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*J. Brooks Bouson*

Poetry and the Unsayable:  
Edwin Muir's Conception of the Powers and  
Limitations of Poetic Speech



Often described as a visionary,<sup>1</sup> Edwin Muir wrote under necessity as he attempted to convey his inner world of memories, dreams, and visions. Having apprehended in isolated, timeless moments a transcendental framework underlying the structure of human experience, Muir was obsessed not only with time but with the felt tension between time and the timeless; and hence, he became a poet not only of the journey through time and place but also a poet who tried to convey the timeless vision apprehended at the core of human experience. Like all those who attempt to communicate the visionary experience, Muir was deeply aware of both the powers and limitations of language.

Aware of the "story that never can be told," the irreducibly simple and utterly unsayable story of silent immortality, Muir realized that the ultimate mysteries of life elude poetic speech. But he also realized that poetry, the speech grown from the darkness of the unconscious, offered him a way of knowing and a way of penetrating what he called the "fable" of life, the archetypal myth of Innocence and the Fall.<sup>2</sup> Although his visionary experiences occurred only in brief flares of illumination, poetic art, as a nexus of verbal energy and imaginative insight, empowered him to commemorate his momentary glimpses of that elusive world. In the timeless, ordered

world of art, he momentarily was redeemed from time's disorder; in the self-enclosed, gemlike world of poetic contemplation, he uncovered a world that was boundless and unfathomably precious.

Art, Muir realized, has a deep power to give shape and intensity to experience. As the artist creates order out of chaos, so he creates a new structure of existence--a new time and place--in the midst of our everyday world. When we cross the threshold and enter the concentrated, magical realm of art, as Muir indicates in the sonnet "The Emblem" (230-1),<sup>3</sup> we pass beyond the horizons of our daily world:

I who so carefully keep in such repair  
 The six-inch king and the toy treasury,  
 Prince, poet, realm shrivelled in time's black air,  
 I am not, although I seem, an antiquary.  
 For that scant-acre kingdom is not dead,  
 Nor save in seeming shrunk. When at its gate,  
 Which you pass daily, you incline your head,  
 And enter (do not knock; it keeps no state)

You will be with space and order magistral,  
 And that contracted world so vast will grow  
 That this will seem a little tangled field.  
 For you will be in very truth with all  
 In their due place and honour, row on row.  
 For this I read the emblem on the shield.

Likening the toy to the emblem and drawing a further analogy between these and the poem--for "toys," as Muir states in an article, "are the first works of art in our experience" and help us to "recapture the feelings of the first artist and the first spectator"<sup>4</sup>--the speaker-poet discloses the child-like wonder he feels both as a creator and spectator of the artistic object. Although the artist may appear to be nothing more than an "antiquary" and his fashioned world of myths and symbols nothing more than a shrunken, insignificant toy kingdom, the world of the artistic imagination is a world of "space and order magistral." Although the world of the imagination may appear to be inaccessible and elusive, it is both approachable and penetrable for we pass the "gate" to its realm "daily." It is a world open to all men--all men may achieve that same vision. When we imaginatively perceive the "contracted world" of the artistic object or poem and succumb to its formalized magic, we enter a place so vast and ordered that our daily world of time appears, by comparison, both chaotic and trivial: it seems but a "little tangled field."

Through art we triumph over time and chaos. And through art we uncover the dynamic coherence of life as we find ourselves "in very truth with all / In their due place and honour, row on row." The formal, ordered world of art opens wide the gate of vision and gives us a perspective of the wholeness and totality and unexpected magic of human life.

And art also, as Muir indicates in "The Myth" (144-5), can reveal the pattern and meaning of existence by linking the individual to the timeless world of innocence, a world known in childhood and subsequently lost. As Muir contemplates the span of his life in the quiet music of this poem, he uncovers what endures from his first world through the artistic imagination. Looking back, in the first stanza of the poem, to his childhood on the small island of Wyre, located in the Orkney Islands, he sees it as something fabulous, a "myth / Enacted in a distant isle" (1-2). Childhood, from the perspective of the sojourner in time, the wayfarer now "past the prime" (25) of his life, remains a potent icon before the eye of the imagination. For during that brief, unconscious moment of childhood, the poet exists in a sacred, self-enclosed world of primal blessedness, a world filled with the interpenetrating spiritual presence of the "faithful watchers" (12), the unearthly guardians of innocence. And in that brief but eternal moment, he exists in eternity: he exists in a world in which time remains suspended so that "immobility might save / Continually the dying song, / The flower, the falling wave" (6-8).

