Studies in Scottish Literature

Volume 17 | Issue 1 Article 4

1982

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Recommended Citation

Dodd, Philip and Lapsley, M. (1982) "Is Man no More Than This? A Consideration of Edwin Muir's The Story and the Fable," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 17: Iss. 1.
Available at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol17/iss1/4

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Philip Dodd and *M. Lapsley*

Is Man no More Than This?
A Consideration of Edwin Muir's
The Story and the Fable

In *The Story and the Fable* and in a letter written at the time of its composition, Edwin Muir poses a question which reveals the nature of his concern in the autobiography. His repeated question is neither the orthodox autobiographical 'Who am I?' nor the question John Ruskin asks himself in *Praeterita* when speaking of his desire for a vocation--"What should I be, or do?"[1] If the former indicates an anxiety about personal identity, and Ruskin's question involves a concern with self-definition in a social sense, Muir's question is of the very nature of man:

> ...I am taking notes for something like a description of myself, done in general outline, not in detail, not as a story, but as an attempt to find out what a human being is in this extraordinary age which depersonalizes everything.
> (*Letters* 100)

> The problem that confronts an autobiographer even more urgently than other men is, How can he know himself? I am writing about myself in this book, yet I do not know what I am.
> (*SF* 55)

> But they [a man's actions] are not of much help to us when we set out to discover what we are, and there is a necessity in us, however blind and ineffectual, to discover what we are.
> (*SF* 57)

We propose to argue that in *The Story and the Fable* Muir apprehends and judges the available definitions of "what a human being is" through his evaluation of the social orders and the religious and secular faiths which enshrine those definitions.

In Muir's discussion of *King Lear* in the autobiography, and in its progeny, "The Politics of *King Lear*," he discerns in Shakespeare's play two conceptions of society, conceptions which, his autobiography reveals, are of crucial importance to his understanding of contemporary life. Indeed such are the parallels which Muir sees between the world of *King Lear* and his own world that the very personal vocabulary of moral discrimination and evaluation which he employs in his judgement of the conceptions of society in Shakespeare's play also enables him to comprehend and place the social orders of his own experience. Muir argues that the "conflict in Lear is a conflict between the sacred tradition of human society, which is old, and nature [animal nature], which is always new, for it has no background" (*SF* 60). For him, the "communal tradition, filled with memory" of Lear is opposed to the "new conception of society" of Goneril, Regan and Cornwall who are "merely animals furnished with human faculties" (PKL 47, 40, *SF* 59): their "life in the moment...their want of continuity, their permanent empty newness, are sufficient in themselves to involve them with nature, for nature is always new and has no background" (PKL 43). Representatives of a "brand-new order," and here Muir is explicit about their contemporary relevance for him, they point to "*laissez-faire* and the struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest so dear to the Victorian economists" (PKL 36, 43). What "they have the power to do they claim the right to do"; for "having no memory, they have no responsibility" (PKL 38, 41). Both in *King Lear* and in his own life Muir perceives an opposition between an old communal order which recognises custom and memory, and an individualistic "brand-new order" which denies all relationships other than those of power.

In *The Story and the Fable* Muir records two antithetical social orders of his own experience: the "good order" of Wyre and the "chaos" of Glasgow (*SF* 72). Of Wyre he writes:

> The farmers did not know ambition and the petty

> torments of ambition; they did not realize what competition was...they helped one another with their work when help was required, following the old usage; they had a culture made up of legend, folk-song, and the poetry and prose of the Bible; they had customs which sanctioned their instinctive feelings for the earth; their life was an order, and a good order.
> (*SF* 71-2)

