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Edwin Muir’s “The Labyrinth”:
A Study of Symbol and Structure

The poems in *The Labyrinth* (1949) were written in Czechoslovakia between 1943 and 1948, when Edwin Muir was Director of the British Institute in Prague. These were dramatic and tragic years for Muir; so much so that on his return to England in 1948 he suffered a breakdown and withdrew into a state of despairing apathy, "a dead pocket of life", for several months. On his arrival in Prague, after a journey through countries scarred and altered from the war, Muir had been horrified by stories of Nazi atrocities during the recent occupation and the effect this had had on the Czech people, but even more disturbing was the ferment of political intrigue, culminating in the "Putsch" of 1948 when Russia effectively and brutally took over the country. This sudden coup was reinforced by a sinister and pervasive apparatus of secret police, informers, censorship, and personal and artistic repression and, in this climate of fear and suspicion, Muir found it almost impossible to function.

Willa Muir writes of these years that "the unrest, the flurries from pessimism to optimism which ravaged the country ravaged Edwin and me as well", and many of the poems in *The Labyrinth* exhibit the poet’s shocked awareness of how great political machines can dehumanise and brutalise individual lives. The problem of evil and suppression obsesses him, and in no other volume of his poetry do we sense so sharply what M. L. Rosenthal calls his "infinite sadness, and the repressed hysteria that underlies it." Here the redemptive possibilities of Eden and eternity, towards which his symbology had been moving, become swamped and negated by an overwhelming sense of man caught in time, in social and political necessity. The shadow of the labyrinth broods over this collection, manifesting itself as an agent of blockage, interrupting and disorientating man on his journey back to Eden. Poems like "The Combat," "The Interceptor," "The Interrogation," "The Bel-


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met” "The Good Town,” "The Usurpers" are informed with a barely controlled violence of feeling and a political awareness new in Muir's work, even though the negative experience itself was by no means new to him, being a parallel in many ways to the violent sense of threat and disorientation he had experienced as a boy when he moved from Orkney to the industrial squalor of Glasgow. At that time he felt he had moved into time from eternity, into disintegration from wholeness and unity, and the "fearful shape of our modern inhumanity" which impinged so sickeningly on him in Prague is an integral component of that symbolic Fall, the loss of Eden, he had experienced in the labyrinth of Glasgow’s slums some forty years previously. The recurrence of this destructive ghost, released from a place in his mind he had thought sealed, must have been terrible.

The title poem of The Labyrinth dramatically embodies this sense of terror and loss of certainty. Not only is it interesting in terms of its desperate tone of nightmare, its sense of the lost self and its obsessive concern with psychological blockage, but it illustrates fully, for the first time, Muir's use of symbolist techniques. It is as if the new urgency of the content, the violence of the conflict of positive and negative potencies, has forced him into dramatic technical experiment, and, instinctively it seems, he uses classic symbolist devices. In this poem, and frequently in his poetry from this volume on, Muir employs a non-logical structure, dislocating tenses and confusing dream and reality in an attempt to free his symbols from the restrictions of time and space. And this deliberate movement in and out of time and reality is reinforced, as I hope to demonstrate, by a highly expressive use of syntax and metre.

In a broadcast, Muir described the genesis of "The Labyrinth".

Thinking there of the old story of the labyrinth of Knossos and the journey of Theseus through it and out of it, I felt that this was an image of human life with its errors and ignorance and endless intricacy. In the poem I made the labyrinth stand for all this. But I wanted also to give an image of the life of the gods, to whom all that is confusion down here is clear and harmonious as seen eternally.

This account makes clear the central strategy of the poem — the juxtaposition of the images of confused man and harmonious gods, of the Fall and Eden — but the result is, in fact, far richer than Muir intimates here.

"The Labyrinth" is a highly complex poem. It draws together all Muir's great symbols — Eden, the Fall, time, the journey, the labyrinth — into a coherent and fully realised structure which resolves itself perfectly while remaining accessible to many levels of interpretation and response. The poem starts with the hero looking back at the labyrinth:

Since I emerged that day from the labyrinth,
Dazed with the tall and echoing passages,
The swift recoils, so many I almost feared
I'd meet myself returning at some smooth corner.
Myself or my ghost, for all there was unreal
After the straw ceased rustling and the bull
Lay dead upon the straw and I remained,
Blood-splashed, if dead or alive I could not tell
In the twilight nothingness (I might have been
A spirit seeking his body through the roads
Of intricate Hades) . . . . "