Although, as Muir indicates in the second stanza, that first world is lost during the "tragi-comedy" of youth (13), a vital link to that eternal world is retained. For the war fought during adolescence, a war of "dreams and shames" (14), is "Waged for a Pyrrhic victory / Of reveries and names" (15-6)--it is waged, at great cost, for the poetic imagination. For through the "name," i.e., poetic language, he can recover and hold intact his world of "reverie," those elusive memories, momentary visions, and fleeting dream images which link him to his timeless childhood world. While the reverie and the name are hurled against the ever-encroaching reality of "flesh and blood" (18), the poet, in his manhood, shapes an art that retains something of the radiance of his lost world:

And there in practical clay compressed,  
The reverie played its useful part,  
Fashioning a diurnal mart  
Of radiant east and west.

(21-4)

And it is the poetic imagination and that mysteriously present but elusive world of the spirit which survives "past the prime" (25) of manhood, Muir indicates in the final stanza. For when the designs of "flesh and bone" grow "halt and lame" (29-30)

Unshakeable arise alone  
 The reverie and the name.  
 And at each border of the land,  
 Like monuments a deluge leaves,  
 Guarding the invisible sheaves  
 The risen watchers stand.

(31-6)

The poet, faithful to the world of the poetic imagination--the world of the reverie and the name--, remains in touch with the timeless world of childhood, the world of the unearthly "watchers." When the "deluge" of time's wave passes over him, he reaps a rich spiritual harvest as he apprehends the mysterious core of life, the self-enclosed world of sacredness and integral reality.

Not only committed to the intangible world of the reverie and the name, Muir is also committed to the deep and potent magic of the racial unconscious. He is a poet who has been "taught," he tells us in the last poem he wrote, "by dreams and fantasies" and by the "friendly and the darker phantoms" (302, 1-2) of the imagination. In "The Song" (257-9), Muir describes how a vivid dream vision, an unearthly visitation by one of the "darker phantoms" of the racial memory, kindles the poetic imagination, man's song-creating faculty. In the opening lines of the poem, the speaker describes the inception of the poetic process in the elusive world of unconscious memories. Haunted by memories that knock at "a disused, deaf, dead door" (2) of the mind and yet remain unformed and remote --"They could not get to me nor I to them. / And yet they knocked" (4-5)--the speaker initially feels "oppressed" (7) because he is cut off from his unconscious world. Yet in dreams, he realizes, where one's consciousness of self as a being in time and place is suspended as one enters the world of the fable, "These meetings are renewed, dead dialogues / Utter their antique speech" (13-4). For in the world of dreams where "fables turn to beasts and beasts to fables," anything "can be in a natural wonder" (11-2).

And so it is in a dream that the speaker passes beyond the borders of his daily world as he opens himself up to the creative--and song-making--faculties of the unconscious and confronts the irreducible otherness of this hidden, magical

realm. For when the speaker, in his dream, returns home from a "long day's work" (18) and crosses a park, a "Utilitarian strip of grass and trees-- / A short-cut for poor clerks to unhallowed rooms" (22-3), he encounters an inexpressibly strange beast: "As heavy as earth it stood and mourned alone, / Horse, or centaur, or wide-winged Pegasus, / But far too strange for any fabulous name" (39-41). When the dreamer is brought within sight of the "great beast in anguish" (26)--a beast that mourns for the Fall of man, a "deed once done and done for ever / And done in vain" (28-9)--he is brought in sight of an inarticulate mystery. At once gentle and fearsome, submissive and forceful, the creature moves, its hoofs "treading out a meditation" (52) and then, breaking out in thundrous sound, the "wild thing" charges at the park gate but is unable to pass that "simple barrier" (53-4). When the creature with "hoofs, wings far overhead" (61), climbs the sky, the vision passes: "pain raised that wonder there; / Nothing but pain. The drumming died away" (62-3). As the world of the fable crystallizes only to dissolve again into the familiar world of everyday reality, the dreamer questions the source of his mysterious vision:

