' and how the Scottish literary tradition and Scottish society have suffered as a consequence. The tonic offered is as straightforward as the diagnosis: 'If we are again to have a complete and homogeneous Scottish literature it is necessary that we should have a complete and homogeneous language [...] English is the only practicable one at present, whatever Gaelic may become in the future'.<sup>98</sup>

Consistent with his view in *Scottish Journey*, Scottish nationalism is seen as an unconvincing remedy to Scotland's plight, a movement that goes against his 'reading of history',<sup>99</sup> arguing that Scotland's cultural 'hiatus'<sup>100</sup> 'cannot be solved by writing poems in Scots or by looking forward to some hypothetical Scotland of the future'.<sup>101</sup> Muir's Socialism takes a back seat to his desire for national unity; a unity he believed could only be achieved through the use of English. Aside from the problematic linguistic absolutism of his final proposal, Muir adopts the premise that identity (both individual and collective) must be crystalized into a wholly unified entity to be meaningful and he chooses not to explore any other avenue with regard to how this might be achieved.

As with *Scottish Journey*, Muir is drawing heavily on his own experiences and extrapolating conclusions from them rather than allowing any line of dissent to enter his argument. The over-emphasis on the idea of unity, although logically deduced from his critique of Scott and the history of Scottish literature is also a product of his own soul-searching during this time, as well as a response to the threats he saw being posed by the impersonal forces of fascism, Communism, and competitive individualism.

Muir had been honing the key ideas within *Scott and Scotland* for some time. For instance, in 'Scott and Tradition' (1932),<sup>102</sup> he can be seen attempting to gauge Scott's

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., pp.21-22.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p.172.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p.22.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., pp.11-12.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p.178.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p.181.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p.11.

<sup>101</sup> Muir (1936), p.16.

<sup>102</sup> 'Scott and Tradition', *The Modern Scot*, III (August 1932), in Muir (1982), pp.208-210.

significance and relation to English and Scottish literature, concluding that Scott, ‘a man of great native genius and of enormous inventive powers’, had nevertheless been responsible for lowering the ‘standards of literature’ through his exclusion of social criticism from the tradition of the novel, and introducing an alien ‘gentility’ into Scottish literature, a tendency that ‘must make even carnage pleasing and picturesque’.<sup>103</sup> In ‘Sir Walter Scott’ (1932)<sup>104</sup> Castigating the lifelessness of Scott’s leading characters, Muir applauds the ‘eloquent figures’ he draws from the ‘Scottish peasantry’, and in particular Scott’s rendering of the Scots language, which is ‘not ordinary spoken Scots, but spoken Scots deliberately heightened, consciously used as means of literary expression’.<sup>105</sup>

The quality of Scott’s use of Scots is only briefly touched upon in *Scott and Scotland* but when Muir does so it is to bring his ideas into unison and underline the central strain of his argument:

as the Scots vernacular did not come out of a unity, he felt that it could not express a unity; so for the structural, the unifying, part of his work relied upon English [...] the determining fact was a social and political one: that he lived in a country which could not give an organic form to his genius.<sup>106</sup>

That Scottish literature and culture had come to occupy such a marginalized position as the one Muir describes was beyond doubt, and advancing the idea that the interdependence of language and identity is a central issue in any attempt to reverse that situation was clearly important, but to suggest that one language, and one language alone, presented the only way forward was a proposal destined to provoke controversy. Muir had already grafted his poetry ‘on to the great tree of English literature’<sup>107</sup> and he is suggesting that all Scottish writers should do likewise. To argue that no other future was imaginable says a great deal about Muir’s inability to appreciate the value of linguistic diversity, an anxiety that was no doubt exaggerated by the pessimism that he was experiencing personally.

While not agreeing with all the findings, Mackay Brown admired the ‘purity of statement’<sup>108</sup> that is achieved in *Scott and Scotland*, and, as Noble catalogues, Muir’s study was warmly welcomed by many of his literary peers, with Janet Adam Smith,<sup>109</sup> Neil Gunn, Catherine Carswell and William Soutar, all among the first reviewers and

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p.210.

<sup>104</sup> ‘Sir Walter Scott’, *The Spectator* 5439 (24/09/1932), pp.364-365, in Muir (1982), pp.211-214.

<sup>105</sup> Muir (1982), pp.213-214.

<sup>106</sup> Muir (1935), pp.174-175. See ‘Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832)’, in *From Anne to Victoria: Essays by Various Hands*, Bonamy Dobrée ed. (London: Cassell & Co. Ltd., 1937), in Muir (1982), pp.528-545.

<sup>107</sup> Willa Muir (1968), pp.115-16.

<sup>108</sup> Muir (1987), p.2.

<sup>109</sup> Janet Adam Smith, ‘The Language of Scotland’, *London Mercury* XXXIV (October 1936), pp.567-557. Muir (1982), p.52.

commentators to recognise its significance and its felicitous timing.<sup>110</sup> This not to suggest there was consensus regarding Muir's proposals, far from it, but as Soutar recognised

a repudiation of Mr Muir's prognosis in no way invalidates the excellence of his dissection upon the broken corpus of the Scottish language; an investigation which makes his book not only one of the most valuable contributions to contemporary Scottish studies, but also a challenge to every Scottish writer.<sup>111</sup>

The depth of Muir's analysis and the value of its contribution is impressive but the haste at which he arrives at his conclusion, particularly given its implications, is contentious. Brevity was certainly a contributing factor and attempting a less ambitious task may well have yielded a more thoroughly argued set of findings. Although understanding that the past was an unstable 'basis for a modern tradition',<sup>112</sup> Muir's attempt to imagine the future dismisses the present too quickly; the fixation on psychological unity leading him to reject the importance of linguistic diversity and the strength that a society gains through its dissident voices. Immersed in the ephemeral contingencies of the day, Muir seems to have momentarily lost sight of the greater harmony usually gifted to him through his faith in eternity.

Soutar's claim that *Scott and Scotland* would be a 'challenge to every Scottish writer' was true for some more than others, and given the explicit dismissal of the revival of Scots, the severity of the response from Grieve was unsurprising. For Grieve the offence was compound, being both personal and political, and writing to Neil Gunn three months after *Scott and Scotland* appeared he described it as an act of 'sabotage [...] an infernally dirty piece of work'.<sup>113</sup> For Grieve, Muir was an example of the 'enemy' within and as he lamented to his friend and nationalist agitator Roland Muirhead, 'we must expect to receive our most painful wounds in the "house of our friends"'.<sup>114</sup> Muir had dedicated his biography of Knox 'in admiration' of Grieve's endeavours and their association dated back over a decade, so it is unsurprising that the wound that Grieve received at the hand of Muir was one that never fully healed. Prior to the full publication of *Scott and Scotland*, Grieve had already read enough to alert him to the provocative nature of some of Muir's more controversial pronouncements, and immediately sought to 'prevent him exercising an influence' that would prove 'harmful on our younger Scottish writers'.<sup>115</sup> That Grieve's

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<sup>110</sup> Muir (1982), pp.53-54.

<sup>111</sup> William Soutar, 'Debateable Land', *Outlook* I (October 1936), pp.87-90. Muir (1987), p.54.

<sup>112</sup> Muir (1936), pp.180-181.

<sup>113</sup> Letter to William Soutar (21/12/1936) in Hugh MacDiarmid, *The Collected Letters of Hugh MacDiarmid*, Alan Bold ed. (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984), p156.

<sup>114</sup> Letter to R.E. Muirhead (08/02/1940). Bold (1984), p.300.

<sup>115</sup> Letter to Catherine Carswell (15/08/1936). Bold (1984) pp.427-428

volume on *Red Scotland*, which was to have followed *Scott and Scotland* in the Routledge ‘Voices of Scotland’ series, was dropped served only to fuel his ire. In an unpublished response to Muir’s essay ‘A Literature Without a Language’,<sup>116</sup> Grieve branded Muir as one of the leaders of the ‘Anglo-Scottish literati and a noted connoisseur of buttered bread’, and in a subsequent letter of complaint refers to Muir as a member of ‘a historically doomed class of petit-bourgeois due for liquidation’.<sup>117</sup>

As Grieve explained to Peter Butter, ‘the trouble was that Muir had been privy to what F.G. Scott and I were doing and had never voiced any disagreement with our aims. So his sudden attack in *Scott and Scotland* was a stab-in-the-back’.<sup>118</sup> Grieve also took the opportunity to deny Butter’s assertion that he had ‘pursued him vindictively ever since’ adding that

I cannot agree that he is a good, let alone an important, poet. I do not believe at all from my knowledge of him in his professed Christianity or his near saint-hood of character. On the contrary I do not believe he had any intellectual integrity at all.<sup>119</sup>

Grieve discussed Muir’s critique of Scots in *The Golden Treasury of Scottish Poetry* (1940) and at length in *Lucky Poet* (1943), in which he cites Muir’s essays from the 1920s praising his own poetry, and goes on to argue why Scots is an equally capable medium for abstract thought as English.<sup>120</sup>

Some of the background for the sustained nature of Grieve’s response resides in the fact that he had conversed extensively with Muir for some years on the subject of Scottish politics, language and the need for a cultural revival. It was through conversation with Grieve that Muir had been inspired to write the *Freeman* magazine article on ‘The Functionlessness of Scotland’ (1931) in which he suggests that Scotland was ‘a nation without a central organ to give it unity’, arguing that nationalism was ‘a must’ being the only path essentially compatible with ‘the old, complete human tradition’.<sup>121</sup> No matter how cynical he became about the motivations and desired ends of the nationalists, Muir seemed to remain in little doubt that independence was the only tenable way forward for Scotland, and as he proposes somewhat bleakly in his *Criterion* review of G.M. Thomson’s *Scotland: That Distressed Area* (1936),<sup>122</sup> Scottish independence is as much in the interest

<sup>116</sup> ‘A Literature Without a Language’, *Outlook*, I (03/06/1936), pp.84-89.

<sup>117</sup> Letter to J.H. Whyte (01/07/1936). Bold (1984), pp.851-853.

<sup>118</sup> Letter to Peter Butter (22/12/66). Bold (1984), p.868.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p.868.

<sup>120</sup> Hugh MacDiarmid, *Lucky Poet: A Self-Study in Literature and Political Ideas* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1943), pp.20-22 & 28-30, 33 & 35.

<sup>121</sup> *The Freeman* (11/02/1931), p.6. Reprinted in Muir (1982), pp.105-107.

<sup>122</sup> Review of *Scotland: That Distressed Area* (1936), *Criterion*, XV (January 1936), pp.330-332. Reprinted in Muir (1982), pp.115-117.

of England: 'for her own sake and for the sake of Scotland; otherwise she may find that a still important part of her kingdom will have sunk past hope and recovery'.<sup>123</sup>

Given the depth of his political insight it is unfortunate that Muir set out to attack the Nationalists so explicitly and chose the subject of a 'homogenous language' to be his totem in *Scott and Scotland* rather than exploring how the revitalization of Scottish life and literature could be brought about. Muir could not imagine a future in which English was not the only language which would be used for all areas of social and artistic discourse, and for better or worse, that pronouncement has proved itself to be fairly accurate. Yet the lack of confidence in Scotland's ability to embrace and flourish through linguistic diversity is a critical shortcoming. While his opinions were informed by the debates of the day, they are also heavily overshadowed by a philosophical pessimism exasperated by his less-than-robust mental health and the strain of trying to maintain a metaphysical faith while feeling dislocated from his own past and deeply uncertain about the future.

This uncertainty, however, was not without its compensations. The challenges Muir faced during the mid and late 1930s, aside from inspiring some highly vivid and engaging poetry, led him to begin collecting the thoughts and recollections that would form the basis of *The Story and the Fable*, and they also paved the way for his reconciliation with Christianity, which was a profound breakthrough for him, both spiritually and creatively.

During the 1930s Muir produced over four hundred reviews, articles and essays (and collaborated with Willa in at least twenty-two translations), and *Scottish Journey* and *Scott and Scotland* certainly demonstrate an accomplished critic thoroughly absorbed in the debates of the day. Despite the longing backward glances as he scans Scottish history for evidence for his theorizing, the primary focus of his Scottish criticism remains fixed on the present and the immediate future. Both studies depict Scotland as a country dislocated from its own history, a fallen state whose people have become displaced within their homeland (the scenario that is powerfully allegorized in *Variations*). Through their abstract representations of displacement and dislocation (both temporal and spatial), *Six Poems*, *Variations*, and *Journeys* form an exploration of the furthest reaches of imaginable human time, the scale of his abstractions allowing expressions of stoicism, faith and hope to enter the frame to occasionally defeat the deterministic fatalism that is evoked in so many of these poems. There is no lasting impression of a reconciliation having been achieved between time and eternity in any one of these poems, and it is that unresolved quality that has contributed to their marginal status in comparison to the cohesion offered in Muir's poetry from the 1940s and 1950s. This is an unfortunate irony as it is this unresolved

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., p.117.

quality which forms the essential strength of the most successful poems from this period (as the four closing poems of *Journeys* illustrate). No matter how superficially unattractive it may be, this demonstrates a reluctance to accept a convenient or ill-won resolution, highlighting the creative and philosophical integrity that underpins the best of Muir's metaphysical poetry. Whether it is within the context of a mythological, allegorical, or apocalyptic landscape, *Variations* and *Journeys* demonstrate a heightened level of conceptual and creative engagement with the subjects of time and mortality, forming insightful and resonant articulations in their own right and offering auguries of the material and spiritual conflicts and reconciliations that Muir tackles in his later poetry.

## Chapter Eight

### Eternity Written and Hidden: Recognition and Reconciliation

#### Edinburgh, Prague and Rome (1939-1949)

Having started gathering material for *The Story and the Fable*, by the spring of 1938 Muir was undergoing a period of intense introspection, and as his diaries from this time suggest, this process stirred up many joyful as well as traumatic memories and provoked numerous vivid dreams.<sup>1</sup> As Muir describes in a diary entry from April 1938, this search for self-knowledge was motivated not only by his own inner turmoil, but also by a desire to better understand the ideologically charged atmosphere of contemporary Europe. As he writes,

the more you observe yourself the more you observe other people and the world in general. So introspection needs no apology. The great sin is to let everything go past in a sort of dream or stupor; aware neither of yourself nor of the world: the ordinary stage of man.<sup>2</sup>

The journey through the past into the present, as Muir sees it, is one that must be reviewed, lest we lose our place and end up in the same lost world as the inhabitants of ‘Scotland’s Winter’.<sup>3</sup> During his days in Glasgow, he felt he had lived in an existential ‘stupor’ and he was keen not to let the past repeat itself so Muir began thoroughly interrogating his view of the world. In particular, he was experiencing a great deal of trouble maintaining a belief that an immortal soul resided in every human and was increasingly becoming fixated with the animalistic aspects of human nature. The major breakthrough in his quest to reconcile his belief in eternity with the corporeal nature of humanity did not come through intellectualization alone; it was achieved through the combined realization of the importance of self-knowledge, faith and love.

Willa, long plagued by the gynaecological aftermath of Gavin’s birth, relapsed in the winter of 1938 and was admitted to hospital. The severity of her illness and the fear it induced in Muir brought him to consider what life would be like without her. The surgery was ultimately successful and by March 1939 Willa was out of danger and beginning her convalescence.<sup>4</sup> Having already experienced a series of minor visionary and aesthetic epiphanies during the summer of 1938—which Butter proposes ‘gave him a

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Diary March 1938–August 1939’. NLS MS 19668. See Butter (1966), pp.158-160.

<sup>2</sup> Butter (1966), p.159.

<sup>3</sup> Muir (1935), p.46. *CP*, p.214.