Muir stresses that the inhabitants of Wyre acknowledge their dependence not only on each other but on the animal world: as the life of animals "had to be taken and the guilt for it accepted, the way of taking it was important, and the ritual arose, in which were united the ideas of necessity and guilt, turning the killing into a mystery" (*SF* 53). Yet though the Wyre social order is a good one, a co-operative one, it is threatened by a new kind of society represented by the figure of the Muir's landlord. Our awareness of Muir's belief that the traditional is the "distinctively human" (*Trans* 208), and that only nature is "new," would be sufficient to dictate our hostile judgment of the landlord with his castle, a "brand-new one like a polished black-and-white dice" (*SF* 13); but his association with such newness is only one of several suggestions that he is, in terms of the assumptions of the Wyre community, a new kind of man. The animal world, whose relation with the human world is, for the Wyre community, a "sacred" one (*SF* 53), is for the landlord merely the object of his sport (*SF* 13-4), as are, in a different way, his fellow men. The master of his tenants' fortunes, as his identification with the "black-and-white dice" would suggest, he drives the Muir family "out of the farm by his exactions" (*SF* 14). The landlord with his "dapper walk" foreshadows the "dapper," "new owner" of the firm in the "chaos" of Glasgow whose arbitrary sacking of his employees gives Muir his first concrete realisation of the "power of an employer" (*SF* 13, 153): "I was beginning to see that my job was at the mercy of any chance" (*SF* 151). Absolved from the "plague of custom" (PKL 37), such figures as the landlord and the factory owner are of the "new" competitive order: what they "have the power to do they claim the right to do" (PKL 38).

At the age of eight Muir moves from Wyre to Garth on the mainland of Orkney. With its "rich shopkeepers" and "clean, businesslike school" whose headmaster pulls Muir towards him "as he might have pulled a lever," Garth can be seen, within the moral scheme of the autobiography, as a "stepping-stone" on the way to commercial and industrial Glasgow (*SF* 79, 80,

93). After five years on Pomona the Muir family finally leave Orkney and journey to Glasgow--a journey which Muir understands not merely as a geographical shift but also an an irrevocable temporal shift, into the twentieth century: from 1751 to 1901 (*SF* 263). The principle of the "new society" (*SF* 108, 109) of Glasgow and Fairport in which Muir and his family are plunged is competition not co-operation, and the dominant relationship is a financial one. Even salvation is seen in the light of a "good business proposition" (*SF* 103). If on Wyre the relation of the human and animal worlds is a "personal relation" (*SF* 53), at Fairport it shrinks to an economic one at the bone factory whose "repellently clean" head-office in Glasgow (*SF* 153) remains a polite distance from the source of its profits: "the last relics of well-tended herds which had browsed and copulated in the rich fields of Scotland" (*SF* 164). The ruling principle of this *laissez-faire* society, "looking after yourself" (*SF* 109), is quickly grasped by Muir's older brothers as they are (and the language of social Darwinism is here explicit) at an age "when adaptation becomes conscious and deliberate" (*SF* 109). But Muir's parents are too old to understand or adapt to this "new" order and are destroyed. ("The Politics of *King Lear*" makes plain Muir's understanding of the relationship of the "new" order and the doctrine of the survival of the fittest.)

If Wyre is a "protective" and "fostering" order (*SF* 263)--Muir is born, and note the curious preposition, "into" Orkney (*SF* 12)--all that the "chaos" of Glasgow and Fairport ensures is utter deprivation; Muir suffers homelessness, the deaths in his family, his own continual illnesses, his incessant wanderings from job to job, and his succession of lodgings. In the chapter on Wyre the word "gathered" can be used of both the human and natural worlds, thus suggesting their communion: on Sunday evenings Muir's father "gathered us together to read a chapter of the Bible," and at the onset of the long nights the "winter gathered us into one room as it gathered the cattle into the stable and the byre" (*SF* 27, 32). All that can subsequently be "gathered" is associated with poison and dissolution: "the poisonous stuff" of Muir's adolescent state, as of his Glasgow years, "gathered" in him (*SF* 102, 133); and decaying animal bones are "gathered by diligent hands" for the Fairport bone factory (*SF* 164). Certainly then, the ways of life of Orkney and Glasgow seem to be antithetical. On Wyre beggars are known only in traditional songs (*SF* 30), and if, in Garth, they are encountered, they are "always taken in and given food" (*SF* 95). Only in Glasgow do the Muirs learn that "you must not take a beggar in and give him something to eat, but must slam the door at once in his face" (*SF* 106). But if,

on Wyre, a "new" conception of man as a competing animal appeared, in Glasgow an old conception of man as a co-operating being does linger on, in the figure of the slum doctor who successfully treats Muir for an ailment which other doctors, with whom Muir had spent "many a useless half-crown" (*SF* 122), had failed to do. With the successful doctor who found "some excuse whenever I asked him how much I owed him" (*SF* 122-3), Muir felt he was "intelligently collaborating" (*SF* 123).