We are immediately presented with a vision of chaos; the protagonist (Theseus/Muir/Everyman) dazed and lost, splashed with blood, not knowing whether he is dead or alive. The labyrinth is deliberately likened to Hades, as a symbol of anti-Eden or anti-Heaven. It is the country of fallen man, removed from his beginnings and diverted from his true journey. But Muir immediately opposes this opening symbol with a compensatory vision of Eden:

. . . ever since I came out
To the world, the still fields swift with flowers, the trees
All bright with blossom, the little green hills, the sea,
The sky and all in movement under it,
Shepherds and flocks and birds and the young and old,
(I stared in wonder at the young and the old,
For in the maze time had not been with me;

This vision of growth, of archetypal simplicity, with everything untroubled and in its place, heightens the effect of the labyrinth by contrasting emblematic pastoral colours with the "twilight nothingness", and the full potentiality of life and growth with the sterile half-life of the fallen condition. Through the device of the line "For in the maze time had not been with me", Muir now switches tenses, taking us back into the labyrinth with an evocation of bewilderment and helplessness:

I had strayed, it seemed, past sun and season and change,
Past rest and motion, for I could not tell
At last if I moved or stayed; the maze itself
Revolved around me on its hidden axis
And swept me smoothly to its enemy,
The lovely world) . . . .

This is close to Kafka’s nightmare world of disoriented man confronted
with vast hostile organisations which lead him to doubt the authenticity
and validity of his existence. The labyrinth undermines the self. Un-
located in time and space, the struggle for individual survival is made
desperate by the absence of fixed points by which the self can find
balance and perspective.

Up to this point, Muir has distanced this vision of chaos and
insanity by placing it firmly in the past as a memory of the now safe
traveller. Now he takes even that prop away by bringing the labyrinth
into the present, continuing the Kafka-like images of helpless dis-
orientation of perception:

.......
since I came out that day,
There have been times when I have heard my footsteps
Still echoing in the maze, and all the roads
That run through the noisy world, deceiving streets
That meet and part and meet, and rooms that open
Into each other — and never a final room —
Stairways and corridors and antechambers
That vacantly wait for some great audience,
The smooth sea-tracks that open and close again,
Tracks undiscoverable, indecipherable,
Paths on the earth and tunnels underground,
And bird-tracks in the air — all seemed a part
Of the great labyrinth. And then I’d stumble
In sudden blindness, hasten, almost run,
As if the maze itself were after me
And soon must catch me up.

The protagonist is not free from the experience of terror. The self
remains threatened and paranoid as the past presses into the present.
The Eden-vision is undermined and becomes fragile and semi-permanent
in face of this reassertion of terror. The labyrinth is no longer a myth
of time past but a massive reality reaching into the hoped-for stability
of the present. The hero remains confused, uncertain of his actuality,
split into the labyrinth-man and the religious visionary:

But taking thought,
I’d tell myself, ‘You need not hurry. This
Is the firm good earth. All roads lie free before you.’
But my bad spirit would sneer, ‘No, do not hurry.
No need to hurry. Haste and delay are equal
In this one world, for there’s no exit, none,
No place to come to, and you’ll end where you are,
Deep in the centre of the endless maze.’

Here the opposing symbols of the poem converge and move into direct
confrontation. But just as the voice from the labyrinth, "my bad spirit",
seems triumphant, Muir brings us back to the vision of Eden and the
life of the gods, almost desperately invoking another world, which, by its transcendent properties, can perhaps defeat the chaos which threatens to overwhelm the protagonist:

I could not live if this were not illusion.
It is a world, perhaps; but there's another.
For once in a dream or trance I saw the gods
Each sitting on the top of his mountain-isle,
While down below the little ships sailed by,
Toy multitudes swarmed in the harbours, shepherds drove
Their tiny flocks to the pastures, marriage feasts
Went on below, small birthdays and holidays,
Ploughing and harvesting and life and death,
And all permissible, all acceptable,
Clear and secure as in a limpid dream.
But they, the gods, as large and bright as clouds,
Conversed across the sounds in Tranquil voices
High in the sky above the untroubled sea,
And their eternal dialogue was peace
Where all these things were woven, and this our life
Was as a chord deep in that dialogue,
An easy utterance of harmonious words,
Spontaneous syllables bodying forth a world.