<sup>4</sup> Willa Muir (1968), p.201.

renewed sense of the glory of the physical world'<sup>5</sup>—Muir identifies the moment of his reconciliation to Christianity as 28 February 1939. While alone (Willa was still in the Cottage Hospital), undressing for bed, Muir suddenly became aware that he was reciting aloud the Lord's Prayer, a thing he had not done since his early adulthood.<sup>6</sup> Repeating it over and over again, he drew new meaning with every recitation:

the meanings it contained, none of them extraordinary, indeed ordinary as they could be, overcame me with joyful surprise, and made me seem to realise that this petition was always universal, always adequate, and to life as it is, not to a life such as we long for or dream of: and for that reason it seems to sanctify common existence. Everything in it, apart from the Being to which it is addressed, refers to human life, seen realistically, not mystically. It is about the world and society, not about the everlasting destiny of the soul.<sup>7</sup>

This is the extract from Muir's dairy rather than the edited version Muir recalls in his autobiography and it gives a fuller sense of his recognition that through Christian doctrine the eternal can be seen manifest within the corporeal, that

to pray as "we" is not only to embrace in the prayer all human life, all the aspirations of mankind for the perfect kingdom when God's will shall be done on earth; it is for the individual soul a pledge for all other souls, an act of responsibility, and an act of union which strengthens him from within and at the same time lends him infinite strength from without.<sup>8</sup>

The communal aspect of this passage reflects Muir's visionary experience of his first May Day March in Glasgow where he recalls how 'all substance had been transmuted'<sup>9</sup> by the mass of humanity moving in unison, an experience he re-works into Mansie's May Day experience in *Poor Tom* where 'all distinction had been lost, all substance transmuted'.<sup>10</sup> 'Socialism', declares Mansie, is 'Christianity in practice',<sup>11</sup> and in his exegesis of the Lord's Prayer Muir rediscovered a way of thinking about time and humanity's place within it that resonated with the socialist values that remained integral to his view of society. Yet those values never crystalized into a philosophy of life, as Muir explained to Alex Aitken, 'I have no philosophy [...] no explanation for Time except as an unofficial part of eternity—no historical explanation for human life'.<sup>12</sup> Despite this uncertainty, Muir was becoming increasingly aware that 'there may be

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<sup>5</sup> Butter (1966), p.166.

<sup>6</sup> *Auto*, p.246.

<sup>7</sup> Butter (1966), p.168.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.169.

<sup>9</sup> *SF*, p.135.

<sup>10</sup> *PT*, p.93.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.93.

<sup>12</sup> Letter to Alec Aitken (04/01/1940). *SL*, p.112.

something more in faith than we can account for, a source of energy and reconciliation which philosophy cannot reach'.<sup>13</sup> As Muir recalls, 'I had a vague sense during these days that Christ was the turning-point of time and the meaning of life to everyone, no matter what his conscious beliefs'.<sup>14</sup> The acceptance that 'a real life can only begin with a resurrection'<sup>15</sup> gave Muir the impetus to start speculating about Christ's role with regard to humanity's place within time. Through Christ's resurrection life and death become reconcilable and time, whose entry into the world comes through the Fall, is seen as an aspect of eternity rather than its counterpart. Muir does not discuss the significance of this revelation in *The Story and the Fable* but later refers to it *An Autobiography* as he appears unsure in 1940 what significance it will hold. Having experienced several conversions in his adolescence and early adulthood, he clearly had no wish to mislead himself again.

The revelation was not a false conversion, indeed it was not a conversion at all; it was the acceptance of something he had long felt yet had been unable to articulate. His disregard of religious institutions ensured that he never joined a church and it was not until they moved to Rome in 1949 that Muir began to appreciate that a religion can contribute as much to the lives of its adherents as it demands. From 28 February 1939 Muir resigned himself to the fact that he was 'a Christian, no matter how bad a one',<sup>16</sup> and the spiritual resurgence he received from this realization allowed him to endure the war years in a relatively sound psychological and emotional state despite periods of physical infirmity. His religious reconciliation also led to a series of creative breakthroughs and it was during this period that Muir wrote his first love poems to his wife, 'witnesses to True Love', that she was very glad to have after his passing.<sup>17</sup>

The start of the war brought an end to the German translations that Muir had relied upon to supplement the income from his weekly reviews in *The Scotsman* and his regular 'New Novels' column in *The Listener*. Hermann Broch stayed with the Muirs for a month after he escaped from Nazi Austria. Willa found work at New Park School in St Andrews where Gavin was enrolled but by January 1941 the bulk of her wages were withheld to cover fees.<sup>18</sup> Unable to get teaching work, Muir spent the opening years of the war as a clerk in the Dundee Food Office, his daily train ride from Leuchars station inspiring the poem 'The Wayside Station'.<sup>19</sup> The poem is a study of the light as

<sup>13</sup> Letter to Alec Aitken (04/01/1940). *SL*, p.112.

<sup>14</sup> *Auto*, p.247.

<sup>15</sup> *SL*, p.112.

<sup>16</sup> *Auto*, p.247.

<sup>17</sup> Willa Muir (1968), p.211.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.207.

<sup>19</sup> 'Poem', *Listener*, XXV (20/03/1940), p.411. *The Narrow Place* (1943), *CP*, p.95.

it as begins to whittle away the darkness and continues the ceaseless ‘winding journey/Through the day and time and war and history’ (25). It shows Muir focusing on the hope that comes with the light of each new day. It is a poem of continuity and renewal, and its optimism, like Muir’s renewed faith, is tentative but nevertheless palpable.

By the end of 1941 Muir had secured a post at the British Council’s International Houses in Edinburgh, beginning his appointment on 2 March 1942.<sup>20</sup> During the summer of 1941 Muir had been invited by Harvey Wood, the British Council Representative in Edinburgh, to give a lecture on English Literature to a group of Polish officers, and the lecture was such a success that Wood was keen to secure Muir’s services.<sup>21</sup> One of the main duties was to organize lectures and entertainment for the residents and through his literary contacts in London Muir solicited a regular stream of writers including Herbert Grierson, T.S. Eliot, Stephen Spender and John Betjeman, as well as international figures including Paul Eluard, Louis Aragon and Raymond Aron.<sup>22</sup> The vibrancy and diversity of the houses, occupied by allied servicemen and foreign civilians, invigorated Muir’s imagination and Willa recalls how he would take long tram and train journeys through Edinburgh and beyond to the Pentland hills and the coast in order to cajole his ideas to the fore, many of these ‘Tram Poems’ being collected in *The Voyage* (1946).<sup>23</sup> *The Scots and Their Country* (1946), a mannerly and succinct introduction to Scottish culture and history written for the British Council, suggests something of the convivial atmosphere that Muir enjoyed in Edinburgh and the closing endorsement for Scottish ‘Home Rule’<sup>24</sup> expresses a quiet confidence absent from the fervent pronouncements of *Scott and Scotland*.

Muir was once again at the heart of cultural and literary activity, albeit they were somewhat overshadowed by the war. Muir’s involvement with the BBC, dating back to his first St Andrew’s Day broadcast in 1936, led to a series of seven programmes entitled ‘The Book of Scotland’ that were broadcast between 1941-1942 and he was also a contributor to the Scottish affairs ‘Chapbook’ (1943-44) magazine programme.<sup>25</sup>

Soon after the war ended, Muir secured the post of Director of the British Institute in Prague, a city the Muirs were eager to revisit, and he enjoyed two engaging and creative years there. As part of his additional duties he delivered bi-weekly lectures on English literature to hundreds of students at Charles University with his weekly seminar

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<sup>20</sup> *Auto*, p.249.

<sup>21</sup> Butter (1966), p.189.

<sup>22</sup> *Auto*, p.250 and Willa Muir (1968), p.210.

<sup>23</sup> Willa Muir (1968), p.210.

<sup>24</sup> *The Scots and Their Country* (London: British Council, 1946), p.31.

<sup>25</sup> Butter (1966), pp.191-193.

groups proving very popular and lively affairs. Muir was involved with the Prague branch of PEN and attended the Zurich Congress (1947) as one of their delegation.<sup>26</sup> At the invitation of the Austrian British Council Representative, Muir delivered a series of lectures at the Universities of Vienna, Innsbruck, and Graz.<sup>27</sup> As a mark of recognition and gratitude for his contribution to their English Department, Muir was awarded an honorary PhD from Charles University at a ceremony for his sixtieth birthday on 15 May 1947.<sup>28</sup>

Given its timing, its political relevance, and the shortage of texts at Charles University, it is highly likely that his students would have enjoyed material from his lecture on Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of King Lear* (1605) delivered at Glasgow University 23 April 1946, published as *The Politics of King Lear* (1947). According to Muir's critique, the play is one in which 'two ideas of society are directly confronted, and the old generation and the new are set face to face, each assured of its right to power'.<sup>29</sup> The play symbolizes, Muir asserts, the crumbling medieval world order, as the 'old idea' of society is overthrown by 'the new'. Because of their revolutionary rejection of the past and their inherent 'will to power', 'the new generation may be then regarded as the embodiment of wickedness'.<sup>30</sup> Comparing the symbolic power struggle at the heart of the play with the rise of Fascism in Italy and Germany, Muir proposes that the play forms a 'mythical drama of the transmutation of civilization': 'the communal tradition, filled with memory, has been smashed by an individualism that exists in its perpetual shallow present'.<sup>31</sup> Shakespeare's portrait of Edmund reveals what lies behind the outward finery of the 'new Renaissance man':

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.<sup>32</sup>

Recognizing that Shakespeare lived in 'a violent period of transition', Muir proposes that 'the old world still echoed in his ears; he was aware of the new as we are aware of the future, that is as an inchoate, semi-prophetic dream'.<sup>33</sup> Here, Muir appears to be

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<sup>26</sup> R.A. Wilford, 'The PEN Club, 1930-50', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.14, No.1 (January 1979), 99-116, p.111.

<sup>27</sup> Butter (1966), pp.210-211.

<sup>28</sup> Willa Muir (1968), p.227.

<sup>29</sup> *The Politics of King Lear* (Glasgow: University of Glasgow Press, 1947), pp.7-8. Reproduced in Muir (1949), pp.31-48.

<sup>30</sup> Muir (1947), pp.15-16.

<sup>31</sup> Muir (1947), p.24.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p.24.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p.7.

speaking for himself as much as of Shakespeare, expressing his own understanding of how it feels to be caught up in the conflict between two starkly contrasting visions of society.

The contemporary relevance of Muir's interpretation of *King Lear* to the Prague students would have been clearly evident, and unfortunately they would scarcely have had a chance to reflect on it before the next violent round of social 'transmutation' was upon them. As Muir suggested to the young Communist who was minding Graham Greene on his visit to the city directly after the Communist *putsch* in February 1948: "why it's Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil!" all over again".<sup>34</sup> The young idealist denied the comparison but the parallel was clear; the new order had overthrown the old and was asserting its 'right to power' just as the previous regime had done before it.

The bureaucratic battles which were a constant frustration to Muir and his staff were nothing compared with the social and intellectual clampdown that followed the Communist coup. By July 1948 Muir was convinced that he could no longer teach at the University nor run the Institute due to the levels of censure and interference being exerted under the new Communist authorities and with the strain seriously affecting his health. Muir secured a transfer on medical grounds and returned to England at the start of August. The exertion of the journey and the stress of the preceding months led to a nervous breakdown. They relocated to Hampstead to wait for a suitable offer from the British Council. In December a post was found and Muir became the Director of The Institute in Rome in January 1949.<sup>35</sup> The move to Italy had a restorative effect on the couple and although his appointment was terminated after only sixteen months, the positive impact of their time in Rome made a lasting impression on him, both creatively and spiritually. The atmosphere created by his predecessor meant that on his first day Muir felt like he 'was breaking into an Eden' and he was greatly relieved that the 'Institute remained a form of talkative Eden and was the most friendly, kind, busy place imaginable'.<sup>36</sup>

The contentment that Muir enjoyed at the Institute allowed him to be unguardedly receptive to Italian culture, and in particular, he reconnected with the essential and organic nature of human society he had first experienced as a child:

I had known fresh and natural speech among Orkney farmers living close to the cattle and the soil, but not till now among men and women moulded by city life, and sometimes of subtle mind. From such people what one expects is sophistication, but here there was

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<sup>34</sup> *Auto*, p.265.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.272-273.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.275-276.

something quite different, for which sophistication seemed a vulgar substitute [...] 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.<sup>37</sup>

In likening Rome with the Orkney Islands Muir is making a strong statement about the warmth of his feelings for the city and the people. Despite having a history ‘drenched in blood and blackened with crime’,<sup>38</sup> Rome was also saturated with religious iconography and through his daily absorption of devotional art Muir gained an appreciation of the innate humanity of Christ, an understanding of the Incarnation far removed from that delivered in the austere sermons of his childhood.<sup>39</sup> Through Catholic iconography Muir came to recognize that ‘Christ was born in flesh and had lived on earth’.<sup>40</sup> What he was moved by were not images of Christ preserved in eternity, rendered immutable beyond time, but a Christ inside time, clothed in flesh. In Rome Muir came to understand that flesh has a sanctity in its own right and that time need not be thought of as an opponent of eternity, as he had so often argued in his poetry, but can equally be thought of as a manifestation of it.

### ***The Present Age from 1914 (1939)***

Before discussing Muir’s inquiry into the nature of time in *The Narrow Place* (1943) and *The Voyage* (1946), giving specific attention to the impact of his spiritual and creative breakthrough in 1939, it is worth looking at *The Present Age from 1914* (1939) as it bears some relevance to how he believed our collective experience of time was changing. *The Present Age* is an attempt to discover the direction in which contemporary society and literature are heading and mirrors the critical intent behind *Transition* in that it seeks to establish the characteristics of the *zeitgeist*. The discussion is divided in accordance with the major literary forms of the period: poetry, genre fiction, general prose, criticism and drama. Exploring the evidence from each of the genres in turn, Muir proposes that there are three distinguishable periods that constitute the first four decades of the Twentieth Century:

The century began with a belief in the future, lost that belief and relapsed into a mood of hopelessness tempered by faith in the past, and has now

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<sup>37</sup> *Auto*, p.275.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p.277.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p.277.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p.278.

returned to a modified belief in the future, coloured by the intervening disillusionment.<sup>41</sup>

Identifying the ‘effect of millennial time’ on the later poetry of W.B. Yeats,<sup>42</sup> the temporal double-vision in *The Waste Land*,<sup>43</sup> Wyndham Lewis’ opposition to the ‘flow’ of time in James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and in the ‘time philosophies’ of Bergson,<sup>44</sup> Muir reaches the conclusion that the current age can be thought of as a ‘period of disintegration’.<sup>45</sup> This verdict does not necessarily lead to a pessimistic prognosis, quite the reverse:

the disintegration, though actual, a general calamity, a general emergency as palpable as the wrecking of the ship in which we all sail, is not merely disintegration, but a mode of change, painful, critical, filled with extreme dangers, but containing also the possibility of a new organisation of society.<sup>46</sup>

For Muir, a significant contributing factor to this ‘disintegration’ has been our inability to deal with ‘the rapidity of social change itself’ and ‘this speeding up of change has profoundly affected our feelings of Time and led to an unusual insistence on its importance quite apart from the various time-philosophies which have appeared’.<sup>47</sup> The idea that sudden change can bring about a heightened awareness of time was one that Muir was deeply aware of and it was around the same time that he was writing these remarks that he commented in his diary that he felt he had ‘skipped a hundred and fifty’ years in a single ferry journey from Kirkwall to Leith.<sup>48</sup> The metaphor of the shipwreck is a telling one and the ‘general calamity’ that ensued in Glasgow took Muir many years to fully come to terms with.<sup>49</sup> His remarks in *The Present Age* are evidence of how he was using his critical writings as well as poetry to better understand his own history as well that of the literature and society he cared so much about.

Time and transition were very much on his mind during the writing of *The Present Age* and *The Story and The Fable*, but as Elizabeth Jennings persuasively

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<sup>41</sup> Muir (1939), p.23.

<sup>42</sup> Muir (1939), p.58.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p.84.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p.137. Lewis attacks the misguided ‘mystical time-cult’ that he sees dominating contemporary thought. Wyndham Lewis, *Time and Western Man* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1927), pp.5-6, 53-54 & 101-103. Lewis savagely parodies the Muirs in his satirical novel *The Apes of God* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1981), p.300.

<sup>45</sup> Muir (1939), p.182.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p.183.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p.35.

<sup>48</sup> *SF*, p.263.