Was it these hoofs, I thought, that knocked all day  
 With no articulate message, but this vision  
 That had no tongue to speak its mystery?  
 What wound in the world's side and we unknowing  
 Lay open and bleeding now? What present anguish  
 Drew that long dirge from the earth-haunting marvel?  
 (64-9)

Although the moment of vision passes with the ascension of the Pegasus-like creature--a creature symbolic both of the world of the fable and the magical realm of poetic insight<sup>5</sup>--, the experience holds the speaker in its peculiar power. The speaker retains, upon awakening, a memory of the beast's "dirge":

Yet I woke up saying, 'The song--the song'.  
 (75)

The miracle of the "song"--something given to the speaker-poet--redeems him from the pain and suffering of his vision of the Fall. Now that the "disused, deaf, dead" door of the unconscious has been opened and the poetic imagination has been stimulated, the speaker-poet is ready to translate the inarticulate dream "song" into a poetic "song." Through the formalized cadence of poetic speech, he will attempt to convey his visionary experience.<sup>6</sup>

A poet inspired by dreams in which "fables turn to beasts and beasts to fables" and in which "dead dialogues / Utter their antique speech," Muir is also a poet who knows the "delicacy / Of bringing shape to birth" ("All We," 158, 7-8), and the difficulty of sustaining the moment of poetic inspiration. He is a poet who must find the "right moment"<sup>7</sup> if he is to create verse that is "both simple and unexpected"<sup>8</sup> for the "poetic state, the state in which poetry is produced, is a state balanced more or less exactly between the conscious and the unconscious, between inspiration and formulation...."<sup>9</sup> There is "no knowing," Muir explains as he describes how lines sometimes occurred spontaneously in his mind, "when such things will come, or where."<sup>10</sup> And when the "right moment"--a moment such as that described in "The Song"--did come and Muir felt the premonitions of a poem, he needed solitude and silence to sustain the poetic state, as he indicates in the conversational tones of "The Visitor" (198), a rare public statement by Muir on the creation of verse. In the abrupt opening lines of the poem, the speaker-poet asks to be left in privacy so he can receive his "delicate," ghost-like muse who stands waiting at the threshold--the "door"--of consciousness:

No, no, do not beguile me, do not come  
 Between me and my ghost, that cannot move  
 Till you are gone,  
 And while you gossip must be dumb.  
 (1-4)

Through the natural speech cadences of these lines, Muir creates an intensely personal poetry, poetry that has the ring of authenticity. The tone of this "half-uttered scarcely whispered plea" (11) is at once hushed (an effect created through the combined use of prolonged vowel and muted consonant sounds) and urgent (an effect produced through the use of repetitions, especially of negative assertions, such as no...no/do not...do not). We are made privy to the speaker-poet's increasing distress as the subdued tension of the first few lines of the poem gives way before the speaker's frustration, a frustration verbally betrayed through the use of hyperbole (to describe the "din" of a whispered plea) and irony (to describe the intruder's gossip as "great tidings"):

But I would be alone  
 Now, now and let him in,  
 Lest while I speak he is already flown,  
 Offended by the din  
 Of this half-uttered scarcely whispered plea  
 (So delicate is he).

No more, no more.  
Let the great tidings stay unsaid.  
(7-14)

In the final lines of the poem, we find an open avowal of the speaker-poet's anxiety:

For I must to the door,  
And oh I dread  
He may even now be gone  
Or, when I open, will not enter in.  
(15-8)

Distressed by the thought that his delicate, elusive muse has fled, he fears that he has squandered that precious moment given to him, the moment of poetic inspiration when the intangible worlds of the reverie and the name fuse together in the poet's consciousness.