This great vision of the gods is an expansion of the lines in the early poem "The Mythical Journey":

And on the hills
The gods reclined and conversed with each other
From summit to summit.

but in the symbolic structure of "The Labyrinth" the vision takes on a much wider significance. In this world everything is permissible and without tension. The gods preside over a place of harmony, "Where all these things were woven," and the labyrinth, in comparison, becomes small and inconsequential. The problem of time, however, is further confused here by the poet, for the vision of harmony occurred "once in a dream or trance." The world of the gods is a dream-reality, unconnected to the time-place of the labyrinth, and expressed with all the precise vagueness of a dream. The scene on which the gods look down is filled with "toy multitudes" and "tiny flocks"; the ships are "little", birthdays and holidays are "small", giving simultaneously an impression of unreality, of a toy landscape, and the sense of the striking new perspective from the high world of the gods. The gods themselves remain unconcrete, symbolised as in substantial voices, creating only a vast music over the human landscape.

The next six lines defiantly celebrate the redemptive authenticity of this vision:

That was the real world; I have touched it once,
And now shall know it always. But the lie,
The maze, the wild-wood waste of falsehood, roads
That run and run and never reach an end,
Embroiled in error — I'd be imprisoned there
But that my soul has birdwings to fly free.

The conflicting symbols of the maze and Eden are temporarily reconciled here by the insistence upon a fortifying, Platonic reality, by which the pressures of actuality can be transcended. The tense is present once more, with the hero looking back on his vision while still conscious of the "wild-wood waste of falsehoods" — the labyrinth — pulling at his feet.

But the poem can not end here. Once again, Muir deliberately confuses the tenses, modifies the conclusion, and reaches for the ambiguity of the symbolic conflict:

Oh these deceits are strong almost as life.
Last night I dreamt I was in the labyrinth,
And woke far on. I did not know the place.

We are left to decide whether last night's dream is the same as the early experience in the labyrinth, or whether it is a further vision of the former reality. Certainly we have been led back into the world of vision, having moved in and out of time and actuality throughout the poem, and the last line, because it leaves us stranded outside the safety of the concrete world of here and now, is charged with a vague menace. "I did not know the place" demonstrates once more the dislocation of time and space around which the structure of this poem is built. Ending in this way with a return to disorientation, Muir leaves us not with the vision of the gods but with the knowledge of nightmare, threat, bewilderment. The gestures towards a healing unity are proved to be no more than tentative, and the gap between human and divine reality, between time and eternity, falsehood and truth, remains strongly implicit.

This summary of the structure of "The Labyrinth" permits us to look more closely at the details of the symbolist method employed by Muir. We have seen how the poet works with two opposing symbols — the labyrinth and Eden — to create tension and meaning. I have deliberately avoided trying to interpret these symbols more widely, but it is clear that they are extremely rich and resonant, generating both personal and universal meaning. "The Labyrinth" is a completely symbolistic poem — non-rational, non-conceptual, non-allegorical — where the symbols, as we have seen, do not stay located in time or space, but are
endlessly shifting between past and present actuality and vision. In this way they become centres of many overlapping circles of meaning, where oppositions are emphasized and resolved in a completely non-logical manner. There is no either/or in the symbolist imagination as there is in the logical process. In this poem, the labyrinth does not represent either the Fall of man or insanity, say; it encompasses the Fall and emotional blockage, loss of control, the political terror in Prague, the sour and squalid tenements of Glasgow, the labyrinth of the original Greek myth, the awareness of death, the soul’s dark night, the sterile technological world of secondary objects and Muir’s experience of Kafka’s stories. And yet the symbol is more than all of these. Similarly, the world of the gods in the poem embraces Eden and Orkney, the harmonious relationship with the animals, pre-industrial life, positive religious experience, a celebration of poetic creation and a healing return from madness and confusion. In addition, we must remember that the poem tells us that both of these symbols derive from dreams or trances. This poem shows clearly the possibilities of the symbolist method, moving imperceptibly from level to level, place to place, tense to tense; from the world of myth to the real world of Prague; from Orkney to Glasgow; from sanity to madness. All this is achieved by the use of the two symbols, which Muir leaves next to each other to mean what they can. This is the essence of the symbolist method, and the essence of Muir’s art. Time is not process; symbol is not tied to concept, as in allegory; inner and outer worlds become inseparable. The poet makes just one act of perception, through the symbols, which transcends analytic thought; the symbols are not reminders of meaning as much as sources of meaning, striving to define themselves. In this poem, the dark vision of the labyrinth is threaded by the bright symbol of rebirth and harmony; the conflicting symbols acting as generating elements in an undifferentiated stream of thoughts, feelings, perceptions and associations.

Writing about Whitman’s great elegy for Lincoln, Charles Feidelson describes the symbolistic act of creation:

The act of poetizing and the context in which it takes place have continuity in time and space but no particular existence. Both are ‘ever-returning’; the tenses shift; the poet is in different places at once; and at the end this whole phase of creation is moving inexorably forward.