<sup>49</sup> As he explained to Herbert Read, Glasgow was ‘where all the calamities came upon the Muir family. I feel I probably have a sort of obsession about Time [...] Instead of seeing Time as the dimension of growth, I see everything passing away’. Letter to Herbert Read (12/05/1940). *SL*, pp.119-120.

asserts, although ‘time itself’ is just ‘one of the great themes of Muir’s work’,<sup>50</sup> it is ‘extremely important to bear in mind that Muir’s obsession with time *is* an obsession, not in any pathological sense but in the sense of one man’s urgent and often tormented inquiry into the meaning of change, rebirth, decay and changelessness’.<sup>51</sup> The unusually ‘slow sureness’ of Muir’s poetic development, proposes Jennings, is due to the fact that his poetry was not merely a ‘marginal comment’ on his life but a direct expression of it.<sup>52</sup> Jennings is also correct in recognizing that while Muir’s later poems shine with an ‘acceptance’ and are ‘more profound in meaning and interpretation’ than many of the earlier ones, he would have been unable to have written them if the ‘earlier struggling ones had not preceded them’.<sup>53</sup> What Jennings is identifying here is the organic relation between Muir’s spiritual and intellectual development and his poetry. As she suggests, *The Narrow Place* does attain ‘a new subtlety and strength’,<sup>54</sup> but there is also a tentative, yet equally evident, reconciliation to life in the round. His faith, although stimulated by metaphysical doubts and insecurities, appears to have been the vehicle through which Muir was able to re-engage with the material and emotional aspects of life more positively. In more ways than one, it was a link with his childhood, but his renewed faith was also the beginning of a new phase of his story.

### ***The Narrow Place* (1943)**

The significance of Muir’s recognition of faith in 1939 undoubtedly had a marked effect on the poetry he produced afterwards. That is not to suggest that it became any more Christian in nature; as Muir acknowledged, he had been writing what could be called Christian poetry for some time. Nor is it to suggest that there is a sudden change of attitude or approach. The change is one of attunement rather than adaptation, and it is marked by the move toward the reconciliation of the greater oppositions which feature so prominently in his writings: fiction and reality, captivity and freedom, life and death, flesh and spirit, time and eternity. There is also an increased confidence about the communication of faith, joy and love, expressions of emotion and thought which affirm themselves without justification or contradiction.

The quest for a unity of expression, of thought and emotion, is a major feature of the prose and poetry Muir produced during the 1930s as the previous chapter discusses, and his poetry from the 1940s to some extent bears the fruits of that labour and serves to

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<sup>50</sup> Jennings (1961), p.149.

<sup>51</sup> *SF*, p.151.

<sup>52</sup> Jennings (1961), p.148.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p.148.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p.154.

illustrate that his change of attitude is born of an evolutionary process rather than an abrupt *volte-face*. *The Narrow Place* illustrates this movement through the attainment of a more unified expression of the relationship between the past, the present and the future, and the collection achieves a sense of continuity and renewal made possible by the penetrating enquires that have gone before.

'To J.F.H. (1897-1934)'<sup>55</sup> opens the collection with a sudden burst of energy and pace much in contrast to its *in memoriam* title. The addressee of the poem is John Ferrar Holms, and it was inspired, as the poem relates, by the chance sighting of a soldier on a motorcycle who reminded the poet of his dead friend. The pace of the opening stanza is achieved through a series of internal rhymes and rhythmic cadences that capture a sense of the motorbike careering through the St Andrews streets. The use of colloquial terminology adds to the pacey quality of the delivery: 'The hundred mile long hurtling bowling alley,/To-day I saw you full tilt for the jack' (2-3). The internal rhyme on 'time's gate' (4) and 'flying fate' (6) also introduces the twinned ideas of time and fate that are explored in greater detail in the second stanza.

The poem operates by initially suspending time and allowing the motorcycle to be slowed down and its movement captured in detail, mirroring the desire of the persona to hold onto his sighting of the rider. Holms is simultaneously 'seven years dead' (12) and 'Trussed to the motor cycle' (5), being both 'a dead and living man' (16), having leaped 'death's low dike' (29) into 'here through here straight into here' (31). Then just as suddenly time is allowed to return to normal as 'The clock hand moved, the street slipped into place' (36) and the motorcyclist is seen to be no more than 'a chance face flying past' (35). The vision over, the persona reflects on the 'the terror and mystery/Of unrepeatable life' (39) and recognizes that there is a connection, a 'hole in space' (36), through which the past and the present can always connect, that his friend 'half wrapped in eternity' (40) is also half wrapped in time, alive always in the life he lived, a life he shared with others. The poem relates something of the vitality and dynamism of Holms's life but it is also about the energy that animates all life; a force that is seen in the 'burning comet's race' (26) as well as in the faces of those we love and remember.

An aubade for the Fife countryside, 'The Wayside Station'<sup>56</sup> uses the description of the dawn light making its transit over the landscape to illustrate the continuity of our collective experience of morning. 'Here is day again' (10), the light seems to announce, stoic and renewing, heedless of 'day and time and war and history' (25). There is a

<sup>55</sup> *Listener*, XXVI (24/07/1941), p.116. *CP*, pp.95-96.

<sup>56</sup> 'Poem', *The Listener* XXV (20/03/1949), p.411. *CP*, pp.96-97.

similar sense of continuity in the central metaphor of the 'The River'.<sup>57</sup> Winding its way through history, the persona imagines the river finding a place of 'peace' (37) beyond this 'burning world' (38), where 'The disciplined soldiers come to conquer nothing' (32) and 'March upon emptiness and do not know/Why all is dead and life has hidden itself' (33-34). 'The Refugees',<sup>58</sup> like the less than wholly successful 'Then',<sup>59</sup> that precedes it, is another war poem and although it laments that 'world's brow grows darker and the world's/hand rougher' (18-19), it refuses to accept that war is an inevitability of life. 'We bear the lot of nations/Of times and races' (20-21), 'We must shape here a new philosophy' (52) the persona decrees. To compare this bold statement of responsibility and intent to the uncertainty of the 'Can we' refrain of the last stanza of 'I' from *Variations* emphasizes the difference in attitude between the two poems; the time for hesitation and speculation has passed, the time of 'non-committal' (24) is over. Clearly inspired by his work with the British Council, the poem also sees Muir re-exploring the theme of displacement so prominent in *Variations* and *Journeys*, with the otherwise unremarkable poem 'The Prize',<sup>60</sup> echoing the line 'Did we come here' (1) from 'I' *Variations*.<sup>61</sup>

'Scotland 1941',<sup>62</sup> takes on the subject of Scottish history, and in a vein reminiscent of *Scott and Scotland* it tells how the Reformation was able to 'crush the poet with an iron text' (20) and how Burns and Scott, the 'sham bards of a sham nation' (30), have become the nation's 'mummied housegods' (29). The original final sentence,

If we could raise these bones so brave and wrong,  
Revive our ancient body, part by part,  
We'd touch to pity the annalist's tongue  
And gather a nation in our sorrowful heart (38-41)<sup>63</sup>

is far stronger than the tempered version in *The Narrow Place*,

Such wasted bravery idle as a song,  
Such hard-won ill might prove Time's verdict wrong,  
And melt to pity the annalist's iron tongue. (39-41)

The fact that this stanza was edited for inclusion in *The Narrow Place* suggests that he did not want the poem to carry any sense of sentimentality, having no wish to evoke 'pity' or become as 'idle as a song'. In the latter version the 'annalist's iron tongue'

<sup>57</sup> *CP*, p.97.

<sup>58</sup> *New Alliance*, Vol.1 No.1 (Autumn 1939), pp.61-65. *CP*, pp.98-99.

<sup>59</sup> *New Alliance*, Vol.1 (NS) No.1 (March 1940), p.8. *CP*, p.98.

<sup>60</sup> *Listener*, XXVI (30/10/1941), p.586. *CP*, pp.111-112.

<sup>61</sup> 'Did we come here/Through darkness or inexplicable light' (17). *CP*, p.51.

<sup>62</sup> *New Alliance*, Vol.2, No.3 (April-May 1941), p.9. *CP*, pp.100 101

<sup>63</sup> *CP*, p.330.

echoes the 'iron text' that silences the poet's tongue establishing a connection between the annalist and the poet; both have censure to overcome and both must exercise 'bravery' when facing the challenges of the past.

Forming something of a companion piece to 'Scotland 1941', 'The Ring'<sup>64</sup> opens with a similar account of generational discontinuity. 'Long since we were a family, a people' (1), the persona laments, yet the lack of historical figures or specific events in this poem allow it to act as a commentary on a universal, rather than a national, malaise. Unlike the pessimism of 'Scotland 1941' there is the promise that, despite the war being waged by animals dressed 'in human flesh' (11), mankind's true inheritance, 'Our treasure, still unruined and unmarred' (24), remains safe from harm. The ring here is a symbol of continuity and renewal, signifying a sacred gift passed from one generation to the next, a prize resistant to ephemeral tarnish and one that can only be accepted and never taken by force.

That 'A Letter'<sup>65</sup> directly follows 'Scotland 1941' lends support to Butter's proposition that the poem constitutes a response to Grieve's bitter criticism of Muir following the publication of *Scott and Scotland*. Using the trope of *memento mori*, the persona appeals to the addressee that only through 'reconciliation' (18) can they attain 'salvation' (24). It is interesting to note that although it was initially published in the winter of 1937, two years before his revelation of 1939, this poem is entirely in keeping with the attitude of renewal and consolidation that forms such an important feature of the collection as a whole.

The array of heraldic images and the use of underworked dream material in 'The Human Fold' and in 'The Narrow Place' somewhat undermine the more readily appreciable discussions of love, endurance and renewal that the poems deal with. More powerfully realized are the poems which deal with these themes directly or are approached through the imagery relating to Christ, and they also demonstrate the breadth of influences that Muir is able to draw upon. 'The Recurrence'<sup>66</sup> rejects the Nietzschean concept of 'eternal recurrence' through suggesting that while life is indeed full of renewal what the 'eye' (35) sees and 'the heart and the mind know/What has been can never return' (40-41). The final proof of this is given as the Passion of Christ: if all time did indeed return, the persona argues, Christ would be simply an 'Actor on the Tree' (44), 'miming pain/And counterfeit mortality' (46).<sup>67</sup> The image of 'Christ

<sup>64</sup> 'As in a dream the half-remembered word', *The Spectator*, CLXVII (26/12/1941), p.596. *CP*, pp.112-113.

<sup>65</sup> 'Letter II', *London Mercury*, XXXVII (November 1937), p.7. *CP*, p.101.

<sup>66</sup> *CP*, pp.104-105.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. *SF*, p.152.

hung upon the Cross' (21) is similarly used in 'Robert the Bruce'<sup>68</sup> to suggest how mortal life must pass 'by unreturning ways' (25-26), that the arrow of time must always point in one direction. In these two poems faith is beyond doubt and the experience of faith constitutes a form of knowledge in itself.

In 'The Good Man in Hell'<sup>69</sup>, Muir uses the notion of faith to speculate how it would only take one 'good man' with 'One doubt of evil' to

[...] bring down such a grace,  
Open the gate, all Eden would enter in,  
Hell would be a place like any other place,  
And love and hate and life and death begin. (17-20)

With rhetorical dexterity reminiscent to that of Satan from *Paradise Lost* (1667),<sup>70</sup> love is unified with hate and life with death. Hell, like heaven, exists beyond time. It is only through Eden, being fated to fall, that 'love and hate and life and death' have meaning. Their unification here carries with it the statement that hate and death are as essential to the liberty of the human spirit as love and life. Time is not the enemy in this equation; it is the paradox that gives meaning to human life.

The 'Postscript' section of poems appended to *The Narrow Place* includes the first love poetry that Muir wrote to his wife and it also includes his first explicit declarations of Christian faith. In 'The Annunciation',<sup>71</sup> Muir writes of his love for Willa through a meditation on the relationship of the body and the soul. 'Now in this iron reign/I sing of freedom' (1-2), the persona announces, and this freedom turns out to be the bondage of love, a love 'born/Here in a time and place' (21-22). The highest achievement, 'the most/That soul and body can' (30) do, is to find a unity within the individual so that they can become unified with another body and soul. The endurance of this physical and spiritual unison is reflected in the last stanza of 'The Commemoration',<sup>72</sup> where despite the passage of many years the bond of love holds firm. Here, love is a 'strong and subtle chain' (32), a 'monologue of two' (30), singing through the years like the 'echo of a bell' (27) that rust, rain nor 'time cannot undo' (31).

<sup>68</sup> 'Robert the Bruce Stricken with Leprosy: To Douglas', *New Alliance*, Vol.1 No.4 (June-July 1940), p.9. *CP*, pp.115-116.

<sup>69</sup> 'Poem', *New Verse*, No.28 (January 1938), p.3. *CP*, pp.105-106.

<sup>70</sup> 'The mind is its own place, and in itself/Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven' (I: 254-255). John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, in *Complete English Poems, Of Education, Areopagitica*, Gordon Campbell ed. (London: Dent, 1993), p.156.

<sup>71</sup> *CP*, p.117.

<sup>72</sup> *CP*, pp.118-119.

The effect of time is again seen to be insignificant by comparison with the endurance of love in 'The Confirmation'<sup>73</sup> which opens with a positive recognition and affirmation of love: 'Yes, yours, my love, is the right human face' (1). The addressee is then compared to 'A fountain in a waste,/A well of water in a country dry/Or anything that's honest and good' (7-9). The beloved is the owner of an 'open heart' (10) and 'an eye that makes the whole world bright' (9) and restores the air, the sea and the land to the way 'they were meant to be' (15). This is a love poem that consciously refuses to extol beauty but chooses instead to celebrate honesty, goodness and the spiritual and emotional nourishment that has openheartedly been gifted. The poem is a statement of heartfelt appreciation as well as a confirmation of love.

'The Day'<sup>74</sup> which concludes the collection has been noted for its accomplished construction (consisting of seventeen lines of verse forming one complete sentence) and for the way in which 'freedom and necessity, mortality and immortality [...are] brought together in a single vision'.<sup>75</sup> The deftness of its formal considerations and the focused intent of the poem are certainly noteworthy, but what is even more striking is the directness of its closing supplication:

Oh give me clarity and love that now  
The way I walk may truly trace again  
The in eternity written and hidden way;  
Make pure my heart and will, and me allow  
The acceptance and revolt, the yea and nay,  
The denial and the blessing that are my own. (12-17)

The request is simply formed and passionately delivered, and points to an acceptance that the 'eternity written and hidden way' resides within the poet himself, that the 'field of good and ill' (11) is tilled by his own hand. As in 'The Trophy',<sup>76</sup> where evil and good 'grow together and their roots are twisted/In deep confederation' (11-12) and where 'king and rebel are like brother to brother' (14), there is an appreciation that continuity necessitates a harmony of oppositions. Muir is writing about a new-found sense of balance and freedom, a liberation that comes through recognition that time is part of eternity, that mortality is the 'human face' of immortality.

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<sup>73</sup> *CP*, pp.117-118.

<sup>74</sup> *CP*, p.121.

<sup>75</sup> Butter (1966), p.204.

<sup>76</sup> *The Listener*, XXVI (18/12/1941), p.811. *CP*, p.116.

***The Voyage (1946)***

Despite taking its title from a poetic consideration of self-imposed constriction, *The Narrow Place* as a collection demonstrates a widening of Muir's imaginative vision. The move from St Andrews (which for Muir had become the 'narrow place') enabled him to continue this process, and although having previously described the city as an 'empty capital of the past',<sup>77</sup> he found himself immersed in a maelstrom of contemporary European life in Edinburgh. The majority of the poetry collected in *The Voyage* was written during Muir's time at the International Houses. The opening poem 'The Return of The Greeks',<sup>78</sup> although written and published shortly before the war in Europe had ended, anticipates the scene when the soldiers would come back 'Sleepwandering from the war' (2). A marked feature of this collection in contrast to *The Narrow Place* is the brevity and formal economy of the poetry and 'The Return of The Greeks' demonstrates how successfully Muir can convey his vision without relying on compound allegory or complex symbolism. The tightness of the ABABBA rhyme scheme, which reuses the last word of the first line as the last word of the last line in each of its eight stanzas, is reinforced through lines composed predominantly of iambic tetrameter verse. The sound patterning that this achieves is akin to the steady, yet occasionally faltering, marching quality which imitates the somnambulant steps of the returning troops. The returning soldiers are re-entering the world of time from the timeless world of war and are dismayed to find that nothing seems to have changed:

But everything trite and strange,  
The peace, the parcelled ground,  
The vinerows—never a change!  
The past and the present bound  
In one oblivious round  
Past thinking trite and strange. (31-36)

The only markers of time's passage are the grey hairs of their wives and their sons who have 'grown shy and tall' (38). As the poem closes the reader realizes that they have been sharing Penelope's view on the scene, as witnessed from her lonely tower.

The journey through timelessness back into the world of time is described at length in the collection's title poem. 'The Voyage',<sup>79</sup> as Butter identifies, shows the sailors's journey from the 'timelessness in which they have been voyaging' back into the 'familiar plain of ordinary life'.<sup>80</sup> Employing quatrains of tetrameter, the swaying of

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<sup>77</sup> Muir (1935), p.4.