A poet inspired by a ghostly muse and by those visionary glimpses into the world of the fable, Muir is also inspired by those moments in which he comes to a deep awareness of the absolute value of life. In the celebratory poem "In Love for Long" (159-60) Muir captures and makes formal the magic of an experience he had during the war years while sitting in the countryside and gazing at the scene around him. "Suddenly and without reason," he recalls, he felt a deep and abiding fondness for the hills, the cottages, the clouds, the soft, subdued light, and for the very ground he sat upon, and he realized that he loved these things "for themselves."<sup>11</sup> Seeking to give concrete form to his experience of an irreducible and irresistible love, a love grounded in the soil of this world, Muir attempts to grasp, in the verbal space of the poem, that mysterious force which grasped him, that force from which "there's no escape," and that force which challenges his powers of poetic expression:

I've been in love for long  
With what I cannot tell  
And will contrive a song  
For the intangible  
That has no mould or shape,  
From which there's no escape.  
(1-6)

As he tries to penetrate the enigma of "what" it is he loves in these simple, trimeter lines with their mixture of simple and Latinate diction, the speaker-poet poses a riddle. Giving



a series of clues to the identity of the mysterious thing he loves, he invites the reader to become involved in the process of discovery. Though what he loves is "not even a name," yet it is "all constancy" (7-8). It is simultaneously as fleeting and airy as a "breath" and as "still" and stable as "the established hill" (11-12). Whether "Tried or untried," it is "the same," and it is an essential part of his being for it "cannot part" from him (9-10). What he loves resides in paradox and contradiction for he loves the very stuff of "being" itself:

It is not any thing,  
 And yet all being is;  
 Being, being, being,  
 Its burden and its bliss.  
 How can I ever prove  
 What it is I love?

(13-8)

What he loves cannot be grasped through the reason nor can it be localized or confined by the intellect, and therefore, he cannot "prove" it. What he loves can only be grasped in a poetic song of simplicity and child-like intensity.

Though the "happy moment" of love passes--for time crushes it "beneath and above / Between to-days and morrows" (21-2)--the speaker-poet recovers, in its integral time-space unit, a world of innocence, joy, and fulfillment. His love is "A little paradise / Held in the world's vice" (23-4):

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.

(31-7)

Though vulnerable and doomed by time, his "moment" of profound love, like the "happy doe" found in the tiger's grasp, "vindicates its cause" by the very fact of its existence. In the moment of love he discovers a dynamic world of perfected order and value. As the poet "contrives a song" to celebrate the freedom and joy which emerge within the boundless moment of love, he seeks to create verse of a higher order, verse which tells what he "cannot tell" and gives shape to the "intangible / That has no mould or shape."

Driven to create poetry by the ecstatic moment of love, Muir is also driven by the quieter moments of poetic contemplation and reflection, by those "transformations of reality which the imagination itself creates,"<sup>12</sup> those transformations of reality which bring one towards the limits of language. "I have always had a particular feeling," Muir states in a letter, "for that transmutation of life" found "occasionally in poetry" and "sometimes in one's own thoughts when they are still."<sup>13</sup> In the sonnet "The Transmutation" (154-5), a poem which Muir liked "best" of all his sonnets,<sup>14</sup> he gives formal expression to his enigmatic experience of the imaginative transmutation of life. Employing an unresolved syntax in the first three and one-half lines to convey a feeling of wonder, the speaker-poet describes, in the lingering music of this poem, a moment of value redeemed from time:

That all should change to ghost and glance and gleam,  
And so transmuted stand beyond all change,  
And we be poised between the unmoving dream  
And the sole moving moment--this is strange

Past all contrivance, word, or image, or sound,  
Or silence, to express, that we who fall  
Through time's long ruin should weave this phantom ground  
And in its ghostly borders gather all.

