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Nancy Dew Taylor

Edwin Muir's Penelope Poems



"Nothing yet was ever done
Till it was done again"

In our day poetry is more often read with the eyes than the voice, and its spoken quality—that power of language to move—is often lost. When it is heard, as all poetry ought to be, the mind creates pictures from the sounds. Read aloud, for instance, these lines from "Telemachos Remembers" by Edwin Muir:

Twenty years, every day,
The figures in the web she wove
Came and stood and went away.
Her fingers in their pitiless play
Beat downward as the shuttle drove.

Slowly, slowly did they come,
With horse and chariot, spear and bow,
Half-finished heroes sad and mum,
Came slowly to the shuttle's hum.
Time itself was not so slow.

And what at least was there to see?
A horse's head, a trunkless man,
Mere odds and ends about to be,
And the thin line of augury
Where through the web the shuttle ran.¹

Heard, that one line—"the thin line of augury"—in a single flash throws in front of the mind a maelstrom of images: massed heads, wild, wide-eyed horses; helmeted men; a jumble of spears and arrows, all glinting with movement. Seeing that thin line on the loom—the line between created and yet-to-be-created, between past and future—seeing the line brings into focus the whole of the loom, with its chaotic groups of threads in parallel lines running at odd angles to each other: the confusion of creation. It is an unbelievably *visual* line of poetry.

Such a line impels the hearer to Muir's *Collected Poems*; once there, one discovers five poems concerning Penelope. To write five poems about the same person is odd enough; add to that fact that in three of them Muir emphasizes the same aspect of Penelope's story, her weaving, and the fascination of the poet for this character and her story becomes even more apparent. An attempt to fathom this fascination is the purpose of this article.

In his poetry Muir is much preoccupied with Eden and the figure of Christ and with the subjects of time and war. He is interested in how to make the most of our timed lives, in discovering why we are in time, in the cyclical nature of time—particularly its wheel-like ability to crucify if we do not learn to control and make good use of it. Above all else, Muir's poetry implies that in order for the race to endure, humanity must discover its convictions, that it must have the strength of those convictions.

Once these themes and preoccupations are recognized, connections between the Penelope poems and the others begin to suggest themselves. In this study, "The Return of the Greeks" needs to be considered along with "Penelope in Doubt," so the discussion of the poems will not be chronological. And although it may be difficult to go from Odysseus' homecoming "back" to three poems that deal with Penelope's years of waiting, the three poems which emphasize her weaving will be examined last. They contain the heart of Muir's fascination with Penelope.

"The Return of the Greeks" is a good example of a Muir poem that presents the differences between war and real life. For ten years the Greeks have lived with deep knowledge of the literal walls of Troy and

¹References to line numbers in individual poems, all found in *Collected Poems* (New York, 1965), will be placed in the body of the paper.

with the possibility of imminent death. On their return home the warriors are stunned to find that life goes on and that home seems somehow smaller—what they have missed has been enlarged by memory until the real things appear unreal.

The Greeks come home "sleepwandering" (2), a lovely, concocted word which implies both sleepwalking and the absent, still "wandering" Odysseus (as does the word *scar* in 5). Their ships blunder over the bar; they have been soldiers so long they have almost forgotten how to sail. The "boundless" sea-vistas (20), the "squat and low" hills (24) don't look right; the up-close, "towering" (18) walls of Troy have knocked out their sense of perspective, both literal and figurative. The "vinerows" (33) probably remind them of "an alley steep and small" (17),² but "the parcelled ground" (32) is totally different from the battlefield which knew no neat lines of demarcation. They are shocked by empty space (23) because for years they have been "reading" (7) "the huge heartbreaking wall" (14).

The Greeks cannot get used to being at home, where there is "...never a change" (33).³ They find "a childish scene/Embosomed in the past" (26-7), a world so seemingly trite and strange that were it not for their grey-haired wives and their sons grown shy and tall, they would go back, raise the defeated walls, and begin the battles again. Just how much they are tempted to do so is evidenced by the change in wording from "But for" (37) to "In spite of" (42).

But they stay. And Penelope, alone in her tower, watches the men as, hesitantly, then more surely, but always slowly, they enter their homes with their wives. "...within an hour" (45) she knows she will still be alone, that Odysseus is not among them. "In her tower" (43, 38) she watches: not *from* her tower. The tower remains her prison, and she remains in it, imprisoned alone, looking down "upon the show" (44). Muir's word choice here is a further attempt to alienate Penelope from the action around her, an attempt to portray her as observer or audience separate from the action of the drama. This separation is, of course, what Penelope does not want, so the irony of *show* is a good choice.