<sup>78</sup> 'The Return', *New English Weekly*, II (May 1945), pp.235-236. *CP*, pp.125-126.

<sup>79</sup> *Orion* II (Autumn 1945), pp.7-9. *CP*, pp.134-136.

<sup>80</sup> Butter (1966), p.205.

the boat is captured within the slow and steady progress of the poem's ballad stanzas in a manner that evokes the cadences of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798). The *in medias res* opening of the poem joins the sailors lost at sea after weeks of aimless sailing. Disorientated, it appears to them as 'if the land had stolen away' (27):

We stood and stared until almost  
We saw no longer sky or sea,

But only the frame of time and space,  
An empty floor, a vacant wall,  
And on that blank no line to trace  
Movement, if we moved at all. (35-40)

Revisiting the trope of the stationary journey, Muir demonstrates the relativity of time and space from the perspective of the sailors: without an inertial frame of reference they cannot discern the passage of time nor movement through space, there is 'no line to trace' between the known and the unknown. A frame of reference is restored as soon as they see land and they are returned, tinged with disappointment, to the mundane world of time: 'A wound! We felt the familiar pain/And knew the place to which we were sent' (92). This closing conceit of precognition allows a passing allusion to Eliot's 'Little Gidding',<sup>81</sup> although it was 'Burnt Norton' which Muir recognized was closer to his own conceptualization of the 'contradiction of Time', as his *Spectator* review of 'Burnt Norton' illustrates:

a pure intellectual enquiry into the nature and forms of Time. It alternates between the most close argument and the most vivid imagery expressing the contradiction of Time, a contradiction implicit in the recurring phrase, 'At the still point of the turning world'.<sup>82</sup>

Given how similar its treatment of its subject matter is to Muir's own approach, it is unsurprising that Muir was so interested in Eliot's poem, particularly as the motif of 'the still point of the turning world' shares a high degree of similitude to his own notion of the stationary journey. 'The Rider Victory', evocative of the riders from 'II' of *Variations*, explores another aspect of the stationary journey by offering an image of movement held in stasis by capturing both rider and horse suddenly fixed in a heraldic

<sup>81</sup> 'We shall not cease from exploration/And the end of all our exploring/Will be to arrive where we started/And know the place for the first time' (V:26-29). T.S. Eliot, 'Little Gidding', *Four Quartets* (New York: Faber, 1944), p.59.

<sup>82</sup> 'Mr Eliot's Poetry', Review of T.S. Eliot's *Collected Poems 1909-1935* (1936), *The Spectator* (3/04/1936), p.622. 'At the still turning point of turning world./Words move, music moves/Only in time; but that which is only living/Can only die' (IV:10-V:3). T.S. Eliot, 'Burnt Norton', *Collected Poems 1909-1935* (London: Faber, 1936), pp.189-190.

stance. The sudden transition between stasis and movement, timelessness and time, in the concluding stanza of 'The Voyage' goes beyond poignant imagery and deals with the psychological impact of temporal dependency and the anxieties that can result from it.

'The Voyage' was inspired by a story told to Muir by Eric Linklater about a merchant ship which had been lost inside heavy fog and storms and had not had contact with any other vessel for many weeks.<sup>83</sup> Another story that Muir reshaped into verse was taken from David Scott's *Corporal Jack* (1943), in which an English soldier escapes from a prisoner of war camp in occupied France only to be recaptured in Northern Spain. In 'The Escape' Muir offers a 'partly real partly symbolical'<sup>84</sup> interpretation of this story. From stories of the recent war, 'The Castle'<sup>85</sup> sees Muir turn his attention to Scottish history and revisits the story of Cardinal David Beaton's murder in St Andrews during the Reformation. The 'wicked-looking, wee gate' through which Beaton's killers enter the castle as described in *The Three Brothers*<sup>86</sup> becomes 'a little private gate/A little wicked wicket gate' (18-19), opened by a 'wizened warder' (20).

A gate of a very different order is presented in 'Thought and Image',<sup>87</sup> where Christ enters this world 'through the gate of birth' (16) to 'save the entangled Soul' (14) of man. 'Past time and space the shaping Thought' (1) brings humanity into being but being 'wrought/Of water and clay' (1-2) the mortal host drags 'the embodied soul' (5) down with it into the 'dull earth' (12). Christ's entry into the world is to 'reverse its doom' (13) and to allow the soul to return to its origin beyond 'time and space'. As a short, lyrically pleasing rendering of the Passion of Christ, its brevity works in its favour but it does little to further any of the ideas the poem touches upon. Moreover, its easy dismissal of the 'human clay' (to borrow Auden's term)<sup>88</sup> lacks the celebration of *Felix culpa* that is manifest in 'Twice-Done, Once-Done':<sup>89</sup>

I could neither rise nor fall  
But that Adam fell.  
Had he fallen once for all  
There'd be nothing to tell. (5-8)

<sup>83</sup> Letter from Eric Linklater to P.H. Butter (06/08/1963). Butter (1966), p.205.

<sup>84</sup> Letter to Oscar Williams (19/11/1944). *SL*, p.140. See also *CP*, p.335.

<sup>85</sup> *The Listener* XXXIV (04/01/1945), p.12. *CP*, p.128.

<sup>86</sup> *TTB*, p.13.

<sup>87</sup> *CP*, pp.131-132.

<sup>88</sup> 'To me Art's subject is the human clay,/And landscape but a background to a torso;/All Cézanne's apples I would give away/For one small Goya or a Daumier'. W.H. Auden, *Letter to Lord Byron III* in W.H. Auden and Louis MacNeice, *Letters from Iceland* (London: Faber, 1937), p.103.

<sup>89</sup> *CP*, pp.132-133.

Here there is no lament for Eden, no concern for what happened before the Fall: it is the fallen world of time that matters, so much so that the persona beseeches humanity's progenitors for guidance, 'Teach me, teach me to believe' (15), he pleads of 'Father Adam and Mother Eve' (13). The petition is not simply for religious faith alone, a confirmation of a metaphysical reality beyond this world; it is a call for support to help him hold onto his regained faith in this world, to have faith enough to know that 'All time is unredeemable'<sup>90</sup> and yet still believe that it may be redeemed. The paradox is akin to that of Kierkegaard's challenge to believe 'on the strength of the absurd'.<sup>91</sup> It is the marriage of doubt and faith, a relationship where opposites do not cancel each other out but are recognized to be contingent upon each other.

With 'The Trophy' Muir seeks the union of opposites to demonstrate a natural concordance and this process can be similarly seen in 'Dialogue'.<sup>92</sup> Yet, in keeping with the playfulness of its ballad form, the poem also suggests that achieving a natural balance is not as straightforward as it may seem:

'If lover were by lover laid,  
And enemy brought to enemy,  
All that's made would be unmade  
And done would be the destiny  
Of time and eternity.'

'But love with love can never rest,  
And hate can never bear with hate,  
Each by each must be possessed,  
For, see, at every turning wait  
The enemy and the mate.' (6-15)

As the poem climaxes the cycle begins again and the reader is offered a vision of humanity in its ongoing struggle to deal with the extremities of both love and hate, counterparts that cannot be unified yet must always co-exist.

The collection's most enigmatic and visionary poems of recognition and reconciliation are the three which draw the volume to a close. 'A Birthday'<sup>93</sup> shows the poet reconnecting with his earliest memories of the natural world, his first sensations and impressions of 'Beast, insect, flower, earth, water, fire' (10). With 'acceptance' and

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<sup>90</sup> 'Time present and time past/Are both perhaps present in time future,/And time future contained in time past./If all time is eternally present/All time is unredeemable' (1-5). T.S. Eliot, 'Burnt Norton' in Eliot (1936), p.185.

<sup>91</sup> 'Faith is therefore no aesthetic emotion, but something far higher, exactly because it presupposes resignation; it is not the immediate inclination of the heart but the paradox of existence'. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, Alastair Hannay tr. (London: Penguin, 1985), pp.65 & 76.

<sup>92</sup> *CP*, pp.133-134.

<sup>93</sup> *Poetry-Scotland*, No.1 (1943), pp.12-13. *CP*, p.152.

‘gratitude’ (14) the mature poet recognizes the strength of this elemental connection, a union that he has carried within himself for ‘fifty years’ (12):

Now that I can discern  
It whole or almost whole,  
Acceptance and gratitude  
Like travellers return  
And stand where first they stood. (26-30)

There remains a degree of uncertainty regarding the precise nature of this connection and there is neither a bold claim made nor singular unified vision offered. Yet there is discernment enough to understand that the returning memories carry with them a gift that cannot be devalued by age nor by shifting perception and that his re-discovered ‘acceptance and gratitude’ is as genuine as the child’s first vision of the world.

In ‘All We’<sup>94</sup> an appreciation of the natural world is brought about through the experience of feeling ‘Pleasure in everything’ (5) but in this poem recognition is also given to ‘the maker’s solicitude,/Knowing the delicacy/Of bringing shape to birth’ (6-8). God is the great artificer, being one of those ‘who make/Things transitory and good’ (2) and who understands ‘the delicacy’ (7) required ‘To fashion the transitory’ (8), accepts the ‘ring’ (10) of the artist and joins those who have already pledged themselves ‘to the earth’ (11). ‘In Love for Long’<sup>95</sup> builds on the major themes of the poems that go before it—the sense of awe in ‘A Birthday’ and the beautiful transience of creation in ‘All We’—and delivers a quiet, yet powerful, revelation of both the sublime subtlety and fearful magnitude of existence. The poet-persona recognizes that he has ‘been in love for long/With what I cannot tell’ (2) and proceeds to explain that ‘It is not any thing,/And yet all being is; Being, being, being,/Its burden and bliss’ (14-16). The ineffability of this experience of being in love is as a delicate and as transitory as life itself, yet it is also unyielding as any universal law of nature:

This love a moment known  
For what I do not know  
And in a moment gone  
Is like the happy doe  
That keeps its perfect laws  
Between the tiger’s paws  
And vindicates its cause. (31-37)

The poise and majesty of the image of the doe resting between the tiger’s paws captures perfectly the twinned sense of fragility and force being described. The image is

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<sup>94</sup> *CP*, p.153.

<sup>95</sup> *CP*, pp.153-154.

more than just another contribution to the stock pile of heraldic vignettes that Muir amassed through his poetic career. It has a simplicity and poignancy, while never being reductive, that allows it to convey its symbolic meaning without elaboration or development.

What the poem describes is the love of life; not an image nor idea of life formulated or filtered through politics or religion, but life as it is experienced, the living and dying transitory world of experience, the organic yet spiritually animated world. A holistic vision of this kind cannot be conjured at will and, as the poem acknowledges, it is one the poet seldom experienced. It is 'A little paradise/Held in the world's vice' (23-24), yet it 'flourishes sweet and wild' (28) in the imagination. That it constitutes, as Jennings proposes, 'the credo of his life',<sup>96</sup> is hard to confirm but his realization that such a feeling of connection and devotion is possible and that it can be experienced by all certainly sits well with the values he expressed both as a Socialist and as a Christian. Aside from the visionary holism that the poem articulates, 'In Love for Long', demonstrates a poet enthusiastically pursuing his subject into whatever area of speculation it may lead and it shows someone still striving to learn more about himself and the world around him.

In *The Narrow Place* and *The Voyage* there is a marked acceleration in the progress that Muir makes in attempting to better understand himself and the contemporary world. The self-reflection that led to *The Story and The Fable* also led to his spiritual reconciliation to Christianity, or to be more precise, his realization that 'Christ was the turning-point of time and the meaning of life'. The impact of this faith and his increased emotional and psychological stability saw him explore the possibilities of continuity and renewal on both a personal and collective level, and in his war poems, these themes must have had a particularly contemporary relevance. Poems dealing directly with love and devotion become a significant feature of his verse at this time, which suggests that the unity of emotion and thought he had been struggling for so long to achieve was finally being realized.

The intellectual and spiritual territory that Muir came to occupy during the 1940s was the product of many years of imaginative endeavour and self-interrogation, but neither his prose nor his poetry from this period suggest that he thought he had reached the end of his creative quest. *The Story and the Fable* and *The Present Age* seek to uncover a meaningful pattern within the recent past, both personal and collective, yet their conclusions are markedly open-ended, and the poetry of recognition and

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<sup>96</sup> Jennings (1961), p.158.

reconciliation retains the speculative quality of much of his earlier and more sceptical writings. What Muir recognized was that he was beginning a new phase in his journey: he had turned an important corner. With renewed appetite Muir retraces a few of his favourite creative paths through history and mythology in *The Labyrinth* (1949), interrogating their imaginative value as waymarkers of the course through the past into the present. In *One Foot in Eden* (1956) and his last poems it is evident that, while he never reached a unified theory regarding temporal existence and immortality, he is able to accept a parallax view of time in which human history is seen in relation to a trans-temporal eternity.<sup>97</sup> Accepting that anything we experience of eternity within this life is gifted to us through faith or fortune, Muir's quest to discover the relationship between eternity and time entered its final phase. The task now was to reconcile the belief in Christ and the immortality of the soul with the perplexing and disempowering knowledge of mortality in order to affirm and accept human life as the union of flesh, imagination and spirit.

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<sup>97</sup> Adapting the optical phenomenon of parallax into a conceptual metaphor, Slavoj Žižek illustrates how a 'parallax gap' can be thought of as 'the confrontation of two closely linked perspectives between which no neutral common ground is possible'. However, rather than accepting this gap as an 'irreducible obstacle', Žižek proposes that through adopting a 'parallax view' the distance between seemingly opposing theories or concepts—those which cannot be 'mediated/sublated' into a higher synthesis—can be seen as a matter of perspective rather than an irresolvable antithesis. Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (London: MIT Press, 2006), pp.4-6.

## Chapter 9

### 'The Spoils of Time': Affirmation and Acceptance

#### Newbattle, Harvard, Orkney and Swaffham Prior (1949-1959)

Though mostly written in Prague, *Essays on Literature and Society* was published five months after Muir's arrival in Rome with *The Labyrinth* quickly following it in June 1949. With the Council's sudden decision to close its Italian institutes, Muir's three year contract came to an end less than halfway through. John Macmurray, Professor of Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh University and member of the Executive Committee at Newbattle Abbey College, invited Muir to apply for the position as the College's Warden. Muir's 'socially progressive' and unconventional approach chimed with Macmurray's 'Christian humanism',<sup>1</sup> and although he did not have any formal qualification in adult education, the Committee believed that he had the 'right kind of sympathetic outlook' and a sound 'knowledge and experience of adult student needs'.<sup>2</sup> What excited Muir about Newbattle was having another opportunity, as he had in the International Houses in Edinburgh, to be part of an environment where learning was valued as a goal in itself. 'Any strictly vocational benefit of adult education', Muir proposes, should be a 'bye-product',<sup>3</sup> but for many Newbattle students, including George Mackay Brown, the experience would also lead to new vocations.

Appointed in March 1950, Muir began at Newbattle in June 1950 and concluding *An Autobiography* (1954), written 'in scraps of spare time and during vacations',<sup>4</sup> he describes how the job felt like the natural culmination of his working life.<sup>5</sup> Writing appreciatively of his rewarding work with the students what he neglects to mention are the challenges he faced in protecting the liberal education he believed in against what he viewed as the bureaucratic machinations of the college's Executive Committee. As Hargraves argues, ultimately Muir's determined stance, and his inexperience of negotiating the various constraints and compromises necessary for the delivery of adult education, led to his being directly at odds with the Committee. Following the removal of two members of staff in 1951 and the failure of the new short-courses programme in 1953, Muir was given a year to improve the running of the college.<sup>6</sup> Muir survived his stay of execution but knowing

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<sup>1</sup> Neil Kevin Hargraves, 'An 'experiment in the wilderness': Newbattle Abbey College and the idea of residential adult education in Scotland 1931-1955', *History of Education*, Vol.39, No.1 (January 2010), 95-114, p.107.

<sup>2</sup> Minute, Governors Meeting (19/05/1950). NLS Acc 12299/7. Hargraves (2010), fn.76.

<sup>3</sup> 'Adult Education in Scotland', draft paper (27/02/1953), 2. NLS MS Acc 12299/7.

<sup>4</sup> *Auto*, p.280.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.279.

<sup>6</sup> Hargraves (2010), pp.109 & 112.

that his time at Newbattle had reached an end, he accepted a visiting professorship at Harvard, leaving for the States in August 1955.