It is evident, then, that Wyre and Glasgow nourish two radically different conceptions of man: man as a co-operating being, and man as a competing animal preying on his fellows. But nevertheless Muir does not pretend that pre-industrial Wyre is available as a model for the men and women of industrial towns. At best the memory of Wyre serves for Muir in *The Story and the Fable* as a chief inspiration towards a humanly satisfactory society of the modern world. For the way of life of his first home possesses, in its rooted patterns of work with their corresponding ceremonies, "custom, tradition, and memory" (*SF* 260), the necessary conditions of a co-operative life. It is within such an order--one never to return--that Muir spends, at the Bu, the first stage of his childhood, a period of his life when, to use his own terms, he lived "within immortality" (*SF* 26). (Compare Wordsworth, "But trailing clouds of glory do we come / From God, who is our home.") The description of those early days is replete with acknowledgements that "human life is not fulfilled in our world, but reaches through all eternity" (*SF* 203): Muir's first definite memory is of baptism (*SF* 18); biblical exegesis is a common subject of argument in the Wyre home (*SF* 64); and Sunday night signals the family prayers in which Edwin waits for the words: "'an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens'" (*SF* 27). The immemorial customs of Wyre and the adherence of its community to the rhythms of the seasons ensure that Wyre is a community "in which everybody possessed without thinking about it much the feeling for a permanence above the permanence of one human existence, and believed that the ceaseless flux of life passed against an unchangeable background....They felt also that there was a relation between the brief story of man and that unchangeable order" (DeN 148-9). Muir's first home and the first stage of his childhood are both lost at the same time; and with the loss of these two inheritances, which had sanctioned his belief that life "reaches through all eternity," Muir has to evolve his subsequent faiths purely out of his own experience.

It is at Garth, a "stepping-stone" on the way to Glasgow, that Muir first locates his heaven not in an eternal future but in a temporal one, in an adulthood which as an adolescent

he imitates and of which he speaks in religious terms: a "state which I longed to reach, in which I divined an unknown glory" (*SF* 83). He lives as an adolescent at Garth, as he will live in later life in Glasgow, not in the present but in a desired future: "I could not see things with my own eyes; instead I tried to see them as I thought my father and my mother and Sutherland saw them" (*SF* 77): to cite Wordsworth's "Ode" again, "As if his whole vocation / Were endless imitation." Nothing is done for its present sake, all for the adult life which is to come. But, if it is at Garth that we have our first indication that Muir's heaven might be precipitated "from the transcendental to the historical plane," to use the words of *Poor Tom* (Muir's earlier attempt to face some of the issues of the autobiography: *PT* 231), it is in Glasgow, after the deaths of so many of his family, that Muir's heaven is firmly located through his socialism in a temporal future. The journey of a "hundred and fifty years" from Orkney to Glasgow (*SF* 263) which Muir undertakes is, as he makes clear in *Poor Tom*, analogous to that temporal journey which takes place when a "man of our time...is converted from a Christian creed to one of the modern faiths" (*PT* 185), which for Muir are purely secular faiths. What meaning such modern faiths can give to the life of a man is, from one standpoint, the subject of the Glasgow and Fairport chapters.