A kind of irony exists as well in the way Muir sets up this poem. The first and last lines of each stanza end with the same word. The recurring

²The vinerows and alley both remind the reader of "The Narrow Place," title poem of Muir's third volume of poems. And "The Narrow Place" reminds one of the first poem in "Variations on a Time Theme."

³Elizabeth Huberman's extended explication of this poem, in *The Poetry of Edwin Muir: The Field of Good and Evil* (New York, 1971), is excellent; her emphasis on the tone and theme of boredom is particularly enlightening.

words give a sense of the sleepwandering Greeks' reactions and their dazed condition. They are an evidence of "The past and the present bound/In one oblivious round/Past thinking trite and strange" (34-6). The repetition also suggests the triteness of this life versus the life of war ("trite and strange" are one of the two examples of *two* words—a phrase—being repeated in the first and last lines). The strongest case might be made for the repetitious words representing a prison. Each stanza is confined within the two words just as Penelope is confined within her tower. Her solitariness in the tower in the last stanza effectively contrasts with the second example of more than one word being repeated: "came home" (1, 6): these words emphasize her separation from the rest of the Greeks.

In "Penelope in Doubt" Penelope experiences the same kind of dazed reaction to Odysseus' return as the Greek soldiers displayed in their return ten years earlier. White-haired, her eyes bleached pale by time's passage, Penelope surveys her white-haired husband with the shrivelled scar. She stands there listening to Odysseus as he describes a brooch.⁴ She remembers it as he talks, marvels that the hound and doe remain unchanged by time. As she listens, she wonders: despite the proofs of brooch and scar, is this really Odysseus?

Her hesitancy in answering this question grows out of more than just their changed physical appearances. Faced with him, she suddenly realizes they are both totally different people, people changed by experience. "How many things in her had died" (14)? Who was he now, this stranger, "who had seen too much,/Been where she could not follow" (19-20)? "How could she know/What a brown scar said or concealed?" (22-3). If she thinks his tale of hound and doe both "strange" (17) and "idle" (13), what will he think when she tells him what *she's* been doing, day in and day out, for twenty years? In her confusion Penelope perhaps even equates the two of them with the doe and the hound; are they not irrevocably bound one to the other? Such a possibility is suggested by the rhyme scheme, abccba, of each stanza, a metrical device which also implies the going away of Odysseus followed by his return and might also imply the weaving and unweaving of Penelope's years.

⁴Both Christopher Wiseman in *Beyond the Labyrinth: A Study of Edwin Muir's Poetry* (Victoria, BC, 1978, pp. 206-7) and P. H. Butter in *Edwin Muir: Man and Poet* (London, 1966, p. 288) quote a passage from Muir's 1957 notebook on the genesis of this poem. Muir states that he had an actual brooch in mind. In the poem itself, we cannot know the brooch was one Odysseus was describing rather than one he had taken with him to Troy, perhaps, and brought back. Nor does Muir, in the poem, describe "the dog fastened to the fawn's throat, the fawn striking at him with its slender hoofs." Since that information does not appear in the finished poem, the image can be read also as one of the endless chase, one applicable to Penelope's doubts.

"Penelope in Doubt" concerns the return of Odysseus, but "The Return of Odysseus" does not deal with what its title suggests. Odysseus is still "on the long and winding road of the world" (27-8). The poem is about Penelope, about her long wait for Odysseus' return. And Muir's picture of her is certainly imaginative: in stanza one we find that Penelope has let the outer part of the house go to the dogs and cattle and all strangers. The onomatopoeic "flapped," "lolling," and "babblers" help create the noise and sense of disorder which pervade the outer house. All manner of men come there as to a public market; they lean on the walls, spit on the floor, eye without interest newcomers. We remember here Homer's description of Odysseus' actual homecoming; the "guests" at first regarded a newcomer without interest, then with jeers, then—as they realized who he was—with fear and trembling. But in this disordered house—dusty, crumbling, weedy—no one expects Odysseus. The last line of the first stanza, however, reminds the reader of him: "All round the island stretched the clean blue sea"—and the word *clean* both contrasts with the description of the outer rooms and leads perfectly into the second stanza.