Despite the administrative challenges of Newbattle, Muir spent five years there ‘at one with his environment’<sup>7</sup> and he also enjoyed a creatively productive period there. In addition to his fortnightly reviews for *The Observer*, he regularly submitted new poetry to *The Listener* and *The New Statesman*. At the suggestion of J.C. Hall, Muir agreed to the publication of *Collected Poems* (1952), inviting Hall to act as editor. Muir was also approached by Hogarth to consider updating *The Story and the Fable*, and although initially reluctant, by May 1953 he had agreed terms and spent the summer and the following winter hastily redrafting and writing the additional chapters.<sup>8</sup> In July 1952 Muir received a request from Eliot for a poem for the new series of Faber’s Ariel poems,<sup>9</sup> *Prometheus* (1954) appearing in October 1954. Newbattle was also where many of the poems in *One Foot in Eden* (1956) were composed, the title of the collection being a fitting statement about his time there and his imaginative view more generally. As Willa explains, his ‘scant acre on earth reached far up and down into timelessness’,<sup>10</sup> and life at Newbattle allowed Muir the opportunity to enjoy a foothold in both the practical everyday world and that of the imagination.

Muir’s Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, posthumously published as *The Estate of Poetry* (1962), show him drawing together some the great themes of his creative and critical writing. The opening essay on ‘The Natural Estate’ of poetry brings together his mutual love of ‘epic’ verse, such as that of Dante and Shakespeare, and the older folk traditions, an appreciation of both, he argues, being necessary for those who write poetry as well as those who are critics of it.<sup>11</sup> One of the greatest challenges the modern poet faces, he argues, is fear for the future, a fear that develops from not addressing the past and recognizing its relation to the present:

We are worried about the acceleration of time, but time is always more rapid than we realize, and the present always seems more natural than the past, simply because our daily lives are spent in it. Only now and then do we know that it has formed on us a new kind of sensibility, imposed new habits and with that new ways of thought, and determined the speed at which we live and feel.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Willa Muir (1968), p.275.

<sup>8</sup> Letter to George Mackay Brown (13/05/1953). *SL*, pp.166-167.

<sup>9</sup> See Letters to T.S. Eliot (01/08/1952), (27/08/1952), (10/10/1952) and (20/11/1952). *SL*, pp.162-164.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.276.

<sup>11</sup> Muir (1962), p.22.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.8.

What Muir is proposing is that our inability to contextualize the present in relation to the past has led to ‘the decline of imaginative literature’, that our modernity with its ‘vast dissemination of secondary objects isolates us from the natural world in a way that is new to mankind’.<sup>13</sup> What is being argued for is not a ‘return to the past’ but the need to first recognize mankind’s dislocation from the natural world and then to imaginatively re-affirm that bond. The pace at which time seems to move then is seen as dependent upon the viewpoint of the observer; demonstrating a parallax view of time, Muir imagines the swift flow of the present into the past and the slower moving background of human history, all set against the universal stasis of eternity. Within both the ballads and epic poetry this double-vision of time is achieved, he argues, with the differences between the two artistic forms being essentially those of convention, magnitude and audience. The value of the imagination has always been that ‘it opens the past to us as part of our own life, a vast extension of our present’.<sup>14</sup> While a writer may choose to either condemn or celebrate the present, he will be unable to ignore it, as ‘the relation between time past, time present, and time future is always with us’.<sup>15</sup>

Their experience of Cambridge (Massachusetts) was generally a positive one and Muir writes of the ‘kindness and consideration’ they both experienced, despite the sense of longing he felt for both England and Scotland which seemed increasingly ‘so far away’.<sup>16</sup> Writing to Raine a month before they were due to return to Britain, Muir’s desire to return was less muted: ‘I am not at home here [...] I suppose what is wrong with me here is that I am hungry. Horrible thought: I don’t know whether Eden was ever here’.<sup>17</sup> The ‘beautiful houses, mobbed by cars’ (20)<sup>18</sup> and the vast de-historicized ‘spatial sense’ of American life was alien to Muir’s temporally aligned imagination and his thoughts were returning to the world of the ballads, a world he had been born into:

I am fascinated by the world they live in and the world that produced them and kept them alive for so many centuries; the transmission of poetry for such a long time by the peasantry, and some of it great poetry; the light this throws on poetry itself; the effect it had on romantic poetry and the romantic movement; the part of the supernatural in all this, its acceptance and its realistic delineation. [...] I would like most of all to recreate imaginatively the whole world of the ballads, which I don't think has been done yet. I was born into it, for the ballads were still being handed on in our house in Orkney when I was young, and in the other houses there as well.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Muir (1962), p.8.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p.91.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.93.

<sup>16</sup> Letter to Kathleen Raine (28/02/1956). *SL*, p.178.

<sup>17</sup> Letter to Kathleen Raine (10/04/1956). *SL*, p.185.

<sup>18</sup> ‘Salem, Massachusetts’, *Botteghe Oscure* XIX (1957), p.77. *CP*, p.244.

<sup>19</sup> Letter to Kathleen Raine (28/02/1956). *SL*, p.179. Cf. Letter to T.S. Eliot (13/03/1956). *SL*, pp.180-181.

Soliciting the support of Raine, Eliot, and Herbert Reid, Muir applied for and received a grant from the Bolligen Foundation for a study of the ballads. On returning to England in May 1956 the Muirs bought their first home in Swaffham Prior then immediately set off for Orkney. Securing a BBC commission through Robin Richardson for the script of 'Revisiting Orkney',<sup>20</sup> Muir enjoyed his last visit to the islands of his birth.<sup>21</sup>

As with the ballads, Muir was returning to source, but in visiting Orkney he was also affirming the truth of his own story to himself and accepting his contribution to what he thought of as 'the fable'. Infirmity prevented Muir from returning to Orkney again but 'Revisiting Orkney' gives such an impression of vitality and continuity that one gets a sense that this is how he wished to remember it. Thinking about his memories of his mother, he wrote in a notebook in May 1958 that 'I do not know how to conceive immortality, though I still believe in it [...] remember, remember, remember; we begin to die when we stop remembering'.<sup>22</sup> He clearly sought hard to preserve and carry his first vision of life, embodied in her 'simple and delicate humanity',<sup>23</sup> through to the end of his life.

### ***The Labyrinth (1949) and Essays on Literature and Society (1949)***

The need to remember, to reclaim the past, took on a particularly poignant significance in the final years of Muir's life but it was a process that had begun in earnest in *The Story and The Fable*, and in *The Labyrinth* this process is reflected in the attempts to retrace humanity's faltering steps into the present. The collection's central metaphor is that of a maze, and this notion is echoed throughout many of its poems. One of the most important aspects of this metaphor is that it suggests that, despite the confusion and uncertainties highlighted, there is a way through the myriad of pathways and junctions. The challenge is to rediscover our individual and collective paths and accept that we must retrace them in order to free ourselves; to recognize that our freedom resides within the quest to discover who we are and in the acceptance of ourselves as the products of where we have been.

The title poem, 'The Labyrinth' owes as much to Kafka for its inspiration as Minoan mythology. Utilizing the myth of Theseus as its starting point, its central focus is the experience of the persona who, although having physically escaped from the labyrinth, remains psychologically bound to it. The core conceit of the poem is the disempowering

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<sup>20</sup> 'Revisiting Orkney' (1956), pp.89-101.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p.90.

<sup>22</sup> Butter (1966), p.287.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p.287.

bewilderment of not knowing if you are running towards something or away from it. The persona is lost 'Past rest and motion' (19), unable to tell if he has 'moved or stayed' (20), or indeed, if he is running from the maze or whether it is pursuing him: 'As if the maze itself were after me/And soon must catch me up' (37-38). The sudden recognition of the futility of the struggle, that 'Haste and delay are equal/In this one world' (42-43) from which 'there's no exit' (43), is placed into sharp relief against the visionary dream related in the second section of the poem in which humanity is seen from a god's-eye-view and the persona touches 'the real world' (65) inhabited by gods whose 'eternal dialogue was peace' (60). Our world, the world of time, is 'the lie,/The maze, the wild-wood waste of falsehood' (64-66), a confusion of Platonic secondary forms in contrast to the truth that resides beyond them. In this regard the poem looks toward the Platonic 'shadows' (22) of 'I have Been Taught',<sup>24</sup> one of Muir's finest unfinished poems, yet here the greater reality, the radiant 'One and whole' (18) remains obscured. The metaphor of the maze (temporal and spatial confusion expressing existential nausea) forms an 'objective correlative' of a universal human condition and its meaning is not confined by the metaphor that conveys it. The maze is ultimately our maze, we cannot escape it any more than we can escape from ourselves; it is an essential part of how we experience our world.

'The Labyrinth' displays the surreal, yet self-coherent, dream logic that first attracted Muir to Kafka's writings,<sup>25</sup> and clearly the descriptions of the endless 'Stairways and corridors and antechambers' (29) in the poem owes something to the perplexing interiors through which K attempts to reach his goal in *The Castle*. A more significant point of connection, however, is provided in Muir's critique of Kafka in *Essays on Literature and Society* (1949) in which he suggests that, as Kafka realized, the value of depicting a general situation greatly outweighs a specific one because 'the meaning of a general situation is inexhaustible; the story can, actually should, go on for ever'.<sup>26</sup> The universal situation, Muir proposes, is always stationary, it can go nowhere because it has no beginning nor end, it is always present. What Muir finds most universally apposite in Kafka's stories of the 'frustrated hero'<sup>27</sup> is that the struggles of his heroes are always the product of the 'irreconcilability of divine and human law; a subtle yet immeasurable disparity'.<sup>28</sup> For Muir, laws that are drafted beyond time can never be fully comprehended from inside it, but as 'The Labyrinth' suggests, knowledge of the reality in which they exist is possible and the quest for this knowledge is innately human, a universal feature of

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<sup>24</sup> *CP*, p.274.

<sup>25</sup> See *SF*, p.67 and *Auto*, p.240.

<sup>26</sup> Muir (1949), p.120.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p.120.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p.122.

imaginative thought. Kafka's genius, then, resides in his ability to convey the universality of a story, its timeless value:

He has provided imaginative writers not merely with a way of looking at life, but with a way of dealing with life. In an age obsessed by the time sense, or, as it is called, the historical sense, he has resurrected and made available for contemporary use the timeless story, the archetypal story, in which is the source of all stories.<sup>29</sup>

The discussion of universal truth forms one of the central preoccupations of *Essays on Literature and Society*, whether it be in George Chapman's *The Tragedy of Bussy D'Ambois* (c.1604) which takes the reader 'into the region of absolute things',<sup>30</sup> or in the characters of Laurence Sterne who exist in 'a world of universal forces',<sup>31</sup> or in the proposition that as the 'belief in eternity is natural to man [...] it is inconceivable that it should fail'.<sup>32</sup> In his essay 'Hölderlin's *Patmos*' Muir argues that just as he himself had discovered that 'Christ was the turning-point of time and the meaning of life',<sup>33</sup> Hölderlin similarly demonstrates this understanding in later revisions to the poem. The subject of Hölderlin's *Patmos* (1802), argues Muir, 'is not St John, as the title might indicate, but Christ; it marks the turning point in Hölderlin's imaginative interpretation of history and time'.<sup>34</sup> Muir suggests that Hölderlin found the workings of God in both history and time, not merely in a historicized sense but in a 'historical sense' (encompassing the past, the present and the future) and recognized them to be part 'of the universal story of mankind'.<sup>35</sup> 'He approached the mystery of time and eternity through the imagination', asserts Muir, 'the mystery itself, not any particular manifestation of it, was his theme; and what he made out of it was a mythology'.<sup>36</sup> Just as Muir recognizes the influence of the Platonic theory of forms inherent in Hölderlin's mythology, so too can it be seen in Muir's own mythology of 'the story and the fable'. For Muir, the story can be seen as a secondary form of a greater truth, the fable being the source of all stories and the sum of all experience.<sup>37</sup>

The vision of divine perfection in 'The Labyrinth' is counterbalanced by the terror of the disempowering struggle for perspective and understanding that precedes it. In 'The Journey Back' the quest for understanding continues but this time it ends with a more

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<sup>29</sup> Muir (1949), p.124.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p.30.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p.56.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p.150.

<sup>33</sup> *Auto*, p.247.

<sup>34</sup> Muir (1949), p.90.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp.91-92.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p.102.

<sup>37</sup> *CP*, pp.274. & 366.

transcendent vision of perfection, one that ultimately accepts the epistemological limits that mortality places on humanity rather than attempting to struggle against them. 'I take my journey back to seek my kindred' (1), the reader is told but by the second stanza the journey has become an axiom rather than an intention: 'Seek the beginnings, learn from whence you came' (9). However, the journey back, the search to find 'the starting-point' (180), is also a means by which to find the way ahead and discover 'the secret place [...] my home' (111). As is the case in 'The Way',<sup>38</sup> where the question 'And what will come last?' (19) receives the answer that 'The road leads on' (20), the persona accepts that 'That there is no prize in this race; the prize is elsewhere,/Here only to be to run for' (204-205), that 'There is no harvest' (204) that we can reap in this life that will not wither and pass. The poem closes with a striking image of the sun, 'the golden harvester' (209),<sup>39</sup> sweeping low and bright across the shining fields, gathering all before it. The diurnal passing of the sun allows human time (represented here by a single day) to be seen in the context of cosmological time. The fragmentary nature of the poem's seven part structure (a reference to the first week of creation) is a result of it being compiled from several fragments written over several months<sup>40</sup> but the closing passage successfully brings all its parts together to a harmonious conclusion (delivered in the present tense) as the 'tumultuous world slips softly home' (196) beneath the ancient transit of the sun.

McCulloch argues that 'The Journey Back' has received more positive critical attention than it merits as 'there is too often a tendency in criticism of his work to accept that a high, spiritual, symbolically-defined theme must result in a major, significant poem', suggesting that Butter and Wiseman's readings 'are conditioned by an acceptance of Muir's Christianity (and perhaps by the critic's own religious viewpoint).'<sup>41</sup> There is some validity to this assertion and certainly 'The Journey Back' is not the most significant, nor the most accomplished, of Muir's later poems as has been claimed.<sup>42</sup> McCulloch's observation, however, does not stress the importance of the poem's central theme to the collection as a whole, nor does it fully recognize the resonant symbolism of the poem's closing image. Muir's response to Christianity must be engaged with on its own terms and taken seriously if his use of symbolism is to be understood fully. This is something that McCulloch, an otherwise sympathetic and insightful critic of Muir's work, at times seems

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<sup>38</sup> *CP*, p.159.

<sup>39</sup> Butter suggests this image is the harvest moon but this seems an unlikely conclusion given the context and its description. Aitchison accepts the internal textual evidence that it is the sun. Aitchison (1988), p.159. Cf. *CP*, p.342.

<sup>40</sup> See *CP*, pp.340-341.

<sup>41</sup> McCulloch (1993), pp.53 & 58.

<sup>42</sup> As proposed by Kathleen Raine, Elizabeth Jennings, James Aitchison and Peter Butter. See McCulloch (1993), p.55.

less exercised to do. Nevertheless, as McCulloch rightly identifies, this poem is stylistically more akin to the earlier ‘mythical journeys’<sup>43</sup> and its fragmentary composition is certainly one of its chief similarities with *Variations*, yet the importance of its core theme (the paradoxical journey back into the future), no matter how falteringly it is progressed, justifies the critical attention it has received, if not necessarily the praise that has often accompanied it.

A very different yet no less powerful closing image is found in ‘The Combat’ where two fighting beasts are seen locked in an eternal struggle that neither can win nor lose, helplessness counterpointing ‘pride’ (7) and ‘fury’ (49) countering ‘despair’ (50). Through accepting its perpetual loss the ‘soft round beast’ (17) overcomes defeat and the pride of the heraldic chimera becomes its own downfall. Although handled very differently, self-defeat is seen as the cause of the fall of ‘The Good Town’: ‘Good men made evil wrangling with evil/Straight minds grown crooked fighting crooked minds’ (102-103). Such is the trouble with evil the poem concludes; through opposing evil with force evil still triumphs as an ill deed can never be undone. Whereas ‘The Combat’ is a poem whose power resides in its abstract universality, ‘The Good Town’ can also be read as a Cold War allegory. Such a reading, however, does not undermine the universal nature of the problem the town’s people face. The evil that has beset their town is intrinsically human in nature yet it brings intensely inhumane consequences; it is a problem that must be lived through as it cannot be defeated through force.