In Glasgow Muir is very soon deprived both of his family and of his religious belief, and suffers, as we have already mentioned, continual bouts of illness, the loss of several jobs, and the lack of a stable home. He gradually comes to accept the creed of socialism which offers him the hope of re-release from his present painful experience, allowing him to "escape from the world I had known with such painful precision" into a "future in which everything, including myself, was transfigured" (*SF* 133). Muir's socialism is a deterministic creed which holds that "when the evolution reached a certain point a revolution would painlessly follow...as the logical consummation of the evolutionary process preceding it" (*SF* 132). His faith in the future, which his socialism nourishes, slowly hardens and shows itself to be inhuman as he comes to believe with Nietzsche that life is "guiltless and beyond good and evil," and that "the future did not lie with mankind at all, but with the Superman": "I was not interested any longer in descriptions of suffering, for suffering had no place in the vision of mankind I still clung to, where all vice and weakness and deformity were transcended" (*SF* 58, 143). Both Muir's socialism and the curious mixture of socialism and Nietzscheanism (*SF* 150) which he later adopts set the moving principle of good outside man in the inevitable evolution of

the universe towards a "heaven on earth" (*Letters* 112) and, in so doing, make of man a compliant passenger on that journey. The character of the journey is given concrete expression in the tramway of Glasgow with its inexorable, mechanical, simple forward movement, with its propulsion of its passenger, who is released from the burden of choice, in a determined direction and to a set destination.[2] The image of the tramway is crucial to the Glasgow and Fairport chapters: it is on a tram that Muir has his Nietzschean vision of animal man "moving towards an animal death as towards a great slaughter-house" (*SF* 59); on another tram, a glimpse of his future as a clerk (*SF* 151); and on another, his conversion to socialism (*SF* 131, see also *SF* 119, 120, 176).[3]

Muir does not deny his socialism a certain kind of redemptive power, and he describes it as a "pure, earthly vision" (*SF* 134): "My sense of human potentiality was so strong that even the lorry-men and the slum boys were transformed by it; I no longer saw them as they were, but as they would be when the society of which I dreamed was realized" (*SF* 133). It is a faith which engenders in him a "hygienic love" by which "the future had already purified in anticipation what it would some time purify in truth" (*SF* 134). His conversion to socialism is itself a cleansing of the "poisonous stuff" that had "gathered" in him during his early Glasgow years (*SF* 133). The exact nature of the purification that the vision of socialism can effect is described by Muir in *Poor Tom* (1932), in a vocabulary close to that of the autobiography, as a chemical purification:

> Like the visions of the saints, the Socialist vision is one of purification, and arises from man's need to rid himself of his uncleanness, the effluvia of his body and the dark thoughts of his mind. Yet the Socialist does not get rid of them in the fires of death, from which the soul issues cleansed and transfigured, but rather by a painless vaporisation of all that is urgent and painful in a future which is just as earthly as the present....it is a chemical or bio-chemical purity, not a spiritual. It is what is left when man eliminates from himself all that is displeasing, unclean and painful.
>
> (*PT* 190-1)

What Muir achieves in exposition in *Poor Tom* finds realisation in *The Story and the Fable* in the Fairport bone factory which, in conjunction with the image of the tramway, allows Muir to

gather up fully the implications inherent in his conception of the man of "modern faiths." The bone factory, whose "*clean* and indifferent chemistry" reduces to "*pure* dry dust," to "dry, *sterilized* residue," the unclean decaying bones (*SF* 164, 165), operates as an image of the way in which a "hygienic" socialism evades what in man is irremediably "displeasing, unclean and painful." One remembers that Muir describes his socialism as a "*pure*, earthly vision" engendering a "*hygienic* love," and speaks of the revolution being "painlessly achieved" (our emphases). He also notes that his reading of Nietzsche confirmed him in a "vision of mankind... where all vice and weakness and deformity were transcended." Muir is able to evade, with his gaze set firmly on a purified future ("I flung myself into it, lived in it" [*SF* 133]), what is "unclean" and sinful in himself and others until his "very painful" psychoanalysis in London (*SF* 187).