Here, at the heart of the house, sits Penelope, weaving. "Sole" (14) implies both *lonely* and *soul* and *only*—in the sense that only where Penelope is do we find cleanliness and order. This stanza reveals as well the reason Penelope has allowed the outer house to lie open, to decay: if the door is open, so to speak, then "order and right and hope and peace can enter" (23) in the form of Odysseus, who, on his return, will bring these things back into the house with him.

Odysseus can tend to these outer attributes because Penelope has maintained "at the house's heart" (14) the soul of both herself and their home. Penelope *is* the heart of the house. Here she sits at her "chosen" task: "endless undoing/Of endless doing, endless weaving, unweaving" (15-6). Here, paradoxically, we again encounter disorder: the unweaving of the day's work. Penelope describes it as "an emptiness/Amid disorder, weaving, unweaving the lie/The day demands" (19-21). But then she puts a name to it: duty. Her duty is "To do and undo, to keep a vacant gate" (22), both of which are necessary to assure the return of Odysseus which the title speaks of. Only by holding her suitors at bay (to do and undo) and only by expecting Odysseus (the vacant gate) to make things right upon his return can she get through her long days and years of waiting. The poem, then, is about duty and about warding off the despair which breaks out of her soul in the lines "'Oh will you ever return? Or are you dead,/And this wrought emptiness my ultimate emptiness?'" (24-5).

Telemachos, as a child, might have asked these same questions. His poem about his mother begins, however, with an adult observation full of

awe: "Twenty years, every day." (This same feeling recurs in stanzas four and five: "How could she bear the mounting load?"—16.) His descriptions of the figures Penelope weaves are a combination of both childish memories and adult perspective; her "Half-finished heroes," he says, were "sad and mum" (8), much like Penelope herself. It is his description of the heads, of both horses and men, in the work, along with the insinuation of movement in "odds and ends about to be" (13) that creates the maelstrom image, as though "that jumble of heads and spears" (31) were being carried along on a wave denoting both the passion of Penelope and the passions of war. Penelope has, in effect, woven her fear into this tapestry.⁵

Here we come to a central question: why does Penelope weave this particular scene over and over? Would she not grow tired of the monotony of it? Why would she not weave the picture of Odysseus' voyage over the waves on his way home to her or why not weave their actual reunion? But after knowing her definition of duty, this scene seems the only possible one Muir could have given her to weave. In this battle scene are all her deepest fears: Odysseus being killed in battle, Odysseus being swept away by a maelstrom at sea. If she did not keep herself in such fear, perhaps she would give in and finish the tapestry, give up on Odysseus' return, let herself be claimed by a suitor. Thus she weaves not possibly happy scenes but ones that remind her of her fear and her duty.

Everything—all these thoughts of Penelope's; the whole of her future, of "the task grown sick from morn to night,/From year to year" (22-3); her memories of her life with Odysseus, the "forlorn scraps of her treasure trove" (32)—all these are foretold in "the thin line of augury" (14). Telemachos wonders if even the *loom* did not grow "weary" (21). Yet if she had finished it, he says, she would have "worked a matchless wrong" (30), for it represents and portrays "her ghosts" (17), her *fears*—"Pride and fidelity and love" (35). If she does not hold pride and fidelity and love in jeopardy, she may begin to take them for granted and thereby lose them.⁶

If we wonder why Telemachos thinks her finishing the piece would have worked a matchless wrong, we can find the answer, or part of it, in "Song for a Hypothetical Age." Here Penelope's weaving is used as a parable, so before we can examine it, we must try to see why Muir chooses her story as a parable for this particular poem.

⁵John Holloway ("The Poetry of Edwin Muir," *The Hudson Review*, 13 (Winter 1960-1), p. 555) suggests it is a bridal gown.

⁶Roger Knight, in *Edwin Muir: An Introduction to His Work* (New York, 1980), p. 193, states "pride and fidelity and love' are not given; they must be endlessly created and recreated."

The hypothetical age Muir describes is one in which there is no personal grief. We of the hypothetical age are "exempt from grief and rage"; we "Rule here our new impersonal age" (3-4). History's and time's cycles turn to an age in which there is much to mourn for, yet none to do the mourning (8), for we have forgotten how to grieve "In a world to order grown" (10), a world so orderly that even justice is idle (9). Like the new age, justice is impersonal (4) and does not weep. We have taught ourselves not to grieve: have found "a smoother tale to tell/Where everything is in its place/And happiness inevitable" (14-6).