By way of a response to the problem of evil ‘Love’s Remorse’<sup>44</sup> argues that it is not time but eternity that can undo our wrong doings, presenting love as a force for perpetual renewal, a force that is not in opposition to time but which is exempt from it. Utilizing the traditional English sonnet form in terms of its rhyme and metre, the poem nevertheless performs a *volta* at the ninth line to form a sestet in the style of the Petrarchan sonnet, a rhetorical ploy suited to the poem’s subject matter and tone:

But the old saw still by the heart retold,  
‘Love is exempt from time.’ And that is true.  
But we, the loved and the lover, we grow old;  
Only the truth, the truth is always new:

‘Eternity alone our wrong can right,  
That makes all young again in time’s despite.’ (9-14)

It is not love but eternity that triumphs over time, reversing the direction of its flow and restoring the lovers’ ‘summer heaven’ (7) that was turned to autumn by ‘the little deadly

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<sup>43</sup> McCulloch (1993), p.59.

<sup>44</sup> *CP*, p.181.

days' (4), the 'crime' (4) which invokes the persona's declaration of 'remorse for all that time has done' (1) to his beloved.

The sonnet which follows on from 'Love's Remorse' moves from the abstract notion of love as a spiritual and emotional emanation outside time's rule to a more physical and personalized account of love confined within it. Contrasting the failings of the false lovers, the 'cold conqueror, unfeeling lover' (5) and 'perfect careful lover' (10), with that of the true, 'Love in Time's Despite'<sup>45</sup> argues that it is the lovers who 'love and love again' (12) that can hold onto their 'summer still' (13). The poem itself is something of a palinode to the sonnet 'Time Held in Time's Despite' in *The Voyage* in which it is the union of souls which allows them to transcend time: 'Impersonally soul and soul embrace,/And incorruptibly are bodies bound' (8-9). The main conceptual distinction between the two poems is that in 'Love in Time's Despite' the endless summer that the lovers share is seen as the product of their constant giving rather than the result of a single act of union. Their love is a process, a bond constantly re-affirmed and renewed; it is an organic love rooted in the transmutable world. We are all 'given' (1) to time the persona proposes but it is also 'through time' (2) that we can give ourselves to one another; it is only through time that we can truly love and know love.

'Love gathers all' (32) is the refrain of 'Song'<sup>46</sup> which looks toward the day when 'times from times fall' (4), when 'Man from himself is led/Through the mazes past recall' (11-12) and all has finally 'Come to one place at last' (31). This form of all-redeeming love is of the order celebrated in 'The Transfiguration'<sup>47</sup> which looks toward the second coming of Christ, not with fear and trembling as witnessed in 'The Dreamt-of Place', but with hope and joyful certainty:

Then he will come, Christ the uncrucified,  
Christ the discrucified, his death undone,  
His agony unmade, his cross dismantled—  
Glad to be so—and the tormented wood  
Will cure its hurt and grow into a tree  
In a green springing corner of young Eden,  
And Judas damned take his long journey backward  
From darkness into light and be a child  
Beside his mother's knee, and the betrayal  
Be quite undone and never more be done. (56-65)

The 'long journey backward' for Judas into childhood allows him to be effectively reborn with Christ's redemptive return, just as the wood of the cross returns to a living tree and

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<sup>45</sup> *CP*, p.181.

<sup>46</sup> *CP*, pp.187-188.

<sup>47</sup> *The Listener*, XXXIX (19/02/1948), p.304. *CP*, p.185-187.

brings new life into a redeemed Eden. Despite the concentration of allusions the overall sense of this passage never becomes obscured by its complexity. There is clarity but there is also humanity in this all-encompassing vision and the depiction of a child at his mother's knee creates an impression of homely intimacy. The scene is both specific and universal: the child is both Judas and every child. It is an image of incorruptible innocence and love.

The final poem in *The Labyrinth* looks again at childhood and explores the iconic value of toys, as figurative symbols as well as objects in which time and timelessness can be seen to co-exist. 'The Toy Horse'<sup>48</sup> describes a wooden figure from a child's Noah's Ark (a toy he had owned as a child)<sup>49</sup> and is evocative of the treatment of the statue in 'The Rider Victory' the horse is depicted transfixed in motion:

His lifted foot commands the West,  
And, lingering, halts the turning sun;  
Endless departure, endless rest,  
End and beginning here are one. (13-16)

Again, there is the paradoxical union of movement and stasis as the horse's journey ends where it began, 'His wandering journey from the East' (3) will go on forever.

Returning to this image in the essay 'Toys and Abstractions' (1957), Muir suggests that

By virtue of one front leg raised as if for pacing, the toy horse creates a road to lie before it, and the road may in turn evoke little rivers and hills to be crossed, a small landscape, a small world ruled, like the actual world, by the law of departure and return [...] it has at the same time the qualities of motionlessness and motion, and that while unchanged it suggests countless images of change. The explanation is that every true imitation of an object becomes a pattern and has the power to gather round it the world of patterns.<sup>50</sup>

Through appreciating the imitation, the universal image can be comprehended and the underlying pattern that allows one to relate to the other can be recognized. Such an understanding should help us to recognize that we are also capable of 'recreation and transformation',<sup>51</sup> and that through our own imaginative powers we can reconnect with the elemental nature of childhood and reclaim 'a sense of wonder'<sup>52</sup> that takes us closer to the heart of life's mystery than reason alone can do.

*The Labyrinth's* central metaphor, as in many of the poems within *Journeys and Places* and *The Narrow Place*, is that of life's journey, but the significant point that *The*

<sup>48</sup> *The Listener* XXXIX (08/01/1948), p.59. *CP*, pp.188-189.

<sup>49</sup> See *CP*, p.345.

<sup>50</sup> 'Toys and Abstractions', *The Saltire Review*, Vol.4, No.13 (Winter 1957), pp.36-37, p.36.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p.37.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p.37.

*Labyrinth* emphasizes is that that journey does not simply continue forward in accordance with the direction of time's arrow; the course of our journeys can force us to double back upon ourselves, forcing us to revisit the past. In addition, we can feel like time itself has slowed to a near halt or that it is accelerating wildly as if it had a will of its own. Like 'The Riders' of *Variations*, we can feel utterly disempowered by a force which we barely understand, yet are utterly reliant upon. Yet through the twisting course that forces us to revisit the past, with all its losses, betrayals and confusions, we can also re-discover purity, innocence, and love. The journey at the heart of the collection may be that of one man's faltering road into faith but it is also an expression of Muir's newly-formed acceptance of life, a life which is not seen as an inadequate version of the past nor as a precursor to some imagined future, but instead accepts life, as it were, in the present tense.

### ***One Foot in Eden (1956)***

The poems collected in *One Foot in Eden* were written during Muir's time in Rome and at Newbattle, and although he expressed some uncertainty regarding the title of this collection, it is decidedly appropriate. Muir had changed his mind and was planning to use 'The Succession'<sup>53</sup> as the collection's title poem but was dissuaded from doing so by T.S. Eliot who recognised the rhetorical strength of Muir's original title. The dipartite composition of the collection certainly reflects the 'one foot in Eden, the other firmly on earth' duality but the idea of succession is also an important aspect of the collection as a whole as it emphasizes the major theme of continuity, that, as 'The Succession' contends, for humanity 'the road is scarce begun' (36). Broadly speaking, the main distinction between the two parts of the collection is that the first utilizes Classical Greek and Christian mythology whereas the second adopts a more lyrical approach; Part I is drawn from the world of the fabulous, the eternal, and Part II is rooted in the familiar world of time.

The collection opens with a series of poems relating to the biblical account of creation and the first poem, 'Milton',<sup>54</sup> establishes the idea that the story of mankind's origin is best related from a poetic and imaginative perspective, that the 'fields of paradise' (14) that Milton saw with his 'unblinded eyes' (13) have a symbolic reality that transcends myth. 'The Animals' and 'The Days' announce the arrival of man on the sixth day and in 'Adam's Dream'<sup>55</sup> it is the Fall which is celebrated as the moment of humanity's birth into time, a moment when the divine immutable logic of Eden is overturned by chaos as the

<sup>53</sup> *The Listener*, XLIV (01/11/1950), p.457. *CP*, pp.204-205.

<sup>54</sup> *London Magazine* Vol.1, No.5 (June 1954), p.15. *CP*, p.193.

<sup>55</sup> *The Listener*, XLVI (14/09/1950), p.352. *CP*, pp.195-197.

empty land fills with people, 'As by an alien arithmetical magic/Unknown in Eden' (24-25).

'This is time'  
Thought Adam in his dream, and time was strange  
To one lately in Eden (52-54).

Adam's vision of chaotic creation seems to him little more than 'an illustrated storybook of mankind' (65) and the absence of a divine 'pattern' (28) unnerves him until he recognizes and accepts, with 'love and grief' (74), that the people are not the 'sons of God' (69) but the children of mankind, made not from a divine pattern but a human one.

It is a lost love that haunts the sleeper in 'Orpheus's Dream',<sup>56</sup> and the dream of ecstatic union, a moment 'pure and whole' (10) when 'Forgiveness, truth, atonement' (13) is only achieved in Orpheus's mind. While Orpheus dreams, Eurydice sits alone 'in Hades' empty hall' (18). There is no union between the dead and the living so both must endure their separated existence alone. By contrast, the vision of continuity in 'Adam's Dream' is one of infinite adaptation, a 'moving pattern' (64) of making and remaking, yet at its core are the archetypes of man and woman, Adam and Eve, from which all human life springs and whose broken promise birthed mortality.

The themes of continuity and adaptation are also dominant features of 'The Horses'<sup>57</sup> which places its action in the recognizable future rather than in mythical prehistory. Relating the events during the 'seven days war that put the world to sleep' (2), the poem's opening effectively runs the creation myth in reverse. As the persona describes, the survivors of the war have regressed into a pre-industrial state: 'We have gone back,/Far past our father's land' (30). Hope comes in the shape of the 'strange horses' (32) who return, as if 'from their won Eden' (50), to the people who gratefully accept their 'free servitude' (52).

Although he had previously written sceptically about the threat of nuclear weapons,<sup>58</sup> in 'The Horses' Muir recognizes that the fear of nuclear holocaust is a particularly modern horror and yet it is significant that the poem is being related by one of the survivors. Human society is beginning to renew itself. The horses are not Promethean figures from another plane, as Muir once explained to a student, they are 'good plough-horses and still have a memory of the world before the war', they are simply 'seeking the long lost archaic companionship'.<sup>59</sup> As Andrew Frisardi notes, the horses are 'strange' only because society

<sup>56</sup> *The Listener*, XLV (31/03/1951), p.863. *CP*, pp.200-201.

<sup>57</sup> *The Listener*, LIII (10/03/1955), p.429. *CP*, pp.226-227.

<sup>58</sup> See 'Our Generation', *TNA*, Vol.28, No.20 (17/03/1921), p.233.

<sup>59</sup> See Butter (1966), p260.

has estranged itself from them.<sup>60</sup> Although the horses are endowed with symbolic significance, representing continuity and renewal, they are not archetypal or ethereal beings. They are horses of this world who have returned to reclaim their place in the natural order. There is a sense that the future has arrived to reclaim the present from the destructive past; that, as is proclaimed in ‘Into Thirty Centuries Born’, tomorrow will sanctify all that has gone before:

To-morrow sounds the great alarm  
 That puts the histories to rout;  
 To-morrow after to-morrow brings  
 Endless beginning without end.  
 [...]  
 Time shall cancel time's deceits,  
 And you shall weep for grief and joy  
 To see the whole world perishing  
 Into everlasting spring,  
 And over and over the opening briar. (37-63)

Among the last poems, those written after the publication of *One Foot in Eden*, the subject of war is particularly prevalent with poems such as ‘After a Hypothetical War’, ‘The Last War’ and ‘Impersonal Calamity’, suggesting a recurrent anxiety about the contemporary political situation in Cold War Europe. One of the last poems that Muir completed before his death was another vision of manmade apocalypse. ‘The Day Before the Last Day’<sup>61</sup> describes how a ‘Mechanical parody of the Judgement Day’ (15) will ‘murder all/That has ever been’ (4-5). There is the same eerie silence ahead of the anticipated proclamation that time has come to an end seen in ‘The Dreamt-of Place’: ‘But they hear no great voice crying: “There shall be no more time, nor death, nor change”’ (52-53). The final line of the poem goes further than ‘The Dreamt-of Place’ in that the persona recognizes that this vision of apocalypse is nothing more than an ‘Imaginary picture of a stationary fear’ (59), an ‘hypothetical picture’ (17), a manifestation of the same ‘dark ancestral dreams’ (25) that torture the living whose dead return to them in the narrative ‘essay’ (17) in the poem. This ‘stationary fear’ is the ‘primal fear’ that Muir identifies in his discussion of a hypothetical nuclear war in his *New Age* column;<sup>62</sup> it is a fear which

<sup>60</sup> Andrew Frisardi, ‘The Anomaly of Edwin Muir’, *The Hudson Review*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (Winter 2000), 576-586, p.581.

<sup>61</sup> *CP*, pp.269-270. See also *CP*, p.364.

<sup>62</sup> Muir argued against the modernity of the prophecy ‘that in the future, when the days of war in the shape of harnessed electrons were unloosed, not a single human being would survive on any battlefield. A general officer, sitting at his comfortable desk in the War Office, might touch a button and release destructive agencies capable of sweeping hundreds of square miles and depriving of existence every living creature thereon. We know that “comfortable desk,” and that “button”, which is now so battered and disreputable that it should be sent to Ibsen’s button-moulder to be melted. We know that fear also; it is the primal fear, before

cannot be overcome through reason and must be projected into the future in an attempt to distance it from ourselves. Rather than God undoing time, the fear is that time could be undone through mankind's own actions.

'The Son'<sup>63</sup> depicts the Passion as the moment when Christ overcomes time and transcends his mortality. Again, imagining a view of time from outside it, Muir employs the image of the cross-tree (a motif seen in 'Antichrist' and 'The Incarnate One' in this collection)<sup>64</sup> to illustrate the co-existence of two separate moments on the timeline of story. As the narrative of the poem follows Christ's growth from childhood into adulthood, we see the 'waiting tree' (42) that is destined to become the cross of his crucifixion, yet the tree is never anything other than a living tree, even after the crucifixion: 'God from God bereft/Down from the tree was taken' (47-48). It is as if the tree is never felled and goes on growing and bringing forth new life. Christ's Passion has ensured that 'all be made new/Down to the last grain' (51-52); the tree is both a living and an eternal tree, a symbol of Christ's relation to creation:

Ordinary men  
Saw him take his fall  
All is changed since then;  
He is joined with all. (53-56)

The story of Christ's life is briefly retold in the closing lines of Muir's Ariel poem *Prometheus* (1954)<sup>65</sup> where Christ is seen rising from death, bringing back 'all the spoils of time' (55) with him. Outcast by the Olympian gods and seeing their shrines and temples emptied by a people whose only creed is now 'An iron text' (41-42), Prometheus identifies Christ as a god of forgiveness and mercy, a god who 'would hear and answer' (59) his calls. Recognizing his own fall, Prometheus acknowledges that unlike himself or the other gods, Christ came to mankind 'Not in rebellion but pity and love' (53), and that Christ is unique as he was 'born of a woman, lived and died' (54).

The inclusion and arrangement of the poems in *One Foot in Eden* reflects something of Muir's dialectic approach,<sup>66</sup> as can be demonstrated by comparing two pairs of the partnered poems in the collection. 'Scotland's Winter'<sup>67</sup> was originally included in *Scottish Journey* (1935) and was presumably chosen for inclusion in this collection as it offers an

knowledge, from which mankind has been struggling to free itself for thousands of years'. 'Our Generation', *TNA*, Vol.28, No.20 (17/03/1921), p.233.

<sup>63</sup> *Botteghe Oscure*, V (1950), pp.156-157. *CP*, p.208.

<sup>64</sup> 'Antichrist', *CP*, p.211. 'The Incarnate One', *CP*, pp.213-214. In 'The Recurrence' Nietzsche is described hanging like an 'Actor on the Tree' (44). *CP*, pp.104-105.

<sup>65</sup> *Prometheus* (London: Faber, 1954). *CP*, pp.198-200.

<sup>66</sup> See McCulloch (1993), pp.102-103.