(1-8)

As the speaker-poet celebrates the unutterably "strange" transforming vision which so "changes" things to reveal their unchanging core, so he celebrates that which cannot be grasped: the elusive "ghost," the fleeting "glance," and the intangible "gleam." It is this unlocalized world--a world hovering between dream and reality and time and the timeless--which is the poet's domain. Although life in time is a protracted fall through the flawed (i.e., ruined) world of time and place and towards the final "ruin" of decay and dissolution, and although time's process is irrevocable and irreversible, the poet can recover essence from time's substance. In the "ghostly borders" of an isolated and framed moment of contemplation, the poet can encompass the "all"--the essence--of reality and "weave" from these ethereal strands an enduring design.

The speaker-poet discovers, interwoven in this contemplative vision, a world of utter simplicity and human significance. For here he envisions not only the innocent realm of first childhood where "incorruptible the child plays still" and the world in which the lover "waits beside the trysting

tree," but also the self-contained world in which "The good hour spans its heaven, and the ill" (9-11). He has been granted what Muir believes to be the "supreme vision of human life," the reconciling vision in which both the good and ill "have their place legitimately."<sup>15</sup> In this iconic realm of contemplation, the worlds of innocence, love, and good and ill remain "Rapt in their silent immortality" (12): they are held in dynamic suspension by the mysterious power of the transforming vision.

Although, as the concluding couplet suggests, the transmuted world of vision does not have a permanent, tangible existence in our world--it exists "As in commemoration of a day / That having been can never pass away" (13-4, my italics)--and although, when the vision passes the speaker-poet must return to the world of "time's long ruin," yet he has transcended, during the moment of contemplation, the dissolving and ruinous flux of time. And he has fashioned, out of his experience, a formal poetic utterance. He has poetically commemorated a moment of vision, a moment "poised between the unmoving dream / And the sole moving moment"; he has reverentially held in memory and celebrated the magic of an experience strange "Past all contrivance, word, or image, or sound, / Or silence, to express." Brought to the threshold of "silent immortality," he has been within sight of what Muir, in another poem, describes as the "story that never can be told" ("The Bargain," 189, 11).

Paradoxically, at the point Muir has everything to say he discovers his inability to say anything. For as he approaches, in moments of contemplation, the world of "silent immortality," so he approaches the borderline of the unsayable. Though he can, through poetic speech, give form and intensity to the visionary, and though he can commemorate and make formal his experience of the transmutation of life by telling it and shaping it into a poem, there is something which the poet apprehends but must leave unsaid. There is that final mystery which defies poetic formulation, as Muir indicates in a late poem, "Images I" (260), in which he gives poetic utterance to a dream he had and subsequently related to Kathleen Raine, a dream he felt conveyed the "deepest truth" about the act of writing:

The dream was a very simple one: it consisted of a semicolon. The meaning of this semicolon, as it revealed itself to the dreamer, was that the poet never knows all that he writes: he writes only, as it were, as far as the semicolon; beyond the statement is something more, that completes his meaning.

We can never define it, for it is not finite in its very nature; yet it is part of the poem, and part of what the poet communicates to the reader.<sup>16</sup>

In the poem--which can be conceived either as a self-dialogue or as an address by the speaker-poet to another writer or to the reader--this "truth" about writing is conveyed as the speaker directs the "you" of the poem to behold the inexpressible mystery of that which is at once intimate and immediate and yet elusive and symbolic: the human face. Combining, in the abrupt opening statement of the poem, a familiar tone with a cryptic command to "look" at a face--a face which is never identified or described--, Muir conveys to the reader something of the suddenness and mysteriousness of the moment of revelation described in the poem:

Take one look at that face and go your way.  
(1)

"One look" at this face is sufficient. Seen in a moment of illumination, this face provides a direct awareness of a mystery deeper than life, a mystery that resides in paradox. Although the cares and burdens of time have left their mark in the "lines" of this face, the "yearning" evident in these features, with their "lines of motionless desire / Perpetually assuaged yet unappeased" (2-4), discloses a deep-seated hunger for something outside of time, something glimpsed in a moment of self-forgetfulness when the temporal, private identity has been shed and the alien distance intervening between the self and the real overcome. For

These are your lineaments, the face of life  
When it is quite alone, and you forgotten.  
(6-7)

A manifestation of the individual and universal man, this face conveys to the observer a deep truth about life, a truth which can never be defined or stated as the speaker explains in the self-referential lines that follow, lines that, as critic Christopher Wiseman puts it, use syntax as an "expressive agent" to create a poetry which describes and comments on itself:<sup>17</sup>

Look once. But do not hope to find a sentence  
To tell what you have seen. Stop at the colon:  
And set a silence after to speak the word  
That you will always seek and never find,  
Perhaps, if found, the good and beautiful end.