But happiness is never inevitable, Muir believes, and he proves it by telling a parable of Penelope. Once upon a time, he says, there was a woman named Penelope who for twenty years wove and unwove a web all day. This web might have been her masterpiece—if she had let it have its way (i.e., get finished)—a masterpiece that would have driven "all artistry to despair" (23). Such a masterpiece, in bringing despair to artists, would have "set the sober world at play/Beyond the other side of care,/And lead a fabulous era in" (24-6). In other words, if artists refused to write or weave because Penelope had made the great masterpiece no one could ever hope to equal, the world would be set at play, would be ushered into a new, fabulous (in the sense of *feigned* or *astonishing*) age—a hypothetical age, in fact. The reason such a new age of play would be created is that artists are those who remind us of "despair," of the "sober world"; without them, we would think the world was merely play, that happiness was inevitable.

But, Muir continues in the fable, Penelope did not finish this possible masterpiece.

"Where I begin
Musty I return, else all is lost,
And great Odysseus tempest-tossed
Will perish, shipwrecked on my art.
But so, I guide him to the shore" (27-31).

"But so"—by not finishing—Penelope remains true to her duty, faces her despair, will begin again. Her weaving and unweaving, which she has sometimes described as "an emptiness/Amid disorder," is exactly what will keep the world human and humane.⁷

⁷P. H. Butter quotes a BBC address by Muir, "Scottish Life and Letters," on this subject. If Penelope, "the great image of love and constancy," had finished the web, she "would have achieved the supreme work of art, but in doing so would have renounced her humanity" (p. 253).

Thus the poet can say to the hypothetical age: unpetrify your heart; do not let "Heart and earth [be] a single stone" (37). Break the stony barrier—weep, grieve—for unless we do this, "Grief and joy no more shall wake" (39). Although this mention of "joy" in the last line shocks (it seems totally opposite to "inevitable happiness," and the poem has been about the necessity to grieve), the word *joy* is not just thrown in. Muir implies that if we have not grief, neither can we have that which is its opposite, joy: this is the message he sings for the hypothetical age.

Muir's fascination with Penelope, then, lies in her artistry and its relationship with duty. He is obsessed with her as a representative not only of duty but of constancy, even constancy under pressure from time and social forces (in allegories, constancy was the old Latin *fortitudo*, the strength of conviction under duress). Yet I believe the last three poems give us a clue to a deeper fascination Penelope holds for him: she represents the duty and/or role of the artist, both as an individual and as a member of society. The weaving and tearing up thus become a metaphor for the artist's work, the continuing attempt to create a great work, the constant frustration of having missed the mark, followed by a need to start again.

Seen in this light, Penelope's "making an emptiness/Amid disorder" in "The Return of Odysseus" represents work worth doing in the highest sense; the fear that her "wrought emptiness" might become her "ultimate emptiness" is a fear not contemptible of but full of praise for things "wrought." The weary loom and "the task grown sick from morn to night,/ From year to year" in "Telemachos Remembers" are evidences of the difficulty of creation; "the shuttle's cunning song" is a warning against the creator's becoming so involved with his work that he forgets both the "real world" and his true purpose, the purpose outlined in the parable "Song for a Hypothetical Age."

In "Twice-Done, Once-Done," the poem from which the title of the paper is taken, Muir is concerned with our connectedness to the past which allows us to find life in the present. This is precisely what Penelope was doing in her weaving; it is certainly one of the themes of Muir's work. Daniel Hoffman states it as follows:

It is thus the transformation through ritual of necessary action into sanctioned duty that redeems life from chaos. Such repetitions create the unchanging forms which extend through time and give us the grace of merging our individual existence with an eternal existence.⁸

⁸*Barbarous Knowledge: Myth in the Poetry of Yeats, Graves, and Muir* (New York, 1967), p. 238. Holloway would agree; in his fine article he claims that one of Muir's primary themes is that of "the dignity in tribulation" (p. 555).

Two other lines in "Twice-Done, Once-Done"—"Even a story to be true/Must repeat itself" (23-4)—give us another clue into Muir's fascination with Penelope: in her story he found one worth repeating. Penelope, too, had found a story worth repeating. Perhaps, like Muir, whose approach to her story was different each time, Penelope herself—artist that she obviously was—did not weave the same scene all the time. Perhaps she, too, had her favorite themes and wove them using her favorite images, but never wove them in the same way twice.

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