<sup>67</sup> *CP*, p.214.

unremitting negativity with which to counter the redemptive conclusion of 'The Difficult Land'. 'Scotland's Winter' paints a bleak portrait of a country lost beneath a winter wasteland, where 'its dead and living waits the Judgment Day' (20). Scotland is a 'kingless' (17), 'songless' (19) realm where the 'frozen life' (28) of the dead is seen to be of more interest than that of the living.

In stark contrast to the restricted focus of 'Scotland's Winter', 'The Difficult Land' shows a Scotland of four seasons. It is a land where 'Sun, rain, and frost alike conspire against us' (4), where 'spring floods and summer droughts' (6) always bring too much or too little. Despite the challenges of climate, the ever-present threat of conflict, or self-loathing, there is still a sense of pride and unity, 'We are a people; race and speech support us' (24), the persona extols. The people are unified through 'Ancestral rite and custom' (25) and the weather cannot defeat them 'For we can love even the wandering seasons/In their inhuman circuit' (44-45). The poem closes on a note of resignation tempered by an expression of warm affection: 'This is a difficult country, and our home' (52). Whereas 'Scotland's Winter' offers only the cold, abstract criticism of the intellect, 'The Difficult Land' comes from the position of one who has an empathic understanding of his subject. The former is the viewpoint of the impersonal onlooker while the latter is that of the emotionally involved insider.

The paired poems at the collection's philosophical centre are 'Outside Eden' and 'One Foot in Eden' and these poems create a similar set of oppositions. The persona of 'Outside Eden'<sup>68</sup> is another onlooker, a detached reporter whose use of third-person pronouns underlines the distance between himself and the settled 'clan' (7) who tend the fields east of Eden's 'ruined walls and broken gate' (2). The main conceit of the poem is the paradox of innocent guilt, a condition of moral ambivalence that the descendants of Adam and Eve must endure because the couple, 'Guiltiest and least guilty' (21), 'In innocence discovered sin' (22). Their descendants have not left the scene of the original expulsion as they want to remain in sight of Eden. As a result, 'Guilt is next door to innocence' (27) and the people toil away in 'their simplicity/Standing on earth, looking at heaven' (52). In the absence of divine rule to maintain 'geometrical symmetry' (46), they have established equilibrium for themselves and their tending of the 'knotted landscape' (43) is both a penance and a right of freedom, it has become a form of worship in itself.

The opening couplet of 'One Foot in Eden'<sup>69</sup> places the persona firmly in the middle of the scene: 'One foot in Eden still, I stand/And look across the other land' (1-2). Whilst guilt and innocence are bound together and the people are 'haunted' (8) by their memory in

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<sup>68</sup> *CP*, pp.197-198.

<sup>69</sup> *The Listener*, XLIII (25/05/1950), p.634. *CP*, pp.212-213.

'Outside Eden', 'love and hate' (5), 'Evil and good' (11), 'charity and sin' (12) are intertwined in 'One Foot in Eden' as 'Time's handiworks by time are haunted' (6). Rather than faltering crops and ritualistic harvests, here everything grows abundantly, both weed and grain, bearing witness to 'flowers in Eden never know' (20): 'hope, and faith and pity and love' (25). Where 'Outside Eden' presents a scene of simplicity and pious acceptance, here there is complexity and diversity; it is a fuller vision of life, one described from the inside. Carrying the agricultural metaphor through to the end, the people appear to have won a greater bounty than that which was lost in the Fall, as the closing lines propose, 'Strange blessings never in Paradise/Fall from beclouded skies' (28-29).

As the Scottish and Eden poems illustrate, Muir uses two different approaches, that of the onlooker and that of insider, to explore divergent and contradicting aspects of his subject. In the examples given the differences in perspective are explicitly signposted and the effects they achieve are equally overt, but this is only one side of Muir's dialectic technique. By comparing 'The Late Wasp'<sup>70</sup> with the 'The Late Swallow'<sup>71</sup> we see how Muir can introduce an idea or image then subtly subvert it, drawing new meanings from it.

Starting with some obvious similarities, both poems are meditations on mortality and both titles pun on the connotations of 'late' which in this context pertains to the season, the fact the wasp and the swallow are nearing the end of their lives, and that perhaps they are recently deceased (the swallow is also late in the additional sense that it is one of the last to migrate). The wasp which has enjoyed a summer of gorging at the breakfast table now finds that the 'blue thoroughfares have felt a change;/They have grown colder' (8) so that 'the good air will not hold' (12) it in flight any longer. The wasp's final flight is a fall to its death: 'And down, down you dive through nothing and despair' (14). The wasp is described as diving rather than falling to convey a sense of its rage against the turning season and the determination of his will to fight against the air that was once its easy dominion.

Similarly for the swallow, the changing season and the 'ageing narrowing day' (10) are against him. 'Prepare:/Shake out your pinions long untried' (12) the swallow is implored, 'Your comrades all have flown/To seek their southern paradise' (4-5). However, whereas the wasp is described as diving rather than falling, when the swallow reaches its destination it is described not as flying nor diving but as 'falling down' (15). While the wasp dives to its death, the swallow is seen 'falling down' through 'the homing air' (15) to alight on the 'radiant tree' (16). Muir introduces another level of meaning in the closing lines of the poem to suggest that the swallow's 'fall' has an anagogical significance. Given

<sup>70</sup> *Botteghe Oscure*, V (1950), p.310. *CP*, pp.232-233.

<sup>71</sup> *The Listener*, LXVI (13/12/1951), p.1025. *CP*, p.233.

that both poems are allegorical meditations on time and aging, what Muir presents are two opposing views on mortality: the wasp's final flight is a fall into death while the swallow's is the flight into eternal life. The 'radiant tree' is the eternal tree, the tree of Christ's cross and the tree which bore the fruit through which mankind first fell. This additional level of meaning does not swamp nor undermine the surface narrative of the poem, as such weighty symbolism might, and its light, easy lyricism carries it effortlessly. Given its spiritual depth and its lyrical deftness, it is unsurprising that George Mackay Brown describes it as 'one of the most beautiful lyrics he ever wrote' or that Willa suggested to Brown that 'it is Edwin's epitaph'.<sup>72</sup>

### ***Last Poems (1956-1959)***

Of the poems written after the publication of *One Foot in Eden* the most powerful and successfully realized are those which have a strong autobiographical element or are rooted firmly in the present, albeit they necessarily draw upon memory and prior experience. Many others deal with war and conflict from an abstract distance, such as 'The Desolations', 'After a Hypothetical War', 'Impersonal Calamity', 'Nightmare of Peace' and 'The Breaking'. Each of these poems has its own quiet successes but in 'The Day Before the Last Day' and 'The Last War'<sup>73</sup> Muir is able to move closer to his subject and rediscover the personal amidst the impersonal, with the particularly effective fifth and final verse paragraph of 'The Last War' also offering a remarkable spiritual vision of continuity and renewal:

About the well of life where we are made  
Spirits of earth and heaven together lie.  
They do not turn their bright heads at our coming,  
So deep their dream of pure commingled being,  
So still the air and the level beam that flows  
Along the ground, shed by the flowers and waters:  
All above and beneath them a deep darkness.  
Their bodies lie in shadow or buried in earth,  
Their heads shine in the light of the underworld.  
Loaded with fear and crowned with every hope  
The born stream past them to the longed for place. (79-89)

Despite being warned by Kathleen Raine and Herbert Reid that he would find little to stimulate his imagination in America,<sup>74</sup> 'The Church'<sup>75</sup> and 'Salem, Massachusetts' show that Muir had at least a couple of significant moments of inspiration during his stay and he

<sup>72</sup> Muir (1987), p.210.

<sup>73</sup> *The New Statesman* LV (14/06/1958), p.770. *CP*, pp.256-258.

<sup>74</sup> Letter to Kathleen Raine (12/08/1955). *SL*, p.173.

<sup>75</sup> *Encounter*, VII, No.1 (July 1956), p.55. *CP*, pp.241-242.

was evidently working on fragments and drafts of several poems as well.<sup>76</sup> Offering two radically opposing views on faith, the poems show Muir contrasting images of hope and potential against those of destruction and avarice, juxtaposing the Christian values of piety and compassion against the self-righteous malevolence of a puritanical creed.

'The Church' opens with the description of the installation of a small cross on a half-built church opposite the Continental Hotel in Cambridge (Massachusetts) where the Muirs were staying. The compact wholeness of the crucifix, 'Bright as a new penny' (3) and laden with symbolism and history is contrasted against the unknown potential of the 'unfinished church' (2). The hope and possibilities that these two images embody is then seen against the decline of the modern church since the day that Christ, 'Three in One' (14), 'God and Man in more than love's embrace,/far from their heaven in dust and tumult died' (15-16). The gilt-edged tyranny of 'ingenious theological men' (38) who managed to 'crib into bars/The Love that moves the sun and the other stars' (42)<sup>77</sup> is seen as a direct perversion of the teachings of Christ, 'A poor man skilled in dialectic art' (28). The intertextual reference to Dante, whose verse Muir had a life-long admiration for,<sup>78</sup> serves to illustrate the beauty which can be achieved through the recognition of love as a divine principle and is far removed from the 'proud' (41) works of the self-righteous theologians.

The empty church represents a site free from dogma, a space where 'Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant' (46) may find Christ for themselves and 'may its door/Never be shut' (42-43), the persona exclaims, to 'the poor in spirit, the always poor' (45). Counterpointing 'The Church' which looks hopefully toward the future, 'Salem, Massachusetts' condemns the sins of the past, those of the 'Puritan English country gentlemen' (5) who, with 'texts and guns drove the Indians out' (3) and 'burned young witches' (6), clearing the way for their 'new Apocalypse' (2). After the opening picture of the colonial oppression and pious malice, time is fast-forwarded to the point when the 'son's grandsons' (7) of the settlers have tired of the limitations of the land and have returned to the sea to become whalers and oriental traders. Muir's use of 'Leviathan' (8) alludes both to Hobbes's wrathful state of nature and Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), serving to illustrate how the religious zeal of the first settlers has been transformed into avarice and materialism. From the 'beautiful wooden houses' (9) of the traders and whalers the narrative accelerates forward again to contemporary Salem where Boston businessmen now 'Sit in the beautiful houses, mobbed by cars' (20). The puritanical faith

<sup>76</sup> There are drafts of at least six other poems on Muir's Harvard lecture notes. See *CP*, p.314.

<sup>77</sup> 'Through Love that moves the sun and other stars', 'Heaven' (XXXIII:145). Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, Peter Dale tr. (London: Anvil Poetry Press, 1996), p.414.

<sup>78</sup> See Letter to Jean Leitch (24/03/1919). *SL*, p.19. See also letters to Soutar (03/02/1940) and Eliot (27/09/1952). *SL*, pp.115 & 163.

of Salem's founding colonialists, who 'Ruled young and old with stiff Hebraic rod' (4), is a failed impersonal faith unlike the hope expressed by the new church which, in its unfinished state, represents an unsullied image of faith in a purer form. In contrast to the founding fathers of Salem who ensure 'That all was well and truly consumed by fire' (17), for the faithful Cambridge church builders 'All's still to do' (48).

As well as continuing to draw inspiration from his travels and the world around him, nearing the end of his life Muir was also looking back across his own journey through time, and of the eleven poems published in the two years before his death 'The Brothers' and 'Dialogue' demonstrate most clearly how this process was both deeply emotional and self-consciously philosophical. The 'brothers' of the poem are Willie and Johnnie Muir and the vision of them as children racing across a field is based upon a dream Muir had sometime shortly before the end of January 1957.<sup>79</sup> The poem juxtaposes a series of temporal and spatial relations which lead to a new understanding of the poet's relationship with his brothers, and in so doing, allows him to accept 'The beauty and buried grace' (28) in their childhood games. The opening places the dream in the immediate past, 'Last night' (1), and the brothers are seen close up being 'two yards away' (3). This establishes a spatial and temporal intimacy which is suddenly overturned by the information that 'For half a century' (4) his brothers have been 'among the peaceful dead' (6). The brothers are then described as ethereal-like beings, 'like two revolving suns' (11), and while being unable to 'see their eyes' (13) because of the radiance pouring from them. Muir reaffirms his recognition of them as his brothers and then re-establishes a spatial intimacy by stating that 'where I was they once had been' (16).

Having decreased the spatial distance once again Muir quickly reintroduces the temporal distance by reminding the reader that it was 'Twenty thousand days ago' (18) since the brothers last played together on the green, only to reduce it again in asking 'Were you really so/As you are now, that other day?' (20-21). This question, originally directed to his brothers in the dream, prompts Muir to recognize that their boyhood rivalries had obscured the 'The beauty and buried grace' in their innocent play. The closing stanza contrasts this vision of timeless innocence, albeit obscured by the 'mask' (27) of childish competition, with that of the 'indifferent justice done/By everyone on everyone' (31-32). Through the careful manipulation of time and space, the poem effectively recreates the alternating sensations of the immediacy and the distance, of connection and loss. In addition to its poetic achievements, it is a deeply personal and evocative account of how

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<sup>79</sup> See Letter to Kathleen Raine (27/01/1957). *SL*, p.191.

through the imaginative interrogation of memory and dreams we can gain alternative perspectives on experience, potentially enhancing even our most treasured recollections.

The compound imagery and elaborate grammar of 'Dialogue' creates a very different effect from the lyrical minimalism of 'The Brothers', being reminiscent in subject matter and in the 'exactness of universal sentiment' achieved in third quatrain of Burns's 'Auld Lang Syne',<sup>80</sup> yet 'Dialogue' is no less autobiographical and its confessional tone is no less effective. More than anywhere else in Muir's late poems, this poem brings together many of the major images and conceits of his writing, drawn together, not to achieve synthesis, but to express a *discordia concors*. While on one hand Muir seems to be accepting a view of life as series of counterpoints, there remains a sense of his desire to uncover an underlying unity, one perspective appearing to balance the other. Opening with a series of self-interrogating questions, the persona, 'Returning from the antipodes of time' (1), asks himself if he has been an 'adventurer seeking your home' (2) or 'A soul seeking its soul' (9). While the heraldic images of the dragon, the lion, the antelope, and the hounds establish a fabulous backdrop in the first stanza, the following stanzas—all dealing with the present—focus on the return to the world of time where the traveller finds that 'all is in its place' (22). The traveller recognizes now that there is an 'equal and strange order' (23), that 'good and evil' (23), 'Hunter and quarry' (24), 'war and peace, generation and death' (29), 'Jack and Jill/And Kate and Harry, black, brown and white' (40-41) are all bound together by the same 'patient mutability' (40). Through his self-reflection and observations he comes to understand that 'This is not the end of the world's road' (50), that adaptation and diversification are in themselves agents of continuity and renewal.

Having established the forward-flowing flux of time, Muir introduces its converse, that of an 'endless stasis' (59), the eternal moment in which it seems 'as if time's work were over' (53). This counterbalance achieved, the persona returns to the discussion of the present: 'That was a moment, now a memory/I do not live in the house of memory' (62-63). Recalling the lost/hidden road motif of *Variations* and 'The Road' from *One Foot in Eden*, the persona relates a fable he attributes to his 'kinsmen' (64) which asserts that the place where they have settled and made home is simply 'the first and last,/Neither good nor bad, the right nor the wrong' (65-66). The location is both arbitrary and contingent; what matters is that they have accepted it as home. This is reminiscent of 'Houses' in *First Poems* where 'distant houses shine with grief and mirth' (1),<sup>81</sup> and where 'Hope and sorrow ethereal' (78) are united. There is a heroic stoicism in the acceptance that the lost

<sup>80</sup> 'We twa hae paidl'd in the burn,/Frae morning sun till dine;/But seas between us braid hae roar'd/Sin auld lang syne'. Marshall Walker, *Scottish Literature Since 1707* (London: Longman, 1996), pp.87-88.

<sup>81</sup> *CP*, p.6.

road, which may 'still run somewhere in world' (76), can no longer be reached and that the existential questions which open the poem, 'Question on question' (77) must remain unanswered. The abstract 'house of memory' is juxtaposed against the house of the living, a place 'lighting or darkening' (74) with the births and deaths of the generations who know it as home. As Willa states in relation to 'The Difficult Land', when Muir writes about 'our home' he does not mean a specific house nor a particular country.<sup>82</sup> As 'The Dialogue' proposes, this life may be 'the first and last' but 'heavenly hope' (67) need not be suppressed by 'ethereal sorrow' (73); 'the end of the world's road' remains far from sight. The traveller's kinfolk have made their home within time yet they have not lost sight of the eternity for which 'a great god died' (68).