Within this framework the symbols behave like characters in a drama, the plot of which is the achievement of a poetic utterance."

"The Labyrinth" is not about a labyrinth, not about Muir's personal experience; rather it enacts the symbolic journey through the dark in terms of the vision of light. It is a perfect example of how the successful symbolist poem actually embodies what it is about by its use of symbol, syntax and prosody, and this poem clearly gives the lie to those who play down Muir's technical abilities.

For instance, J. C. Hall has claimed that "in this poem 'The Labyrinth' Muir sustains the first sentence for thirty-five lines without metrical support." This is demonstrably untrue. "The Labyrinth" is written in regular metre, often loose, but with a five-stress line throughout. The syntax and metre are complex, and they are vital to the poem's effect and to the presentation of the symbolism.

The first sentence does, indeed, go on for thirty-five lines, enacting in its tenuous, uncertain, broken syntax the stumbling journey through the labyrinth. The pentameter lines use many foot-substitutions to enhance the syntactical re-enactment of the theme, letting the language speed up or fall away in flat despair. Let us consider lines 8 - 15:

8
Blood-splashed, if dead or alive I could not tell
In the twilight nothingness (I might have been
A spirit seeking his body through the roads
Of intangible Hades) — ever since I came out
To the world, the still fields swift with flowers, the trees
All bright with blossom, the little green hills, the sea,
The sky and all in movement under it,
Shepherds and flocks and birds and the young and old

Here we see only one line of regular iambic pentameter. Of the forty feet in the eight lines, there are no fewer than fourteen non-iambic substitutions, occurring not only in the usual first but in all of the five positions. This is a highly patterned poetry, but rhythmically extremely flexible. In these lines, too, we can see the labyrinthine effect of the syntax: the parenthesis introducing a new image and followed immediately by the change of tense and location; the run-on lines; the switch in tempo (and stress pattern) in line 12 to indicate the sudden emergence into the world of Eden; the many monosyllabic words, ar-

ranged in a simple catalogue form, in lines 12 - 15, which contrast formally with the much more tortured description of the labyrinth itself.

This order of technical complexity continues through the whole poem performing a vital expressive function. After the long first sentence, the syntax and the metrical pattern alter perceptibly. Short sentences, appropriate to the dialogue between the good and bad spirit, as well as imaging the desperate haste to leave the maze behind, are suddenly given a strikingly regular metrical base:

\[
x / x / x / x / x / x /
In sudden blindness, hasten, almost run,
x / x / x / x / x / x /
As if the maze itself were after me
x / x / x / x / x / x /
And soon must catch me up. But taking thought,
x / x / x / x / x / x /
I'd tell myself, 'You need not hurry. This
\]

These lines, dealing with actuality, are perfectly regular, but with the great vision of the gods we return to the earlier pattern of long sentences and many non- iambic feet, giving an immediate effect of non-reality, of dream. Of seventeen lines describing the vision of the gods, only three are regular iambic pentameter and there are only two sentences. But again, emerging from this dream of the gods, the syntax and metre bring us back to reality, moving forcefully and purposefully back into regularity to conclude the poem:

\[
/ x x / / / x / x / x / x /
That was the real world; I have touched it once,
x / x / x / x / x / x / x / x /
And now shall know it always. But the lie
x / x / x / x / x / x / x / x /
The maze, the wild-wood waste of falsehood, roads
x / x / x / x / x / x / x / x /
That run and run and never reach an end,
x / x x / x / x / x / x / x / x / x /
Embowered in error — I'd be imprisoned there
/ / x / x / x x x / x
But that my soul has birdwings to fly free.
x / x / x / x / x / x / x /
Oh these deceits are strong almost as life.
x / x / x x / x / x / x / x /
Last night I dreamt I was in the labyrinth,
x / x / x / x / x / x / x /
And woke far on. I did not know the place.
\]

Here the metrical resolution enforces the poem's conclusion. The iambic pulse now dominates so strongly that the earlier irregularities have been
absorbed. The syntax, culminating in the last short sentence, is strong and tight, giving force to the poem's ending. Thus we can see that the prosody of the poem is highly expressive, itself symbolising dream and the time-space dislocation through irregularity, and actuality through insistent regularity. Throughout "The Labyrinth," metre and syntax are, in this way, an organic part of the poem's movement in and out of actuality and dream. The shifting of tenses, the slackening and tightening of the metre, the negative and positive uses of syntax, all combine with the richness of the symbols to embody the poem's many levels of meaning. In this way, the experience of "The Labyrinth" is rendered not only by the symbols but by the movement of the lines, as the processes of frustration, stasis, growth and fruition are expressed and embodied in the poem's sound. In sound, as in the conflict of symbols, when one tension is resolved another begins, thus creating a formal complexity which perfectly embodies the psychological complexity which lies behind the maze/Eden conflict.