The psychoanalysis, which shakes him with "disgust and dread" of himself (*SF* 188), forces him to recognise that he shares with all men the same *impure* thoughts: "every one, like myself, was troubled by sensual desires and thoughts, by unacknowledged failures and frustrations causing self-hatred and hatred of others, by dead memories of shame and grief which had been *shovelled* underground long since because they could not be borne" (*SF* 188). (Compare the bones of Fairport which "were *shovelled* along with the maggots into the furnaces" [*SF* 155, our emphases].) The religious man confronts "these things" and, in so doing, wins "a certain liberation from them" (*SF* 188); the man of secular faiths merely attempts to avoid them. The importance of the psychoanalysis for Muir is twofold. First, he realizes that man is a creature of sin in need of expiation and not beyond good and evil; and second, he begins to apprehend, although in a simplified way, that human beings are understandable only as "immortal spirits" (*SF* 203):

> I realized that immortality is not an idea or a belief, but a state of being in which man keeps alive in himself his perception of that boundless union and freedom, which he can faintly apprehend in Time, though its consummation lies beyond Time. This realization that human life is not fulfilled in our world, but reaches through all eternity, would have been rejected by me some years before as an act of treachery to man's earthly hopes; but now, in a different way, it was a confirmation of them, for only a race of immortal spirits could create a world for immortal spirits to inhabit.
> (*SF* 202-3)

The experience of self-reflection in London is resumed and intensified a short time afterwards in Dresden, in a period of idleness and contemplation which Muir had not known since the age of fourteen:

> ...when at last I looked back at that life...it seemed to me that I was not seeing my own life merely, but all human life....In turning my head and looking *against* the direction in which Time was hurrying me I won a liberation and a new kind of experience.
>
> (*SF* 234-5)

Muir's italicisation of "against" explicitly announces the nature of his victory over the "ceaseless flux" of time, and his final liberation from those secular beliefs which imaged in the inexorable forward movement of the tram insist that man's life is determined.

With Dresden Muir effectively closes his account of his life, an account whose purpose, according to the author himself, was an attempt to find out "what a human being is in this extraordinary age." Certainly in *The Story and the Fable* Muir, as we have seen, has grasped and judged the conceptions of man enshrined in religious and secular faiths and in co-operative and competitive social orders. But, notwithstanding such an achievement, he ends his autobiography on a provisional note: "So here for the present I leave it" (*SF* 236). This should not surprise us when we remember that Muir, firm in his belief that man is an "immortal spirit" (*SF* 249) and a co-operating being, sees himself in 1940 adrift in a world which increasingly recognises no social relationships other than those of power. The diary chronicles the Spanish civil war, the Munich agreement, the persecution of the Jews, and the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Hitler's armies which Muir appropriately expresses through an animal metaphor: "We had no premonition then that history, in Oswald Spengler's words, 'would take them by the throat and do with them what must be done'" (*SF* 229). The problem of envisaging a modern social order capable of nourishing and sustaining, as did Wyre, man's co-operative nature evades resolution in *The Story and the Fable*, and continues to obsess Muir in the revised *An Autobiography* (1954). But in *The Story and the Fable* Muir has at least laid bare the available past and present definitions of man and, in so doing, has clarified for himself his position and his choices in "this extraordinary age."

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NOTES

[1]*The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E.T. Cook and A. Wedderburn (London, 1903-12), XXXV, 312. Page references to the following editions of Edwin Muir's works will be inserted parenthetically in the text using the abbreviated titles indicated below: (*Trans*) *Transition* (London, 1926); (*PT*) *Poor Tom* (London, 1932); (*SF*) *The Story and the Fable* (London, 1940); (*Letters*) *Selected Letters of Edwin Muir*, ed. P.H. Butter (London, 1974). The following abbreviations are used for the essays collected in *Essays on Literature and Society* (London, 1949): (PKL) "The Politics of *King Lear*"; (DeN) "The Decline of the Novel."

[2]It is interesting to note that Muir translated Kafka's "On the Tram" which associates the surrender of the will with movement on a tram: "I have not even any defence to offer for standing on this platform, holding on to this strap, letting myself be carried along by this tram..." (Franz Kafka, *Wedding Preparations in the Country and Other Stories* [Harmondsworth, 1978], p. 98).

[3]In his description of creeds of temporal life which deny immortality Muir, in letters written around the time of the composition of *The Story and the Fable*, uses phrases that suggest that the tramway does gather up concretely his sense of a purely temporal existence. He says of history that we "are moved about, caught, wedged, clamped in this machinery," and that if this was all he could believe in "he would hand back his ticket" (*Letters* 108, 112).