By 1958 the heart condition that had impacted upon Muir's health since the mid-1950s rendered him frequently bed-bound, and after suffering breathing difficulties during a public reading in June 1958, he was diagnosed with pneumonia. On 27 December 1958 he was admitted to hospital in Cambridge where he died on 3 January 1959. He was buried in the cemetery at the Church of St. Cyriac and St. Julitta in Swaffham Prior. His gravestone is inscribed with the closing line of his poem 'Milton': 'his unblinded eyes/Saw far and near the fields of Paradise' (13-14). It is a fitting memorial for such a visionary poet and an insightful critic of literature and life.

Muir had only made a few pages of notes for his book on the ballads prior to his death but the Bolligen Foundation agreed to transfer their support to Willa enabling her to write *Living with Ballads* (1965). As Christianson proposes, Willa's focus on the psychosocial aspects of the ballads, particularly the role of the unconscious and her feminist critique, results in a very different study to that which Muir was conducting.<sup>83</sup> That said, in drawing a distinction between the 'clock-time' of contemporary 'popular culture' and the seasonal cyclical time of the ballads,<sup>84</sup> as well as in her sustained attack on the legacy of Scottish Calvinism,<sup>85</sup> Willa's study does articulate some perspectives and preoccupations that were major features of both their writings. Having worked so closely together for the entirety of their married life it would perhaps be surprising if it were otherwise. Looking back over their time together Willa recognized how fortunate they had been to enjoy such 'a lasting wholeness and joy' in each other, a 'harmony' that endured to the end.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Willa Muir (1968), p.283.

<sup>83</sup> Christianson (2007), pp.170-171. See Willa Muir, *Living with Ballads* (London: Hogarth, 1965), pp.142-174 & 191-192.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.259-260.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p.189.

<sup>86</sup> Willa Muir (1968), p.318.

## Conclusion:

### 'Strange Blessings Never in Paradise Fall'

The preoccupation with time did not develop into the 'static obsession'<sup>1</sup> Muir feared it had the potential to become. As his philosophical outlook evolved, the ways in which he represented his dynamic understanding of time adapted similarly. On completing *An Autobiography* in 1954 Muir writes sceptically about the notion of personal 'development' or that a life story could be brought 'into a neat pattern'.<sup>2</sup> One of his aims in writing *The Story and The Fable* fourteen years previously, however, had been to 'make clear the pattern of my life as a human being existing in space and moving through time, environed by mystery'.<sup>3</sup> What had changed in the ensuing years was that Muir had come to recognize the value of the 'mystery' on its own terms over the authenticity of any recognizable pattern. He had developed an appreciation of the discordant harmony of life, the dialectic vitality that can no more be transposed into a single musical score than it can be summed up in a poem or an autobiography.

The 'invisible leeway' that Muir felt he had incurred when he became a 'Displaced Person' in Glasgow may have been one he never fully overcame yet he came to recognize that he learnt things from the experience that he 'could not otherwise have learned'.<sup>4</sup> Through the 'time-accident'<sup>5</sup> that befell his family when they left Orkney, Muir developed an acute understanding of the relativistic nature of psychological time and how our understanding of our own time is shaped by forces acting from within the present as well as those which have shaped the past. Following the adaptation of his ideas relating to time through his writing career, a trajectory can be traced from his early writings, which protest against the destructive power of time to the celebratory embracing of life's temporal fragility in his late poems. A 'static obsession' could not have inspired such a committed search for understanding nor resulted in such a creatively rewarding journey. Indeed, as his development of the conceit of the 'stationary journey' (discussed in Chapter Seven) illustrates, the very notion of stasis was one that Muir found worthy of creative interrogation.

Beginning with Muir's autobiographical method, this thesis opened by suggesting how Muir frequently seeks to gain an objective view on experience by establishing a creative distance between the subject of his writings and the imaginative process, often

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<sup>1</sup> Letter to Stephen Spender (04/05/35). *SL*, p.85.

<sup>2</sup> *Auto*, p.280.

<sup>3</sup> Muir (2000), p.278.

<sup>4</sup> *Auto*, p.280.

<sup>5</sup> *SF*, p.263.

with years passing between a particular incident or thought and its imaginative reinterpretation. Anxious not to offer a 'presentation' of the unexamined 'life as it is lived',<sup>6</sup> Muir reworks an array of biblical and Classical Greek myths, allegories and heraldic imagery to depict a symbolic truth rather than an axiom seemingly derived directly from the contemplation of his own experience.

Despite the absence of a definitive pattern, the corpus of Muir's writing does suggest an evolution of ideas which offer a rough outline of four discernible phases, characterized through a series of related perspectives or attitudes. The prose and poetry prior to 1927 explore the uncertainty of living in an age of apprehensive transition and deal with the challenges of individuation, processes exasperated by the stultifying confinement of time. Muir's writings of the late 1920s and 1930s explore the themes of dislocation and displacement, central concerns of the three novels and his Scottish cultural criticism and themes explored at length in *Variations*. Coinciding with his renewed spiritual faith, much of his poetry and critical prose during the 1940s expresses a 'modified belief in the future',<sup>7</sup> and argue for the recognition of love and empathy as essential principles in the reorganisation of society which must arise from the 'general calamity'<sup>8</sup> that had engulfed the world. Muir, having reconciled himself with his faith (not just in Christ, but in life also), seeks to remind his readers that, no matter how immersed we are in time, we are also 'half wrapped still in eternity'.<sup>9</sup> This breakthrough allows the final affirmation of life as the harmonious union of the mortal body and the immortal soul as glimpsed momentarily in *The Labyrinth* and celebrated more fully in *One Foot in Eden* and the late poems where time's transience is now its virtue when seen against the unmoving background of eternity.

Muir's acceptance of a 'parallax view' of time is neither unquestioning nor unconditional. There is the explicit suggestion that we experience the dichotomy between time and eternity in the way that we do because we have a relativistic view of time, that is, that we can only conceptualize it in relation to itself. For Muir, the relationship between time and eternity bears a degree of relation to his myth of 'the story' and 'the fable' in that time is presented as a secondary form of eternity in a similar way that 'the story' is seen as a secondary form of 'the fable', the former being a contingent manifestation of the latter. In this model, time is the material certainty that flows from a higher metaphysical reality and while we can learn much from our experience of one, we can only speculate about the nature of the other. No matter how much our imaginations may strive to fashion a vision of a universal singularity, Muir proposes, such an appreciation of eternity can only be

<sup>6</sup> 'We Moderns', *TNA*, Vol.20, No.3 (16/11/1916), p.65.

<sup>7</sup> Muir (1939), p.23.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.183.

<sup>9</sup> *CP*, p.96.

achieved by the soul after it has been liberated from time. An absolute vision of ‘The One and whole’,<sup>10</sup> like the poem in which Muir tries to define it, must always be incomplete. It is a visionary aspiration, a journey beyond the terminus of time that can never be realized in language: ‘only the imagination can venture upon it; and setting out, the road, and the arrival: all is imagination’.<sup>11</sup>

This metaphysical aspect of Muir’s writing is only one side of his creative engagement with the subject of time. As well as a visionary poet, Muir was intuitively responsive to the variform problems of the modern world, a point McCulloch keenly underlines:

Muir, too often considered in the past as a transcendent poet, concerned mostly with spiritual matters, appears in his late poetry, essays and letters as a poet of the sublunary world, concerned with how we live with one another, and about where our eager embrace of technology may lead us in the future.<sup>12</sup>

As evidenced by the poems concerned with war and its aftermath, Muir’s critiques of Scottish and European culture, and the essays on the relationship between literature and society, Muir was, as Willa proposed, a writer with ‘only one foot in Eden, the other firmly on earth’.<sup>13</sup> The occasional love poems which begin to appear after 1939 also show a degree of tenderness and devotion which is seldom mentioned with regard to Muir’s verse, ‘The Confirmation’ offering a particularly touching expression of enduring affection.

Recent research on Scottish modernism and the European modernist period more generally conducted by McCulloch and others<sup>14</sup> has led to the recognition of Muir as a modernist writer grounded firmly in the ‘sublunary world’. As such, his reputation as a significant Scottish modernist will continue to grow and his early poetry and criticism will no doubt attract the broader critical recognition they deserve. To overemphasize this aspect of Muir’s creative outlook at the expense of his spiritual quest for understanding, however, would be to devalue a defining characteristic of his contribution to Modernism. As Muir identified in Kafka’s writings, one gets an impression of the ‘mysterious spiritual plane

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<sup>10</sup> *CP*, p.274.

<sup>11</sup> *Auto*, p.224.

<sup>12</sup> McCulloch (2009), p.194.

<sup>13</sup> Willa Muir (1968), p.276.

<sup>14</sup> Elgin W. Mellow, ‘The Poems of Edwin Muir and Their Relationship to Modernism’, *Postscript* Vol.1 (Asheville: Philological Association of the Carolinas, 1984), 1-7. Paul Robichaud, ‘MacDiarmid and Muir: Scottish Modernism and the Nation as Anthropological Site’, *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol.28, No.4 (Summer 2005), pp.135-151. See also Alexander J. Cuthbert, ‘Edwin Muir and *The New Age*’ and Ritchie Robertson, ‘Edwin Muir, Kafka and German Literature’, in *Scottish and International Modernisms: Relationships and Reconfigurations*, Emma Dymock & Margery Palmer McCulloch eds. (Glasgow: ASLS, 2011), pp.20-33 & 63-74.

which was obviously the supreme reality of the author'.<sup>15</sup> Muir, like Kafka, is able to project a metaphysical backdrop for his writings which suggests the presence of another reality which, rather than devaluing the significance of human interactions in immediate world of experience, heightens their symbolic importance. It is a form of modernist writing in which time and space are not always readily recognizable yet the estranged realms that Muir and Kafka create are not alien in nature. They are undoubtedly presenting views of our world yet they show enough of another reality to make it clear that, no matter how concrete and static our world may appear, there exist forces animating it beyond our view.

Muir echoes Hölderlin's perspective that 'poetically man/Dwells upon earth' (32-33)<sup>16</sup> yet it is only when we 'look up' (27) that we find the meaning of our existence. In Hölderlin's poetic meditation the only 'measure' (28) against which mankind may judge itself is a hidden and divine image, and for Muir it is the concealed yet manifest reality of eternity which gives meaning to time upon earth. It is the recognition that human life is not defined by a single temporal reality; that mortality is not the opposite of immortality but rather eternity as viewed through the prism of time, the latter being the refracted image of the former. What Muir presents in his poetry is the endeavour to reconcile two seemingly opposed views of life, one transient and one transcendent, and from the 1940s onward we see how effectively he achieves this in a unified vision. Far from being antithetical to literary modernism, Muir is just one of many writers of the era whose work expresses a keen metaphysical focus, as seen in the writings of Yeats, Auden, Eliot, Proust, and Woolf. Like his fellow Scottish modernists, MacDiarmid, Gunn, MacLean, and Gibbon, Muir believed that such speculations were not just of significance to the individual but were also important to society as a whole.

Orage's alternative spirituality and Nietzsche's metaphysics inspired Muir as a young writer, and his rural Christian upbringing provided him with an imaginative resource throughout his career. Yet one of the refreshing aspects of Muir's writing is that the reader is never confronted by a dogmatic convert or a disillusioned cynic. His belief in eternity and the immortality of the soul go hand in hand with his humanity; his passionate interest in 'where we came from, where we are going, and [...] how we should live with one another' seems inspired by his understanding that time forms, as he defined it in *Variations*, 'Eternity's unhidden shore' (VIII:38). In the Scottish ballads Muir found a way of viewing life in which the 'fundamental human things' are seen naturally 'against the eternal', offering a 'vision of life seen *sub specie aeternitatis*' combined with a passionate

<sup>15</sup> Letter to Sydney Schiff (08/07/1929). *SL*, pp.66-68.

<sup>16</sup> Friedrich Hölderlin, 'In Lovely Blue...', *Hymns and Fragments*, Richard Sieburth tr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp.249-253. See Martin Heidegger, '...Poetically Man Dwells...', *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Albert Hofstadter tr. (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), pp.209-225.

‘magnanimity about life’ and without any sense of dichotomy between the two.<sup>17</sup> What Muir saw in the ballads is a vision of time in natural relation to eternity, not a cold intellectual abstraction, but a lived reality seen through the eyes of generations. It was a way of envisaging the world he had been ‘born into’<sup>18</sup> and it was one that remained fundamental to his imaginative vision.

With regard to the issue of influence, this thesis has sought to identify and comment on those figures and ideas which impacted upon Muir’s writings, and aside from briefly mentioning George Mackay Brown’s tutelage under Muir,<sup>19</sup> it has not been possible to comment further on the influence that Muir has exerted on the work of others. Imlah’s suggestion that Muir was guileless plagiarizer of Eliot’s poetry<sup>20</sup> is insufficiently supported to merit serious consideration, although the relationship between Muir and Eliot is certainly one which deserves closer exploration. Muir was certainly interested in Eliot as a critic, in particular his theories relating to the ‘objective correlative’, the ‘dissociation of sensibility’ and the ‘historical sense’, but he remained critically unimpressed with most of Eliot’s poetry during the 1920s and 1930s. Indeed, as is discussed in Chapter Six, in *Variations* Muir can be seen offering a directly opposing perspective to that proposed in *The Waste Land*. Eliot’s poem presents a nihilistic vision of social atrophy while Muir’s lost travellers are seen interrogating their path into the present, attempting to rediscover the continuity that has become obscured along the way. Mirroring Muir’s sentiments, Eliot states that ‘in my youth I gave very little heed to Muir’s poetry [...] and it was not until after my own lines of development were well established that it began to appeal to me’.<sup>21</sup> How influential this appeal was and what impact it had on Eliot’s poetry are questions certainly worthy of future consideration.

Although Muir is one of Scotland’s most prolific and respected critics, the vast corpus of his essays and reviews remains a relatively under-examined resource. They offer a diverse range of critical insights and impassioned perspectives on literature and society and as the work on Scottish and European modernisms continues, undoubtedly more of these writings will be retrieved and a fuller appreciation of his contribution to an extraordinary period in literary history will be realized. For most readers, however, it is Muir’s poetry that continues to excite interest, inspiring an array of critical and creative

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<sup>17</sup> ‘A Note on the Scottish Ballads’ (1923), *Latitudes* (1924), pp.17, 18, & 30.

<sup>18</sup> Letter to Kathleen Raine (28/02/1956). *SL*, p.179.

<sup>19</sup> In ‘*Keeping the Sources Pure*’: *The Making of George Mackay Brown* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2003), Sabine Schmid identifies Muir as ‘the most important’ influence on Brown. See pp.43-105.

<sup>20</sup> Muir (2008), pp.xvi & xxiii.

<sup>21</sup> Muir (1965), pp.8-9.

responses, as John Gourlay's instrumental labyrinthine soundscape<sup>22</sup> and Geoffrey Kimpton's lyrical interpretation of 'The Confirmation'<sup>23</sup> demonstrate. As Muir told the students of Harvard in 1956, 'the first allegiance of any poet is to imaginative truth, and that if he is to serve mankind, that is the only way in which he can do it [...] In the end the poet must create his audience, and to do that he must turn outward'.<sup>24</sup> There is an open directness in the respect that Muir affords to the role of public service and to the function of poetry as communal discourse which certainly reflects something of the 'integrity' of which Eliot and Bruce write. Such clearly expressed sentiments may be one of the reasons why new readers are drawn to Muir's writings. There is another arguably more profound, yet less readily quantifiable, quality that continues to attract readers to his work. Committed to the 'imaginative truth' of life, his writings resonate with an elemental humanity, a quality that resides at the heart of his ambition to better understand the nature of time and its meaning in our fallen yet strangely blessed world.

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<sup>22</sup> John Gourlay, 'Labyrinth for Double Bass and Orchestra', Calum Gourlay and the Fife Youth Orchestra, Central Hall, Edinburgh (28/08/2008). <<http://youtu.be/kqJXujNf3hQ>> (accessed 21/06/2011).

<sup>23</sup> 'The Confirmation' by Geoffrey Kimpton and Mark Rowlinson. Track 11, *Songs of Love & Loss* (Campion Cameo, 2007). <<http://youtu.be/MaX5BNo12B0>> (accessed 20/06/2011).

<sup>24</sup> Muir (1962), p.109.

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