Before leaving this poem, it is worth turning briefly to Kafka in relation to the symbol of the labyrinth. In particular, Muir's critical writing on Kafka helps to clarify the relationship between the hero and the two opposing symbols, which lies at the heart of this poem. In an essay on Kafka, Muir writes:

The image of a road comes into our minds when we think of his stories, for in spite of all the confusions and contradictions in which he was involved he held that life was a way, not a chaos, that the right way exists and can be found by a supreme and exhausting effort, and that whatever happens every human being in fact follows some way, right or wrong . . . . He looks ahead and sees, perhaps on a distant hill, a shape which he has often seen before in his journey, but always far away, and apparently inaccessible; that shape is justice, grace, truth, final reconciliation, father, God. As he gazes at it he wonders whether he is moving towards it while it is receding from him, or flying from it while it is pursuing him. He is tormented by this question, for it is insoluble by human reasoning . . . . the right turn may easily chance to be the wrong, and the wrong the right.10

and later in the same essay, Muir refers to "the frustration of the hero . . . caused by what in theological language is known as the irreconciliability of the divine and the human law; a subtle yet immeasurable disparity."11

11. Ibid., p. 122.
These remarks are remarkably relevant to Muir’s own work and to “The Labyrinth” in particular. The central symbol of the journey; the “supreme and exhausting effort” to find the right way; the distant goal, apparently inaccessible, which is “final reconciliation”; the frustrated, tormented self; the “irreconcilability of the divine and the human law”—these are strongly present in “The Labyrinth”, embodied by the two symbols. Ultimately, the fallen hero — as much Everyman in Muir as in Kafka — struggling towards the grace and fulfilment of a transfigured reality is at the centre of Muir’s imaginative vision. We know that translating Kafka had affected Edwin Muir and his wife deeply. He records that “At one stage the stories continued themselves in our dreams, unfolding into slow serpentine nightmares, immovably reasonable.”

The labyrinth of this poem reflects this serpentine nightmare perfectly and we must agree with Elgin Mellow that “many of Muir’s poems . . . inevitably remind one of Kafka’s stories; and certainly Kafka, even if he did not directly influence Muir, strengthened the poet’s faith in his own ideas.”

“’The Labyrinth’, for all its vision of the gods, is one of Muir’s most serious explorations of frustration, evil and terror. He is struggling to acquire a ”negative capability”; to find a means of preserving the self and the vision of harmony and joy in a world seemingly bent on destroying them. He pits an imaginative reality against the forces of darkness, refusing to meet despair on its own terms, but translating the battle into a symbolic conflict which escapes from time and place, but which still can move towards integration and resolution. As a result, this is not a poem of defeat, but one more stage on the journey towards truth. At the age of sixty, Muir is only now able to treat, through symbol, his knowledge of the hideous gap between human reality and the world of the gods. In “The Labyrinth” he peers over the abyss of insanity and despair, but does not go over. There is a defiance embodied in the positive symbols which precludes their annihilation by the negative. Although balance has been lost, and the values of imagination, love, individuality, freedom are almost extinguished by the impersonal power of the will and political necessity, the possibilities of integration and rescue remain implicit, unkillable; the thread leading out of the maze is there in this poem, elusively and weightlessly beckoning as it floats in dream and hope. It is a thread which will eventually lead Muir

out into the positive landscape of *One Foot in Eden* (1956), where the labyrinth shrinks under the confidently asserted pressure of symbols of growth and regeneration.

*The Labyrinth* shows Muir's slow struggle with the forces of evil, played out through the combat of symbols. Only by perfecting his technique so that his symbols could range freely and untethered over time and space could he cope with the intensity of concrete reality by assuming it into a larger pattern. The price he paid for overcoming the threat of annihilation was high. Back in England he had "the vacant state of a shell-shock case after a modern war", and the poems in this volume are the record of a war, symbolic and psychological, but as strenuously fought as any physical conflict. Muir's breakdown demonstrates that however remote his poetry sometimes seems, it is a deeply involved, though symbolic, treatment of highly personal experience. "The Labyrinth" is a record of a human being moving sluggishly but desperately in the dark underworld of his own spiritual crisis; that it is also a universal statement of man's relationship with evil and his instinctive and insistent craving for the numinous is a tribute not only to Muir's wisdom and knowledge, but to his suddenly matured poetic techniques, which enable him, through symbolist devices, to link the particular and personal with the universal in an urgent and distinctive way.

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