You will not reach that place. So leave the hiatus  
 There in the broken sentence. What is missing  
 You will always think of.

(8-15)

Paradoxically, only silence can speak; only the "hiatus," the missing word in the sentence, can convey the mystery perceived by the observer. For the direct awareness of mystery cannot be captured by language or shaped and structured through words and syntax: the totality of the observer's experience defies formulation. If his experience could, somehow, be articulated, the "good and beautiful" vision might be lost through the transformation of his immediate, intuitive knowledge into conscious, verbal knowledge. And if he were to "scan" (16) that face once again, he might read himself into his experience: he might leave, on that face, his own "personal load of trouble and desire" (17) and so lose the moment of disinterested contemplation. Though his revelatory insight is fleeting, it is also whole, a totality: "You cannot add to it nor take away" (18). Having witnessed the mystery of that face, the observer must rely on the "imperfect mystery" of the "limping sentence" for there is nothing more he can "think or say" (19-20). And he must rely on memory: "And do not forget. But look once at that face" (21).

Aware of the inexhaustible mystery of human life, Muir speaks, as he indicates in "The Poet" (286), written several years before his death, "in bewilderment":

And in bewilderment  
 My tongue shall tell  
 What mind had never meant  
 Nor memory stored.  
 In such bewilderment  
 Love's parable  
 Into the world was sent  
 To stammer its word.

(1-8)

Possessed by the overwhelming presence of love, the poet becomes a vessel through which love's word is conveyed. But he relays his knowledge only imperfectly when he embodies it in language: he must "stammer" the deep truth he has apprehended. He does not force his visionary experience into the predetermined structures of rational thought, for he realizes that "If thought should thieve / One word of the mystery / All would be wrong" (18-20). In moments of poetic inspiration, when the rational processes of the mind are submerged

and the poet enters the world of "ghost and glance and gleam," he travels beyond time's framework and stands in the presence of ultimate reality:

Where traveller never went  
Is my domain  
Dear disembodiment  
Through which is shown  
The shapes that come and go  
And turn again.

(11-6)

In touch with the imponderable mysteries of life, Muir is in touch with the profound sources of poetry. As he states in the last poem he wrote:

And now that time grows shorter, I perceive  
That Plato's is the truest poetry,  
And that these shadows  
Are cast by the true.

(302, 19-22)

Telling the untellable tale through the "limping sentence" with its missing word, the poet says more than he can ever know through the conscious mind. "What I shall never know," Muir states in "The Poet," "I must make known" (286, 9-10). Although he must "Stop at the colon: / And set a silence after to speak the word" which he seeks and cannot find, he communicates a profound truth which exists beyond systems and beyond the words of poetry. As he creates his song out of his deep spiritual awareness, commemorating his momentary glimpses of a transmuted, perfected world, he communicates, however imperfectly, a knowledge that transcends and fulfills us. Through his song, and its deep inwardness, Muir reveals to us the boundless mystery and hidden significance of the human experience.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Muir is frequently placed in the company of the great visionary poets of the English tradition, poets such as Herbert, Vaughan, Blake, Wordsworth, and Coleridge. See, for example, J.C. Hall, *Edwin Muir*, British Council Writers and

Their Work Series, No. 71 (London, 1956), p. 31; Elizabeth Huberman, *The Poetry of Edwin Muir: The Field of Good and Ill* (New York, 1971), pp. 7-9; Thomas Merton, "The True Legendary Sound: The Poetry and Criticism of Edwin Muir," *Sewanee Review*, 75 (Spring 1967), 318; and Ralph Mills, Jr., "Edwin Muir's Poetry: An Introductory Note," *The Newberry Library Bulletin*, 6 (Nov. 1963), 78.

<sup>2</sup>The "fable" of Innocence and the Fall is one of the central themes in Muir's poetry. Muir became obsessed with the "fable" of life because of his own life experiences. As he states in *An Autobiography* (London, 1954; rpt. New York, 1968), p. 114: "There are times in every man's life when he seems to become for a little while a part of the fable, and to be recapitulating some legendary drama which, as it has recurred a countless number of times in time, is ageless. The realization of the Fall is one of those events, and the purifications which happen in one's life belong to them too."

<sup>3</sup>Page and line references to the *Collected Poems* (New York, 1965) will be indicated parenthetically within the text.

<sup>4</sup>"Toys and Abstractions," *Saltire Review*, 9 (Winter 1957), 36.

<sup>5</sup>It is also possible to find, as Christopher Wiseman points out (in "Edwin Muir's Last Poems," *University of Windsor Review*, 10 [Fall-Winter 1974], 9), a "subdued Christian element" in this poem: "The living presence from a higher world come to earth to bring understanding of a wider purpose and pattern is seen as suffering intensely, as if bearing the whole world's pain. As with Christ, the great powers are not allowed to prevail in order to release it from necessary suffering. Here a simple park gate 'defeats' the huge animal, just as a wooden cross 'defeats' Christ. Here, too, following the agony, there is a mysterious upward rising from the world." And one might add, the image of the "wound in the world's side" also reflects the "subdued Christian element" found in "The Song."

<sup>6</sup>We can carry this process one step further. The poem "The Song" is Muir's translation of his dream experience into a poetic "song."

<sup>7</sup>*Selected Letters of Edwin Muir*, ed. P.H. Butter (London, 1974), p. 146.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 143.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 179. In his biography of Muir, P.H. Butter discusses this in more detail. As Butter states (in *Edwin Muir: Man and Poet* [Edinburgh, 1966], pp. 190-191): "Muir always waited for a poem to knock on the door, for inspiration. He could not--or at least did not--stimulate inspiration in himself by deliberately setting himself tasks. He waited--sometimes for a long time. Then perhaps sitting on the top floor of an Edinburgh tram, 'looking at the windows flying past, feeling as if I were in no fixed place, as if I were nowhere,' he would find odd lines coming into his mind which he recognised as the beginning of a poem. Or this might happen in company, and he would withdraw right out of the conversation, and Mrs Muir would nudge her neighbour and say 'birth is coming.' Then he would need perhaps quite a long period of gestation, walking by himself preferably in the country, before he would write down the poem and work at it with the top of his mind."

<sup>11</sup>Cited by Butter in *Edwin Muir: Man and Poet*, p. 206, from the B.B.C. "Chapbook," 3 Sept. 1952. As Muir recalls in a B.B.C. broadcast: "'I was up at Swanston in the Pentlands one Saturday morning during the War. It was in late summer; a dull, cloudy, windless day, quite warm. I was sitting in the grass, looking at the thatched cottages and the hills, when I realised that I was fond of them, suddenly and without reason, and for themselves, not because the cottages were quaint or the hills romantic. I had an unmistakable warm feeling for the ground I was sitting on, as if I were in love with the earth itself, and the clouds, and the soft subdued light. I had felt these things before, but that afternoon they seemed to crystallise, and the poem came out of them.'"

<sup>12</sup>From the B.B.C. "Chapbook," 3 Sept. 1952. Cited by Butter, p. 222.

<sup>13</sup>*Selected Letters*, p. 148.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 157.

<sup>15</sup>"Yesterday's Mirror: Afterthoughts to an Autobiography," *Scots Magazine*, NS 33 (Sept. 1940), 406.



<sup>16</sup>Kathleen Raine, "Edwin Muir: An Appreciation," *Texas Quarterly*, 4 (Autumn 1961), 234. Although the poem is about a colon and not a semicolon, this dream is undoubtedly a source of "Images I."

<sup>17</sup>Wiseman, p. 10.